SLA BEST PRACTICES

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As ITOps' role has evolved from fixing technologies to focusing on governing service levels, the importance of ensuring service level agreements (SLAs) has increased. While in the past SLAs might have been part of the contractual agreement between the company and a contractor, today many companies establish SLAs to determine levels of excellence that they must maintain internally. Companies realize the importance of focusing on metrics in order to be effective and accountable.

But which metrics matter and how should they be tracked? Is it important to see how many tickets the IT team handles in a week? Should the team measure how long it takes to resolve an issue? These questions are important components of defining SLAs, but the process does not start and end with establishing meaningful values for these metrics.

This whitepaper delves into the process of developing realistic, well-defined SLAs, including:

- The importance of SLA metrics
- How companies can improve the focus of their service level definitions
- What tools can help IT teams achieve SLA definition and compliance

THE IMPORTANCE OF SLA METRICS

Legendary business strategist Peter Drucker is quoted as saying "*What gets measured, gets done.*" ITOps that are looking to improve their efficiency should begin by including rigorous quantitative measurements as part of their metrics for success. SLAs serve as the contractual agreement that the help desk buys into, agreeing to meet certain service levels. Specifically, when it comes to managing a help or service desk, companies need to focus on time to first response (TTFR) and mean time to resolution (MTTR).

TIME TO FIRST RESPONSE (TTFR)

TTFR measures the time it takes from the moment an employee makes a request to the time a help desk agent receives the ticket and begins to read it. A ticket from ConnectWise, Datto's Autotask, ServiceNow or other ticketing platforms should be considered received when the desk agent opens the ticket and reads is. As soon as it's read, the ticket, it is "in progress" and the sender of the ticket should be notified.

A key part of TTFR is notifying the sender that the ticket has been created and that the work is in process. Ideally, the sender should also be able to also see the status of her ticket along the way. High performing service desks place a high level of importance on communicating the ticket's status to the sender so she knows where it stands at all times.

 TTFR is also a reflection of the ITOps' efficiency. If the ITOps team can respond to a colleague's high priority need within minutes, then the overall level of performance is where it needs to be. If immediate response is not the case and it takes the ITOps team a day or two to respond to a request, then ITOps needs to up their game.

The second important metric that ITOps teams need to follow is Time to Resolution (also called mean time to resolution or MTTR). MTTR measures the average amount of time that it takes a customer service team to resolve an issue after it has been opened. This metric is usually measured in days or business hours and doesn't factor time when the team is off the clock. Research from

HDI has shown that time to response highly correlates with customer satisfaction (see graph below). The lower the help or service desk's resolution time, the more satisfied employees and management will be. While it is important to let colleagues know that you have received their request and that it is in queue, it is even more important for them to know that the ITOps team is managing the resolution of the problem.
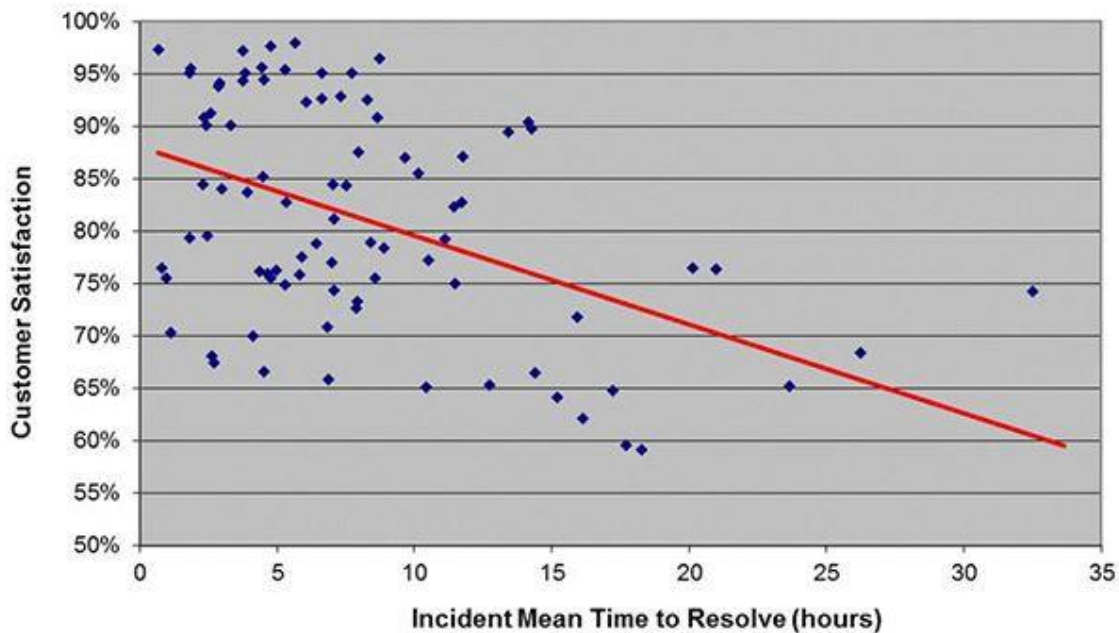
Source: ThinkHDI.com

Although this metric seems quite simple, there are several nuances to consider. What happens when an issue needs further input from the sender? Does the time waiting for this input count against the help desk? The answer is not necessarily easy because it depends on what managers believe is the most accurate way to reflect the status of the ticket. ITOps teams need to work with management to define MTTR in a way that matches the company culture.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MONITORING

In order to make these metrics meaningful, they must be measured and managed in real-world situations. To achieve this, the IT team needs to collect objective and accurate measurements through monitoring tools.

Monitoring is how teams can learn that a problem exists with core technologies or potentially a colleague's technology before the colleague even knows that there is a problem. However, the problem with monitoring is separating false-positive noise from actual problems. The solution is to initially set the IT monitoring and alerting parameters somewhat loosely so that you can determine the overall health and robustness of your system and adjust as needed.

While initially painful because the IT team will be inundated with notifications and alarms, having loose parameters will allow ITOps teams to see what types of alerts are garbage and which are meaningful. [Tech Target](#) summarized this issue brilliantly:

[O]ne important lesson that administrators learn early on is that alerts are not created equal--not every alert that server monitoring tools generate is actually important. If servers are configured to notify you every time an alert is triggered, you would receive so many nuisance notifications that truly important alerts might go unnoticed. This tip will help administrators determine which alerts are really important and how they want server monitoring tools to notify them of such alerts.

By fine-tuning alerts, monitoring tools will be more effective at letting teams know when a real event has occurred. Additionally, it is best practice to measure at the backbone rather than through a derivative measurement tool. This will eliminate some of the noise and ensure the accuracy of the metrics. Also, by using "last mile" measurements that come directly from the user, IT teams will improve the accuracy of the measurements.

REQUIRED TECHNOLOGIES

For ITOps teams to review TTFR and MTTR, IT management teams need to ensure certain pieces of technology are available. These include monitoring, ticketing and alerting tools. Let's look at each of these items and identify what ITOps teams need to look for:

Monitoring – Many IT shops use tools such as Nagios, Solar Winds or Big Panda to monitor the health of their stack and systems. It's usually the job of the help desk or NOC team to manage these solutions, detect issues as soon as they arise and create a ticket to alert the service desk. Some issues inevitably arise during shift changes or after hours. For these after-hours cases, teams

need ticketing systems integrated with alerting tools to make sure that IT is notified of the problem.

Ticketing – Once the monitoring tool picks up a problem, a ticket needs to be created and completed with relevant information. Many ITOps teams use tools like ConnectWise, Datto's Autotask, ServiceNow or JIRA to automate this process. The ticket needs to capture information such as where the origin of the failure and the importance of the issue (low or high priority). Creating the ticket is key to establishing TTFR.

Alerting – Alert notifications are a crucial part of effective security and incident management. They are also critical to maintaining TTFR and MTTR levels. Although email and text communication methods are often used to alert IT teams of critical incidents, these messages are too easy to miss and ignore. Missing even one single email or text can result in delayed incident resolution and downtime costs totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars per hour.

Instead, teams should use intelligent alerting platforms and smartphone apps to quickly notify IT teams of priority situations so they can reduce the amount of time it takes to resolve the issue. The alert needs to be loud, distinctive from other texts and email notification sounds, and persistent – it should continue to alert the recipient until the recipient acknowledges the alert. The incident alert management system should include integration with monitoring and ticketing systems, features to ensure that if the first person receiving the alert doesn't respond the alert escalates to the next person or to a group, and support for on-call schedules. With these important features, critical alerts are never missed and TTFR can be drastically reduced.

MAKE SLAS A TEAM EFFORT

Effective incident management requires bringing the whole team together to respond to high priority incidents. The team needs to have a sense of shared organizational goals and objectives, as well as effective ways to collaborate and communicate during incidents.

To help them achieve shared success, IT teams need a strong collaboration platform that enables communication once alerts are received. Ideally, the alerting and communications platforms are

unified so that once alerted, teams do not need to switch devices to exchange messages with colleagues. It's important to have the ability to attach and exchange voicemails, images and documents to the, to have as much information as needed on hand to effectively resolve issues.

CONCLUSION

SLA management has become an integral part of effective IT management and growth. Effective SLAs require that services are monitored, reviewed and analyzed regularly to find improvement points and steps. All that is required is the right plan, the right mindset and the right tools.

OnPage's award-winning incident alert management system for IT professionals provides the industry's only ALERT-UNTIL-READ notification capabilities. Built around the incident resolution lifecycle, OnPage helps teams reduce downtime and costs while improving coordination and performance.

OnPage's escalation, redundancy and scheduling features ensure that a critical message is never missed. Infinitely more reliable and secure than emails, text messages and phone calls, OnPage provides instant visibility and feedback on alerts. As part of IT service management, the solution tracks alert delivery, ticket status and responses, delivering complete audit trail reporting during and after each incident. The OnPage platform includes seamless integration with mission-critical systems, including ServiceNow and other leading platforms, to help deliver optimum service levels and get the most value from IT investments, making sure that sensors, monitoring systems and people have a reliable way to escalate critical alerts to the right person immediately.

IT organizations trust OnPage's incident alert management system to help them reduce downtime, meet SLA commitments and keep teams motivated and performing at a high level.

For more information, visit onpage.com or contact the company at marketing@onpagecorp.com or at (781) 916-0040.