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Developing Sievo's Customer Support

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<p>The title of thesis Developing Sievo's Customer Support</p>	<p>Number of pages and appendices 30 + 5</p>
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<p>This thesis's target is to find out present state of Sievo's customer support and to offer ways to develop it. Target is not to produce new process scheme nor finished directions for customer support work.</p> <p>Source material included literature about customer support and service, information from Sievo's intranet and interviews with Sievo's employees. Altogether five persons, who have been doing support work in Sievo, were interviewed.</p> <p>Customer support has important role in development of customer satisfaction. Most important features of customer support are reliability, working environment and appearance, empathy and fast reacting ability.</p> <p>Customer support is relatively new part of Sievo's functioning. First customer support work in Sievo was done in the end of the year 2007. At the end of the year 2008 Sievo's management team wanted to clarify functioning of the customer support and introduced an idea about research that would be implemented as thesis.</p> <p>On the ground of this research can be stated that Sievo's customer support is functioning technically well. It is easy for Sievo's employees to follow support requests and interaction that have been made concerning to a certain ticket from a system incorporated in Sievo's intranet.</p> <p>Customer support process should be made clearer for everyone who is doing customer support tasks in Sievo. Now all employees do not have a clear picture about how should be operated in different situations. Support process scheme could be updated so that different roles and support levels would be clarified there. The scheme could be presented to all employees that are involved in the support process.</p> <p>To have functioning support process it is important to have at least one person who takes care full timely that support requests are handled in appropriate way. There should be a plan about how to operate when the employee that is operatively main responsible of customer support is away.</p>	
<p>Key words customer support, customer service, customer relationship, customer satisfaction</p>	

<p>Tekijät Jukka Sivonen</p>	<p>Ryhmä</p>
<p>Opinnäytetyön nimi Sievon asiakastuen kehittäminen</p>	<p>Sivu- ja liitesivumäärä 30 + 5</p>
<p>Ohjaajat Markku Tarkki</p>	
<p>Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena on selvittää Sievon asiakastuen tämän hetkistä tilaa sekä tarjota tapoja sen kehittämiseksi. Opinnäytetyön tarkoitus ei kuitenkaan ole tuottaa uutta prosessikaaviota eikä valmiita ohjeita asiakastukityöhön.</p> <p>Lähdeaineistona käytettiin asiakastukea ja palvelua käsittelevää kirjallisuutta, Sievon intranetin tietoja sekä Sievon työntekijöiden haastatteluja. Yhteensä haastateltiin viittä asiakastukityötä Sievossa tehnyttä henkilöä.</p> <p>Asiakastuella on tärkeä rooli asiakastytyväisyyden muodostumisessa. Asiakastuen tärkeimpiä ominaisuuksia ovat luotettavuus, työympäristö ja ilme, empatia sekä nopea reagointikyky.</p> <p>Asiakastuki on suhteellisen uusi osa Sievon toimintaa. Ensimmäiset asiakastukityöt tehtiin Sievossa vuoden 2007 lopulla. Vuoden 2008 lopulla Sievon johtoryhmä halusi selvittää asiakastuen toimivuutta ja esitteli idean opinnäytetyönä toteutettavasta tutkimuksesta.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen perusteella voidaan todeta, että Sievon asiakastuki toimii teknisesti hyvin. Sievon työntekijöiden on helppo seurata tukipyynnöjä ja niiden osalta käytävää kirjeenvaihtoa intranettiin sisällytetystä järjestelmästä.</p> <p>Asiakastukiprosessi tulisi tehdä selvemmäksi kaikille Sievossa asiakastukitehtäviä hoitaville. Nyt kaikilla työntekijöillä ei ole selkeää kuvaa siitä, miten eri tilanteissa tulisi toimia. Tukiprosessikaavion voisi päivittää niin, että siitä selviäisivät eri roolit ja tukitasot sekä esitellä sen kaikille tukiprosessissa mukana oleville Sievon työntekijöille.</p> <p>Tukiprosessin toimivuuden kannalta on tärkeää, että ainakin yksi henkilö pitää huolta kokopäiväisesti siitä, että tukipyynnöt hoidetaan asianmukaisesti. Lisäksi tulisi laatia suunnitelma siitä, miten toimitaan, kun asiakastukitehtävistä operatiivisesti päävastuussa oleva työntekijä on poissa.</p>	
<p>Asiasanat asiakastuki, asiakaspalvelu, asiakassuhde, asiakastytyväisyys</p>	

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1 Introduction

Subject of this research is developing Sievo's customer support. Sievo is a mid-sized Finnish company that is specialized in procurement performance measurement. Sievo was founded in 2003 and has 22 employees. Sievo's office is located in Helsinki. Typical customers of Sievo are big and international companies. Sievo has achieved many big references like Lego, Carlsberg and Valio. Sievo's mission is to help big companies to save money through effective procurement performance management. Idea is that through effective procurement performance management it is possible to save big amounts of money, because procurement is a function that has a significant impact on the bottom line in all companies. In the year 2008 Deloitte listed Sievo as third fastest growing technology company in Finland.

Customer support is a relatively new concept in Sievo. Management team was interested to know how well the customer support process is functioning, so they introduced the idea of making a thesis about it. Aim of the thesis is to find out the most important development areas and ways to develop them. There is one employee working full-time at Sievo's customer support at the moment.

Sievo accomplishes projects with its customers. Projects last usually from three to six months. Projects can be full-length implementations or pilots. Pilot projects are smaller projects and on the ground of them customers can decide if they want to buy a bigger project.

When full-length project implementation is closed, customers start to use Sievo's software by themselves. This is the point when project tasks are transferred to customer support. Usually there is more customer support when a project has just been closed and software is given to customers' use. When they have been using software for a longer time, their support contacts get fewer.

Research problems are: What are the most important areas to be developed in the customer support? Why are they the most important? How can they be developed? Is it possible to find alternative solutions? This research does not produce a process flowchart or direct instructions to the customer support.

There are three ways of gathering information in this thesis: theory background from the literal sources, interviews with people in Sievo and customer support ticket tracing information from Sievo's intranet are all important parts of the work.

From Sievo's side five people were interviewed. They have experience about doing the support work and they probably have idea whether the support process is working properly and should it be optimized or organized in other way. Of course literal sources bring their own aspect, about what is good customer support in general.

2 Customer Support Theory

2.1 What Is Customer Support?

Help desk is centralized contact center that is supposed to take care of some service or problem. Centralized organization is easy to reach and it can operate professionally. It is important for quality and effectivity of service. (Roos 2003a, 1.)

Most important mission of support service is to make certain service or product easier to use or to solve problems related to using it. Customer support also protects own organization from interruptions. Aimed impacts are also to increase customer satisfaction, productivity of customer's work, use and sale of the product and profit earning capacity elsewhere in own organization. (Roos 2003b, 4.)

When customer has a problem he takes contact to the customer support. It is supposed to answer quickly and take care of the case all the way. Customer support is part of the customer interface. (Roos & Systä 2001, 15-16.)

Characteristic feature of help desk is that support is given by email or phone. Typical names for help desk are:

- support service
- customer support
- IT support
- user support

(Roos 2003a, 5.)

In this research help desk and customer support mean the same thing.

2.2 Importance of Customer Service

Excellent customer service belongs to most effective and least costly ways to market a business. Customers are self-evident necessity for doing business. The importance of customer service is higher than ever. Companies perceive that offering a product or service alone is not enough in today's competitive financial environment. These days customers are

more enlightened than before. They are conscious that if some product or service does not satisfy them, someone else usually offers it with better service. (Elaine 2003, 2.)

Customer support is significant part of the concept on which you market service to the customers. The more complicated the service is, more important its functionality is. If customers do not get the service when needed, they do not use it either and are not ready to pay for it. (Roos 2003a, 2.)

Customers are looking for solutions or packages that create value for them. A high quality product cannot give value to customers if maintenance and support work are not taken care in proficient manner. Whatever customers purchase, it should work as a service for them. (Grönroos 2000, 4.)

Customers' expectations and competitiveness in the marketplace have increased and companies are recognizing the high price of losing customers. There is several unfortunate occurs in losing them: loss of money, loss of jobs, loss of reputation and loss of future business. (Elaine 2003, 8.)

From the customer organization's point of view it is most important to get support that corresponds to their needs. Support employees must understand it and adapt to that. Good support center is at the same time competitive weapon and necessity. (Roos et al. 2001, 15-16.)

Customer support person does not represent only himself but the whole service organization. If customer tells to others about good or bad service, it was not given by one person, but the whole unit or company. Criticism is directed to larger entirety than a single person. (Roos 2003a, 6.)

2.3 Good Customer Service

It has been noticed that customers estimate quality of the service on the ground of following factors:

Trustworthy.	Ability to keep promises.
Assertiveness.	Showing expertise and being credible.

Concrete environment. Facilities, equipment and appearance of staff.
Empathy. Taking care of customers as individuals.
Reacting ability. Being able to help immediately.

(Performance Research Associates 2006, 14.)

Customers tend to be honest for their reasons about why they need help. This is starting point for proper business ethics. No one will survive long in business without being honest. You should always stay in truth, no matter how much it hurts. It is better way to disappoint a customer with a truth than satisfy with a lie. Without the truth you and your company are on shaky ground. Pretence of service without substance is called placebo service. It is wrong way of doing business. Prevent to think that placebo service is your only option. (Coscia 1998, 15-16.)

Reacting and willing to help are very important, customer must hear and feel that you want to help him. Lack of reacting gives indifferent impression and customer can figure that he is not respected. (Roos 2003a, 12.)

There is a risk that if quality service is defined too thinly, quality programs become too narrow in scope. For example, the technical specification of a service or product is often considered the only or the most important feature of the perceived quality. The more technology oriented the firm is, the bigger this risk tend to be. In reality customers often think quality as much wider concept. Many times other aspects than technical ones dominate the quality experience. Firms should define quality in the same way that customers do, otherwise wrong actions may be taken and money as well as time poorly invested. (Grönroos 2001, 62-63.)

Good technical quality of a service process is usually first requirement for good quality. It has to be at an acceptable level. The definition of acceptable level depends about strategy of a firm and needs of the customers. However, once the technical side is good enough it becomes transparent. When customers pay attention to the total service, the functional quality has to be well executed as well. However, if technical quality fails, total perceived quality fails as well. (Grönroos 2001, 66.)

2.4 Support Process

A good process is series of events that lead effectively and reliably to the wanted outcome. Every interest group knows what they are doing and there is no need for clarifying responsibilities or watching after each other. (Roos et al. 2001. 47.)

Professionally operating help desk manages controlled service process, operates in responsibility way and produces at the same time valuable information about customers' behavior. (Roos 2003a, 21.)

There are two ways to organize customer support staff: solid and winding. Solid support consists from permanent employees whose main mission is to take care of the customer support and service work. In the winding system each person works part-timely in the customer support.

Strength of winding system is that it is easy to organize. No one needs to be truly named to the support team. On the background there is often thought that customer service can be revolting job and that is why the responsibility needs to be separated. Best part of the winding system is maintaining expertise and variety in the work. When tasks change all the time it can be experienced as positive thing.

Solid organization is better solution. Then people have gravitated to the customer service work. They have right attitude and understand the importance of the customer service. Other benefits are constant quality of service, fluent teamwork and better customer satisfaction. Winding system works better when it's executed outward of solid support staff, so that solid service people get variety to the working. (Roos et al. 2001, 35-36.)

Customer's skill levels variety a lot and their contacts fluctuate a lot. It is undue to assume that regular service person could handle all these questions. Often customer servicer has to transfer responsibility to someone with better know-how. (Roos 2003a: 21.)

Customer support organization has usually at least two levels. First level handles contacts immediately. If they do not find a solution they transfer issues to level two.

Second level solves more difficult problems that take more time. People who work in other parts of the organization can be part of the second level. Two levels are necessary because support has to always be available.

Third level is often situated outside of the organization. Typical third level actors can be producer or importer. Customer service does not usually contact third level actors, instead second level authority usually take care of that.

Zero level is a relatively new concept and it means that customer gets answer on its own initiative from a system or software. (Roos et al. 2001, 47-48.)

According to (Roos 2003a, 22.), all the four levels of help desk are demonstrated in the attached model. Help desk has to always answer to the customers, solve 80% of issues and take 100% responsibility, understand customer, book all the matters under consideration, prevent recurrence of problem and take care of briefing.

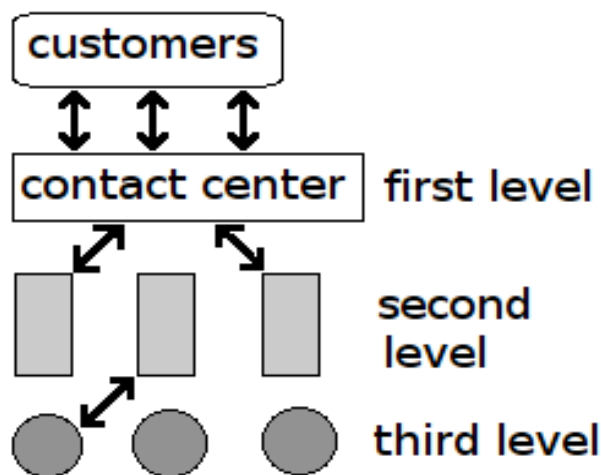


Figure 1. Help desk model. (Roos 2003a: 22.)

Support process requires usually some kind of second level. It's not good situation if support services have to solve hour lasting problems, because it has negative effect to the accessibility. (Roos et al. 2001, 27.)

Contacts with customers should be booked. Booking can be done during the contact as recommended, or after it. Booking can be large or abridged. Well-done bookings can be utilized afterwards. If in question is problem situation, earlier booked solutions can be helpful information. If problem cannot be solved it is moved to the background support. In that case

issue is registered to “open” and moved to the working line. Case processing control ends when customer has got the answer. Number of tries to contact, number of successful contacts and queuing time are the most important measurements of the process. (Roos et al. 2001, 59.)

Customer support should make plans for most probable crisis situations. Crisis can derive from technology, sufficiency of staff and different unexpected situations. Often moment in time makes the crisis worse. For an example the worst situation of a year can happen when experienced staff is away and only trainees are present. (Roos et al. 2001, 61.)

2.5 Keys to Success in Support

To the quality of support service impacts four crucial elements:

- Expertise
- Motivation
- Case processing
- Accessibility

Good expertise is much more than just ability to solve problems. Expertise can be estimated with following grading:

Weak	Cannot solve tasks.
Satisfying	Can do tasks regardless the shortages. Has desire and ability to solve the given task.
Good	Has desire and ability to explain to himself and others how the result was achieved and explain the chosen devices and procedures.
Commendable	Has will and ability to see oneself and work comprehensively, develop oneself and working.

(Roos 2003a, 16.)

Expertise can be divided in three divisions:

1. Work community skills
2. Occupational technical skills
3. Occupational internal skills

To the work community skills belongs that one knows the support organization, his role in it and the targets of the customer support. He must have good communication skills and know well his tools and software. He must be responsible, he must take responsibility of customers problems. Gathering and sharing information is essential part of work. (Roos 2003a, 17.)

Occupational technical skills mean that professional knows his devices. Those are: Company's systems, contacting ways, office system, case processing system, booking, information retrieval and tracing operation. (Roos 2003a, 17-18.)

Good occupational internal skills include principles of customer service, ethical principles of customer service and elements of personal service quality. Reference is to know how to control customer service situation: reception of a customer, listening and gathering information, controlling situation and empathy. Important features are also good ability to solve problems, spoken presentation and literal expression. (Roos 2003a, 18.)

Motivation is very important factor in the customer service. It is difficult to hide lack of motivation most people sense it easily. It is difficult to motivate anyone, but still worth trying. Things that decrease motivation are indefinite targets, unclear responsibilities, recrimination, injustice and internal conflicts. (Roos 2003a, 18-19.)

It is necessity for help desk to have working case processing. Small help desk can operate without a proper flowchart, but it is necessary for bigger help desks. Most simple case processing model answer to following questions: how to answer to phone, how different problems are handled, how does the cooperating with different support group levels work, what is booked and what is done if issue is not solved. (Roos 2003a, 19.)

Good accessibility needs easiness and fastness. Easiness means that you know where to contact. Fastness means that phone is answered within 20 seconds and emails are replied within 2 hours. Service times must correspond to customers' needs.

Accessibility of the customer support must on a good level. When help desk is small it is important that every employee understand the importance of accessibility. Support center must be able to answer to the contacts at normal office hours. (Roos 2003a, 16-20.)

2.6 Maintaining Know-how

Different kind of background processes are needed to support the actual support process. Most important of those is maintaining know-how.

Important tools of maintaining expertise are need mapping and know-how spectrum. Need mapping is a way to find out what kind of expertise is needed at help desk. Areas of expertise can be defined for an example to three levels:

1. Compulsories that everyone should manage at least well.
2. Useful that is not absolutely necessary to manage.
3. Special areas, which are not meaningful to teach everyone.

Know-how spectrum expresses every help desk employees' expertise level at different areas of expertise. It can be measured with following spectrum:

1. Cannot use or can poorly
2. Can use
3. Can teach
4. Can develop

Usually level 3 is enough at help desk work. In that case employee can hold a basic course, but does not know all the special features included to the process. At level 4 employee can tune software and utilize even its exotic features. Usually this is second level help desk work.

Know-how spectrum is useful in many ways. It expresses with one glance the state of expertise and where are the biggest weaknesses. Based on this it is easy to make personal development plans, or to plan working shifts and holidays. (Roos 2003a, 31-32.)

2.7 Solving Problems

Normalizing means getting back to the normal situation. A good problem solver uses considered and positive operations to get dissatisfied customer satisfied again. Normalization process should start when a problem is recognized. (Performance Research Associates 2006, 93.)

The flowchart in the figure 2 presents how to assimilate, define and solve problem. If you cannot assimilate a situation you face the risk of misunderstanding problems. Not solving problems in the first time means you might need to redo or undo work, and that can be costly. When issues are in-line you can qualify them with asking questions. When you ask questions it allows you to control interaction. Once you have assimilated and defined a situation you can begin to fix it. You should assimilate before defining and define before fixing. This custom allows you to master events, instead of events mastering you. During the assimilating and defining process it is possible to consult supervisor. (Coscia 1998, 36-37.)

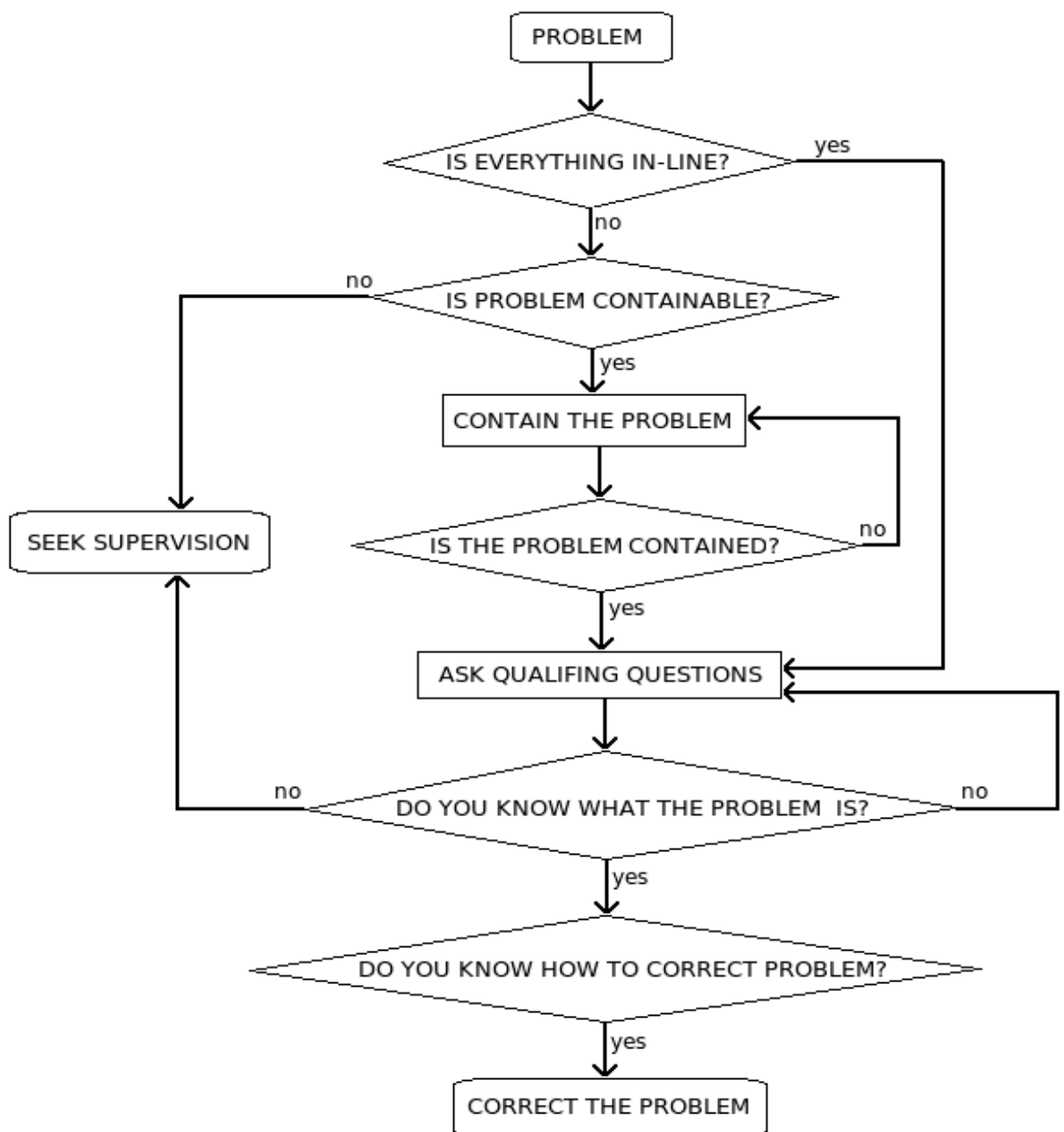


Figure 2. Contain, Qualify and Correct. (Coscia 1998, 37)

Prioritizing means putting things in order of importance. Seriousness of a problem depends on the operating methods and order. (Roos et al. 2001, 59-60.)

When a problem is solved it is important to tell the customer what is done or will be done. Often the problem is solved during the phone call. Then it is enough that the customer verifies that the solution works and the situation is clear. Then the phone call can be ended. If the situation cannot be solved you must promise when the problem can be solved or explain why the issue is not possible to solve in the way that the customer wants. These are critical situations from the customer's satisfaction angle.

General principle is that about the solution should be told:

1. Why this solution is chosen.
2. What and when is done or will be done.
3. What consequences does operation have.
4. What customer should do if the solution does not work.

(Roos 2003a, 41.)

2.8 Customer's Expectations

Customers have their own expectations about every customer service event. Depending on the experience customers build a perception about you and what you can do for them. When you fail fulfilling the wishes of a customer, whether you know about them or not it has the same effect as breaking any promise. Most of the promises given to the customer are made by you. When you tell the customer that "I will take care of this during this day", you will take responsibility of these promises. (Performance Research Associates 2006, 17.)

According to (Roos 2003a: 10.) service always starts with a promise. Service provider gives a promise and customer bids. A promise can be given in many ways. Promises are presented in leaflets and service descriptions. In many cases vendor gives very concrete promises. Customer service does not always know what has been promised to the customer.

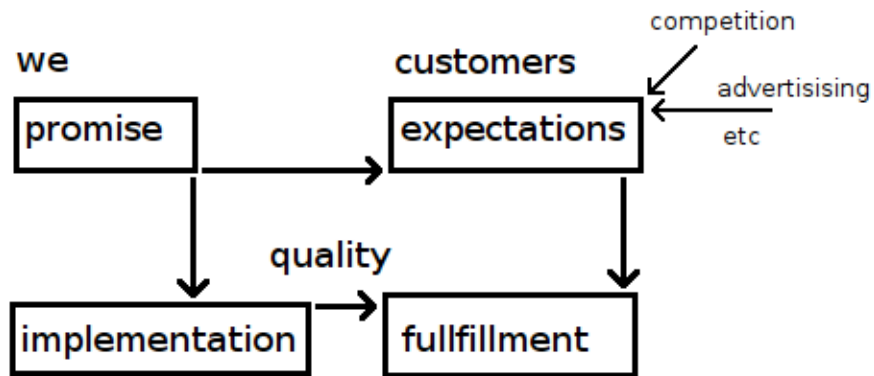


Figure 3. Quality of the service (Roos 2003a, 10)

When interacting with people we must be abreast of their perceptions of, experiences, situations and people. Everyone's perception of situations will be at least a little bit different. Often perceptions are developed over a period of time and reflect to how we have been treated, our values, priorities and sensitivity to others. Customers cannot remember all the details of an experience, but they will recall overall feeling about it. That feeling conducted with other experiences will create their perception of you and your company. (Elaine 2003, 15.)

According to Elaine (2003, 18-19) with following instructions you can begin trying to exceed customers' expectations:

- Become familiar with customers. Learn to know who they are and why they are doing trade with you.
- Ask from your customers what they are expecting. Solve what they see as a benefit about cooperating with you.
- Announce to your customers what they can expect. Express to the customers your commitment for them.
- Fulfill their expectations. Be aware of what you have said that you would do.

- Maintain consistency. Do not promise anything what you cannot do, but always give a consistent service. Customers appreciate that they will always have the same positive experience when they do business with you.

One important thing to remember when fulfilling customers' expectations is that expectations are always changing. What was previously your benefit compared to what your competitors are doing can disappear totally at the next moment. If we do not stay up to date with the competition situation we might not be aware of our customer's current expectations. (Elaine 2003, 18-19.)

When you serve customers you can and you should control what you promise to the customers. When you know what customers are expecting, you have possibility to modify their expectations to correspond your real abilities to help them. (Performance Research Associates 2006, 17.)

2.9 Interaction

Customer can be the best source of new ideas, if you can ask advice in the right way to developing possibilities from them. In the traditional customer queries made by phone or with a form the thinness of information may become a problem. When you are listening to the customer a good conversationalist reacts to the comments and search more depth to it. Questions where conversations leads are not usually prepared, but you have to same time process, interpret and combine meanings. (Mattinen 2006, 43-44.)

For many companies an internal analysis is the foundation of creating strategy. This kind of analyses tend to be dreams of management, far from reality or too far to be achieved. Our customers can give us more honest picture of our strengths and weaknesses. (Mattinen 2006, 45.)

Instead of trying to decrease the number of complaints companies should try to increase them, because they tell what the customers really want. (Barlow & Moller 1998, 34.)

You cannot always keep the given promises. All the factors that affect to the experiences customers get are not in your control. When you notice that given promise is not kept you should first apologize. Never spend time in finding a scapegoat or blaming yourself, company

or customer. Admit that something has gone wrong and try to immediately find out what the customer now needs. Find out have there appeared new problems, or do you now have a chance to save your reputation as a trustworthy customer servicer.

(Elaine 2003, 19.)

2.10 Processing Spontaneous Feedback

Spontaneous feedback is usually given when a customer thanks or criticizes the reserved service. Processing spontaneous feedback is passive customer feedback acquisition. Information is received only when a customer gives it unprompted. This kind of information is very valuable and its purchase cost is very low. In many companies resources of processing customer reclamations should be much higher and is should have own process because most customers appreciate fast answer for their feedback. (Roos et al. 63-64.)

2.11 Common Problems

There are many barriers in the way of excellent customer service. Some of the common problems include difficulties for customers with a problem to contact a company or the person who can help; unsafe equipment; servitude company policies; difficult-to-understand warranties or owner's manuals; out-of-date procedures and misunderstanding the value of the service. Many of these barriers are out of control for the customer service provider. Some barriers instead are within control of the customer service provider including laziness, poor communications skills, attitude, and moodiness, lack of sufficient training, inability to handle stress, insufficient authority, and deficient staffing. (Elaine 2003, 14.)

Most typical problems in the support function are maintaining know-how, functionality of the process and internal cooperation, keeping and recruiting new staff and introduction of new technology. It is a big challenge to educate customer support where staff can solve most of the customers' issues. On the other hand continuous education can lead to a situation where employees progress on their careers away from the customer support. (Roos et al. 2001, 26-27.)

2.12 Utilizing Customer Query

Collecting customer feedback can have only negative effect if the results are not benefited the right way. Phases of utilizing feedback are:

- Verifying the results. Surprisingly often news are not true. Verify that results are reliable.
- Acceptation of the results. Information includes often surprising and sometimes tedious knowledge. Accept the results and make sure everyone else approves too.
- Internal processing and reporting. Review the results with whole organization. Let everyone to express their proposals about following operations. Mirroring own picture with the customers' eyes is shaking experience and gives stimulates for progression.
- Action. Mobilize operations if results demand so.
- Telling to the customers. Use results constantly in your interacting with customers. Show that you know what your customers think and your caring about their opinions.

(Roos et al. 2001, 120-121.)

3 Sievo's Customer Support Process

First customer support work in Sievo was done late in the year 2007. At first there was only support email address where customers sent their issues. Soon organizing emails manually proved to be impossible. Sievo decided to buy customer support solution from other company. Sievo's new support solution was introduced in June 2008. (Lauttia, M. 13.3.2009.)

3.1 Process Steps

At the moment process goes with the following way. Customer notices a problem in Sievo's software and needs to find a solution for it.

Support level zero is Sievo User Guide that is given for customers' use. From there is possible for customers to find answers to for an example how to use Sievo's software on their own initiative. First support level is located in the customer's company. Sievo educates at least one main user that can give answer to the general problems, for example regarding to how to use the Sievo's software. If the main user cannot solve the issue, usually he contacts by email to Sievo's customers support email address. Consequently Sievo's customer support is the second support level. Third level of support is Sievo's employee who has more specific know-how about certain issue.

According to (Roos et al. 2001. 47.), in customer support it is important to have clearly defined process. In Sievo's process scheme (figure 9 in appendix 1.) different support levels are not described.

Sievo's customer support system forms automatically support tickets from received emails. Every support ticket gets its own ticket ID. With the ticket ID all the correspondence regarding certain ticket are saved and can be seen afterwards. As seen in the figure 4 tickets can be set to different status.

Content Type	Support Ticket ▾
Title *	<input type="text"/>
Description	<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px;"> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 100px; width: 100%;"></div> </div>
Contact person	<input type="text"/>
Contact email	<input type="text"/>
Customer	<input type="text"/>
Initiated	3.3.2009 14: ▾ 35 ▾
Priority	(2) Normal ▾
Status	<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px;"> In Progress ▾ Not Started In Progress Completed Deferred Waiting on someone else Trash can </div>
Assigned To	<input type="text"/>
Start Date	<input type="text"/>
Due Date	<input type="text"/>
Internal comment	<input type="text"/>

Figure 4. Ticket form

When new support emails have arrived and ticket consisted, idea is that support's operatively responsible employee solve as much tickets as one can. As seen in the figure 9 in appendix 1, directions are now that if you can solve the ticket in less than 30 minutes, do it and test the solution. After that answer to the customer that problem is solved.

If solving the problem seems to take more than 30 minutes you should first answer to the customer that ticket is received and you are working to find a solution to it. After it is solved test your solution, answer to the customer and express that problem is corrected. Customers cannot see Sievo's ticket system, but it has been planned that in the future they would see the status of their own tickets.

In March 2009 customer support phone was introduced. Email is intended to be primary contact way, but for instant issues phone is faster way for customer to find a solution. If customer calls regarding to new issue, support ticket should be created manually from the Sievo's side. From that manually created ticket should transpire what was the problem and how it was corrected.

3.2 Support Roles

There is one fulltime employee in Sievo's customer support. Other people take care of the support work besides their other work. The operatively responsible person's responsibility is that when new ticket appears the customer gets answer that we have received the ticket. One to also either start working on a ticket by myself or find other employee who takes care of it. If a ticket turns out to be too difficult to solve by self, it is advisable to consult project manager or other employee with better know-how. Consequently Sievo's customer support is organized in solid way. Solid and winding support processes are defined in chapter 2.4.

3.3 Customer Support Ticket Tracing System Analysis

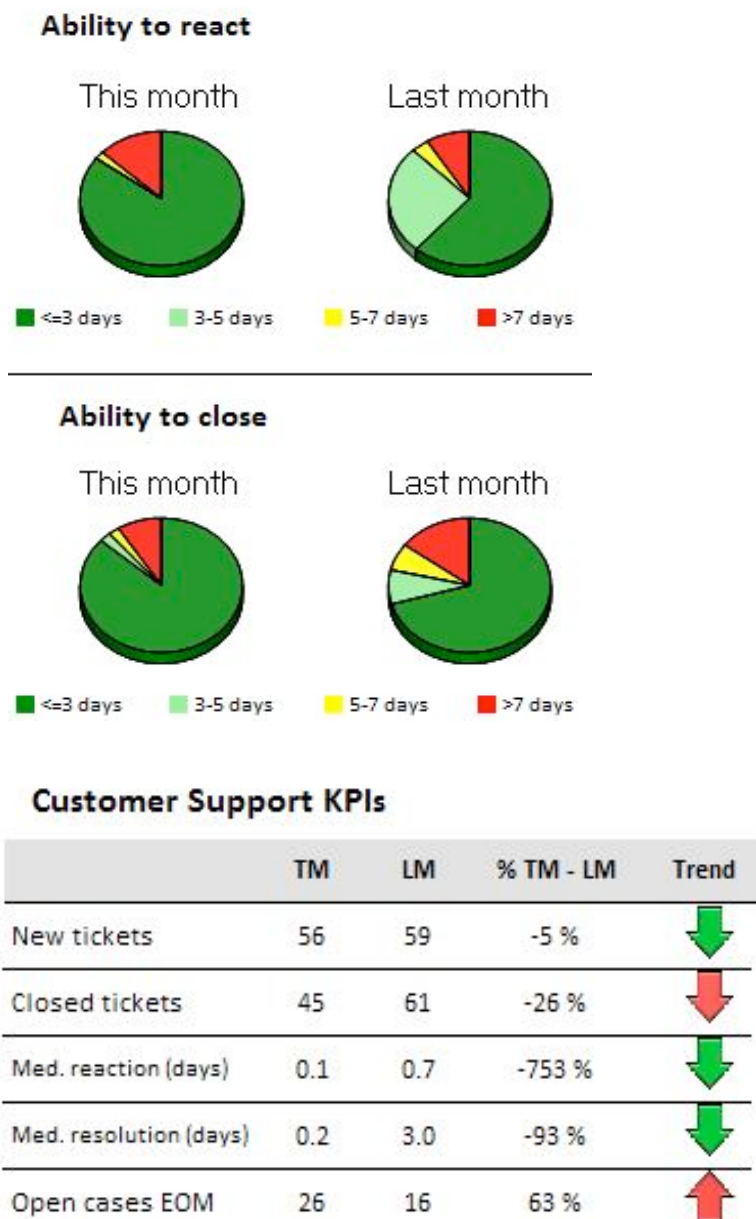
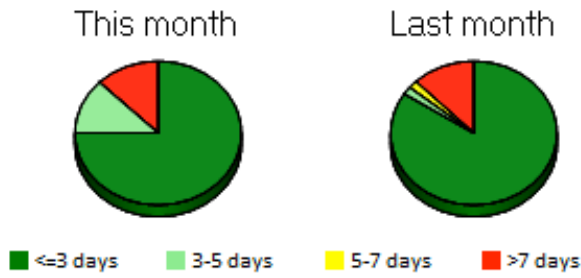


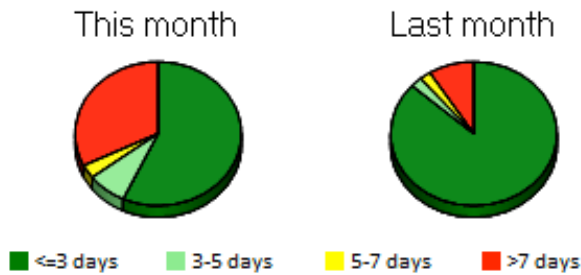
Figure 5. Customer support report in February 2009

Most of the January there was not fulltime employee taking care of support work, because person who is operatively responsible was away. In February there was responsible of operative side of customer support for the whole month. From the figure 5 above you can interpret that it is important to have at least one person who takes care of the support process full timely.

Ability to react



Ability to close



Customer Support KPIs

	TM	LM	% TM - LM	Trend
New tickets	49	56	-13 %	↓
Closed tickets	65	45	44 %	↑
Med. reaction (days)	0.1	0.1	27 %	↑
Med. resolution (days)	1.8	0.2	725 %	↑
Open cases EOM	16	27	-41 %	↓

Figure 6. Customer support report in March 2009

Customer support report for March seems worse than report for February. This results mostly from using customer support's ticket system for project works. Projects works last usually longer than support issues and that is why "Ability to close" figure is not on good level.

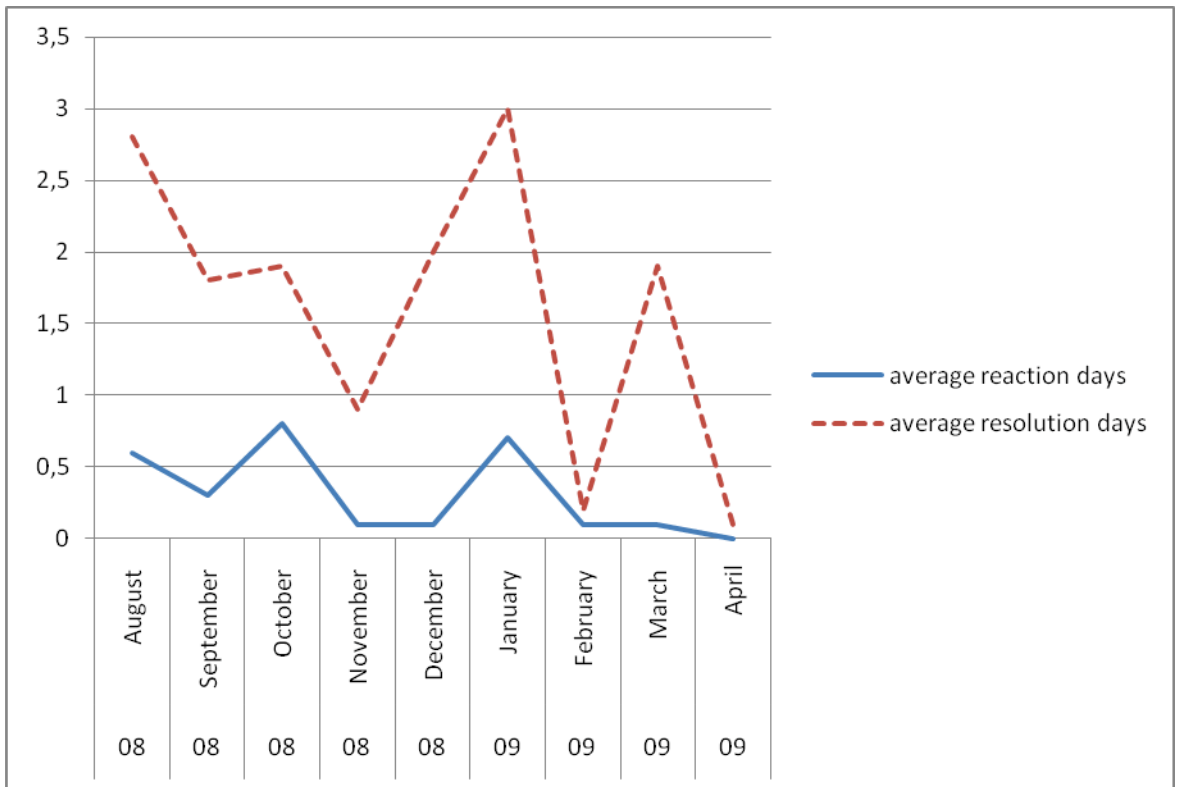


Figure 7. Reaction and Resolution days

In the November of 2008 customer support started to be organized in the solid way. From the figure 7 above you can derive that support work varies a lot, but the reaction and resolution times are going to good direction.

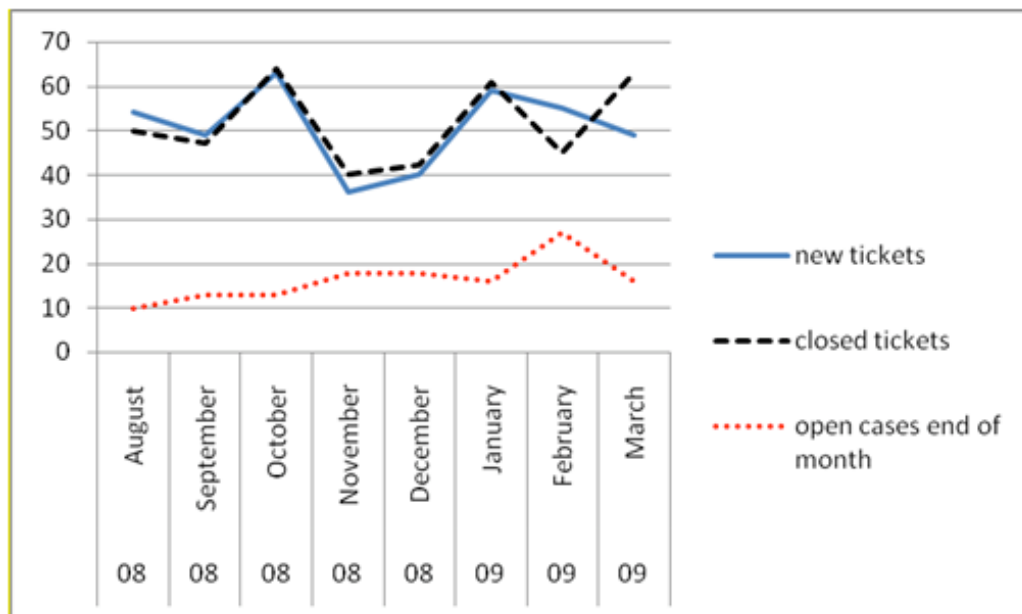


Figure 8. New Tickets, Closed Tickets and Open Cases End of Month

In the figure 8 can be seen that there is monthly variety in the number of new support tickets. Open cases end of month line has been increasing. Reason for it is that there has been each month some tickets that were not able to solve on time.

4 Sievo's Employees Opinions about Customer Support

Interviews were executed at Sievo office. With interviews target was to clarify, how do the employees at Sievo experience the customer support work? Goal was also to find out what they thought about current process and what kind of developing ideas they had.

Interviewees were:

Aapo Kuulasmaa, Solution Consultant

Johan-Peter Teppala, Manager, Project Deployment

Markus Luttia, Product Manager

Philip Lima, Solution Consultant

Timo Nikkanen, Data Integration Specialist

Markus Luttia implemented the present customer support system and was principal chief of support in the year 2008. Johan-Peter Teppala is the present principal chief of customer support. He has been also involved to the support process earlier by solving the support tickets. Aapo Kuulasmaa, Philip Lima and Timo Nikkanen have all experience of doing different kind of support tasks since 2008.

Questions were a little different to each person depending on their role in customer support.

4.1 Good Things in Support Process

Support ticket system is functioning, because you can track from the ticket site if tickets are open or completed and see all correspondence that has been done regarding to the support issue. (Teppala, J-P. 13.3.2009.), (Kuulasmaa, A. 9.3.2009.), (Nikkanen, T. 6.3.2009.), (Lima, P. 12.3.2009.)

At the present assigning tickets to employees and their responsibility of working on them is at good level. (Teppala)

Generally speaking Sievo's employees think customer support processes present state is at good level and it is technically functioning well.

4.2 What Does Not Work?

Process that defines who is supposed to take care of certain ticket could be more clear. (Kuulasmaa) Especially when more difficult ticket arrives it is not perfectly clear what should be done. (Lauttia, M. 13.3.2009.) There are problems with setting right status to the tickets. Sometimes support process has been totally skipped, for an example support work has been done even though ticket has not been opened. (Teppala & Lauttia) This could derive from the lack of education. (Lauttia)

It should be considered that what happens when operatively responsible person cannot take responsibility of a ticket. At least in the past difficult tickets might have been ignored, because it was not defined how those situations should be handled. Also answer to support requests has been many times too late. (Lauttia)

4.3 Developing Topics

Customers should have better visibility to status of tickets that they have made. At the moment they only see status of tickets from emails received from Sievo. They should easily see all the interacting that has been made concerning a certain ticket. (Lauttia & Teppala) Before this amendment can be done updating the status of tickets should work in a proper way. (Teppala)

Important developing topic is to introduce customer support phone. This would make interacting with customers more efficient. (Teppala)

Tickets that are reported by phone might need own kind of ticket forms. We need to watch how present ticket system works combined to phone interaction. (Teppala)

One idea is that when customer creates a ticket there could be structured form that they could fulfill and describe the problem. This way support employee would have better idea about what is problem and what should be done. This could also prevent the risk of misconceptions. It would make the work also easier for new employee to solve a ticket, because there is often very customer specific data that needs to be known to solve an issue. (Kuulasmaa) On the

other hand it would make creating new tickets more cumbersome for customers and dealing with Sievo should be as easy as possible for them. (Lima)

At the moment situation is very difficult for support employees when a project is moved to the customer support side, because there is so much customer specific information that one needs to know. Now there is shortage of available project specific information. From this derives that tickets are often signed to the project manager of concerned project. (Lauttia & Teppala)

Customer specific information should be documented in a readable form, including data that is deviant from the standard setup. It could contain for an example flowcharts about how customized calculations are executed. Now one learns little by little, here and there about the customizations. (Teppala)

Customers' knowledge could be better about what and when to make support ticket and when to take contact in other way. (Kuulasmaa) In case of some customers the know-how of support users could be better. This would preempt number of tickets that are sent to Sievo. (Lauttia & Teppala)

4.4 Resources

Sensibleness of support work is dependent of situation with other tasks. If situation is busy, the support work is experienced as burden. Otherwise it is as pleasant as any other work. (Kuulasmaa & Nikkanen) One idea could be that support work should be considered when weekly or monthly working schedules are planned. (Lima & Kuulasmaa) For an example if there are projects going to be moved to the support side there is probably more support work ahead and resource planning should take that into account. Now there is gap between forecasted and realized hours and one reason is that support work is not considered enough. (Lima)

On the other hand it should be decided that is it acceptable to use project employees continuously to the support work. If it is, it should be considered when planning resources. (Lauttia)

There are not enough backup resources for support work at Sievo. There should be at least one person who should take responsibility about support when operatively responsible person is away. (Lauttia)

5 Conclusions

Interviews were good a way to get information about what is functioning well in Sievo's customer support and what should be improved.

Effectively functioning customer support process needs accurately defined process and tracing system. Technically Sievo's customer support is functioning well. Ticket system is a good tool to organize and trace support issues.

Customer support tickets and project tasks should be however handled separately in ticket tracing system. Otherwise it confuses the ticket tracing system as seen in the figure 6.

Support process is not clear enough for all the employees in Sievo, who are involved in the process. There ought to be a clear process scheme where everyone's roles and different support levels are defined. This scheme should be presented to all those employees at Sievo who are involved in customer support process. Customer support is very important part of customer satisfactory. That is why people who are dealing with support work should be aware of the process and its consequences. There is also lack of training in using the ticket system.

To have a functioning support process it is important to have main responsible that takes care that all support tickets are noticed and the customers are getting the needed answers. Solid way organized support process is the best solution for Sievo, because it lets project resources to concentrate better to other than support tasks. There should be a clear plan about how customer support is organized when main operative responsible is not available. Ideal solution would be a reserve employee who could take responsibility of the process when necessary.

Sensibility of support work is straight comparable to situation with other tasks. Support work fluctuates quite a lot and often very project specific information is needed to solve problems. It is impossible for one employee to solve all the issues. That means that project resources are needed also in the support side. When monthly hour resources are planned the estimated customer support hours should be taken into account in individual level. This would prevent the risk of too much overwork.

Customer query did not fit to this research schedule, but it is important to implement the query in the future. Customers' aspect is very important when support process is developed. Lack of customers' aspect limits conclusions of this research.

Results of this research could be one source when customer support process is planned. Especially this could introduce aspects of Sievo's employees when customer support process is updated.

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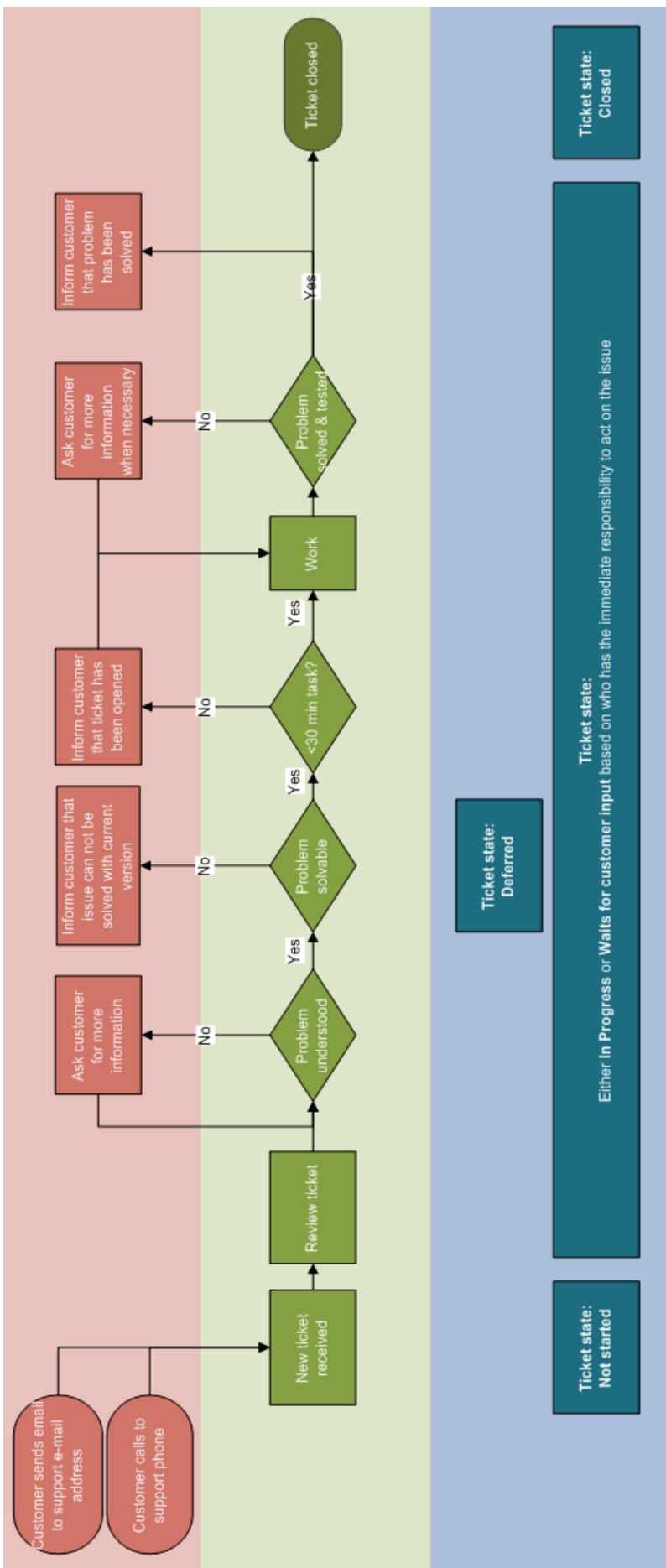


Figure 9. Sievo's customers support process scheme

Thesis Final Project Report

Sievo's management team was interested about how well Sievo's customer support was functioning. They introduced idea about making thesis about it. I worked already in Sievo and I did a lot of support work, so it sounded a good idea. I had experience about making a little same kind of investigation for the seminar work in Haaga-Helia. Topic was then "Customer Service in Web Stores".

1.1. Archived Results

This research collected Sievo's employees' opinions about customer support, gathered theory background from literal sources and got information about support process from Sievo's intranet.

Interviewees had good points about current support process and relevant development ideas. Results of interviews, context and Sievo's intranet information are combined in conclusions. This information was able to fulfill research target: "produce new and useful information that can be useful when thinking about how customer support process should be improved".

Customers' aspect would have been important, but it did not fit to this research's schedule.

1.2. Process and Progression of the Work

Project plan was done in schedule, but background took longer time than I expected. It was finished two weeks late. There are not very much literal sources about customer support available, so it was not easy to put the theory together. Searching sources from different schools' libraries helped to find suitable sources and putting the context together. After finishing customer support theory the schedule was reached.

Original plan was to include customer query to the project results. During the project I heard from Sievo's management team that customer query cannot be implemented with this research's schedule. This made this research shorter and more unilateral. If I had known this from the beginning I would have probably made more detailed interviews with Sievo's people.

Most important source of all was interviewing. They could give most essential and detailed information to answer to the research problems.

Project meetings were good way to define research goal more accurately and hear feedback about archived results.

1.3. Expenses

There were no personal expenses included in this research. I was allowed to use working time to make this, so that could be thought as investment for Sievo.

1.4. Used Resources

1. Original schedule:

21.1.-27.1. Point 1. Making the project plan (30 hours)

27.1. Project start-up meeting

28.1.-30.1. Point 2. Finishing project plan (10 hours)

31.1.-11.2. Point 3. Finishing background theory (60 hours)

12.2.-22.2. Point 4. Preparing interviews (30 hours)

23.2.-29.2. Point 5. Making interviews and writing the results down (20 hours)

30.2.-29.3. Point 6. Analyzing the results of interviews, (query) and background theory (130 hours)

18.3. Second project meeting 9:00 AM at Sievo office

30.3.-19.4. Point 7. Making the conclusions (75 hours)

20.4.-28.4. Point 8. Finalizing project (35 hours)

29.4. Final project meeting 9:00 AM at Sievo office

Total: 390 hours

2. Updated schedule:

21.1.-27.1. Point 1. Making the project plan (32 hours)

27.1. Project start-up meeting (1 hour)

28.1.-30.1. Point 2. Finishing project plan (12 hours)

31.1.-23.2. Point 3. Finishing background theory (65 hours)

24.2.-5.3. Point 4. Preparing interviews (28 hours)

6.3.-13.3. Point 5. Making interviews and writing the results down (19 hours)

14.3.-29.3. Point 6. Analyzing the results of interviews, ticket tracing information from intranet and background theory (100 hours)

18.3. Second project meeting 9:00 AM at Sievo office (1 hour)

30.3.-19.4. Point 7. Making the conclusions (65 hours)

20.4.-28.4. Point 8. Finalizing project (53 hours)

29.4. Final project meeting 9:00 AM at Sievo office (1 hours)

Total: 377 hours

Finishing background theory and finalizing the whole project took more time than I expected. Otherwise project progressed pretty smoothly. It was really good opportunity to use working time at Sievo to make this research done.

1.5. Learning Experiences

It was good learning experience to familiarize into literal sources. Preparing and making interviews was instructive way to gather information. It is enlarging to hear what other people think about the subject.

1.6. Proposals for Future Operations

Customer query is important to implement later. This research could be considered as one source when customer support process is developed by Sievo management team.

1.7. Recommends About Changing Procedures

Risk analysis could have been wider. The fact that customer query does not fit to this research schedule was surprisingly revealed in the middle of the process and it was not included to the risk analysis. Haaga-Helia reporting standards should be clear from the beginning, because the bigger the text is, bigger job it is to correct.

Interview Questions

Questions that were asked from all the interviewees:

How functioning Sievo's customer support process is at the moment?

What are the good sides of it?

What about bad sides?

What are the most important developing areas?

Should the support work be concerned more when monthly resources are planned?

Questions for Aapo Kuulasmaa, Timo Nikkanen and Philip Lima:

Do you feel support work as burden or is it as pleasant as any other work?

How support work could be more pleasant?

Do you have enough resources to do support work?

Questions for only Markus Luttia:

When was the first support work done in Sievo?

How was Sievo's support process evaluated from there to the current process?

Question for only Johan-Peter Teppala:

What kind of introduction the customer's main user gets about using the Sievo's software?

Questions for only Johan-Peter Teppala & Markus Luttia:

Are the main users capable enough to use Sievo's software and solve issues?

Should the support work be concerned more when monthly resources are planned?