A Toolkit for Better Communication and Collaboration
Businesses need to innovate more, while at the same time delivering unprecedented levels of IT availability, stability, and security. The rise of DevOps brings a new perspective on velocity and continuous feedback across the groups responsible for development, testing, deploying, and supporting these applications and services. Proper communication, collaboration and synchronization between cross-functional teams has become more important than ever before, but especially during time-sensitive events, such as new releases, hot-fix deployments, cyber-attacks, and major incidents.

In this six-part toolkit, we'll explore some of the ways to increase the speed and accuracy of communications, thereby reducing impact, downtime, and time spent “keeping the lights on.”

1. The Importance of Communications Within the IT Organization: The Big Picture
2. Challenges and Solutions for Communication in Large Organizations
3. How to Reduce Adverse Business Impacts
4. How to Minimize Time Spent on “Firefighting”
5. Tips for Getting Past Communication Pain Points
The Importance of Communications Within the IT Organization: The Big Picture

When it’s performing at its best, an IT organization is a team. Some of the attributes of great teams are collaboration, mutual respect, no finger-pointing, solidarity, accountability. None of this is possible without proper communication. Teams of all kinds thrive on communication; collaboration is impossible without it. When these communications are incomplete, misunderstood, or do not reach the intended recipients, team functions become, at best, inefficient and ineffective, and, at worst, counterproductive.

Day-to-Day Communications

More and more workers are mobile and/or remote. Many may be using devices of their own choosing (BYOD). The days of standard office communications such as email and desktop phones are—at least in many cases—all but over.

Additionally, the need to keep staff levels optimal means having people on call in a 24×7 world. Manually tracking and charting on-call schedules may complicate communications when they matter most. A robust tool that can manage scheduling and automate communications can help you create a more responsive IT department, while at the same time minimizing risk and increasing customer satisfaction.

During normal operations, it’s important for communications to be clear, accurate, and timely. IT team members shouldn’t be spending time trying to track down a person or the status of an incident or service request. With today’s business emphasis on velocity, it’s more important than ever that lines of communication be open. When the unexpected happens, communications become even more important.

During Critical Incidents

Effective communication goes a long way toward reducing the contact volume (call/contact avoidance or contact management) during an unplanned outage and preventing what is known as a “call storm.” Remember, if you’ve been successful at making the support center a single point of contact (SPOC), you’ve conditioned your end users/customers to contact the support center when something goes wrong.

Tools, however, are only part of the equation. They won’t be effective unless you have a good plan for how to use them.
During an outage, communicate appropriately, early, and often. Your end users/customers will want answers to some very basic questions:

- Do you know about this problem?
- How can I get work done?
- When will it be fixed?

As clearly as possible, let them know what happened, what they can do in the absence of the affected service, and when the service will be restored. The estimated time of restoration should be updated every time information is communicated. It may mean the difference between managers deciding to keep staff in the business units at work or releasing them until the service has been restored.

Getting information out to stakeholders and end users can minimize a call storm and keep support and other IT personnel available for the work of managing the incident.

For every minute of system downtime, there are severe effects on the business: angry end users/customers, a reduction in employee productivity, frustrated executives, and often an impact on revenue or, in the case of hospitals, patient safety (see Part 3). Not only should IT teams strive to resolve the major issue as quickly as possible, they must also make sure they communicate with key stakeholders to prevent confusion and ease concern.

**Important Takeaways**

- Understand the importance of good communications with the team, department, and business units
- Have plans and tools in place for critical communications
- Have a multifaceted communications plan to reach the right people at the right time
- Use the right tools and methods for everyday communications
- Eliminate as many manual procedures as possible

*Part 1 features extracts from Roy Atkinson’s HDI white paper, “Communicating and Staffing for Unplanned Outages” (2012), ubm.io/2jrZby5*
Organizational size and complexity often go hand in hand. The larger and more complex the organization becomes, the more complex the communication issues become. Consider the challenges of global organizations:

- Time zones
- Cultural differences
- Preferred communication channels and methods
- Organizational hierarchies and boundaries

### The Challenges of Time and Distance

Of course, we want to communicate in a timely fashion, but we sometimes fail to understand what that really means. A high-priority email sent in the afternoon to recipients who are in a time zone where it’s the middle of the night may not convey the desired sense of urgency when it’s read eight hours later.

Keeping far-flung team members who work in different parts of a country or around the world in sync requires effort, thought, and planning. But luckily, there are many practices and tools that can help solve this riddle.

- Set expectations for frequency and type of communication
- Have regular meetings scheduled at times that are fair and considerate
- Have open channels for incidental communication (a “virtual water cooler”)
- Use video to best advantage
- Include remote teams in as much as possible with on-demand conferencing
- Get frequent feedback
- Prepare for escalations and major incidents

For more information on these topics, view this webinar presented by Brandon Caudle and Vincent Geffray.

### Addressing Cultural Differences

Different cultures create different types of communication. One illustration is the difference between high-context and low-context communication styles and the difference between relationship-based and rule-based cultures. John Hooker explains:

As a rule, cultures with western European roots rely more heavily on low-context communication. These include Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States, as well as much of Europe. The rest of the world tends toward high-context communication...
Behavior in relationship-based cultures is regulated through close supervision by authority figures. This requires that authority be respected, and it therefore resides in persons with whom one has significant relationships, such as parents, elders, bosses, or even departed ancestors. Improper behavior is deterred by shame, loss of face, punishment, or ostracism...

Rule-based cultures are distinguished by two characteristics: (a) people respect the rules for their own sake, while rules in relationship-based cultures derive their authority from the persons who lay them down; and (b) compliance with rules is often encouraged by guilt feelings and fear of punishment if one happens to be caught violating the rules, rather than shame and constant supervision.

Knowing how members of your organization need to receive their communications—regardless of the technology involved—can avoid misunderstandings and ensure your messages are understood and any directions are followed.

There may also be strong preferences for one communication style and/or channel or another due to differences in age (generational differences). Brad Shirilla lays those differences out as follows:

- We see Baby Boomers who communicate primarily through calling the various offices and using interoffice mail to transfer documents around the office.
- Generation X associates are more familiar with using email but also use the phone as a way to communicate. Depending on the situation many Generation X’ers inter-branch documents or drop off documents to departments in person.
- Millennials are commonly communicating through the organizational chat and email system, and prefer to hand deliver documents to specific departments.

**Mobile and Multichannel Solutions That Work**

Workers of all generations and cultures are more mobile than ever, but pushing a notification to a mobile device might not be enough. A two-way mobile communication system can increase knowledge about any ongoing incidents by facilitating feedback from those on or close to the scene or with the most understanding of the occurrence.

Having a multimodal, intelligent notification solution can facilitate notifications to the right people at the right time in the right way. This helps address the complications of organizational hierarchies and boundaries by targeting the appropriate recipients via paths that ensure messages are received and attended to.

Combining the right solutions with the right understanding of the culture and complexity of the organization facilitates communication when it’s critical, as well as during day-to-day activities.
How to Reduce Adverse Business Impacts

The intent of incident management is to minimize the effects of a service interruption on a business as a whole, as well as on individual end users/customers. Any automation that can be applied to the process will accelerate the flow of information and enable a faster resolution.

The response and outreach process—including communications and notifications—can be automated. IT service alerting solutions are often used to help achieve this level of automation. Some important elements of such a solution include:

- On-call schedule management to know who’s responsible for what
- Ready-to-use templates with predefined messages
- Preset/predefined lists of the appropriate message recipients
- One-click access to conference bridges
- Instant messaging and group chat for better collaboration

During a critical incident, every second counts. The cost of downtime in businesses can be astronomical. According to The Ponemon Institute’s Data Center Frontier, the average cost per minute of an unplanned downtime is $8,900 US, which represents more than half a million dollars per hour.

The impact of IT issues on the business operations is felt across all industries and verticals. In healthcare, when the EHR system experiences an outage—even if it’s only partial—the whole hospital feels the pain, which can quickly put patient safety at risk and expose the hospital to bad publicity and decreased patient satisfaction. In the midst of a crisis, there’s no time to hunt for the right people or massage the messaging. Support staff responsible for managing a critical incident should have the ability to:

- Contact the appropriate teams for any given incident
- Contact those who are on-call without hunting for the information
- Immediately start a technical conference bridge with the right people
- Inform key stakeholders and business management
- Notify key customers and impacted end users
- Send messaging that is compliant with regulations, such as HIPAA
- Apply remedial actions according to predetermined, automated workflows

Today’s mobile workforce needs to have these capabilities literally in the palms of their hands, enabling rapid response and corrective action with minimal manual work, while also reducing the opportunity for human error.
How to Minimize Time Spent on “Firefighting”

1. What is firefighting, and why does it happen?
A fire department responds to the report of a fire, and then attempts to put the fire out. Often, support centers are in a similar position: Systems break, or applications don’t perform normally, and the support center finds out only when end users/customers start contacting them about the issue. Work has already been interrupted, and all or most of the support center’s energy is directed toward getting people back to work. This type of work is also known as KTLO, or *keeping the lights on*.

2. Why is firefighting bad for support and for the organization?
Firefighting can only return things to square one. No progress is being made toward completing projects or updating legacy systems (hence, KTLO). Other issues that need attention are put on hold while resources are consumed getting things back to normal. Time is lost while the right people are found, the right actions are discussed, and the right solutions are applied.

3. How can firefighting be avoided?
Have good service management processes in place:

- Configuration Management – Know your infrastructure and dependencies
- Problem Management – Stop repeat incidents by getting to the root causes
- Change Management – Manage how, when, and which changes are made
- Incident Management – Have (and follow) a course of action to resolve

4. How can technology help?
By definition, lowering **Mean Time to Resolve (MTTR)** cuts down on the time you spend firefighting. According to Forrester, there are four components of MTTR:

1. Mean Time to Identify (MTTI): The time it takes to detect an incident
2. Mean Time to Know (MTTK): The time it takes to engage IT responders, investigate, identify the root cause(s), and put a remediation plan together
3. Mean Time to Fix (MTTF): The time it takes to implement the fix
4. Mean Time to Verify (MTTV): The time it takes to verify that the incident has been resolved

Companies have invested significantly over the years in automation tools and solutions to identify issues faster, deploy patches quicker, and automate testing. Besides cross-system integrations, very little automation has been implemented around MTTK. Many organizations still rely on manual and time-consuming processes to identify and then contact IT responders. Minimize the time getting “back to square one” by having the right processes, tools, and automation for rapid response to and remediation of incidents.
Tips for Getting Past Communication Pain Points

Pain Point: Communication Policy and Procedure
Almost everyone gets too much email. One side effect of email overload is the potential to overlook or miss important information if email is the primary communication channel for every eventuality. While communication is taking place all the time, both internally and externally, every organization should have a policy and procedures in place stating what is appropriate for routine communication, what constitutes a major incident, what constitutes an emergency, and—just as important—who declares a major incident or an emergency and puts the appropriate plan into action.

Pain Point: There’s an Emergency: Who Do We Contact?
A detailed and tested communication plan can save all-important time and effort in case of any emergency. The plan should lay out:

- All of the stakeholders (internal and external) that you’ll need to communicate with during and after an incident
- The internal “owner” of that communication relationship (e.g., help desk, incident management)
- The tools that will be used to communicate with each stakeholder, as well as the communication path(s) that will be used
- Incident message templates (to be modified at the time of the incident)

The critical incident communication plan should be tested periodically. Infrastructure changes. People change roles and responsibilities. Just as fire drills ensure that alarms work and people know what to do, communication tests confirm that the plan works and communications reach the right people.

Pain Point: How Do We Know Our Message Was Received?
You know the email or pager message was sent...how do you know it was received and read? One way is to use methods of communication that allow recipients to confirm receipt of the message. With a read receipt, you’ll know that critical communications have reached the intended recipients.

It’s also best to use a communications system that uses multiple means to contact people; for example, using phone, SMS, and mobile app notifications to attempt to reach a person until he or she responds, escalating to the next person in line or to management if there’s no response.
Pain Point: Security and Compliance

A widely broadcast message, while sometimes necessary, may violate compliance requirements, cause unnecessary emotional upset, and perhaps even allow important information to fall into the wrong hands. Since mobility and BYOD have become so popular, it’s increasingly important to safeguard critical business, patient, or law enforcement information by using a secure messaging system. As you formulate your communication plan and policy, make sure that you understand how secure messaging plays a role.
Tips for Better Cross-Functional Collaboration (Including DevOps)

Collaboration is a working practice whereby individuals work together to a common purpose to achieve business benefit. – AIIIM

Why collaborate?

1. Bringing diverse skills and perspectives to bear on a problem tends to yield better results more quickly than individuals working separately.
2. People are happier working as part of a team. In fact, the 2016 HDI Technical Support Practices & Salary Report found that “relationships within the team” have a greater impact on employee satisfaction than any other factor.

What are some tips for good collaboration?

• Eliminate the culture of blame and institute the culture of learning from mistakes
• Eliminate silos and focus on business goals
• Set SMART goals:
  o Specific
  o Measureable
  o Attainable
  o Realistic
  o Time-based
• Clarify roles and align them to goals
• Eliminate communication hurdles and encourage frequent feedback

As Barclay Rae puts it so simply in ITSM Goodness, “Get all of IT working together.” Of course, this is easier said than done. But by following the tips above, teams can go a long way towards a collaborative environment.

Can technology help?

Technology certainly can help. Sharing common tools and being able to get the message to the right people at the right time and in the right way allows people to collaborate to solve problems and resolve incidents. As Vincent Geffray puts it, “emails don’t wake up people” when there’s a critical incident.
**What about DevOps? Isn’t it all about collaboration?**

As John Allspaw says in his foreword the newly-released paperback, *The DevOps Handbook*, “success in modern technical endeavors absolutely requires multiple perspectives and expertise to collaborate.”

DevOps is, at its core, a culture of collaboration. It's more of a cultural or philosophical shift than a framework or methodology. DevOps tends to do away with divisions by providing a model of rapid feedback loops for incremental improvement and continuous release of updates. Although its name implies that it is primarily collaboration between application development (Dev) and operations (Ops), DevOps is larger than that, including all of the groups responsible for development, testing, deploying, and supporting these applications and services.

**The Three Ways of DevOps**

All of these tips for collaboration align with the Three Ways outlined by DevOps advocate Gene Kim:

- **The First Way: Systems Thinking**
  - This aligns with the elimination of silos and the focus on business goals.

- **The Second Way: Amplify Feedback Loops**
  - This way aligns with the collaborative approach in general, and with the use of technology to eliminate barriers to feedback.

- **The Third Way: Culture of Continual Experimentation and Learning**
  - This way aligns with eliminating the culture of blame.

For further thoughts on DevOps, see:
- [Embracing a DevOps Culture, Part 1](#)
- [Embracing a DevOps Culture, Part 2](#)
About HDI

In 1989, HDI became the first professional association created for the technical support industry. Since then, HDI has remained the source for professional development by offering resources to promote organization-wide success through exceptional customer service. We do this by:

- Facilitating collaboration and networking
- Hosting acclaimed conferences and events
- Producing renowned publications and research
- Certifying and training thousands of professionals each year

Our mission is to elevate the customer experience through the development of the technical support industry.

About Everbridge

Everbridge is a global enterprise software company that provides applications that automate the delivery of critical information to help keep people safe and businesses running. Everbridge's SaaS-based critical communications solutions are used every day by more than 3,000 corporations and organizations to quickly and reliably deliver the right message to the right people, via more than 100 different communication devices in over 200 countries and territories—simultaneously. In case of a disruption of IT service, customers can quickly and systematically engage the right IT staff based on who's on-call, inform stakeholders, and notify the impacted customers. Everbridge's IT Alerting application increases businesses IT performance and availability while minimizing the impact of major incidents on the business.