Improving Business Productivity Through The Lowly Incident

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These days it seems that all the talk in the industry centers around things like the CMDB, Service Portfolio, Desktop Virtualization and other really important issues. While it's exciting and sexy to talk about these trendy topics we shouldn't lose sight of the value that can gained by putting a new spin on old process such as Incident Management.

I know what you're thinking. You probably have other life sustaining initiatives to take care of other than worrying about how many times a week Service Desk Agents are telling that clerk in Accounting to reboot her PC because the receivables system appears to be hung again.   I will tell you though, that to ignore these incidents is foolhardy on many levels. First off, I'm sure that Accounting clerk is always amazed when the Service Desk Agent has the problem solving ability to deduce that rebooting will solve her problem. At some point though it is very likely that she will get tired of this answer and complain to her boss about it. Depending on which Executive her boss routinely has lunch with, someday you may be in for a rude awakening when you come to work and the CIO wants to know why you never did anything about the crummy accounts receivable system. Trust me ladies and gentleman. This happens. I've been there.

So... whatever should you do about the bazillions of incidents that are logged every day by Service Desk Agents? Before answering that question let's take a step back and review some basic incident management expectations.

The Golden Rules of Incident Management
- Attempt to get users up and running as quickly as possible using *acceptable* work arounds.
- Log <u>all</u> incidents in service desk software, *as the call is taken*, in a *consistent manner.*
- Incidents with work arounds cannot be escalated.

Basic But Powerful

What knowledge does a Service Desk Manager or IT Analyst gain by the Golden Rules of Incident Management? To name a few :
- number of incidents per system/service
- handle time
- lost productivity of end users

By now you're probably starting to think about how you can possibly sort through all these incidents to try and categorize them into buckets that would aid in further analysis. Because the Service Desk has been doing Incident Management for so long they probably have controls in place to ensure that the right incident description is documented either through Knowledge Centered Support processes, standard descriptions or some other zen idea they came up with over the years. Continuing on with our accounting example, I would have to assume that every related incident is logged with a highly descriptive word such as 'hung', 'froze', 'tilt' or 'crash' in the description. Those incidents are also most likely categorized with a field that indicates it was the receivables system that failed. With just a little bit of technical knowledge and a tool like Business Objects or Crystal Reports, you can easily isolate those incidents with a simple query, do a few calculations and see if this is an issue that merits further investigation.

The Real World

This is probably a good time for a real world example of an actual issue that we've been able to isolate.   A while back our programmers put in a new automated system that would, on occasion, produce an error message that read, "RB Error xx – please call the Help Desk".   *I won't quibble about the fact that they got our name wrong.* The xx was a number that changed depending on what was currently broken in the system. They kindly gave the Service Desk a list of all the various error messages with information on what the end user needed to do to resolve them. They knew at the time this probably wasn't the greatest way to handle error messages but were under the gun to get the system into production and promised to turn the errors into something resembling an English-like message in the future. You all know what happened next. The programmers moved on to the next biggest and baddest thing and the Service Desk handed out the answer to the RB Error question many, many times over many, many months. Fear not! Yours truly came to the rescue! I was able to isolate the incidents by searching on 'RB' and came up with the following statistics for these errors.

End User Productivity Impact

Avg Handle Time	10.36 minutes
Avg Incidents Per Week	30
Avg Weekly Prod Minutes Lost	311 minutes

What this meant was our end users were spending 5 hours every week talking to our Agents about these errors. And while our Agents loved handling these tickets we knew their skills would be put to better use by doing something other than looking up the solution to RB Errors on a spreadsheet. When we talked to the programmers about it they said they could fix it in the next release with a five minute table update. At that point I actually fell off my chair so after I picked myself up off the floor we spearheaded an all out offensive to get this issue resolved. Think about this folks. These errors were in production for a period of around one year. Doing the math, the programmers eliminated 1,560 future incidents per year with a five minute table change.

Imagine what would happen if you did this 10 times a year. It won't be long before the Service Desk can hold the line on staffing, has more time for training, has the capacity to perhaps support the next 'RB Error' issue that the programmers concoct, your end users are happier and everyone is doing really meaningful work that truly helps the business. All tied to the lowly incident...

So who needs to know about this kind of thing? After all, if you don't share it with anyone then no good will come of it.

I'm just guessing but I would think that the manager who is in charge of the programmers would be pretty excited to know that their fixes could potentially make life a lot better for end users. Rather than spend 20 hours, for example, coding a fix that resolves a minor issue and helps a small group of users with an ancillary system, show them how incident elimination can help the masses who are using those mission critical apps! I would also think your forward-thinking CIO would be interested in these kinds of things. It goes without saying that the Service Desk Manager will be your new best friend. If you *are* the Service Desk Manager you should immediately schedule a meeting with yourself to talk about this!

But wait a minute... Not every issue in IT land can be resolved with a five minute table change. What about that accounts receivable system hanging up throughout the course of the day? If a whole bunch of people are being affected it could be any number of causes from an infrastructure issue to a data base issue to a coding issue. How should IT go about researching a fix for those kinds of issues if the justification is there based on the impact to end user productivity? If you said log an incident and assign it to a programmer you are officially banished to the corner of the room. This can't be handled through Incident Management can it?

With apologies to Bob Dylan, the answer my friends isn't blowing in the wind. Rather it's in Incident Management's sister process, Problem Management. Why? Because no one knows the *cause* and cause analysis is not within the scope of Incident Management.

To explore these issues in depth and to learn how Incident Matching and Trending provides input into Problem Management, come see me at Session 403 at HDI 2010. I am already getting very excited about being delivered from the frozen tundra of Erie, Pennsylvania and seeing everyone's smiling faces in the warm confines of Orlando!