OCIO — Information Technology Services

ITS Connections

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Delivering on Our Promise: The ITS Service Desk and Technical Support Division in Action

By Kelly Stelmach, Rick Sabo, Larry Brooks, & Stephen Spector

Whether the Internet connection is down, a hard drive has crashed, or an agency application can't reach a database, the ITS Service Desk and Technical Support Division are there to help. With 45000+ customers across the country at FSA, RD, and NRCS locations, the ITS Service Desk registers around 18,000 requests for service each month.

Photo: TSD Migration Team in Washington, DC during the last phase of the WDC migration. Over June and July about 60 TSD specialists and contractors from around the country helped in this effort. Left to right:
1st Row: Juanita Zani, WDC Site Coordinator, Nancy Gallo- Customer Service/WDC, Lori Grandalen-ND, Nakeva Corothers-WDC, Darryl Russel-WDC, Yolanda Rose-WDC, Perrie McHenry-Idaho;
2nd Row: Justin Huff-Special Assistant to ACIO, Jenese Hankins-CO, Vinod Gulati-WDC, Edy Price-IN, Beverly Washington Hazel-WDC, Mary Jordan-WDC;
3rd Row: Tim Crestwell-WDC, Cliff Ehlers-CO, Chip Worrilow-MA.

As providers of comprehensive customer support, ITS is here to solve all of those problems. How is that possible, one might ask? It is a process of coordination and communication between the 52 Customer Service Branch specialists (based in St. Louis, Kansas City, Fort Collins, and Washington, DC), the centralized Magic Help Desk, and the Technical Support teams with about 525 specialists who are strategically placed around the country at state, multi-state, and large office branches.

About half of the service requests are often resolved by the agent who is first contacted; the other half require work orders that assign Technical Support Specialists to the problem.

Problems are sorted according to the tier of service required:

Self-Help – Simple problems that can be solved using Magic self-service.

Tier 1 – Simple problems requiring personal help over the phone.

Tier 2 – Service requiring TSD or vendor on-site support, or escalation to a CSB specialist.

Tier 3 – Complex problems requiring escalation to special teams such as the IO Lab, Telecom, or Security.

In some cases, problems like overstuffed email accounts or lost passwords can be corrected over the phone; other problems like interrupted Internet access are fixed at the network level. Persistent or complicated problems may require a few levels of escalation.

As Kelly Stelmach, the CSB East Group Leader, describes the process, "A site may be experiencing problems with a server that interrupts access to an agency program or database. The local customer may arrange for service in a number of ways: entering a ticket in Magic Self Service Help Desk (SSHD), by contacting the appropriate TSD team, or calling a service desk number ."

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New Fiscal Year

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1st Anniversary of ITS

Monday Nov. 28, 2005

Contact Information

Please share with us your story ideas, comments, calendar items, ingenious solutions, questions or answers. E-mail us at:

ITSConnections@usda.gov

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"The three pillars of customer support are the Service Desk Teams ... Magic ... & the Technical Support Division."

The specialist receiving the call inputs a service ticket in Magic. If the call comes directly in to CSB, our specialists are prepared to take care of any request or issue. Any CSB agent can perform the necessary categorization, triage (setting the priority of the problem), or trouble shooting." Or a typical request may get picked up by a technical support specialist at a branch office.

Whether CSB or TSD, the first ITS support specialist to respond may also be the one who handles the problem. A service ticket that registers the problem into the system is the first task to be done. If the specialist is busy with other support activities or can't resolve the problem, he or she will generate a work order and assign it to the ITS Service Desk group.

The Customer is Always Covered

As Kelly says, "The key is to make sure customers are always covered. If a customer is used to calling an individual they know for help, that person may not always be available. We have designed a system that will always locate the most appropriate and available person or team." That is why all calls lead to a service ticket.

With this last hand-off, the ITS Service Desk agent who has additional administrative rights on the server will perform more diagnostics and troubleshooting. If the problem is still not resolved, the work order will be assigned to a special team, such as the Interoperability Lab (IOLab) for assistance and resolution. Once the team has resolved the problem, they will close the work order, which automatically updates the ticket with the resolution and sends an e-mail status notification to the ticket owner (the IT specialist originally responsible for the case).

On the question of response time, Rick Sabo, Branch Manager for Customer Support, said, "Before convergence, the ITWG Help Desk Group measured average response time to a problem at about two hours for emergencies, four hours for normal requests, and eight hours for non-critical calls. Overall, we are improving on that."

Photo: Scott Henney, TSD-Ohio, migrating a desktop.

To accelerate emergency response, CSB is testing an emergency assistance phone line, the "Bat Phone" that would allow a TSD employee to call the 800-457-3642 number and enter a special code to receive immediate assistance.

Response time and how long it takes to resolve the problem are very different. In the complex environment that ITS works in, many variables factor into the resolution time. For example, if an on-site visit by the Technical Support team is required, timeliness depends on proximity. The same would hold true for an on-site vendor visit.

As Larry Brooks, Technical Support Division Director, describes it, "ITS designed a process to provide the most efficient and responsive customer support possible. We have over 500 specialists deployed in customer offices around the country and they are able to get to the most remote customer's location as soon as possible."

And, in the course of normal customer service, TSD specialists are also on the alert for any anomalies in the network that should get immediate attention by the IO Lab's Tier III team.

Equitable Support Resources

Supporting the computing requirements of three agencies and over 40,000 customers is a daunting and complex task which ITS is achieving in a streamlined and responsive way. With its three pillars of customer support: the Service Desk Teams, who generally manage first response to requests for help; Magic which provides the case management system and database; and the Technical Support Division which fields about 525 specialists to customer offices and remote locations across the country, ITS can meet its goal of providing equitable support resources where and when they are needed.

The Service Desk

The ITS Service Desk Team (Customer Support Branch) numbers about 52 IT specialists who are available Monday – Friday, 6 a.m. CT – 7 p.m. CT. CSB agents are located in Washington, DC, St. Louis, MO, Kansas City, MO and Fort Collins, CO. The CSB coordinates and supports the resolution of technical and operational problems, incidents or questions received from the customer, continually monitoring the status and progress toward resolution of all open incidents.

Getting Help - The Poster is included on page 4 to print out or send to your customers.

Do You Believe in Magic?

The Magic database is one of the fundamental improvements that ITS has implemented: it allows us all to understand patterns of technology problems and service effectiveness. As thousands of service tickets are analyzed, ITS and our customers will know what kinds of services are most needed, how long it commonly takes to solve specific classes of problems, or even what services may rarely be used but are still vital to the infrastructure.

The data gives us a vital sense of the big picture for ITS and the agencies; it reveals patterns as varied as component failures, service interruption, viruses, network issues, or user errors. We can also analyze service trends and needs according to geographic locations as well, and see where we can improve our response and support.

The same Magic tool also manages each individual service request- tracking each step toward solution: time of receipt; steps taken by the first responder to assess the problem; subsequent contacts and follow-ups with the customer; escalation, as needed, to technical support specialists; and close-out information once the problem is solved.

Getting Help - The Poster is included on page 4 to print out or send to your customers.

Magic Stats: June 2005

For the month of June 2005, 18,079 tickets were recorded and 9,718 work orders were generated. The following table shows the top subjects for the month.

SUBJECT	TICKETS	WORK ORDERS
Software		
• FSA	2,344	1,263
• COTS	1,877	554
• General	1,506	438
• NRCS	856	416
• OS	543	193
• RD	494	268
• USDA	249	158
Hardware		
• General	1,805	1,032
• Desktops	1,005	976
• Printers	749	446
• Laptops	676	639
System Administration	**1,756**	**1473**
Network	**1,666**	**963**
Security	**1,112**	**549**
Total	***18,079***	***9,718***

CONTACT METHOD FOR SERVICE REQUESTS

Of the 18,079 tickets recorded in June 2005, contact to the ITS Service Desk and Technical Support Division was made in the following manner:

REQUEST TYPE	TICKETS
Automated Alert	103
Call	12,042
Direct Contact	1,300
E-mail	2,119
FAX	74
Other	294
Self Service	1,707
Voice Mail	440

Getting Help - The Poster

1.	**Contact the ITS Service Desk, Magic Self-Service Help Desk or Your IT Support Specialist or the Service Desk.** ➢ **ITS Service Desk— at 1-800-457-3642 or chd@stl.rural.usda.gov.** The Service Desk team member will create a service ticket and place it into the Magic database for tracking. He or she will determine the nature of your problem and if it can be solved immediately, over the phone. If the problem requires an on-site visit by the Technical Support Division, a work order is prepared and the appropriate Technical Support team member will be dispatched and should contact you usually within a few hours. ➢ **Magic Self-Service Help Desk (Magic SSHD)— at https:/merlin.sc.egov.usda.gov/magicsshd/** Magic will automatically create a service ticket for you, 7 days a week, 24 hours per day. It will send a notification to your appropriate support branch office. To use Magic, you will need to register with your CAMS ID available only to USDA employees (If you need assistance in registering, contact the CSB). Although the process for using Magic SSHD is pretty straightforward, detailed instructions can be downloaded at its.ocionet.usda.gov/customers. ➢ **Your Nearby Technical Support Team Specialist— by phone, shoulder tap, or other convenient method.** He or she will first enter your request into the Magic database and, time permitting, may be able to work on your problem right away; otherwise your request will be addressed by the Service Desk as soon as possible and escalated as necessary.
2.	**The Technical Support Specialist will attempt to resolve the problem or escalate it to the next appropriate response team.** ➢ As your first responder, and time permitting, the ITS Support Specialist – whether at the Service Desk or on site TSD team, will try to solve the problem or assign it to someone who is available. ➢ If the problem is resolved, the Service Ticket will be completed and closed. ➢ If it requires further attention, a work order will be issued and the problem will be escalated to the appropriate Technical Support team. In some cases, a problem gets referred to special ITS teams (Interoperability Lab, Telecom, Security, etc.) for further action. ➢ Your Service Desk Specialist will continue to track and manage your service ticket, including further escalation as necessary.
3.	**Closing the Service Ticket.** ➢ Once the problem is fixed, the service ticket is closed out. ➢ The Service Desk database will retain the history of your service request, how it was resolved, how much time was required, and customer satisfaction with the process. The data will be used both to chart service request patterns and to help ITS constantly improve how we do business.

Introducing the Service Line Managers

The Service Line Managers are key to this process. They are the points of contact at a high level between the Service Center Agencies and ITS divisions and branches.

Service Level Management is the foundation on which ITS will fulfill the business needs of the Service Center Agencies. Among its benefits are that:

- ITS can maintain a qualitative understanding of customer needs and requirements.
- The services developed for each customer are tailored for those requirements.
- ITS can track how customers utilize our services, allowing us to improve service delivery and reduce costs over a period of time.
- ITS and our customers have well defined roles and responsibilities and clear and consistent expectations of the level of service required.
- ITS can monitor overall service provision and customer satisfaction.

The Service Line Managers are key to this process. They are the points of contact at a high level between the Service Center Agencies and ITS divisions and branches. The idea is for the SLMs to understand what the agencies need – in terms of new or existing services or in handling complex system-wide service issues that require high levels of collaboration to solve problems, establish and monitor service level agreements, and develop IT implementation plans. The SLMs focus on customer communications and team coordination so the division directors and branch managers can focus on the work to be done. Service Level Management clarifies services, expectations and costs.

Greg Gage, SLM
Security

Security is as much about each desktop as it is about the whole infrastructure. It combines both system-wide policies and procedures as it does making sure each end-user knows the basics about protecting his or her pc.

We have security teams throughout the Technical Support Division's state and regional offices working with our special teams in Infrastructure Operations, and with the Service Desk to maintain a safe network and also respond effectively when problems occur.

Nadim Ahmed, SLM
Telecommunications

Telecommunications at USDA is more than just the LAN/WAN circuits, switches, routers, phones, and other network components that keep our customer computers connected. It is about enabling communication in many forms to keep our business programs successful in supporting our communities.

The Infrastructure on which agency applications and other systems run is very complex. Part of my job is to know what telecommunications support the agencies need – whether it is setting-up a new site, setting-up a new service or resolving a problem – and working with different ITS divisions and special teams to make it happen in an effective and orderly way. Another part is to ensure that agencies know and follow our agreed to procedures so we can keep our services running smooth and efficiently.

James "Sarge" Sargent, SLM
Hosting, Web & Data Utility Services

Our job implementing and hosting an application or supporting data utility requirements is to make sure they run flawlessly.

Accomplishing that is a careful process of determining what the customer needs, who will use it, and how; then planning and testing the application in the Information Operations Lab (IO Lab) which mimics USDA's computing environment. This shows us how secure and stable the application is. Once we certify it works correctly, we can then introduce it into the network and support it.

TSD-Nebraska Continues U Asked IT

Over the years, the IT staffs from the RD, FSA, and NRCS agencies had various ways to communicate IT information to end-users. Distribution of newsletters and/or other informational materials were used. Nebraska NRCS used an "Ask Us" process initiated by Peggy Hanlon whereby employees would E-mail questions to the NRCS IT staff. Answers to the questions were then distributed to all employees. Subsequently, through Jean Johns' commitment, "U-Asked-IT" evolved into monthly distribution with input from all IT staff.

This question and answer "newsletter" provided end-users answers to common issues and questions as well as providing other information IT wanted to stress and/or publicize. The ITS staff decided to continue "U-Asked-IT" as a way to provide IT information to all Nebraska USDA employees. Periodically, an "index" of the question/answer topics is provided which enables employees to easily locate a topic discussed in previous editions. Answers to questions are also updated in future editions when technology changes, software is updated, or policy changes.

At this time, "U-Asked-IT" is distributed through E-mail. In the future, we hope to make all editions available at a common location. Distribution of this type of communication has met with end-user appreciation and has been a great tool for sharing information.

Photo: Nebraska ITS Staff: Back Row – Dean Shaffer, Peg McGrane, Gary Alexander, Ann Anderson, Peggy Hanlon, Curt Sorenson, Kent Stauffer. Front Row – Paul Bouffard, Frank Schmal, Michele Beason, Jean Johns, Linda Rogers. Photo by Molly Tebo (SED Asst for NE FSA).

A Sample *U Asked It* Tip

Q 3. I have been experiencing some "slowness" with my computer. It just doesn't seem to operate as quickly as it once did. Is there anything I can do?

A 3. We have been finding that as the ArcGIS/ArcView programs are being utilized more, there are more files being stored and then not removed from the C:\Temp directory. In the case of this problem, the C:\Temp folder was over 5 GB (5,000MB) in size! Since C:\Temp is just a temporary storage area and is utilized by programs as they are being executed, C:\temp should be less than 5 MB in size. ArcGIS/ArcView seems to be leaving behind extra files once the program is closed.

In an attempt to help keep the workstations running as efficiently as possible, we ask that users periodically check their C:\temp folder and make sure it is being cleared of extraneous files. You can view the C:\temp listing and get information on its size as follows: Start, My Computer, Local Disk C:, and double-click temp directory.

In the display below, I clicked within the "Size" column heading so the files were arranged largest to smallest. This makes it easier to find and delete the largest files. The below Temp directory is over 13 MB in size. By deleting the two largest files listed, over 9 MB will be eliminated, leaving C: temp around 4 MB.

All the "log" files listed are from the automatic patch installs, etc. There is no harm in deleting these files. Actually there is no harm in deleting any files from C:\temp. Just be sure you are in C:\temp before you start deleting files (your location is displayed in Address entry box)!!

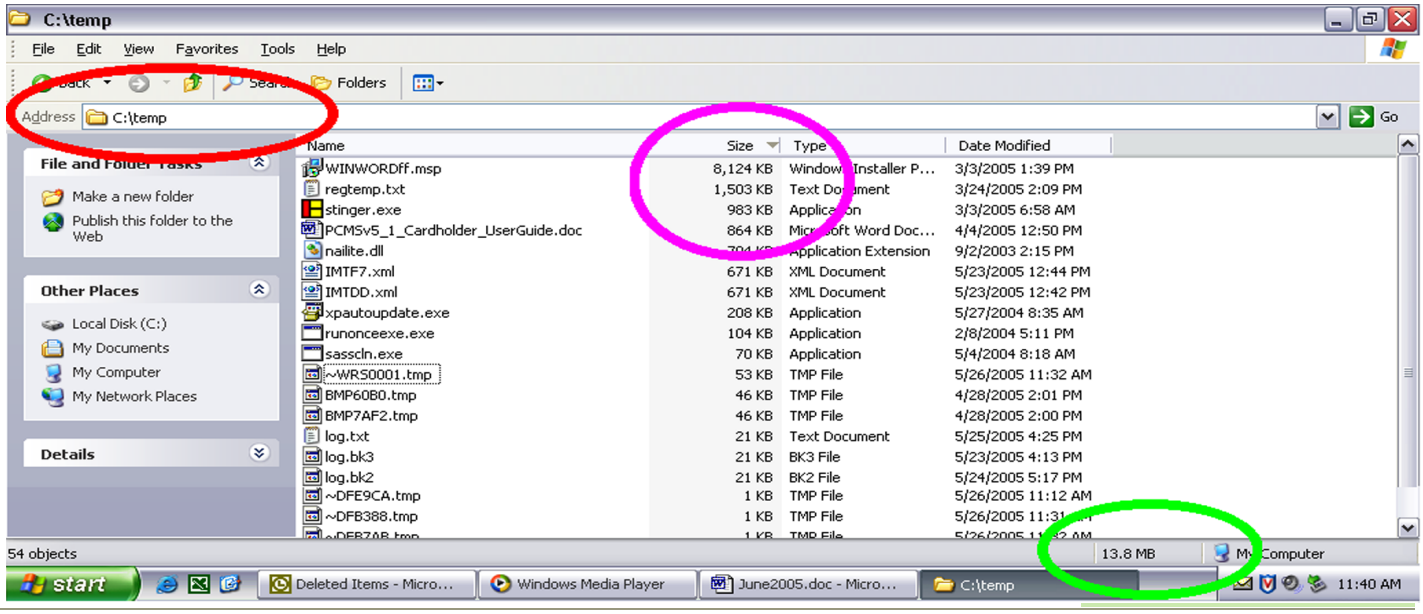

Photo: The George Washington Carver Center, Beltsville, MD, home of the IO Lab. Photo by Jesse Fleury

ITS Behind the Scenes: The IO Lab

The secure, cold windowless chamber deep inside the USDA Carver Center in Beltsville, MD is called the IO Lab (Interoperability Lab). Inside and nearby, about fifty people work on different aspects of infrastructure upgrades and deployment, network protection, system-wide trouble-shooting, and operations support. They are spread along five aisles of desktop equipment that mirror the systems used by ITS customers throughout the country, and between racks of servers, back-up systems, and associated items and software that are identical to the network systems used in the shared infrastructure.

The outcome of what they do supports the day-to-day activities of End User Computing environment, by making sure that, when the hardware and software systems get deployed to our customers, they are as stable and secure as possible. And when problems arise, the IO Lab works with other ITS specialists and teams to identify the source and implement the solutions.

The IO Lab is organized by functional teams:

Change Management, led by Jack Zechman and Curt Anderson, guides the procedures for upgrading equipment and software through¬out the ITS system following change, release and configuration process and procedures.

Development and Integration, led by Barry Hodge and Carl Chernisky, establishes the baseline "clean" configuration for the operating system used throughout our network prior to the addition of any applications; it also governs and protects the Active Directory, the nervous system of the ITS infrastructure.

Testing, led by Jack Zechman and Jay Szlamowicz, provides a disciplined regimen for making sure new software, patches, or other requested changes to the network can be safely installed – that is, they won't crash or otherwise compromise the computing environment.

Security, led by Mary Wilson and Don Michelli, reviews the integrity of the network in terms of vulnerabilities, either through user error, software issues, or external threats such as viruses or hackers.

Operations, led by Debbie Ogle, makes sure all the other teams get what they need to do their jobs. The ***Tier III Help Desk,*** led by Jesse Fleury, is part of the IO Labs Operations section. It monitors the integrity of 3000 domain controllers, data and file replication, and the Active Directory. Should a problem arise, this team protects the network, diagnoses the problem, and fixes it (either remotely from Beltsville or in coordination with the Customer Support Branch Service Desk and Technical Support Division specialists in the field).

Origins of the IO Lab.

Jack Zechman, Chief of the Infrastructure Deployment Branch (Infrastructure Operations Division), describes the current IO Lab as, " … a far cry from the staff of three in a borrowed closet space at the APHIS facility in Riverdale, Maryland. The IO Lab began in 1998 with the convergence of two events: first, a mandate from Congress to consolidate the computing systems used by the Service Center Agencies (FSA, NRCS, and RD) into a shared infrastructure with common applications and other shared resources, and second, Y2K and the planned replacement of over 20,000 desktops and software. We realized we needed a way to make sure a new integrated system would work and that it fulfilled the specialized requirements of each agency."

Photo: The Interoperability Lab. Photo by Jesse Fleury

Admin News from Michael Tolle, Employee Services Branch Chief

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Position Management

As you well know, there are a lot of things that need to be done in establishing a new agency such as ITS. First, of course, is ensuring the customers' needs are met. That's where you have stepped up to the plate and hit like Albert Pujols. (Sorry, I live in St. Louis, and we love our Cardinals. For those of you who aren't baseball fans, let me assure you this is a compliment.)

In the administrative area, we had a number of priorities, too. At the top of the list was, and still is, making sure everybody gets paid. To do this, we had to assign employees to position descriptions at the various grades they held before they transferred. We designed position descriptions that represented our best shot at the work that needed to be performed, knowing full well we would have to look at this issue carefully after ITS had its supervisors in place and had been operating long enough to get a good idea of what is needed.

We are ready to do this. Plans are to begin with IT Specialists in the Technical Support Division (TSD). A pilot group of managers will meet soon with the Bureau of Public Debt (BPD, our Human Resources service provider) and Senior IT Staff to discuss goals, processes, and timeframes. After this meeting, the pilot group, with input as needed from employees and other managers, will develop a list of IT Specialist duties required to perform the work of the office, along with the approximate amount of time needed for each duty. BPD will take this list and draft position descriptions for the pilot group's review. After BPD and the pilot group reach agreement, the position descriptions will get a broader supervisory review within TSD. BPD will consider any comments or suggestions from this supervisory review, prepare final position descriptions and organizational structures, and present them to senior ITS management for approval.

We expect the new position descriptions will accurately describe the work needed to be performed, make clear distinctions concerning any different grade levels, and provide organization structures that are fair and efficient. Plans are to complete this study by January 2006. We will keep you updated on the progress, and we ask for your patience during this process. After completion of this study, we will move to other ITS organizations and occupations for a similar review.

TSP Lifecycle

"With the TSP Lifecycle Funds, you don't have to worry about the bumps in the road. Just relax and enjoy the ride."-- Thrift Savings Plan Lifecyle Funds brochure

Starting August 1, 2005, the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) is planning to offer "lifecycle funds." These funds have a mix of investments of different types and characteristics, such as domestic stocks, international stocks, and bonds. The mix is chosen based on the date you will need to use your money. If that date is a long time from now, the lifecycle fund in which you are invested will be more heavily weighted toward equities (stocks or stock funds). As the date you will need your money gets nearer, the allocation will be weighted more heavily toward fixed income or stable value investments, such as bond funds and Treasury securities. The lifecycle funds will use existing options—*the G, F, C, S, and I funds*—but will automatically adjust the mix as time passes.

The lifecycle fund concept assumes that participants with longer time horizons for investment are both willing and able to tolerate more risk (up and down swings in an investment portfolio) while seeking higher rates of return. A further assumption is that as participants approach the time when they will begin to need their TSP assets, their portfolios should be adjusted to reflect a lower tolerance for risk.

The TSP website (www.tsp.gov) has more details on this new option. TSP also plans to send information, including a DVD, to current participants.

(IO Lab, continued from page 7)

To determine what could be shared and how the SCA network would function, Zechman's team opened nine pilot sites at field offices to begin testing domain controllers, software applications, workstations, and servers. A mini-infrastructure was built to simulate and test the planned shared network. The IO Lab has evolved into a sophisticated and disciplined process of managing and deploying system change for agency customers and over 40,000 users across the country.

Photo: IO Lab Testing Rack, 2005. Photo by Jesse Fleury

The IO Lab teams support the rest of the End User Computing environment by helping keep the overall system healthy and up-to-date from the inside – ensuring the stability of the inner workings of each computer and server and each software change and upgrade prior to it getting released into the field.