

SupportStep Application Support Framework™ Overview

The purpose of the SupportStep Application Support Framework is to showcase a common set of processes, best practices, and templates that can be used to build and run the application support function consistently throughout the company. SupportStep provides value to your company in the following areas.

- Sets an overall direction and destination that all support groups can strive to achieve.
- Establishes a common set of terms and a framework for thinking that can be used consistently throughout the company. This helps facilitate communication and reduces the chances for confusion.
- Provides a set of management practices that can be used consistently to proactively manage resources and align the work to ensure it supports business initiatives.
- Creates a common and consistent set of measurements for internal process improvements and for external reporting to the clients.
- Facilitates training and cross-training, since the knowledge and skills of how you do support work is consistent from one area to another.
- Encourages organizational horizontal planning across multiple groups since each group is using common terms and a common support framework.

In many companies, the place to start evaluating your support function is through a formal organizational definition. Depending on the size of your company, the formal definition could be at the company, division, department, group, or team level. This process helps you think through and gain agreement on the fundamental nature of your organization. Examples of the types of information that could be included in the organizational definition would be mission, vision, strategy, and principles. It is also important to define who your clients are.

Once you have the foundation provided by an organization assessment, you can look at your support organization to determine the best way for them to be managed and to operate effectively. SupportStep helps to define a common business model that can be used as a starting point. The various areas SupportStep covers include:

Definition

The content in this section is used in two instances. The first is when you are putting together a support function for the first time. The information in this section allows you to understand your responsibilities and how the work you do aligns with the rest of the company. However, most of the readers of SupportStep already have support functions in place. If you have a support function already, you can still use the Definition section to validate your work, your processes, your clients, etc. In many cases, you will find that the things you do today are perfectly fine. In some instances, you may discover that you want to fundamentally change what you are doing and for whom you are doing it for.

Organizing for Basic Support

This is where most of the direct, targeted content is described. If you worked through the Definition Section, this is where you would fill in most of the details needed to organize and run the support function. This section is divided up into a number of sub-sections that are used to document the details about your applications, your clients, your team, and how you run and manage the support process.

- **Activities.** Activities refer to work done for clients or stakeholders that does not result in the creation of tangible deliverables. Services provide value by fulfilling the needs of others through people contact and interaction. SupportStep describes the types of activities associated with the application support group, including emergency response, major/minor error correction, environmental changes and even simply answering questions from users.
- **Applications.** Support work implies that your group is maintaining some specific set of products. SupportStep focuses on the support of applications that your company uses to run their internal and external business processes. These applications need to be understood and inventoried, along with key information that is required for support.
- **Clients.** Providing services implies that you are helping other people. SupportStep helps identify the clients and stakeholders that your support team serves, as well as characteristics about them. Clients and stakeholders include application business owners, main user contacts, power users, and regular users. The support team ensures that the applications are accurate and stable on behalf of clients and stakeholders.
- **Team.** Most of the dynamics of the application support organization revolves around the support team. SupportStep describes the application support team, roles and responsibilities, profiles, etc. Your management challenge is to structure your support team so that all the applications have the proper level of coverage, all the staff is challenged, and everyone has the right skills. For example, one technique for a small team is for everyone to share all support responsibilities. However, as the application inventory gets large, this becomes difficult. For large teams, application specialists are usually more effective. These specialists include application primary and backup support roles, or designating a support dispatcher.
- **Processes.** This section of SupportStep defines some of the basic processes used to run and manage the support organization. Among the topics covered are prioritizing work; defining different levels of support severity; and creating an escalation procedure.
- **How to Measure.** There are a number of potential metrics that can be captured as a part of the application support process. One is time reporting, which tracks time spent in many different aspects of support, including fixing errors, answering questions, communication with the client, cross training, etc. Other potential metrics include support surveys and management surveys. These metrics can determine customer satisfaction, time allocation, cost, quality of service, and much more.

Management

SupportStep also provides guidance on how to manage the support function. This includes how to allocate people, how to plan the work, and how to validate that the actual work is aligned close to your Business Plan.

Miscellaneous

All support organizations need to work through the various subsections associated with the Definition section. There are other specific activities that the support group may be responsible for. The larger your organization is, the more applicable these advanced topics become. This includes content in areas such as disaster recovery exercises and software change management tools. In many support organizations, these “advanced” topics may really just be a part of the normal expectations for support/.

Related Topics

This section includes information on subjects that might be of interest for people working on support functions, but that are not directly related to support. For instance, many people on support teams also perform enhancement requests. These enhancement requests are actually small projects. However, they are managed with much less rigor and structure than regular projects. This topic and others are explained more fully in this section.