IT Help Desk Implementation: The Case Of An International Airline

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study concerns IT help desk management within an international airline. The core of what is described relates to attempts at implementing help desk procedures in practice, and illustrates the problems of treating these both as predominantly technology systems and predominantly human systems.

From the failures outlined in the case, an alternative approach is proposed, based on the application of methods drawn from an understanding of critical social theory. The practical problems and theoretical issues are discussed, and a theoretically informed framework is applied retrospectively to the case.

This allows conclusions to be drawn which, it is argued, strongly support the value of a critically informed approach to human-centered IT help desk issues.

BACKGROUND

The international airline on which this case is based was formed in 1984, and operates scheduled freight and passenger air services.

Sales have historically been divided fairly evenly between the United Kingdom and overseas, with transatlantic travel providing much of the overseas income. As can be seen from the information on the next page, both turnover and profit have climbed consistently since 1995, with the latest figures available showing turnover in excess of £900 Million, and profit over £100 Million.

The company employs almost 6,000 people–a relatively small number for such a large organisation, pointing to the efficiencies expected in its operations. The almost doubling of employees in the last five years gives some indication of the training and business continuity issues requiring ongoing consideration.

With the exception of 1997, control of current assets has been strong: the company pays its debts on time and collects funds owing efficiently.

Table 1: Sales Differences

	1999 £'000	1998 £'000	1997 £'000	1996 £'000 8 Months	1995 £'000 10 Months
Turnover:					
U.K.	491709	453107	365426	193383	228000
Overseas	423329	369124	313030	189658	220000
Total Turnover	915038	822231	678456	383041	448000
Profit (Loss) before Taxation	105227	75601	45172	34437	32000

Table 2: Number of Employees
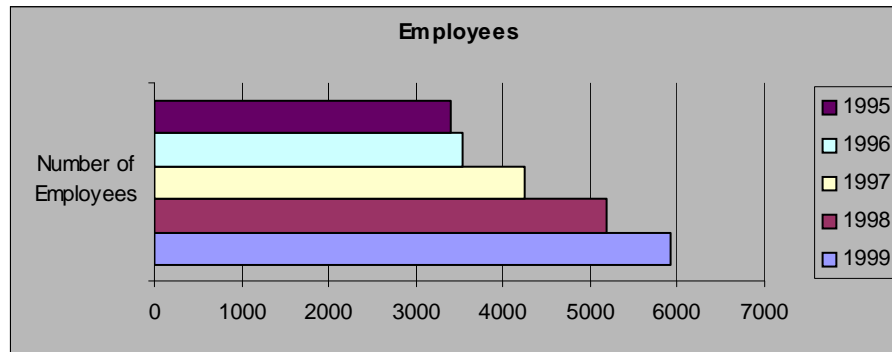
This is clearly a successful enterprise, and that success has meant that the organisation needed to grow as the service provision expanded, placing a strain on, amongst others, the information technology (IT) department.

This growth was–through the 1980s and 1990s, and in common with other major international organisations–accompanied by an expansion in the use of computers, particularly networked PCs. To facilitate this, a help desk was established to deal with user issues and problems. The evolution over time of this help desk from being a multi-skilled base of generalists to a more complex and diverse team providing support activities across a broad range of systems, forms the core of the subject of this case study.

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