Boost employee productivity with automated support

Digital support solutions use data and advanced technologies to improve employee engagement and productivity.

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Despite the near-universal embrace of digital technologies to reimagine business and increase employee productivity, many IT departments still struggle to provide innovative digital support solutions. There are two main reasons: Digital technologies aren't optimized to meet employees' support needs, and IT budgets can't keep up.

Employees, unfortunately, suffer. They simply want their tech problems fixed fast. And frankly, they want to spend as little time as possible dealing with support.

When employees reach out for help, it means their work has been disrupted. The best employee experience with support gets them back to work simply and quickly. Fortunately, there are many digital tools available to IT today to deliver a positive support experience — everything from chatbots to self-service portals and even automation options that can fix issues before users even recognize them as problems.

A workplace support approach that embraces digital solutions to meet user demands can result in an improved employee support experience and, more importantly, a reduced need for support in the first place. This increases employee engagement, can optimize support costs and, in turn, improve employee productivity, satisfaction and retention.

Roadblocks to a better employee experience

Many organizations find it difficult to create plans that integrate automated support technology, build momentum to address support issues and increase employee productivity. They are often overwhelmed by the sheer volume and variety of support data and technology choices.

For example, consider natural language processing (NLP) technology. While NLP improvements have opened exciting employee engagement possibilities, the technology by itself cannot enable the success of virtual support agents within IT support systems. In general, early executions of digital capabilities have fallen short of their employee productivity promises, slowing adoption.

Several other challenges create barriers to implementing advanced support solutions, including:

- **Niche products.** The market offers a variety of emerging automated support capabilities, many of which focus on niche issues. In this environment, it's easy to be distracted by efforts focused on individual capabilities rather than on broader support problems. By losing focus on improving the employee experience with support, businesses can take too long to produce a functional solution.

- **People and funding.** On one hand, digital support solutions are expensive. On the other, many enterprises face a scarcity of talent. Both situations can hinder an organization's ability to quickly take advantage of digital self-service support features. Compounding the situation, IT departments are often under pressure to deliver more support at less cost.

- **Employee engagement and change management.** While some employees gladly engage with technology to save time, others have grown accustomed to relying on support personnel. That's unlikely to change soon. Creating campaigns that show how digital options can make support frictionless can stimulate a positive shift toward employee productivity. Companies that don't focus on change management may find they've created a solution few people actually use.

- **Knowledge management and employee productivity.** Knowledge is critical to the success of any digital support solution. Low-quality, disorganized articles and hard-to-find processes are, unfortunately, still a reality. If the knowledge behind a digital support solution does not actually provide easy-to-understand solutions for business users, it creates a bad experience and reduces employee productivity.

How analytics, automation and AI can help employee engagement

A confluence of cost pressures, new technologies and new employee engagement expectations has created the perfect opportunity for IT to augment traditional support models with digital support solutions. The advent of analytics, artificial intelligence (AI) and automation makes designing and running easy-to-use, personalized support solutions achievable.

Analytics

Analytics and automation can help proactively address employee engagement and support issues before they become work disruptors. By using specialized monitoring coupled with machine learning, which uses computational methods that learn from experience, solutions can not only proactively detect and resolve worker issues but can also make accurate predictions for support needs. Together, analytics and automation can help organizations improve automated support in two important ways:

- **Personalization.** By personalizing support, analytics help deliver engaging employee experiences. Dashboards — personalized for individual employees — can offer a real-time, end-to-end view of their environment, based on collected diagnostics. This opens options for self-service and chatbot solutions to mirror Amazon's "Recommended for you" approach to serving up resolutions that fix tech issues, further enhancing the automated support experience and employee productivity.

- **Reducing effort.** Machine learning can identify repeated problem areas and mundane processes as candidates for automation, creating better employee engagement. For example, consider a time-tracking system where employees record their activities every week, yet often have trouble or questions with the process. In cases like this, a digital support solution can be configured to proactively alert the user when a task must be completed and intelligently guide the employee through the task, so it's handled with ease.

  Similarly, consider a PC that's running out of memory; an intelligent system could automatically detect the situation and proactively engage the user to show him or her how to self-correct the problem or automatically place an order for more memory.

Taking a cue from the "digital twin" approach, if employees so opt, analytics can simulate a day in their life, taking care of the mundane while they focus on the high-value tasks. In this scenario, employee engagement with automated support begins the shift from helping resolve problems for people to "doing" things on their behalf — a leap in employee productivity and satisfaction.

Improved employee productivity with AI

AI and cognitive computing have great potential for improving productivity and the employee experience with even further support. Consumer devices such as Siri and Alexa have socialized the idea of working with virtual personal assistants. And chatbots are already being used throughout the retail web. Now, as a complement to IT self-service portals, virtual agents are starting to act as front-line automated support for employees.

Virtual assistants or agents are available via chat and voice channels, offering these AI-enabled capabilities by whichever support channel employees prefer. Key benefits include:

- **Always on.** Virtual agents can perform common support actions such as resetting passwords, answering "how to" questions, and installing software via an "on-demand" service. Employees can be more productive by conversing with virtual agents at any time of the day and in some cases, in any language. That's important because virtual agents have the power to be that always-on employee engagement channel for support — standing by, ready to serve whenever asked. This is especially helpful for employees who prefer to receive guided assistance, rather than go it alone via self-service portals. Virtual agents can also deliver extra support capacity, relieving pressure on traditional service desks at times of peak demand for automating remedial support tasks.

- **Personal touchpoints.** Virtual agents can use embedded analytics and natural language capabilities to "know" many aspects of an employee's environment in advance, resulting in efficient support conversations. They also can continuously learn by building on prior queries to provide fast answers to an individual's support questions. This personalized support increases employee engagement and results in higher employee productivity.

- **On dedicated standby.** A virtual agent that is waiting to deliver personalized support can have a huge impact on productivity. Consider an employee who notices the system is experiencing a slowdown but doesn't know why. If the situation isn't critical, the employee might not take the time to raise a trouble ticket. But with a dedicated virtual agent, the employee could simply ask, "What's going on in my environment?" The virtual agent has immediate access to all monitored events and can quickly identify the issue, recommend a resolution and give productive time back to the employee — every time.

Guidelines for top-notch digital support

To enrich employee engagements, IT departments must build enhanced digital support platforms. Follow these guidelines to get there:

- **Focus on the employee experience.** Take a design-thinking approach that keeps employees in view. The digital support solution must allow employees to decide how they get support — on their own terms, based on their current task and location. It should encourage individual preferences because choice leads to empowerment.

- **Handle support problems first, technologies second.** Stay focused on solving business problems. Digital tools such as AI, analytics and machine learning can provide valuable support options and improve employee productivity. To exploit the maximum help that technologies can offer, enterprises should start small and prove success against predefined scenarios. Stay focused on producing desired outcomes.

- **Make it personal.** With today's digital technologies, it's possible to personalize the employee experience with automated support. For example, apply cognitive technologies and automation together to deliver support that contextually matches the tasks employees perform, so they can stay focused on what they do best — their jobs.

- **Build on proven knowledge.** Automated support solutions are only as good as the knowledge they are built on. Knowledge must be updated frequently, continually maintained and tested, reflecting the latest environment. Use disciplined knowledge management processes to tag and categorize content in line with the enterprise's support history to promote fast and accurate search resolutions.

- **Extend help beyond the IT staff.** An end-to-end employee experience requires a support solution that can extend beyond the IT department. Including other corporate functions such as human resources and facilities services will offer cohesion and a unified experience across employees' work lives.

Finally, businesses need to key in on change management. Too often companies focus employee productivity efforts on explaining the technology itself, as opposed to how employees' jobs will change as the result of the new technology. When employees are fully briefed on how automated service options will reduce mundane tasks and free up their time for real work, they will buy into the effort, letting the organization's digital transformation projects move forward successfully.

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