

Next-generation SLAs focus on user experience



Are your organization's service-level agreements still measuring what truly matters? Most organizations use conventional SLAs to measure IT's internal performance, using such metrics as system uptime and reaction time after a failure. Until recently, these measures were sufficient. But as organizations continue their digital transformations, the definition of successful service is changing, and a new generation of SLAs is needed. These next-generation measures are shifting IT's spotlight onto user experience.

This new focus is necessary because today's technology users — both employees and customers — increasingly expect a consumer-like experience everywhere. Users have become accustomed to fast, intuitive services from Amazon, Google and other providers in their personal experiences, and now they expect the information services they encounter at work to be just as fast, easy, mobile, secure and seamless. Younger users — those who've grown up in the constant presence of smartphones, cloud services and social media — not only expect a consumer-like experience at work, they demand it.

There's another reason organizations need new SLAs: Many IT groups have both promised more than they can deliver and underestimated the true cost of delivering those services. When IT groups under-deliver on their promised technology services, their users learn to distrust IT's promises. This can create a dangerous "trust gap." And when IT underestimates costs, it risks going over budget, creating a similar trust gap with the chief executive officer, chief financial officer and other senior business leaders. Making old-style SLAs more stringent has been the traditional response, but that hasn't translated into providing better service quality, higher user satisfaction or fewer disruptions.

Some organizations may consider adapting traditional SLAs for this new business-technology environment. But traditional SLAs express an IT-centric mentality, and they mainly measure incidents and events. It's the CIO — not the user — who cares how quickly IT projects get delivered, or how long the mean time is between failures. In addition, SLAs get used only when something goes wrong — for example, in the case of a service disruption or an update issue. Users, when they're considered at all, are seen as cumbersome. After all, in this view, it's the users' incident tickets that keep IT from delivering on time!

In fact, the industry-standard SLAs are one major reason why today's users feel frustrated. While users don't care about IT's internal metrics, that's exactly what traditional SLAs measure. And what users want — a seamless and innovative consumer-like experience — yesterday's SLAs don't measure at all. Something new is needed.



A new mindset for SLAs

That something new is the next-generation SLA. Unlike traditional SLAs, these new agreements focus on what today's customers and employees want and increasingly demand — namely, a great user experience. Some providers have even given these metrics a new name: experience level agreements, or XLAs for short.

To be clear, XLAs do not replace traditional SLAs, but instead augment them. For the CIO and other IT executives, internal metrics remain important. But now, outcomes matter, too. For example, if an IT service is delivered on time, that's good, but how satisfied are its users? These user-experience results now need to be measured.

One important goal of next-generation SLAs is proactively eliminating incidents, rather than just responding to incidents after they occur. This proactive stance can dramatically reduce the number and extent of disruptions, keeping users highly productive and satisfied.

Implementing new technologies and metrics can also give the IT group greater visibility into users' technical environments and devices. When appropriate, that can lead to an additional “human touch” — that is, direct support of users for incidents that automation can't handle.

A proactive approach and increased visibility give IT the tools needed to initiate a service transformation that goes beyond just changing SLAs. They help IT deliver a new workplace experience that includes support but also allows users to improve productivity and personalization, with projects like device and application transformation, virtualization, new productivity tools and operating systems, personalized portals, analytics and AI that helps users stay on top of their tasks. All can move the workplace into a new virtuous cycle of collaboration. And by incorporating users into the planning and transformation of the workplace experience, those users perceive IT's support experience as purposeful and user-oriented. In this way, old SLAs and new XLAs can ensure a continuous cycle of improvement.

To measure the user experience, next-generation SLAs need to focus on three main elements:

- **User satisfaction:** This can be based on feedback from email surveys, smart pop-ups that ask for thumbs-up/down ratings, onsite service ratings and focus groups. New metrics can include “shift left” (automation, virtual agents); support quality; self-help adoption rates; and self-service completion rates. New proactive measures can help, too, such as preemptive incident tickets with pull-through automation. Data from these various feedback mechanisms can then be combined to give a single index of user satisfaction. This index can also be charted over time, showing improvements as well as downturns.
- **User-reported incidents:** The goal, of course, is to have fewer incidents and especially to lower the number of tickets delegated, as each touch is a secondary cost for IT and additional wait time for the user. To do this, organizations can track both the overall IT-support workload and the number of incidents/requests touched by each team. Fortunately, automation and self-service can help reduce both

incidents and escalations. These tools can include virtual agents and bots, social collaboration and self-help/self-service user portals. Another approach involves streamlining the underlying service processes. Here, intelligence is built into a process so that incidents are reported directly to the right resolver group, rather than having to be escalated. This can help save time, ease frustration and improve the overall user experience.

- **Innovation:** How many innovative deployments does the organization launch in a set period of time, whether that's a week, month, quarter or year? This matters. Users appreciate the way innovation gives them new options and empowers them to select new capabilities. Smart IT teams should also publish roadmaps of their user-facing innovations; it's a powerful way to connect with users, showing them how IT works on their behalf.

Better service at lower cost

Done right, next-generation SLAs can empower users to establish a simpler, more personalized and more effective way of interacting with all the services the organization provides. Compared with traditional IT-support practices, new SLAs can also help an organization do this at a lower cost.

For example, at DXC Technology, we recently implemented our own built-for-purpose software bot, known internally as MigrationBOT, to respond to employee questions regarding a recent technology migration. Our goals included improving the user experience, increasing the productivity of our service staff, and accelerating both the speed and responsiveness of our user support. The results have been impressive: Nearly 70 percent of calls are now being deflected to self-service, and 40 percent of incidents are resolved on the first contact, without a single human interaction. But more importantly, users are getting answers to their questions right when they need them, and they can ask in their own language through a simple interface designed for an optimum user experience.

DXC is also helping clients improve their customer experience with power from DXC Bionix, our digital-generation service delivery model for providing intelligent automation at scale. The joint targets we created with our clients helped us achieve results beyond traditional service metrics. They include:

- **A global pharmaceuticals company** had excess capacity on the service desk during nonpeak hours. Now, using "lean" approaches and service-pattern analytics, these resources have been aligned with demand, keeping users satisfied while also controlling costs.
- **A telecom provider in the Nordic region** needed to reduce its service desk's average handle time (AHT) and improve the caller experience. Using computer-telephony integration, the provider has done both by reducing its AHT by 40 seconds. New voice-enabled bots, currently in development, should also let the company stop measuring AHT and instead measure resolution. Users don't care how long it takes the bots to accomplish their work, but they certainly do care whether their service need has been resolved.

- **An insurer in Spain** used a proactive analytics tool to discover that automatic security upgrades were creating disk errors on users' PCs. To stop this, a disk-cleaning script now automatically executes self-healing processes on user devices. This keeps users productive while lowering IT support and device-management costs.

Easier said than done?

While every organization can benefit by adopting next-generation SLAs that focus on the user experience, not every organization will find their implementation easy. In fact, many organizations adopting next-gen SLAs will encounter any or all of three main obstacles:

- **Incomplete adoption:** Old habits die hard. IT may implement innovative changes to improve the user experience, only to find users falling back on their older practices, such as calling IT every time there's an issue. If this happens, user-experience investments may fail to return a payback.
- **A lack of understanding about integration:** Today's IT environments are more complex than ever, involving multiple tools and technologies from multiple vendors. As a result, IT leaders may find it difficult to integrate these tools for the best possible user experience.
- **Analysis paralysis:** Overthinking the challenge can lead to inaction. IT leaders have learned that being a pioneer is risky, while being an innovator can involve failure. So they bring in costly consultants, vendors and others to lead workshops, return-on-investment analyses and ongoing assessments. While these activities can be helpful, they can also serve as substitutes for much-needed action. Users get impatient, and IT budgets get strained.

A better way forward

How to overcome these obstacles? While every organization is unique, taking some common steps can help.

A good place to start is designing a transformation strategy that uses both traditional and next-generation SLAs. This will focus on improving both internal IT delivery and the user experience. The organization may also need to empower IT and business leaders to take on some new and additional risk. Whatever downside this may involve is likely to be more than compensated for by the benefits of having highly satisfied users.

Partnering can help, too. The best partners for today's IT environment can help integrate multiple technologies from multiple vendors into a single service. This can improve the user experience while simplifying the way services are administered.

Collaborating with users is another good approach. Organizations can include users in early brainstorming sessions, and get their help when creating a technology

roadmap. Advocate groups can help, too, by promoting the adoption of new user-experience best practices throughout the organization.

Innovative technologies are another tool for improving the user experience. Now's the time for leading organizations to be pioneers, not followers. Helpful technologies include big data analytics, APIs and their frameworks, and process automation. These technologies enable IT to monitor the user experience and automatically fix processes that aren't working for users. These technologies can also automate user-facing communications. Automation can proactively eliminate incidents, thereby reducing service disruptions that can hurt the user experience. Because users understand what's been done, they are likely to become more involved in the process.

A new mind-set may be needed, too. Organizations need to recognize that the value of IT comes not only from savings and reduced costs, but also from meeting the new expectations of users to help attract talent, boost productivity and explore innovative business models.

Above all, organizations today should track the user experience based not on how IT delivers, but on what the users want. In this age of digital transformation, that's how every organization can truly measure success.

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