

Rapid resolution

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A quiet revolution in problem management is taking place, if you know where to look. As any IT support team knows, it's how you handle the chronic problems that defines your success. IT is so often remembered, unfortunately, for these problems – business managers will blithely forget the complex projects delivered on time and on budget, but will clearly recall every little detail of the last chronic problem. Such problems may only account for around 3% of the total encountered, yet they use up a disproportionate amount of time, creating a significant workload and slowing the completion of other IT projects.

Root cause identification has long been recognised as the most effective way to solve a problem, but often not accepted as the fastest way. Method-based problem diagnosis is rarely understood and even more rarely practised, yet it offers an effective means to solving long running problems – it is the critical missing element within the service toolbox. As an independent consultancy specialising in IT performance and stability, we have developed and refined our Rapid Problem Resolution method over 18 years, it has had success in solving chronic problems in both the private and public sector. RPR works with the IT department and allows them to make better decisions, faster.

In order to achieve this, the problems need to be broken down and analysed in a rigorous fashion. Time and again, we have found that our customers either don't have a problem management team, or, if they do, that they often aren't getting the best use out of them. We know that our method can drive the process forward, and together with the client we can reach a quick solution.

In our experience, problems come in three flavours:

- **Functional** – it should work, but it doesn't;
- **Stability** – it works most of the time, but sometimes it fails;
- **Performance** – it works, but sometimes goes slow.

Functional problems are generally easily fixed, but stability and performance problems can drag on and on, soaking up support time, and causing serious business inefficiencies as staff adjust processes to accommodate the problem. Yet the good news is that the increasing adoption of method-based problem resolution is proving to be the fastest way to solve chronic problems.

Sometimes it's difficult for an IT department to know when to switch to a full problem resolution method. We've found that problems pass through four distinct phases. Recognising these phrases is vital for effective resolution.

Phase 1

- Characterised by simple issues and user errors;
- Solved by help desk/first line staff as incidents;
- Solved through knowledge, Known Error Database access and procedures;
- Solved within 16 hours.

Phase 2

- Dealt with by second or third Line support;
- Issues caused by faults, overload or misconfiguration;
- Fixed though advanced knowledge, tools and knowledge-base access;
- Fixed within a further 24 hours.

Phase 3

- Dealt with by third line support with supplier product specialist;

- Characterised by complex problems, often performance related and/or intermittent;
- Fixed by pattern methods, detailed product knowledge and advanced tools;
- Process elimination may be attempted;
- Fixed within a further 24 hours.

Phase 4

- Phase 4 problems are complex problems that have dropped through Phase 3 process with the root cause unknown;
- Attempts made to fix through swap-out, holistic methods, gut feel, random upgrades, etc;
- May be fixed within 10 days to 2-plus years – or may never be fixed.

Phase 4 problems have some common characteristics:

- The involvement of senior IT management;
- Frequent crisis meetings are held;
- No clear sense of direction is present;
- An ever-growing group of people are involved;
- Help desk calls are reduced;
- Business adjusts work processes in order to lessen the impact.

Perhaps the most obvious indication that the problem has entered Phase 4 is the repeated use of the line "We're just going to try one more thing..." If you hear this more than once, you can be fairly sure that you are faced with a Phase 4 problem.

At this point the IT team is often faced with just two choices: do more of the same, even though this has not produced the solution to date, or resort to trial and error, which could involve testing a range of changes, upgrading infrastructure or replacing software. Neither option is attractive; both are slow and often expensive, and cannot be relied upon to produce the solution. Clearly this is the time to look for something different: a problem resolution method that can cut fix time dramatically.

RPR is aligned with ITIL best practice, making it easy to integrate into IT departments, and is a natural extension of what customers already use. IT teams everywhere struggle for weeks, months or even years with Phase 4 problems. RPR is a collaborative method; it enhances the existing skills of the IT team and supplier technical support staff, and it cuts fix time dramatically. From experience, we know that RPR can cut Phase 4 time by between 60% and 95%.

In one recent case, we worked with a fund manager who had an application start-up problem that had been affecting 1,000 users for eight months. Using RPR the root cause was determined in two and a half days and fixed in a little over three – that's 98.7% less wasted time.

Another client, a major bank, had a network problem affecting 7,000 users over a three week period. We found the root cause in four days.

Executing each of the core steps is not as simple as it may seem at first glance, which leads us to another important feature. RPR defines both the process and the specialist techniques necessary to achieve the objectives of each step. The techniques gain significant benefit from the tools and facilities available already within the IT environment, allowing a seamless flow from current support activity.

Problems, unfortunately, will never disappear, but it appears, at least, that they don't have to be intractable.