



Case Study: Global IT Support Service

Background

The client is a major global research and high-tech manufacturing company, the largest company in its field in Europe. It's many sites and facilities around the world are integrated through IT systems, including through the use of a global supply chain management system. The specific client in this case was the central corporate IT support function for all the company.

Challenge

The presenting brief was to redesign the organisation of those people who between them provided support for the use of the system to control the Global Supply Chain of the manufacturing company.

The organisation had recently upgraded the version of their system being used and it was supposed that the current issues in the support community were something to do with a lack of clarity in roles, triggered by the fact that the upgrade had required a more profound reworking of the systems than would be expected for a mere version release of software.

Intervention

Tricordant is not an expert in the areas of IT and IT support but has tools that look at the 'wholeness of work'. It approached the problem by: a) setting up a series of interviews with key personnel; and b) accumulating statistics on the nature, frequency and provenance of problems being solved by them.

The interviews were at the service director and practitioner level and allowed 'Tricord Mapping' to be used at multiple levels, for: a) each individual at their level of activity; b) for the workgroups; and c) for the directorates. By assembling the Tricord Maps of the workgroup activities it was possible to understand the flow of the support process and assess whether the way the support process was divided-up made sense from a whole work perspective.

Symptoms

The interview process rapidly threw up that there was a level of dysfunction and discontent among the staff, with a number of key staff either off sick or contemplating job changes. This level of stress appeared not to have been in place before the work was moved to the current headquarters building. This move had only preceded the systems upgrade by a number of months.

This alerted the Tricordant team to the fact that one was probably not looking here just at the effects of the IT upgrade, or of lack of job role clarity, but that there was something more profoundly wrong in the underlying socio-technical structure of the work process.

The director who ran the unit was trying to create a structure where an autonomous and homogenous team accepted calls from the field and used their individual and collective skills to proactively address the issues. In this context, team management should be a light responsibility, mainly concerned with ensuring that the difficult to fix cases were managed collectively and not left on the side. Tricordant would naturally support managing work in this way. However, it was rapidly clear that there was a gap between expectations and reality and that the management style and the personalities involved meant that blockages were not being talked about or addressed.



Nature of the Issues

At the root of the problem was a company dictat that work should be outsourced. This was fracturing work that should have been done by a homogenous, integrated team, into unclear responsibilities between a number of different, unrelated, geographically scattered groups. For instance:

- Company policy had said that all first points of contact must go through a global help desk, which had been outsourced to a company in Canada. The help desk staff were responsible for logging all calls and assigning a fault type to each and then storing the call on the fault system. The IT support team management, who only worked UK 9-5 time, would then pick up the fault when in the office. Unfortunately, this help desk was the first line of call for all IT issues in the global organisation and could not be trained in the arcane business applications of each specific manufacturing logistics system, even if staff churn had allowed them the time to learn the skills. The result was that their intervention increased the work in the system, they did not have the understanding to write down the presenting issues with clarity and they assigned the responsibility for resolution to the wrong area. This was worse than users e-mailing their problems to a competent logistics system support team and only added to the cost of the operation. All the work they were meant to have done was then redone by competent staff when they came into the office in the UK morning.
- The job queue was then managed by a person who worked for the IT side of the organisation, however, the majority of user problems were business process-related and centred on how the IT was used to get business results and not related to a failure of the IT to function correctly. This meant that most of the work was being done by two temporarily assigned business support specialists who felt alienated from their own business development team and trapped in a lesser activity. This tension had not been present in the previous location as business support and IT support had accidentally sat together in one office and effectively worked as an informal team. However, in the headquarters they were separated by two floors and a 100 yard walk, which had removed this informal co-operation.
- When the issues coming in through the help line were actually IT issues, those responsible for resolving them to a large extent were in a part of the service that had been subcontracted to a body-shopping consultancy. Their staff were partly based in the UK head office and partly in India. This produced two levels of barrier to co-working, one between companies and one between countries.
- The IT technical staff were well motivated and could be proactive, however, their attempts to explain to end users the nature of the problems had a poor track record. This was because the focus of the IT staff was on issues like the integrity of translation of data between databases at the hexadecimal level, whereas the users were thinking in terms of market demand or factory output. This non-communication led to users giving up on getting problems solved, so the apparent clear up rate was sometimes actually the user fatigue rate. A significant number of problems became entrenched (e.g. needing >24 iterations of e-mails to resolve) and supply could be lost to markets while this was going on.
- The conflict of process between business issues and IT issues meant that there was an institutionalised friction between the Business and IT support directors and their teams. This they managed professionally but as any solution could mean one party losing or gaining authority, people or budget, talking about the solution was sensitive.



Summary of the Problem

The management believed the issue to be one of job descriptions. In reality the fundamental problem was a process fractured by doctrinaire outsourcing and the splitting of teams that had historically worked well together and had been co-located. This important synergy had not been a conscious thing, so that in the new head quarters they had been split up to fit the available space. As a result a task that required a single, multi-skilled, cross-functional team to manage and complete it was being attempted by a several groups of people, split by reporting lines (Helpdesk, business and IT), split by company (manufacturer and sub-contractor), in three time zones and three continents, none of which actually covered the Pacific rim and Australia/New Zealand in real time.

Nature of the Solution

The key to the solution was that the users needed to get rapid access to a team of people who would take full responsibility for their whole problem. If at all possible the helpdesk needed to be streamlined out of the process. If this was politically unacceptable then its role had to be minimised, so that its negative and impact and cost was limited.

This competent team should either be business-led or IT focussed but must be capable of managing solutions in the other half so that the users only had to deal with one group of people and speak one language.

Because the greatest number of presenting issues were business issues, it made sense for the lead team to be in the business support directorate and not the IT support directorate. They would to be both business support competent and have the capability to manage IT problems through the IT specialists teams, talking hex as needed! However, this was radical change to the status quo, which had always seen this work as primarily IT support.

The real value-add objective for this team, on top of the standard clear up rate, should become the education and training of the user community in the use of the software, the development of training aids and packages and the ownership of the user documentation.

Outcome

The Tricordant solution was shared with the three directors working in the area, who agreed that this approach was correct. The support activity was realigned into business directorate. This pleased the IT people who were under pressure to outsource work and outsourcing to business support was seen as positive from an IT directorate accounting perspective. Business support took on four new heads to create a nucleus that could deal with the 80% of incoming calls and could manage the 20% through the specialist IT and other support teams. The help desk role was politically unavoidable, but was managed down to level of minimum annoyance and impact. The outcome was felt to be good by all parties.

The team was contacted 12 months later. One of the area's senior managers said, 'You know I was actually a bit sceptical at the time, but we've now implemented everything you said, and you know it works. It really works!'.