MIND THE GAP

Colin Butcher (below) says that the 'expertise gap' is a worrying new trend in infrastructure support.
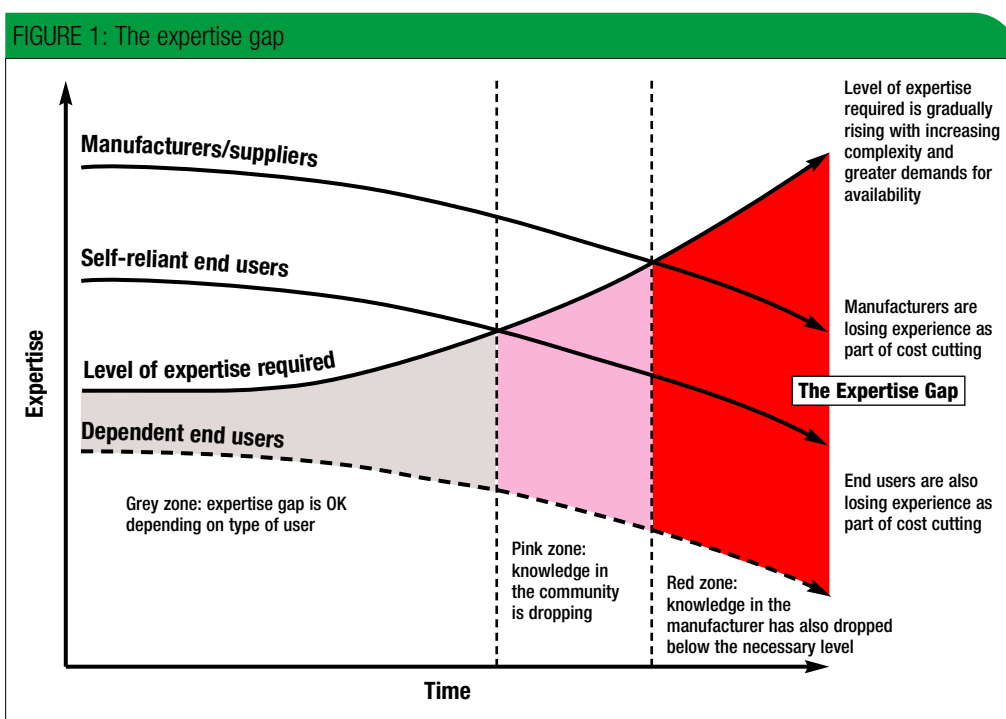
We have a support 'time bomb' waiting to explode. It has been created by the widespread loss of experienced staff, the lack of new people coming through to take their place, and across-the-board cost cutting initiatives such as outsourcing and offshoring to the cheapest supplier. Getting good value is important, but cutting costs to the point that quality of service is impacted at the front line will cause long-term damage.

In practice, an 'expertise gap' is growing between the necessary level of skill required to support companies' technical infrastructure, the immediately available level of skill with end-user organisations and, crucially, the immediately available level of support from manufacturers and suppliers. This is creating a major risk to the survival of businesses when they have problems with their technology infrastructure or with their external communication mechanisms. Figure 1 summarises the situation:

● The level of expertise required to keep systems and networks running is gradually increasing, primarily due to increasing complexity and greater expectations of both features and availability.

● The level of expertise available within both end-user organisations and manufacturers/suppliers is falling, primarily as a response to the perceived need to cut costs and deliver short-term profits. This manifests itself in the loss of experienced staff and the growth in the use of outsourced (and often offshore) telephone support services.

As Figure 1 notes, end-user organisations fall into two types: those who are predominantly self-reliant – generally larger organisations or those working in fields where the importance of mission-critical systems is well understood; and those who are predominantly dependent on external assistance – generally smaller organisations or those working in fields where some outage can be tolerated. At some point the immediately available level of expertise falls below that needed to solve problems and restore service. This is the 'expertise gap'. The problem becomes worse with time as the general level of knowledge in the community decreases.

FIGURE 1: The expertise gap

Manufacturers/suppliers

Self-reliant end users

Level of expertise required

Dependent end users

Expertise

Time

Grey zone: expertise gap is OK depending on type of user

Pink zone: knowledge in the community is dropping

Red zone: knowledge in the manufacturer has also dropped below the necessary level

Level of expertise required is gradually rising with increasing complexity and greater demands for availability

Manufacturers are losing experience as part of cost cutting

The Expertise Gap

End users are also losing experience as part of cost cutting

There are a number of other factors contributing to this, but the underlying trend is that the expertise gap is real and is upon us now. So what risk does this pose?

Most businesses are now completely dependent on their technology infrastructure. Many of them no longer have alternate manual processes. If the systems and networks fail then the business will be severely affected, in some cases to the point where the business will not survive.

An example could be a company which is highly reliant on email for communicating with its customers and suppliers. If the email system suffers a prolonged outage it could go out of business fairly swiftly, because the customers will go elsewhere. If the company does survive the outage, then it will have put a serious dent in the company's turnover and cashflow.

The risk to business created by the growing expertise gap needs to be understood and managed. Simply pursuing short-term revenue goals at the expense of long-term survival is not a good strategy for many businesses, especially essential services such as healthcare, banking, energy, transport and communications. Prudent business continuity planning forces companies to deal with this issue before it can severely affect them.

Put simply – companies need to realise that this problem must be dealt with effectively and that they need to undertake long-term investment in skills. The nearest analogy is that of the railway infrastructure; for years it suffered from under-investment and profiteering, then we witnessed a number of major failures and eventually we have seen a programme of reinvestment gradually bringing about improvements, together with a slow increase in the level of expertise to the point where things can begin to move forwards again.

Shedding expertise is easy to do – just get rid of staff. Regaining expertise is difficult – it requires prolonged training and hard-won practical experience.

Need for good support

At the surface level, most technology appears relatively easy to use, prices are relatively low, and we're now at the point where most people can just pick items out of a catalogue, connect them together and it mostly works, most of the time. However, when it stops working you need to have sufficient expertise to be able to diagnose and resolve problems, especially if they are complex and intermittent.

With the proliferation of cheaper system and network hardware and the rapidly spreading reliance on them comes a vast requirement for competent and responsive support services.

A large part of the problem is that most businesses do not have realistic expectations of the requirements for, and the cost of, effective and responsive support. Businesses seem to believe that support and purchase costs can be continually reduced, to the extent that it drives the cost below the point where an effective service can be delivered.

This isn't greed; it's a simple fact that good people cost money. Support is fundamentally about problem solving. There aren't that many people who are very good at it, so to get and retain good support you have to pay accordingly.

The other side of the coin is that it is frustrating to be paying for premium levels of support, and receiving a decreasing quality of service. Suppliers also need to be realistic about the quality of the support they provide and need to ensure that it remains above the point where customers become dissatisfied.

Support experience

Many manufacturers and suppliers are reducing their capability to provide support. In trying to cut costs, they are reducing the number of highly experienced people they have, cutting some of their spares holdings, outsourcing some of their logistics and offshoring much of their call handling.

All of these actions lead to deteriorating customer satisfaction because it takes longer for calls to be handled, and takes longer for the customer to get through to somebody who knows what they're doing while nobody in the call centre seems able to take direct responsibility.

Overall it's just a lot more pain and effort to go through before you get a useful response to your problem, let alone get the problem resolved and are able to resume normal operations.

If you're a company dependent on external support this is bad news, because when things go badly wrong, you need help in a hurry.

If yours is a self-reliant organisation, then you've probably got plenty of expertise on tap, you've probably got a good idea of what's wrong and the last thing your own staff need is to be confronted by a poorly handled support call response by someone wading through a script without much experience and not knowing enough to actually get the problem fixed quickly.

Investing in front-line people

Catering for the expertise gap is yet another facet of business continuity planning. We're not interested in response time, we're interested in fix time to minimise the effect of an outage. That's what affects us and our customers.

In summary, if you are responsible for a business, you need to ensure that you have sufficient expertise available to resolve issues when things fail. You need to have that expertise inhouse or very close to you, or somebody at the other end of the phone whom you can rely on utterly and who can be up-to-speed very quickly.

This is an area that businesses should review very closely, because recent experience shows that a lot of manufacturers and suppliers are no longer delivering that level of support and commitment. Customers are not able to resolve problems swiftly and effectively.

You should ask those who provide support to you what certifications they have, what training they receive, and what investment they routinely make in their front-line staff.

Do their staff have hard-won practical field experience? Are language skills or cultural barriers likely to get in the way of delivering a timely solution? You will be dependent on them at some point, so you need to ensure that they are worthy of the trust you place in them.

You need to plan ahead and invest in both internal and external support services so that when things do go wrong, you stand a good chance of resolving issues swiftly and effectively and can continue running with a minimal impact to the business itself.

Your own internal people are in the front line when things go wrong. You need to make sure that they have the necessary level of expertise and available resources for them to be effective.

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