

Guardian News & Media

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Guardian News & Media (GNM) publishes theguardian.com, the third largest English-speaking newspaper website in the world.

Since launching its US and Australia digital editions in 2011 and 2013 respectively, traffic from outside of the UK now represents over two-thirds of the GNM's total digital audience. In the UK, GNM publishes the Guardian newspaper six days a week, first published in 1821, and the world's oldest Sunday newspaper, The Observer.

theguardian

GNM is a dynamic and pioneering news organisation across all departments. Amongst all this cutting edge transformation, GNM's IT service desk has been going through its own upheaval. Over the last year the team has experienced arguably the most transformative change any service desk is likely to face—that of insourcing from a third-party outsourcer and rebuilding from scratch.

So what is life like for IT service management (ITSM) folks at GNM? How do they handle delivery of IT services for one of the world's leading brands? How have they insourced the service desk? These are all questions I was keen to ask when I met the team in London.



Insourcing the service desk

GNM has around 1,700 staff working for them globally. Roughly half of GNM staff work in commercial teams, the other half are in editorial teams including worldwide journalists and bloggers. The 60-member IT team supports 1,200 Macs, 800 PCs and twin mirrored datacentres in London and Bracknell.

The service desk was insourced from the 1st August 2013 when a team of six service desk analysts took over the front line of IT service and support.

The insource meant choosing a suitable solution to underpin its service management processes. Previously, the IT team was provided with technology as part of IT outsourcing contracts, such as Remedy or ServiceNow. With ITSM now firmly the responsibility of the in-house teams, there was a requirement for a smaller system that suited their needs. Flexibility and value for money were key drivers. Following a review of the market, the team chose SysAid.

MEET THE TEAM Left to right – Steve Erskine, Louise Sandford and Vicky Cobbett, Guardian News and Media

A GNM version of ITIL

The IT support team at GNM records 600–650 incidents a week, working core hours of 8am until 6pm, with extended cover until 3am to support publication of the printed newspaper.

“We resolve as many calls as we can on the first line, not just log and flog, we try to do as much as we can and only escalate to second line if we get stuck,” said Vicky Cobbett, Service Desk Manager.

Incidents arrive in the way of system monitoring, email, telephone and walk ups. The team has not yet implemented any self-service options with SysAid, as they wanted to build up a reputation and confidence in existing channels first.

Third line teams are arranged by technology stack or competence area, such as business applications, networks, integrations, multimedia, AV, Oracle applications and so on.

“Our technology base is really quite broad,” said Steve Erskine, Technology Supplier Manager. “We are digital first. It’s a very different company than the newspaper I originally joined.”

“GNM is at the cutting edge of the media industry, it means we are constantly changing. We are constantly being brought new things to manage,” added Louise Sandford, Application Analyst.

Like most organizations that refer to best practice frameworks, GNM has cherry picked guidance from ITIL to suit its requirements.

“We’ve adopted a GNM version of ITIL,” said Steve.

“We have a Change Advisory Board (CAB) every Monday and use SysAid to manage all of our changes. If you look at the ITIL book, we’re not quite doing it the way ITIL suggests, we’ve taken the bits that are appropriate for us.”

“For example, we don’t have a change manager because of the diverse teams in our IT staff, but we make sure we follow a change management process and follow ITIL where appropriate.”

“Individual teams get direct calls too. We work in a deadline driven environment so things need to be resolved quickly. Sometimes you need to resolve the ticket before logging it,” said Louise. “We try not to get too caught up in process protocol – publishing the paper comes first.”

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Our SLA is to ensure the paper is published each night and that our website remains online

Publishing the newspaper and keeping the website up in total alignment to business requirements was a recurring theme during our conversation. There is no time for navel gazing about service desk metrics at GNM. Its focus is on deadlines and the key priorities of the business seem familiar to the old fable about President Kennedy visiting the Space Center.

It is said that the President approached a man sweeping and said “Hi, I’m Jack Kennedy. What are you doing?” to which the janitor replied “I’m helping put a man on the moon, Mr President.”

I found their customer focus refreshing. I asked the team: “How do you know if you’re doing a good job? How do you measure success?”

“The newspaper gets printed. The website is always up,” said Vicky.

The team monitors call volumes, call open times and escalates where appropriate – but the main focus of meeting customer requirements is via the personal relationships developed by Business Relationship Managers (BRMs) who go out to the business and listen for requirements, help prioritize projects and develop a medium term plan.

“Success for me is if we can put processes and procedures in place without slowing the business down,” said Steve.

“We don’t get too caught up with measuring statistics. The company knows we work hard to close all tickets as quickly as possible and are focussed on helping the company print the paper and keep the website up,” said Vicky.

"In terms of statistics and metrics and comparing this year with last year – that's not what we're about... and I don't think we'll ever get to that point," added Steve.

"We work in a vocal environment, if we're not doing the right thing people will soon tell us. We also have our BRM team who are going out to the business to ensure we are doing the right thing and meeting their requirements."

"We don't really work to formal Service Levels. We might be working on something quite important to one person, but if something happens, which means we can't get the paper out, everything gets dropped to fix it and that person will have to wait. If we're going to breach a Service Level Agreement (SLA), we're going to breach it. We've got to get the paper out."

"Everyone in the company has this focus. It's our purpose for being here," added Louise.

Why SysAid?

As Application Analyst Louise is the main owner of SysAid. She has looked after the application since insourcing back in August and works with their account manager Yair Bortinger at SysAid.

GNM learnt from working with previous tools that despite all the bells and whistles on offer they would only end up using a small fraction of the features available. So a reason for choosing SysAid was that it is a smaller system and easier to customize to their own requirements.

"We find it user friendly," said Louise. "With other systems we've worked with you have to stick to the templates or labels issued by the software company. SysAid is a lot more flexible to customize to your own requirements so you can label things the way you want them and in a way the whole IT department will understand. We use the cloud version so we can use it anywhere, we can use it at home."

A quirky bunch

I asked the GNM team about their experiences with SysAid as a company. They were extremely complimentary. Specifically, the team stated that customer service was their strongest asset.

"They're a quirky bunch," said Vicky, "very, very friendly."

"They are amenable and get back to you quickly," added Louise.

"Sometimes when you work with software companies, you'll deal with the salesperson and they are the friendliest person in the world, but once you've signed the contract the relationship changes. With SysAid, when we phone them up, they're as friendly as the day we signed the contract," said Steve.

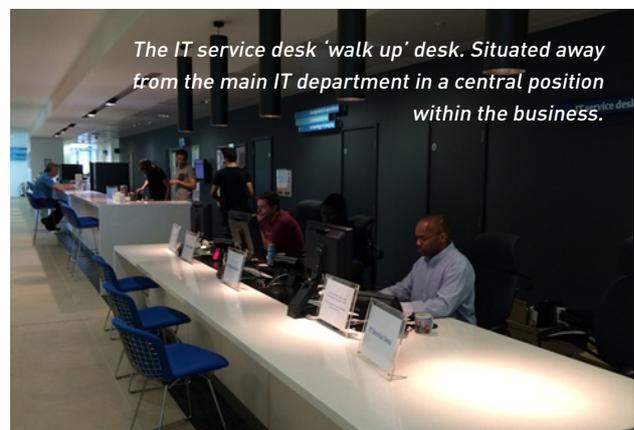
"...And that's not just one person, that's everyone you speak to, the account management team, professional services, senior management," said Louise.

"We sometimes ask the professional services team to do something completely random and weird and they say, yeah ok, we'll do that for you," said Vicky.

"I hope they don't get bought and stay as they are. We are doing this case study because they are good not because of some commercial arrangement. We want to give something back in exchange for their great product and great service," added Steve.

IT service desk bar

The GNM IT team has built an "IT service desk bar" as a concierge desk for walk-in IT support enquiries. It is situated adjacent to a main stairwell and thoroughfare of the business and is intentionally separate from the rest of the IT department. Three service desk analysts work at the service desk bar, which accounts for around 15% of all incidents.



The IT service desk 'walk up' desk. Situated away from the main IT department in a central position within the business.

“It’s meant that we’ve built better relationships within the company. They see IT as having a face rather than being a voice at the end of a phone,” said Vicky.

“But around 15%–20% of incidents come from the service desk bar. 50–60% come in via email and around 20–25% are phone calls.”

Customizing to requirements

Louise estimates that the split between in-house customization and development from SysAid is around 70/30.

“I do as much of the customization myself and liaise with Yair and the SysAid professional services team to do everything else,” said Louise.

“One of the great things we like about SysAid is that it’s so configurable and it’s very flexible. It is also quite user-friendly, so without a huge amount of configuration knowledge you can pick it up and use it quite effectively.”

User account creation, which was previously managed in Lotus Notes, is now handled by SysAid.

“That was a custom project they built for us. SysAid is used to automate the account creation of logins for new users. It’s completely out of scope for what SysAid is designed for but they’ve been very ‘can do’ about the whole project. It feels like a partnership,” said Vicky.

Future plans

Having embedded change management, the team aims to look at problem management in more detail and also plans to build an asset register to record laptops and desktops using SysAid. Knowledge management is also on the agenda, done at a steady pace with issues ironed out as they go.

“It’s such a small system in the grand scale of things in terms of all the systems we use. But it’s such an important one,” said Louise.

GUARDIAN NEWS & MEDIA

- The Guardian first published in 1821
- Offices in UK, USA, Australia
- Headquarters: King’s Cross, London, UK
- Revenue Guardian Media Group Plc. £210M
- Over 100million monthly unique browsers for theguardian.com
- 1,700 staff, 60 IT Team staff
- www.theguardian.com

Overall Review of SysAid by Guardian News & Media

"It's a great tool, with great service," said Steve.

Strengths

- Customer service from the SysAid team
- Ease of use
- Customization

Weaknesses

- Reporting – doesn't have the depth we'd like but SysAid is addressing this in Q4 2014.
- Reverse customization – when you've built something by configuring it and need to undo it, it is not always straightforward. Some elements aren't as friendly as others. Some of the workflow elements could be improved.

Ratings

- Customer Service 9.5/10
- Product 8.5 / 10
- Reporting 5/10



Martin Thompson

Martin is owner and founder of the The ITAM Review and The ITSM Review.

Martin is also founder and Chair, Campaign for Clear Licensing. A contributor to the British Computer Society (BCS) Configuration Management Group and contributor to the UK itSMF UK Service Transition SIG.



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