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Offshore Support Questioned

Vendors must balance user satisfaction with desire to curb costs

Story by [Bob Brewin](#).

DECEMBER 08, 2003
([COMPUTERWORLD](#)) - Offshore technical support services have become a fact of life for many technology vendors and their customers. But both vendors and users last week said support operations have to balance their desire to reduce labor costs with customer satisfaction considerations.

The issue came to the forefront late last month, when Dell Inc. said it was

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returning phone-based technical support for its corporate PCs to the U.S. because of complaints from some users about the quality of service they received from a call center in India [QuickLink [43172](#)].

Other major vendors, including IBM, Hewlett-Packard Co., Oracle Corp. and Computer Associates International Inc., last week said they don't plan to follow Dell's turnabout by reducing their reliance on global support operations.

Lori Moore, vice president of product support services at Microsoft Corp., said via e-mail that the company has never changed support locations because of user feedback, although it does get complaints "from time to time in each of our support centers." But she noted that Microsoft sets up support facilities in new countries "in a thoughtful and deliberate manner. We don't rush into other markets."

For example, Microsoft two months ago launched a pilot program to support some of its products from a site in Bangalore, India. However, Moore said it plans to take a "very selective" approach on the pilot project. No companies with Premier Support contracts are being supported from the new facility, she added.

Despite its pullback, Dell indicated that it might eventually shift PC support back to India. Glenn Bonner, CIO at Dell user MGM Mirage in Las Vegas, said providing technical support from offshore locations "really doesn't matter as long as the quality of service is the same and there is not a language barrier." If Dell can successfully serve users from



India, "it'll just serve to reduce Dell's cost and ultimately give savings back to us," he added.

Tom Iannotti, vice president of business development at HP, said it doesn't make sense for vendors to continually chase around the world for the lowest labor costs. That requires constant training of workers, not only in the technical aspects of product support, but in English-language skills as well, he said.

IBM doesn't have any help desk operations in India, but it does handle support calls from a global network of facilities in Atlanta, Toronto, Scotland, Australia and China, according to a company spokesman. IBM isn't among the vendors that "pride themselves on doing things cheaply," he added.

Kirkland, Wash.-based vCustomer Corp. operates a pair of technical support outsourcing centers in India with a total of about 2,500 customer service workers and 700 other employees. Sanjay Kumar, the company's CEO, defended the quality of service that his India-based support technicians provide but acknowledged that their accented English can be hard for U.S. users to understand at first.

"To the user, it's a new accent, a different one," Kumar said. However, he added that vCustomer spends "thousands of dollars" per agent on computer training and to "help neutralize the accent." (Kumar isn't related to CA's CEO, who shares the same name.)

Several analysts said they view the offshore sourcing of support as a trend that won't go away. But IDC analyst Ned May noted that the hardware success Dell has reaped through tight-fisted management of its supply chain does not necessarily translate into the more people-based support business.

Reporters Matt Hamblen, Carol Sliwa and Marc L. Songini contributed to this story.

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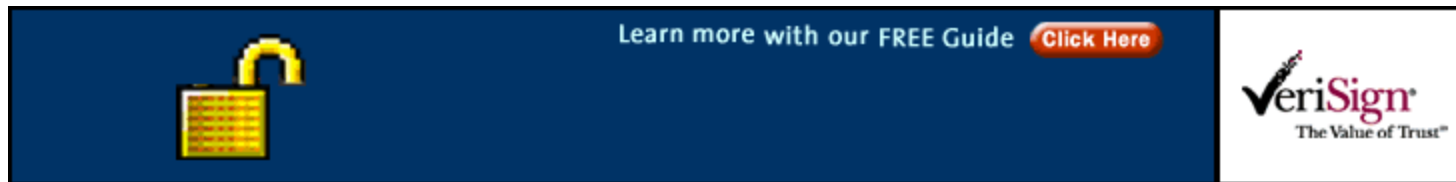
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