



Inspiring service desks to be brilliant

# Switching off Email:

## The Future of the Support Channel

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### Member Report

August 2017

# About the Author

The author of this report is SDI's Industry Analyst Scarlett Bayes. Scarlett is dedicated to providing insightful and practical research to the service desk industry through investigating trends, analysing data and engaging with the IT service community. You can find more of Scarlett's work on the [SDI blog](#) and can follow her on Twitter [@SDIScarlett](#)

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# Introduction

Email has long been a favoured support channel for many service desk users. It is a simple, accessible, and widely accepted form of support communication. However, email-based support can present a communication challenge for service desk professionals; for example, end users may not be clear about an issue, or may not provide all the necessary information, which can lead to multiple email interactions between end users and the service desk. As a result of this, end users and service desk staff alike, may get frustrated with the time it takes to resolve an issue. It can also be very labour intensive for service desk staff, for the aforementioned reason, as well as the act of sifting through raw, unstructured data on a daily basis to log and resolve interactions. Customers may also use it, perhaps not consciously, as a way to avoid processes present in other support channels, which can also cause problems for the service desk. These challenges have led to some service desks opting to remove email as a support channel.

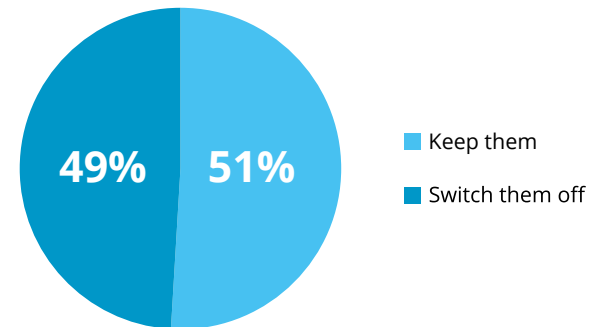
However, despite frustrations, many decide to keep the method of contact open in order to offer multichannel support options to keep end users happy. For example, end users may become frustrated with a self-service portal due to irrelevant questions, a small scope of predicted query types, or an inefficient and time-consuming logging process. Alternatively, email may simply be the only communication channel for certain service desk users.

This member's report will explore the benefits of switching off email, as well as the reasons behind why some service desk professionals may prefer to keep the channel open. We will also explore other support channels used by service desks.

# Switching off – yes or no

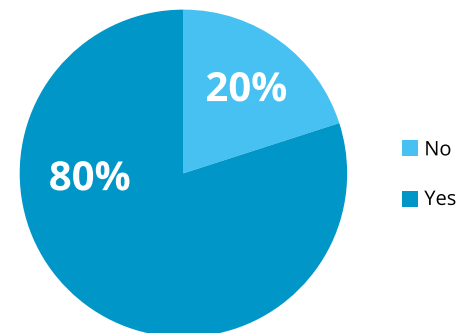
After a debate among members of the SDI LinkedIn group, SDI posted a Twitter poll to find out whether service desk professionals preferred switching off email to keeping it as a support channel.

## Emails to your service desk - keep them or switch them off? What's your preference?



Interestingly, almost 50% of respondents selected that they would prefer to turn off support emails to their service desk. We have noted that there are multiple benefits of switching off email, and while there may be obstacles to doing so, we cannot ignore that 51% of respondents would actually prefer to keep the channel open.

To explore this further, SDI devised a mini-survey to glean a better impression of whether opinion throughout the service desk industry reflects the result of the Twitter poll.



## Switching off - yes or no

Of the respondents, only 20% have actually switched off email as a means of support communication. This statistic is not surprising, as while around half of service desk professionals would prefer to remove the option of emails, there are many possible barriers to the actual act of removing email as a support channel. As previously noted, the biggest obstacle to removing email as a support channel is the customers; often, they will prefer to use email over other methods of communication due to personal preference and convenience.

## The reality of switching off

Of the 20% of respondents who confirmed their service desk had switched off email as a support channel, the majority did so because end users did not give enough information. With other support channels, such as telephone support or self-service, users there may be more opportunity to structure an interaction and provide a more efficient approach to information gathering. However, as there is typically less of a structured approach when raising an incident or service request via email, this channel can often take longer to resolve issues or requests due to multiple email interactions.

### Why did you choose to switch off email as a support channel?

Users did not give enough information

 **80%**

To boost user adoption of other support channels (i.e. self service)

 **40%**

It was too labour intensive

 **40%**

Other

 **20%**

## The reality of switching off

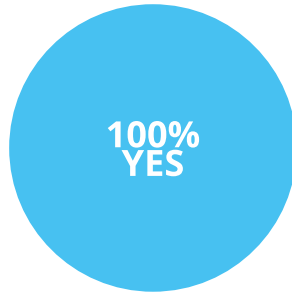
40% of respondents identified that they switched off emails to their service desk in an attempt to boost user adoption of other support channels, such as selfservice. Service desks can often struggle with changing end user habits. Therefore, when implementing a new service channel, it can be difficult to encourage user adoption. This can have an impact on ROI and the overall efficiency of the service desk. Although it may be viewed as counterproductive, by restricting or removing the options users have, service desks can improve user adoption to other support channels. However, mitigating the risk to end user satisfaction as a result of such an approach is an extremely significant consideration.

40% also claimed using email was too labour intensive. This stems from the fact that users may not provide enough information, thus causing service desk staff to chase end users for more detail regarding their incident or request, which takes up valuable and resources and increases the average time spent per incident. Also, as there is no built-in filter to sort the unstructured data within emails, i.e. establishing whether an unstructured email interaction is an incident or a service request, or being able to effectively categorise or prioritise these interactions can be extremely challenging and inefficient. In some cases, it can also take time for service desk staff to sift through a potentially large inbox of emails and log them individually or update existing tickets. Self-service allows this to be done automatically, and calling in requires the incident to be logged there and then, but email logging is a longer process.

All of the respondents, whose service desks have switched off email as a support channel, identified that doing so has benefitted their service desk. Of course, there are multiple ways in which the benefits can manifest themselves, such as faster response times, quicker resolution times, better customer experience, and greater end user adoption of self-service.

## The reality of switching off

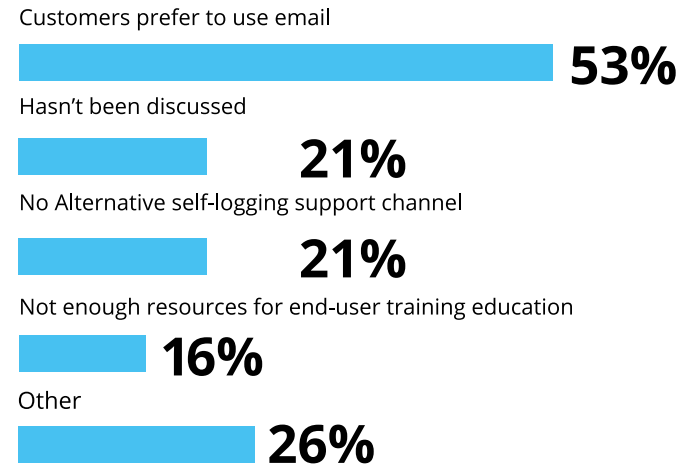
Has switching off your email as a support channel benefited your service



One LinkedIn group member explained that by removing the option of email as a support channel and focusing on the self-service portal, her service desk was able to reduce tickets by 45% and phone calls by 20%. Another member claimed that by switching off email, user adoption of his service desk's self-service portal jumped from 0% to 81% in just over a year. Therefore, there is certainly weight behind the argument that removing email as a support channel can improve selfservice user adoption and improve service efficiency.

## Why some keep the support channel open

What is the reason behind keeping email as a support channel?



The majority of respondents (53%), specified the main reason behind keeping email as a support channel was because customers prefer it. While many service desks claim removing email as a means of support communication benefits them, they may not have considered the greater impact it may have on their end users. We have established that it can be hard to change user habits and encourage them to use a different support channel. Furthermore, simply removing the support channel can cause customers to become dissatisfied. One way to make sure you are keeping your customers happy, whilst also improving the efficiency of your service desk by switching off email, is to simply engage with the end userbase to establish what support channels they prefer to use.

The second most popular reason, specified in the "Other" category, was established by respondents as the fact that their email-based support is part of a multi-channel support service desk. Providing end users with the flexibility and availability a multi-channel support environment offers, is a brilliant way to develop a customer centric approach, and if done well, a way to improve the efficiency of the service desk. However, it is essential for service desk professionals to regular review the support channels they provide to ensure that they meet

# Why some keep the support channel open

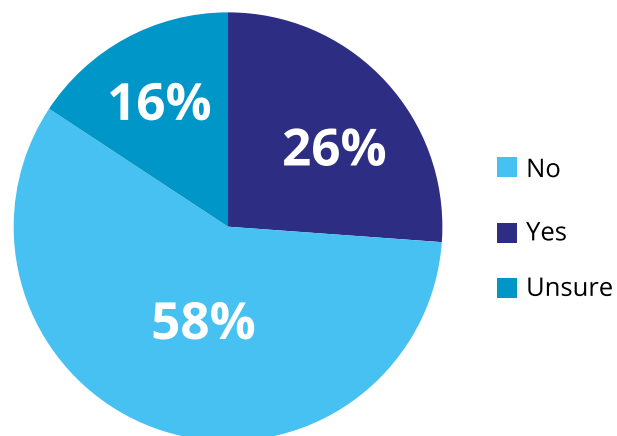
the expectations of their customers where possible. If keeping email as a support channel is impacting this, then the pros and cons of the support channel should be considered.

Some service desks may find it easier to deal with high email volume, for example, if there is a low volume of emails, or traditional channels are favoured. As such, the option of switching off emails may not have been discussed, or there may simply be no alternative self-service channel for end users to engage with. These factors, both highlighted by 21% of respondents, support the 16% of respondents who have identified that their serviced desk does not have enough resources to provide end user training or education.

This is also indicative of how diverse the service desk industry is. The industry is, however, starting to see larger service desks and managed service providers (MSPs) developing and adopting the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Virtual Assistant (VA) technologies which offer an alternative, 'cognitive' low code support channel which can support end user education.

However, desks on a smaller budget may not be able to implement such technologies, as it is not a priority for their service

## Do you think your service desk will switch off support channels in the near future?



The main take away from this statistic is that almost 60% of respondents identified that their service desk had no plans to switch off email as a support channel. This is not surprising, due to the above factors. There is no correlation between the reasons service desks have not switched off email and those that will switch off the channel in the future, which suggests that there is no singular factor impacting service desks' decision to keep or switch off email.

The seeming necessity of multi-channel support is possibly the biggest obstacle to removing email as a support channel. One member of the SDI LinkedIn group explained that his service desk is trying to move away from email by using selfhelp and self-service, they will keep the email channel open, in order to educate and encourage customers to use the other support channels, with the justification that the alternative ultimately provide faster and more efficient service.

## What do we have instead?

Aside from traditional support channels, such as telephone and face to face support, service desks now have the opportunity to implement a wide range of support channels which can be more efficient than email. Self-service and automation are possibly the better assets options in terms of incident and service request management, as users are prompted to give all the relevant information, which allows for immediate categorisation and prioritisation without taking up too much resource time, analyst's time. This frees up more time and resources to spend on more valuable tasks, such as continual service improvement, knowledge management, self-help content creation, or supporting problem management.

For many organisations, the use of live chat as a support channel has become a preferred communication channel; and for those end users whose roles or circumstances make it preferable to engage with a service desk using a computer keyboard rather than the telephone. Live chat as a support channel can offer a responsive and more real time conversational alternative to email. Live chat can also mitigate any issues caused by a hard-to-manage service desk mailbox. This can help improve time spent per incident, customer satisfaction, and the general efficiency of the service desk.

AI and VA technologies are also becoming more readily accessible for implementation on service desks. VAs provide supplementary first line support, complimenting traditional troubleshooting activity and providing 'cognitive' triage for the likes of request fulfilment, knowledge sharing, end user education, and skills based routing. This is ideal for service desks that have to deal with a large volume of incidents and requests. However, some users may be averse to using cognitive technologies as a support channel, or may be averse to changing their support channel in general. As such, as the use of cognitive support channels increases, service desks may still opt to keep traditional support channels in order to ensure their end user satisfaction is maintained.

## Conclusion

Switching off email as a support channel can have a significant impact on a service desk, both positively and negatively. If you believe your service desk would benefit from removing email as a support channel, there are several things you should consider. For example, is switching off email going to negatively impact end user experience? Is there an alternative channel you can encourage email users to adopt, such as live chat, self-service, or a VA? How can you create a blended and optimised support channel approach, that helps to optimise the workforce, to not only improve service capability and end user satisfaction, but also to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and productivity?

Omnichannel support is an excellent way of ensuring users have the flexibility and availability they need to be happy with the service provided, but there must be some process in place where the impact of each channel on productivity, among other things, must be assessed. Above all, the key to switching off email, as with any change to service, is engagement. Changes must be fully communicated to the end users, and their input and feedback should be valued and considered.

# About SDI

The SDI company mission is to inspire service desks to be brilliant. To achieve this mission SDI has developed a set of goals by which it aims to inspire service desks to:

**Embrace:** To raise the quality of service delivery by valuing best practice

**Engage:** To create an inspiring and engaging customer experience

**Invest:** To empower their teams to be inspired, take action and be better


**Shine:** To demonstrate and deliver exceptional business value


SDI sets the globally recognised best practice service desk standards that provide clear and measurable benchmarks for service desk operations and professionals. The standards are designed to encourage service desks to embrace and value best practice in order to raise the quality of service delivery.


For more information about SDI please visit [www.servicedesk institute.com](http://www.servicedesk institute.com)

# Contact

Service Desk Institute  
21 High Street  
Green Street Green  
Orpington  
Kent, BR6 6BG

 +44 (0)1689 889100

 [hello@sdi-e.com](mailto:hello@sdi-e.com)

 [@sdi\\_institute](https://twitter.com/sdi_institute)

 [servicedesk institute.com](http://servicedesk institute.com)