



# The Definitive Guide to IT Service Desk KPIs and Metrics



## Introduction

Your IT service desk likely employs a large number—and a wide variety—of key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics. Recent research by HDI and the Service Desk Institute (SDI) shows that more than 90 percent of IT service desks employ metrics to better understand performance, demonstrate value, drive improvement activity, and influence IT support-related decisions (although not necessarily all four of these).

However, many IT service desk leaders and practitioners wonder whether they have the right portfolio of KPIs and metrics, even when they are hitting (or exceeding) the targets they have established. If this sounds familiar, then this guide is for you and your service desk team.

## The Definitive Guide to IT Service Desk KPIs and Metrics covers:

- The difference between KPIs and metrics
- The most commonly adopted IT service desk metrics
- Common mistakes organizations make when developing IT service desk KPIs and metrics (along with the outcomes of those mistakes)
- How recent business trends are causing the need to rethink traditional IT service desk KPIs and metrics
- The impacts of self-service, automation, and artificial intelligence (AI) success on service desk metrics
- Guidance for regularly reassessing your portfolio of IT service desk KPIs and metrics

## The Difference Between KPIs and Metrics

Before we launch into how to develop the right metrics, let's first examine the relationship and key differences between KPIs and metrics. They are both crucially important, but serve a somewhat distinct purposes.

Think of KPIs as the most critical performance measures; these are the most important signposts in meeting business goals. They are still metrics, but not all metrics can be “key”—if they were, then none of them would be more important than the others. But metrics are still important, especially when trying to understand why a KPI isn't where it should be performance-wise, and how to nudge it in the right direction.

You can also think of the difference this way: metrics and KPIs are like birds and parrots. All parrots are birds, but not all birds are parrots. Similarly, all KPIs are metrics, but not all metrics are KPIs.

Because each organization's service desk KPIs will vary based on their corporate strategies and individual needs, this guide will primarily focus on the metrics you'll need in order to support your KPI targets.

## The 10 Most Commonly Adopted IT Service Desk Metrics

The following list of metrics is taken from the 2018 SDI report, "Measuring and Making the Most of Metrics." (Note this is a UK and European view of common metrics; HDI shows a similar set of metrics for North America, but with different rankings.)

The table below shows ten of the most frequently employed metrics, along with corresponding pros and cons and unique considerations for each metric. Because all metrics must be evaluated on their own merits in the context of business needs, organizational maturity, and desired outcomes, there may be additional pros, cons, or considerations to take into account. This will be explored in further detail later in this guide.

It's worth noting that the relative metric adoption rates shown in the table reveal that apart from volume-based and customer satisfaction (CSAT) metrics, service desks have a wide range of philosophies and approaches to their metrics portfolios. These can vary greatly based on their unique goals and reporting capabilities.



Metric (Adoption Level)	Pros of the Metric	Cons of the Metric	Tips
<b>1. Number of Incidents (96%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides a high-level indicator of service desk workload and demand</li> <li>Offers a view (albeit limited) of service desk worth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focuses on the mechanics of IT support rather than the quality</li> <li>May not be inclusive of all volume</li> <li>Changes to monthly volume might be incorrectly explained</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be careful when interpreting change—an increase might be a good or a bad thing (or both)</li> <li>Don't expect business stakeholders to view high volume as a good thing—it's often perceived as an indictment of IT's issues and mistakes</li> </ul>
<b>2. Number of Service Requests (89%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as metric #1 (number of incidents)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as metric #1 (number of incidents)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as metric #1 (number of incidents)</li> </ul>
<b>3. Customer satisfaction (CSAT) (74%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offers a truer perspective of service desk performance than number of incidents or service requests</li> <li>Provides a balanced view relative to changes in other metrics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questionnaires often focus on the mechanics of support rather than end-user experience</li> <li>Too many questions, a lack of feedback/action, and other factors often lead to low response levels</li> <li>Can be biased by only the very happy and/or very unhappy end users responding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Make it easy for end users to provide feedback</li> <li>Ask questions related to what's important to end users rather than about service desk "mechanics"</li> <li>Request feedback in a timely manner</li> <li>Ensure you respond to the feedback—from callbacks to positive change</li> </ul>
<b>4. First contact resolution (FCR) (66%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflects the end-user need for immediacy of resolution</li> <li>Helps minimize the "ping pong effect" of end users being passed between agents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can drive the wrong behaviors—with the target causing agents to "hold on" to issues they should assign to someone else</li> <li>Value of the measure can be eroded by availability of self-help technology such as password reset, self-service portals, and chatbots</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>While FCR can help service desk agents focus on meeting end-user expectations of real-time resolution (and provisioning), be careful that it's not driving internally focused behaviors related to hitting key targets at all costs</li> </ul>
<b>5. Average resolution time for incidents (65%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offers a good gauge of service desk agent capabilities and the service desk as a whole (if used correctly)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can value quantity over quality</li> <li>Can be misleading because of different ticket mixes (e.g. a high volume of password resets will reduce the average for some organizations)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>This metric should be viewed in conjunction with CSAT (and perhaps reopened ticket volume ) to ensure that speed isn't aimed for at the expense of employee/customer experience (or actual issue resolution)</li> <li>Be aware of how what's included can skew the metric</li> </ul>

Metric (Adoption Level)	Pros of the Metric	Cons of the Metric	Tips
<b>6. Average time to respond to incidents (59%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides a good gauge of service desk availability and accessibility (if used correctly)</li> <li>Can be applied meaningfully to different channels (e.g. telephone, chat, email, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Can be misleading if time is being measured only after an end-user is placed in a telephone queue and routing practices are not optimized</li> <li>Lacks meaning if the metric is aggregated across channels</li> <li>Might show a two-tier service, depending on demand and staffing level at different times of day</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be careful not to overlook the varying performance at different times of day</li> <li>Don't create an aggregate metric that covers all channels</li> <li>Measure queue wait time separately from incident response time.</li> </ul>
<b>7. First level resolution (56%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as metric #4 (FCR)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as metric #4 (FCR)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as metric #4 (FCR)</li> </ul>
<b>8. Abandon rate (55%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Offers a good gauge of service desk availability and accessibility for callers (if used correctly)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Abandoned calls need to be split between those that are inside and outside of the call-answering SLA (only the latter is truly a sign of "bad" service)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understand that some abandoned calls will be unavoidable without the ability to immediately answer the phone</li> <li>Ensure that your call-answering SLA target is in line with end-user expectations (or likely balanced with budgetary limitations)</li> </ul>
<b>9. Average resolution time for service requests (53%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as #5 (incident resolution time)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as #5 (incident resolution time)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as #5 (incident resolution time)</li> </ul>
<b>10. Average time to respond to service requests (51%)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as #6 (incident response time)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as #6 (incident response time)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same as #6 (incident response time)</li> </ul>

## Common Mistakes with IT Service Desk KPIs and Metrics—And How They Impact Business Outcomes

Bad KPIs and metrics generally offer similar outcomes to “bad data,” even though they’re likely to be generated from an accurate data set. But bad KPIs and metrics can cause far more harm than just bad decisions (and this is important to understand on its own). That’s because the wrong metrics, and the KPI targets they encompass, can overstate or understate true performance, as well as drive the wrong behaviors. A few of the common mistakes are outlined below.

### 1. You have too many KPIs and metrics

There are a great many IT service desk metrics listed within IT service management (ITSM) best practices and available within ITSM toolsets. Oftentimes these metrics encourage “quantity over quality” scenarios. Perhaps because it’s often the easiest things, rather than the most important things, that get measured (and then reported). But more data doesn’t necessarily lead to better decision-making; in fact, it will likely only distract you from the more important measures.

### 2. Your metrics focus on what IT support does, rather than what it achieves

Consider your existing metrics from a business perspective: What does 10,000 incidents handled per month actually mean? Firstly, is the business actually interested in incident volume? And secondly, if it is, does it interpret this as “Hold on, you’ve prevented the business from working 10,000 times this month?”

### 3. You’re employing metrics for the sake of metrics

All too frequently, organizations “do” metrics simply because they’re expected to—without explicit reasons to capture and analyze data and consider performance against targets, it turns into mere busywork.

### 4. Your KPIs are merely targets to be aimed for

In this scenario, KPIs (and the metrics they encompass) are the “end” rather than the means to the end. That is, organizations see metrics as the final “output” of performance measurement—rather than as an input into something else, such as business conversations about service or improvement activity.

### 5. The factors influencing your metrics aren’t well understood

Conventional wisdom would suggest that a reduction in incident volume is a good thing, right? Not necessarily. If a service desk is providing a poor level of service, it might see incident volume drop as employees decide that calling or emailing is futile. Conversely, a service desk doing a great job might see an increase in volume as more end users reach out for help.

### 6. A one-dimensional view of metrics is taken

When performance is viewed in monthly silos—rather than month-over-month, quarter-over-quarter, or even year-over-year—the service desk may still hit its targets. But there might be a service-level failure just around the corner as performance degrades over time.

## 7. Too much emphasis is placed on best practice benchmarks.

Using benchmark data to develop your targets can lead you down the wrong path. Such data can be misleading if it's out of date, not relevant to your business, or derived from a set of inputs that are different from your own. A great service desk example is cost per incident: how do you know which costs have been included in the benchmark and which haven't? Your IT service desk might have a lower cost per incident merely because it doesn't account for all of the relevant costs.

## 8. There's no structure for (or context between) metrics

Oftentimes, there's a lack of correlation between different metrics. A good service desk example is the excitement commonly felt when the cost per incident has dropped—but closer inspection of other metrics shows that the cost has gone down not because you've become more efficient, but because you've had more incidents during the reporting period than normal. Also, the metric hierarchy and the relative metric importance might be unclear (or ignored altogether).



## 9. The business impact and behavioral aspects of metrics are overlooked

Ironically, your service desk metrics can drive behaviors and decisions that are good for IT but detrimental to the business at large. For instance, saving on IT support might be causing greater cost at a business operations level. Furthermore, at a team or individual level, metrics can also drive the wrong behaviors, with particular metrics making individuals act for personal reasons rather than for the good of the business. Finally, metrics can also conflict and pull IT support staff in different directions. For instance, an agent might be torn between needing to improve CSAT scores and reducing average ticket handling time, resulting in the failure to meet either target (but this could actually be the optimally balanced position).

## 10. IT service desk performance measurement is limited by existing metric success

When your service desk consistently hits its targets, the standard response is to continually set higher targets. But this isn't necessarily the right approach. Instead, there's a need to consider whether the metrics are still worthwhile—whether they will continue to benefit IT and the business. Sometimes, the right answer is to remove a particular metric and replace it with one that better reflects current business needs and desired outcomes.

Signs of these mistakes alone should be enough for your IT service desk to reconsider, or to assess, its current metric portfolio. The next two sections highlight major factors that will also affect your IT service desk's current and future metric choices.

## Business Trends Impacting Traditional IT Service Desk KPIs and Metrics

The above list of ten common metrics mistakes is nothing new—in fact, you might have immediately recognized that some are at play within your own organization. However, there are additional factors to consider when assessing the suitability of your metrics and their targets—factors that relate to the many changes that IT support teams, and their wider IT organizations, are currently experiencing:

### 1. The growing importance of IT services (and thus support)

The service desk has grown in importance, along with a reliance on IT services. As such, there's likely to be even greater scrutiny of IT service desk performance and more finger-pointing when IT issues are adversely affecting business operations.

### 2. The shift in business emphasis from cost to value

While costs and budgets are still important to business operations, the need to clearly demonstrate value (even if just in “return on investment” terms) has moved center stage.

### 3. Consumerization and the growing importance of employee experience

As the digital era continues to unfold, we have come to enjoy a more convenient, personalized, and streamlined experience with technology. We bring these higher expectations into the workplace, and to the IT services, support, and customer service we receive.

All of these changes have a significant impact on what your IT service desk should be measuring and reporting on.





## The Growing Significance of Self-Service, Automation, and AI

While the above three factors are alone enough to warrant an assessment of your IT service desk status quo, it's also important to understand that an additional set of factors need to be considered. And if not now, likely soon.

Namely, the increasing importance of self-service, automation, and AI will have a significant impact on IT service desk KPIs and metrics—and their associated targets. This starts with the fact that the successful implementation of any or all of these capabilities means that many of the less complicated, more routine tickets won't be created in the first place because employees are helping themselves and/or the technology is fulfilling simple, repetitive tasks. As a result, the service desk will likely be left handling the most complicated and time-consuming issues and requests that take longer to complete for both the service desk agent and the waiting end user. This means the ticket profile mix is changed, which, in turn, changes the average service desk analyst's work profile—specifically, they'll be spending more time on fewer, yet more complicated, tickets.

This change in ticket mix will also impact many of the traditional IT service desk KPIs and metrics from a number of different perspectives. For example:

- Service desk ticket volume should decrease if self-help, automation, and AI are done right.
- First contact resolution will potentially drop dramatically, if not become irrelevant. Why? Consider the 60-70 percent FCR target that your service desk might currently aim for—and perhaps even exceed. This will include a high volume of simple issues and requests such as password resets. But with these simpler tasks removed, and with more complicated tasks remaining, what will happen to FCR achievement level? It will likely plummet—so much so that it might no longer even be relevant to measure.
- Average handling time and cost per ticket will increase. This is logical, as manually handled tickets will be more complicated and time-consuming.
- The tickets handled per agent per hour will also decrease—potentially dramatically—for the reasons stated above.

There are other metrics that will likely be affected too; but hopefully the point has been proven with these examples.



## The Critical Need to Reassess Your Current IT Service Desk KPIs and Metrics

Even if the effects of self-service, automation, and AI won't be fully realized for some time, the common mistakes and three business trends discussed earlier in this guide should be enough to drive, at a minimum, an interim assessment of your current IT service desk metrics and KPIs.

Your IT service desk, end users, and broader organization all deserve great service that's guided by the appropriate metrics. In the wise words of one of the original ITIL authors, Ivor Macfarlane:

"If we measure the wrong things, then surely we get better at the wrong things."

So, is it time to assess the suitability of your IT service desk metrics? If it is, then the following five tips will help.

### **Tip #1: Understand and Address the Common Metrics Mistakes**

There are a number of things to look out for, and to address, when assessing your service desk metrics. Above all, it's critical that you:

1. Fully define, document, and communicate what you're trying to achieve through metric use. Importantly, service desk metrics aren't designed to represent solely the IT perspective, but also a more holistic business wide view.
2. Understand the "story" your metrics tell—especially what any changes in performance show.
3. Be wary of IT benchmarks—while indicative metrics are very useful, they represent an average organization that probably isn't the same as your own. You might find using month-over-month trends a better indicator of your IT service desk's performance.
4. Understand the "connectivity" between metrics, and recognize and address the potential for behavioral issues or directional ambiguity that may arise.
5. Realize that your foundational metrics, not just the targets you've set, can and should change over time.

### **Tip #2: Wake Up to the Need for Value-Based KPIs and Metrics**

When considering potential value-based KPIs and metrics, it's important to understand what's perceived to be "of value"—with service desks needing to incorporate various customers' views of how value is defined. And while it's easy to think that these will inevitably relate to revenue, profit, and risk, it will likely differ across stakeholders and different areas of the business.

It's also important to state that value needs to be defined by business stakeholders, not assumptions made by IT. There are probably very few ITSM professionals who would feel confident in publicly stating what the business as a whole considers to be of value, much less report on exactly how well the service desk is performing against these value-based criteria.

This value-based thinking needs to be built into your KPI and metrics assessment and potential redesign activity just as much as other assessment criteria, including the chosen metrics used to identify and drive improvement.

### **Tip #3: Don't Overlook the Importance of Employee Experience**

While value is often spoken about in terms of senior business stakeholder needs, IT service desks can't afford to ignore the employee piece of the puzzle. You might be thinking: "Hold on, we already measure CSAT." But this is not the same as the employee experience—and there's too often a disparity between CSAT scores and how employees and customers really feel about their experiences with IT support (even if CSAT targets are being met or exceeded).

In the 2019 ITSM.tools Future of ITSM survey, half of the respondents stated that employee experience is already important to their IT organization, and another quarter believe it will be by 2021. If it's important, then it needs to be measured—ideally in order to improve it, but at the very least to ensure that a minimum level of achievement is being recognized.

#### Tip #4: Get a Balanced View of IT Service Desk Performance

While the concept of a balanced scorecard might seem “old hat” to some, you can’t escape how well it describes the need to measure other success-influencing factors as well as the operational perspective:

As shown, the balanced scorecard focuses on both the value perspective and customer (or employee) perspective in line with two of the three business changes outlined above (the shift in business emphasis from cost to value, consumerization, and the growing importance of employee experience).

If the concept of a balanced scorecard is new to you, be sure to Google the term to find out more, and keep the concept front-of-mind when assessing your current metrics. Your current approach is likely to be tilted heavily toward the operational perspective.



#### Tip #5: Try to Keep Things Simple

So far, this paper has covered the need to avoid mistakes, focus on value and the employee experience, and create a balanced portfolio of metrics. A final tip is to try to keep things simple, if only because complexity often slows progress and keeps you from pursuing a more targeted set of goals that will have the greatest impact.

This simplicity can relate to a number of things. For instance, reducing the number of KPIs and metrics employed. Or not investing more in delivering certain metrics than the value that’s realized from their production. Or even in ensuring that metrics are fully understood by those who need to act on them.

Sadly, there’s no simple answer in terms of a single set of KPIs and metrics that work for all organizations—but this doesn’t mean that the concept of simplicity can’t be used to create something that’s valuable to your organization. It’s also a concept that should also be applied when assessing the suitability of existing service desk metrics.



## Next Step—Assess Your IT Service Desk KPIs and Metrics

Hopefully, you've read enough to realize that an assessment of your IT service desk KPIs and metrics is needed. A simple two-part approach can be used, starting with either part; or it's also possible to do both simultaneously, learning as you go. The approach you take will ultimately depend on how you feel about where you are now and the availability of key players to participate.

First, check your current KPIs and metrics against some form of business value. If you already know what's important to business stakeholders, great. But if this has yet to be captured, then simply ask yourself whether someone outside of IT would care about each metric. This is an interesting early exercise to undertake, as it starts to encourage the right type of thinking and reveals where the focus is currently misplaced.

Second, talk with key business stakeholders and other employees, to understand how they receive (or don't receive) value from IT service delivery and support. Armed with this information, and your internal assessment of any given metric's worth, you'll be well on your way toward defining which service desk KPIs and metrics to establish, modify, and maintain.

The Ivanti logo consists of the word "ivanti" in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters are red, with a small white square above the 'i' and 't'.A vertical bar on the right side of the page, transitioning from red at the top to orange at the bottom.

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