port, *Software Services, User Wants and Needs, 1994 Annual Edition.* The report also indicates that multivendor support is the area most likely to be delivered by an outside service provider.

ON-LINE ANSWERS. In response to escalating service needs, IS managers also look to the information superhighway to provide assistance. They are accessing the growing number of BBSes set up by vendors to provide support information. On-line support forums on CompuServe, GEnie, America Online, Prodigy, BIX, and the Internet provide users with information on bugs as well as tips and tricks for using applications.
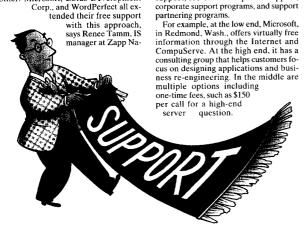
"Microsoft answers both Internet mail and CompuServe, which is more useful than calling them on the phone and waiting on hold," says David Vonarb, who provides support to users at the University of Osteopathic Medicine and Health Sciences, in Des Moines, Iowa.

Vonarb turned to on-line services after a frustrating experience with the toll-free support line provided by WordPerfect Corp. (prior to the company being acquired by Novell Inc.). The university had been using that vendor's office E-mail application, now called Group-Wise (formerly WordPerfect Office) on PCs for more than a year. Then the school purchased a few Macintoshes and wanted to tie them into the PC E-mail. Vonarb bought a new client pack for the Mac from WordPerfect and ran into problems during installation. When he called to ask questions, assuming he had 90 days of free support, he was told that his support ran out with the PC platform and didn't start up again for the Mac.

"That is just crazy. The installation issues for Macs are different than PCs and we should have been entitled to 90 days of free support," he says. The solution to the problem at hand was to reinstall the Mac software.

"That was not what I wanted to do, because I never learned what went wrong," Vonarb says. The solution to the problem in the long run, however, may be to switch vendors. "WordPerfect might just be going away. Microsoft is giving away E-mail with its operating system now," Vonarb says.

USING THE SYSTEM. At least one clever support professional has found a way around the 90-day cap on free support. When the 90-day free support runs out on one software license, she activates another. Microsoft, Lotus Development Corp., and WordPerfect all extended their free support with this approach, says Renee Tamm, IS manager at Zapp National Bank, in St. Cloud, Minn. Tamm oversees a help desk for about 120 users.

"We answer 90 percent of user questions. But when we can't resolve them ourselves, we call the vendor directly. Fortunately, when one software license runs out, we have 100 more to activate," she says.

Although Tamm evaluated purchasing priority-level support options from software vendors, the bank has not opted for priority-level support.

"It looked very costly and there was still no guarantee that you would get an answer any faster. I seem to answer my own questions while I'm on hold," she says.

There is a growing trend toward fee-based support, however, as vendors struggle to meet user needs without losing money. Most desktop application vendors offer free support through toll lines during a warranty period. A few offer toll-free lines during that period. And most offer multitiered support programs to follow the warranty period. In fact, the new model for vendor support programs is multitiered and usually includes a wide range of options, including limited basic support, fee-based telephone support, corporate support programs, and support partnering programs.

For example, at the low end, Microsoft, in Redmond, Wash., offers virtually free information through the Internet and CompuServe. At the high end, it has a consulting group that helps customers focus on designing applications and business re-engineering. In the middle are multiple options including one-time fees, such as $150 per call for a high-end server question.

How much does service really cost?

Establishing a benchmark for the cost of providing service to users is difficult. The cost, scope, and complexity of the support provided are all growing.

"Our goal is to reduce costs even though the volume of work is increasing," says Frank Armijo, computing and telecommunications support manager at Boeing Computer Services Inc., in Richland, Wash. Armijo says it's essential to communicate the cost of services to users.

"Your support structure and the products you support have to be clearly defined to your customers, so they know there are costs associated with their increasing service expectations," he says.

"Most customers don't understand true cost of service," agrees Ann Livermore, group sales and support manager for the worldwide customer support operations of Hewlett-Packard Co., in Mountain View, Calif.

Livermore says there are many hidden costs of providing service, which may lead companies to opt for the economies of scale that an outsourcer can provide.

Although some of these costs may be obvious, they are often overlooked. Expenses include:
- Training — and retraining — technology specialists to keep up with new products;
- Staffing the support department, including backup personnel for regular support employees;
- Overhead involved with management layers above the support level;
- Salaries for 24-hour, seven-day-a-week support, including overtime and graveyard shift pay;
- Telecommunications equipment and charges;
- All of the above for remote staff, which is particularly costly if the support person is not fully utilized; and
- Capital and other equipment each support staff member needs to complete his or her job.

Overall, Microsoft spends more than $100 million per year on support.

"Our focus is not as a profit center. I get measured on customer satisfaction and cost control," says Sam Jadallah, general manager of corporate support at Microsoft.

The proper support program is one that is highly individualized, Jadallah says.

"Some customers want to try to figure it out using our Internet services and then will pay per call if they don't succeed. Others want annual contracts, so they can call at a priority level with unlimited questions," he says.

MORE CHANGES COMING. On Nov. 1, Novell will announce a restructured multilevel support program. Each level addresses three areas: applications, groupware, and systems. The plan merges the service strength of Novell, which relies on VARs and resellers, and the phone-support strength of its recent acquisition, WordPerfect, says Kim Cooper, vice president of service marketing and business development at Novell, based in Provo, Utah. Although actual pricing has not been finalized, customers can pick and choose each level for each area of support, or get a cost reduction for an across-the-board level contract, Cooper adds.

One twist in support options comes from Claris Corp., in Santa Clara, Calif., which offers users a prepaid debit card. The cost is $24.95 for 15 minutes of phone time to be used over any number of calls.

"This is an innovative way to make it easier for users to get support. Many companies block 900 numbers, and it is often difficult for users to get reimbursed if they use their credit cards on phone support," says Kurt Johnson, manager of software services for International Data Corp., in Framingham, Mass.

The impetus for all these programs is the need to reduce the growing cost — and manage the complexity — of providing service for vendors and user firms, Johnson says.

"Publishers' costs are going through the roof driven by problem complexity.

The average call length and call volume is increasing," he says.

Costs are increasing on the user side for the same reason, says Patrick Bultema, director and general manager of the Help Desk Institute, a division of Ziff-Davis Corp., in Colorado Springs, Colo. Bultema says that this year, for the first time, members report that service needs have increased not because the number of new users increased — which was the main cause in the past — but because of changes and upgrades in technology. (For tips on assessing the cost of support services, see box.)

"It is a fundamentally different challenge today — just classifying a problem. In the old world, a user couldn't print and there was a single reason — often user error. Today, it could be at the router, the network, the data, the hardware, and so on," Bultema says.

"The trend is that support folks are having to learn as much as possible about a lot of different platforms," says Frank Armijo, computing and telecommunications support manager at Boeing Computer Services Inc., in Richland, Wash. His organization supports the Department of Energy and its contractors.

Armijo is attempting to meet this challenge by teaming support specialists so they can learn from one another. He recently integrated Unix and PC support.

"There is a tremendous amount of learning being accomplished between Unix support and DOS-based support people, which is improving the service for both customers," he says.

Armijo also believes that user self-sufficiency is an important solution to the growing cost of service. He addresses this by providing a knowledge database, developed in-house, that lets users find their own answers to common problems. The challenge, of course, is convincing users to use the database.

Getting users to solve their own problems, of course, would be the ultimate answer to service and support. Although this is obviously impossible in today's complex, networked environment, it is increasingly enabled by access to on-line and CD-ROM-based database services. It can even be done the old-fashioned way — by reading. Corporate Software recently published a series of books in conjunction with Osborne/McGraw Hill, called *The Certified Technical Support Series*. These books are full of tricks Corporate Software has garnered over 12 years and, perhaps, can empower users to solve at least some of their problems themselves.

More self-reliant users still won't resolve some of your networking problems or handle calls from your remote offices at odd hours in the morning. But they may take a little of the strain off the support department. And, unfortunately, that may be a more reliable approach than waiting for better products or larger support budgets. ❏

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> **What have you tried?**
> Do you have a solution to the support dilemma? Let us know what works – or doesn't work. We'll follow up in a future article. Send E-mail to rachel_parker@infoworld.com or call (800) 227-8365, ext. 517. If you have a gripe about vendor support, call the Gripe Line at ext. 7100.