

TECH SUPPORT HOURS

PRODUCED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

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66 Mt. Auburn Street
Watertown, Mass. 02472-3929
Telephone 617/924-3944
Fax 617/924-7288
www.asponline.com

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Tech Support Hours

In recent years, software companies have extended their live telephone tech support coverage by several hours a day, sometimes even to full 7x24 coverage (seven days a week, 24 hours a day). These extended hours reflect the fact that many customers—consumers as well as business users—need help outside of regular office hours. In addition, the three-hour difference in U.S. time zones means that East Coast users will begin calling for help three hours before their West Coast counterparts, and West Coast users will call long after most East Coasters have gone home.

So far, however, this gradual extension of support hours has been a fairly haphazard process. There is almost no reliable data on “standard” hours of operation, compensation, or use of basic technology for offsite coverage, and so decisions about extended coverage are too often made on the basis of gut feelings and skimpy anecdotal data.

To help answer basic questions about extended hours of coverage, the Association of Support Professionals recently conducted an e-mail survey of support coverage and related business practices among its members. The survey drew a total of 174 usable responses, and this report summarizes the key findings.

■ HOURS OF WEEKDAY COVERAGE

Currently, almost two-thirds (63%) of software companies staff their support lines for at least 11 hours a day (see chart on page 3). In addition, 15% of the companies in our survey provide 24-hour coverage during weekdays. It’s important to note that after-hours customers may not get the same *depth* of coverage that’s available during normal business hours: During extended hours, the phones may roll over to an outsourcing service, to a employee on standby duty at home, or—in the case of a few truly global companies—to an office in Europe or Asia. However, demand for support during these extended hours is typically light, and most customers seem satisfied if they’re at least able to get the trouble-shooting process under way.

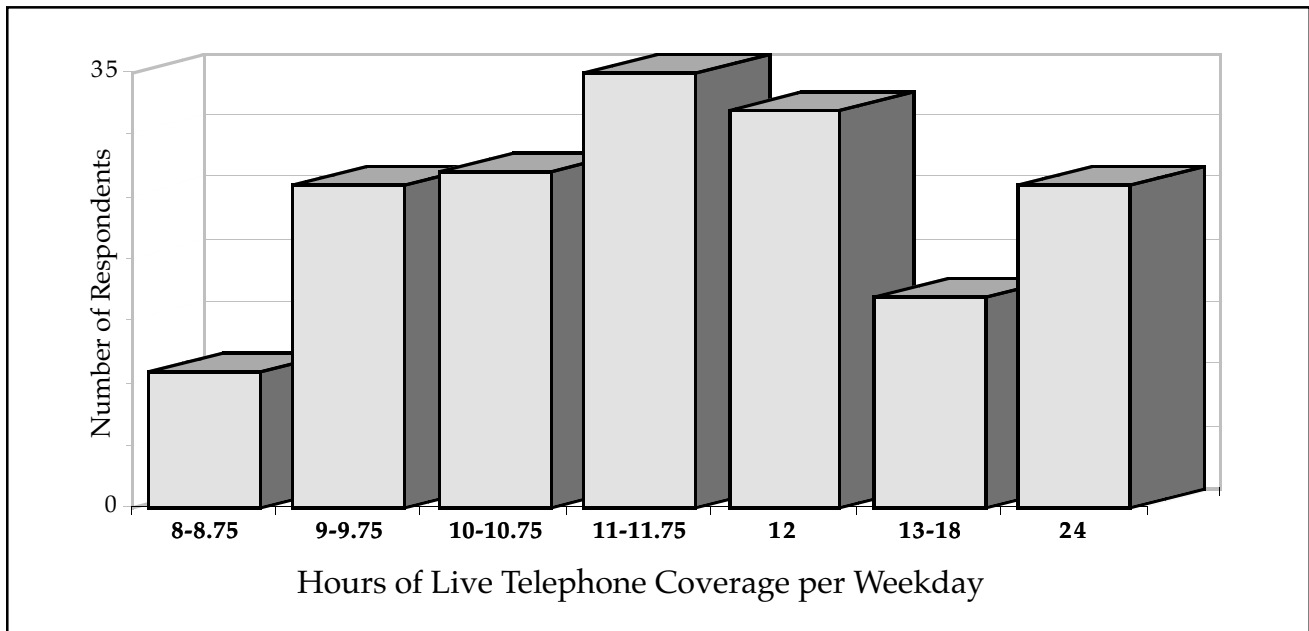
Full phone coverage across four U.S. time zones is often a more difficult challenge, because customers may not know where their vendor’s support center is located. Worse, the main U.S. population centers are on opposite coasts, so support centers typically experience two daily peaks of calling activity separated by relatively light demand. This “camel’s hump” pattern of demand creates significant (and costly) inefficiencies in support center staffing. Ideally, support centers should rely heavily on part-time employees to cover peak periods; however, the high cost of training and equipment tends to discourage the use of part-time staff.

The most practical solution seems to be hours of operation that vary by time zone:

Time Zone	Open (median)	Close (median)
Eastern (88 respondents)	8:00am	7:00pm
Central (23 respondents)	8:00am	6:00pm
Mountain (9 respondents)	7:00am	6:00pm
Pacific (40 respondents)	6:30am	5:00pm

■ WEEKEND COVERAGE

Although weekend support is by no means a standard practice, a surprising number of companies do provide live phone coverage on Saturdays (24%) and Sundays (20%). Often, this coverage is



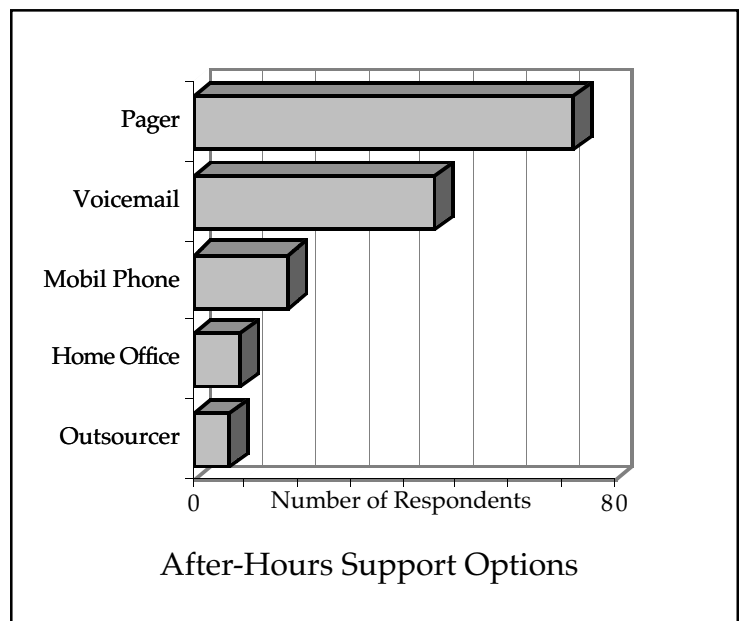
provided by one or two employees who are on standby—at home, or reachable by pager—rather than working at company offices. For the few calls that come in on weekends, however, standby coverage generally seems adequate.

Much of this weekend phone support, moreover, reflects a commitment to 7x24 coverage rather than actual levels of demand for support. Of the 42 companies in our survey that provide Saturday support, 62% are open for a full 24 hours; of the 34 companies with Sunday hours, 76% provide full 24-hour coverage.

■ OFFSITE COVERAGE

After-hours call volume is typically low, so many companies provide extended coverage by forwarding calls to employees who work at home or who may carry a mobile phone or pager. Of the ways to reach support reps offsite, pagers have become by far the most popular technology (see chart at right).

In addition, 46 respondents noted that they provide voicemail coverage outside their regular support hours. While most customers certainly do not feel that voicemail represents “live” phone coverage, it’s probably a better alternative than a phone that’s not answered at all.



■ AFTER-HOURS COMPENSATION

There is clearly no consensus about how to pay support employees who provide extended-hours coverage. In fact, software companies typically have little experience with any non-salary compensation; many companies are still experimenting with various combinations of bonuses, revenue sharing, comp time, and other non-standard arrangements.

Here are some of the most popular compensation approaches that the survey uncovered:

- * **Hourly rates:** One of the most common compensation solutions is simply to pay employees by the hour for extra time on the phones. Most companies report that they pay a 50% hourly premium for overtime; some also guarantee a minimum of three hours of overtime pay for any after-hours assignment.
- * **Shift premiums:** Larger support organizations usually handle after-hours coverage by assigning employees to regularly-scheduled early or late shifts. Employees who work these shifts are paid a slightly higher salary, which usually depends on the shift time, the employee's skill level, and other factors. Our survey respondents report that their shift premiums range from as low as 2% to as high as 15%; however, most fall in a 5%-8% range.
- * **Flexible hours:** A fair number of companies give their employees compensatory time off for any after-hours or weekend work. One company reports that it has adopted a four-day, ten-hour workweek for support reps, which reduces the need for daily overtime and lets employees have more days off.
- * **Standby payments:** Employees who carry pagers or answer calls at home often handle only a few incidents a month, so companies generally pay a much lower standby compensation rate. Flat-rate arrangements are common, usually \$25-\$50 per day of coverage, with higher rates for weekends and holidays. Other companies pay per incident (anywhere between \$75 and \$150). And still others pay a regular hourly or overtime rate for employees who are paged, with a guaranteed minimum number of hours.

■ THE PRICE VARIABLE

In theory, a customer who paid a half-million dollars for a mission-critical application will expect more support coverage than a consumer who just bought a \$29 CD-ROM game. But price actually turns out to be a fairly modest factor in determining support coverage. Companies that sell enterprise-level products (which we define as upwards of \$10,000) get slightly longer hours and more 7x24 support. But, otherwise, mid-range and desktop products get similar support coverage—with one exception: Surprisingly, only 5% of companies with mid-range products offer 7x24 support, while 19% of desktop companies have adopted a 7x24 model.

Price Range	Coverage (median)	7x24
\$10,000+ (54 respondents)	12.0 hrs	24%
\$1,000–\$9,995 (41 respondents)	11.0 hrs	5%
\$20–\$995 (43 respondents)	11.0 hrs	19%

■ HOLIDAY STAFFING TIPS

(Contributed by ASP members in response to an e-mail poll)

“One major point to consider is you cannot effectively enforce [working holidays] if you as a manager are not willing to commit yourself to doing some time on the holidays yourself.”

Tim Lyons, Manager, Technical Services CyberLink Technology, 2500 Red Hill Avenue, Santa Ana, CA 92705; 714/477-6734. E-mail: timl@cyberlinktech.com.

“Our company schedules holiday staffing, both in office and pager coverage, a year in advance, with all support staff members taking turns. The list rotates such that it is not possible to be on Christmas duty two years in a row.”

Paul Rice, System Engineer, Computer Concepts Corp., 8122 Perry Lane #11, Overland Park, KS 66204; 913/383-1970. E-mail: paulrice@broadcast.net.

“Open the windows, open the doors, roll in a grill and some flags, and keep them plied with hot dogs and hamburgers all day.”

Katherine Grayson, Editor, Support Management Magazine, 535 Connecticut Ave., Norwalk, CT 06854; 203/857-5656 x156. E-mail: kgrayson@supportmgmt.com.

“Our on-call staff carries cellular phones and laptops. This enables them to set up a virtual office at any location.”

Larry Malatzky, Manager, World Wide Customer Solutions Center, PictureTel Corp., 100 Minuteman Rd., Andover, MA 01810; 508/292-3890. E-mail: malatzkyl@pictel.com.

“Trade [the holiday time worked] for slots in training programs.”

Mikael Blaisdell, Director, Mikael Blaisdell & Associates, 1011 Post St., Alameda, CA 94501; 510/865-4515. E-mail: tao@cis.compuserve.com.

“If the appropriate teamwork/customer focus exists, this is not a problem. Someone will volunteer—or at least be reluctantly willing when asked.”

Ivan Temes, Director, Customer Support, Navigation Technologies, 740 E. Arques Ave., Sunnyvale, CA 94086; 408/737-4157. E-mail: ivant@navtech.com.

“You contact a temp staffing company who handles that sort of person.”

Paul D. Smith, President, Lloyd Staffing, Seven Medallion Ctr., Merrimack, NH 03054; 603/424-0020. E-mail: paul@lloydstaffing.com.

“Hire those Canadians!”

Fred Van Bennekom, Lecturer, Northeastern University, 314 Hayden Hall, Boston, MA 02115; 617/373-2516. E-mail: fvanbenn@lynx.neu.edu.

“Use this opportunity to the best advantage! It’s a great catch-up day. Often team training is scheduled to increase our general skill level, outstanding issues can be dug into completely, team-building exercises, etc.”

Carolyn Perchaluk, Manager, Customer Support, MKS185 Columbia St. W., Waterloo, ON N2L 5Z5; 519/883-3203. E-mail: carolyn@mks.com.

“Have a July 4th party in the office (with all the July 4 type of activities, such as a contest for who has the funkiest bathing suit or hat).

“Schedule shifts so that no one has to work more than 1/2 day.

“Give a night out (dinner / movie or dinner / show).”

Julia Fox Garrison, Manager Frontline Support, Interleaf, Nine Hillside Ave., Waltham MA 02154; 617/768-1350. E-mail: fox@interleaf.com.

“I would suggest staffing with a skeleton crew. For example, Autodesk shuts down the entire company every year between Christmas and New Year’s Eve, but because many of our customers do not, we staff with a skeleton crew across most of our product lines. As an incentive to attract staff during the holiday period—and I assume this is the heart of your question—we offer time and a half in comp days. That is, for every day they work, they get a day and a half at some other time. Other incentives might be something like a free dinner for two or a gift certificate for music or computer equipment. We’ve never had a problem getting volunteers on that basis. The technicians I’ve talked to about this like working those kinds of days because it is usually fairly quiet and they can get projectwork done without much distraction.”

Brad Brown, Manager Product Support, Autodesk, 111 McInnis Pkwy., San Rafael CA 94939; 415/507-5440. E-mail: brad.brown@autodesk.com.

“If you have multiple sites (or a good working relationship with other call centers with the required skill sets) you can rotate holiday duty. In the past, I was involved with a multi-site service organization, each of the 5 sites were assigned a holiday(s) and the other sites routed calls to the one “on-duty”. Any center only needed to be open 1-2 holidays per year and we rotated which holidays.

Michelle Frank, Director Service Operations, Reality Online, 1000 Madison Ave., Norristown PA 19403; 610/277-7600 x8335. E-mail: mfrank@reality-tech.com.

“Basically we reduce the amount of traffic we get on holidays by posting our calendar before 12/1 (this is the “goal”) of the previous year on:

- our Web site
- company / support newsletters to customers
- our ACD system when appropriate (sometimes before, sometimes day of, closings)
- any other reasonable notification method

—and then we set expectations for the customers by only offering certain levels of coverage, based on support contract they purchase. Top Priority Callers can buy a contract 24x7 for critical situations only. We use a beeper for this. This covers the most important situations. These customers have a phone number of an answering service, which pages us. We pass the beeper around (scheduled) on a weekly basis. Employess get extra pay for that week (\$30/night weekdays, \$150/night weekends) - they want the beeper (it hasn’t gone off yet!). FTP Support and its customers have the security of knowing that they can reach someone in a critical situation (down server - production operation halted, basically).”

Richard Reiter, Manager Technical Support, FTP Software, Two High St., N. Andover, MA 01845; 508/684-6706. E-mail: reiter@ftp.com.

“I have found that being on pager is ‘worth’ about 25%; i.e., one day on pager is worth a quarter day of comp time. On-site or actual working if paged is more like one to one.”

Laura Pickett, Integrity Support Consulting 6014 Morning Glory Court, Newark, CA 94560; 510/791-2255. E-mail: laura@integrity.com.