

Phone Support: How to Get the Results You Need

The purpose of this document is to help you understand how to get the most from any technical support phone call you make. For any type of technical problem, there are a few important things to keep in mind to help the technician or engineer resolve the problem as quickly as possible. It is important not only to clearly describe the nature of the problem and exactly where and under what circumstances it is occurring, but also to provide all the necessary information for them to properly address it.

Be Prepared

First, it is important to determine if a phone support call is even necessary, as many simple problems can be resolved without the help of a technician. For example, unusual keyboard or mouse behavior can be caused by a stuck Shift, Alt, or Ctrl key and can be resolved by pressing the key a few times to release it. Network connectivity problems are often caused by loose cable connections and can be corrected by securing them by hand. A random program or system "crash", evidenced by a sudden blue screen or an error saying "This program has performed an illegal operation," can generally be resolved by rebooting the machine (though persistent program/system crashes are likely caused by a more serious problem).

If you do need to call for support, be prepared to provide all the necessary information. On which device did the problem occur? What operating system is the machine is running? What software were you using at the time the problem occurred, and what version is it? Has any new hardware or software been recently installed, or have other changes been made to the system? Even minor changes, which may on the surface seem completely unrelated to the problem you are experiencing, may in fact be an underlying cause. All of this information is necessary in order to begin to identify the source of the problem, and other information, such as usernames, passwords, error messages (including any applicable error codes), serial numbers or model numbers, etc., may be necessary in order to reach a resolution.

Be Specific

Armed with all the information outlined above, now you're ready to call for support. When describing your problem to a technician, engineer, or other technical support personnel, it is crucial to be as specific and detailed as possible, especially if you have to leave a message to receive a call back. Leaving a generic message without a detailed description of your problem means starting at square one when you receive a call back, whereas if you leave adequate information from the beginning, technical staff will be far better prepared when they return your call and may even have a solution ready for you.

In addition to the questions posed above, there may be other details that provide helpful clues in tracking down the source of your problem. Besides knowing what software was running at the time the problem occurred, what function were you performing within that software? What unusual behavior did the computer exhibit as the problem manifested itself? Did any strange sounds or onscreen displays occur? Perhaps most importantly, are any other devices, workstations, or servers in your office affected? Some problems may only affect a single user or small group of users, but other system malfunctions may affect the entire network. Providing answers to these questions when you call to report the problem will help technical personnel determine the source of the problem more quickly, which will save you down-time and save your company money.

Be Patient

Technical personnel expand their skills daily from each challenge they face and building their knowledge from direct hands-on experience. Engineers who have worked in the field for a long time come to recognize certain symptoms and patterns as indicative of a specific kind of problem. Still, there will always be new technical challenges that arise, and it is the engineer's job to sleuth them out by process of elimination and get them resolved. Eliminating individual components or parameters as suspects one by one can be time-consuming, but this is an essential procedure in order to isolate the source of the problem. It is important to realize that any one or even a combination of hardware and software components may be to blame, and they are not always readily apparent.

If a problem is relatively complicated or uncommon, it may require additional investigation or research. Technical personnel have a variety of tools available to help in these situations. They may call on a colleague for input or consult an online forum where others may have outlined their experience with or approach to a similar problem. They may consult the manufacturer's technical support personnel or research an online technical knowledge base. Again, this type of legwork can be time-consuming, but it is crucial in order to get your system back up and running properly. If a technician or engineer has to place you on hold or call you back, please understand that they have not forgotten you. They are doing the necessary work behind the scenes to find the right solution for you.

Of course, this can be difficult to bear in mind if your system malfunctions during a mission-critical task or while you're under a tight deadline. But remember – we are here to help you, and we will do everything we can to get your problem resolved as quickly and painlessly as possible.

Phone Support Checklist

Before you call for technical support, did you:

- Check the cable connections?
- Reboot your computer?
- Compile a list of all applicable logins, passwords, error messages, serial/model numbers, etc?

When calling for technical support, be prepared with answers to the following questions:

- On which workstation did the problem appear?
- What operating system is running on it?
- What software (and what version) was running at the time the problem occurred?
- What function were you performing within the software?
- What unusual behavior, sounds, or onscreen displays have you noticed?
- Are any other devices, workstations, or servers in your office affected?
- Has any new hardware or software been recently installed?
- Have any recent changes been made to the system?