

The State of Unassisted Support 2014



The State of Unassisted Support: 2014

Deflection Back on the Table; Self-Service Success Rates Rising

by John Ragsdale

EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

At TSIA's Spring 2014 Technology Services World Conference, the concept of Extreme Automation was introduced. Technology firms need to take evolutionary steps forward to increase productivity and lower costs to meet the realities of the cloud economy: product prices are trending down, volumes are trending up, and service has to deliver an exceptional experience—and drive consumption—with fewer resources. When faced with cutting service costs, the first lever support organizations have to pull is self-service. With assisted support incidents costing hundreds of dollars, the more interactions that can be handled via self-service, the bigger the savings to the bottom line.

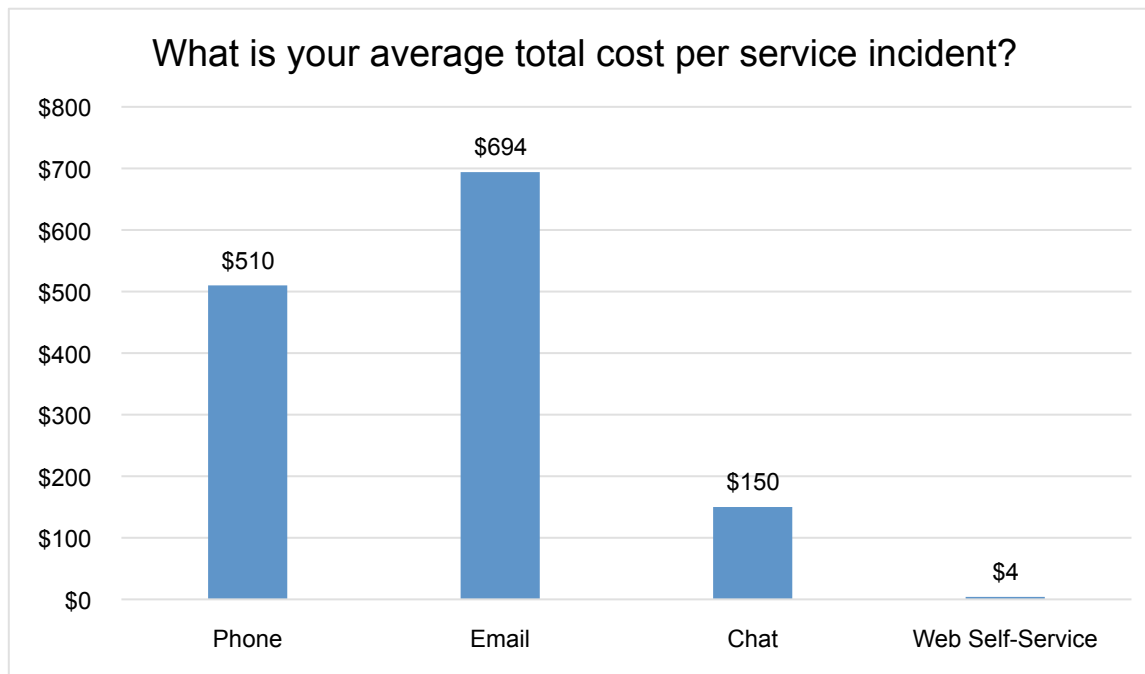
The state of unassisted support, i.e., web self-service, is strong and looking stronger in 2014. Self-service success rates are up, companies continue to invest in knowledge management, and more companies are including multiple tools for customers to find an answer online. Companies looking to lower service delivery costs should invest in online knowledge and search tools, and benchmark their success rate against their peers. Use case analysis is highly recommended to understand exactly what online tools customers need, and then be prioritized for implementation.

EXTREME AUTOMATION MEANS A RETURN TO DEFLECTION STRATEGIES

For the last few years, “deflection” seems to have become a dirty word. Many companies focused on the customer experience were concerned that trying to deflect assisted support interactions equated to not wanting to talk to customers—not a message you want to send when trying to dazzle customers. In the cloud economy, technology budgets are rapidly changing, with an emphasis on volume sales driving down product cost, and service organizations are being asked to deliver high-quality service, and boost customer consumption, at a lower price point than they were allocated in the on-premise days.

As seen in *Figure 1*, assisted support incident costs for enterprise support companies are rising as products grow more complex and more technical training is required. According to the most recent TSIA Support Services benchmark data, incidents resolved via phone now average \$510. Email incidents, with their back-and-forth conversations to gather additional data stretching out resolution times, now average nearly \$700.

Figure 1: 2014 Incident Cost by Channel

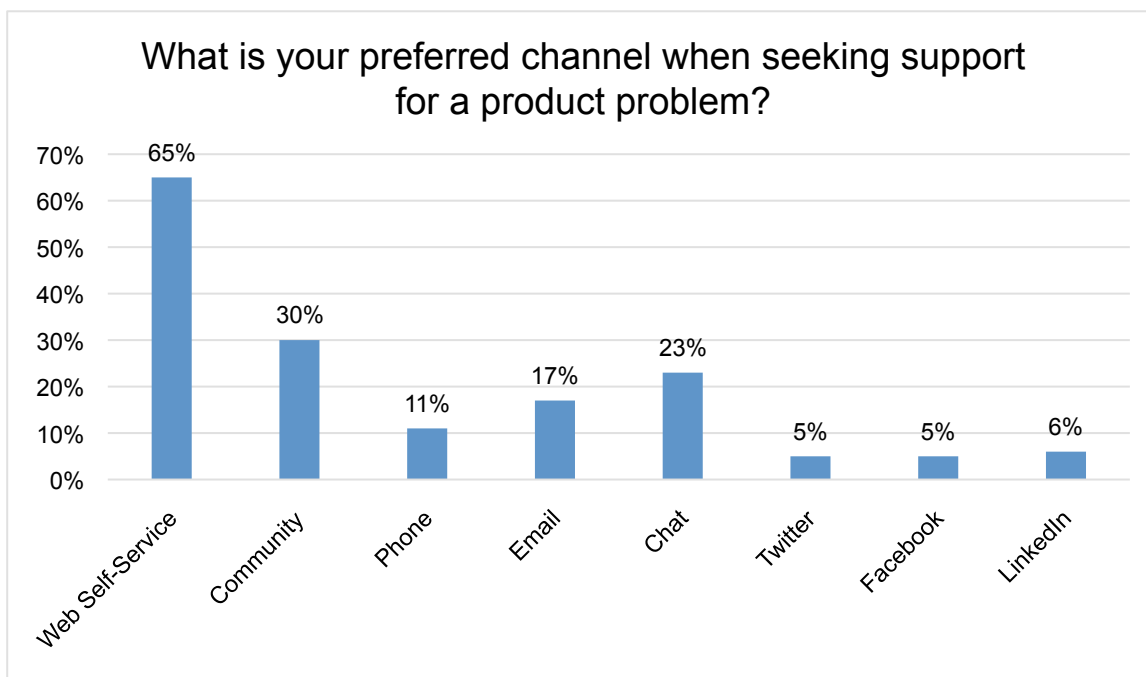


Source: TSIA 2014 Support Services Benchmark.

Though chat interactions—typically easier one-and-done type questions—average a much lower \$150, the real surprise is that web self-service incidents average only \$4. Clearly, the savings from moving more phone and email incidents to the self-service channel can make a huge difference in operating costs. For this reason, deflection is back on the table, with a rising volume of inquiries from TSIA members asking how to shift more traffic to unassisted support.

Companies concerned about the impact of deflection strategies on the customer experience need to realize that customers *want* self-service. In TSIA's 2013 social media survey, respondents were asked which support channels they preferred to use when seeking help for a product problem. As shown in *Figure 2*, the largest percent of respondents said self-service was their preferred channel. Very few customers—less than 20%—prefer the phone or email channel for product support. TSIA Research would therefore posit that other than “hard down” or crisis situations, most phone and email interactions only happen because self-service failed.

Figure 2: Preferred Support Channels



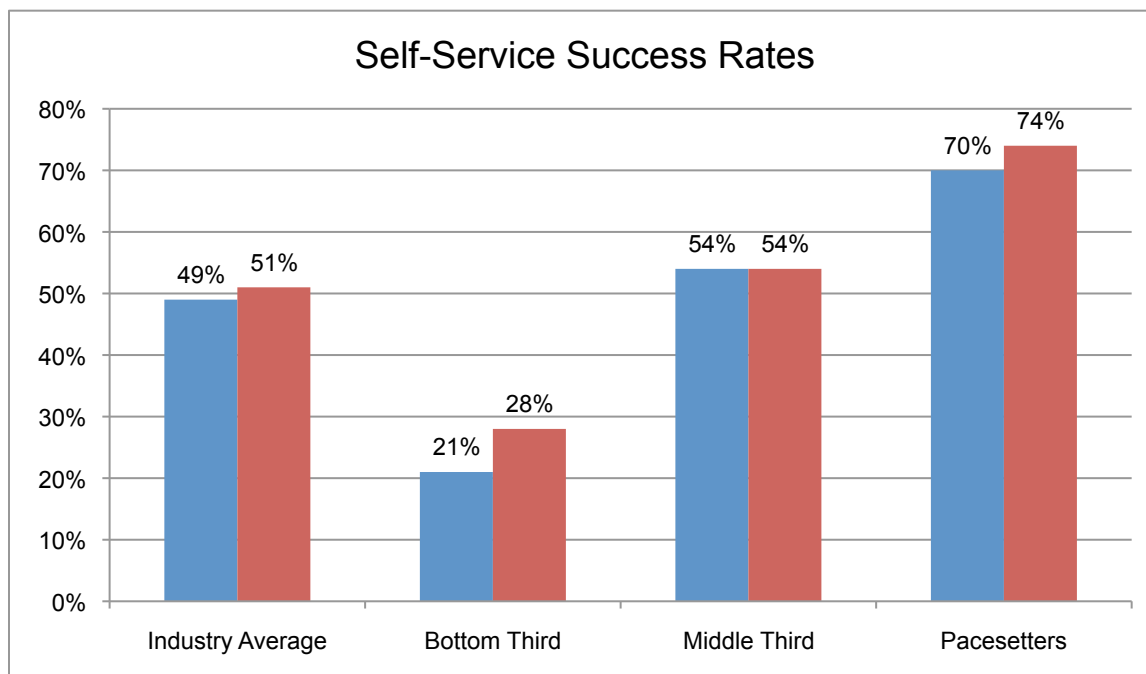
Source: TSIA 2013 Social Media Survey; respondents could select more than one preferred channel.

If the term “deflection” is a stumbling point in projects to drive up self-service adoption and success rates, find a different term. Call it self-service enablement. Call it right-channeling. Call it whatever you like. But don’t let anyone tell you that customers prefer to call you, because this simply is no longer the case.

Self-Service Success Rates on the Rise

What percent of customers that attempt self-service actually find the answer they need? In 2011, that number was a shockingly low 39%. Luckily, we seemed to have hit rock bottom and things are now improving. In 2013, the average self-service success rate rose to 49%— a big improvement over 2011. As seen in *Figure 3*, the average self-service success rate for 2014 rose to 51%, and Pacesetter companies are doing even better.

Figure 3: 2013-2014 Self-Service Success Rates



Source: 2013 TSIA Support Services Benchmark.

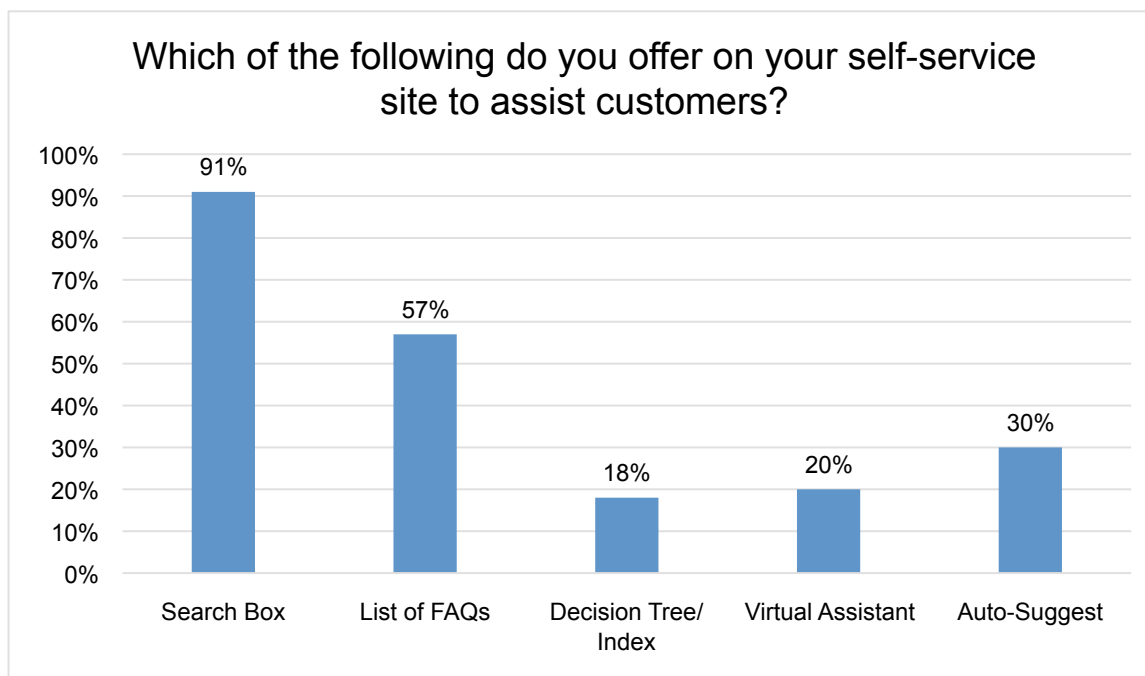
If all of the responses are sorted into three categories, the bottom-performing group averages only a 28% success rate, the middle tier saw a 54% success rate, and the top third, i.e., Pacesetters, saw an average success rate of 74%—an impressive average. The bottom third and the Pacesetters both saw significant improvements over last year, while the middle third averages are flat compared to last year.

Multiple Self-Service Tools Required for Success

Why are self-service success rates climbing? There are two primary reasons. First, more companies are expanding the tools available to customers to help them find the right answer, and secondly, there is rising investment in unified search technology to help customers find what they need across multiple content sources—not just the knowledgebase.

When reviewing past STAR Award winners for Best Online Support, the winners have one thing in common: they have done extensive use-case analysis of their customers to understand exactly what tools are needed to encourage self-service adoption and success, and this means more than a search box. *Figure 4* shows the adoption of various self-service approaches by tech firms.

Figure 4: Multiple Self-Service Tools Required for Success



Source: TSIA 2013 Knowledge Management Survey.

TSIA recommends that companies include multiple paths to content on self-service sites to encourage adoption by the widest array of customers:

- **Search Box.** Perhaps surprisingly, not everyone is enamored with the traditional search box which almost all companies, 91%, offer on their self-service site. While search is a great tool for experienced users who know exactly what they want, it can be intimidating and not helpful for a more novice user who doesn't know where to start or how to phrase a search string.
- **FAQs.** Used by 57% of tech companies, FAQs are a list of frequently asked questions. This is a great short-cut to common problems, and many companies extract the FAQ list to use in multiple places on the website, in the customer community, in external social media sites, and in customer newsletters. The FAQs should include direct links to the knowledge article for complete information. Ideally, the FAQ list is constantly updated, and some companies even filter the FAQs to only show content for products the customer owns.
- **Decision Trees.** Offering a decision tree or index of content is less intimidating for non-technical customers to find what they need by stepping through a series of topics to narrow down their desired subject. Used by 18% of support organizations, decision trees are

especially helpful for new customers who are not yet familiar with your naming conventions or technical vocabulary and are not able to find what they need using search.

- **Virtual Assistants.** These tools, which may include a friendly avatar who greets you and offers a conversational approach to problem solving, are common in the consumer world but are now slowly finding adoption within enterprise support. Virtual assistants, now used by 20% of tech support organizations, are especially helpful for novice users and end users asking general and “how do I?” questions. As companies downsize IT, more end users are looking for application help, as there is no system administrator on site to ask, so more consumer-oriented self-service can come in very handy. You don’t want highly paid, degreed engineers walking end-user customers through a reboot or password reset, if possible.
- **Auto-Suggest.** Most companies offer customers the ability to create a support incident online. However, you want to be sure they have at least attempted to solve the problem themselves before resorting to creating a ticket for your support staff. Auto-suggest is a feature that analyzes the short and long description entered for the ticket, as well as any required fields concerning product and version, and then executes a search and displays all likely matches for the customer. This approach, used by 30% of tech firms, forces the customer to at least review self-service options before creating an assisted support incident.

Beyond the Knowledgebase: Unified Search

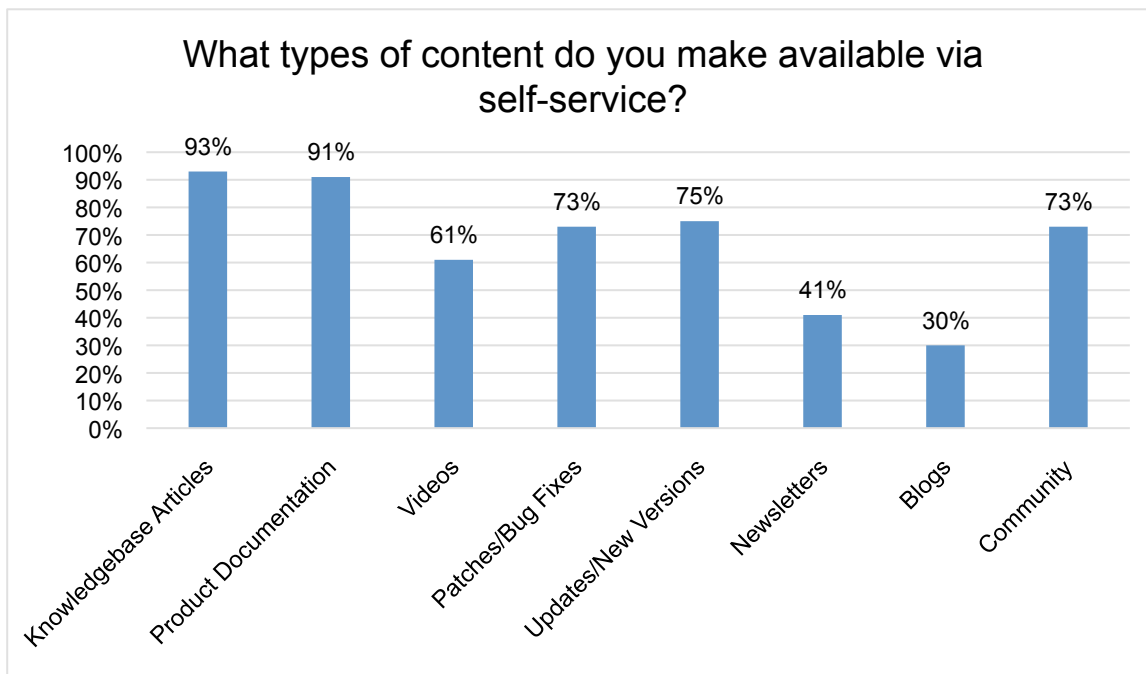
The other factor influencing self-service success rates is that companies are expanding the content available for self-service, as well as their search tools, in order to find the answer across multiple content sources. TSIA defines unified search as technology that can index any content repository and allow natural language searching across all of these repositories, returning a single search results screen listing the source of each match. Typically, filtering options are allowed so customers or employees can narrow their search results by date, author, content type, repository, etc.

Natural language, or semantic searching, is a critical element. Unlike text-matching search engines like Google, which only find exact matches for what you type, natural language search knows that if you search for “run a program,” it should also find matches for “initiate a program,” “execute a program,” “start a program,” etc. This avoids forcing the user to rephrase the search string over and over to try to find the answer.

In *Figure 5*, the various content repositories offered by technology support organizations on their self-service sites is shown.



Figure 5: Self-Service Content Sources



Source: TSIA 2013 Knowledge Management Survey.

While practically everyone offers an online knowledgebase, a library of product documentation is also offered 91% of the time. Online communities continue to grow in popularity, with nearly three-fourths of companies, 73%, now offering customer discussion forums. Video content, usually product tutorials and training guides, are now offered by 61% of technology firms.

When customers search the knowledgebase, or the online community, or any place on your website for that matter, it is important that the search is able to access content from all available repositories and return the matches to the customer in an easily consumable format. Offering ubiquitous access to multiple content repositories is an important element to boost self-service success rates.

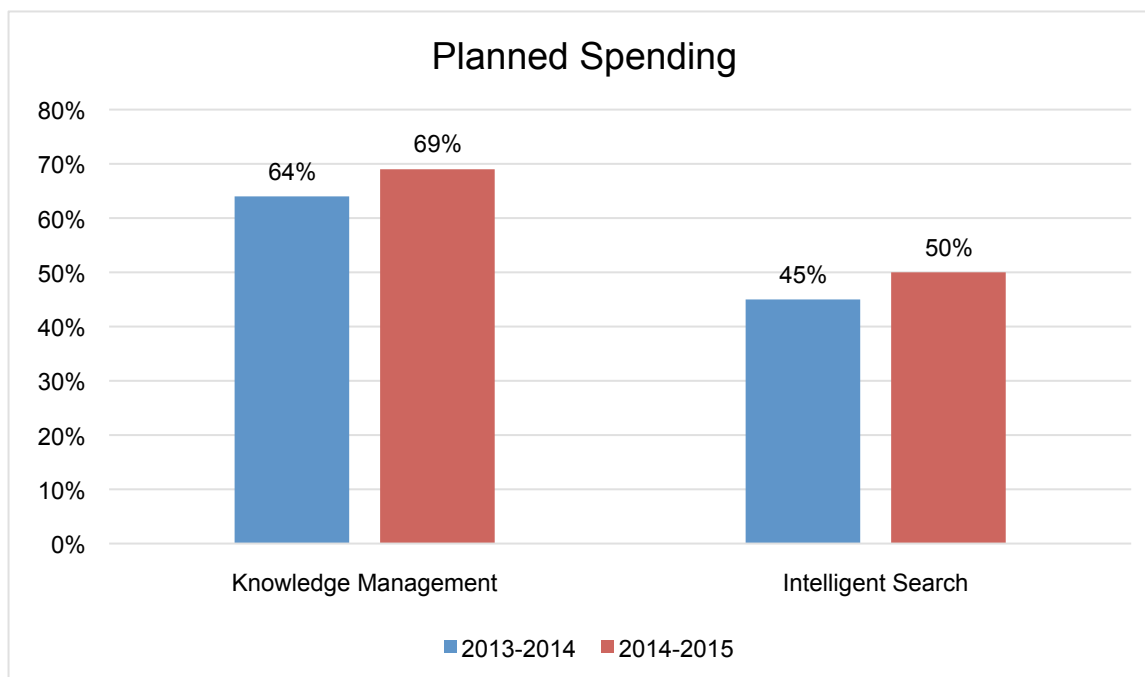
More than Half of Tech Firms Planning Additional KM Investments

One of the primary reasons for low self-service success has been aging knowledge infrastructure, with some companies relying on the slim knowledge management (KM) capabilities they received for free with a CRM system, and other companies struggling to figure out the future for their current technology due to the massive industry consolidation in this sector that we've seen for the last decade, leaving even some best-of-breed KM suites with no certain future or upgrade path. In the 2014 Global Technology Survey, satisfaction with KM tools averaged a satisfaction score of 3.6 on a 5-point scale,



with 1 meaning “highly unsatisfied” and 5 meaning “highly satisfied.” This equates to a C- satisfaction rating.

Figure 6: Planned Knowledge Management and Intelligent Search Spending



Source: TSIA Member Technology Survey.

As seen in *Figure 6*, according to the 2014 Global Technology Survey, 69% of support services organizations have budget earmarked for knowledge management technology in 2014-2015, up 5% from last year. A full 50% of support organizations are planning new or additional investments in intelligent search tools, including unified and semantic search, also up 5% from last year. When half or more of technology firms are planning spending in a single area of technology, clearly a major industry shift is occurring.

INVESTING IN SELF-SERVICE: WHERE DO WE START?

For companies with budgets for new knowledge management or self-service tools, there are so many options for investment it can be difficult to know where to start. TSIA Research recommends prioritizing investments in these key areas:

- **Unified, intelligent search.** The first step to improving self-service is to adopt an intelligent search platform that can search all content repositories (including the knowledgebase, forum



discussions, product documentation, release notes, etc.) with a single query, giving customers a list of matches from across the enterprise—and even from the discussion forum.

- **Use case analysis is required.** Successful self-service is not “one size fits all.” Depending on customer skill level, education, age, and other demographics, different customers need different tools for self-service, ranging from a search field to lists of FAQs to index trees and diagnostic aids. Offering a single path to content can alienate customers who prefer alternate approaches. Do a thorough analysis of the types of customers who access—or would like to access—your self-service site, and find out what different tools or search paradigms appeal to them.
- **Analytic-based knowledge platforms.** TSIA has published case studies of members making impressive improvements to self-service success by leveraging analytic-based knowledge platforms. These sophisticated tools detect trends, help identify unused or unusable content, as well as proactively report on missing content.
- **More rich media, multimedia.** Today’s customers will not read a 15-page procedure to fix a problem. With screen capture, application emulation, and video-editing tools now available for a fraction of the cost from five years ago, it is getting easier and cheaper to create rich media self-help content. When possible, show customers how with a video tutorial or step-by-step instructions with pictures, not just text.
- **Increased mobility.** Multiple sources claim there will be more Internet activity from smartphones than desktops and laptops in the coming years. Even companies with highly successful self-service websites need a wakeup call—what works perfectly on a 15-inch PC monitor may be useless on a four-inch smartphone screen. It is time to rethink webpage infrastructure and design to maximize effectiveness of self-service on mobile devices.

