Today’s business climate rewards innovative solutions, cost effectiveness, customer service, and flexibility. Business values rely, at least at some point, on the functions performed by Information Technology (IT). Today’s CIOs must ensure businesses continuity at existing standards, while facilitating growth strategies and a competitive edge in the market. On top of all this, many CIOs are faced with the challenge of decreasing the costs associated with IT service delivery.

In order to achieve these tactical and strategic business objectives, IT executives must ensure that their organizations are running as efficiently and effectively as possible. This requires visibility and control of all activities, along with a philosophy that encompasses best practices and process optimization to ensure that the “right” services are delivered in a cost-effective manner.

Many suggest focusing on improving the efficiency of the application development function since it is a critical component of strategic initiatives. However, significant value can be achieved in optimizing the application support function. The most compelling reason for doing this is that 100% of all production applications are the responsibility of the support function. By coupling that scope with the fact that 20-30% of all IT spend is in application support, it becomes clear that this functional area provides the greatest opportunity for optimization.

**STANDARDIZE YOUR PROCESSES**

The first step in optimizing the application support function is to standardize support services. It is best to segment the services based on a set of generic business processes. Three standard service categories used for the support effort include:

- **Incidents:** unscheduled activities such as problem resolution
- **Call support:** consultation requests
- **Enhancements:** work requests

For each service category, a set of structured processes and measurements should be defined and implemented. The number of processes is not important. What is important is that each process is clearly defined, the roles and responsibilities are laid out, and each step in the process is repeatable. This consistency ensures quality source code, business aligned deliverables, and effective management of the support effort.

With standard processes in place, a reliable estimate should be defined based on effort complexities. The estimates should quantify in clear business terms effort, costs, and average time frame to complete. They should be used by both the business and the IT organization to manage work effort.
Once the estimates have been established, goals should be set for achieving them based on business needs. The goals (percentage of time within compliance of estimates) should be mutually agreed-upon by the business and the IT organization. The goals provide a baseline for measuring performance against expectations and indicate the nature and priority of the work.

MANAGE AND MEASURE PERFORMANCE
When processes, estimates, and goals are in place for each service category, performance can then be measured against expectations. In addition to event-specific goals, general performance expectations can also be defined and tracked. The following are examples of performance goals that can apply to all IT service delivery organizations:

- Response time to resolve production problems
- Work requests delivered on time
- Number of outstanding work requests
- Customer satisfaction survey ratings
- Work requests estimated accurately
- Zero defects on new work

Experience shows that using only one measurement may be misleading. That’s because if you focus on one measurement the performance of other critical actions may be inadvertently missed. This could cause an inaccurate picture of the achievement of service expectations which could ultimately lead to the IT organization not meeting the strategic and tactical needs of the business. When multiple measurements are utilized, a more accurate assessment of the levels of performance can be made.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT
Effective management of service delivery requires the use of a service delivery and workflow management tool. The tool should provide total visibility and control of the support effort by enforcing processes for each service category and collecting information about the effort expended. The tool should also facilitate the identification of repetitive problems and consultation requests, and help to identify the ‘root cause’ of service requirements. Through root cause analysis, team members can take the appropriate remedial actions, which can result in dramatic effort reduction, and sometimes elimination of non-value added activities. Integration of repeatable processes in the work management tool facilitates the analysis and continuous improvement of IT service delivery and the associated processes.

When an organization fails to meet expectations it may be the result of poor performance, inadequate processes or controls, unachievable expectations, or changes in expectations because of new business requirements. A structured process for analyzing and addressing performance issues is needed to ensure that the root cause is uncovered and mitigated. One
such framework is the Six Sigma analysis approach which can be used to analyze issues and implement improvements. The following is an example of the Six Sigma framework and how it would be utilized to improve the application support function:

1. Define the problem – Performance expectations are not being met
2. Measure – Obtain metrics and corresponding details
3. Analyze – Determine why the expectations are not being met
4. Implement – Take corrective action (process changes, goals adjustment, coaching)
5. Control – Establish control mechanisms and additional metrics

Optimized IT organizations must constantly monitor performance and adjust to changing requirements or business priorities in order to achieve the appropriate balance between control and agility required for long-term effectiveness.

CONCLUSION
Through process standardization, performance measurement, and activity visibility and control IT organizations can improve their work effort and complete more service requests in a shorter amount of time. This increased efficiency can be used to eliminate backlogs or to cut costs by reducing the size of the support teams. The results are clear: dramatically improved capacity coupled with improved performance and increased quality. As a result, the IT organization can continue to offer quality service delivery activities while enabling the company to achieve growth strategies and a competitive edge in the market.