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# 2011 TECHNICAL SUPPORT SALARY SURVEY

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PRODUCED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF SUPPORT PROFESSIONALS

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# The 2011 ASP Tech Support Salary Survey

In last year's ASP salary survey, we noted that a severe recession and high unemployment didn't seem to have much impact on support pay. "Support employees have largely dodged the bullet," we pointed out, largely because the technology industry has moved toward wider adoption of fee-based services, more complex products, and greater reliance on stable customer bases—all of which require competent, stable post-sale support people. Laying off half the support department to meet quarterly profit goals no longer looks like a sensible (or even sane) management plan.

So here we are a year later, and the unemployment indicators are certainly no better. Yet this year's salary data actually shows modest *gains* in many support job categories, especially in those that represent the largest number of support bodies: senior support technicians (a 15% increase in median pay), entry-level support technicians (an 8.7% increase), and customer service reps (a 5.7% increase). Are technology companies really handing out hefty raises to their rank-and-file support staff?

Well, probably not. It's hard to know for certain, but there are signs that we're actually seeing the outcome a classic "weeding-out" dynamic at both the individual and corporate levels. Weeding out occurs when the lowest-paid members of a group of employees are removed from a department payroll, or when less-successful companies are acquired or go out of business, leaving a smaller but more profitable group of survivors. The average pay or profitability of the survivors goes up, even though none of the individual members of the group are better off.

One clue that we're seeing a weeding-out effect in support salaries (as opposed to real raises) is the fact that average pay levels for department managers, analyst/project managers, and field support technicians did *not* rise last year. These jobs are typically not part of a group, or the group is small and specialized, so there are essentially no low performers to remove.

We think that's what's happening to support pay: Average pay now reflects a smaller, more successful universe of companies, and a more selective universe of employees. The challenge for managers is not simply to bring all employees up to some generic industry compensation benchmark, but rather to craft pay packages especially for top performers—never an easy job.

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To help identify benchmarks for support pay, the Association of Support Professionals has been tracking support compensation for the past 16 years. In addition to overall compensation statistics (page 3), we offer a look at some of the variables—such as company size, number of support employees, application price, and geography—that have an impact on these general numbers. A key part of our survey methodology is a set of standardized job titles and capsule job descriptions that have remained constant for the entire history of this survey. Here's how our questionnaire describes the categories we use, along with a few observations about this year's data:

★ **SENIOR SUPPORT EXECUTIVE (vice president or director level)**

*"Coordinates activities and budgets of multiple support groups or sites. Meets regularly with senior corporate management and key customers."*

Seventy-six percent of the companies in this year's survey have *both* a "senior support executive" who coordinates several support groups and at least one "department manager" who oversees an individual support center. Overall pay for senior support executives (median \$125,000) is up slightly (4%) from last year. Increasingly, the top support executive has become a key spokesperson for customer relationships and overall services management, and this role often puts support executive pay on a par with other top corporate executives; currently, 35% of the senior executives in our sample earn between \$150,000 and \$300,000.

<b>Tech Support Salaries</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>High</b>	<b>Low</b>	<b>Median</b>
<b>Senior Support Executive</b>	98	<b>\$150,000</b>	<b>\$100,000</b>	<b>\$125,000</b>
<b>Department Manager</b>	98	<b>\$100,000</b>	<b>\$70,000</b>	<b>\$85,000</b>
<b>Analyst/Project Manager</b>	71	<b>\$90,000</b>	<b>\$60,000</b>	<b>\$75,000</b>
<b>Senior Support Technician</b>	93	<b>\$77,000</b>	<b>\$50,000</b>	<b>\$69,000</b>
Least skilled	59	\$68,000	\$47,000	\$60,000
Most skilled	67	\$95,000	\$65,000	\$80,000
<b>Field Support Technician</b>	32	<b>\$73,000</b>	<b>\$55,000</b>	<b>\$63,500</b>
Least skilled	22	\$75,000	\$52,000	\$60,000
Most skilled	22	\$105,000	\$65,000	\$80,000
<b>Support Technician</b>	87	<b>\$60,000</b>	<b>\$42,000</b>	<b>\$50,000</b>
Least skilled	57	\$50,000	\$37,000	\$45,000
Most skilled	58	\$70,000	\$55,000	\$60,000
<b>Customer Service Rep</b>	50	<b>\$43,000</b>	<b>\$32,000</b>	<b>\$37,000</b>
Least skilled	32	\$40,000	\$30,000	\$32,000
Most skilled	33	\$50,000	\$38,000	\$44,700

Source: 2011 ASP Tech Support Salary Survey. Note: "Count" is the number of responses in each salary category or sub-category. "High" salary is the median for the top 50% of all salaries in each category; "Low" salary is the median for the bottom 50%.

★ **DEPARTMENT MANAGER**

*"Manages day-to-day activity of a single support center staff."*

Most support organizations have at least one inside manager who oversees ongoing operations, including tactical areas such as productivity, recruiting, and customer satisfaction. Usually, support department managers supervise fairly small groups of technicians, and many spend part of their time on the phone during periods of heavy call volume. Department managers saw no change in pay last year (\$85,000 median), after a 5.6% decline in 2009.

★ **ANALYST/PROJECT MANAGER**

*"Manages major business activity; usually has no direct reports."*

In addition to department managers, many support organizations have specialists who manage such areas as performance analysis, staff scheduling, Web site implementation, and automation systems. Currently, analysts and project managers earn \$75,000 in median pay, unchanged from the last two years.

★ **SENIOR SUPPORT TECHNICIAN**

*"Answers escalated calls; may function as a group or team leader."*

Most support organizations have developed career paths that reward experience, in-depth product knowledge, certification, or a part-time management and training role. Often, the primary job of a senior technician is to provide answers to questions that first-level support reps or outsourcers can't answer. Median pay for senior technicians is now \$69,000, a 15% gain from a previous level of \$60,000. (Historically, senior technician pay has risen more or less steadily by 4%-6% per year.) The best-paid 25% senior support technicians earn more than \$77,000; the bottom 25% earn less than \$50,000.

★ **FIELD SUPPORT TECHNICIAN**

*“Provides on-site service, primarily for enterprise products.”*

Support for products priced below \$10,000 is typically provided over the telephone, but many high-end software companies also provide on-site services, usually as part of installation or fee-based maintenance plans. In the past, field technicians were the industry’s highest paid support reps; in more recent years, however, their salary profile has become more closely aligned with the “senior support technician” category. Pay trends for this relatively small group have often shown big year-to-year gains and losses; last year, median field support technician pay dropped from \$70,000 to a current level of \$63,500.

★ **SUPPORT TECHNICIAN**

*“Provides first-level solutions, primarily over the phone.”*

At most software companies, the task of handling unescalated telephone calls is an entry-level job that may lead to a “senior” support technician title or even a job in development or sales. We’ve seen a fairly steady year-to-year trend (roughly 3%-5% per year) toward higher pay since 1998; last year median pay in this category rose by 8.7% to \$50,000 after two years of almost no growth.

★ **CUSTOMER SERVICE REP**

*“Answers routine service questions; routes calls to technicians.”*

Customer service reps typically handle first-level customer contacts that don’t require diagnostic skills or training, such as collecting background information and filling orders. Many companies pay customer service reps on an hourly basis; the current industry median salary of \$37,000 is equal to about \$18/hour. There has been little salary growth in this category in recent years.

**VARIABLES: REVENUES, ORGANIZATION SIZE, PRODUCT PRICE, LOCATION**

- **Annual revenues:** Company size is becoming a very predictable factor in support pay. With only two minor exceptions (field service techs and customer service reps), big companies now pay the highest salaries, and the smallest companies the lowest:

	Annual Company Revenues		
	<\$10 MM	\$10-\$99 MM	\$100+ MM
Senior Support Executive	\$100,000	\$117,500	\$150,000
Count:	24	34	38
Department Manager	\$68,000	\$80,000	\$100,000
Count:	20	33	41
Analyst/Project Manager	\$58,000	\$62,500	\$87,500
Count:	17	16	36
Senior Support Technician	\$55,000	\$60,500	\$75,000
Count:	20	32	39
Field Support Technician	*	\$65,000	\$70,000
Count:	6	10	15
Support Technician	\$44,000	\$45,000	\$55,000
Count:	19	29	36
Customer Service Rep	\$37,500	\$40,000	\$37,000
Count:	10	13	26

Salaries are medians. “Count” is the number of responses in each salary category or sub-category. Asterisk (\*) indicates insufficient data (fewer than 10 responses)

- **Organization size:** Another important variable for support compensation is the size of a firm’s support department. Large support organizations (those with 30 or more employees) generally pay substantially higher salaries in higher-skilled categories, compared to their mid-sized (10-29 employees) and small (1-9 employees) counterparts. Even among lower-skilled support technicians, moreover, the pay differential between large and small support organizations has become substantial.

This pay pattern probably reflects the fact that most large organizations now provide support for relatively complex products, which require above-average technical skills even for entry-level customer issues. In addition, the near-universal adoption of self-service Web support has reduced the demand for live entry-level support throughout the whole industry.

	Support Organization Size (employees)		
	1 - 9	10 - 29	30+
Senior Support Executive	\$120,000	\$110,000	\$137,500
Count:	29	27	42
Department Manager	\$73,000	\$80,500	\$93,500
Count:	27	26	44
Analyst/Project Manager	\$72,000	\$60,000	\$80,000
Count:	17	15	39
Senior Support Technician	\$61,000	\$65,000	\$70,000
Count:	23	27	43
Field Support Technician	*	\$60,000	\$70,000
Count:	5	11	15
Support Technician	\$45,000	\$50,000	\$52,000
Count:	22	27	38
Customer Service Rep	*	\$37,000	\$37,000
Count:	6	17	27

Salaries are medians. “Count” is the number of responses in each salary category or sub-category. Asterisk (\*) indicates insufficient data (fewer than 10 responses)

- **Product price:** Companies that sell high-end software (priced above \$10,000) usually provide support as part of maintenance contracts and other fee-based programs, so they tend to recruit better-paid support staff. As an aside, it’s worth noting that the number of companies that support mid- and lower-priced products (under \$10,000) has declined relative to those in high-end markets:

	Price of Company’s Best-Selling Product		
	<\$999	\$1,000-\$9,995	\$10,000+
Senior Support Executive	*	\$120,000	\$130,000
Count:	9	26	56
Department Manager	*	\$78,000	\$90,000
Count:	9	27	55
Analyst/Project Manager	*	\$75,000	\$75,000
Count:	7	15	45
Senior Support Technician	*	\$65,000	\$70,000
Count:	8	23	52
Field Support Technician	*	*	\$65,000
Count:	1	7	23
Support Technician	*	\$50,000	\$55,000
Count:	6	24	6,0
Customer Service Rep	*	\$38,500	\$36,000
Count:	1	14	31

Salaries are medians. “Count” is the number of responses in each salary category or sub-category. Asterisk (\*) indicates insufficient data (fewer than 10 responses)

- **Location:** Support pay is also affected by local cost-of-living differences, especially between rural and metro areas. California and Massachusetts, the two states with the highest concentration of technology companies in our survey (16 respondents for Massachusetts, 15 for California) have labor costs that currently seem to be about 15% above our national average. That labor cost differential may help explain the fact that support centers based in both states tend to be relatively small (11 employees for each) compared to a national median of 16 employees, a pattern that we saw last year as well.

## THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF SUPPORT

This survey, our 16th annual report on tech support salaries in the software industry, reflects survey data supplied by 118 software support organizations with a total of more than 9,000 support employees. Some key characteristics of our sample universe:

★ **Company size:** 36% of our respondents report annual sales of \$100 million or more, 35% have sales of \$10-\$99 million, and 29% have sales of \$10 million or less.

★ **Organization size:** Although a dominant share of support employees now work for very large companies, there are still a fair number of smaller companies that help keep the median organization size at modest levels. Median support headcount for all the companies in our sample is currently 16 employees; 39% have 30 or more support employees, 26% have 10-29 employees, and 35% have 1-9 employees.

★ **Product price:** The majority of the software companies in our sample serve high-end vertical or enterprise markets. The median price for our respondents' best-selling products is now \$20,000; 60% support products that sell for more than \$10,000, another 30% support products in the \$1,000-\$9,995 range, and 10% support products that sell for less than \$999.

## A FEW NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

*The world is full of salary surveys, and sometimes the numbers for nearly-identical jobs are remarkably inconsistent. What's going on?*

*The answer, usually, is that these variations reflect underlying differences in survey methodology. HR managers are generally pretty savvy about these differences in methodology, but most of our readers probably aren't (or really don't want to know...). For those who do care, here are some frequently asked questions:*

### **First, where do you get your data?**

We send out e-mail invitations every year to our in-house list of members, former members, survey respondents, research and event customers, support managers, LinkedIn forum members, and other potential respondents. While the specific names and companies on

### **Year-to-Year Pay Comparison: Despite a Recession, Modest Gains in Many Support Jobs**

	2009	2010	Change
Senior Support Executive	\$120,000	\$125,000	+4.2%
Department Manager	\$85,000	\$85,000	0.0%
Analyst/Project Manager	\$75,000	\$75,000	0.0%
Senior Support Technician	\$60,000	\$69,000	+15%
Field Support Technician	\$70,000	\$63,500	-9.3%
Support Technician	\$46,000	\$50,000	+8.7%
Customer Service Rep	\$35,000	\$37,000	+5.7%

(values are medians)

this list may change from year to year, it's a good cross-section of people in external tech support roles and related jobs.

**Does this mean the salary data is self-reported?**

No. Self-reported salary surveys, which are typically conducted by large-circulation trade magazines, ask individuals about their own salaries. Self-reporting is a good way to generate lots of data points, but it tends to bias the results upward (lower-paid employees are less likely to supply data on their own pay). The ASP survey asks about pay levels for the whole organization, and most of our respondents are managers who have a big-picture view of compensation in their companies. This year, for example, our respondents included 13 CEOs and presidents, 28 vice presidents and C-level officers, 36 directors, 22 managers, and 14 people in HR or finance roles.

**What about company size and demographics?**

Our respondents are pretty evenly divided among three groups—large companies with annual sales of at least \$100 million, a mid-range category with sales of \$10 million to \$99 million, and a small-company group with sales of less than \$10 million. Within each of these segments we've found that the organizational models are surprisingly similar: For instance, a billion-dollar company will structure its support groups in essentially the same way as a \$100 million company, even though the bigger company will have many more support employees.

Like a large part of the technology industry these days, most of our respondents are business-to-business software companies, or in closely related technology sectors such as hardware, telecom, or Web services (consumer and business). The biggest long-term change we've seen in our demographics is a continuing decline in the number of small software firms that sell inexpensive software through retail channels. Historically, these firms helped set customer expectations for unlimited free telephone support, so their diminished visibility probably helps the rest of the industry move toward fee-based support (which usually results in less cost pressure on support salaries).

**Do you weight your data based on company size?**

No. There are two schools of thought about this issue. One group argues that because most support employees now work for relatively large companies, the most realistic picture of industry-wide pay levels is to multiply a company's survey response by the number of its employees in a job category. Thus, a company with 500 senior support reps would carry a 100x more weight in the final results than one with only five senior reps. The counter-argument, which we favor, says that weighting effectively wipes out almost all the data provided by smaller companies, who therefore can't use the survey as a peer-level guideline for their own pay practices. We've tried to find a middle ground by also breaking out our data by company size, but it's worth noting that the \$100+ million segment in our survey sample this year reflects the pay levels of almost 8,000 support employees, while the segment with less than \$10 million in sales reflects pay levels for just 363 total support employees.

**What if our job descriptions don't match your categories?**

There's no standard business model for tech support delivery in the technology industry; in fact, there aren't even standard job titles for the employees who deliver support. Our approach, based on a lot of input from support managers and HR consultants, has been to create seven job categories that seem to accommodate the majority of support employees. In addition, we've defined skill-based sub-categories for the largest categories. But if you've really set up a unique set of job classifications, you'll probably have trouble finding any salary survey that aligns perfectly with your compensation system.

**What if our salaries are generally higher or lower than your survey benchmarks?**

Our survey data isn't designed to tell you what you *should* pay your employees—it's just a statistical snapshot of what is currently happening in the marketplace. Companies are different from each other, employees are different, and even job descriptions are different from company to company.

Often, the best use of our survey data is to measure *relative* differences in pay levels based on such factors as experience, skill, and responsibility.

We've also designed the survey to capture small year-to-year trends in support pay. We've done this primarily by strictly preserving consistent language in the wording of survey questions and the appearance of the survey questionnaire for more than a decade. (Survey experts point out that even subtle changes in wording can have a dramatic impact on survey answers.) Even if your actual pay levels differ from our benchmarks, you can use the year-to-year trend data to better align your pay levels with current market trends.

### **Speaking of medians, how are these values different from averages?**

When you analyze a group of salaries using averaging, a few extremely high salaries will tend to bump up the average value for the whole category. For example, if four employees earn \$25-\$35,000 each and one earns \$100,000, the *average* pay for the group will be about \$44,000, which doesn't correspond to any real-world salaries in that group. Medians, which we use for all of our data reporting in this survey, generally provide a better indication of the midpoint in a range of salaries. In the preceding example, the median will be about \$33,000, which is a useful number if you're looking at pay levels for the majority of employees in the group.

### **What's the "50% range" that shows up in many of your pay charts?**

This is essentially an expanded median that measures the middle half of all data points in a category. For instance, salaries for customer service reps tend to cluster closely around the \$35,000 median: Half of the employees in our survey sample earn between \$30,000 and \$40,000. By comparison, there's a much wider spread in pay for department managers: Here, the median is \$90,000, but the 50% range extends all the way from \$66,200 to \$100,000. This is especially handy data if you're recruiting new staff or negotiating raises. Paying just \$5,000 above the median for a customer service rep puts your job near the top of the pay scale, but it takes \$10,000 to make a department manager's job equally attractive.

### **Does your survey report on bonus pay?**

Not explicitly. When we set up the original survey questionnaire, hardly anyone in support received bonus or incentive pay. Many more companies have now incorporated incentive pay into their comp plans, though the actual amounts are usually small. We do ask about "average annual salary rates," so it's likely that most respondents will include group bonuses in the numbers they report to us. For more on this topic, see the ASP's 2010 report on Front-Line Support Incentives.)

### **You show breakouts on company size, organization size, and product price. Which variable is most important?**

That depends on your individual company demographics. Often, these variables converge: For instance, a large enterprise software company will probably have a good-sized support organization and high-priced products. But there are also large consumer-oriented companies with inexpensive products, and that combination will probably yield a very different salary profile. We provide data for all three variables to let you find the combination that best fits your specific demographics.

However, please note that statistical reliability suffers when there are too few responses in a breakout category. We've reported the specific number of responses (the "count") in every segment as a rough guide to the accuracy of each data point.

### **What about geographical breakouts?**

In the past, we've presented some state-level breakouts for Massachusetts and California, which reveal—no surprise—that it costs more to operate a support center in these states. However, the biggest variations tend to appear at a more granular level (urban vs. suburban vs. rural), so we'd need several thousand more responses to provide meaningful geographical comparisons, virtually impossible with our present methodology. Instead, we suggest using one of the popular cost-of-living calculators, such as Sperling's BestPlaces ([www.bestplaces.net](http://www.bestplaces.net)), to adjust pay levels to local conditions.