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- Diego Ripamonti  
Dell, Montpellier



## Case Study: Dell's Enterprise Expert Centre

Dell's Enterprise Expert Centre in Montpellier has become the first European site to achieve the coveted CompTIA ASC Gold status. By doing so it has achieved a 10 percent increase in customer satisfaction levels.

Dell EMEA is totally committed to customer satisfaction. Its business is based around the delivery of quality products and excellent customer service, ensuring long-term customer retention. But being one of the best in the world at looking after customers means that the pressure is always on to do more than just sustain existing levels of satisfaction - you have to continually find ways to improve.

Dell's Enterprise Expert Centre in Montpellier is already one of the leading lights for the global computing firm. It is the European hub for technical enquiries from enterprise computing customers. It boasts impressive levels of technical competence amongst its staff and customer satisfaction is demonstrably high. But the site's Customer Services Director Jean-Pierre Berone wanted to push the boundaries of excellence and saw an opportunity to do more. "Customer satisfaction is always our top priority. At Montpellier it has been much increased over the past four years. But recent customer feedback surveys have shown that we could still improve. As a result, we decided to strive for improvements on three axes. Firstly, we wanted to further improve the customer service experience as a way to increase customer retention. Secondly we wanted to increase the technical capabilities of our staff. And finally, we wanted to boost morale by enabling Montpellier to achieve independent recognition for its excellent levels of technical ability and customer satisfaction."

Dell turned to the computing industry's trade association, CompTIA, to help identify the best way to achieve these objectives through a programme of training and certification. As a global association working with more than 23,000 technology members, one of CompTIA's main responsibilities is developing vendor neutral certification programmes that help the technology industry meet its ongoing challenges. CompTIA is particularly proficient at developing core-level certifications that set clear benchmarks for the levels of competence required to undertake foundation-level technical tasks in technology professions.

Dell is an existing global CompTIA member and this was not the first time the Association had worked with the Montpellier site. It had already proved its technical staff's technology competence by putting 50 percent of its agents through one of CompTIA's enterprise programme certifications (CompTIA A+, CompTIA Network+ or CompTIA Server+). This helped it become an accredited CompTIA Authorised Service Centre (ASC) in early 2007. The next step up was ASC Gold, the highest level of recognition available from CompTIA. ASC Gold requires an additional level of commitment to technical certification across the site, and 50 percent of site technicians to have successfully completed CompTIA's customer service programme. Berone saw ASC Gold both as a way to achieve the site's training objectives and the independent recognition of excellence the site deserved. Together with programme manager Diego Ripamonti, he began working with CompTIA to build a programme that would take Montpellier Dell's first ASC Gold status site in Europe.

"Better training is about more than increasing the number of courses you offer," explains Martin Hill, European Strategic Accounts Manager at CompTIA. "It's about clarifying what you want to change as a business and then identifying the approach which can help you achieve those objectives. Our responsibility is to ensure the technology industry takes the right approach in order to raise levels of technical compe-

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tence and service quality across the board. Our ongoing relationship with Dell is an example of how this works in practice. At CompTIA, we don't sell a product - we guide organisations, helping them build bespoke certification programmes that best suit their requirements and which we know are suitable for technology businesses today. Dell approached us with an ambition and we have helped their Montpellier site achieve it."

CompTIA realised that the Montpellier site had proven technical skills from the internal benchmarking undertaken as part of the original ASC certification process. What it needed now was a training programme focused on customer service skills to meet the requirements for ASC Gold. It introduced Impact Learning Systems - a training partner specialising in improving customer skills - to Dell. Impact's role was to craft and deliver a CompTIA certification programme that met industry-recognised standards and would enable Dell's Montpellier site to reach CompTIA ASC Gold status.

Impact based Dell's programme on industry standard training but injected Dell-specific examples making it bespoke to the Montpellier site's practices and workplace experience. "The starting point always has to be existing, industry-recognised training," explains Kurt Friedmann, Vice President at Impact Learning Systems. "That way we ensure every programme is based on competencies agreed by industry to be critical for customer satisfaction. We then mix in specific examples and base the logistics of the programme on the customer's working environment."

Impact created Dell's CompTIA training programme as seven Web-based modules. Each technician had a username and password that allowed them to log in and complete modules as and when they were able. This allowed them to fit learning around their working time. Candidates also received an explanation about how the CompTIA programme worked and why it was put in place. This made them fully aware of how important the training was, and what certification would mean for them as individuals, their relationship with their customers and the site's success rate.

The approach has been a huge success. More than 120 people were successfully trained in little more than eight weeks. Montpellier is now a CompTIA ASC Gold status site. The response from participants has been testament to the successful planning and delivery of a very worthy programme. Roberto Sergiacomi is a Case Coordinator at the Montpellier site. He was one of the technicians trained through the CompTIA process. Not only did he feel the training was suited to his working practices, he also understood the importance of the training for both himself and the site as a whole.

"I think CompTIA's certifications are very useful for our kind of work," Sergiacomi said. "It is as important for me to manage the customer as it is to quickly and effectively solve their technical problem. I need to check they are satisfied on all fronts. This means I'll get to use the information I've learned on these courses every single day. Dell takes training very seriously and this process really proves that point. The online access made it slick and efficient whilst the content itself was easy to understand."

The impact is certainly positive but the response from customers has been phenomenal. Impact Learning Systems and CompTIA have measured the impact of the training by comparing customer satisfaction surveys before and after the training. The analysis demonstrates a leap in performance for both solving technical problems and keeping customers happy. It shows a 10% rise in customer satisfaction rates and a 10% reduction in the time taken to resolve technical issues.

"These are really impressive figures," suggests Berone. "You would expect this level of increase from a site with low levels of customer service at the outset but Montpellier started from a market-leading position. To increase by another 10 percent on top of this is truly extraordinary. It puts Dell well ahead of the industry average."

Ripamonti worked closely with both Impact and CompTIA and believes that without the help of specialists who can create and deliver a great programme, these achievements would be a huge challenge.

"The support from CompTIA and Impact Learning Systems has had a direct impact on our ability to increase customer satisfaction," Ripamonti said. "We told them what we wanted to achieve and why. They helped us identify the islands of excellence amongst a complex landscape of technical and customer training. We worked closely together as a team and achieved exceptional results for our customers and our staff."

Dell's Montpellier site is now the first place in Europe to have achieved ASC Gold status. It has quickly become a pioneer of how to improve customer service and relationships through work-based learning. Russell Mangum is the certification manager for Dell across the EMEA region. He sees Montpellier as a model for other sites to follow... "Montpellier is performing really well. It is considered one of the best customer expertise sites and we now showcase the impact that well-developed, strategic training and certification can have on our business. The next step is to roll the programme out to other sites in other countries. We want to make Europe Dell's ASC Gold continent."

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