

Freeing up NSK Americas to focus on the big projects.

How Littlefish's personal Pod approach to IT Service Desk allowed NSK Americas to finally tackle the strategic issues.



Introduction: Victims of their own success

Growth is a good thing. Sales are a good thing.
Profits are an exceptionally good thing.

But when a company enjoys a successful year, back-office functions like technical support sometimes get a rough ride at budgeting time.

Often, the hiring effort focuses on the sales staff and engineers who create and sell the company's products, and less on the back-office functions (like the Service Desk) that enable them to do their jobs effectively.

It was a challenge familiar to the Americas region of global motion & control experts [NSK Americas](#) (NSK).

Sharp growth in the form of some big business wins from prestige automotive brands had

highlighted the fact that critical Service Desk processes were in need of review, improvement, and modernisation.

This would allow NSK to ensure their people – and in turn their business – could be productive and optimised in order to deliver the best possible service to internal and external clients alike.

The way the team dealt with the daily workflow needed to change. But with headcount limitations in place, what were the options?

IT LEADER. ***FUTURE THINKING.***

Despite their workload, NSK's Service Management team were initially unsure about "rightsourcing" with outside help. They were, after all, experts, with hard-won knowledge built up over years.

They felt ownership of the problem, and didn't want to trust the IT issues of users across North, Central and South America to some faceless voice

following a script. They wanted to build capacity within their department, so they'd have the resources to fully answer every trouble ticket.

And in many ways, they were right. In the end, effective support isn't about narrow procedural and technical definitions on a legal document. It's about the people providing the service.

The relationships they build with users, the knowledge they gain over time, how they share it within the team to create what Steve Jobs called "customer delight". And that meant there couldn't be a distinction between the guys in-house and the guys from out of town. All parts of the service offering had to function as a single integrated team.



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Meet NSK

Founded in 1916, NSK was the first company in Japan to develop and manufacture bearings.

It is now a global leader in motion and control engineering, such as automotive products, precision machinery and parts, and mechatronic products.

With around US\$10bn in sales per year to its B2B customers, a significant number of all automobiles and industrial plants will have at least one NSK SKU inside them.



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A quick introduction to NSK



Nippon Seiko Limited Partnership founded in Tokyo in 1916



Now has over 31,500 worldwide employees



Operates in 145 production and sales sites across 29 countries



Focuses on two core business segments: Industrial Machinery, and Automotive Products

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It's all about the people

As Donald Banks – head of NSK's in-house service organisation – and his counterparts drew up their requirements for a smoother, faster technical support department, it became clear the answer might lie in an unexpected location: across the Atlantic in the UK city of Nottingham. (Familiar to Americans as the birthplace of Robin Hood.)

UK service provider Littlefish were the existing IT outsourced partner for NSK Europe. With a detailed working knowledge of NSK already in place and an excellent relationship with NSK Europe's users, Littlefish came highly recommended. As time went on, Littlefish didn't just stay on the shortlist – it became the obvious choice.



*Not just because
of technology, but
because of how it
organised its people.*

The problem of home bias...

Organisational behaviour – which studies group effectiveness at work – has put out study after study about “home bias”.

From investing in stocks to choosing universities for your children, human nature pushes us to favour what's closest to home, even if all evidence suggests it'd be sensible to look further afield.

Home bias is a major reason for business problems in the back office.



The (misguided) thinking is that when you use support resources a long way from home, other problems may creep in due to:



Different time zones



Language differences to those spoken by your organisation



Cultural nuances

Home bias meant that NSK initially thought the smart option would be to engage a Service Desk provider from within the US, *because they were under the misconception that local meant better.*

...and the pain of a headcount freeze

On the other side of the equation, the resources available locally were few and far between.

Globally, NSK divides its business into four sales regions, with over 31,500 staff. For the American market, Banks' team numbered just six professionals – all based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. With no option to recruit more.

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The problem was manpower. I have a team of six and there are approximately 350 users in this office alone, plus all the plants and offices elsewhere who have no IT support – they rely on us. There was one phone number for issues and the phone would constantly ring and the tickets would pile up.”

Donald Banks, Head of IT Services for the Americas, NSK

Despite being home to a top research university, the former Rust Belt state doesn't enjoy the same size hiring pool as tech-dense Silicon Valley, or even genteel New England to the east.

So if he'd given in to home bias, it would have seriously narrowed the field of candidates – and an IT services group on the other side of the Atlantic wouldn't normally even be on the radar.



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Headcount was up, but not in the IT department

The team in Ann Arbor had always been busy; it's an occupational hazard for any IT department. (Some IT professionals even pride themselves on their ability to stay awake for days at a time!)

All trouble tickets raised came straight into that one department.

But for some time there'd been hiring restrictions on the Service Desk. So success for the business as a whole meant Banks' people were being stretched thinner and thinner. While sales and staff had grown worldwide, his Service Desk staff had remained lean, mean... and dangerously low on capacity



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We put out annual surveys on our performance, and the results would come back quite poor. So my Director said: ‘we have to make a change. Doing the same thing year after year and expecting different results: that’s insanity.’”

Donald Banks, Head of IT Services for the Americas, NSK

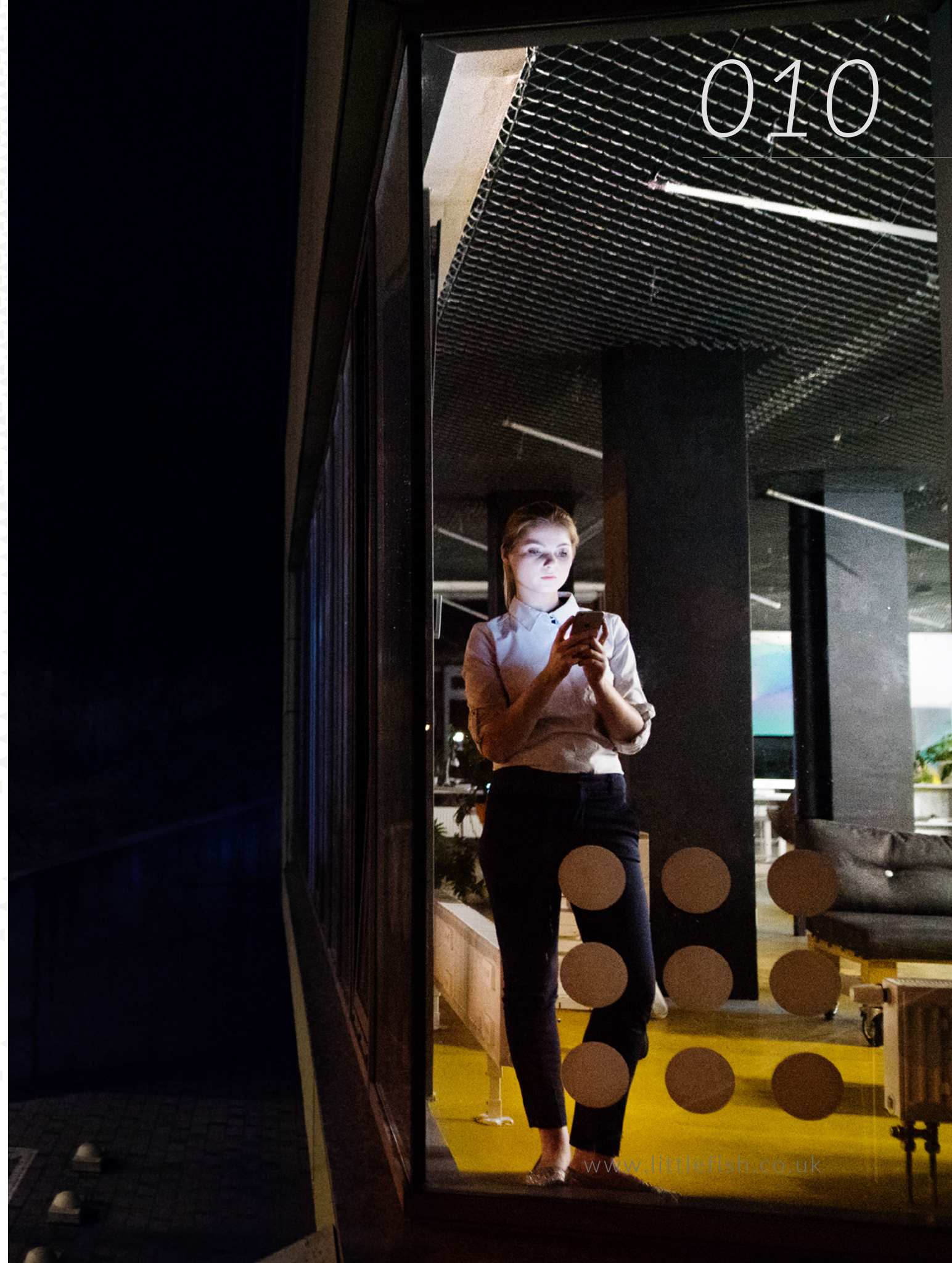
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Just six people had to cover the whole American continent and all its time zones. That meant at least one person being on call 24 hours, every day. And as any IT professional knows, 'being on call' usually means 'being on a call', often many calls, throughout the night.

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One person was on call 24 hours, rotating each month. When it was your turn, you pretty much knew you weren't going to get much sleep.”

Donald Banks, Head of IT Services for the Americas, NSK



Multiple languages multiplied the pain

The problems weren't limited to the need for 24-hour support; the users calling in hailed from a variety of languages and dialects. In a typical day the Desk would take calls in English, Spanish, and Portuguese. They coped: but not without a daily dose of frustration.

Troublesome software issues become nightmarish if a non-technical user has to explain them in a non-native language. And the applications the team supported weren't just the usual array of office and productivity packages: there were solutions developed in-house that weren't used anywhere else.





The perfect storm of Service Desk troubles

All this meant that a typical resolution cycle for a call into the desk for the in-house team was between 48 and 72 hours. And it was worse at peak times, like Monday mornings when a surprisingly large percentage of staff would forget their login passwords.

So what impressed Banks about the team from across the Atlantic?

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The Pod: how Littlefish sees the world

In his first discussions with Littlefish, Banks noted with approval how the British IT services provider put people first – literally.

Before any discussion of technology approaches or SLAs, Littlefish explained Pods and their ‘people matter’ approach.

Pods are how Littlefish matches its people to its clients. Each client – including NSK – enjoys not just a resource allocation of Full-time Equivalents (FTEs) but a designated team. Named individuals who work on the client’s business day to day, month to month, and year to year, building up knowledge of the client, and relationships with them, that get deeper over time.



A photograph of a modern office environment. In the foreground, a man with glasses and a beard is sitting at a white desk, looking at a laptop. He is wearing a grey t-shirt and a watch. On the desk, there is a laptop, a keyboard, a mouse, and some cables. In the background, other people are working at similar desks. The office has large windows that let in a lot of natural light. The ceiling is white with some recessed lighting. The overall atmosphere is professional and collaborative.

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Littlefish's solution for NSK included a Pod of expertly trained and technically accredited technicians. It nearly doubled the resource available for answering support requests – and provided useful 'burst capacity' for answering tickets faster at times of peak demand.

This is one of the significant benefits of working with Littlefish, because their Pod approach to Service Desk means the client isn't having to endure poor service for its users when service demand peaks, nor pay for people to be underutilised when service demand declines, as it would with an in-house Service Desk.

The engagement: setting initial conditions

Littlefish's people focus didn't stop at naming names.

They treated engagement as a process rather than a product, booking an in-depth series of training sessions to build a base of knowledge. The goal: to go beyond an outside resource and truly become an integral part of NSK's team.

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We had a lot of meetings, webinars, training sessions to bring Littlefish up to speed, and I can honestly say they are now truly an extension of NSK because they understand the inner workings of our applications.”

Donald Banks, Head of IT Services for the Americas, NSK



“ *The Littlefish Perspective*”

The transition was key. The investment in knowledge transfer between the in-house team and the NSK Americas Pod was instrumental in ensuring the service was able to “hit the ground running” and begin to deliver a transformative level of service from day one.

Delivering services through a designated Pod means that the knowledge continues to build and continually enhance the service, meaning continually improving First Contact Resolutions and a Service Desk that understands the customer, its business, and its users.”

Richard Roome, Services Director, Littlefish





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The Littlefish Perspective

Another important step in the transition of the service was a roadshow, delivered by Littlefish Service Delivery Management staff. This built both stakeholder relations as well getting the buy-in from staff at sites in Brazil, America, and Canada, and was reciprocated with a visit to Nottingham by Donald Banks to cement the relationship with the Pod and the wider team.

Face time with the user gave Littlefish the opportunity to showcase the support interfaces, notably LF Live, which is now the preferred method of contact for NSK Americas staff.”

Richard Roome, Services Director, Littlefish

IT LEADER. ***FUTURE THINKING.***

Maintaining the same team of people over time also let them build up intimate knowledge of NSK's in-house applications. This means they can now speak confidently to expert engineers and sales professionals within NSK Americas, using the terminology and jargon they're familiar with. It's yet another factor enabling Banks to treat Littlefish as an integral part of his service desk offering.

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There are mission-critical situations when we need answers straight away – if a product or a plant has gone down – and the specialised, intimate knowledge that Littlefish have about our internal applications is crucial. We do a lot of in-house development, so we need someone who is willing to be a genuine partner.”



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The key differentiator: multi-language support

Alongside the organisational learning was the true dealmaker for Banks: Littlefish's ability to provide support in the languages Banks' users spoke natively.

Half of the Pod designated to work with NSK has been there from the beginning. The Ann Arbor and Nottingham teams are on first-name terms; from the perspective of an NSK service user, there's no difference between them. Except, perhaps, for the occasional question about where someone's accent is from.



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The one thing that Littlefish gave us that the other providers simply couldn't was the multi-language support. Nobody else could 100% adhere to our English, Spanish, and Portuguese needs 24/7, but Littlefish stepped up to the plate. For a global company like us, that stood out.”

Conclusion

Even with a cursory look at the metrics, the improvement from NSK's perspective is self-evident

Rather than a turnaround of several days, some 60%+ of Service Desk calls are now resolved there and then, in a single service interaction.

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“The ability to get that one-on-one support changes everything. I've heard many times from my users that issues that previously took two or three days will now get resolved the same day.”

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+60%

of Service Desk calls are now resolved there and then, in a single service interaction.



“ *Littlefish says*”

Littlefish had been working with NSK Europe for two years and had been able to demonstrate that the remote delivered Pod approach delivered significant benefits. Delivering a multi-lingual Service Desk to 14 different European countries across four different languages, Littlefish had demonstrated that the people first approach worked.

Driving up First Contact Resolution from 20% to 80%, and shifting left from internal teams to the Service Desk delivered tangible business benefits. NSK Americas were able to see how this could address their own challenges around a growing demand from a variety of languages.

It also enables their IT team to focus on delivering business benefits rather than firefight the day-to-day demands of the users.

The benefits to NSK Americas are tangible. But perhaps unexpected are the additional benefits for the wider NSK organisation, who now have a Service Partner who can help with the delivery of global initiatives. Working across NSK Europe, NSK Americas, and the wider NSK ASEAN & Oceania region, Littlefish are now supporting NSK to coordinate support for global projects in a way never envisaged.”

*Richard Roome, Services Director,
Littlefish*

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The increased size of the resource means a full 24-hour service can be offered without anyone needing to be on call sundown to sunup. Littlefish has access to the same resources as the Ann Arbor team, with the same level of administrator permissions, in a relationship of ongoing trust.

The two sides share reports daily, and Littlefish is able to respond to feedback instantly rather than weeks later. (Banks reports that it always does.) Banks also notes that even in the rare case of negative feedback, it's usually due to a deeper problem within NSK rather than an error within the Pod.

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The question for me was, ‘how much like my own team would the Pod feel?’ The answer is, there’s no differentiation. We function as a team; Littlefish are fully integrated into the service organisation. And all credit to Littlefish for making it work.”



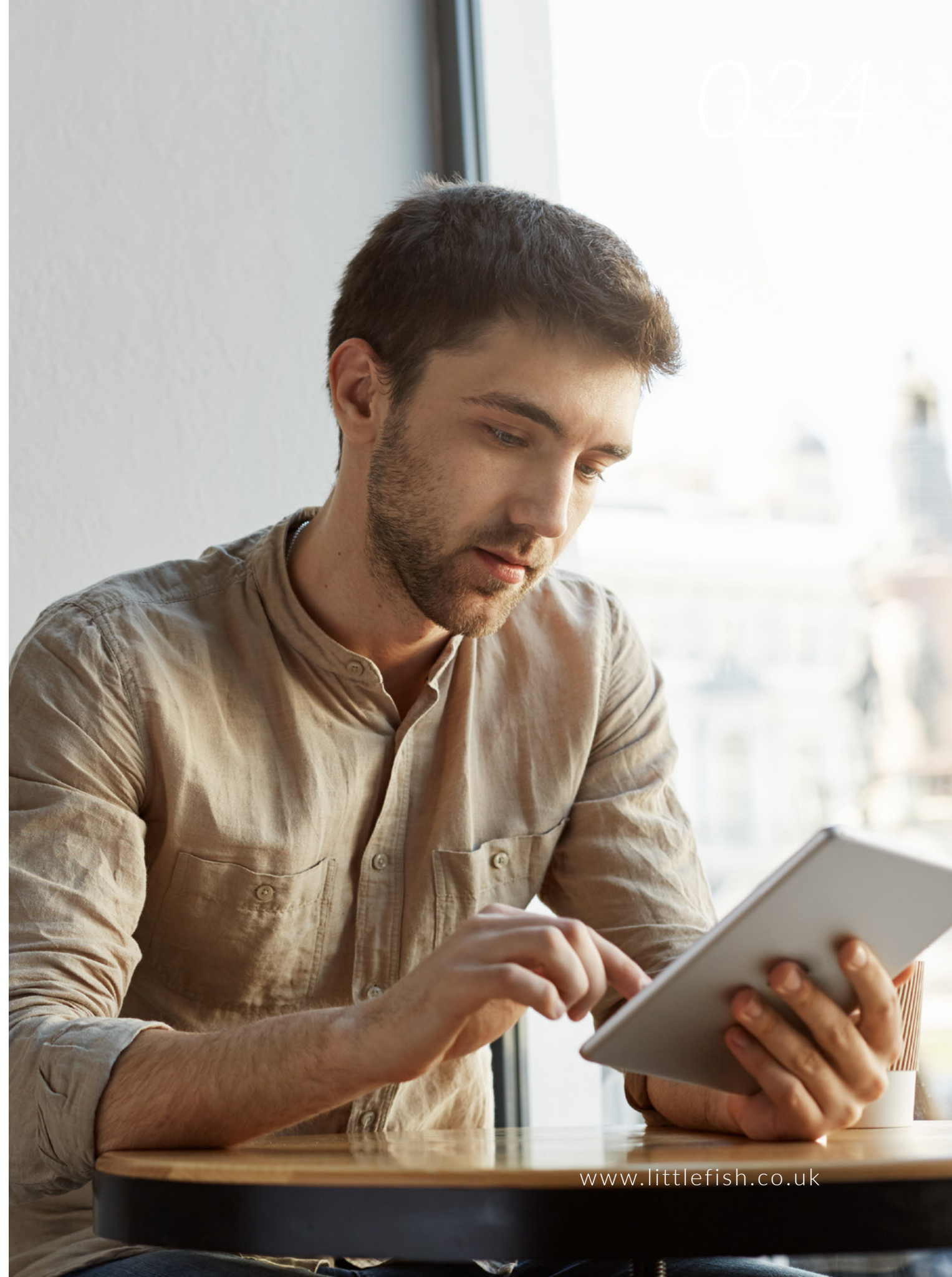
But there's something else putting
a smile on Donald Banks' face.

**Something
bigger**

From the start, Littlefish made the engagement more about business than technology, with business cases detailing how much money NSK could make if certain resources were freed from everyday busywork. And in many ways it's been the engagement's most positive outcome.

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Littlefish look after the little things like lock-outs, all those people who forget their passwords over the weekend. Littlefish take care of all of them and our phones are completely silent. We can come in on a Monday morning and prioritise our work without having to keep stopping to unlock accounts.”





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Without the pick-up-put-down problem of dealing with an endless flow of trouble tickets, Banks' people were able to be more strategic. Today, they spend time on fixing processes that lead to problems, rather than sticking a plaster on the problems once they appear.

Infrastructural issues – like why the network's slow, why an application's suffering overload – these are the things Banks now has time to focus his attention on. He feels he's now supporting the business as a whole, not just the users raising the tickets.

“

We were never able to concentrate on these big projects before because we were always having to stop and look at the little things. We have time to do those big jobs now. Plus people here are happier, calmer, and not as stressed.”

In the end, the Littlefish solution has turned out well for everyone:



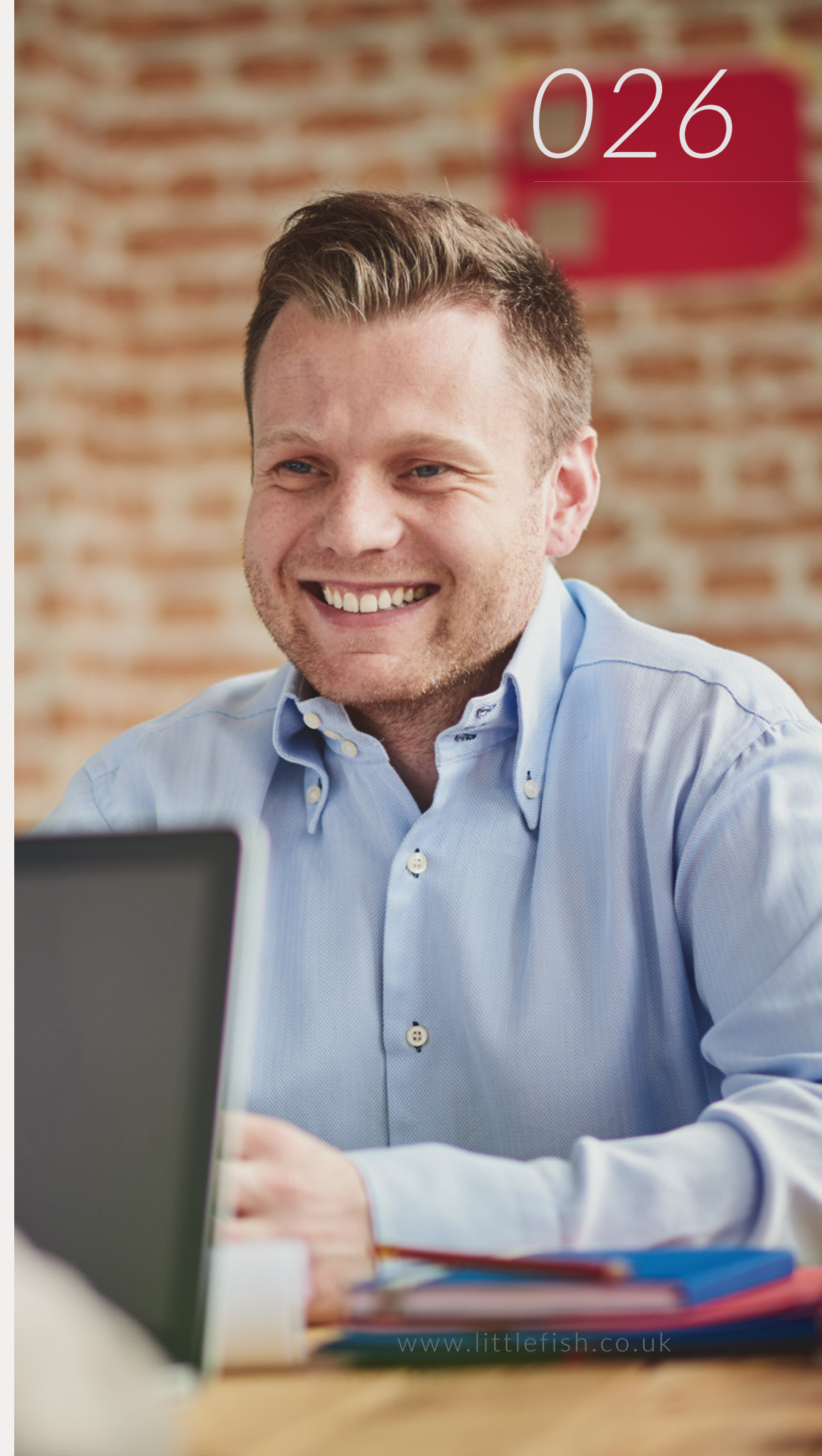
For NSK's business, which gained an external partner who feel more like an internal part of their team, with a deep understanding of NSK's internal apps and processes.



Especially for its users across America, who see issues resolved in minutes, not days.



And for Littlefish in Nottingham, proudly providing support in multiple languages and freeing its client in Ann Arbor to do what it does best.



*A win-win situation?
More than that.
It's win-win-win.*

Key takeaways



An integrated international team doesn't need to sit in the same office



24-hour support doesn't mean someone having to be on call and active through the night, impacting next day availability



Providing multi-language support doesn't mean having a service desk in each country

Key takeaways



Freeing up time for an in-house team lets them turn their talents to more strategic tasks



The right partner can significantly contribute to the wellbeing of the NSK user base, reducing stress and creating calm



Key to building an integrated team is people that stick around, deepening their knowledge over time

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Speak with Littlefish

See how their personalised Pod approach can give you the skills and talent you need when you need them

Get in touch

www.littlefish.co.uk