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Top 5 Reasons ITIL Implementations Don't Go "By The Book"

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Organizational change is hard, and, as is the case with the process and technology pieces of ITIL implementations, it will vary greatly based on your size, structure, and culture. But there are some common threads that will enable you to get the necessary buy-in to succeed with organizational change...

By Leetza Pegg

ITIL – the IT Infrastructure Library, common in many parts of the world, is no longer new to much of the USA. Many organizations are maturing and moving past initial interest and awareness phases. A significant number are actively trying to implement ITIL and other good practices like CobiT, PMI/PMBOK, Six Sigma, and others in an attempt to improve IT service quality and reduce costs in alignment with business requirements.

Even though they study the texts diligently, they often come to the realization that ITIL and most of the other good practices that ITIL requires are just books. They read these books, take classes, earn certifications, and with the faith of a new convert, they seek to achieve IT Operational Excellence.

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But during their journey things do not go as expected. Obtaining upper management buy-in is always a challenge, effecting organizational change is hard, and coordinating such a massive undertaking seems overwhelming. Welcome to the real world.

Presented below are my top five real-world challenges to implementing ITIL and ways by which you can overcome these roadblocks.

5. Different parts of the IT organization have vastly different priorities

Once an organization has become excited about implementing IT service improvements, we almost always see tension arise between those with strategic and tactical responsibilities. The strategic thinkers typically want to focus on service catalogs and financial management; while the tactical teams knows that the focus must be placed on day-to-day operations like change control and incident management. If you choose a solely tactical approach, you'll alienate the strategists. A strictly strategic effort, and your tactical team may see ITIL as just another thing being pushed on them that doesn't improve their day-to-day operations. Say bye-bye to organizational change.

To drive success, it is vital that good energy be focused on process improvement — not on second guessing other parts of the organization. The best way to do this is to give as many parts of the organization their piece of the pie. Let the tactical team tackle change management improvement and task the strategists with developing some meaningful key performance indicators to feed into other processes.

In other words, be prepared to support multiple improvement activities concurrently so you can foster healthy competition (whose process was implemented them fastest) rather than begrudging acceptance.

4. The job gets in the way

The most common reason our ITIL projects stall is that day-to-day business gets in the way. We see this happen even when there is project support from all levels of IT management. In the "keep it up and running" vs. "operational improvement" clash, the real-world activities of the business always win — much in the same way problem management is not done because incident management always trumps. In this case, of course, the underlying problem with the IT infrastructure is not the technology, but the processes themselves.

This is neither unexpected nor unreasonable; the business needs to run, so releasing the latest business service must take precedence over attempts to improve IT. So, how do you get process improvement started and keep it rolling? Focus early and often on a CSIP – the continuous service improvement program.

A CSIP approach recognizes that few, if any, organizations are going to have the time or resources to conduct a complete, one-shot overhaul of their IT services. The CSIP is a means of establishing and organizing a series of agreed-upon process improvements (both tactical and strategic), including prioritization, timeframes, and resources. The smaller and more focused the items, the better organizations will be able to steal time away from daily tasks and focus on accomplishing IT improvements. We generate the CSIP as the first project deliverable and require it to be reviewed at least monthly.

3. You already own the technology

We hear all the time, "But we already own a tool to perform [process xyz], so that process is complete." This is wrong — from so many standpoints.

Remember, the big picture requires people, process, and technology. Technology by itself is almost never an adequate solution. What is more useful, a great tool used ineffectively or a mediocre tool implemented intelligently? The latter can be an important component in a mature IT Service Management solution; the former can be a very expensive mistake.

Do not let the tool blind you to the needs of training staff and developing workable processes. A fool with a tool is still a fool.

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Your initial focus should be on designing processes that meet your organization's needs and then implementing the tool to meet the majority of the process requirements.

2. You don't know your status quo

The first question isn't "where do you want to go," it is "where are you now." Think of it like a road trip. Unless you know things such as your starting location, your goals for the trip, and the trip timeline, it will be difficult to plan an effective itinerary.

The Planning to Implement IT Service Management book has an entire chapter titled Where Are We Now?, yet many skip that important question and try to design new process in a vacuum. There is a general sense of "we know what we do now, we do it every day." It is important, however, to move beyond a general sense to a more concrete understanding.

Before embarking on a CSIP, take the time to understand important questions such as:

- What are your drivers (business, technology)?
- Who are your IT stakeholders, what are their needs, and are their needs presently being met?
- What will the impact be — on both the IT org and the business at large — if you make no change?
- What processes are now in place?
- What skill sets do you have in place?
- What technology do you have in place?

By taking the time to understand the status quo, you'll have better insight into the scale and complexity of your improvement program.

1. Organizational change is too hard

Unless you tackle the people component, your CSIP is very likely doomed. Many organizations want to gloss over this very important piece, either because they don't understand its significance or it is just too overwhelming.

Guess what? Organizational change is hard, and, as is the case with the process and technology pieces of ITIL implementations, it will vary greatly based on your size, structure, and culture. Are there then some common threads that will enable you to get the necessary buy-in to succeed with organizational change? We find the organizations most effective in their efforts to have a multi-pronged approach:

- Training for your IT staff and IT management. Give yourselves a common vocabulary and a common understanding of IT service management best practices. If you don't have the time and budget to put everyone through Foundations-level ITIL training, consider bringing in a trainer to conduct half- or full-day seminars about the service delivery and support processes.
- Simulations for you customers and management (both IT and non-IT). There are number of simulations available that help illustrate the challenges faced by the IT department and the value of process improvement in enhancing service delivery. These simulations typically increase the willingness and commitment of non-IT staff in improving your processes, and show IT participants that improvement is possible.
- Workshops with stakeholders to facilitate planning efforts. Involve your staff, customers, and other stakeholders in your process development. This will require a degree of time commitment in terms of scheduling the workshops, and it is highly advised to bring in an outside consultant to facilitate the workshop and keep things moving forward.

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