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Why “Doing ITIL” Doesn’t Work (And How to Fix It)



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For every complex problem there is a simple and appealing solution that is wrong. For many, ITIL is that solution. This illusion of simplicity is similar to the illusion the Emperor had about his fine new clothes. To succeed with ITIL you have to understand why the Emperor has no clothes...

By [David Nichols](#)



We all agree that the practices in the IT Infrastructure Library are worthy objectives, so why is it so hard to find organizations that have actually been successful in the implementation of more than the most basic ITIL processes?

Major players have sunk millions of dollars into tools, consulting and training -- only to end up with expensive tools, run and supported by well-heeled consultants; with a bunch of ITIL-certified folks wondering why what they do at work doesn't match what they learned in class.

Sure, it would also be great if we had full cooperation from the business, and customers would clearly define the quality and quantity of IT services they need, and those services had clearly established value to the enterprise. And who doesn't want to “rapidly restore disrupted IT services,” or “discover and remove the root cause of problems.” Not to mention “understand the content and context of the infrastructure,” “properly assess the impact of changes,” and “release changes without doing any harm,” oh yeah, and that whole thing about understanding and controlling the costs of IT too.

But we don't, they won't, and we can't -- at least not doing things the way we have been

doing them. Reality is that Emperor ITIL is wearing no clothes.

Based on my first-hand observations as a practitioner managing a large IT organization following ITIL and as a coach and trainer teaching others, I describe what is why “doing ITIL” doesn’t work, and offer a solution that is neither simple, nor appealing. But it is proven to be effective.

Stop looking for silver bullets!

If you examine any of the myriad of self-help books, methods, schemes or any of the proven addiction recovery methods, the first step is to come to grips with reality and admit to yourself that you have a problem. The problem you have to come to grips with is that you think that complex problems have simple answers. If that were true, then there would not be any complex problems left would there?

The delivery of the components of the IT infrastructure as a set of IT services that directly enable business objectives is not simple. It’s very complex and as the world and technology continue to get more complex it becomes harder and harder to even be marginally successful doing so.

The first step toward recovery is an understanding that IT professionals, at all levels, must develop an in-depth understanding of the nature of the problems faced in the delivery of IT services. There is no quick fix, simple solution or “ITIL in a box.”

Follow or lead, but get out of the way!

This is a difficult issue to deal with because those few organizations that can claim some success also can claim that they had good leadership within IT as well as the enterprise as a whole.

The reason leadership is so important is that any implementation of ITSM processes, or any other process framework, methodology or the adoption of standards requires a fundamental change in the way people do their job. Good leaders will craft a vision of a “better world” and help the stakeholders see themselves in that vision.

In effect, any effort to change the way people work actually requires a significant effort in the management of that change. IT executives that “hear” about ITIL and issue a decree to “go do ITIL” are not going to be successful. “Doing ITIL” requires the IT executive management team to “live in the belly of the beast.” It requires management commitment, not just management involvement. Much like the difference between a chicken and a pig in a bacon and egg breakfast; the chicken is involved, but the pig is committed.

There is no substitute for knowing what you’re talking about!

This goes hand-in-hand with following or leading. Leadership requires that the leader have a “working” understanding of the subject. That doesn’t mean a two-hour “introduction to ITIL” squeezed in between important matters. Too often IT executive management asks

the enterprise to commit significant resources to tools, consulting and training to “do ITIL” without having a clue what it’s all about. This is symptomatic of the “simple appealing” issue. “It sounds good and simple. Go do ITIL and I’ll get back to more important things like figuring out why all we seem to do is fight fires and why my peers keep sending me brochures about outsourcing companies.”

Any thought of adoption of any framework, methodology or standard has to be undertaken with the full understanding of the objectives and an unambiguous description of the desired outcome.

Go buy some books; yes read them too. Join a local interest group. Do your own research, take a class and get certified. Understand what IT Service Management is and just as important, isn’t.

Understand your appetite for risk!

This is not about “no guts no glory.” This is about having a good understanding of how much risk IT and the business is willing to accept. In simple terms you are managing risk; understanding what the risks are, making sure the risks are transparent to the stakeholders, and making the decisions necessary to accept the risk, mitigate them or transfer them. That’s why [version 3 of ITIL](#) has put a greater focus on governance.

This means that everyone that has a stake in the outcome of the implementation of any framework, method or standard understands what the risks/rewards are, what can be dealt with, and what can be laid off on others, such as vendors or partners. The importance of understanding your appetite for risk becomes evident in next section.

Some assembly required!

This is the epiphany you have when you’ve dealt with the fact that no silver bullet exists, leadership is required to provide vision and direction, more than a cursory understanding of the subject is required, and that implementing organizational change is risky business.

There is no “one size fits all” in ITSM, despite what software vendors, consultants and training providers tell you. IT Service Management is the complex problem, and its solution requires many moving parts. While ITIL may not be the answer, it’s at least part of the answer. It’s missing a few parts such as IT governance, resource management, quality management and security. So “doing ITIL” isn’t so much about doing ITIL, but integration of a number of frameworks, methods and standards that when combined provide some of the solutions for IT Service Management.

Summary

IT Service Management is a complex endeavor. The environment in which today’s enterprise compete in is very complex and today’s IT organization is required to provide the IT services that enable the enterprise to compete successfully.

The organizations that have succeeded at implementing the ITIL processes are the ones that have figured out that for every complex problem there is a simple and appealing solution that is wrong, or in the case of ITIL; incomplete. They understand there is no quick and easy solution. They know that ITIL cannot be “bought” and they cannot just “do ITIL” to their organization. They have learned that they must “do it themselves” in order to internalize the organizational change required for success with ITIL.

And they know that when that happens, there is no natural limit to the level of success an IT organization -- or the enterprise -- can achieve.

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