Back When I Knew It All

By David Nichols

I am sure we all remember where we were and what we were doing at the exact moment that we realized that our parents were getting smarter as they got older. It's also comforting to know that as we age our own offspring will experience similar moments of thoughtful clarity as expressed in Montgomery Gentry's song, "Back When We Knew it All."

As I was researching a topic for this week's DITY, I rummaged through my research folder and noticed that a lot of articles published in the popular trade press about ITIL and the practice of IT Service Management just have not stood up the to the test of time. So, I thought it would be fun to pull out a few recurrent themes and see what the conventional wisdom was then, and how it looks today. What follows might be insightful, with a bit of humor to go along.

Implementing ITIL – How many times over the last few years have you read articles about "implementing ITIL," and how or how not to go about doing it? There has been a whole boatload of them, and you can usually separate them into two stacks – the ones written by someone promoting a particular "ITIL Compliant" software product and the ones extolling the virtues of the wholesale "implementation" of ITIL.

It is easy to understand the reasoning behind the "software" folks. They have a product to sell, whether it works or not. However, the "wholesale" folks seemed to have missed the whole idea behind a descriptive framework of good practices that provides an "approach" for Service Providers to "adopt" to provide technology-enabled services to the enterprise to help it achieve its desired outcomes.

Service Providers that adopt a service management approach understand that it is more of an organizational transformation initiative than a process implementation project. Those that do not, usually do not (or have not) succeed in their efforts. In fact, I had a client who told me that adopting the practice of IT Service Management is similar to going through the self-discovery steps of the 12-Step Program.

All or Nothing – The idea that a Service Provider organization MUST implement (there we go again) all of the ITIL processes or do nothing was another recurrent theme of articles several years ago.

They were primarily written by (you guessed it) someone selling software or consulting to help you implement software. What is interesting is that a large number of articles promoting an "all or nothing" implementation strategy normally included only the subset of ITIL processes supported by the product they produced. The rest seem to fall into the "Kool Aide" drinker category and were written by a newly minted ITIL Foundation certificate holder from within the vendor's organization.

I was amazed by the sheer volume of articles that promoted the idea that "ITIL Nirvana" could only be reached by implementing (in the sequence of the Service Support and Service Delivery books by the OGC) all of the ITIL processes.

There were actually a couple of articles that mentioned that it might take a "few months" to get this done so the implementing organization should be patient.

ITIL Out-of-the-Box – It might seem that I am picking on software vendors and their efforts to promote their products in the ITIL market space. Nope, to their credit, they have consistently been out front in building the ITIL market; they just looked at it from their own unique perspective.

Much of what I ran across seemed to be marketing copy thinly disguised as "real information" about how a product's feature set enabled the implementing organization to just open the jewel case that the software came in and miraculously mature ITIL processes would spring into being.

I have to believe that many product specialists had to wear flak jackets during software installation. However, this whole "ITIL Out-of-the-Box" idea did create a very large and lucrative consulting niche for many independent and small consulting companies who followed the software vendors around picking up the pieces of failed software implementations.

There was a sub-industry that attached itself to the software industry that promoted the idea that "some software" could said to be "compliant" with ITIL; then later that was changed to "verified" to … do something. On the face of it, the entire notion that a software product could be compliant with processes in a "descriptive framework" seems just silly. It did seem to enable many Service Provider organizations to add the requirement as a "check box" item to their software requirements, thus eliminating small, innovative and nimble software companies with superior products, but limited capital (or lots of integrity) from being considered for selection.

Until recently, product endorsements for compliance or verifiability were limited to vendor-specific offerings. However, there is now an "official" offering that seems to go down the same path, but now the revenues flow to ITIL's Office of Government Commerce (OGC).

Software companies that spend their money to get their product "certified" and customers that rely on that certification to select enabling software will probably end up with what they both deserve. Knowledgeable ITIL practitioners will point and laugh at the software companies, and implementing organizations will stand around with the software jewel case in their hands wondering where the ITIL processes are.

ITIL Certification is the Goal – Similar to the articles I found on software there were many articles about ITIL "certification." On the other side, there have been many articles questioning the need for ITIL certification. Both sides seem to miss the point that a client of mine seems to understand.

A client told me of a time when he and his managers were interviewing candidates for a position on a process reengineering team which was part of their continual improvement initiative. The position required "knowledge of ITIL processes" but did not require any certification.

The candidate showed up for the interview proudly displaying his "green" diamond pin signifying his ITIL Foundation certification level. The three interviewing managers pooled their own ITIL pins and wore them on their lapels during the interview. The manager remarked that the candidate seemed a bit intimidated by folks with three pins.

While the managers had a good laugh at the expense of the candidate, they did not hire him because, while he was certified, he did not demonstrate that he knew enough about service management processes to be a contributor to their project.

A relatively small number of large players (software and consulting firms) have dominated the ITIL "training industry" for a long time. Prior to v3, the vast majority of ITIL training completed was for ITIL Foundation certification. This resulted in several hundred thousand IT professionals with the idea that they actually knew something. Unfortunately a number of them became (or were) consultants. We all know what happens when a lot of people have a little knowledge about a dangerous subject.

The v3 certification scheme expanded the v2 scheme (which focused on foundation and service manager certification) to include an entire intermediate level of certification aimed at managers and practitioners. While a bit more rational than the v2 scheme, the current v3 qualification scheme focuses its efforts on the Accreditor, its Examination Institutes and their Accredited Training Organizations (ATOs) toward churning out ITIL-certified students.

In the U.S., unfortunately very little has been done to establish ITIL certification as a meaningful standard of achievement, necessary to establish it as a valuable professional credential. This will probably remain the case until independent professional bodies provide the necessary framework for the licensing or sanctioning IT professionals and establish ITIL or similar frameworks as a necessary part of the IT professional knowledge/experience base.

Such an effort is just getting underway with the American Computer Society. Until that happens, IT professionals seeking training should first focus on finding someone who is intent on actually teaching them something as opposed to preparing them for a test. To paraphrase a car parts company's slogan, "Doing IT yourself doesn't mean you have to do IT alone." However, the IT professionals must LEARN to do it themselves.

Start with Strategy – It amazed me after the release of ITIL v3 the number of articles written extolling the virtues of the IT Service Management Lifecycle spoke of the wisdom of IT organizations starting with Service Strategy (the "first

phase" of the IT Service Lifecycle – their words, not mine) in order to achieve ITIL nirvana. While these articles did not seem to be written by members of a special interest group, it appeared that uniformly the authors did not have experience in the practical aspects of adopting an IT Service Management approach and those associated with organizational transformation.

The reality of the issue is that all organizations have the processes covered in the ITIL. It is just that they are not all that mature; broken things get fixed, systemic errors in the infrastructure get removed, changes get built and installed, and new services get designed. Most of the time IT knows enough about what the business is doing to produce stuff the business finds useful.

By taking an approach of continually improving the practice of service management, the service provider can improve its capability of practice, its capability of process and the quality of the services it provides. Service management is a complex system where cause and effect are separated in time and distance.

Service management practitioners understand this and understand that Service Provider organizations must improve their practice, process and quality at the same time due to the close coupling among the three. While one could argue that the IT Service Management Lifecycle represents the linear flow of a service through its lifecycle, the practice of IT Service Management is a bit messier because lots of stuff goes on at the same time (probably why ITIL is "descriptive" not "prescriptive").

Summary

Savvy Service Providers do not implement ITIL. They know better. Their approach to the adoption of ITIL best practices is as an approach to the practice of service management. They understand that "ITIL projects" often fail and that a continual improvement approach can become part of the Service Provider's culture and one of its core principles. They understand that there is no substitute to actually knowing how do something themselves and that training should be about education, not certification or entertainment.

They understand that everything in the universe touches everything else, only it is more so with IT Service Management. And they will look back to this time and laugh at how much we thought we knew.