ITIL Doesn't Matter Any More (or Less)

By David Nichols

After a long wait the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL®) version 3 was released. Among the requisite hype, pundits started pointing out the missed opportunities, and I realized that ITIL still doesn't matter...

ITIL v3 is here. Would it be overly dramatic to say that IT Service Management is at a crossroads in its history? Some say yes, but I say no. The fundamental issues that face us today are the same issues that we have faced for the last 30 years (or more).

Yes, ITIL has played a very important role in providing a descriptive framework of good practices in IT Service Management (ITSM). Yes, ITIL has helped thousands of IT professional improve their IT operations. Yes, ITIL v3 tries to be more prescriptive.

But it is our experience that IT organizations and individual professionals can only benefit from ITIL by learning how to do it themselves. ITIL still requires adaptation and customization – and this is what is missing in all the ITIL v3 hype.

ITIL v3 offers important clarifications, for example around the Request Fulfillment, Service Catalog and the CMDB – these now require much less "interpretation" than before, but ITIL is still far from a cookie-cutter.

So, in the scheme of things, ITIL v3 doesn't matter any more – or less – today than it did 7 years, or 20 years ago. What matters is what you do with ITIL, and this is the point that is lost in all the v3 hype.

Based on my personal experience with ITIL v1, the transition to v2, and now ITIL v3, the following is my recommendation on what you need to take into consideration as ITIL v3 rolls out amid both fanfare and criticism from the industry.

The new release of the ITIL adopts a lifecycle approach for planning, designing, delivering, operating and improving IT services. Experienced practitioners have welcomed this approach because in "real life" this is how IT organizations actually do things. Hmmm…must be a "best practice" kind of thing. The new volumes break down into:

- Continual Service Improvement
  - Principle of Service Improvement
- Service Operation
  - Processes
    - Event Management
    - Incident Management
    - Request Fulfillment
    - Problem Management
    - Access Management
  - Functions

- - Service Desk
    - Technical Management
    - Application Management
    - IT Operation Management
  - Service Transition
    - Processes
      - Transition Planning & Support
      - Change Management
      - Service Asset & Configuration Management
      - Release & Deployment
      - Service Validation & Testing
      - Evaluation
      - Knowledge Management
  - Service Design
    - Processes
      - Service Catalog Management
      - Service Level Management
      - Capacity Management
      - Availability Management
      - IT Service Continuity Management
      - Information Security Management
      - Supplier Management
- Service Strategy
  - Processes
    - Service Strategy
    - Service Portfolio Management
    - Demand Management
    - Financial Management

I have only read each book once so my opinions are still forming. I am sure it will take a few more slogs through the whole set before I really get comfortable with this release. In general I (along with many others) was disappointed as I was reading the new volumes.

I believe that while the OGC did a very good job of addressing many of the "mechanical" issues in ITIL, it missed the opportunity to bring the rigor needed to provide "actionable" guidance. In other words, there is still a lot of "what," but not enough detail to readily derive "how."

One quick note about the Service Strategy: This volume has taken some criticism for being too academic and not having much to do with the practical aspects of IT Service Management, nor with "good practices." I do not want to argue those points, but I do want to state that the volume has a lot of very valuable conceptual building blocks that business and IT executives and management teams must internalize if they are to lead their respective organizations in the transformation from Information Technology to service providers.

ITIL v3 uses conceptual models in an attempt to provide a more holistic view of IT Service Management; i.e., easier to make it "get your head around the subject."

There has been some criticism that there is still no "grand unified theory of ITIL" or an accompanying model. Many critics gnash their teeth and wring their collective hands bemoaning this fact. Okay, I would be doing the same thing if the title of this release was *ITIL v3 – The Definitive Version.*

But it isn't, and I believe all we can do is wait for v.3.1 or 3.2, or whatever. I do hope that in the future we will see

more frequent better-managed releases, and with professional writers teamed with "recognized" subject matter experts.

Why Should You Care?

I believe there are three areas IT professionals should be concerned about; how does this impact what I am already doing, what impact does it have to my training investment, and what happens to all this expensive software I bought?

If an organization already has a continual service improvement program underway, has assessed its current capabilities, defined a process improvement implementation plan, and is in the process of executing that plan – GREAT!!!! DON'T DO ANYTHING!!!

If you have actually done all that, and are working your plan, continue with it. If you used a good consultant, you will have predicated your implementation on incremental process and service improvements, and you will be able to integrate the additional processes as your organizational and process capabilities mature and you can assimilate them.

If you are just starting out (just kicking tires, or getting some initial training) then you really do not care what version of ITIL is out there. None of your ITIL training in version 2.0 will go to waste. The current v3 training syllabus is very high-level material, and all accredited training providers must provide bridging courseware to bring everyone up to the same level.

The fundamental enablement of the core support and delivery processes has not changed at all. So you probably should not care either – unless you get an invoice to upgrade your software to be ITIL v3 compliant.

What Do You Need to Do?

You should be thinking and learning about IT Service Management, not ITIL. ITIL is a framework, and so is CobiT and a bunch of others that are out there. What you need to do is to understand that "some assembly" is required to actually realize the benefits of adopting the concepts of IT Service Management and continual service improvement.

ITIL should not sit in the center of your ITSM universe. While it is a valuable framework, it has a much greater utility when combined with other frameworks such as CobiT, and methods that help with quality and program management and security. It is interesting that the ITIL volumes tell you the same thing. Version 3.0 has gone a bit further in rationalizing how it works with other frameworks and methods. However, it still falls short in providing direct and actionable guidance.

Why Do You Need to Do It?

Traditional IT as we know it is dead or at least dying. There is a fundamental transformation that is taking place in the industry, driven by the business who demands that IT demonstrate agility and innovation in exploiting technology in support of technology-enabled business processes. An organization that fails to transform itself into a service provider will be replaced by an organization that has.

ITIL v3 provides much more guidance and direction for organizations coming to grips with this mega trend, but falls short of its full potential. I believe a great source for a service-provider capability model is Carnegie-Melon's eSCM-SP capability model.

Summary

So why did I say ITIL isn't important anymore? It has never really been "important." It is a descriptive framework, not a belief system. So, ITIL doesn't matter any more – or less – for that matter.

It is what it is and will continue to change and morph driven by internal and external forces. We practitioners must focus our efforts on assembling a working service-provider model from all of those frameworks, methods and standards

that some really smart people have already come up with. In the final analysis, the marketplace of ideas and "what works" will determine winners and losers … kind of a Darwinian thing.