

10 Traits of Successful ITIL Adopters

By [Hank Marquis](#)



All IT organizations face similar challenges adopting the best practices of the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL®). While not all succeed in overcoming these challenges, many do. Those that face these challenges and overcome them provide valuable lessons about what it took to succeed.

Examining success is more valuable than examining failure. Failures have little to offer but theories; those that succeeded met the issues head-on -- and won!

Why then do so many articles, presentations, and white papers focus on why ITIL adoptions fail? With so many success stories available, one has to wonder at the motives of the authors of these "failure based" approaches to ITIL adoption.

This article takes a different approach, a success-based approach. It presents a view into success with ITIL adoption without any bias, based on those who succeeded.

Following I present the 10 common traits that seem to foretell success with ITIL.

Looking Under the Headlines

Among those successful in the adoption of ITIL, one can identify several key commonalities. Accepting that a success-based approach to ITIL adoption is more useful, an evaluation of the common experiences of these successful adopters yields valuable insight into the potential problems that can occur, and the solutions required to overcome these problems.

Working with and observing many companies I began to realize that it was not the software, consultants, or training purchased (or not purchased) that foretold successful ITIL adoption. It was the desire to learn how to change and do IT yourself. Over time I put together a list of the top traits that foretold success with ITIL adoption. Use this as a checklist to see if you are moving in the right direction. If you are planning an adoption, then use this as your roadmap.

Top Ten Traits Predicting ITIL Success

Trait #1: Understanding the Politics of ITIL

The ITIL provides a collection of processes, activities, tasks, roles and responsibilities. ITIL workflows span many traditional IT boundaries of responsibility or "silos." In a recent study of organizations that thoroughly examined ITIL and then made an enlightened decision not to implement, the top reason cited was "Not enough of the organization would participate." Successful ITIL adoption depends upon cross-silo process interaction and shared responsibilities. For ITIL to succeed, the entire IT organization, including all silos and their management, must work together as a service-delivery chain.

Trait #2: Accepting that ITIL is an IT Matter

It is very important to realize that ITIL is an IT matter. IT must align with the Business in order to deliver services required by Customers and Users. However, the Business will not drive ITIL adoption, only IT can drive ITIL adoption. It

is incumbent upon IT to communicate, convince, and justify our plans. IT leaders must take the responsibility to communicate and justify ITIL benefits to the business in business terms.

Trait #3: Gaining Management Commitment

The politics of ITIL (Trait #1) require senior management commitment, and IT must generate this commitment (Trait #2). The entire IT organization must support ITIL adoption, and all staff and management must work together as a service-delivery chain. This requires a strong leader able to influence all of IT and impress the Business. Management commitment extends from senior management all the way down to supervisors and team-leaders. Successful adopters comment on the willingness of all involved to take ownership when and where required.

Trait #4: Acknowledging the Goal

Successful ITIL implementations start with the goal of benefiting Customers and Users through the concept of the "quick win." A quick win is an immediate, visible benefit that Customer and Users will realize. This contains two critical bits of wisdom: first, you have to implement ITIL in pieces, going after the "squeaky wheel" first; second, you need to continue delivering value visible to the Customer and User. You may need to change your implementation plans to ensure quick wins arrive regularly. For ITIL to succeed you must plan several visible quick wins to gain and keep the positive momentum required.

Trait #5: Keeping it Simple

ITIL adoption is an IT effort (Trait #2), but the purpose of the effort is to benefit Customers and Users of IT Services (Trait #4.) This takes careful planning and time. You cannot and will not implement ITIL overnight. Implementations often take 1 to 3 years or more. Practically speaking this means you will not implement everything in the ITIL, nor will you implement whatever you decide to implement all at once. Successful ITIL adoption is evolution, not revolution. If there is a revolution, it will be in your thinking, communicating, and management skills. Start simply, move purposefully.

Trait #6: Remembering that ITIL is Process

ITIL is process, not a project. Any process, including ITIL, requires roles (owner, manager, implementer, auditor, etc.) responsibilities (outputs, conformance to requirements, etc.), authorities (ability to direct or perform activities, etc.) activities (actions required to meet responsibilities, etc.) and procedures (documentation of how to perform actions required, etc.)

For ITIL to succeed you must:

- Define roles and responsibilities clearly
- Select and empower a process owner with cross-silo management scope
- Select and empower a manager responsible for establishment, auditing and day-to-day operational oversight
- Define process workflow responsibilities in enough detail for workers to follow
- Implement process reporting and auditing in order to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equity of the process continuously

Key here is to establish a sound framework without going overboard. You must not spend too much time trying to create perfect workflow diagrams and all-encompassing procedures. For ITIL to succeed you must adopt elements of your existing workflow, process, and procedures while molding new behaviors into existing workers. Good enough is perfect (Trait #5.)

Trait #7: Recognizing that ITIL Does Not Stand Alone

Commonly, successful companies use other best practices in addition to ITIL. Adopting ITIL requires more than just two books describing Service Support and Service Delivery best practices. The ITIL is clear that it does not stand alone, and in fact, can only succeed when used with other best practices. The ITIL requires a Continuous Service Improvement Program (CSIP), a Process Maturity Framework (PMF) and a Quality Management System (QMS).

- **CSIP** The CSIP must tie back to key business drivers. Common business drivers include regulatory compliance with industry regulations like The Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act (GLBA), the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), and others. All regulatory compliance business drivers require reporting and auditing. Common audit schemes include Statement on Auditing Standards (SAS) No. 70, is for Service Organizations, including IT service providers. Another popular audit is for compliance with the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002. Auditing connects the business driver to to the organization. The CSIP must steer IT toward systems and methods that support successful audits. For ITIL to succeed you must clearly identify business drivers, auditing required, and most importantly affected stakeholders organization. This is a proven method for obtaining senior management commitment.
- **PMF** ITIL calls for a PMF to identify organizational and process maturity and capability -- the "where" to implement and the "when" to begin implementing ITIL processes, and the definition of the "desired end-state." There are several well-known PMF options, including Capability Maturity Model Integration (CMMI, previously CMM), COBIT Governance Maturity Model (GMM) and the ITIL PMF. For ITIL to succeed you must choose and use a PMF consistently.
- **QMS** ITIL calls for a QMS as the "how to" to manage quality improvement and implementation. There are numerous QMS options including Deming, Six Sigma, LEAN, and others. ITIL provides the "what" to consider, the PMF provides the "where and when" and the QMS provides the "how to" for managing. The QMS provides step-by-step analysis and improvement. For ITIL to succeed you must choose and use a QMS consistently.

Trait #8: Realizing That ITIL Adoption is a Project

Remembering that ITIL is a process (6th trait), and recognizing that ITIL does not stand-alone (7th trait) successful adopters all treat ITIL adoption as an IT project. Project Management underlies all successful changes done, built, or delivered within IT (and most other functional areas.) The best practice for Project Management is the Project Management Institute (PMI) Project Management Book of Knowledge (PMBOK.) PRojects IN Controlled Environments (PRINCE) is another project management system closely aligned to the ITIL. For ITIL to succeed you must approach its adoption as a project, using sound project management techniques.

Trait #9: Discovering that the Biggest Obstacle is Change

Repeatedly, successful ITIL implementers mention that their success came from their people. They attribute their success to not just the commitment of management, but also to the commitment of the line staff who perform ITIL duties day in and day out. Remember that ITIL is a process (Trait #6), and as a process, it requires people do things in a certain manner. People often do things how they choose to do things, not how you tell them to do things. The ability to gain the active support, commitment, and enthusiasm of line staff workers is a key requirement.

People do not like change. IT staff work in what is arguably the most dynamic, fast-paced and rapidly changing of fields, and IT staff are some of the most resistant people when it comes to change. The only proven method to gain the commitment of staff required to change is involving line staff in the adoption process. You must lead by example; involving line staff in the entire process from the initial decision to implement, through process design and into process establishment. For ITIL to succeed you will need to use sound interpersonal management skills to involve and empower staff at all levels during the entire adoption process.

Trait #10: Learning that You Must Do It Yourself

It is very common for training vendors, software suppliers, and consultants to create the impression that ITIL adoption will not succeed without training, software or consultants (or whatever else they sell!) However, this is only true to a small degree -- you can do it all yourself, if you know (or learn) what you have to accomplish.

Successful adopters all report using some trainers or tools, that's a given. However, they often further clarify this by describing how they learned how to do things themselves. For example, you can hire an outside firm to audit your internal processes. Aside from the questions arising from the motivations of the auditor (e.g., Are they trying to sell something?), you learn how to do nothing. In contrast, if you learn how to assess your own maturity yourself then you can perform assessments at will, for little or not cost, with real benefits. Successful adopters learn how to do things themselves, and then make these changes the "new normal" in their organizations. For ITIL to succeed you and your staff must learn new

skills and use them during the implementation.

Summary

A "success-based" approach to ITIL adoption is more useful than a "failure based" approach. An evaluation of the common experiences of successful adopters yields interesting insight into the potential problems that will occur, and the solutions required to overcome these problems.

In summary, you can learn how to succeed with ITIL. Your success with ITIL lies in improving the skills and abilities of you and your staff. When the trainers and consultants go home, you and your staff remain. You can (and must) do IT yourself!

Entire Contents © 2008 itSM Solutions® LLC. All Rights Reserved.
ITIL ® and IT Infrastructure Library ® are Registered Trade Marks of the Office of Government Commerce and is used here by itSM Solutions LLC under license from and with the permission of OGC (Trade Mark License No. 0002).