DITY™ Weekly Newsletter
itSM Solutions®
IT Experience. Practical Solutions
The workable, practical guide to Do IT Yourself Vol. 5.31 • August 6, 2009

ITIL v4? It Depends ...

By David Nichols

ITIL "purists" will say, "Well, you can't always do it that way because 'it depends.'"

Yes it does, but one major shortcoming of ITIL has always been that "depends" is the answer to most questions of adoption, with little consistent guidance as to what good decisions depend on and the application of that rationale.

Almost two years ago, ITIL's much awaited and ballyhooed version 3 refresh was rolled out. Public reaction reflected confusion about what was new, and the trade press, pundits and vendors engaged in a frenzied barrage of articles, blogs and marketing press releases that amounted to a well intentioned, but meaningless discussions of differences, similarities, changes in location, changes in attitude . . .

I cringed when the ITIL's Chief Architect, Sharon Taylor, pronounced that there were no plans for an "ITIL version 4." Fast forward two years and stakeholders are starting to voice the need for a new version of ITIL or at least a major point release.

I'd like to establish the context for this DITY article; the intent is not to trash v3, its authors, or the entities involved in its care and oversight. It is intended to examine three major areas where ITIL v3 could be significantly improved to advance the adoption of its approach, the consistency of its guidance and its delivery into the marketplace.

Adoption

ITIL v3 first saw the light-of-day in 2007. It embarked along the "hype-curve," as expected, as "knowledgeable people" pronounced the expected comments on it. The word out of Europe was that adoption would be slow because there was no perceived value to switching from v2 to v3. ITIL's adoption was well entrenched in Europe and organizations that had spent millions of Euros just didn't seem to see any significant upside to v3.

In North America, where ITIL adoption was significantly less than in Europe, things seemed to slip sideways as early adopters tried to understand the benefits, and new adopters waited for training and consulting firms to come up to speed (U.S. folks seem to have a penchant for only wanting "the latest and the greatest").

The governing bodies, trying to be sensitive to all parties (adopters, training organizations, and consulting communities), fostered uncertainty by delaying the promulgation of a definitive end for v2 certification. Furthermore, a prolonged public discussion raged over v2 vs. v3 as if they were mutually exclusive. This further confused both organizations that had adopted ITIL v2 and organizations considering the adoption of ITIL. To date, v2 has not been officially retired.

A significant improvement to the current set of guidance would be an official transition (transformation would be a better word to use) guide for the adopters of ITIL v2 that speaks to the adaption of the core ITIL processes and to the adoption of those added via v3 in the context of a "service lifecycle."

Consistency

I enjoy woodworking as a hobby. When I make a mistake while making a piece of furniture, I refer to the piece as having "character." ITIL v3 has lots of character and that would be okay if hobbyists produced it. As the world's best-recognized guidance on IT Service Management, it should have very little character and a much higher level of consistency.

The major reason for the current state of the ITIL is that v3 was approached as a refresh, thus much of the original rambling verbiage from v2 (and even v1!) seems to have been cut and pasted into v3.

Moreover, inconsistencies exist in the process area as well. Many processes in both v2 and v3 are not really processes, but are capabilities, such as Availability, Capacity, Continuity, and Security.

Also, processes that span the entire service lifecycle had to go somewhere, so they live in specific lifecycle volumes. There can be a significant level of inconsistency between the "home" volume's guidance and that found in the other lifecycle volumes. A good example of this is answering the question "when is a service is entered into the Service Catalog?" The answer is at the end of this article.

Consistency in the topics covered for each process (and non-process) is poor, as is the depth of content for each topic. One process may be well written with an adequate balance between textual information and bulleted lists, while others may be all text or all bullets. Graphics are too detailed, confusing and inconsistent, not to mention sometimes totally out of context.

The "template" used for Service Design, Transition and Operation needs to be rigorously enforced and content edited for conformance to standards, consistency across the lifecycle, and utilization of graphics. CSI should be integrated into Service Design, Transition and Operation. Service Strategy should be renamed and become the catchall volume for lifecycle-spanning processes and capabilities that need a home.

Marketplace

Adoption of v3 in the marketplace has been inconsistent. There are several reasons – failure to create and articulate a value proposition for its adoption; failure to provide an adoption/transition plan; and the failure to shape the v2 or v3 question into a more meaningful discussion of ITIL transformation.

The Service Strategy volume notes, "Value is defined not only strictly in terms of the customer's business outcomes; it is also highly dependent on customer's perceptions." It goes on to say that, "…perceptions are influenced by attributes of a service that are indication of value, present or prior experiences with similar attributes and relative endowment of competitors and other peers."

Unfortunately, the definition of ITIL's value proposition has been diluted by software companies, consultants and large training companies, who primarily define value in the context of their products and services. ITIL needs to take back control of its value proposition and actively promote it. There have been wild and unsubstantiated claims of savings, improvements and such, and virtually no objective academic study on its value.

Skeptics abound, but while many perceive ITIL to have an intuitive value, the risk exists that adopting organizations do so with totally unrealistic expectations. That inevitably leads to widespread disappointment and the eventual loss of credibility.

As mentioned above, adoption/transition guidance could significantly improve the rate of ITIL adoption (let's assume that is a good thing) and establish more of a practical context for ITIL's guidance (less cult status for the "silver bullet" approach).

While ITIL is a descriptive framework, all one has to do is look to frameworks like CobiT or eSCM-SP to get a really good idea of how this guidance is formulated around practice areas, not lifecycle phases or process groups.

I've written before about work I did on the Service Management Quality Initiative for the then Managed Service Providers Association (MSP Association). The initiative sought to provide an objective measure of Service Providers and their offerings for customers of their services.

The adoption of ITIL is really more about the achievement of service management capabilities than it is about the implementation of the ITIL processes. Comprehensive guidance toward achieving higher levels of capabilities in Service Management practice areas would be a tremendous aid for adopting organizations by putting process improvements in the proper context of the practice of service management.

End the Debate

The v2 vs. v3 debate has gone on too long and for no apparent good reason. V2 processes are a virtual subset of the v3 processes. The only thing that changes is the context … and if you really read the other five volumes of the v2 library, even that doesn't change all that much.

A cynic might attribute that lack of uptake to training providers not being able to deliver the intermediate-level courses in a timely fashion.

I think it's more a function of the combined lack of meaningful advanced training (Practitioner level) in v2, and v2 Foundation's depth of coverage on the ten core processes of Service Support and Delivery.

The v3 Foundation course is intended to be an "introduction" or "orientation" to ITIL v3, with the actual meat delivered in the intermediate-level courses (Capability and Lifecycle). To use a phrase from Service Strategy, a "mind gap" exists when it comes to spending training dollars on a Foundation course that is a three-day orientation class, and a bunch more dollars on intermediate-level classes.

What is missing in the debate is the shift of certification training toward a commodity and the lack of high-value "how to" training in the context of service management processes and capability areas.

In reality, the v3 qualification scheme makes more sense than the v2 scheme because of the granularity of the intermediate- level courses and the focus on two paths of training – those that will guide adoption (Lifecycle) and those that will implement and operate in the new environment (Capability).

Version 2 should receive an honorable burial and the stakeholders should focus on the above more meaningful issues.

Summary

I'm pretty sure when the Chief Architect came down from the mountain that v3 was not written on stone tablets; probably it was stored in Microsoft Word files. Her proclamation of v3's definitive guidance was a bit premature (but well intentioned).

IT Service Management is best thought of as a complex system operating in a highly dynamic environment, and ITIL currently is deeply rooted in a static process approach.

ITIL should represent a dynamic set of guidance, and should be updated and maintained by teams of subject matter experts and co-authored by real writers. By taking that approach it will retain its position of significance and dominance in the IT Service management marketplace of ideas.

However, if the OGC fails to heed the guidance of its own Continual Service Improvement volume it will eventually loose creditability to emerging dynamic frameworks.

Answer to the question: It depends. See Service Design, 4.1.4 page 6, third paragraph.

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