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Getting started with ITIL deployment April 2, 2007

By Megan Santosus, Features Editor

As with a number of prior attempts at systematizing IT, the challenge is often not in the "why?" but the "how." Specifically, how do you begin to deploy ITIL without drowning in the complexity of such a large and ambitious effort?

In addition to the top systems management vendors such as CA, BMC, HP and IBM that offer products with ITIL processes "baked-in," there's an entire industry emerging around providing IT shops with ITIL training, consulting and certifications. Among the most prominent organizations are the IT Service Management Institute, the IT Service Management Forum and Pink Elephant, as well as The ITIL Community Forum and Office of Government Commerce's ITIL site. And many vendors that offer ITIL-inspired products also provide training.

But organizations that equate ITIL with hiring consultants or buying software that supports ITIL are also likely to fail.

"Utterly relying on consultants and software products doesn't work," says Hank Marquis, managing partner and CTO of itSM Solutions, a Lexington, N.C.-based consulting firm that specializes in IT service management. "Successfully implementing ITIL requires leadership skills." Marquis likens the typical data center's leadership style to a communistic approach in which staffers respond to instructions issued down from on high. That won't work with ITIL.

"Data center people will implement ITIL because they want to do it, not because they are told to do it," he says. That requires a certain amount of education and hand-holding.

Start implementing ITIL with processes, not products

And don't look for ITIL in a box. While software undoubtedly can ease ITIL implementations by providing a baseline of automation, software in and of itself isn't ITIL. "Software is a great tool but you need a good process wrapped around it," Bertolini says.

Even a long-time ITIL fan like Rich Jackson, senior director of technology operations at Hilton Grand Vacations Co. acknowledges that ITIL isn't easy and can take a toll on IT staff. "Training is certainly one part of implementing ITIL, but it is critical to have staff believe in the process-based approach that ITIL brings and evangelize this to the masses. We worked really hard to make the staff champions of implementing ITIL. "

Still, as a collection of best practices guidelines, ITIL offers practitioners little advice in terms of where or even how to begin. Practitioners say that focusing on service support and service delivery are good places to start because either the deficiencies in those areas are readily apparent or the opportunities for improvement are easy to quantify.

"We started with our help desk—incident management and problem management," says Jackson. "We prioritized our efforts by targeting our current biggest pain points. Centralizing all of our customer calls through our help desk enabled us to establish a consistent, standardized approach to serving our customers."

What worked for Jackson may not work for other organizations. Hence it's best to first closely examine your organization's needs and then see how ITIL can address them, rather than the other way around.

Even though ITIL seems to be gaining adherents, consultants caution that it isn't for every organization. For one thing, ITIL's guidelines are descriptive rather than prescriptive—they will suggest ways to do change management or problem management, but they will not tell you how to do them. Nor at this point does ITIL offer a formula to demonstrate a return on any of its proscribed processes. Indeed, as ITIL consultant Dave Agonis says, IT departments may have to increase costs to facilitate ITIL adoption because they may have to add roles such as service managers that previously didn't exist.