Five ITSM Pitfalls

By Dolf van der Haven, Powerful Answers

Introduction

IT Service Management (ITSM) has gained considerable popularity in the (IT) services industry. At the same time, knowledge about what ITSM can provide as benefits to companies is often limited to the theory from frameworks such as ITIL (IT Infrastructure Library), COBIT or ISO/IEC 20000.

This booklet provides guidance on a number of more practical aspects of ITSM we ran into that are to do with either the perception of ITSM or with the practical implementation thereof. Necessarily, this only touches on the surface of a full service management system. If you are interested in going into more depth, feel free to contact the author.

Dolf van der Haven

dolf.vanderhaven@powerfulanswers.eu

ITSM Pitfalls Part 1: ITSM is about IT

The notion that IT Service Management (ITSM) is about IT primarily is mostly its own fault, having "IT" as its starting letters. This is the reason why I prefer to talk about "Service Management" rather than "IT Service Management" nowadays.
It is also ITIL's fault, for exactly the same reason: "IT Infrastructure Library" as a name is nothing to do with the intentions of service management in the current times.

So what is ITSM about exactly? Two things: the business outcomes and the services.

The business outcomes are what drive any business: what business results we want to achieve, what kind of customers we want to attract, what are the costs, what do we charge and what is eventually the bottom line. This is the same in any company. And IT is only supportive to these business outcomes. Nobody in the business cares if a server is managed in this way or that way, if a router has IOS version 12.4 or 15.3 or if the software development is done using a classic Waterfall methodology or using fancy Agile principles. What the business is interested in is whether IT supports them in an efficient and cost-effective manner. Whether IT is an internal provider to support its own company's business or an external provider working with other businesses, the principle is the same: IT is there to support the outcomes of the business/customers.

The services are eventually what IT provides to its customers, be it internal or external ones. Within the ISO committee that deals with the development of the ISO/IEC 20000 standard, we started to refer to these as "IT Enables Services" or ITES. Service Management should focus on ITES, all the while keeping in mind how whatever decision about ITSM needs to be made influences the business outcomes. If Problem Management is done poorly and needs to be improved, the improvements need to have a clear relation to and positive impact on the business outcomes. If Financial Management is done poorly, this will transpire to the business as IT costs that are too high and have a negative effect on the business results.

ITSM needs to be released from its IT focus and be integrated and embedded into the end-to-end business model of the company in order to be effective and have a positive impact on the aims of the company it serves.

ITSM Pitfalls Part 2: ITSM is only about Processes

Another bad name ITSM has managed to get for itself is that it is all about processes. And processes are boring, tedious, time-consuming to document and nobody cares about them anyway. In the words of someone who commented to a friend of mine who just turned ITIL Expert, "Now you know everything about the processes that everybody will ignore."

The cause of this misconception goes further than just bad marketing from the side of the ITSM frameworks. Of course, ITIL has done a bad job focussing so much on splitting itself up into 26 processes that could easily be streamlined into the 14 that ISO 20000 has (or be further streamlined to an even lower number by combining related processes into a few efficient process-blocks). But this is not the main issue. ITSM consultants have classically focussed too much on implementing the processes without being aware of the context in which the processes need to function.

This "context" I mention is much broader than ITSM alone. ISO 20000 makes a good start by commencing its requirements with Management Responsibility (a.k.a. Leadership): no Service Management System (SMS) will be successful if there is no top management support for it. I have bumped into this issue many times and know that (at least in classic hierarchical companies) nothing happens if you don't have active support from top management.

Beyond management support there is much more that ITSM is involved in, roughly falling into four categories: individual attitude (how do individual employees in the organisation view the service management system and its impact on their daily jobs?), individual behaviour (do employees actually follow the requirements of the service management system and if not, why is that?), the company's culture (is the SMS well-adapted to the company's corporate culture?) and the company's organisation (is the organisational setup in line with the way in which the SMS has been set up, and vice-versa?). All these aspects have been discussed in far more detail in my series on Integral IT Service Management (see references below).

In the end, ITSM is about the people and the way they work to provide IT Enabled Services to their customers. If you look at ITSM from a people-perspective, the processes become simply means to an end, where the end is the most efficient way to provide services at the lowest cost and to the highest satisfaction of the customer.

You can find the Integral ITSM Model in the following LinkedIn articles:

1. Introduction
2. Third Quadrant
3. First Quadrant
4. Second Quadrant
5. Fourth Quadrant
6. Development

ITSM Pitfalls Part 3: Trying to implement it all

Both ITIL and ISO 20000 give the impression that they are end-to-end frameworks that need to be implemented fully in order to get the best results. Trying to implement (the discussion whether ITIL can be "implemented" or not is another one) something as big as ITIL or ISO20k is a daunting task in the first place, so the next question is then usually, "What process is the most important to start with?"

Let's rewind here…

Neither ITIL nor ISO 20000 are intended to force people to implement their service management system to the full extent of what is written in the documents (caveat on ISO20k: if you have the intention to be audited and certified as a company you need to show that you are at least accountable for all parts of the standard). It is also a recipe for failure if from the onset your intentions are to do end-to-end ITIL service management, design and implement all processes and functions and expect to be successful providing services in that way.

The (psychological) reality is that it is much easier to break up a daunting task into bite-size activities than to attack it as a whole. The road to success is therefore to first identify the

pain points in your existing service management environment and focus on improving those. You may have great incident management, but it is overwhelmed with issues related to new implementation because your Change Management is failing. Then look at the ITIL guidance or ISO20k requirements for Change Management and to the interfaces with Incident Management and fix what is the issue there. Once everything works nicely, go on to the next pain point and fix that.

This is also the answer to the question "What process is the most important to start with?" It's the process that hurts you most in delivering your services in an effective way.

I am quite convinced that no company needs all the processes ITIL describes nor do they need all ISO 20000 requirements to be fulfilled from the start. Once the way of delivering services is getting more mature, more elements of ITSM can be implemented in order to be more successful. The trick is to do things step-by-step as the need from the service quality perspective arises. You may end up implementing a full ITSM framework, but you may stick with a number of core processes for a lengthy period of time as well.

ITSM Pitfalls Part 4: The right Tool is the right Starting Point

Tools and automation are useful. However, when you start implementing or improving a service management system, you should not start buying or developing a tool and expect that to fix all your service management issues. The starting point is to look at the organisation, the people in it, its culture, the processes and everything impacting the quality of the services you provide. Only then does a tool come in sight.

Something I encountered in real life was an IT department that claimed that they had built a database system that was completely "in line with ITIL requirements." It had a Configuration Management Database (CMDB), with Asset Management databases feeding into it, a Change Management/Request Fulfilment module feeding into a ticketing system, and all that according to the "specifications" of ITIL. Notwithstanding their well-meant intentions, most users hated their system, because it was not user-friendly, too complex and most importantly: it did not support their workflow.

This example made me realise that a tool is not there to define the processes; it is the processes that need to be supported by a tool. Or rather, the processes, organisational model, service models and business outcomes define what a tool should do that supports this service management system.

No matter how great platforms like ServiceNow, HPSM, Jira and many other ITSM tools are, tools and automation are probably somewhere last on the list of things to do when you want to develop a service management system. Start with getting management support, the people, the organisation, communication, culture, processes. Then look at how tools can help you to do things more efficiently.

FYI, I have written elsewhere about the criteria to select the right ITSM tool for your environment.

ITSM Pitfalls Part 5: Roll it out from the base

Grassroots initiatives in large companies are to be stimulated, as top management is not always aware of the burning needs of the people working at the base of the organisation.

That said, speaking specifically for the more traditional hierarchical companies, grassroots initiatives rarely lead to major change in the organisation. The reason for this is that for true change to happen in such companies, strong management support is a prerequisite.

ISO 20000 is quite explicit about this, as it starts with requirements for Management Responsibility, stating that top management needs to show its support for the establishment of a Service Management System (SMS) by creating policies and plans; by communicating effectively about the reason for developing an SMS; by providing the resources to do the work; and by managing risks related to rolling out service management.

Practically speaking, well-meant grassroots initiatives can and should be stimulated by providing a true dialogue between the people starting them and management at the level that can make sure the support and resources can be put into place to help these initiatives to develop themselves. Regular interactive "Town Hall" or other meetings between management and employees are helpful in this respect, but also a working continual improvement process where people can submit improvement suggestions which are evaluated by the relevant stakeholders.

About Powerful Answers

ITSM Consultancy from a Human Perspective.

Powerful Answers is and ITSM consultancy that provides advice and support to companies who want to streamline their IT Service Management processes and organisation in order to provide their services in a more efficient and cost-effective way, leading to higher customer satisfaction and improved business results.

Powerful Answers is an international consultancy focussing on IT Service Management in the widest sense. We are professionals with a broad background working for large ICT companies, with deep knowledge of service provisioning processes, organisation design and international business.

What is most important to us is seeing your business improve by implementing the proper service management processes. We strongly believe that IT Service Management is the key to a successful business that so strongly depends on IT.

Powerful Answers has its base in Bulgaria, The Netherlands and in the Czech Republic, so is accustomed to working internationally, cross-culturally and in various languages.

For more information, visit www.powerfulanswers.eu.