

Viewpoint – ITIL Configuration Management: Why the Emphasis on Managing Change?

A Management White Paper by:

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HIGHLIGHT

As one reads the CM chapter (chapter 7) in the ITIL book entitled “Best Practice for Service Support” in hopes to compare CM to ITAM, the overwhelming emphasis appears to be on managing change to configuration items. Why is this focus so strong and what about the important ITAM concept of minimizing asset life cycle costs?

DETAILS

The quick answer to the first question is – you can’t achieve best-in-class IT infrastructure management and service delivery without effectively managing change - period.

ITIL is a framework whose focus is best-in-class IT infrastructure management and service delivery. The place within the framework where existing ITAM implementations best fit is Configuration Management, which is very tightly coupled with Change and Release Management. Together, the ITIL mission of these three tightly coupled disciplines is the systematic control, documenting, application, and auditing of change.

One of the most common perceptions of IT organizations is that they are “reactive” as opposed to “proactive”. The fact that many IT organizations tend to spend much of their time reacting to today’s issues generally leads to availability problems with critical IT services (such as critical business applications and infrastructure), which tends to lead to dissatisfaction with the IT function in general. Dissatisfaction with IT almost always has the direct impact of pressure to lower IT’s existing budget. That pressure – the pressure to continuously deliver more with less – completes an arguably counterproductive cycle. The cycle starts with IT feeling it is “trapped” fighting daily fires with insufficient resources and ends with IT being pressured to reduce its resources even further.

To reverse, or at least stabilize this cycle, IT must begin to operate as any business would – starting by setting, then meeting or exceeding, its customer’s expectations. However, setting expectations means having sufficient staff to handle ongoing infrastructure management and maintenance, which means being able to predict, with a high degree of certainty, the amount of work required. The only way to predict the work level, which is required to determine staffing levels, is to be dealing with a deterministic environment – one that does not continuously “change itself” – thereby causing endless reactionary behavior.

Most IT organizations use Service Level Agreements as the vehicle to set customer expectations and drive service delivery. Meeting SLAs means having appropriate staffing levels, which means having predictable incident and request rates. The more tightly change can be controlled, the

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more predictable incident and request (most importantly incident) rates become, and the more predictable staffing becomes. The net effect is reduced reactionary behavior, reduced and more stable staffing, and, most importantly, the proper setting and meeting of customer expectations resulting in increased customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction, therefore, is dependent on properly managed change.

At first glance managing (really *controlling*) change appears to be an impediment – a cost driver for which there is no perceivable benefit. Also, how to control change in the distributed environment (after all, IT old-timers will quickly talk of all the change control processes that used to be in place for the mainframe) has been elusive. Arguably the distributed environment had to mature and settle on standards before change management made sense. However, that day is quickly approaching, and some might argue that it is here now – that the PC has sufficiently stabilized and “commoditized”, and can be “locked down”, as to be able to expect to enforce reasonable change management/control.

The fact of the matter is that IT organizations simply cannot achieve customer satisfaction with reasonable staffing levels without following some form of change management/control. The authors of ITIL recognized that fact and that is why you’ll find it as such a fundamental building block of the ITIL framework. Some will continue to argue that ITIL’s vision of Configuration/Change/Release Management is just not realistic in most of today’s IT environments. If that is the case, then those same IT environments must continue to accept that improved customer satisfaction and reduced budget pressure are also, therefore, unrealistic expectations – as gains on either front will be marginal at best until the IT infrastructure can be made largely deterministic through proper change management.

Arguably the main premise of ITAM – the efficient management of an asset over its life cycle in order to minimize the cost of “owning” that asset – is absent from ITIL CM philosophy. ITIL addresses financial management of IT in the financial discipline, which is covered separately from ITIL CM. However, the fundamental data elements and need for accuracy to properly manage change are highly consistent with the fundamental needs of ITAM, so it appears reasonable that the two practices can be intersected successfully. It is important, however, to keep in mind the differences in philosophy between the two disciplines as that fundamental philosophical difference will tend to drive divergent paths, if not properly recognized and managed.

Effectively managing change is critical to best-in-class IT infrastructure management and service delivery. ITIL’s Configuration, Change, and Release Management disciplines work closely together to address this critical need. Existing ITAM implementations most closely fit under ITIL’s Configuration Management (CM) practice, and therefore will be taking on an expanded focus of closely monitoring and auditing change as they begin to adapt to the ITIL framework.

About the Author

Brett Husselbaugh has over 20 years of experience primarily in the IT industry. He has consulted with over 25 of the leading Fortune 500 companies on strategies for optimizing the IT investment. With experience as both a CIO and a CEO, Brett brings a unique and practical perspective to IT management, promoting the concept of operating as a "business within a business" to deliver measurable value. Brett is a proven business leader, an innovative thinker, a highly effective writer, and an enthusiastic and motivational public speaker.

Brett has experience as founder and CEO of TOBEK Technical Services, an IT Asset Management firm which he started with no outside investment and grew to 80 people in three years. He then positioned the firm and sold it to Inacom, a Fortune 500 company. Brett also has experience as a CIO, Managing Partner for Managed Services, VP of Strategic Development, VP of Services R&D, Principal Consultant, Industry Analyst, and Program Manager.

Brett has published several magazine articles as well as over 50 industry white and position papers. He has spoken on numerous occasions to audiences of senior and executive management teams on optimizing IT investment, developing strategy, and effective IT management.

Brett holds a Masters of Science in Electrical Engineering from the University of Texas at Arlington and a Bachelors of Science in Electrical Engineering from the University of Maryland at College Park. He is currently a member of American Mensa.

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