

ITIL: NOT JUST FOR BOOKWORMS

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In the 1980s, the U.K. government created a set of common definitions and best practices for IT operations called the Information Technology Infrastructure Library, or [ITIL](#). Popular in European companies, the library, which runs to many volumes and is currently on its third revision, has been slow to catch on in the United States. But as IT infrastructures evolve, becoming both more complex and more of a commodity, American companies, vendors and IT professionals alike are seeing the value in adopting a lingua franca for IT services.

ITIL is very much on the radar of Michael LaMendola, an IT security consultant who has forged a successful career by specializing in SAP. Clients are increasingly listing ITIL certification in their requirements, he said, and when he vets applicants for one of his projects, he makes sure to ask what they know about ITIL.

"It's one thing to know an application, but quite another to know security and IT best practices," LaMendola wrote in an email.

Bill Hamilton, an enterprise architect at Maritz Inc., a Fenton, Mo., company that designs employee incentive and other reward programs, is a big fan of certification, period, as evidenced by the alphabet soup of qualifications under his signature. ITIL certification is not a replacement for experience, but it "helps eliminate confusion in terminology and provides a foundation for understanding," he wrote. Still, his main reason for being certified in ITIL IT Service Management Foundation is to help keep him "current and more marketable."

Hamilton said, "I do it for me and not my employer's benefit, even though my employer does benefit by my getting my certs."

Goodbye, gunslingers

The increasing interest in ITIL-based systems does not come as news to Hank Marquis, chief technology officer at [itSM Solutions LLC](#). The Lexington, N.C.-based firm has provided ITIL coaching and training in IT Service Management (ITSM) to companies such as Electronic Data Systems Corp., Northrop Grumman Corp., Cisco Systems Inc., and Verizon Communications Inc.

Marquis said the need for ITIL, or frameworks like it, has become ever more critical as IT has become integral to doing business -- all kinds of business.

"It boils down to the fact that IT is becoming a commodity, more and more important and more ubiquitous, and therefore more regulated. This regulation is forcing IT to work in a consistent way," Marquis said. "IT can no longer be deployed in an ad hoc and creative environment, where the gunslingers are doing their own thing. ITIL is helping convert IT delivery from an art to a science."

Scott Monaghan, senior director of the Global Solution Services (GSS) group at Hitachi Data Systems Corp., said his department started looking for ways to bring discipline to ITS consulting offerings about two years ago.

Rather than go with something proprietary, GSS used the time-tested ITIL service delivery model, because it had the most application to the storage services the department sold to customers, Monaghan said. GSS teamed up with ITIL expert Fox IT LLC in Bridgeport, Pa., to develop a service offering for customers, Storage Management Process Consulting.

The common protocol allows HDS's storage clients to apply the same best practice standards, along with their server and network management counterparts.

"If you look at data as a supply chain, if you are using different protocols and processes to manage, provision and secure that data you run into inefficiency. The best starting point for efficiency a lot of times is a common protocol," Monaghan said.

At the same time, GSS realized it had to "walk the talk," and revamped its own delivery model around ITIL standards. Eight months after launching this, GSS is realizing its own bottom-line benefits.

"We have probably reduced our customer rework hours by about 25% on its large projects," said Monaghan, adding that the adoption of ITIL was a contributing factor to the company's transition from a break-even business last fiscal year to "absolutely profitable this year."

Letting the vendors and experts do the work

So why isn't ITIL ubiquitous? ITIL standards are difficult to implement. ITIL described the "what," but not the "how" of IT service delivery, said Thomas Mendel, an analyst at Cambridge, Mass.-based Forrester Research Inc., in a 2004 report. In addition, ITIL did not define measurements for process improvements, so companies were unclear whether the arduous conversion was paying off.

Those hurdles began to fall in 2004, as infrastructure management tool vendors increasingly used ITIL and work began on making the new versions easier to implement and on providing best practices for measuring improvements, Mendel said.

ITIL is very much in fashion these days at Coldwater Creek Inc., the women's apparel and accessories retailer. Of the approximately 100 IT staffers at Sandpoint, Idaho-based Coldwater, 80 have had ITIL training, said Michael Carper, divisional vice president for technology operations. "For us, it's been very successful," he said.

Coldwater Creek sells to customers online, through print catalogs and at a growing number of retail stores, making the need for a set of common practices imperative.

The department kicked off its ITIL implementation about two years ago, Carper said. It brought in Microsoft to give Coldwater IT managers its "airport simulation" of Microsoft Operations Frameworks (MOF), the software giant's best practices for IT services, which are based on the ITIL framework.

Coldwater then converted its service desk, using ITIL-based products from BMC Software Inc. and implementing "out-of-the-box" processes for incident, problem and change management, all in about eight weeks' time. Carper used BMC to teach its version of ITIL, the BSM Framework, to its 80 staff members. About 20 managers and technical leaders took an on-site ITIL Foundations boot camp to earn certification.

Carper also hired away an ITIL trainer from Burlington, Ontario-based ITSM expert Pink Elephant Inc., and put him in charge of IT Service Management for all of Coldwater Creek.

A new plethora of vendor tools and ITIL specialists, as well as new ways to measure improvements, are two important forces behind the increasing adoption of ITIL, according to Forrester. Indeed, Forrester's Mendel predicted that improvements in ITIL's "ease of use" would drive many CIOs to re-evaluate ITIL implementations, resulting in widespread acceptance by 2008.

Still, CIOs should not look at ITIL as a magic bullet, Mendel said.

"While ITIL best practices are certainly the foundation for better control of how IT delivers services to the business community, they are not a foundation for business process management or managing IT from a business process perspective," Mendel cautioned. "True business alignment has to be implemented in a top-down manner, not bottom-up from where ITIL's frame of reference originates."

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