Midmarket CIO News:

How midsized organizations are adopting, adapting ITIL best practices

By Kristen Caretta, Site Editor
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The IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) has had some ups and downs within the midmarket. The benefits are difficult to nail down after a certain point, and many SMBs don't have the time and resources to follow ITIL to the letter: But should they? While ITIL best practices can promote a healthy IT environment, there are diminishing returns for small IT shops.

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Steven Porter, CIO of Touchstone Behavioral Health, said ITIL is a great idea, but doesn't make sense in a small organization like his. "We're really too small to depend on a formalized framework, although we do loosely use [ITIL] as guidelines for best practices," he said.

Touchstone Behavioral Health, a Phoenix-based nonprofit organization offering family-centered behavioral health services, has four IT staff members, each wearing multiple hats. Porter said he works with his team to adapt some ITIL best practices into ones that fit more comfortably within the IT organization.

"We're voracious readers, and we like to see what other organizations are doing," he said. "We evaluate each project against what we've learned about ITIL and other frameworks -- gathering requirements, scoping the project and categorizing priorities."

However, while some aspects of ITIL have been incorporated into his IT environment, they're not formal, and he definitely doesn't refer to them as *ITIL*. "ITIL calls for a very structured team approach, and it wouldn't work for us in our small shop," Porter said. "We'd just be adding a layer of complexity on the shoulders of those already tasked with keeping the lights on."

This practice of adapting ITIL best practices is not uncommon across the midmarket, according to George Spalding, an executive vice president at IT management consulting firm Pink Elephant in Rolling Meadows, Ill.. "We tell people not to push the word *ITIL* onto their teams because while the principals are understood, the word puts them off," he said. "So if they want to morph ITIL into something that works for them and not call it *ITIL*, that's fine."

The dislike of everything that comes along with ITIL spurred "stealth ITIL" -- a way to introduce it into an organization without calling it *ITIL*, Spalding said. "IT people don't like to change how they do their jobs, but they do accept new tools and the fact that when a new tool is introduced, processes will change," he said. "Organizations are introducing ITIL into the

company with an accompanying tool and saying, 'There are going to be some changes around here with our workflow and our processes because of this new tool,' without hitting the IT people over the head with the ITIL frameworks."

Process automation and workflow integration tools, with ITIL processes and best practices introduced to the company at the same time, can slowly integrate ITIL into the organization (and gain some wins) without the ITIL baggage, Spalding said.

But there is a fine line. Discarding ITIL best practices, or opting to follow some but not others may cause an organization to miss the overarching and long-term benefits of the framework. "If you're just cherry picking the easy stuff, the programs with a very finite time frame to implement, you're missing out on the ability to solve long-term problems," Spalding said. "It's very shortsighted."

ITIL evolution does not equate to adoption

Misconceptions about how ITIL should be applied in organizations are part of the reason why ITIL V3 didn't take off right away, according to Evelyn Hubbert, an analyst at Forrester Research Inc. "Many companies flocked to ITIL in its first rounds, applied it incorrectly and got burned," she said. "[ITIL] has a black mark."

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ITIL was overhyped and oversold. Many organizations did not clearly understand the benefits and blindly adopted processes without adequately measuring starting points and successes, Hubbert said. And many are still unaware that ITIL has evolved to include service management.

"The challenge is that many folks in the application development groups, strategy groups [and] enterprise architecture teams are thinking that ITIL is purely operational," Hubbert said. "And yes it was, when it was V1 and V2 -- but it has diverged to a broader focus." Today, ITIL is aimed at driving efficiency and effectiveness across all levels of IT, making room for innovation. "About 75% of the work and budget [in IT] is focused on keeping the lights on, and this does not allow organizations to sustain a competitive edge," Hubbert said. "That is why ITIL will be adopted."

But according to Porter, it's not a question of wanting to adopt ITIL best practices -- it's finding the resources to make it happen. "Our developer is also our help desk guy -- we clearly do not have the resources to follow a specific discipline," he said. "And ITIL can't help us with that problem."

Limited resources do present a stumbling block for ITIL adoption. The framework is not a series of concrete steps, and needs to be modified to gain the greatest benefits, Hubbert said.

Let us know what you think about the story; email Kristen Caretta, Site Editor, or follow her on Twitter @kcaretta.