

LEARNING HOW TO USE ITIL 4'S PRACTICES



ITIL 4 has introduced the concept of a 'practice', but why and what is it?

In this article, ITSM Expert Mark Smalley introduces value streams and processes and the pitfalls to avoid.

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From Processes to Practices

We were used to ITIL guidance being expressed in terms of processes, but in the new version, ITIL 4, this seems to have been replaced by practices. And there are 34 of them, subdivided into practices for general management, service management, and technical management.

As you'd expect, the service management practices are described in detail. The general management and technical management practices are different. Because they are not service management practices, you could call them 'contextual' practices. They give an understanding of what – for instance – project management is, because this is closely related to service management practices. It does not attempt to teach the execution of project management – there are much better sources for this.

What's in a Name?

The names of the practices are very much like the names of processes. And very much like the names of organisational entities (departments, teams etc), that execute the processes. Amble opportunity for confusion.

So what is a practice? ITIL defines it as "a set of organizational resources designed for performing work or accomplishing an objective". An alternative name that works well in English but not in some other languages, is capability – the ability to do something. It's about having the resources to do something. But not actually doing it. That's where value streams and processes come into play. Both are about doing things.



Value Streams and Processes

A value stream is “a series of steps that an organization undertakes to create and deliver products and services to consumers”. A process is “a set of interrelated or interacting activities that transform inputs into outputs”. A practice (capability) is the ability to execute part of a value stream or a process. It’s about having the resources.

As ITIL puts it, having the people and organisation, information and technology, and partners and suppliers that are all needed to interact in value streams and processes.

Four Dimensions of Service Management

People and organisation, information and technology, and partners and suppliers, and value streams and processes are ITIL’s four dimensions of service management. They are categories of resources – the things that you need to perform activities. You can compare them with the 4 P’s that we used to talk about: people, processes, products (technology) and partners.

Processes are still in there, but they are no longer the dominant feature.

Pitfalls to Avoid

In the past, possibly misinterpreting ITIL’s process-dominant structure, many people made the mistake of organising around processes. This resulted in process-based silo’s, with unmanaged queues in between. It is conceivable that people who are looking for a quick fix will be seduced into creating practice-based silo’s. Same difference.

Another potential pitfall is regarding the guidance in ITIL as instructions to be followed to the letter. As in previous versions of ITIL, it was intended as input for improvement initiatives. To be adopted and adapted to the specific circumstances.

A warning from Taiichi Ohno, the father of the Toyota Production System (the precursor of Lean): “You have to think for yourself and face your own difficulties, instead of trying to borrow wisdom”. And one from IT service management luminary Ivor Macfarlane: “ITIL is a great place to start your thinking. And a terrible place to stop”.

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