

ITIL best practices drive down cost to maintain IT infrastructure

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As today's practices go, it has become common for most of us to carry a laptop with business critical data on it. The fact that effective functioning of this laptop is highly critical for our success needs little emphasis. Of course, none of us would like the laptop to stop functioning at crucial times. What do we do if that happens?

Does your IT department know what needs to be done to put the laptop back in action and ensure you don't lose a business deal? As IT adoption happens extensively, ensuring effective functioning of our IT infrastructure and finding ways of optimising its use and maintaining business continuity becomes vital. And organisations that either consume or provide IT services can be helped in this regard by ITIL or 'IT Infrastructure Library'.

Having formulated by Office of Government of Commerce (OGC), UK, and made a standard by ISO (ISO 20000), ITIL provides a set of best practices for IT services support and delivery. This is the only set of comprehensive documentation of best practices available in the world.

With a set of five processes and one functional requirement for IT service support and a further set of five processes for IT services delivery, ITIL (v2) provides the clear and simple ways of optimising and maintaining IT.

The support services include 'incident management' (restoration of normal services of computers and other infrastructure as quickly as possible). This process is crucial to ensure "incidents" such as sudden breakdown of IT systems are attended to effectively.

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If several computers, servers and databases stop functioning due to the same or similar set of problems, it needs right identification and eradication so that the impact on business is minimal - thus it becomes a separate process called 'problem management'. To know if all the systems are functioning effectively, we need to know how many systems are there and what their configurations are. Providing such details and managing them regularly falls under 'configuration management process'.

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The support service processes also include 'change management' - making sure systems run on proper & latest version of software and if any hardware device needs replacement etc. This process is important to ensure that standardised methods and procedures are used for efficient and prompt handling of changes for guaranteeing higher performance of the IT systems.

To deal with all aspects of technical and non-technical releases efficiently, organisations can also follow best practices in 'release management process'. On top of all this is functioning of an effective 'service desk' that acts as a bridge between customers and the internal service teams.

Similarly, IT services delivery calls for 'service level management'. Under this process, IT service providers look to match customer expectations with their capabilities by having a series of agreements, which are monitored and reported frequently. The quality of service is improved by finding out and rectifying poor service. Service Improvement Programs (SIP) is initiated wherever necessary.

Proper implementation of this process would enable organisations to constantly improve the quality of their services. At a basic level, organisations must make sure to optimise the capability of their IT systems, which they can take care by implementing the 'availability management process'.

Since organisations tend to grow, they need to clearly measure if their IT installation can serve their current and future business requirements well. They must also find ways of maintaining the capacity of their IT systems cost effectively; which can be accomplished by implementing 'capacity management' process.

Today IT infrastructure is used for several critical business applications, which require high availability of IT Systems. Continuity or quick restoration of services immediately after a disaster requires careful planning and building resilience into IT Systems. This crucial aspect is addressed by implementing 'service continuity management process'.

All of these services costs the company a great deal and unless they have accounts of the spend on the IT services and associate it with the services provided to the customers, it will be difficult for them to exactly determine the cost benefits. ITIL provides for a separate process for this purpose called 'Financial Management for IT services'.

Though there is awareness amongst organisations about ITIL in India, discussions surrounding the best practices and associated standards is usually confined to technical seminars or conferences mostly sponsored by product companies whose main focus is on selling their tools.

The exorbitant licence cost of some of these tools at times discourages organisations from implementing ITIL best practices. The fact is, tool or no tool mere implementation of ITIL best practices can accrue benefits to organisations where IT is a critical requirement for business.

However, ITIL compliant tools do help organisations with large IT infrastructure to implement ITIL processes effectively by eliminating the drudgery of handling massive data and metrics related to IT service management. Though certain amount of investment is necessary for implementing ITIL best practices, the benefits range from greater productivity, higher availability of IT infrastructure, lower manpower and maintenance requirement leading to more cost saving.

There are myths surrounding ITIL such as benefits will not accrue if the standards are not implemented as a whole. This is not true. By implementing certain important processes such as incident management, service desk, problem management, configuration management, change management and service level management organisations can see cost benefits of up to 20 to 30 per cent of their annual IT support budgets depending on their level of implementation.

This would prove to be a huge cost saver for public sector organisations running on revenue from the government.

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Similarly there is also a belief that ITIL helps only large IT organisations. This is not true. Even mid range companies can derive considerable benefits by implementing ITIL best practices.

Though ITIL v2 has recently undergone a refresh and came out with a new version ITIL v3, effective implementation of ITIL v2 can still give organisations value for the money they invest on it.

So for the common benefits of organisations and the whole eco system, it is important for them to implement ITIL.

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