

The 3 Keys to ITIL Success
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If you have been trying to get your arms around ITIL and ITSM then you have probably heard that most projects fail from “lack of management commitment” – a wonderfully provocative and yet completely vacant phrase.

Since establishing a functional ITSM workflow and culture based on ITIL is a project, I looked into how many IT projects fail, and why. The results are shocking, but not unexpected to anyone who actually works in IT.

Data from project management organizations and consulting houses peg IT project success at about 30 to 40 percent, where success simply means the project finished (that is, was not cancelled) within budget, on time and with the features promised. The flip side is, of course, that 60 to 70 percent of all IT projects fail. That is an abysmal success rate and makes it easy to see why the business in general has such a dim view of IT.

Next, I looked into the main reason IT projects fail. A recent survey of over 1,000 IT workers engaged in failed projects found that the reason most IT projects fail was due to poor communications. About 28% of respondents said poor communication is the number one cause of project failure.

Insufficient resource planning came in at No.2 with 18%. Rounding out the top four causes of IT project failure were unrealistic deadlines 13% and poorly defined project requirements at 10%.

That means 69% of all IT project failure comes from just four things—and “lack of management support” is not one of them. It seems IT projects don’t fail for technological reasons, they fail for soft, non-technical reasons. And again, this makes sense, IT is after all nothing if not technically proficient.

So, where was the oft mentioned “management commitment” that so many alleged ITIL pundits, consultants and trainers claim to be the most important factor to ITIL project success? It came in at No.5 with just seven percent of the vote.

Now, getting back to ITIL adoption, clearly something is amiss when it comes to the advice of most ITIL experts. Communication, resource planning, establishing goals and defining requirements are classic project management tasks. To me then, it seems that a lack of basic project management skills are to blame for ITIL failure, not management commitment.

In a paper I wrote several years ago, I presented an analysis of successful ITIL adopters. Every successful ITIL implementation studied had treated ITIL adoption as a formal project using formal project management techniques. At that time I called out the need for improved project management within IT as one of the top means to improve success with ITIL.

Too many would-be ITIL practitioners glaze over the concept of the ITIL CSIP so prominent in ITIL documentation. The goal of the Continuous Service Improvement Program is precisely the answer to this issue. It seems IT doesn’t understand the “5 P’s”—Prior Planning Prevents Poor Projects.

Communicating Is Key

Communication is a primary part of every project. ITIL makes many references to the need for effective communications at all levels. Planning the communications required is itself part of a project plan.

There are three key activities in planning your project communications:

- 1) Who you are going to communicate with;
- 2) When, how and why are you going to communicate with them; and
- 3) What are you going to say to them.

Who

The audience for your communications will vary, and so must your means of communicating and your message. Staff requires frequent specific details to implement and change. Staff will also have the most angst regarding the program and usually have the least information. The more information and details about their jobs and position you can communicate the better.

Your peers need to know what is expected of them, and what you are doing that could affect their span of control. Your managers need less detail and more value and risk data to steer and approve.

When, How and Why

Senior managers will not usually need day to day reports on project status that you and your team need. However, you will find that your direct reports and line staff need almost constant guidance since they are carrying out the line items of your plan.

This means you need to have frequent communications with the team to handle the smaller issues that always arise. Don't forget that the number two reason for IT project failure is "insufficient resource planning", which is the result of overbooking IT staff.

A lack of communications between IT groups and teams often results in exactly this problem. The best way to avoid stretching staff too thin is to organize and plan the project in small steps, clearly and frequently communicating expectations and taking actions to resolve issues immediately.

What

The message delivered will change based on the audience. A single email copied to management, peers and staff will likely not meet the needs of the reader. Instead, consider specific messages crafted and tuned to each audience.

An important element often left out of typical IT communications is remembering that customers need communications from IT as well. Well-written communications to customers need to demonstrate how a project is improving business capabilities.

Communicating "wins" is a critically important project task on the road to ITIL success, but don't limit the good news just to customers. Share with your managers the good job your staff is doing; and vice versa.

IT projects in general, and ITIL adoption in particular, typically does not fail for technical reasons. IT is technically proficient, but this very strength can set the

stage for failure. Be wary of thinking that technology will solve the issue at hand. Remember that people use technology to carry out process. Technology is just a tool. It is seldom the complete solution.

Of course, choosing the right project and setting an appropriate scope is paramount and you cannot assume this is happening. However, assuming that IT projects are all about technology and not paying attention to the 5P's of project management appears to be the reason for the dreadful image IT has when it comes to new projects. This means that the path to improved success is actually fairly easy—focus on basic project management skills and communications (and this includes project selection and scope.)

IT has to learn that technical skills are not enough. It's also not enough to have a Project Management Office inside or outside of IT that "does project management to IT." IT project management skills must be adopted and taught at all levels within IT—from executive management to line worker.

Consider assigning your PMO a project to disseminate basic project management training to all IT staff at all levels. Increase your IT project and ITIL success by take a page from journalism and combining the age old "Who, What, When, Where, Why and How" of communications with basic project management skills.

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