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Is ITIL® still important today?

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"Is ITIL Important" has gone from corridor whispers all the way to symposia themes. Maybe, we should take a hard look at things. I don't expect to astound any one with my revelations - many already know these things. But anyways, here goes: Interestingly, "Is ITIL important?" gets the retort – "Which ITIL?". Actually, there are many forms of ITIL.

The Brand ITIL (historically owned by the Crown - and managed for profit by its designated managers) is the most significant. The primary value in this brand comes from the acceptability of certifications across the IT industry. Microsoft spent millions of dollars to create MOF (Microsoft Operations Framework). But it wouldn't be accepted - there was no significant advantage over the existing ITIL knowledge. MOF also attacked the basic 'openness' of ITIL - by restricting MoF to Microsoft technologies which the industry did not like. This Brand ITIL will stay on for quite some time till it gets sufficiently diluted by the side-effects of over-milking by its managers. (Remember a goose which laid golden eggs?.)

Secondly, the other form of this content is the amorphous IT Service Management practices followed even without the formal ITIL name. They might look rustic, but are gaining ground for quite a few reasons. Over time, they will coalesce into models with domain-specific advantages over Brand ITIL – esp in newer areas which are NOT addressed so far. While Brand ITIL is likely to struggle through another extension process with hundreds of global authors, these smaller models might survive in their niches – while grand-daddy Brand ITIL tries to be everything to everyone.

In the last few years, Brand ITIL has migrated away from a value-based proposition to an exam-centric value-implied proposition. Certifications look good on cv's and are mandatory for many RFPs. Now it has become an implied-value at a pretty high cost. Naturally, it has devolved into a pusher's market with value clapped down on clients using ISO-audit sticks rather than value-propositions rooted in the client's context. The industry's need to cover decision-makers "We are compliant" in case of mess-ups has fuelled this migration to an extent.

It is an open secret that passing the exams today with a few clicks is a far diluted way of examining candidates than the earlier V2 Manager's exam. This has flooded the market with a plethora of "ITIL Experts" who have no evidence of expertise apart from a certificate. Obviously, this will lead people to innovate other wines in the IT Service Management bottle either by the domain-specific track or by novelty path.

Nobody can own the processes of change or release management - by whatever name they get called. Any service management setup will per-force need processes to be

formalized, and would feel the need to create a service lifecycle as complexity increases. Obviously, if Brand ITIL follows its present ways, it will incentivize others to innovate newer brands.

Let us do a thought experiment: Imagine a far off island in a non-English environment where nobody has heard of ITIL. If they start running huge IT Service centers, today or tomorrow, they will have to formalize their service management practices. And more or less, these new practices (by whatever name they get called) will resemble most of Brand ITIL. In spite of not knowing anything about Brand ITIL, they would still be using ITIL knowledge so to speak. So, then, what exactly is the value of ITIL?

I think the core-value of Brand ITIL comes from "formalization of concepts and unification of nomenclature" of best-practices on the global IT Service Management scene. If this unification is not conserved and evolved further, the value (importance) of Brand ITIL will wane away over a period of time. We may still find bits and pieces after fifteen years (the way we still find mainframes deeply entrenched in some organizations even in 2014) but its vitality will be long over.

So, with changing nature of IT Services - ITIL should move in the direction of creating more unification in the concepts and nomenclature of newer platforms for offering IT Services. Android Smartphones, Internet of Things, IPv6 based "tag everything" technologies, etc. will have to be greeted with IT Service Management modules ready to be implemented. Instead of "trying to prove academically that the existing ITIL (5+ books) are already sufficiently capable of managing new services and technologies", we have to understand the complex nature of the interactions of these services and provide concepts and nomenclature for these services which give due recognition to multiple intermediaries within the service lifecycle.

Recall how designing printed circuit boards evolved from an art-form in 1970's to a science in 1980's to many technologies capable of handling multi-layered designs in 1990's. The core idea remained the same in all three cases. However, the three phases are so diverse in actual work that best performers of one area would be completely at sea in another.

At one point, ITIL (V2) was adamant about being technology-agnostic. In V3 (2011) it came down to a more applied "ITIL Certified Technologies" level where tools are certified as being "ITIL Compliant"(!!). Today, I think the time has come to put in efforts to cook newer ITIL forms.

Is ITIL important? I believe yes. ITIL knowledge will always survive as IT Service Management best practices. However, if Brand ITIL is to survive, it must innovate into the new world and come across as a confident unification agent of concepts and nomenclature for the myriad forms of IT services. Instead of riding high on exam revenues, it will have to invest more in its job of providing structure to changing forms of IT Service Management. This will also ensure that those who trusted Brand ITIL by investing in the exams still stay relevant after a few years.

I hope that it doesn't become just another cow in a milking stable where the milkman has many cows to milk. The constant innovation and knowledge-refinement should still be invested in.

All this is my personal experience - and I am making no claims of its global applicability. However, I am sure it will resonate in quite a few minds across the globe.

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