Service management – a new idea?
How long has IT service management been around? Is it 15 years – about when the term IT service management started being used across our industry, or more - since ITIL is nearly 20 years old this year. Or perhaps it has been around for over 3000 years – if we view technology as the use of tools, information about storing data in a way that can be used to transfer and develop understanding - then IT Service management was clearly practised successfully in both China and Egypt.

So if service management has been around since the earliest services (and which was the first service is best discussed in informal surroundings) then what happened to make it suddenly become big business? Could it be that it was the invention of ‘best practice’ that delivered all the recent progress? If you Google™ ‘best practice’ you are left in no doubt that this is a fancy new idea specifically aimed at business people.

What does ‘Best Practice’ really mean?
In reality of course, it isn’t really anything nearly that sophisticated – and it certainly isn’t anything new or invented for the business community. When you see the idea of best practice for what it truly is then in fact it becomes easier to see its genuine relevance and power. Truth is, best practice is something we use in our everyday lives, and have since our earliest years – an approach that has been seen to work for someone else in similar circumstances to our own. We start our adoption of best practice by copying our parents, moving on to our friends and heroes when we realise that our parents’ world is no longer similar enough to our own for us to want to match our behaviour to theirs. We take our best practice from external sources – books, television, maybe even computer games and fan magazines. And when we need practical deliverables we look to more formal best practices – cookery books, road maps – and to show that technology has invaded even here, we perhaps nowadays take our cookery advice from the web and our directions from our satellite navigation box. But in both cooking and travel we are likely to supplement our base best practice with human top-up – we ask our family and friends for cookery and travel tips. We see best practices being exchanged every day – around the water cooler or coffee machine in the office – or wherever people gather to share comfort or refreshment – there is never a shortage of advice if you are willing to talk and listen.

Social best practice – sharing advice and heat

IT Service Management Best Practice?
So, that is the philosophy at the heart of ITIL Version 3 – as it was ever since ITIL started 20 years ago – just writing down what seems to work for other people, as a good place to start with your own recipes – so you can cook up an ITSM meal that refreshes and satisfies. This means that ITIL still works best when:

- Used as a source of ideas and as a basis for an organisation’s ITSM processes and procedures
- IT service managers read widely and take good idea where they find them
- They deliver a service targeted at their customers – that is they allow their knowledge and experience to constructively influence their planning and practise.
How can something so obvious be difficult? (A slight diversion)
Incidentally, you may be interested in an opinion on some reasons why something apparently so simple turns out difficult, if so these are mine – if not, skip the box

What service do we deliver?
Reason #1 – Because we (think we) work in IT – this automatically makes us look for the service as something within IT and we start by looking at what we deliver, and even worse, how we deliver it. In real life (i.e. out in the business where delivering business objectives are the norm) the customer will perceive the service in terms of what is being received by them.
Reason #2 – because we can not separate the elements from their purpose, and so we get confused when a single element of the IT world delivers elements of multiple services. In practice a set of almost identical IT transactions may be elements of multiple – totally discrete – services. The trick is to be sure a service can be attributed cost and genuine value to the business.

Who is our customer?
Reason #1 – We confuse who is our customer, with the customer of the organisation – easily done because in many companies we are inundated with messages about how the business delivers real customer value to those end, business, customers. In most organisations, the customer for IT services is another internal part of the organisation – maybe several steps away from the end customer – those who pay money for something delivered to them.
Reason #2A – Because it is easy to presume that the loudest stakeholder is the customer and in fact the real customer doesn’t even know they are the customer.
Many an organisation has developed and continues to maintain and deliver a service based on the requests and specification of the loudest voice, a stakeholder for sure but maybe not the real customer, the one whose own business benefits and should address cost justification.
Reason #2B – Nobody really knows who the customer is – a common example is an organisation’s travel and expenses service. Who is the customer – the one who should have final say over the way it works (of course you try and please everyone, but at some points a decision has to be made). The associated documentation will typically say it will reduce travel costs, make booking travel easy, allow monitoring and measurement of travel costs etc. But which is the priority? Because to design, transition and operate it then the final customer needs to be known, and they must play a public role in establishing and agreeing the performance and service levels required

ITIL V3 basics
And that all means is that no-one should be ‘doing ITIL’ – they should be setting out to improve the IT service management they deliver to their customers. That is an idea that many of us have espoused for years, but it is nonetheless true for that. What is now firmly evident in the current guidance is that to do this requires you to know two things. These are things that sound easier than they are for most of us, especially those in complex, diversified and distributed organisations. Those two things are:
- What service do you actually deliver to your customers?
- Who are the real customers of those services?

What does ITIL V3 say that makes life better?
Many articles, talks and even books are talking about ‘moving from ITIL V2 to V3’, or even using the word ‘upgrading’. As the earlier words in this article set out to show – that is not the relevant question. Rather CIOs, IT Service Managers and all us other responsible souls, should be asking what extra ideas does V3 offer me, and how do the new elements make our service management better – faster, cheaper, safer or whatever counts as better in the customers’ eyes.

Because ITIL now has a service lifecycle at its core, ITIL finally focuses on ‘service’, taking us forward and building on V1’s functional focus and V2's process focus. This is sensible because:
- service is the only real deliverable
- it allows identification of what is useful – rather than what is traditional, fashionable or comfortable for the supplier.

Once we have found our services, we need to establish how our processes do, can and should support each service – that means what level and nature should each process have to enable us to deliver each service. This is a very different focus from the traditional one associated with followers of ITIL v2.

Process and service approaches
In the old vision, one did the processes because they were identified as the things ITSM did. So, you read both ITIL books, passed the exam and worked your way through implementing the 10 processes – one by one till they were all as good as you could get them to be. There are some problems with that approach:
- There always were many more than 10 processes – testing for example is not a new idea. Truth is there were actually 7 ITIL books, and some key and essential processes were hidden among the 5 lower profile books.
- A process focused approach is about doing things because you can – bottom up, without focusing on the purpose – I came across a mundane non-IT example of this while watching someone cleaning out the fireplace before they set a new fire. ‘Why are you cleaning out all the old ashes?’ was met with – ‘because I always do, I was told you had to’. In most circumstances, a better fire results from leaving a good layer of ash in the bottom. (Secondary lesson here – some things that claim to be best practice might not be, at least not in your work environment)

- It doesn't consider value and usefulness – instead it focuses on excellence for its own sake.

Service focus asks a better question – what level of process maturity do I need? That means looking for each service at what needs to be done compared to how well it is being done now. Of course, that is a common question, and not so new after all maybe? The power that the service approach can deliver is where it shows us that we are doing a process to a level above that which is required. Previously the answer has always been about which process we improve first, with the assumption that we need to make them all as good as we can.

A simple visual analogy is the service being a bridge, supported by the processes. The perfect solution is when each support is at the same height and our bridge is firm and level. We are well aware of what happens if the process is not good enough, the support does not reach the roadway and the bridge – and our service – buckles. But if the support reaches above the level of the roadway – that doesn't deliver the best result either – this in service terms represents wasted resource, by delivering a process that outperforms its requirements.

None of this is new

Of course, like all best practice, this is just an observation of what good people and organisations have been doing for a long time, a very long time actually. This is basic engineering good practice and has been with us for hundreds – probably thousands – of years. It is simply based on doing the right things, not doing the wrong things – doing enough but not more than you need to. I learned this when I was employed in work study over 30 years ago – then it was called ‘value analysis’ and is the same concept as is at the core of today’s lean approach.

So what should we actually do?

The obvious point to start is with service identification – what you are supposed to be doing, and who are you doing it for? And when you know what it is for, how are you measuring that? Indeed, who is responsible for measurement – defining what should be measured, actually carrying out those measurements, ensuring they remain relevant etc. And it is not primarily about hitting numbers you read in a book – it is about balancing correction against non-failure – suited to the circumstances.

Then we need to assess how our processes support those services, determine how we can facilitate business success for our customers and how to establish sensible measures that actually address the usefulness of what we are doing.