A Practical Approach to ITIL Adoption
The adoption of ITIL is widespread and tens of thousands of companies are already reaping its benefits. But, as with any new process, there are a number of common ITIL adoption mistakes to avoid.

When creating your ITIL vision and planning for the adoption of ITIL best practices, you can learn by those who have gone before. This will increase the speed and success of your ITIL adoption, and save you and your team a lot of headaches.
The top 5 ITIL vision mistakes

ITIL can be a peculiar beast, in that different people have different interpretations as to what it is and isn’t. So much so that many common mistakes stem from the players not fully understanding what ITIL is, how it should be used, and the extent to which it will improve IT services and support.

Here are five common mistakes to be aware of when you’re educating your team and your company on IT adoption:

1. **Not understanding what ITIL is.** ITIL is a best practices framework and not a gold standard to be measured against. So there’s no such thing as “ITIL-compliance,” as ITIL is merely guidance, a collection of good things to do, as opposed to a standard that can be measured against or complied with. Also, it’s not about “doing” ITIL but rather that it’s about “using” ITIL to achieve something—so ITIL is not the end, but the means to an end.

2. **Thinking that ITIL is a “silver bullet.”** Adopting ITIL best practices will not magically improve everything wrong related to IT service delivery and support. What ITIL can do is help organizations that commit to the concepts of ITIL deliver IT as a service, using the service lifecycle.
Incorrectly positioning ITIL. Teams must understand that ITIL is about following guidelines for improving IT and business operations, as opposed to adopting ITSM best practices. So it’s not an “ITIL project” or an “ITIL implementation”—it’s a project to improve productivity, speed of innovation, and customer satisfaction in order to reduce costs, risks, and business-debilitating IT issues.

Not realizing the difference between ITIL and ITSM. While there is a lot of overlap between ITIL and ITSM, they are not the same. It’s similar to knowing that all horses are animals but not all animals are horses. Thinking that ITIL is the only popular ITSM framework or standard is also an issue. There are many others, such as COBIT, which can either be used alone or as a complement to ITIL.

Not appreciating the effort required for ITIL success. Respecting the level of resources and commitment needed to successfully adopt ITIL is key because, as with any project, insufficient effort will adversely affect the expected ROI. This includes underestimating the effort ITIL will require across people, process, and technology—the importance of mobilizing organizational change, in particular. And finally, appreciating that ITIL isn’t a one-off project, and is instead something that will require ongoing attention and investment, is critical to continued success.
Once you understand what ITIL is and isn’t, there are plenty additional pitfalls to avoid when planning how your company is going to adopt ITIL. These include:

1. **A lack of—or a lackadaisical—business case.** ITIL needs to be more than a leap of faith, done “just because other organizations are doing it.” Successful adoption requires a carefully thought out and articulated roadmap to ITIL success with the costs and benefits clear to all, even if not in a formal business case.

2. **Not having an overall ITIL and ITSM vision.** What are your short, medium, and long-term goals for where ITIL will take your company? What happens after the new processes and technology have been introduced? Is there a phase two? Do you have the right capabilities to continue improvement over time? These are a few questions you’ll need to ask before going forward.

3. **Misjudging the required timeframe for change.** It is critical to build out a realistic ITIL adoption timeline that takes into consideration the range of people, process, and technological change you’re dealing with. ITIL adoption extends beyond the timeframe for technological
implementation. Carefully assess what you initially want to achieve—trying to do too much too soon can be the equivalent of “running before you can walk,” with a phased approach seen as better than going for a “big bang” ITIL adoption.

4 Getting various “people elements” wrong. This includes sending staff to one ITIL course and considering that a sufficient amount of training or hiring new people based on ITIL qualifications rather than experience, work ethic, and common sense. Insufficient focus on people and organizational change management could cause the project outcome be seen merely seen as an ITIL-aligned ITSM tool being successfully implemented.

5 Planning in a vacuum. Don’t hide ITIL in a black box when planning for its adoption. This includes forgetting to plan for linkages and dependencies between different ITSM or IT management processes, even if they are a future enhancement rather than an immediate need. Or not planning for technology integration—which might be business systems and not just those used by IT. Be sure to involve end users in the planning phase, as they will be the true test of whether some capabilities, such as self-service, are a success.
The top 5 ITIL “implementation” mistakes

So you have a vision and you have a plan, what else could go wrong? It might be plain sailing, but that depends on your upcoming “implementation.” Note that some of the following mistakes are purely implementation related, but others have strong links back to vision and planning:

1. Using the phrase “ITIL implementation.” The use of the word “implementation” can make people focus on the technology, and maybe the processes, at the expense of the required organizational change. It also makes it easier to neglect the fact that ITIL is a deliberate mind-set and a specific approach to IT delivery, not just a finite set of ITSM processes enabled by technology.

2. Aiming for perfection from the outset, rather than trying to get the basics right first. ITIL is about improvement, but that improvement doesn’t have to all come at once. At the other end of the spectrum is ignoring ITIL’s “enabling” processes—such as continual service improvement, knowledge management, and financial management—until months or years later. These are often key elements of other ITSM processes and are thus relevant from day one.
3 Relying too heavily on the technology. Technology alone cannot deliver the optimal outcomes of ITIL adoption, and there’s a reason why so many ITSM professionals quote the ITIL mantra of “People, process, and technology—in that order.” The right people can work with less than perfect technology, but the right technology will struggle in the hands of the wrong people.

4 Placing too much emphasis on the “easy stuff,” such as incident management. It’s human nature to start with the easier stuff and get to the harder stuff later. However, organizations might fail to progress past the “easier” reactive elements to the proactive elements of ITIL, such as availability and capacity management. Plus, they might only ever try to get better by assessing and improving the things they are already good at—the easier stuff.

5 Not using your project staff properly. This might be that specialist third-party resources are badly managed—for example, consultants not focusing on the higher value-add activities of the change project or having no formal knowledge transfer from them to employees. Or it might be that key internal people aren’t freed up from their day jobs to work on ITIL adoption, even though they are the most critical players in its success.
How do most companies start with ITIL?

This is one of those questions that can only be answer with “it depends,” as it really does depend on the challenges and opportunities a company wants or needs to address.

Traditionally, companies start with one of these activities, especially if they will be addressing common ITSM and IT management issues:

- Incident and problem management
- Incident and change management
- Change and configuration management

Incident, change, and problem management are the three most commonly adopted ITIL processes when IT industry analysts or IT support staff member organizations conduct research into which companies do what with ITIL.

More recently though, there is a school of thought that pushes the importance of continual service improvement (CSI) from the outset of ITIL adoption. It makes sense as ITIL is about improvement and, if you don’t start with perfection, you will need the capability and mechanism to improve over time. Add to that the popularity of self-service and service catalog, both of which are now more commonly in the mix for companies starting with ITIL.

Ultimately, your company should start with the ITIL processes that will make the most difference to IT and business operations.
Next steps

Don’t let these lists of common ITIL adoption mistakes deter you from moving your company towards better IT service delivery and improved business operations. ITIL best practices has already improved IT service delivery and IT support for tens of thousands of companies worldwide, with your company a collection of improvement opportunities waiting to happen.

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