

Getting Buy-In to ITIL: Ideas from Actor Network Theory

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One of the major problems with getting ITIL adopted is persuading people that it's in their interests to adopt ITIL. IT managers have to be persuaded of the importance of ITIL. Executives have to be persuaded to invest in IT service management improvements. Staff have to be persuaded that it's worth attending courses and taking exams.

The adoption of best practice such as ITIL and BS15000 standards involves the redefining of organisational behaviour, the changing of practices and the building of different attitudes and cultures. This is no easy task and we need all the help we can get.

The problems in ITIL adoption are not that different from the problems of getting new technology adopted. What causes people to start using mobile telephones, or e-mail, or booking theatre tickets on the Internet. What caused VHS to become standard and not Betamax? Nor is the process that different from the one by which scientific theories or concepts are adopted. How does Newton's Laws, Einstein's Theory of Relativity or the structure of DNA become accepted?

The answer to such questions lies as much in the social sphere as the technical sphere. Whatever the quality of the theory, the technology or the IT service standards, the acceptance of those theories and standards and their embedding in the organisational fabric is a social phenomenon. Therefore the process of embedding ITIL within the organisation is one of establishing social acceptance, of developing social networks in which people's interests are similar and the message of ITIL becomes part of everybody's mindset. The social perception of the ITIL, the prevalence of messages such as 'everybody's using it', and the presence of a critical mass of practitioners will determine its success. As people take a positive view of ITIL within IT service management, they begin to adopt the procedures as part of their work and everyday lives and they recommend its use to colleagues.

Such ideas have been developed in Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This theory arose from French sociologists' efforts to understand how scientific theories spread within scientific communities, become embedded in the community and are then taken for granted as a basis for further scientific progress. Latour (1987) showed that scientific theories are not simply rational, objective and external to the scientists who use them, but are socially constructed, and become established through social interactions within networks of people. The social process is then just as important as the laboratory work in establishing the legitimacy of a theory. The use of ANT quickly extended to providing explanations of how technology is accepted within communities and organisations. Here we'll examine some of the concepts of ANT see how they might help us develop networks of support for ITIL in our organisations and embed ITIL in the organisational structures and processes.

Networks

ANT considers the process of standards acceptance as one of developing a social network of people, standards and systems. These networks grow as new members, or actors are added when their interests are aligned to, or shown to be similar to the rest of the network. The actor network must grow to reach a critical mass and then reach a state of stability. If the network remains unstable, it can disappear as quickly as it emerges, taking with it the IT service standards which then becomes obsolete and not taken notice of. These socio-technical networks are dynamic, growing and shrinking as new actors are added or removed. Within the network there is then a constant reinforcing of the ITIL message.

Actors

ANT focuses on the stakeholders, or actors, within the socio-technical network and how they are involved in shaping the form and the social spread of the standards. Each actor will be an intermediary between other actors. Actors are not limited to humans, but may include the texts which define ITIL, groupings within the organisation and external organisations such as itSMF. Both human and non-human actors have interests and properties which need to be aligned for the technology to be successfully adopted within a network.

Translation and Inscription

The interests of the actors within our ITIL network may vary widely. Establishing technology requires the aligning of the interests of actors within the network. As the interests of actors within the network are aligned, the network becomes stable and the technology is then firmly established. ANT suggests that the aligning of the interests of actors in the network involves the *translation* of those interests into a common interest in adopting and using the standards. In other words, we have to show why the adoption of ITIL is in the interests of stakeholders within the organisation and why their interests can be met by the adoption of ITIL. This translation is achieved in the network through common definitions, meaning and *inscriptions* attached to the IT service standards. Inscription or definition of its properties, usefulness or desirability may be used to support the translation of interests. We answer the questions concerning what's in it for them? Why is it in their interests to support ITIL? How are their interests met by the implementation of ITIL?

Enrolment

The process of alignment of actors' interests with the actor network occurs as actors *enrol* others into the network. As actors are enrolled, the network becomes larger, more established and the use of the technology more common. The successful embedding of ITIL requires that a large actor-network emerges such that there are sufficient actors to justify its adoption. If people ignore ITIL and start to do their own thing or develop service practices incompatible with ITIL then, if sufficient people reject ITIL, it will fail. Again it's up to ITIL practitioners to show others the benefits of the standards, how ITIL

meets their needs and how its adoption is in their interest. This is a social process involving talking, meetings, presentations and social interaction outside the formal work practices. ITIL adoption won't occur if we just sit in our offices.

Irreversibility

In order for stability to be established so that ITIL becomes part of organisational practice, the notion of *irreversibility* must be established. At some point the use of ITIL processes becomes an essential and standard part of IT service practice in the organisation. A point must be reached where the standards are so well used and embedded in the organisation that the effort of undoing them and stopping using them is so great as to be impossible. The move to ITIL adoption has then become irreversible. This is how technical standards become adopted. Once TCP/IP has become embedded as the Internet standard protocol, its use is irreversible however difficult or awkward it is. Through a social process, the standard has been adopted and established as an irreversible part of the social and technical fabric. In essence we reach a point where we can't imagine organisational practice without ITIL.

Black Boxes

Once ITIL standards are adopted by the actor network they become difficult to reverse. Hence users become locked into the actor network and its standards. The IT service standards become a *black box*. The standards are then treated as part of everyday life, embedded in organisational activity and taken-for-granted. Only input and output matters. The standards are then accepted without questioning their rationale, or considering whether they represent the best way to do things.

Applying Actor-Network Theory to ITIL Adoption

By considering what these concepts might mean for ITIL adoption in our organisation we can generate some ideas for how to get ITIL accepted and embedded in organisational practice, both by the IT service providers and the customers. The following suggests some prescriptive steps you might undertake to get that acceptance and to promote ITIL adoption.

1. *Identify Actors.* Who do we need to talk to about ITIL? What are their roles? What are their interests in ITIL? What power do they have to determine the success or failure of ITIL adoption?

2. *Investigate actors.* Look at their interests, attitudes, relationships, roles, power and influence and involvement in the IT in the organisation. Looking at interests involves an examination of the stakeholders' rational, organisational and individual interests. Rational interests concern their logical interests and the objective view they take of ITIL. Organisational interests concern their political and social interests arising from their job roles in the organisation. Individual interests concern personal interests, for example, status, career progress and job security.

3. *Identify actor interactions.* What are the relationships between stakeholders in terms of extent of communication, power, trust, resource control and influence? What are the links between actors? Who talks to whom?

4. *Follow the actors.* What are their perceptions of IT, IT services and ITIL? What messages, emails, and texts currently circulate amongst the actors? The complexity of the actor network can then be assessed. This will have an influence on strategies for aligning the actor-network with the desired outcomes.

5 *Design Inscriptions.* Inscriptions which will support the alignment of actors' interests in the network need to be developed, taking into account not only the interests of the actors, but also the organisational context. Previous exposure to ITIL, together with the history, culture and politics of IT in the organisation may have a significant effect on the development of the network though the attitudes and values which have been laid down within the social groups. Inscriptions will include both the messages and marketing associated with the ITIL and with and the services provided by IT.

6. *Design enrolment strategies.* In addition to understanding the stakeholders and designing the messages and services around the IT service function, the establishing of a stable actor network will require good enrolment strategies. This may involve challenging the stakeholders' current assumptions, and opening existing black boxes in order to promote their replacement with new standards and practice. Lock-in to current technology and ways of doing things will act as an inhibitor to the adoption of new technology and standards. The right economic model involving costs and benefits will be required. Enrolment strategies must address attitudes, power and politics. The aim is to promote lock in, in which ITIL becomes socially acceptable within the organisation, has a positive social construction placed on it and becomes socially embedded as the default means of IT service management among the stakeholders. Through enrolment strategies, both customer and provider expectations will be defined. Where ITIL is successfully embedded in the organisation expectations are defined by ITIL procedures and activities and hence easily agreed between the IT service providers and the organisational customers.

Conclusion

Actor Network Theory suggests, quite rightly, that standards adoption is not a just a technical process of writing the procedures and getting people trained. It is primarily a social process by which groups of people come to share interests and adopt similar attitudes. If we're to get ITIL accepted in our organisations, it is these social processes that must be addressed first. This requires that we move in all the organisation social networks, connecting socially with senior management, shop floor staff and technical staff. It requires that the social links between IT services and the rest of the organisation are strong enough that actor networks can be established and the message of ITIL

transmitted so that people are enrolled into an ITIL network. Their interests must be shown to be aligned with the interests of the ITIL network. They must see that ITIL will help them achieve their objectives. Without this social connection all manner of memos, manuals, training package and service catalogues will be of limited value. In the end you might be better off down on the tennis courts spending time with you user manager before you write the next SLA.

Reference: Latour,B. (1987) Science in Action Open University Press.