



Who Are We?

Defining the Role of IT Asset Management

IT asset management (ITAM) as a profession is a rapidly growing field full of challenges and opportunities. With the maturation of the profession, it now has a professional organization to serve the needs of the membership, conferences focused on ITAM topics alone and a magazine distributed to thousands of readers. Why then is it difficult to define the term IT asset manager? As an ITAM professional and educator, I stress the importance of being able to give the “elevator pitch” on everything we do and, frankly, capturing the IT asset manager has been hard to do.

In a nutshell, IT asset managers handle the ownership of IT assets, succinctly captured in the triad of functional areas: financial, physical and contractual. IT asset managers are most effective when they have responsibility for all three functional areas for the entire life cycle of the IT assets. How this responsibility is interpreted is where the variability arises. In order to work toward a better understanding of the identity of the IT asset manager, this article will examine the location of the function as the defining criteria.

WHERE IS THE IT ASSET MANAGER?

For people in long-standing professions, determining what department they belong in and what roles and job titles they have is not a difficult task. For IT asset management, the position continues to float both within the IT department and outside it. The view of what an IT asset manager does is colored by this placement.

WITHIN IT: PLATFORM-CENTRIC

In large organizations, the IT asset management role is often divided by operational platform groups. Desktop Services is a good example of such a group and is found in organizations that have outsourced this area as well as those maintaining the staff internally. The focus for the IT asset manager in this structure is centered on the service aspects of the life cycle. The individuals often have a great collaborative environment for working with their IT operations peers. Their duties and responsibilities are driven by inventory and process development and fulfillment. Individuals who have a solid background in IT, project management and process development, pay great attention to detail and are good communicators are ideal for this role.

This tactical placement can lead to a career stalemate, where the individual cannot rise above the basic life cycle management to gain the authority to apply the business practices that lead to the true ownership of assets. Immersed in the day-to-day handling of the processes, this individual rarely has time to step back and think about matching ITAM activities to strategic direction, evaluating vendors, or even having a role to play in

contract decisions. Seen from this perspective, the human resources person evaluating the role is likely to label it as clerical and close the door on an IT asset manager’s ability to gain executive exposure and subsequent buy-in towards making the changes that lead to true asset management. In conversations with members, I have talked to several that found it necessary to change employers in order to escape the limitations of this categorization. I have also heard of IT asset manager who could not have those words as their title because the term “manager” implied a level that was not correct.

WITHIN IT: CENTRALIZED

Another place to find an IT asset manager is in a centralized IT finance or strategic planning group within the IT department. In this setting, the IT asset manager often has more direct support from executive management, particularly when the CIO has accepted goals stated in financial terms. The IT asset manager is more likely to be viewed as an integral enterprise resource, with responsibilities that include making and supporting strategic decisions on spending for IT within the organization. In order to achieve these goals, the IT asset manager still has responsibility for the physical and process aspects of the life cycle and often has the staff to help manage the day-to-day activities. The IT asset manager has the opportunity then to include the management of financial and contractual elements of the assets within the scope of his responsibility.

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Given the opportunity, the IT asset manager will manage vendors from relationship building through the development of a score card and evaluating the effectiveness and efficiency of that particular vendor for the organization. Contracts are managed so that terms and conditions are actually taken to their full advantage instead of being lost in a drawer. Maintenance is not just renewed, but evaluated for effectiveness. Vendor consolidation, balanced against competitive bidding and the risks of vendor dependency are thought-out decisions and plans.

THE PROCUREMENT OPTION

Simplifying the location issue to these two camps does not provide a full picture. IT asset managers can find themselves outside of the IT department and part of the Procurement



DIVIDE AND CONQUER

No discussion on the placement of the IT asset manager would be complete without acknowledging that some organizations are separating IT asset managers into software asset managers and hardware asset managers and can even situate them in different departments. The skillsets and the best location for the providers of the asset management for these two groups may indeed be different. There is specialized knowledge required to be successful in managing these two major groupings of assets and different focal points for the attention of the practitioners.

Software asset managers are compliance focused, simultaneously warding off audits and developing proactive methods for handling them if they occur. Although no clear study has been done at this level of detail, it would seem likely that more software asset managers are in a procurement department.

In contrast, hardware asset managers are challenged by the physicality of their assets—to find them, to keep them out of the closets and landfills. It would seem more likely to find these individuals in the IT departments, closer to the service providers.

GETTING TO THE DEFINITION

Defining IT asset managers is much more than placement within the organization, and lacking a fixed location highlights the issues facing the profession such as no clear roles, titles, job descriptions or HR designations. Many in the profession continually

battle to gain access to the scope of duties they need to do their jobs, let alone the authority to match that responsibility.

Our best approach is to make this happen ourselves, by increasing awareness of the value of the business practices that we espouse. You can do this inside your company through sharing results of analyses, and communicating project plans and their progress. Continually measure the success of processes, starting with the initial state measurement and continuing to the present day, and add in new projects and processes as you do them over time.

To grow corporate awareness so that you no longer fight for definition and the right to do the job, consider speaking at conferences, sharing materials that you have developed, and publishing your experiences. Help complete the definition that is only begun here.

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department. In this scenario, understanding the value of the financial and contractual applications of IT asset management grew as rapidly as the need to gain control of the inventory. The management of IT assets begins with carefully managing business choices, such as whether to purchase at all (lease or redeploy), contractual opportunities (volume discounts, warranty extensions to match refresh schedules) and a commitment to compliance enforcement. All of these business practices happen before the asset arrives at the loading dock.

The difficulties for these IT asset managers lies with gaining the trust and collaboration of the IT operations staff, which are critical to providing the services that deliver the actual life to the life cycle.

A hybrid group called IT procurement, which is part of the IT department, is one solution to this problem. Some of the most effective IT asset managers I have met in the last year are in such a department.