



Best Practices

An ITAM Initiative Top 10

I was recently called upon to put together a presentation for executive management about our ITAM initiatives. One of the things I knew I wanted to include in the presentation was a representation of ITAM best practices so I began my search.

Of course I started with the IAITAM web site; what else would a loyal member do? As many of you probably already know the IAITAM Best Practices Library is pretty much a work in progress at this point.

If you haven't checked this out already you should. IAITAM's Richard Kaseler has outlined Process Area Specifications that set an excellent foundation for a secure ITAM business model and provided me with a great deal of food for thought.

I searched the web thinking surely someone had published something on ITAM best practices that I could reference. However, other than articles, I found nothing. (I take that back. There was one publication that was for sale for a couple hundred dollars...out of my price range.) What I wanted was a concise bulleted list of ITAM best practices—a Top 10 List so to speak. I resolved I would have to come up with my own. I was on a mission.

I re-read my CSAM/CHAMP course materials. I re-read the various articles I've received from many of you folks over the past months. I went back to those articles I had found on the web and read them. I solicited articles as well as input from friends and colleagues. All the while I was making notes of anything I came across that I could interpret as a best practice. In the end, I had pages and pages of notes that I reviewed, edited and boiled down to what I was hoping to find in the first place: an ITAM Top 10 List.

This list is by no means comprehensive, but it does set some groundwork and will hopefully provide some food for thought as you consider your own efforts. In the end, we each have to look at our organizations and ultimately embrace what is unique to our environments to determine what our "best practices" are going to be. Hopefully, this list can help in that process.

#1 CENTRALIZATION

The concept of centralization came up time and time again and in different ways. At the highest level, it is ideal to have a centralized, overarching ITAM program wherein both hardware and software asset management functions exist within a single group organizationally, the benefit being a common set of goals, disciplines, tools, etc. An extension from this is the use of a centralized asset repository for both hardware and software assets to facilitate ease of data management and subsequent reporting and data reconciliation. Additionally, a centralized procurement function can enable consistency in request pro-

cessing (service levels), supports process efficiencies and ensures standards compliance.

And while on the subject of service and process (ideally repeatable process), deployment of a centralized request system for both hardware and software assets provides a single point of access for customer requests and ensures both hardware and software requests and subsequently the creation of assets is consistent throughout the organization. This also allows a level of control of the hardware and software spend of your organization.

Each phase of an ITAM initiative should define up front the value it intends to bring to the organization, and how this value will be measured.

The concept of centralization can be applied pretty much anywhere in the asset life cycle—receiving, deployment, reclamation, disposal, etc.—the bottom line being the more centralized the program at any level, the more control and consistency over process and data.

#2 CORPORATE STANDARDS

Corporate standards are a must. It's next to impossible to argue the point. Clearly defined and enforced corporate standards benefit an organization in a number of ways. Hardware standards reduce maintenance, support and procurement costs. Software standards reduce support and procurement costs and facilitate compliance efforts.

Exceptions to standards are inevitable, but they can't be allowed to drive how we do business. Exceptions should be managed as exceptions, and process should require additional authorizations in these cases. Do you want fewer exceptions? A quarterly internal publication of exceptions and the approving party can have a positive effect.

#3 ITAM INITIATIVES

Phased, Operational, Prioritized and Deployed Via Project Management Methodology

ITAM initiatives are complicated. They cross business silos and require the cooperation/buy-in of participants with varying organizational accountabilities. ITAM initiatives bring a new level of discipline, accountability and exposure where historically little or none has existed. ITAM initiatives are the agents of change—and we all know how easily change is embraced. For these reasons success for these initiatives hinges on well organized

and thought-out deployments with as much executive support as you can muster.

The scope of an overarching ITAM initiative is too broad to undertake in a single stroke and isn't going to happen over night. Initiatives can easily take one to two years (or more) to deploy and even longer to truly reap the full range of benefits. To be effective, implementation has to be phased—ideally in line with corporate business objectives. The better alignment your phases have with the overall goals of your organization, the stronger the support you will receive from executive management, and this executive level support is imperative as you cross business silos.

ITAM initiatives must include development of ongoing, operational objectives to be successful. Metrics need to be built into process and tied to workflow whenever possible. Process needs to be measurable, repeatable and dynamic to meet ever-changing business needs. Of course, we should all go for the “low hanging fruit,” but keep the big picture in mind.

Finally, give an ITAM initiative the structure it needs to ensure successful deployment (i.e., employ your company's formal project management methodology). If you're part of a smaller organization without a project office, consider bringing in an outside consulting firm to help you provide this structure to your efforts. You want to be taken seriously. You want your efforts to be successful. You want to deliver the value you promise. The investment made at this early stage will be more than recovered.

#4 COMMUNICATION PLAN

I've already stated that ITAM initiatives need to be aligned with larger corporate goals and result in ongoing operational programs built by repeatable, measurable process. This is all good, but to maintain corporate support for our efforts, we have to provide ongoing feedback and let our management know about our successes. Each phase of an ITAM initiative should define up front the value it intends to bring to the organization, and how this value will be measured. At the same time, each phase should have a communication plan defined detailing just how that added value will be communicated back to the organization.

A successful deployment of a centralized procurement function should include a means to measure performance of the team responsible for maintaining the procurement process. For example, service level metrics include time elapsed from receipt of a procurement request to the receipt of the asset or the receipt of the asset to completion of the asset install. The ability to measure these sorts of activities does two things. First, it identifies opportunities for ongoing operational process improvement—you can't improve what you can't measure. Second, it provides a means to report on performance with hard data. In this example, a communication plan could be to develop service-level reports based on these sorts of metrics to be delivered to a designated layer of management on a designated schedule.

What about the idea mentioned previously to report on approved exceptions on a quarterly basis? Build the functionality into your tool set/process. Tag non-standard assets so they

can be queried. Build approvals so the approver is noted on the asset as well. It's an easy report to generate. The key is to have a communication plan defined up front to ensure not only that you deploy with the ability to capture the data desired, but also that both the business value and ultimate audience of the data is also clearly defined.

#5 COMPLIANCE

Include as an Integral Part of Process Design

Compliance initiatives (Sarbanes-Oxley, COBIT, Gramm-Leach-Bliley) get a bad rap these days. We accept them as part of our new business landscape, but for the most part, they're perceived as a necessary evil. IT asset managers embrace the change. The need to meet these sorts of compliance initiatives is without a doubt one of the best things that ever happened in support of ITAM initiatives. In the name of compliance, we have been handed a golden opportunity to gain the executive support we need to provide structure, centralization and process to our worlds. Talk about a silver lining. Centralization, repeatable/measurable process, controls, metrics, etc.—all needed for a healthy ITAM initiative—are the very fundamentals required to demonstrate compliance on this level.

Additionally, software license compliance is probably one of the strongest arguments in support of any ITAM initiative and potentially the quickest means to demonstrate a return on investment for our efforts. I would recommend an entire phase of an ITAM initiative be dedicated exclusively to software asset management and software compliance risk mitigation. The ability to demonstrate efforts to proactively manage software license compliance can have a positive impact in the case of a compliance event. And although a comprehensive ITAM initiative should enable real life compliancy, if nothing else, having tools and process in place is a plus. The BSA, SIIA, CAAST and FAST are out there and sooner or later one of them will find you. Remember: Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

#6 INTEGRATED ASSET, CHANGE, INCIDENT ENVIRONMENT

Ideally, an ITAM initiative should strive to support a “conception to grave” view of life cycle asset management. A centralized asset repository can't do this on its own. Assets are not static in our environments. They're moved, upgraded, repaired, reclaimed, redeployed and eventually retired. To consistently capture pertinent data relating to all events in the asset life cycle, an integrated set of tools is required.

State up front that a cost/benefit analysis should be conducted to determine the value of data to be collected. An integrated environment can potentially provide a great deal of value. For example, knowing how many “incidents” have been related to a class of assets could provide insight when negotiating maintenance agreements, as well as decisions as to when it makes sense to perform a refresh.

Considering an ITIL business model someday? Understanding relationships between configuration items (often hardware and software assets), and changes to those relationships is a must. What about total cost of ownership? You would need to know asset down time and associated costs. Ever hear the gossip that

this or that class of asset is worthless or that it takes too long for a procurement request to be filled? The only way to fight perception is with data. The possibilities are endless.

#7 REPEATABLE, MEASURABLE, DOCUMENTED PROCESS

I've talked a great deal about data. For an ITAM initiative to be successful, it has to effectively capture reliable data around the asset's life cycle. I only know of one way for this to happen: repeatable, measurable, documented process. Knowing what data will provide value up front (i.e., project-planning stage) goes a long way toward developing process that enables capture of that data (measurement).

That data's reliability depends greatly on an organization's ability to embrace and enforce process (repeatability). For ITAM initiatives, this can be a challenge depending on the size and complexity of an organization's structure. If the scope of a process is spread across organizational silos and the benefit of the data to be collected is not apparent to process performers, then you could have issues. This is where executive support comes into play. For process to be effective, ownership has to be shared by all process participants. Identify stakeholders as early on as possible and bring them into the process development effort. No one likes to have process shoved down their throats, so gaining buy in is essential.

Documenting process makes sense in a couple of ways. First, it's just good business to have your processes documented. It provides a communication tool between you and management, and between you and the process performers. Second, things change. Business value objectives evolve over time and processes need to be able to evolve at the same rate. No process is frozen in time. No process will live forever. Process re-engineering needs to be built into any ITAM ongoing operational program to ensure our organizations are operating as effectively and efficiently as possible and that we have enabled ourselves to realize, measure and report on our business value objectives.

#8 SERVICE-LEVEL AGREEMENTS

Internal, Customer & Vendor

Another benefit to be gained from data collected via workflow/process is the ability to measure how we are responding to customer requests, how we are interacting with other teams within our organization and how our vendors are responding to our requests. Initially, this data can provide great value in terms of our ability to understand and manage our environments. Once a baseline is established, we need to take it to the next level and define acceptable service levels for both our organizations and our vendors.

Typically, ITAM processes cross business silos. For example, in the case of a new user request: The information security team is responsible for initiating steps to ensure needed network connections. The software procurement team is responsible to ensure application licenses are available and properly assigned. The hardware procurement team is responsible to ensure a desktop and monitor are available for install. And the desktop support team is responsible to ensure the hardware is properly imaged and installed at the end user workstation. Ideally each of these teams has a service level defined that specifies timelines for

their part of the overall process (an OLA in ITIL terms). At the same time, the customer who made the request has an expectation as to how long it should take from the submission of his/her request to the set up of the new workstation (a SLA in ITIL terms). Within the procurement processes, there are expectations on timelines associated with vendor responses.

If planned for as part of an ITAM initiative, all of the data needed to track and manage these various timelines can be captured automatically via workflow/process, therefore enabling the development of service-level agreements and subsequent service-level management. Service-level data can be useful in a number of ways: Internally if your organization manages IT services via chargebacks to the business and externally in terms of vendor negotiations. Service-level data also provides management insight into a team's performance and helps identify process improvement opportunities.

#9 INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

IAITAM recommends that, if nothing else, you purchase a discovery tool as a first step to manage your assets. I couldn't agree more, but a discovery tool is not a solution in and of itself. Effective process surrounding the asset life cycle is your best weapon against data corruption. But, no matter how tight your process is defined or how well it is deployed, it's never 100 percent effective. As much as we might all like to get away from them, physical inventories are a necessary evil and provide the audit loop between discovery data and asset repository data. Whether or not you have need of a complete physical inventory or simply spot checks will depend on the effectiveness of the processes deployed around life cycle asset management.

#10 DESIGNATED SOFTWARE/ HARDWARE ASSET MANAGERS

In the end, it all comes down to those of us who obsess over the details of our asset environments. Designation of software and hardware asset managers is a must to ensure ITAM initiative success. The right people are the keys to success of an ITAM initiative. The best tools and processes will bring minimal results without the right people overseeing the environments and pushing forward toward continuous process improvement. The data gained will provide very little value without insight as to how it can be used and applied on a day-to-day basis. It is the software and hardware asset managers who are ultimately responsible for demonstrating the business value an ITAM initiative offers an organization. Over the past year I've had the pleasure of meeting more and more of you through IAITAM, and I continue to be impressed with the extent to which this group takes ownership and pride in the pieces of their organizations for which they're responsible.

So there it is, the ITAM Best Practice Top 10 list. I'm sure it will change over time—as it should—but it's a place to start, something against which we can assess where we are in our environments and where we want to be six months from now, a year from now, three years from now. I hope it helps.

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