

Program Management: Maintaining the Ecosystem

Program Management is the least understood best practice for IT asset management. Often confused with Project Management, Program Management is a set of activities that support an entire department or a set of projects. Like Project Management, Program Management processes include planning, organization and coordination but differ in their scope.

For an IT asset manager, the role of Project Manager is a comfortable one. For example, given the goal to decrease software non-compliance, the IT asset manager is skilled at assessing what needs to be done and proposing a project. A project plan is developed, consisting of the steps necessary to improve current processes and automation. The end result of this project is a specific achievement such as the creation of a central repository of contractual information.

So what is Program Management?

In contrast to the software project, Program Management builds an infrastructure for all projects and coordinates between projects. Unlike a project, Program Management never ends. The Program Manager works with a portfolio of pre-defined resources and business strategies that ensure alignment with the organization's goals. For example, the Program Manager for IT asset management assesses the current state of IT asset management against organizational goals and specific ITAM requirements. The evaluation includes issues such as mergers, IT architecture changes or regulatory requirements faced by the organization as a whole. The next step is to review the entire portfolio of resources including systems, people and executive support. Projects can now be suggested, prioritized and initiated.

Once a Program Manager is in place, IT asset management becomes proactive, with a continual cycle of assessment and realignment aiding management decisions on courses of action. In addition to the steps described above, Program Management includes monitoring ongoing projects and reporting on results to management in other departments and the executive sponsor, as appropriate. The success or issues being encountered by an ongoing project must be assessed, along with the impact on resources and the commitment to organizational goals.

Why Should Program Management be Part of ITAM?

Program Management is NOT specific to IT asset

management. It is in fact a set of practices that should be done in every department of any organization. Program Management is particularly significant for IT asset management because ITAM has:

- A high project rate for iterative improvement
- Impact on all areas of the organization, requiring extensive communication and cooperation
- Visibility especially from the cost and risk factors of ITAM
- A strong association with strategic decisions for IT and the organization
- Legal issues that continually drive change, documentation and process improvement

When the discipline is in place, Program Management takes the pressure off of a project launch by clearing the path to success. Project justification can be based on the assessment of organizational goals, IT architecture and executive understanding already built through Program Management processes. Selecting resources for a project is easier because role definitions and assessment of people resources are in place. Project planning can take advantage of information about systems, network information and communication links between departments that already exist.

Program Management perpetuates these advantages from project to project. If you agree that project failures should be avoided, Program Management is a good way to eliminate or at least reduce the following causes of failure:

- Choosing a project that does not address organizational goals
- Inadequate availability of resources
- Lack of cooperation with other departments
- Insufficient time to plan projects effectively
- No external validation during the course of project execution

Adding Program Management to ITAM

Initiating Program Management for ITAM involves actions familiar in the IT asset management world. The steps resemble the steps taken to justify a project. Instead of an ad hoc analysis conducted to justify one project, Program Management formalizes and standardizes processes for

evaluating the ongoing contribution of IT asset management as a whole. To make it easier to get started on building Program Management, consider the following ideas:

- Combine the analysis steps that have been used to justify projects over the last few years and develop a process flow that is general
- Step back from daily activities to develop a project without any specifications (all structure, no meat)
- Work with Human Resources to develop job roles and titles that make sense
- Formalize the network of managers and resources that provide valuable insight into the strategic direction of IT and the organization
- Review project plans, looking at milestones and reports in order to generalize for a monitoring and validation process

Building the framework for Program Management is confusing. Program Management is where the process on how to create and document processes is developed. The task involves stepping back from the IT asset management practices and looking for the underlying structure that makes those processes understandable and representative of what really happens. A tool kit analogy may be helpful, where the tools are used to create something (a project) and then put back to be used again.

Who is the Program Manager?

There are as many organizational structures for IT asset management as there are stars in the sky. While this variability made it difficult for professional IT asset managers to be recognized at first, it has not gotten in the way of developing ITAM and SAM best practices. To answer the question regarding the Program Manager, I include any department performing some aspect of the life cycle management of assets.

The Program Manager is the individual who has the authority to gather information and the responsibility for guiding projects for IT asset management. The Program Manager is usually a “manager” in the classic use of the term which is a person who manages a staff of people performing related duties. The best candidate for ITAM Program Manager is the individual who makes decisions about projects, budgets and executive reporting now. This individual understands the process for strategic and tactical decision making that leads to projects. This person directly benefits from a portfolio approach to projects through better information and thus better decisions. With Program Management in place, this individual’s job will be easier and more successful.

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