The History of ITIL by Brian Johnson – Part 1

Ignorance is the opium of the shirking classes

I was asked by Ian Clayton if I would like to write a retrospective about ITIL, a sort of back to the future where what I can remember about those early days is put into a context that explains for many the who, where, when, what, how, and most important, the 'why' of ITIL. I'm sure it will bust a few myths (and hits….) on the way. This is the first of three articles covering the beginning, the period through to the publication of 'version 2', and my observations, opinions and comments about the current release – 'version 3'. Being Ian, he asked for the unexpurgated version and that is what I commit to in this attempt to offer my view of the ITIL history.

The intention here is not simply a history lesson for (self or other) aggrandizement or indeed a walk through memory lane for the sake of it. ITIL has come a long way from its inception in the brain cells of Dr. John Stewart and along the way it has (unlike a rolling stone) gathered a lot of unwelcome moss. No, I want to nail down the 'why ITIL' question first, and worry a lot less about the where, when and what.

If My Memory Serves Me...

First a caveat. Or two. This is the history is as I remember it. I will not tell lies or amplify (or even be economic with) the truth. If I get a fact wrong (and I am sure I will), someone with a better memory should feel free to point it out. I will also name names where credit is due, and not name names where criticism is implied or due. If I can't write something nice about someone, I will not write anything.

Second, ITIL began more than twenty years ago. Carts and horses had not been invented and laptops were large wooden abacuses (abaci??) more than six feet across weighing four hundred pounds. In other words, I may not get the timelines precise, but they will be close enough for government.

Where to start then? Well back at the very beginning, when government still used tablets of stone to write upon and six inch nails to write with because they were too mean to buy chisels, and I of course was only five years old, but an infant prodigy in National Savings Office in Durham….ok, I was not an infant and perhaps not a prodigy but I certainly was a business systems analyst working on three of the major design suites of the project, Repayments of savings certificates, post payment accounting and cancellations of issued repayment warrants. And I was very interested in how our new IT operations (an entirely new IT infrastructure was one part of the entire project) was going to be able to handle new business!

The Willy Carroll Period...

Between 1985 and 1988, Willy Carroll (RIP) has probably the sole justifiable claim to be the person who first 'implemented' ITIL. Except then the method was known as the government IT infrastructure management method (GITIMM).

It was not a trademark, a brand, a gravy train or the domain of rock star consultants either. It was guidance created by the forgotten men of the CCTA (Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency), Peter Skinner (also RIP), John Stewart (the team leader), John Coles, Neville Greenhalgh, Neil Croft, Dave Ruffles and Andy Carty—none of the well-known names (Macfarlane, Wheeldon or yours truly) being part of GITIMM until John and his team had trialed the approach in National Savings (Willy's department) and a few others. David was the first to recognize that GITIMM was a good thing to be part of and the first of the three of us to be recruited—see later

What was the 'behind the scenes' thinking that led to ITIL (or GITIMM)? Because John was looking at a means of 'standardizing' good practices in IT that would essentially provide a common language for IT operations and reduce cost of IT (because people would be more efficient). The method was born from government, though John believed it would apply in all sectors and would allow people in IT operations to 'professionalize' what they did, it would be something that they could use as a basis for a professional education curriculum--- applications development and programming personnel had been able to do this for many years. It would also do what those domain experts had always done; document what they were doing. Well, maybe not all……..

I think the key point here is that the focus was on documenting good practices, not on new ideas (though for sure, some ideas were incorporated in the version 1 books, and these were signposted as such (eg, the Business Perspective series, it was not published as best practice but as food for thought). Industry experts such as inter alia, Hans Dithmar, Martin Andrew, Richard Warden, Brian King, and Colin Rudd to name just a few of the people I met most, together with 'up and coming' people such as Rene van't Veen and Arnold van Mameren, drew up what has often been called 'documented common sense'—and much of it remains valid.

Development personnel had long been 'portable people' because of their recognized education in the field, and regularly moved around government (and external) organizations. IT Operational practice was not standardized making people expensive to constantly retrain in new or unfamiliar operations platforms.

This was 1985 BV (before version 3); and GITIMM was printed, on non-photocopiable government issue paper (against the wishes of John Stewart who always perceived that wholly free distribution, ie you could copy it…… would improve take up; those who know John will recognize his anarchic nature…). John later acted as advisor to the Chinese entrepreneur markets……..

Why GITMM?

David Wheeldon and I were lucky enough to get early exposure to GITIMM and to be selected later to join John's team--- probably as a result of that exposure--- but also because Willy Carroll provided us with the opportunity to add something to the guidance; 'how to'…..as with current versions of the guidance, adapting and adopting was key.

Why GITIMM though? Well, Willy had read the early drafts and truly believed that National Savings needed to change culture in order to have any chance of fully (or even partially) gaining benefits from the huge investment in mechanization of the clerical environment. The 'why' for Willy Carroll came down to a need to get IT operations better organized or the new applications being developed would either fail to work as they should or worse, fail completely and that it was IT operations that needed to change its way of working quickly if new applications were to be brought into use efficiently and effectively.

Willy recognized that being better organized would entail a more effective way of managing day to day issues such as incidents, problems and changes. He recognized that the skill sets of people had to change; monitoring performance of systems was going to be superfluous unless he had people who knew the business that was being monitored and the impact thereon.

"Captain"

"Mr Spock"

"The Enterprise monitors have detected a malfunction in photon torpedo shields"

"Excellent Mr Spock, what are we doing about it?"

"Well, we are monitoring it……"

Willy had a lot of people who could and would tell him what was going wrong (purchase applications are running slow Willy), but no one who either knew impact on the business or what they should do about it (…so I will keep an eye on them and tell you when things are back to normal….). sound remotely familiar? Why ITIL? Because ITIL tells you that monitoring lousy performance is not enough, what are you going to do about it?

So how did Willy adapt and adopt the materials? First being a pragmatist Willy realized very early that getting the new ideas to stick would need cultural change; and he was dealing with an eighty year old government department that only then was mechanizing its arcane clerical processes and files. Second, he recognized that carrots and sticks would be likely to be needed in equal measure. And third, (without the need for Kotter and other change guru's) he recognized that he needed a team who would push through the cultural and organizational changes he knew would be necessary.

As with all leaders he began with a vision that people could buy into (and National Savings being a government body he also made sure that costs would not be an issue by employing only internal resources and making no plans to procure software (his only mistake, more on that later). He also recognized a truly gifted individual who would do anything for (top choice) automatic selection as left-winger for the NS football (soccer) team and (second) promotion before NS procedures would normally allow. That was me. I have hidden shallows.

Having purchased my integrity, Willy offered me the chance to pass down similar favors to men and women I could trust. Or buy. Including a proper project manager. These were the carrots and do not underestimate their effect on overcoming resistance to change, the single, most difficult obstacle to overcome when implementing any change is people.

Proof of Commitment to the Vision…

Willy's team may have been bribed, may have been considered mercenaries, but we were loyal and the belief invested in us by Willy made our commitment unwavering. Do not underestimate either the importance of a visionary with the will to upset the apple cart in order to change the status quo. Willy Carroll protected his team from criticism (mind you if it was justified he laid into us privately later) and ensured that all of senior management was demonstrably behind the initiative.

The same was true of John Stewart when he had to fight the CCTA board for support for the ongoing project. Willy also pioneered the approach that other industry visionaries have used, force of will overcoming all obstacles. What about the sticks?

When Willy learned that his appointed problem manager was circumventing the new procedures that we had based on the GITIMM guidelines, he made a point of a public review of the circumstances and an edict that anyone failing to follow procedure had no place in his IT department. When the same person repeated the violation, he transferred him to a non IT department.

That person was one of his best friends.

Imagine the impact on a government organization, where strong Trade Unions existed, where employee rights were paramount and regulations were sometimes considered as 'advisory'. The change was immediate and long lasting.

If Willy was determined enough to damage a long standing friendship, he was not a person to tangle with. The result was even the grumbling classes, who were not overtly flouting procedures, but who were damaging the credibility of the project, shut up shop and got on with whatever their job was.

I would like to point out something I think is often overlooked. People were (and still are) responsible for the changes; not ITIL. ITIL does not (and did not) guide you about how to change people; that is the skill of a good manager. ITIL was simply the catalyst and provided some useful ideas, not a 'how to change and run' your organization the way it is often represented and sold today. And to restate a key point, it contained documented good practices.

Take another issue; in order to better serve the business (National Savings) Willy introduced shift working in IT operations for the first time. People would be in attendance before the start of the business day, and until quite some time after the business day finished. Some would be on call during night hours to 'fix' problems brought to their attention by automated monitoring and alerting systems.

None of this was a result of 'ITIL'. Willy could never fix the problem of those on night duty making sure they were not 'called out' to fix a problem until the call out allowance payment was due. Some shift workers were receiving a salary more than double their 'official' salary thanks to shift allowances, call out payments, and of course extra hours worked. So much for the change reducing costs…..

The changes did however help the business. The IT 'live' services were more often than not available throughout scheduled business hours. Why? Because Willy had instituted shift systems, not because he had 'implemented' ITIL.

Now I did mention Willy making a mistake. In his plan to show that all changes could be wrought from internal resource, Willy decided that GITIMM technology support would be a paper-based system, and over time it would be replaced by an in-house built software support system with the working name APACHE (automated problem and change environment).

The mistake was not the paper based system; even configuration management, though cumbersome, was managed successfully and change management was very effective---though by today's standards of course things moved slowly.

The mistake was trying to build the in-house software. Lives were nearly lost in the process, stress became a medical condition (Willy single handedly created stress as a reason for absence from work), testing went on for a year and finally the project was dumped and support software purchased from a long extinct but darn good company called Ultracomp.

Happy times.

It Was Twenty Years Ago Today...

In retrospect, the mistake did not have material consequences for the changed National Savings IT environment. Though at the time of course, everyone in IT believed that technology would transfigure the environment. The transfiguration however, was entirely due to the changed attitudes and new culture embedded as a result of working with the GITIMM materials and a motivated team determined to change things. We came to understand this of course, and when good software was eventually installed, it became obvious that embedding the cultural changes eased the installation and use.

This piece is based on work carried out over twenty years ago and yet, even now, the same issues arise when it comes to ITIL projects. It is possible to entirely ignore all of the ITIL guidance, avoid buying consultants, laugh in the face of certification zealots---and still make a difference in your organization by focusing solely on changing the culture of the organization to focus on delivering excellent customer service. That is not to imply that ITIL training, consultants or guidance are not useful; the issue is that the ITIL guidance can be interpreted to good use by anyone who really wants to make a difference to the status quo.

Plus ca change…….. For the non Francophiles, I paraphrase a translation of the full epigram, no change there then…..

So the Why ITIL question is answered not by the usual ' first we introduced process 'x' and achieved 'y', but by 'because we needed a catalyst that would motivate us to do something differently'. In other words recognize that IT provides IT services in an often haphazard and uncoordinated way and that business customers require consistency of delivery---and do something about it.

In the next historical (or should that be hysterical) episode, I will cover the 'why ITIL went viral', the initial breakout, some of the first projects and how the Cloggies (an affectionate term for the inhabitants of the Netherlands, who were the first people to truly take up the ITIL cause, even ahead of us Limey's).

Just so that you do not sustain damage through holding your breath, it had a lot to do with Ivor Macfarlane working with the Civil Service College, John Stewart forcing me into founding the itIMF (now itSMF) and David Wheeldon working night and day to build itIMF as a business.