Process Owners –
'Architects' Of ITIL Project Success

Since the advent of Henry Ford's Model T and the creation of complex assembly lines, organisational designs have focused on breaking apart complex processes into individual tasks – the result of which manifests itself as silo or stove pipe based organisational charts where the right hand has little knowledge of what the left hand is doing.

As technically focused IT shops transition into service organisations, it is essential to re-join what has been artificially separated. What is occurring when an organisation defines IT Services and Process, is that two new virtual horizontal organisational structures are being established on top of the traditional domain-based silos. The end result is the establishment of a matrix organisation where staff now have multiple lines of accountability and are constantly faced with the requirement to prioritise their time.

A critical success factor for process implementation is the creation and empowerment of a single, accountable Process Owner whose management activities and scope of governance span across the great divide between organisational silos. The Process Owner plays the important role of champion, visionary, protector and advocate – without whom the process has absolutely no chance of survival.

The Role Of The Process Owner

The initial planning phase of any ITIL project must include appointing the key role of Process Owner. Typically, a Process Owner should be a senior level manager with credibility, influence and authority across the various areas impacted by the activities of the process.

A Process Owner's job is not necessarily to do the hands-on process re-engineering and improvement, but to ensure that it gets done. He or she typically assembles the project team, obtains the resources that the team requires, protects the team from internal politics, and works to gain cooperation of the other executives and managers whose functional groups are involved in the process. Once the new process is successfully embedded, the Process Owner remains responsible for the integrity, communication, functionality, performance, compliance and business relevance of the process.

The three major activities of the Process Owner are Process Design, Organisational Awareness, and Advocacy.

Process Design
The Process Owner is accountable for the ongoing business value and integrity of the process design across the functional and organisational boundaries the process crosses:

- Processes, policies and procedures
- Process roles
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- Process automation requirements
- Process integrations

Organisational Awareness
The Process Owner is accountable for planning and implementing practices, orientation and training to ensure organisational understanding and adoption of the process activities:

- Internal and external training
- New employee on-boarding and orientation
- One-on-one mentoring
- Teambuilding exercises
- Conflict facilitation

- Communication and feedback forums

Advocacy

The Process Owner is accountable for protecting, measuring and reporting on process compliance across organisational silos:

- Dealing with political issues
- Promoting a culture of process collaboration
- Breaking down strong silo or functional mindsets
- Verifying process compliance on an ongoing basis
- Representing IT processes to business
- Managing process exceptions
- Promoting integration with other processes

While design and organisational learning can be delegated to other process roles, it is not advisable to ever delegate advocacy.

Process Ownership Combinations

When reading the ITIL books, the reader can be led to assume that each process has a unique Process Owner; however, while it may be possible to do this in a large organisation, it is far more likely that a single individual may be required to oversee and champion two or more ITIL processes. Care must be taken in the selection of what combinations work well and which represent a conflict of interest based on the process objectives.

Difficult Combinations

Incident & Problem Management

At face value, these two processes look ideally suited for joint ownership; however, in practice this is rarely the case. Unlike other processes, the challenge does not lie in an inherent conflict of interest. Typically, the goals of Problem Management are subverted by the urgency of service restoration.

Problem Management is responsible for taking a holistic view of the issues around service delivery by identifying systemic IT issues and service degradation trends. Incident Management is primarily concerned with the restoration of service as quickly as possible. The typical result of combining these processes is that Problem Management activities are often overridden by the immediate need of fire fighting. This is even more apparent when the Problem Management coordinators are given the role of managing the major incident or crisis processes and resulting post-incident reviews. The great majority of time is then spent in what is actually an Incident Management role, and the proactive side of Problem Management is largely neglected.

Change & Incident Or Problem Management

The objective of Change Management is to efficiently handle, assess, approve and coordinate all changes to the IT infrastructure in an efficient manner. At the same time, Incident and Problem Management are raising records that lead to requests for changes. Combining ownership of these processes invites a conflict of interest around the required due diligence for Change Management.

Strong Combinations

Change & Configuration Management
Change Management acts as the primary control mechanism for the updating of the Configuration Management Database (CMDB); likewise, Change Management relies on configuration data for impact analysis. For this reason, the combination of the two processes under a single accountability provides an added value to each process.

Change & Release Management
Both Change and Release Management deal with minimising the impact of changes to the IT infrastructure; this shared objective makes this pairing desirable.

Availability, Capacity & IT Service Continuity Management
Each of these processes is back-office related and deal with the right sizing of the IT environment according to business needs. This combination is often under the control of a tactical or strategic IT planning group.

Service Level Management (SLM) & Financial Management For IT
Defining IT services, negotiating service levels and the cost associated with these services makes SLM and Financial Management a possible fit; however, most organisations will keep these separated, but aligned, due to the level of work required for each activity.

The Last Word

Best practices clearly indicate that process ownership should reside with a single individual to ensure clear accountability. The Process Owner's role is critical for the successful design and ongoing management of the processes being implemented. While it is not necessary to designate one Process Owner for each process, organisations should be aware, during the initial planning phase, of difficult and strong combinations before assigning multi-process ownership.

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Graham Price, Manager, Consulting Services, Pink Elephant

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