

## **ITIL's Service-Level Management Strength Is in Integration**

**The SLM process is one among many, with high levels of interdependency. Enterprises must view SLM in the context of all its service management processes, and use ITIL as a baseline of best practice.**

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### **Core Topic**

Business Management of IT: Service Management Strategies

### **Key Issue**

What best practices will drive integrated service management to manage the service impact on the enterprise?

### **Tactical Guidelines**

- Enterprises trying to create or improve their SLM process should evaluate ITIL's lead and take a holistic view of all the supporting processes because most problems in SLM are caused by inadequacies in those support processes.
- Enterprises should use ITIL as a baseline against which to create or improve their SLM process.

Service-level management (SLM) is the process of defining, negotiating, agreeing, implementing, monitoring and managing the levels of customer service, with the targets being documented in service-level agreements (SLAs). In the early 1990s, when SLAs became fashionable, many IS organizations were driven toward putting SLAs in place, but treated it as a discrete process. Most of these early initiatives failed, especially in the distributed systems environment, because other processes that are required to support consistent, reliable and predictable delivery of service did not exist. SLM initiatives fail when the IS organization has no way of measuring, controlling and understanding the impact of those things that will disrupt the service (e.g., change) and by setting incorrect user expectations. The result of such an approach will always be the discrediting of SLAs and the process of SLM.

SLM is a key driver of continuous improvement in the service organization and a channel for continuous communication with the customer. As such, it is dependent on other supporting processes. SLM cannot be dealt with on its own if the improvement it should deliver is to be more substantive than a bit of "window dressing." Enterprises need to have the following integrated processes defined and adequately mature to deliver effective SLM:

- Change management
- Configuration management
- Incident management
- Problem management
- Availability management
- Capacity management

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- Release management
- Asset management

Without these supporting processes in place, meeting the agreed levels of service becomes very hit-or-miss. For example, when a new version of an application is released, there may not be a proper assessment of its impact on capacity or on other applications dependent on it. This may result in unforeseen problems, which reduce the quality of service delivered, requiring reactive attention as opposed to proactive prevention. Most failures in SLM are usually related to weaknesses in these supporting processes, rather than the process of negotiation or monitoring service levels. It is failures in these processes that usually result in a “firefighting” mentality that often pervades IS groups.

### **How Can ITIL Help?**

The key to the strength of the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) is its approach to SLM — a holistic approach, integrating SLM with the supporting processes (see ITIL’s “Service Delivery” publication for a definition of its SLM process — [www.itil.co.uk](http://www.itil.co.uk)). ITIL provides an integrated framework within which each of these core processes is defined. Most importantly their interdependencies are defined. Any IS organization endeavoring to implement or improve SLM and SLAs must do so within the context of an integrated framework, ITIL being the clear and obvious choice. The IS organization should assess itself against all these processes as a whole, as opposed to just trying to address SLM on its own.

ITIL’s SLM process itself rightly puts great emphasis on supporting the SLAs with operational-level agreements (OLAs), which are agreements with the other internal groups required to support the SLA, and reflects the agreements with external service providers (ESPs), that again are required to meet the SLA with the customer. While it emphasizes the necessity for discussion with the customer, it does not really address the process and role of relationship management (although that will come in a new publication from ITIL titled “The Business Perspective”). It also recommends the use of multilevel SLAs in large enterprises, such as corporate, customer and service level, which helps keep the size of the SLAs down and reduces duplication and, it is hoped, frequency of updates.

Enterprises, however, should not underestimate the effort and implementation time required, particularly to overcome organizational silos to deliver an integrated and effective SLM strategy. Furthermore, they should not discard any best-practice processes developed in-house, but look at integrating and

identifying gaps by using the ITIL framework. The ITIL framework accurately defines configuration and asset management. However, the framework considers some of the IT asset management functionality as nice to have, for example, legal aspects associated with the maintenance of licenses and contracts.

**Bottom Line:** Leveraging known process methodologies can be quite valuable in “jump-starting” the development of SLM processes. Critical to a solid SLM strategy is understanding how highly dependent it is on other IT management processes. It cannot exist in isolation. Enterprises should use ITIL as the baseline definition of service management best practice, and particularly use it to validate the integration between their own operational processes.