WHY INVEST EFFORT DOCUMENTING PROCESSES AND TO WHAT LEVEL OF DETAILS?

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The decision to document the processesin details with change control is simple to make if the environment is regulated (e.g. Financial, Health Care, ISO). In other environments the questions becomes how much to invest given that there is real work to be done.

Although simpler with very little up-front cost, memory based processes have their shortcomings. They are prone to errors as they cannot be applied consistently unless a lot of time is spent memorizing, performing the tasks or that detailed notes are taken.

In addition to ensuring consistency, documented processes:

- Helps standardize training of new employees
- Records corporate knowledge and best practices
- Helps support succession planning and IT Service Continuity Management (e.g. Business Continuity Management)
- Enables the analysis and understanding how tasks or activities are executed to ensure that they do not create operational issues
- Makes people realize the level of effort required to execute the process
- Clarifies and communicates expectations
- Serves as a written agreement between stakeholders (e.g. OLA)
- Provides a reason to bring back people to the process if/when they deviate from it

Another important benefit to documentation is that when process issues arise, a document, flowchart or meeting notes helps focus discussions on its flaws instead of focusing on what people are doing wrong. Since the conversation can be directed at the document instead of being directed at an individual or group it can avoid the "blame game" or finger pointing. It also provides a starting point for improvement. Without an artifact, discussion practically starts over again covering issues alreadysettled.

Consider two scenarios:

- People are interviewed to understand their participation in the process. A flow-chart with swim-lanes is prepared and several meetings are held to reviseand agree on the document. Along the way a group handling rare exceptions can be discovered as missing causing the flow-chartto be revised again and reviewed with the group.
- Another initiative did not prepare a flowchart. Key people got in a room; discussed how to address a particular process issue and that was it.Every time process issues are encountered the group is mobilized.With hopefully meeting minutes, a record of decision or simply an email.

Both are valid approaches and used on a regular basis. The organization needs to determine how much resource they are willing to devote to documentation.

If the decision is to document the processes, deciding on the level of details to include in a procedure is sometimes difficult to do. Some are tempted to add step-by-step instructions with screen captures like a user guide.Too much detailnot only takes longer to develop and test but experienced users will be tempted to skip it all together thus, running the risk of forgetting a critical step buried in the details. The opposite also has its drawback; without the details the user might not know how to complete it.It is therefore important to define the target audience to ensure that the right level of details is provided.

Ideally the procedure should specify who it is written for, what it is for and in some cases when it should be used. Adding something as simple as "This procedure is for system administrators to create a user group" to the introduction or in a section titled "Audience for this Procedure" is usually enough. In this example, it can be assumed that the system administrator has basic skills and knowledge of that system. Consequently, the procedure can be:

1. Create a group using the following naming convention: (• ...)
2. Set the following parameters on the Advanced tab: (• ...)
3. Reassign the request to the Service Desk

As such, there is no need to specify to login like:

1. Press CTRL-ALT-DELETE
2. Type your user name
3. Press Tab or click in the Password field
4. Type your password
5. etc.

Another consideration is when people use the procedure on a regular basis. They would benefit most from a document focused on critical steps or from a checklist to ensure nothing is forgotten. On the other hand, people with limited experience, or that do not use it often (e.g. semi-annual upgrade) will require more details. Moreover, if the procedure is part of a Business Continuity Plan to ensure IT Service Continuity the level of details can be quite prescriptive as untrained users will likely perform the procedure. To reconcile these needs, the document can have a summary or checklist with detailed instructions asappendix(es).

In conclusion, determine the purpose of the procedure and who will be using it. It is also wise to ask someone from that audience to review and test it to ensure it is usable.

Finally, to paraphrase Einstein: "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but no simpler." Spending time documenting is an investment and "Even formalization of mostly existing procedures will deliver cultural change" (ITIL v3, 2007, Service Transition p. 201, Section 8.1.4 Cultural change aspects.)

About the Author:

Denis Matte has over 20 years of IT experience in the private and public sector. As a consultant he helped organizations implement ITSM integrated toolsets and ITIL based processes by designing and managing projects at the operational, tactical and strategic levels. He currently manages the ITSM team in a public organization that administers the ITSM tool and helps internal groups progress in ITIL as processes are improved. Denis Matte is a certified ITIL Expert, Project Manager and Technical Trainer with formal education in Project Management and Management of Change. In his spare time he publishes www.ITILfromExperience.com