A Three Step Plan to Better Service Delivery

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Service organizations have long recognized the importance of service level agreements (SLA) in driving timely and accurate services to business users. Unfortunately, many organizations only create SLAs to follow ITIL standards, creating the documentation and then simply filing it away to collect dust. It's a "Let's check the box" mindset: *"Okay, done. Next?"*

Even when SLAs are created with the best intentions, the quality of service delivery often falls short of the mark. IT departments do try to guide service delivery according to agreements, but frequently fall short due to lack of ownership and accountability, the over engineering of processes, and the inability to measure success. Additionally, SLAs that are not actionable or enforceable are worthless in guiding quality service delivery.

The most common point of failure is that service organizations will create a SLA against a service without fully understanding the process that is required to deliver that service. Another problem is that they often don't understand the impact that service has on the overall business objective. (e.g., a missed delivery of a desktop impacts the speed of new employee onboarding.) In many cases service organizations exclude the very people receiving the service – their business customers – from providing input. The result delivers a one sided SLA that sets delivery terms favoring IT and often misses the real business need driving the service request in the first place. Is it a wonder that most companies still view IT with reproach?

The key to providing on-time, quality-driven service delivery is to focus on the interdependent relationships among the key stakeholders working to support a specific SLA. It's critical to create clearly defined operating level agreements (OLAs) between these service delivery personnel in order for them to support the SLA. This includes ALL internal business units responsible for service delivery, external vendors responsible for supplying the goods, external services needed for on-time service delivery, as well as the business user receiving the service. Sound like a daunting task? It shouldn't. Defining and implementing SLAs and OLAs should be simple.

By following the three steps outlined below, a service organization can increase its level of service delivery. This process ensures there is not only a document in place, but the defined delivery terms are actionable and measureable, and agreed to by all parties involved.

- Step One – Identify Stakeholders and Set Expectations
- Step Two – Document Service Delivery Requirements
- Step Three – Make Them Actionable and Measurable

SLAs should be more than just documents that are completed as part of a required ITIL exercise. SLAs can be the guiding force behind continual process improvement and a bridge to a better relationship between IT and the rest of the business.

STEP ONE – IDENTIFY STAKEHOLDERS AND SET EXPECTATIONS

Before key delivery requirements can be set in place to meet the needs of a service, it is necessary that all stakeholders responsible be identified, both internal and external. For example, in the onboarding of a new employee, internal personnel from finance, facilities and HR (as well as IT) may be needed. Additionally, external stakeholders such as drug testing facilities and employment screening agencies may be required.

To ensure sustained value is delivered to the business user, ownership must be embedded with the stakeholders by defining the governance relationship, identifying the responsible parties in the escalation process, and actively reinforcing the service expectations. By doing this, stakeholders are positioned to embrace the service delivery process and continually improve service delivery quality and excellence.

During this step, expectations should be validated to determine whether they contribute real business value or are simply just "nice to have." Expectations regarding service delivery can be met by understanding the business's key requirements and value drivers. Following the previous example, the business requirement may be to onboard an employee within two weeks of job acceptance, but the value driver is to reduce the amount of time it takes that employee to be productive once he starts his new position.

To reach this level of understanding, the internal business supporting units and outside suppliers require:

- Transparency in the role they play in meeting service delivery
- Cross functional relationships between all teams
- Understanding what is expected from them in order to deliver value to the process
- Agreement on acceptable tradeoffs

STEP TWO – DOCUMENT SERVICE DELIVERY REQUIREMENTS

The key to the uninterrupted flow of business processes and quality service delivery is creating an environment that fosters internal business supporting units working in partnership. Once this environment is in place, the teams collectively define and agree on how quality service will be delivered. Defining clear business needs, capturing the necessary requirements and managing expectations will bridge the divide between the outputs of different business units. Building this solid foundation allows the process to flow from start to finish with a common understanding by all parties, with a teamwork philosophy embraced.

The product of mutual consensus is a comprehensive and clear set of documented requirements to which all business units will adhere, regardless of their role within each intermediary process. This common ground between business units enables the required handoffs to each intermediary service provider in a timely manner. It also serves to prevent the erosion of quality delivery promised by the service delivery teams to the business. The end result is that the business is able to meet its own obligations.

STEP THREE – MAKE THEM ACTIONABLE AND MEASURABLE

Once the definition of the service delivery requirements have been realized, the "check the box" mindset needs to be checked at the door. The business can't stop there. Putting the document in a drawer to gather dust serves no purpose, solves no problems and only fosters continued the dissatisfaction that has come to be associated with IT service delivery. The way to drive real value is to make this document actionable by holding stakeholders accountable to the expectations agreed to for service delivery.

Implementing newly defined SLAs and OLAs using an actionable service catalog allows business units to monitor, measure, and report on actual results and anomalies. An actionable service catalog also helps an organization be proactive in ensuring that services are delivered when and as promised, by ensuring that escalations are automatically sent whenever an SLA (or OLA) is in jeopardy of being missed. A service catalog allows an organization to monitor and track SLA and OLA activities by tasks and due dates. By implementing a service catalog with the use of SLAs and OLAs, an organization can:

- Provide clear communication of service levels and expectations to business users
- Monitoring SLA compliance and risk, with notifications and analytics for better management
- Measure SLA compliance to aid in process improvement, resource reallocation, and enforcement of delivery expectations
- Enable reporting that identifies process flaws, bottlenecks, and successes or failures

In conclusion, SLAs should be more than just documents that are completed as part of a required ITIL exercise. SLAs can be the guiding force behind continual process improvement and a bridge to a better relationship between IT and the rest of the business.

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