

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Stand Alone or ITSM Built In? How to Choose the Right Service Catalog

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So, you're looking for ways to drive efficiency and cost savings across the enterprise, perhaps wanting to prove the value of your shared services group to the business. Thus, following industry best practices, you're planning a Service Catalog implementation initiative. The ROI and resulting benefits such as increased governance, compliance, transparency, and automation can easily justify the effort. But, as you begin the process of evaluating the various technology options out there, you quickly realize there are two main categories of Service Catalog solutions – stand-alone Service Catalog products, and add-on Catalog components that are included with existing ITSM suites.

IT Service Management (ITSM) suites are tools designed to support a variety of IT processes across the enterprise, but often serve primarily as a Help Desk ticketing system for managing incidents, problems, changes and related IT service requests. ITSM suites emerged as a concept from the ITIL framework, which has been around for decades. As such, most large organizations already have some sort of ITSM tool in place these days. And, as industry trends led to the widespread adoption of the Service Catalog concept as a best practice for organizing available internal service offerings, most ITSM providers began to incorporate Service Catalog modules into their products. From there, such built-in catalog components could be deployed as the main front-end interface for users to interact with the existing ITSM ticketing system without requiring additional, separate technology.

On the other hand, the emergence of the Service Catalog as an industry standard also led to a variety of specialized software solution vendors, with products focused solely on Service Catalog. These stand-alone Service Catalog products enable businesses to organize service offerings for their applicable target audience(s). They automate the corresponding fulfillment processes, while standardizing the input/output behind those processes in a transparent and trackable manner. Such stand-alone Service Catalog products could extend across the enterprise and provide service offerings beyond IT. They might integrate with an existing ITSM suite as part of the fulfillment process, or in some cases even replace that Help Desk ticketing functionality entirely.

Each of these product types has pros and cons, so how do you know which one is best for your initiative? Let's take a look at a few key areas of difference:

1. WEATHERING THE WINDS OF CHANGE

Today, organizations need tools that are adaptable enough to handle ever-changing business requirements, especially in light of constant technology innovation all around us. Both stand-alone Service Catalog solutions and built-in ITSM Catalogs will typically offer system administration features intended to make it relatively easy to manage catalog content and workflows. Some are better at this than others, but generally speaking, leading products from both categories should allow you to build new service offerings and/or modify existing services fairly quickly, as changing business needs dictate.

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However, one of these models is better positioned to withstand a specific kind of business change that's becoming more and more common – changing ITSM tools. According to Gartner's 2015 Market Guide for IT Service Catalog Tools, "When selecting an IT service catalog as part of an integrated suite, bear in mind that a move to a different ITSM suite vendor or product for service management needs will necessitate replacing the IT service catalog. Through 2018, two thirds of organizations' IT service catalog business-user front ends deployed using ITSM suites will change due to ITSM tool replacements. This can lead to user discontent with the tools and cause backlash about overall satisfaction with IT."

Going with an ITSM's built-in Catalog module ensures smooth integration to a particular ticketing system, but effectively locks your catalog into that specific code base, too. On the flip side, stand-alone Service Catalogs can remain intact even during a wholesale replacement of an organization's ITSM product suite. Most of the leading stand-alone Service Catalog products should be able to integrate with a variety ITSM platforms, and can be modified in place to switch from one ITSM to another when needed without greatly disrupting your existing service offerings. This serves to protect your previous investment in the existing catalog, and helps minimize any negative impact on your end-user audience.

2. PLAYING NICELY WITH OTHERS

Integration is a key function of most Service Catalog deployments. The catalog component often serves as an integration point connecting front-end users to external 3rd party systems, sometimes in a manner that's even seamless to the user. Integrating the catalog experience with mission critical external systems on the backend allows an organization to design true end-to-end service delivery processes via a centralized and standardized interface. In some cases, users may recognize when their request process ties into an external system automatically, while in other cases, they may not be aware. Realistically, the typical end-user probably doesn't even care. They just know they need a specific service request to be fulfilled as quickly as possible so they can do their job.

So, maximizing your range of potential integration options should be a key factor when deciding how to roll out your new Service Catalog. You want to choose a platform that offers the most flexibility for connecting to other systems. That way, you can leverage existing and/or new technology investments as needed to support your underlying service delivery processes.

An ITSM's built-in Catalog module will obviously integrate smoothly with its own Help Desk ticketing system, but may or may not integrate as easily with other external systems. And, as a result of acquisition or consolidation, large organizations these days frequently find themselves owning and operating multiple ITSM systems. A built-in ITSM Service Catalog will probably not integrate easily with other ITSM ticketing systems, so in that scenario, you would either need to move all users to the ITSM with the Catalog and drop the other ITSM system(s), or operate multiple catalogs for your disparate user audiences. Neither of these approaches would be ideal for users or the business. On the other hand, a stand-alone Service Catalog could potentially integrate with multiple ITSM's and/or other external systems simultaneously. This flexibility enables a business to create that centralized portal interface, or "single pane of glass," for all users across the enterprise to request

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services, regardless of the various integration points required on the backend fulfillment side. In addition, a stand-alone Service Catalog's integration flexibility minimizes your chances of having to forfeit previous investments in other technologies. There's no need to toss out a legacy system or a newly acquired solution just to accommodate your Service Catalog. If there's business value to be realized by keeping them, a stand-alone Service Catalog could tie everything together.

3. CATERING TO STRENGTHS

As adoption has grown, the Service Catalog market has become more specialized and commoditized. Now widely recognized as an industry standard, most organizations are beyond deciding whether they need a Service Catalog or not, and have moved on to choosing which one to get. Selecting a product requires careful evaluation of the various strengths and weaknesses each vendor brings to the table. One thing to consider when deciding between a stand-alone Service Catalog and a catalog built into an ITSM suite is the area of specialty. ITSM tools, by definition, are primarily focused on the management of Help Desk operations, specifically related to Incident, Problem and Change tickets. In their case, the catalog component is an add-on module mainly intended to provide a front-end interface to their ticketing system. They're generally strong in this regard, but the breadth and depth of functional capabilities beyond that may be somewhat limited.

However, stand-alone Service Catalog products focus solely on delivering a curated catalog experience. They provide functionality to support service request management across the entire enterprise, not just to support IT Help Desk activities. Stand-alone Service Catalogs are typically better positioned to facilitate processes end-to-end across multiple business functions, including HR, Finance, Operations, as well as IT. They may incorporate Help Desk activities, but are not inherently limited to that arena. As such, stand-alone catalogs may offer more opportunities for driving value to the business overall.

So, to summarize, both stand-alone Service Catalogs and built-in ITSM catalog components have their own unique advantages. If your organization already has a single enterprise ITSM tool in place, with no immediate plans to replace it or augment it with other ITSM tools via acquisition, then leveraging its built-in catalog module is certainly worth considering. Even more so, if the primary objective of your service catalog initiative is simply to build a front-end interface to your Help Desk ticketing system, then your ITSM suite's built-in catalog component may make sense. But, if you're looking to automate business processes that are more mature or complex in nature, extending beyond IT across multiple functional areas, then you should consider a stand-alone Service Catalog. It will give you the flexibility to adapt to evolving business needs, including the ability to integrate with multiple external systems, or even multiple ITSM tools. And, with singular focus in this space, such stand-alone products will likely provide deeper functional options for driving business value across the entire enterprise.

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