ITIL Concepts To Improve Library and Research Services

by Greg Lambert of King & Spalding, Ryan McClead of Fulbright & Jaworski, LLP and Lynn Oser of LKO Information Management Consulting, LLC

Library and research services (LRS) departments have traditionally relied upon their reputations of providing good services to the staff and attorneys who use them. However, as these departments find themselves moving away from being autonomous departments and are instead teamed with other departments under a larger umbrella of services, the demands placed on LRS to follow much more formalized best practices have increased significantly. Although it is not a foregone conclusion that LRS will be grouped with the technology services groups, there are many law firms that have taken this approach. As with any change, there are challenges to overcome… and opportunities to explore.

Best practices from the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) standards can be adopted and modified to fit the structure of the library and research services. The idea behind adopting pieces of the ITIL standards is to improve the overall delivery of services without losing the service-oriented goals of the department. In fact, adoption of the ITIL standards should actually increase the effectiveness of the overall services provided by the LRS and create high-quality processes that are documented, sustainable and repeatable. In addition to process improvements, the standards enable the LRS to measure services using similar techniques and processes used by its technology peer departments.

The ITIL Framework

The ITIL framework is a vendor-neutral, nonprescriptive series of best practices developed by the U.K. Office of Government Commerce to improve IT service delivery. By “nonprescriptive” they mean individual aspects of the framework can be implemented without requiring the adoption of the entire framework. There are a number of concepts developed for the ITIL framework that could be adapted for use within the library and research services to great effect. Here are a few:

Service Catalog Management: Service catalog management is a concept best explained by way of a “menu” analogy. When you sit down at a restaurant, you are handed a list of the available meals that the kitchen staff is capable of preparing for you in a reasonable amount of time. Each menu item typically contains a brief description of the meal, including the main entrée, any side dishes and an overview of their preparation. Should you insist upon a meal not listed on the menu, the chef may refuse for lack of resources, or she may comply if you agree to provide additional resources, such as time or money.

Likewise, the service catalog is a “menu” of IT services that includes a brief description of the service and any expected
deliverables associated with each service. It works with management to agree upon services that they can provide within specific parameters. Should a user or customer request a service that falls outside the agreed-upon service catalog, IT can defer to management to decide whether the necessary additional resources will be provided.

The service catalog concept can easily be applied to LRS. Most LRS organizations have an informal, often undocumented, collection of services they provide on a regular basis. They obtain books and articles. They perform research. They obtain passwords for licensed databases. What LRS rarely has is a written, comprehensive menu of services that the LRS team offers with accompanying service-level expectations for the completion of requests.

Compilation of a published service catalog would serve two immediate purposes for the LRS.

- It would serve as a brochure for the promotion of services throughout the organization, making potential clients aware of the services and capabilities of the LRS team.
- The service catalog would serve as a basis for discussions regarding requests that fall outside of the regular service offerings, leading to a negotiation over price, resource availability and the ability of the LRS team to deliver.

**Event Management:** The event management process is intended to recognize all events (i.e., changes to the normal operating state of a system that may impact a service or an asset). This helps ascertain the impact of an event on the service and determine the appropriate action to take following an event. In IT, these events can vary from security breaches and servers going down to software licensing limits being surpassed. Each event triggers a reaction from the service provider, often initiating predetermined processes to remedy the situation.

Events also happen in the world of the LRS, and they can be classified in much the same way as ITIL classifies them for IT. Within the LRS, team members receive calls regarding client billing issues, database access issues or missing books, to name a few. The LRS can learn from ITIL by documenting predetermined processes for handling event resolution. Today, most LRS teams handle events on-the-fly, working as quickly as possible to resolve the issue but not taking the time to find the best way or document steps. Documentation of event resolution processes, assignment of LRS roles to each and training of LRS team members can improve efficiency and reduce time to resolve the problem.

**Request Fulfillment:** The request fulfillment process is best described in contrast to its sibling service within the ITIL framework — incident management. Both incident management and request fulfillment requests are often handled, at least initially, by the IT service desk. When a user calls with a difficulty, such as "My computer isn’t working" or "I can’t log in," an "incident" is recorded and the service desk personnel attempts to return that user to normal operation as quickly as possible. If, however, the user requests an additional asset, like a second monitor or a bit of knowledge (e.g., "How do I...?"), the call is handled as a "request" and request fulfillment procedures are implemented. There are many ways the LRS can benefit from request fulfillment concepts.

First we need to define our terms. For our purposes, the reference/research desk replaces the service desk as the first point of contact. Requests in the LRS world cover a variety of things, including requests for materials (print or electronic), requests for research (legal and nonlegal) and requests for passwords or database licenses.

Next we need to rely on documented, repeatable, reliable methods for fulfilling the request to provide consistent results. We need to develop process models that improve efficiency and deliver high-quality results quickly and effectively.

In addition, we need to configure systems to manage the requests, capturing knowledge gained along the way, measuring successful completions and identifying instances where the team falls short.

Keeping all of the balls in the air when requests are coming in from multiple offices across the world can be difficult. Request fulfillment implementation will give managers a way to see the status of requests, to be alerted when requests have gone beyond a reasonable delivery time and to capture customer reaction to the results.

**Service Transition:** The service transition phase of the ITIL framework is intended to make sure that services, as defined in the service catalog and as designed in the ITIL service design phase, are implemented and deployed in such a way that operations can reliably ensure delivery. The concept of service transition as a whole is a worthy pursuit for library services.

The concept may require implementing a number of processes included in the ITIL framework — change management, release and deployment management, and service asset and configuration management. Each of these processes has a very specifically defined purpose within IT, which may differ slightly in the LRS environment.

For example, within ITIL, a "change" is broadly defined as "the addition, modification or removal of anything that could have an effect on IT services." Change management is responsible for managing these changes in a manner that creates minimal disruption to existing IT services.

In the LRS domain, we make changes all the time. We add databases to our portfolio of electronic resources, we add print materials to our collections and we add new research services in support of changes within the business (e.g., the addition of a new practice group or division). What we rarely have is a repeatable, defined process for introducing the new services or resources to our internal clients. Borrowing from ITIL can help us define (ahead of the change) who needs to know, what they need to know, what systems or services will be affected and what to do if there is a problem. This systematic review of the release or transition will ensure steps are not missed and increase the likelihood of a smooth transition.

**Continual Service Improvement:** Possibly the most important concept for LRS teams to adopt within ITIL is continual service improvement. The continual service improvement phase of ITIL can be represented easily by asking six questions at all levels and during all processes within the ITIL framework:

- What is the vision for this service?
- What are we providing now?
- What do we ultimately want to provide?
- How do we get there?
- Did we get there?
- How do we keep the momentum going?
The concept of continual service improvement has never been more relevant to the LRS than today. The rapidly changing information landscape — information access anywhere, anytime and in any format — means LRS teams need to continually evolve their services, processes and methods for measuring success. They need to review technical services processes to increase efficiency and improve workflow. They need to review research offerings to ensure that they are in line with the demands of their internal clients. They need to identify ways of increasing value, improving leverage across case and project teams, and proactively delivering relevant information to enable informed decisions by those they serve. Asking the continual service improvement questions and systematically reviewing service offerings and processes can pave the way for the LRS to better align with the information and research needs of their organization.

An Answer to a Difficult Question
Leaders within the library and research services know that there is substantial pressure on their department to improve processes, document best practices and create sustainable and repeatable solutions for their customers. Adopting and adapting the ITIL standards is one possible method of obtaining those goals. Through these standards, LRS departments have the guidance they need to define the services they provide and the ability to communicate these services in the language spoken by their peer groups. We know we have to change how we provide services. Adopting ITIL standards may provide the answer to the most difficult question we face: “Where do we begin?”

Greg Lambert is the Library and Records Manager at King & Spalding. Besides managing the research and records teams, he works as a liaison between many departments on issues of business development, competitive intelligence and knowledge management. Greg blogs at the award-winning 3 Geeks and a Law Blog, and he is an executive board member of AALL. Greg can be contacted at glambert@kslaw.com.

Ryan McClead is the Knowledge Systems Administrator at Fulbright & Jaworski, LLP. He has more than nine years of experience implementing policies, procedures and tools to improve the flow of knowledge across the firm. Ryan seeks to find logical and technological solutions to problems plaguing individuals, departments and the firm at large. He can be contacted at rmcclead@fulbright.com.

Lynn Oser is the President and Senior Library and Information Management Consultant at LKO Information Management Consulting, LLC. With more than 20 years of experience, she has focused on strategy, management, research services, process improvement and service excellence for law firm libraries. Lynn can be contacted at lynn.oser@gmail.com.

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