Adapt and Adopt:
An Experiment in Making Best Practices Adequate in an Organization

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Abstract. So called best practices promise many advantages to organizations that adopt them. Reusing these practices, however, requires their adaptation to the specific context of each organization. This adaptation means that for a specific organization, the practices cannot be best. They can, at the most, be good or widely used, but not best. We briefly show this problem by describing a project at the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) where it was necessary to adapt the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) set of practices to the IFRC organizational culture.

1   Introduction

Everybody knows the Titanic story. The ship, believed to be unsinkable, collided with an iceberg in 1912 during its maiden voyage. Its design used some of the most advanced technology available at the time. The ship was considered a "pinnacle of naval architecture and technological achievement" [10]. One magazine even wrote that it was "practically unsinkable". But it sank.

The image people had of the Titanic was a marketing message, but it was not the ship's designers' message. They specified that "the titanic could stay afloat with any two of her compartments flooded, with one of the combinations of three compartments flooded of the first/last four compartments flooded" [10]. Any other combination would lead the ship to sink.

What we can learn from that story, is that we should be careful about marketing advertisement that show us marvelous achievements that we can obtain from a product, service, or method. Often the marketing message hides the reality of a concept and usually the problems hide in the details.

That is something that can be seen in the Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL) advertisement. A casual reading of the benefits listed in ITIL may lead to think that implementing its "best practices" and selecting an ITIL compliant system, will change the prevailing chaos into a smoothly running organization.

As we will see in this paper, ITIL is no magic bullet. It is mainly a collection of practices that has proven itself to be effective in many organizations. They should, however, be "adopted and adapted" to each specific organization, as defined by the ITIL philosophy. But, as this message is written after the benefits in the documentation, people tend to not take into consideration the analytical work required to adapt these so called best practices to the realities of the organization in question so that they stand a chance of being adopted by the would-be users.

Notice that the issue of best practices itself is therefore brought into question. In particular, if the practices defined by ITIL are best practices, why should they be adapted? If they are adapted, do they remain best? If they are best then they shouldn't evolve etc. It is interesting to note that best practices are not qualified as best in all languages. In French, for example, they are called "bonnes pratiques," which means good practices, not best. A different vocabulary is also used in other professions than IT. See for example, Generally Accepted Accounting Principles (GAAP) [8], or Good Laboratory Practice (GPL) [9]. Good practices (or generally accepted ones) stand a better chance of being adapted and modified in time as they are being made better. This is not possible with best practices.

We use the example of the selection of an ITIL compliant service support system in the IT department of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). We show the differences that we observed between the ITIL recommended practices and the specific organization practices that we could observe in an organization such as the IFRC.

The rest of the paper is structured in the following way. In Section 2 we briefly describe ITIL. In Section 3 we present the help desk project at the IFRC. In Section 4 we analyze the problems faced by the Helpdesk and its users. In Section 5 we show the differences between the ITIL recommended practices and the IFRC context. In Section 6 we present our conclusions about this work,

2   ITIL

ITIL is a set of so called best practices in Service Management. Its goal is to provide a collection of processes in order to assist the organizations in developing a framework for IT Service Management. Currently owned by the UK Office of Government Commerce (OGC), it is considered to be the most widely used best practices for IT Service management.

The philosophy of ITIL is "adopt and adapt". Therefore, it provides a process approach that is independent from the structure, the strategy and the size of the organization. It requires substantial analysis and synthesis in order to define the processes for a specific organization. The processes implemented would then be personalized and would not fit another organization.

ITIL is described in seven books that describe the different topics related to service management. The most used part is the IT Service Management part which groups Service Delivery and Service Support. This part is the only one required for the ITIL foundation certification (the entry point level).

As we mentioned in the introduction, we can find a list of attractive benefits in the ITIL documentation that constitutes a majority of the marketing message. We find interesting to list these benefits in order to understand this message:

- Reduced costs
- Improved IT Services through the use of proven best practices processes
- Better customer satisfaction through a more professional approach to service delivery
- Standards and guidance because of the use of a common vocabulary
- Improved productivity and efficiency
- Better uses of skills and experience
- Greater availability and change success rate
- Global view of the system

After reading this list without the context of the "adapt and adopt" philosophy, one might have the impression that if one implement the ITIL recommended practices, one would be able to greatly improve the management of an organization's IT services. It is tempting to think that it will also be easy and quick. However, those with experience in ITIL implementation have a more sober view: "a best practice framework is really an exercise in organizational and cultural change. Failing to realize that can be a recipe for disaster" [7]. Hence, the parallel we made in the introduction between the aura around ITIL and the Titanic compared with the fine print of their implementation. Business process and organizational culture analysis as recommended by [3] and others are necessary to reach an adequacy between ITIL and the organization practices.

3   The Helpdesk at IFRC

"The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the world's largest humanitarian organization, providing assistance without discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It comprises 185 members Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, a Secretariat in Geneva and more than 60 delegations strategically located to support activities around the world. […]
The Federation's mission is to improve the lives of vulnerable people by mobilizing the power of humanity. It carries out relief operations to assist victims of disasters, and combines this with development work to strengthen the capacities of its member National Societies. The Federation's work focuses on four core areas: the promotion of humanitarian values, the disaster response, the disaster preparedness, and the health and community care". [2]

The Information Systems Department (ISD) of the IFRC is a department of the Secretariat based in Geneva. Its purpose is to deliver appropriate IT (Information Technology) and telecommunications services in a cost effective and timely manner to the staff located in Geneva and in the field. It is organized in four units. The User Sup-

port that contains the Help Desk. Its mission is to provide assistance to all aspects of computer, telephones, hardware and software issues and user administration. The System Support aims to research, implement, and maintain high quality, secure technology solutions for other IFRC services. It serves the IFRC community by providing the infrastructure needed by the staff to access current technology. System Support provides network based services, reliable data backup services, access control, installation and support for administration systems etc. The Field Support and Telecom provides support to national societies, federation delegations in the Telecom and Information Technologies Domain, as well as support in case of disaster or emergency. Finally, IT Project Management is responsible for the management of all IT projects in the department.

The management of incidents was performed with a service support system. Within ISD this system was not much liked. Some staff found it too "heavy", too old. Others refused to use it because it was, in their opinion, a poor use of their time. Subsequently, ISD wanted to reorganise its structure and to implement better helpdesk processes, it was decided to create a project targeted at improving the organisation of the support function and during which they would select a better tool to support this new organisation. It was further decided that ITIL processes will be implemented and that the future system will be ITIL compliant.

4   Analysis of the Helpdesk Problem

We used Lightswitch [5] goal and belief modeling to analyze the business processes and culture of IFRC users and ISD staff. The model in Figure 1 summarizes the reasons for which the current system is not used by both users and ISD staff. The model shows, in the upper-level corner, the main goal of the users: "Get incidents solved as quickly as possible". The row of concepts above this goal shows the users' beliefs that reduce this goal to two lower level goals: "Do no enter requests in current system" and "Contact ISD staff directly". Likewise, the ISD staff's upper level goal is shown on the left side of the ISD staff box (Provide IT support to users), and generates the two lower goals: "purchase a better system" and "develop a helpdesk process that satisfies staff and user". The trail of beliefs and goals leading to the goal of purchasing a better system has been highlighted with a different background in Figure 1, to separate it from the need to change the helpdesk process. ..

Interviews of users showed that the main reasons they were not using the current system were the following (expressed as beliefs in Figure 1):

If we enter a request in the system we don't know when it will be solved

We don't want to fill yet another formula

We do not know how to describe IT problems

We do not want to take training to learn the current system

If we ask ISD colleagues they will help us (connected to the goal of IFRC to help people in need)

The ISD staff complains about having too many entry points. Users can enter their request via a web page, send it by email, call directly, send a fax or drop-into the

Helpdesk office to ask their questions. This leads to too many interruptions and prevents the ISD staff to efficiently perform their work.

This creates a tension between the requirements of the users (directly contact ISD staff and not use the system) and the ISD staff that wants users to use the system so as not to be interrupted, hence the decision to purchase a new ITIL compliant system. However, the Lightswitch model also shows that the helpdesk process needs to be reviewed in order to be acceptable to both staff and users. It is important to note that what is needed is a process that takes into account the conflicting demands between ISD staff (users should use system) and the users (bypass system and call ISD staff directly). This sort of solution is not defined by ITIL.
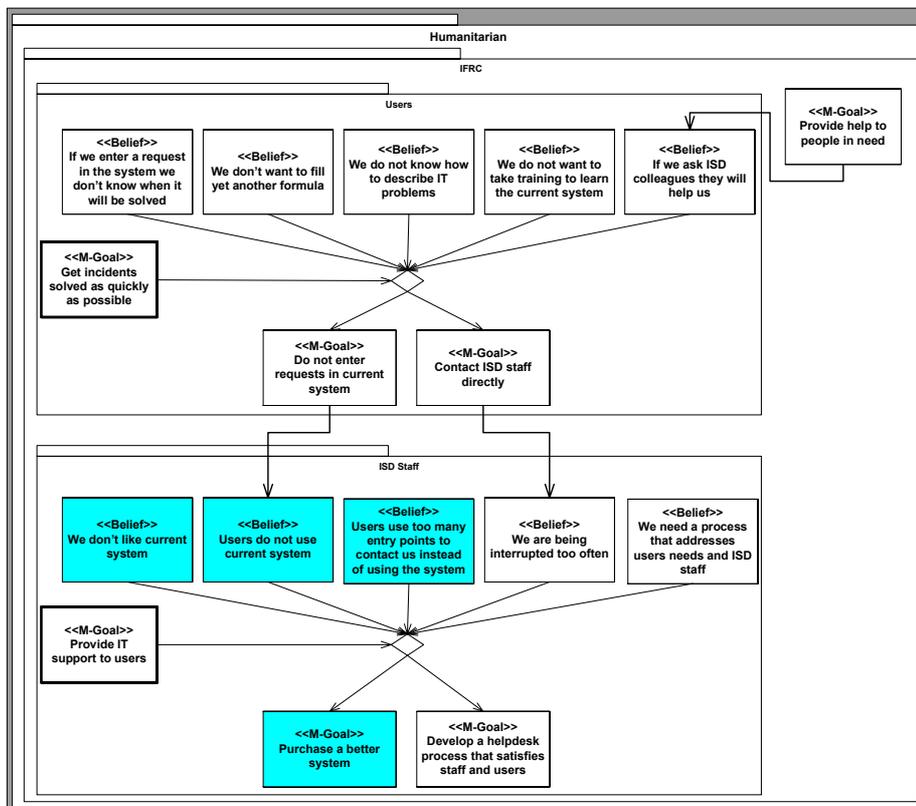

Figure 1: Lightswitch context of helpdesk project

5 Adapting and Adopting ITIL

In this section we compare between ITIL best practices and the actual IFRC practices seeking to find an adequacy between the two and therefore a helpdesk process that satisfies IFRC users and ISD staff. The following table summarizes the discrepancies found which concern mainly the ISD staff and the users' requirements.

Difference	IFRC practices	ITIL recommendations
ISD staff		
D1	Too many entry points: Forms, phone, email, fax and people coming into office. Their biggest complaint was about all the calls they had during the day which interrupt them for sometimes very simple issues that could have been entered in the system. They require a filter on the phone so that only urgent requests can go through.	o Multiple entry points o Advice for using a support tool but no advice that the user should be asked to use the tool. o Much advice about the phone: what should be told, what kind of info to ask for. o No recommendation about how to make users use the tool and not the phone. Only detailed benefits of users entering their request in the system o Focus on user and not on ISD staff.
Users		
D2	Do not want to fill yet another form.	Use of forms is recommended by ITIL: "The usage of form-based inputs increases the integrity of the data supplied and assists in allocation to the best-suited support specialist, team or department" [4].
D3	Do not want to receive many automatic emails that don't solve the incident.	Emails should be sent to users at each step of the resolution process.

D1: ITIL has no recommendation concerning the ISD requirement about having less entry points. It just lists all the possibilities by which users can enter their request, but does not mention staff being overloaded and constantly interrupted. Furthermore there are many advices about answering phone calls. We then have the impression that it favors this entry point.

D2: ITIL recommends the use of IT based forms because it permits the Helpdesk to better manage its workload by being interrupted less often. As the paragraph concerning the tool explains only its benefits for the IT staff, nothing is said about the users' dislike of forms. ITIL recommends the use of forms but does not say anything about the fact that users do not want to fill forms and do not know how to do it. Hence, ITIL does not specify how to promote the use of forms. Furthermore, ITIL does not recommend using it for every request. We understood from [4] that the users should be able to choose the entry point by which they will send their request. If the users dislike forms and can choose the entry point to contact the Helpdesk, they may very well use the ones that ISD doesn't want them to use, e.g. phone. Simply implementing the ITIL recommended processes is not likely to solve the dissatisfaction of the users and ISD staff.

D3: ITIL recommends sending an email to users at each step of the resolution process, which includes confirmation messages when the request is opened and recorded, to inform the user when the problem will be handled, when a software request is accepted, when a request is completed, when an installation is scheduled, and each time more information is requested. Users are then submerged with messages from the Helpdesk about their request, but their request is not handled any faster. Furthermore, people often dislike receiving too many emails, and may become frustrated with these automatic messages that do not address their objective to have their incident solved or their service request handled. This may be a further reason to not use the system, not only the current system but the ITIL compliant system as well.

A possible solution to these discrepancies may be to specify an accommodation [6], [1], a solution which doesn't completely satisfy both parties but represents some arrangement with which they can live. The accommodation means that users accept to use (simplified) forms whereas Helpdesk staff accepts to call people to obtain more information. This accommodation may use a technical solution that addresses both users aversion to forms and ISD staff need for les interruptions by implementing forms where most if not all fields are optional. Submitting such a form only signals the Helpdesk that the user has a problem. It gives little or no information about the nature of the problem but it enables the Helpdesk staff to be notified of problems without being interrupted by phone calls. Helpdesk staff then can prioritize the problems and call users to address the problem. The Helpdesk staff may have to call many of users but they would be able to choose when they want to do it, and to better manage their work. Finally, only essential, meaningful emails should be sent to users by the system, e.g. confirmation of receipt and estimated solution date and/or time.

Such a solution needs a commitment from the Helpdesk to insure fast and reliable service. A configuration database and a list containing standard procedures that users can perform by themselves (how to) may help to provide such a service.

6   Conclusions

In this paper we briefly showed an example of reaching an adequacy between ITIL recommended practices and organizational culture. This is essential in achieving the reuse of the ITIL practices through the small print requirement of adapting and adopting ITIL to a specific organization. After all, ITIL is a good repository of practices that have been proven to be efficient and effective across many organizations. However, if this example is of general value, it means that term "Best Practices" is an oversell. It essentially hides the need to adapt any practice to the context of a specific organization. Organizations would do well to not get blinded by the marketing promise of best practices and remember that much work is needed before they can be used.

7 References

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