

ITSM **101**

10 Tips for Better Problem Management



Introduction

ITIL problem management is an IT service management (ITSM) capability that can take your overall service levels from good to great. Why? Because it gets to the root cause of business-affecting IT issues, identifies solutions, and works with other teams - as required - to ensure these solutions are delivered quickly and safely.

However, it's sadly not uncommon for organizations to treat problem management as a poor relation to corporate IT service desk and incident management activity. So, while the service desk and incident management processes are adequately defined and staffed, problem management is unfortunately often something that's done as and when time allows. Which is probably never for many overworked service desks!

Consequently, your IT department might never be focused on problem management. It might do some reactive problem management in response to a major incident, say. But proactive problem management - with dedicated resource actively identifying problems - will likely never receive the attention and investment it deserves.

This needs to change. And to help get you started (with problem management), this paper offers up ten simple and practical tips to help you run and maintain an effective problem management capability within your organization.



What Are Problems?

ITIL defines a “problem” as:

“A cause of one or more incidents. The cause is not usually known at the time a problem record is created, and the problem management process is responsible for further investigation.”

And problems can be identified just about anywhere within your organization’s IT ecosystem.

In an ideal world, problem management resource will regularly analyze incident data to identify trends (related to common IT issues). Why? Because far too much costly, and possibly scarce, IT resource is spent fighting repeat issues - when this resource would be better utilized supporting problem management to tackle (and remove) the root causes rather than just repeatedly dealing with the symptoms, i.e. the repeat incidents.



Why Do You Need Problem Management?

In today's dynamic, and technology-dependent, business environment, having a problem management process is a must-have if your organization needs to consistently deliver high levels of both IT service availability and performance.

Problem management provides the ability to systematically identify, understand the root causes of, and remedy problems. This helps to improve day-to-day service desk operations and IT service delivery. In particular by:

- **Preventing business-affecting problems.** The business impact of problems, in the form of recurring incidents, can be considerable in terms of lost productivity, the financial implications of outages, and the degradation of both customer perception and corporate brand reputation. Problems can be removed, and risks mitigated, before they adversely impact business operations. It helps to take the pressure off IT service desks, particularly with the proactive identification of issues that would otherwise ultimately manifest in widely-affecting major incidents.
- **Allowing for better major incident management.** Problem management capabilities can also be applied for root cause analysis and resolution post major incidents. It can be used as the backbone of the post major incident review process to improve not only IT services but also the major incident management process itself.
- **Improving customer satisfaction.** Effective problem management reduces the recurrence of commonly-experienced IT issues and their unfortunate effect on business operations. This will have a positive impact on both service desk agent and end-user satisfaction.
- **Improving staff morale and retention.** Problem management capabilities remove many of the repetitive issues from service desk agents' queues. It also provides them with much needed information for dealing with known errors and known problems by way of workarounds. All making for happier IT support staff and a greater probability that they will stay with the team.

So why wouldn't your organization not want an effective problem management capability?



10 Tips for Problem Management

Sometimes, one of the hardest parts of ITSM, and the adoption of additional best practices, is justifying and starting them. To help with this, and with doing the right things the right way, here are 10 best practice tips for problem management:



ENSURE THAT YOUR INITIAL SCOPE IS REALISTIC

Start with a limited scope (for problem management), and it helps to look for some “quick wins” – those one or two high-pain, high-visibility IT issues that have already had an adverse business impact and use problem management to address them.

Monitor your progress with the quick wins in your early-adoption days and use the results to recognize and demonstrate the success and value of problem management to key business stakeholders.



DESIGN AN EASY-TO-USE PROBLEM FORM

Problem management records focus people’s attention on establishing the root cause and actions needed to prevent issue recurrence. So, design your problem form such that it’s easy to capture the right information quickly and particularly when under pressure.

Potential things to include are:

- Description of the issue (both a high-level summary for senior management plus the details for support teams)
- The IT/business service affected
- Impact - and consider both the business and technical implications
- Related incident descriptions

- Related changes
- User profile
- Equipment details including category - hardware, software, network, etc.
- Priority - preferably based on a similar impact and urgency matrix as the one used to drive your incident management process
- Details of all diagnostic or attempted recovery actions taken - what has been tried so far? Has anything worked, even if at least partially? Has anything made the situation worse?
- An attachment field capability - to capture any further information such as meeting minutes, service improvement plans, or device logs.

By structuring your form around root cause analysis, you'll help to drive the right behaviors into your support teams - such that nothing is lost or forgotten, and investigations follow a structured and logical approach.



KNOW YOUR ENVIRONMENTS

When running your problem management process/capability, having a great understanding of your IT and business environments is a must.

Knowing what your IT infrastructure is means that you're better positioned to understand potential causes of incidents. Your environment will be somewhat unique to your company, but a typical IT landscape will include the following:

- Hardware components
- Software components
- Network and voice components
- In-house services and applications
- Third-party supported services and applications
- Policies, procedures, and governance
- Security controls
- Documentation.

And by getting a handle on what your business-as-usual (BAU) operations look like, you're potentially able to get a jump start on identifying the potential root causes for incidents and the associated problems.





DON'T PANIC IF YOU DON'T HAVE A PROBLEM MANAGEMENT TOOLSET

If you don't have a problem-management-enabling ITSM toolset, then it makes things more challenging but not impossible.

Start out with a personal productivity tool. For instance, create a simple spreadsheet such that you can keep track of all your problems and where they're at in terms of investigation and resolution.

Such problem management spreadsheets should contain the following information:

- Unique reference
- Title
- Logged date and time
- Resolution date and time
- High-level description
- Service affected
- Category
- Priority
- Status
- Support team currently investigating
- Related ticket details (typically major incidents, incidents, and changes)
- Root cause
- Workaround
- Permanent fix.

This can be useful for both operational management and management reporting.

It's not the most polished of problem-management-enabling solutions, but it will give you a good start and is something that can be transitioned into a fit-for-purpose ITSM toolset later.





EMPLOY WORKAROUNDS WHEN APPROPRIATE

In the spirit of the quick wins mentioned earlier, use problem management to find temporary solutions - ITIL calls these “workarounds.”

There’s a need to realize that not every problem can be fixed quickly and/or permanently. Maybe the cost is too high, or the benefits don’t justify the effort needed.

So, can any of your problems be addressed by a temporary solution? Something that won’t fix things forever but will quickly get the service and/or end users back up and running again. Common examples of workarounds include weekly reboots for the flakey server that falls over at the worst possible moment, directing the Finance department to a different printer during month end, or re-routing network traffic for a particular service or application.



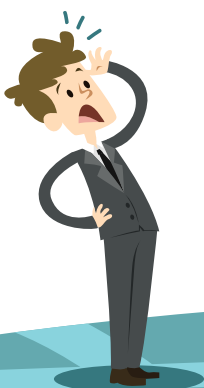
FOCUS ON DELIVERING PERMANENT RESOLUTIONS

By now, you hopefully know that many problems are repeat incidents. The repeat offenders that pop up time and time again. Perhaps the network is always slow on a Monday morning. Or overnight processing always overruns at month end. Or are there persistent email-performance issues?

Workarounds will deliver some quick wins, but your problem management process also needs to concentrate on finding permanent resolutions.

This approach might not be quick, but it will deliver more value over time - because you’ll reduce the number of incidents and the amount of time spent firefighting, plus the business impact of repeat incidents will be minimized.

But remember - while permanent resolutions are great, there’ll still be times when workarounds will be the best, and perhaps only, solutions.





GET PROACTIVE

Proactive problem management is a capability that looks at problems that might otherwise be missed. It's the analysis of incident records, plus the use of data collected by other ITSM processes, to identify trends or significant issues.

This can be done in a variety of ways:

- Trend analysis - reviewing previous incidents and looking for common or recurring themes
- Working with support teams and service delivery managers - asking them what keeps them awake at night
- Working with other process teams - be it by working with capacity management to look at performance, availability management to look at uptime, or change management to limit change-related issue volumes

Balance is key though. If you spend too much time on reactive problem management, you'll be constantly firefighting, stuck in a break-fix mindset and missing opportunities for continual service improvement (CSI). But if you focus too much on being proactive, the business-as-usual (BAU) issues might spiral out of control.



RING IN THE CHANGES

Get more closely involved with change management. Firstly, if problem management personnel aren't attending change advisory boards (CABs), then they should be.

As a problem manager they'll be best placed to identify any trends or issues associated with potential change activity. And, on the other side of the coin, they might be involved with raising changes to resolve particular issues - so the change management process will be key in terms of delivering that change effectively and safely.



Still not convinced (about the need for a close relationship with change management)?

Sometimes a change must go live despite there being known issues with it. Sometimes it's a business-critical product change. Sometimes it's just too expensive to back out and it's more cost effective to deal with issues as-and-when they occur. If faced with such situations, insist on raising a "known error" and sharing any workarounds or fix information with the IT service desk and onward support teams.

What's a known error? We're glad you asked - because so many people get confused by all the ITIL terminology. A known error is a type of problem where the root cause has been identified and there's either a workaround in place or a permanent fix is being planned. By documenting any known errors, especially with regards to planned changes, the service desk gets a head start in planning for, and dealing with, any issues.



CREATE A KEDB

Speaking of known errors, it's good practice to collate them in, and share them via, a known error database (KEDB). This database is created and maintained by problem management personnel and is used by both the incident and problem management processes.

When documenting known errors, it's important to capture the following details to help the service desk as much as possible:

- Nature of the issue
- Service(s) affected
- Common symptoms
- Most impacted business units
- Workarounds
- What to avoid doing.

Having a list of known errors and workarounds in one central location will not only avoid duplication and rework, it can also be used as a tool to upskill your service desk (acting as a springboard for knowledge management). For instance, through using a KEDB your organization can increase efficiency by the service desk developing helpful scripts for handling common calls, which will in turn help call handling and interim resolution times (until the problems are resolved).



LOOK AT HOW FAR YOU'VE COME

As with any business process/capability, there's a need to use the right set of metrics to understand operational performance and business-level results.

When creating a reporting pack/dashboard, it's useful to start with the basics and then build up more detail over time. Why? Because it's all too easy to get carried away with reporting when the reality is: if you create pages upon pages of reports, you'll generate significant work for the team that may not actually be needed.

So, when creating a reporting pack for problem management, start in a limited way. Perhaps using the following as a starting point:

- Management summary - are there any key trends? Are ticket volumes up on previous months? What services were affected?
- Number of problems opened and closed - to give an idea of volumes
- Number of problems by customer - to understand which customers or business units are most adversely affected
- Number of problems by service - to get a handle on which applications and business services are being most affected
- Number of problems linked to known errors - preferably with a proven workaround
- Number of problems on hold with third-party suppliers - to understand the external reliance, if they're being progressed in a timely manner, and whether you need support from supplier management to escalate or get updates.



Summary

Problem management is critical to efficient and effective IT operations - it should be an ITSM staple. If your organization doesn't have a formal (proactive) problem management capacity it should seriously question why.

The barriers preventing problem management probably aren't related to the process itself, given that it's relatively straightforward when compared to most ITIL processes. It's more likely that suitable resource has never been justified. Or that resource has been diverted to something else - perhaps incident management firefighting?

While the justification of dedicated resource might appear daunting, the analysis of corporate incident management data should support the need for the proactive management of recurring incidents.

Try it. Do a little problem management - even if informally - it might just make IT's and customers' lives a lot easier.

About InvGate

InvGate is a provider of IT service management (ITSM) and IT Asset Management (ITAM) solutions, designed to simplify and improve the lives of IT professionals.

InvGate Service Desk helps customers to provide better IT support, offering a single point of contact for end users to report IT issues and make requests for new services. With capabilities aligned with the ITIL best practice framework, InvGate Service Desk enables your company to improve IT support efficiency, to reduce costs, and to improve the quality of service and the customer experience for end users.

If you'd like to try InvGate for yourself, then you can [start your free 30-day trial](#) today.

