The UK ITSM Software Review 2017

A practical, management view of a rich and complex market; how some of the biggest ITSM names performed under scrutiny.
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**Read Me First**

*First things first.* Please do not jump straight to the results for individual vendors without reading these introductory pages beforehand. For this exercise, context is crucial.

**The scenario:** imagine an IT Support Services manager with a need for an ITSM system, not just to log and resolve IT support enquiries, but to orchestrate the manpower resources that produce those results.

He knows what his process is and that it involves more than just the first line. From experience, he knows where its pinch-points are. This gives him a solid idea of the statistics the selected system will have to gather, to inform his management decisions.

Now he has to decide which vendors to talk to. But there are too many. So to create a longlist, perhaps even a shortlist, he visits the websites of some of the top vendors to see if they have demonstration versions in which he can test his predetermined requirements. That way, he can be sure which systems can help him before he calls for sales assistance.

This review describes what happened in that scenario with eight of the UK’s top ITSM vendors.

**Review Premise**

This was a review of the demonstration versions of a selection of leading ITSM software packages available in the UK.

This exercise had two purposes. First was to examine the ‘try before you buy’ demos offered by a number of ITSM software vendors to help buyers get down to a longlist. The second, to some extent more importantly, was to test those demos against a certain set of service management criteria.

Reviewing ITSM software is a complex undertaking. We had to develop a model by which we could test disparate systems under near-identical conditions.

What the review looked for was pointedly *not* whether the software can reflect ITIL processes. That need has become a commodity that pretty much the whole market can meet. Nor whether it had a nice user interface - they all do. Our imaginary Support Services manager wanted to know how well this software would be able to manage IT support delivery.

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**About the Author**

Noel Bruton is a UK-based consultant, writer and award winning IT user support manager. Having joined the industry in 1979, he began his consultancy in 1991. He is the author of bestselling books in the field, which are required or recommended reading for professional and academic IT management qualifications in various institutions around the world. He is frequently quoted in academic dissertations. The originator of numerous concepts, terms, techniques, and algorithms, his inventions and methods have come to be reflected in mainstream IT service management frameworks.
What Does ‘Manage’ Mean?

One of the difficulties here is what is meant by ‘manage’. For several years now, we’ve been led by the hype and vocabulary of the ITSM industry into accepting that ‘management’ is about processes. We only have to count how many ITIL processes have the word ‘management’ in their name to see that. Trouble is, no process can ever be ‘management’. A process is what we invent to replace the need for management. We build all necessary routine decisions right into the process, so the process either runs itself or just needs a supervisor. The manager has already moved on, probably to design and decide over a new process or strategy. Management is needed in the design of a process but not in the conduct of it. It would perhaps be more correct, for example, to call the ‘change management’ process something more accurate and less grandiose, like ‘change control’.

Management is, and always has been the strategic anticipation of demand and the tactical orchestration of resources to meet that demand, with ‘orchestration’ being the key concept. It is a much more elevated view, looking at the bigger picture of the provision of service, than just watching IT support calls going past and much later, checking if we responded within some arbitrary target.

To satisfy that, and thus to actually manage my service rather than just oversee its continuing processes, there are some things I need to know in detail.

Test Questions

1. How much work am I doing, and of what types? If the call-log form does not represent the call types properly, we may never be able to answer this because not all calls will be logged. So we won’t be able to quantify either demand or the number of staff we need. This is particularly important for any IT department that has a varied workload, such as a mix of reactive support calls with projects and BAU. We need data to be able to task our resources accurately.

2. Do we have the skillsets to do it, in terms of quantity, redundancy, and availability? We can check that by who solves what. If all calls of a given type are resolved by the same person, or some people take far fewer calls than others, then we’ve probably got a structural or resource-deployment problem to solve.

3. Am I creating or avoiding backlog build-up? Does the tool’s design emphasise assignment from silo to silo, or does it inherently encourage workload throughput? The former risks backlogs and pinch points, both of which are almost always unnecessary. Most of the time, if we have a backlog of support calls, then something’s wrong with our process. Data can help find out what.

From these questions, we made a list of the stats we’d need to make the requisite decisions, all of which could be collected by the simple process of taking, logging, assigning, resolving, and closing submitted user enquiries.
The decision criteria set by the above considerations are involved and technical. It is doubtful that they could be resolved in a conversation with an account manager or a salesperson. Imagine the exchange: “Does your product do (insert any complex, esoteric, specialist function here)?” Such a conversation would be fruitless unless the salesperson were an experienced IT support manager also versed in the use of statistics. Besides, if the product does not immediately exhibit the capability, all the salesperson can offer is a hypothetical answer, given new fields included in the database, new reports added, etc.

It’s got to be first hand. The required functionality is something the potential buyer needs to be able to see for himself. With so many potentially qualifying systems out there, life is too short to not have a process of elimination.

The next step was to select the vendors we’d be looking at. There isn’t time to assess every product so we just picked from the biggest and busiest stands from the floorplan for the Servicedesk and IT Support Show. The resulting longlist, in alphabetic order, came down to Axios, BMC, Cherwell, Freshdesk, HPE, Hornbill, Ivanti, Manage Engine, Service Now, and Topdesk.

So, away we go. Do they have a demo of the product? Does the demo show the product as able to help this manager genuinely manage his IT support delivery?

It was a very mixed, and not always pleasant experience.
The Results

The Topdesk website invites visitors to take a demo. There is the usual form to fill in but that done, the response was almost immediate. No waiting for an account manager, no being sales-qualified, just access. Having known vanishingly little about Topdesk prior to this exercise, so far so good. The access itself came in the form of a choice between a support operative account, or a visit to the end user portal, another common approach in this review.

Complete

But there, the commonality ended, because for IT support management purposes, Topdesk showed itself to be one of the most complete systems in the survey. Conveniently, it was pre-populated with test data, and allowed new data of all types to be added. Unlike several other products reviewed here, it does not stop at the Servicedesk, but accounts for all types of IT support functions and the variety of their staff’s workload. It also comprises ongoing workload, by which repeating Business-As-Usual jobs can be assigned to staff as ‘tasks’.

This assignment capability is also present in the management of projects, even down to the individual components of a project. This can be examined on a calendar, so management can see at a glance the workday to-do list of staff members and so make decisions about further work allocation.

These ‘tasks’ can also be viewed as skillsets, listed in the profile of individual members of the various support workgroups. Furthermore, we can check how well individual technicians are performing, to highlight skills development opportunities, congratulate productivity, or perhaps question work rate.

Versatility

The ‘Modules’ view was particularly interesting. The entire structure of the system can be perused, not in terms of tables and fields but in terms of workflow functionality. This takes service design to a refreshingly informative level.

Also of interest is where this might be implemented. This is no slave to the world according to ITIL, but considers the design of a support service at a practical level. It is based not around prescribed processes – although one suspects its modular design means it could be, if desired – but around what we deliver and to whom we deliver it, and the resources we need for that. This pragmatic approach suggests Topdesk is blessed with an unusual versatility. It would appear to be equally at home in internal, corporate support or in a channel-based business supporting external users.

Design

Within the parameters of this review, Topdesk did it all and then some. Whoever designed this system really knows what it takes to run, monitor and orchestrate a workgroup, acting as a service
factory. It is truly IT support as an end-to-end service, not just as several silos of reactive specialist technicians. Importantly, the available demo on the company website can show all that functionality, leaving none of it out. Furthermore, it is particularly refreshing that it offers this without insisting that the prospect wait at the behest of a promised ‘account manager’. I was given a contact to help with any questions I might have, not somebody who wanted to know how many licences he could sell me at the cost of which competitor.

Topdesk demonstrated that it had solutions in numerous areas crucial to our imaginary manager’s test criteria. These included Resource management and allocation, throughput monitoring and skills recording. The product can also claim market versatility, with a potential fit for both internal and external support services.

This was a genuinely refreshing, excellent demo, with excellent customer support of an excellent system.

In this writer’s view, this truly superb software should be on the shortlist of any IT service delivery manager.

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): full
- Management criteria testable (no / partially / yes): yes
- Score: 100%

The Hornbill demo is extensive, with various views possible from manager to operative.

Reporting comes in the two common types of straightforward report, or dashboard. The latter is made by accumulating widgets, which take data from the system and present it in graphical or tabular form. The reports are a little trickier to create from scratch, as field names are presented in their esoteric, rather than user-friendly form. A report creator would need a fuller understanding of the system’s table structure or at least a field-name glossary and description.

Some particularly interesting statistics were offered as standard. The average number of times an incident changes hands (“bounces”) before resolution can be a useful indicator of process efficiency. A drill-down shows who are the worst offenders, thus suggesting training opportunities.

Members from all over IT involved in support are described in the software. An operative can be examined by his skillsets and membership of knowledge and special interest groups. An operative’s activities are presented in calendar form, which would be useful to the second-line manager needing to schedule various staff tasks and responsibilities - for example working on a project or dealing with escalated second line calls.

Staff in other parts of IT, not just the Servicedesk, can be made available to the support workflow, or redirected from it under management control. Functions and activities can be assigned to certain staff members.
Hornbill’s system is one of the stronger in this review when it comes to considering the whole of IT support, not just the Servicedesk. The second line is as well catered for as the first. The product still lacks an integrated project-activity control function (although a company representative intimated that this functionality is being considered for addition). Also, the skillsets mentioned in operatives’ profiles are not searchable for escalation and assignment purposes, although they can be found by reading colleague profiles.

Despite this, Hornbill’s demo was still one of the closest in this review to dealing with the requirements of our IT Support manager. It is notable for its breadth of scope in considering how IT support affects the whole of IT, not just the Servicedesk, and as such it is recommended for a closer look.

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): full
- Management criteria testable (no / partially / yes): yes
- Score: 100%

BMC has not one, but three separate offerings in the Service Desk / IT Support arena. These are Remedy 9 and the ex-Numara brands ‘Footprints’ and ‘Track-It’. Of these, only Remedy is reviewed here, being the only one of the three with an online demo.

The Remedy 9 online demo is one of the most accessible in the market. An included button takes the reviewer straight to the reporting page. As well as several standard dashboard-style outputs, there is an extensive ‘Smart Reporting’ system. This consists of a list of fields that can be dragged onto a summary report. Further SQL queries can be added via a built-in editor. The field-list is indeed extensive.

**Smart Reporting**

I found that my key criteria meant that I was using ‘Smart Reporting’ more than the dashboards, even for obvious statistics like speed of response by resolver group.

Mean-Time-to-Ownership (MTTO) could ostensibly be calculated via the ‘Responded Date’ field. Unfortunately there seemed to be no way to report on the number of ownership changes, so arriving at a ‘Pop-Rate’ throughput metric (a process efficiency test, being the number of changes of ownership as a proportion of requests) might be problematical.

There is a report on the article-by-article use of the knowledge database, but that’s somewhat after the fact. As a workgroup manager, I would be interested much less in what knowledge I have, but in the gaps in my knowledge, so I could plan to fill them. Here Remedy takes the route followed by many, which is to focus on enquiries passing between groups and individuals. This has its uses – however, it does not cover the real reason those groups are in the support chain, which is for their specialist knowledge and authorities. This means that I could find no way to manage my technical
skillsets from these reports. Remedy may not be the solution for ensuring the people who log and resolve all these user enquiries have the skills, redundancies and authorities they need.

Compliance

The other demo for Remedy 9 was a portal to the Service Desk functionality of logging and assigning a call. There appeared to be no way to see the reassignment of that call from the assignee’s point of view. Thus, that capability cannot be verified. This is a real limit to the demo; however, this may not be entirely the fault of the vendor. In ITSM, compliance with ITIL is the name of the game. And when it comes to IT Support, ITIL is notoriously narrow in its thinking, being obsessed with the Service Desk in blithe ignorance of other departments’ involvement. If Remedy is following ITIL, it will be no real surprise if it makes the same mistake, as appears to be the case here.

The Remedy reporting demo is smooth, efficient, and highly functional. But ultimately it was able to deal with only some, not all, of my management criteria. But on the basis that my criteria may not be yours, Remedy is worth a look.

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): full
- Management criteria testable (no / partially / yes): partially
- Score: 80%

Ivanti required the demo seeker to fill in a form and await assessment before demo access could be granted. Subsequently, a very friendly lady engaged this writer in a very, very long phone call. Much of this was to qualify the prospect – i.e. find out the scale and likelihood of a potential sale. She understood this was for a review that would be published, and repeatedly promised to provide access to a demo version.

Her first attempt, several days later, was just a repeat of the initial form. Eventually, the demo arrived, via an exception-management route. Apparently I had almost been disregarded by at least three functions in the main machinery, until a senior individual happened to recognise my name. Fortunate – but it had me wonder whether other potential customers might not be so lucky. Easily fixed.

Broad Range

The Ivanti trial majors around the ‘Heat’ product, the result of the recent Landesk-Heat amalgamation. A broad range of accounts is offered, each providing different access from a different point of view – Service Desk Analyst, Service Owner, Change Manager, Problem Manager, etc.

I logged on as ‘Service Desk Manager’ and went straight to the reports. A comprehensive list of preformatted queries was available, along with a useful range of export formats for further calculations and formatting. Several of my target statistics were represented. I was encouraged to see response and resolution by agent, rather than just achievement or breach of some arbitrary
service level target. From this, and the also included trended first call resolution figure, I would be able to calculate my MTTF (‘Mean Time To Fix’, a test of the effectiveness of query resolution) and so begin to get a handle on my resource consumption. Incidents can be broken down into tasks – very useful for complex enquiries.

Having tried several other available logons to see other aspects of the system, it is clear that Heat has ‘mature system’ written all over it, but in a good way. I felt in competent hands.

**Bottlenecks**

Workload by individual shows me who’s overloaded, and so with other statistics I might be able to identify my bottlenecks. Heat has a knowledge database as do others. Unfortunately, again as others, this seems not to translate into any form of usable skillset management, so using the tool to broaden my workflow bottlenecks would not be straightforward.

Going through the help files showed that there were other layers to the system not offered in this demo. There were other reports I felt I needed, but creating them would require authorisation as an administrator. The mouthwatering prospect of a ‘Configuration Console’ was dangled, tantalisingly out of reach. This isn’t surprising – in the hands of the casual visitor, there might be a risk of damage to Ivanti’s demo system. I’d have locked it down too. But I’d have liked to see if I could report, for example, on the frequency of ownership changes to see how efficient my process might be.

As a whole, the system seems to follow a pattern common in this industry, as found in these reviews. This is an adherence to the ITIL dogma of Servicedesk, Incident, Request, Change, Problem and so on. Anything to do with People – development, Single Points of Failure, achievement, etc. - was hard to find or just missing, as in ITIL.

In the demo I witnessed, there was indeed a limited offering for the administration of projects and their associated tasks, but not of the people who would carry these out. In fact I could find no way of seeing the workload from the point of view of a second-line workgroup and how, for example, these projects might be impacted by assigned servicedesk calls. ITIL pretty much ignores the functionally crucial second-line – and it would appear that as is the case with other tools, neither does Heat focus on it.

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): partial
- Management criteria testable (no / partially / yes): partially
- Score: 60%

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**serviceNow**

Service Now’s chosen means of demonstrating its popular and well-reputed product is largely by an extensive selection of videos. This library is slick, professional, and comprehensive. It covers numerous ITSM scenarios, each video as a presentation of how the product might address it. The gist of the videos is to present features and functionality of the software, those capabilities that
the vendor would particularly like the visitor to notice. It was another example of the vendor’s agenda initially trumping that of the prospective customer.

Some of these videos have a form of limited interaction, where the visitor is led to a button on the screen and told to click it. This technique is unnecessary and somewhat patronising – the visitor is likely to be an experienced IT Services manager with an agenda and a budget, not your aged mother-in-law needing to be taught how to print her emails.

Unfortunately, there is no actual live demo version of the software, so the visitor must hope that his bases of decision are covered in the videos’ scripts. Unfortunately, mine were not, whereas others might find them more relevant. While watching these videos, on a couple of occasions, a screen would suggest content that might match my criteria, but the designer of the video would then move onto something else.

There was enough information in the videos to suggest that ServiceNow might well be able to produce output in line with my criteria. But as I could not test this at first hand, it would have to remain an assumption.

The obvious next step would be to call in a vendor representative and request more specific details. But then that defeats the point of this exercise, which was to list products that had proven themselves relevant to decided criteria.

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): limited
- Management criteria testable (no / partially / yes): partially
- Score: 40%

A spokesperson for ServiceNow offered the following comments: “At ServiceNow we provide a number of ways to see and try our solutions. The typical flow is videos on solution pages, DemoNow, DemoCenter, and then a demo by a Solution Consultant aligned to requirements. If a prospect wants a live instance, they can sign-up for the Developer Program or request one from their assigned Solution Consultant.

“DemoNow, with click-through and video demos, is commonly used as an introduction to our products.

“DemoCenter is for those that want a more in-depth experience. It has a greater selection of videos with more technical detail and provides access to a calendar of live demos where participants can interact with the presenter and ask questions.

“The ServiceNow Developer Program provides registered users with a personal instance of the ServiceNow platform. This full-featured instance allows ServiceNow developers to build, extend and integrate new apps, and anyone to explore the platform.”
As regards a demo version, Axios Systems offers two options. One is a live demonstration of the ITSM product, conducted by Axios staff. The other is an example of the user portal, where enquiries can be logged and tracked, and FAQs can be consulted.

I signed up for the live demonstration, and was advised that somebody would call me. Several days later, that still had not happened. I’ve got a deadline.

There is no online example of any management interface, nor of the system as might be seen by a second line resolving agency.

The user portal is just that – how a corporate, non-IT support end user would see Assyst. Curiously though, it would appear that end user can see the number of open enquiries, and SLA achievement by IT workgroup. One might see that as sensitive information not for open publication, especially in the case of the demo, where it would appear a sizeable proportion of requests breach the SLA.

In the limited reports on offer in the demo, there was no illustration of actual service level, which means that the SLA must be taken as gospel. Nor could we find any indication of the SLA schedule.

Out of interest, we sought an example of what the SLA might be by logging an imaginary incident in which two floors of the building were suffering a complete network outage.

![Axios Assyst User Portal](image)

It was logged it at 15:06 on Friday 12th – according to Assyst, a response would due the following Tuesday and a fix by mid-afternoon the day after. From this we make three observations – firstly, as a user I would be astonished at the low priority IT would give such an event, let alone that IT would dare admit it to me. Secondly, in real life, somebody would have to be carpeted by an exasperated CIO for a service like that. Thirdly, should the reader choose to install Axios Assyst, it might be an idea to check the recommended routes for major outages and the default service levels before going live.
Beyond this, there was little else being presented that matched our search for management reporting.

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): limited
- Management criteria testable (no / partially / yes): no
- Score: 20%

**Axios offered the following comments:** “When starting the journey of Service Management tool selection there are a number of ethereal questions we are left asking ourselves. Who am I? What is my job? What do I need? What do my staff need? How can I make mine and my boss’s job better? And so on for all ITIL processes.

“A service desk of 10 people will set up a service management solution differently to one of 100 people, while organisations that log and shift straight to 2nd line will differ from those that try to resolve at first line. Does a ‘first line fix’ mean ‘immediate’ or ‘fixed after 20mins?’ It’s all about data and the way you want to use it.

“Service Management principles are there to be used as guidance but their application to your circumstances deserves a personal touch. A generic SaaS trial will not provide that. Human interaction from experienced sales, solution architects, deployment consultants and customers can help create a dedicated trial for any organisation looking to make a change that will resonate with what is needed.

“Axios Systems prefers the human touch; a meaningful conversation from a conceptual point of view about what you need and how to help you get it. This is Axios Systems’s focus for assyst ITSM and assyst ITAM.”

**HPE (Hewlett Packard Enterprise)** is an industry-leading system, as rated by analysts and commentators. The company’s range of provisions to IT departments is enormous, including hardware, software, and services. A visit to the website shows that a vast – if not indeed daunting – library of presales information is provided covering a range of topics and IT needs, for which HPE offers tools. This includes videos in the form of customer experiences in various sectors, instructive documents, and trial software. There being so much there, it was a little difficult pinning down my comparatively narrow IT support management requirements.

There is some trial software available, but no immediately apparent demo of ‘Service Manager’, so we opted for the offered online chat, of which a transcript was taken. To “how can I help you today?” I described my needs and that I was looking for a demo. “Sure”, came the reply, which I took to mean that a demo could be available. However, he immediately followed that with a sales qualification question. I replied with my purpose, that I was conducting a product review.
Instead of dealing with that, he wanted to know if he was going to oust a competitive tool. I simply answered “No”. He then asked for my location, having never even begun to address my original question. He offered to send me an ‘account manager’. I repeated my question about the HPE products. He swerved it and asked for even more detail. I gave him what he wanted and asked my question again. He swerved it again. I still don’t know if they have a demo.

It appears that my needs as a customer are not in the Hewlett Packard sales qualification script, which seems to be all about HP, not the customer.

By the way, the promised account manager never called; which was a pity, because given the galactic scope of HP’s offerings, that kind of direct assistance would be needed.

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): none
- Management criteria testable (no / partly / yes): no
- Score: 0%

HP was offered the opportunity to comment. A spokesperson offered, “We acknowledge that the chat representative didn’t address your question and was unable to differentiate your request/need from a standard sales query. It is also never our intention to tell anyone that they will be contacted and then not follow through. We will review our training and scripts as well as our process so as to improve this moving forward.

“Our customers are typically large enterprises who work through sales partners or have a dedicated sales representative, so it is unusual that they would want to test or trial our on premise solution without vendor help or guidance. If a company wants to evaluate our ITSM suite of solutions, we offer a trial (temporary license) which is available through a sales representative.

“What we do offer on our website is a robust overview of the solution via a number of videos which are available on YouTube. In addition, our site contains whitepapers, datasheets, ebooks, analyst reports, infographics, solution briefs, brochures, blogs, forums, expert communities, among other collateral to help educate those who want to obtain information on our solution. We also have a “contact us” button with phone numbers to contact a representative toll-free for countries throughout Europe.”

Cherwell has a very positive reputation in the market in general, but I have not had chance to examine the product up close for a few years. As with other vendors, access to demos was controlled by a form. With some excitement at what Cherwell might have achieved recently, submitted said form on Thursday 11th May at 12:16. By 11am the following Tuesday, there had been no reply. I’ve got a publication deadline. I’ve got to stop waiting eventually.
Meanwhile, as I would if I were that IT manager looking for a product, I’ll cut my losses and move to the next vendor. For the purposes of this review only, and to score the experience as we have others, the following results emerge:

- Product demo available (none / limited / partial / full): unknown
- Management criteria testable (no / partially / yes): unknown
- Score: 0%

**Cherwell were offered the opportunity to comment on this.** A spokesman was keen to point out that a “full” product demo is available, adding "Cherwell Software does not provide an unmanaged demo instance, preferring to showcase the flexibility of the product one-to-one with prospects. Cherwell typically turns requests around in 48 hours. Cherwell Software can provide prospects a Proof of Concept instance, once the prospect has been qualified and signs a non-disclose agreement.”
Demo Policies

There appeared to be three main types of reception for the prospective client of the ITSM vendors in this report.

**Category One: no demo.** This group comprises those companies who have made a deliberate policy not to have a demo, and instead collect sales leads, which they may then follow up (or in some cases discard even without reply, see ‘Unwanted Custom?’ below). The thinking behind this is that ITSM is a complex field – and to offer an open demo with functionality A, B, and C may mislead those prospects testing it for functionality D, E, and F. The complexity of such systems also means that the arriving prospect may not yet have a complete picture of what he wants; and so should be allocated an account manager to help define needs and product match.

This writer remains sceptical of that approach – because a key function of the account manager is to lead the buyer toward the vendor’s provision, which may, or may not necessarily match the genuine needs of the buyer. There is an unavoidable bias. The ITSM market is a business activity, not a charitable one.

Our imagined support manager already knew what he wanted. He was testing vendors to see if they could provide what he needed and demonstrate it. Hence, vendors with this policy will score lowest for the purposes of this review.

**Category Two: limited demo.** The second type of reception comes from those companies who want to showcase their products. The ‘demo’ is a demonstration in the strictest sense, namely a vendor-to-prospect presentation, not a try-out. Unfortunately, complexity abounds; and again, there is a risk that the features demonstrated may not be those the buyer seeks, as this review found on occasion.

**Category Three: sandbox.** Some vendors have open, or lead-qualified access to their products and allow the visiting prospect to play with it in its entirety, with or without guidance. These vendors seem to feel less need to appoint a salesperson immediately, although they will make themselves available if required. Given that we already had a set of predetermined criteria to test, this was the ideal for this project. That said, we can understand how prospect clients without a clear idea of what they need can end up wandering directionless around this complexity.

This is perhaps a key message for anybody hoping to install or replace an ITSM system. Start with a clear picture of what you want your support process to achieve. It’s a forest of features out there,
and without direction, you can lose your path, or be misdirected onto a path designed by a vendor. And that means you may end up serving the vendor, rather than the other way round. Know what you want. Get that satisfied first. Then perhaps admire the bells and whistles they’ll be happy to show you.

Unwanted Custom?

At the outset, although the included vendors were informed of who was enquiring about their products, they did not always know this was for a review. Perhaps partly because of this, more than one vendor chose not to progress my enquiry because I was seen as an unlikely candidate for their products. This was curious, as I was not a ‘mystery shopper’. I gave my own name, my title as a consultant, the name of my company and my genuine contact details. Why would a consultant, with several hundred articles in various management publications round the world, be looking for a demo of ITSM software? Given that he is a prolific writer, might he be about to relate his experiences in print? Publicity risk. Or perhaps as a consultant, he might be studying the market on behalf of a client who prefers to remain anonymous? Lost client risk.

Too many companies had gaps in their lead-gathering process that allowed those risks to be missed. It is not encouraging that in those companies which initially dismissed my enquiry, that there might not have been even the faintest tinkle of an alarm bell.

Client Risks

Worse, it has worrying implications for the reader. Depending on whom you represent, when visiting some of our ITSM companies, there is a real risk that in some quarters you will be ignored, your interest rejected, your information request unanswered. One company even described to me how they use an industry marketing database and qualify their leads against that. Some enquiries will be bounced. If you’re not on the list mate, you’re not getting in, it’s as simple as that. And if your time gets wasted in the process, that’s unfortunate, but that is the way some of our ITSM vendors work.

And then there’s the consideration of how you might be treated after the sale. If they can ignore you before they get your money, how might they behave afterwards? I get that I was, in effect, a journalist rather than a prospective customer, and as such I might not qualify as a priority for these companies. I’ll leave it to the reader to query how a tendency to “prioritise” and make promises without delivering might affect any future relationship you might have with them.

It’s Still All About the Servicedesk

Superficially, the ITSM software market is a shifting world. On the one hand there are the mergers, with Landesk, Heat, HPE and BMC going through considerable change. As well as that, and in some sense perhaps related, there is the move being made by some to broaden their appeal beyond IT, to include and cater for general business processes such as facilities and employee
management. At the same time, as ‘IT Service Management’ (ITSM) morphs into ‘Service Integration and Management’ (SIAM), some of the vendors are offering customers a new way of managing multi-sourced services to deliver a new type of IT services portfolio.

Incomplete

But perhaps this change is happening before the job of computer assisted IT support management was completed. There is functionality still needed to help with the management of support departments that has yet to be built into some of the biggest and most established names in the business. A potential concern is that as these companies spread their attention even wider, that needed functionality may be lost in their rush for the new.

What this review shows is that some of the best known ITSM products have lots of content to help us take enquiries but comparatively little to help us manage IT support.

Some vendors seem to still be stuck in the primitive ITIL idea that a Servicedesk is all you need. For a few, it’s still all about Servicedesk first, and just escalate the enquiry to another group, with no equivalent tools for managing those other groups. Other important considerations like the relationship between throughput and productivity, staff development, backlog avoidance, workload balancing, resource allocation, even customer service – these still remain sadly alien concepts to many leading products.

This writer respectfully suggests that some vendors should be thinking about cutting the ITIL apron strings that so limit their creativity. ITIL is an anachronism, and its continued use as a framework for ITSM systems is holding some tool developers back.

Second Line

So the Servicedesk sends a support enquiry to a second line function – if that escalation group does not have the tools and discipline to deal with those assignments in a timely fashion while also coping with its project and BAU commitments, the support service will suffer. I wish more vendors would ‘get’ this. It’s an enormous opportunity, and several of them are ignoring it.

Our imagined Service Manager knew he had to measure the whole of support, not just the most-hyped part of it, namely the Servicedesk. He knows it’s not just about silos and queues. He realises the need to put the service to his customer before the bureaucracy of his department, for the sake of his service contribution to the business that employs him. Yet out there, there are vendors who seem still to have not grasped these ideas. In some cases, this even seems represented in the way they behave towards their prospective clients.
Caveat Emptor

Be aware that as happened here, some vendors may behave in a way that suggests an orientation toward serving themselves before you. If your goals are unclear, there are those who will happily fill that gap with their own goals. But on the other hand, it’s not always the vendor as an entity that will dismiss your business, but some individuals within. There are companies who really do want to give the service you need and will help you achieve that to mutual benefit. Invoke that – if you get a bad service, complain. Their flexibility may surprise you.

It may be, as this review found, that some vendors may not even have conceived of what it is like to manage your IT support. The functionality may not exist, even in some of the bigger, longer-established brands. On the other hand, they may have built in other features for which they have great enthusiasm. Do not let that distract you.

Our criteria for choosing ITSM software may not be yours. A review like this can only point out issues for your attention, not tell you what is right for your particular circumstances. Our advice for a starting position for your ITSM software quest is to know what you want first, and stick to it. When that is satisfied, then keep an open mind about new ways of doing things that vendors are constantly adding to their offerings.

Noel Bruton, June 2017

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