

**The Visible Ops Handbook:  
Starting ITIL in 4 Practical Steps**

Kevin Behr, Gene Kim, and George Spafford  
Information Technology Process Institute,  
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Reviewed by Wayne Brown

The IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL), created by the British government's Office of Government Commerce to help with IT management, is a method for implementing standard processes and best practices into IT operations. (For more information about ITIL, see <<http://www.itil.co.uk/about.htm>>.) *The Visible Ops Handbook: Starting ITIL in 4 Practical Steps* provides a methodology for IT departments in the adoption of ITIL. The book can help create a framework for IT departments to implement effective change control. At just over 80 pages, *The Visible Ops Handbook* is an easy-to-read outline of processes that may be some of the best "bang for the buck" advice in IT-department operations. The authors take a complex subject and boil it down to four simple steps. Following their advice should provide stability, improved system uptime, and reduced recovery time.

Many of the questions in the book are the same questions managers of IT departments ask when they deal with unexpected—and therefore disruptive—changes in their environments. IT managers know, at least intuitively, that their departments spend entirely too much time creating problems through unplanned change and attempts to address it without the right tools and information. IT managers and CIOs want to eliminate the "hair on fire" mentality. When something does go wrong, you typically want to know what changed last, but you might not be capturing that information. The IT department may not have a good inventory of the systems in place or of the changes that have been made to them. Furthermore, the department might not have an easy way to return to the last known good-system state.

This book lays out four steps to reducing the amount of unplanned change,

eliminating the firefighting, increasing system uptime, and decreasing the amount of time it takes to repair a system. It also provides a method for documenting and routing system changes to ferret out potential problems with a change before the change is implemented in the organization's systems.

The first step seeks to bring some order to the chaos that exists around IT change management. Predictably, the book advises that you first reduce access to systems that can be changed and assign a limited group with access as the only entity that can make changes to the identified system. The times during which that entity can make changes are coordinated with the functional area constituencies. Changes are documented and routed through a change-control group for approval. If something does go wrong with a change in a system, the first response by those performing the troubleshooting is to look at the documented and approved changes.

Step two requires an inventory of all server-room assets and detailed information about the equipment, what it does, and who is responsible for it. Other information is also gathered, including how the system is backed up, the change success rate, whether the system depends on other systems, and any forecasted retirement date for the system. Gathering and documenting this information makes it readily available during an emergency, when the IT department personnel will not have the time to assess the system efficiently. The information gathered is also used for change management and during the third and fourth steps.

The third step is to create a repeatable build library. The concept behind this phase is that it is much easier and faster to replace inoperable equipment or configurations than it is to determine why a piece of equipment or software is not working. The work done in this phase gives the IT department a library of system images, a process for keeping them current, and a process for moving them into production when a system does need to be replaced.

Continual improvement constitutes the last step. A key component of a good problem-solving method is follow-up.

How do you know if the processes you have changed have succeeded? You have to go back to the process and measure effectiveness. Measuring the way changes are introduced and their impact on the IT environment is one of the metrics. The ability to recover from unexpected predicaments is another area to measure. Finally, and most important for the health of the IT environment, you have to know how good you are at evaluating change requests and implementing them while keeping systems available.

The steps outlined in this book can be invaluable to IT managers dealing with both planned and unplanned changes in increasingly complex, interrelated, and vital computer systems on campus. Implementing these steps in any IT environment should be at the top of the CIO's to-do list. *e*

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**Student Information Systems:  
A Guide to Implementation Success**

Sharon F. Cramer  
American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2005  
\$95.00/\$70.00 AACRAO members (paper), 336 pp.  
ISBN 1-57858-067-6

Reviewed by Peter B. DeBlois

The Preface of Sharon Cramer's *Student Information Systems: A Guide to Implementation Success*, published by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), is careful to say what the book is *not*: It is not a technical manual, a project management guide, a product selection roadmap, or even a source for definitive answers. Rather, it points to strategies and principles that will help student information system (SIS) implementation teams manage the sea change of disruption, fulfilled and frustrated expectations, and new business process mandates and opportunities that the campus will experience. The book starts at a point *after* two major decisions: the SIS product/solution

has been chosen and members of the implementation team selected.

The author, a distinguished service professor of exceptional education at Buffalo State College with a PhD in human relations and social policy, was asked in 1999 to serve as the executive director of a project team of enrollment management specialists charged with implementing the Oracle Student System. Coming from the academic side of the house, she had to capitalize on the advantage—as well as close the gap of disadvantage—in not knowing the functional operations of admissions, billing, financial aid, registration, and student records, not to mention the detailed perspectives of student services professionals.

Cramer's book, however, is not merely a guide for the SIS project leader who may be a faculty member; rather, it aims to help implementation teams communicate with and prepare a broad array of campus stakeholders for new systems: administrators, staff members of units involved with the implementation, campus governance groups, faculty, and students. The book is designed to give readers "a short cut to improving campus buy-in, communication and collaboration, as well as giving [team members and administrators] 'heads ups' about important, subtle realities of implementations." It fairly well delivers on this promise.

*Student Information Systems* is structured around five major features:

- **Key components for success:** These include campus-wide collaboration with stakeholders, project leadership, managing changes caused by the implementation, addressing system components essential for buy-in, and creating and sustaining outstanding results.
- **Practical suggestions:** Even though most of these are rooted in common sense—such as a sample team mission statement and ground rules covering mutual respect, responsibility, procedures, and work management—implementation projects that ignore or pay half-hearted lip service to them will surely struggle, if not fail.
- **Context:** Mapping most closely to institutional strategic planning,

this concern urges that a major implementation be understood in the context of social and cultural change on the campus that the new system will both support and shape.

- **Diversity of voices:** Throughout the book, in marginal boxes, are quotations from interviews with implementation team members and stakeholders that the author conducted at her own and other institutions. These provide equal measures of commiseration and good advice in such observations as "We built in a formal feedback loop... people don't pull their punches" (IT director); "Political concerns of certain groups take time to resolve but are a necessary evil" (project manager); "If possible, help people learn the scope of the project up front" (functional team member); and "We're constantly gauging whether or not our goals are being met. Every six months, we sponsor a user communication survey" (project manager).
- **Research basis:** Many of the book's guidelines grow out of or are affirmed by two research projects conducted in spring 2005 to look at the values, resources, and recommendations of enrollment management professionals affected by system implementations. In the first, 492 AACRAO members responded to an online survey about stages of and experiences with implementations at different institutions. The second study was an in-depth analysis of the implementation experiences of 74 people on 10 campuses. The studies assessed such critical issues as institutional factors influencing the implementation, above- and below-average values that will help an implementation, resource availability, audiences and conflicts, team members' prior experience, work evaluation, technical versus functional staff, funding, and buy-in. The results of both studies lead to sound if not surprising conclusions: SIS implementations are costly, time-consuming, and exhausting; communication and collaboration are essential for success; 80 percent of campuses are involved in or anticipate starting an SIS implementation in the

near future; and participants cite a high level of pride from a successful project.

The key questions for readers of this journal are "Will \$95.00 and the time spent reading a 336-page book be worthwhile investments?" and "Is it a book for IT managers and practitioners?" The answer to both must be a qualified yes. Yes, if you currently have or may at some point have project management responsibility for a system implementation affecting a broad swath of people on a campus. If you are a member of such a team, probably not. As a project manager, whether you work in a central IT organization, have a distributed IT support role, manage an administrative information service operation, or serve on the faculty, *Student Information Systems: A Guide to Implementation Success* gives as good an overview of implementation principles as you are likely to find in print.

To be sure, much of the content is common sense, but it is uncommonly well organized. Cramer clearly captures the intersection of three cultures—IT, enrollment management, and faculty—that must work together on system implementations. The book would have been stronger had it more fully engaged the critical "fourth estate" of students, with their Net Gen expectations of the information environment. While she clearly aims at the diverse constituents of project teams, at times she seems to speak most directly to the faculty who stay safely (and perhaps feel blessed) on the project's periphery: "The implementation taps your intellect, emotions, and stamina like little else in your academic career." Be that as it may, IT managers, systems analysts, student service leaders, application specialists, and functional staff should always welcome the involvement of faculty such as Cramer who not only take the time to learn administrative systems and processes but who care enough to want to build bridges to the people whom the infrastructure must support. 

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