

Beyond the Mystery: How to Develop a Service Catalog

By Doug Tedder, FSM, Tedder Consulting LLC

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Introduction

Defining a service catalog is one of the most substantial ITSM challenges for many organizations. It starts by first identifying services and understanding how various components work together to deliver value and outcomes. Next, service descriptions that convey what is being delivered must be written in a way that makes sense to the customer. Getting to this point is certainly an achievement! But then, how do we organize these service descriptions into a service catalog that is useful to the business?

In my experience, as with all things ITSM, it helps to begin with the end in mind.

What is a Service Catalog?

There are many opinions about what a service catalog is and is not. ITIL® says that the service catalog is “a database or structured document with information about all live IT services, including those available for deployment. The service catalog is the only part of the service portfolio published to customers and is used to support the sale and delivery of IT services. The service catalog includes information about deliverables, prices, contact points, ordering, and request processes.”¹ This definition provides a great place to start, but it also raises other questions:

- Who is the customer?
- What if we don’t “sell” IT services within our business?
- What and how should we describe the deliverables for the services?
- How do I get beyond the mystery and get to a service catalog?

In this article, I’ll share some of my opinions on how to approach defining a service catalog.

Uses of the Service Catalog

Having a service catalog represents a significant leap over typical ITSM implementations that focus only on incidents, problems, and changes. While these aspects of an ITSM implementation are important, they only begin to scratch the surface of what an ITSM implementation should deliver in terms of value on investment to an organization. The service catalog is a visible demonstration of both an organization’s commitment to service and the critical role that the IT organization performs in delivering the outcomes required by the business.

Having said that, I believe the service catalog is much more than just a “listing of services” and can (and should!) be used for other purposes:

- As a marketing tool for the IT organization, describing its value and capability for delivering solutions
- As the basis for service level agreements, by describing the basic delivery parameters of each service
- As an “on-boarding” tool for new IT staff, by depicting what the IT organization does to deliver or enable the outcomes the business requires
- As an “alignment” tool to change the focus and culture within the IT organization from “my component” to “our service”
- As the basis for business planning and strategy development, by helping to manage expectations, manage demand, and identify areas for investment (and potentially new service requirements to be included as part of the service pipeline within the service portfolio)

1. Axelos Limited, ITIL® Service Design (London:TSO, 2011), p.98

Think Before Developing Your Service Catalog

Defining and developing a service catalog is not a “two week” activity, so allow adequate time without losing that sense of urgency. But the first service catalog is just that—the first one—and through iteration and continual improvement, the service catalog will evolve from that great leap forward in the ITSM journey into an asset that both the business and the IT organization will recognize and value. The point is to establish a good service catalog, not necessarily the perfect service catalog. The service catalog provides a critical communication link between the IT organization and the customers it serves, so proper planning and design of the service catalog is crucial. Here are some items that should be considered prior to starting a service catalog.

- **What does your company do?** Having a good understanding of the business is key to a successful service catalog. What does the business produce? Who are typical customers of the business? Are there specific regulatory, legal, or company policies to which the business must adhere? Having a good knowledge of the business of the business, combined with a bit of overall business acumen, goes a long way in developing an effective service catalog.
- **What does the IT organization do?** This question is often not as easily answered as it may seem. Often, IT organizations will list every activity that is performed and try to call that list of activities its service catalog. Nothing could be farther from being a service catalog. Do not confuse activities with services. Activities are part of what IT does to deliver services. Rather, think in terms of business outcomes. What business outcome is delivered or enabled by something that IT does?
- **Who is the “customer”?** Ah yes, the customer—the target audience for the service catalog. If you don’t know who the customer is, developing a service catalog is a lot of work for no reason. Simply put, customers define the need for and the requirements of a service. If you can’t identify the customer, then how can services be defined and ultimately included in a service catalog for use by the customer?
- **Is the customer really a “customer”?** My dad would often say as I was growing up, “Just because you want something, doesn’t mean you need it.” This saying has a lot of applicability in separating the customer of a service from a consumer of a service. Consumers use a service on a day-to-day basis, and likewise, most of the day-to-day interactions IT has are with consumers within the business. Sometimes, consumers want things that are outside of what the customer has defined as a requirement for the service. It is understandable that as a service-focused group, the IT organization sometimes falls into the trap of what the customer wants versus what the customer needs. When identifying and describing the services for the service catalog, ensure that the customer is really “the customer,” and involve them in identifying and describing services.
- **What function, process, or outcome is delivered or enabled by the services within the service catalog?** The days of doing “IT for IT’s sake” are long gone. If you can’t define or identify how what you’re doing delivers an outcome required by the business, then you need to question why your IT organization is doing it. If the answer is “I don’t know,” you’ve just identified an opportunity for cost savings!
- **What will be the context of the service catalog? How will it be used?** Perhaps one of the most important aspects of developing the service catalog is context. Context depends on many factors, such as the culture of the organization, the industry in which the business operates, the attitude of the business toward IT, and other factors. A good service catalog considers the objectives of the organization and the context in which the service catalog will be used. The content, writing style, language, and presentation is then adapted in such a way so that it can be fully understood by the customer.

Conclusion

In this article, I’ve presented a few concepts that will help get “beyond the mystery” when developing a service catalog. By understanding how the service catalog will be used and with a little planning, the service catalog will pay dividends for years to come.



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About the Author

Doug Tedder, FSM

Principal of Tedder Consulting LLC, an ITSM and IT Governance consultancy.

Doug combines his knowledge of best practices with over 25 years of experience to develop and deliver pragmatic solutions that result in outcomes businesses require. He is frequent speaker at HDI and itSMF events.

