Service Management Deep Dive 2 - What is a service?

Most of us interact with dozens of services every day without giving them much thought.

When you order a pizza, use a ride-sharing app, visit a doctor's office, register for classes, connect to Wi-Fi, or submit a request for technical support, you are consuming a service. While the products, technologies, and people involved may be different, the goal is the same: helping someone achieve a desired outcome.

At Cornell, services are everywhere. Students register for courses, employees receive payroll services, researchers access computing resources, and faculty receive support for teaching technologies. Behind each of these experiences are people, processes, technologies, suppliers, and information working together to deliver value.

A service is much more than a website, application, or help desk. Those things may be components of a service, but the service itself is the complete experience that enables someone to accomplish something important.

For example, when a student registers for classes, they are not simply using a registration system. They are relying on a service that includes policies, processes, data, support staff, integrations, and technology. If any one of those pieces fails, the student experiences a disruption to the service—not just a problem with a particular system.

This distinction is important because organizations often focus on managing technology while customers care about outcomes. Customers are not interested in which server is running, who owns a database, or which department supports a particular application. They simply want to accomplish their goal.

Good service management helps bridge that gap by organizing people, processes, and technology around the needs of the customer.

The ITIL View of a Service

The Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL), one of the most widely adopted service management frameworks in the world, defines a service as:

"A means of enabling value co-creation by facilitating outcomes that customers want to achieve, without the customer having to manage specific costs and risks."

While this definition may sound formal at first, it becomes much easier to understand through a simple example: pizza delivery.

Enabling Outcomes

Imagine you are hungry and want dinner.

Your desired outcome is not actually "buying a pizza."

Your desired outcome is eating a hot meal with minimal effort.

The pizza delivery service enables that outcome.

The service handles the activities required to achieve your goal so you don't have to grow tomatoes, make dough, maintain a commercial oven, hire delivery drivers, or build an ordering platform.

The service allows you to focus on the outcome while someone else manages the complexity.

Value Co-Creation

ITIL emphasizes that value is co-created between the provider and the customer.

The pizza shop cannot create value alone.

The customer must choose a pizza, provide an address, pay for the order, and be available to receive it. Likewise, the pizza provider must prepare and deliver the meal.

Value emerges only when both parties participate.

The same is true at Cornell. A service provider can offer systems, support, and expertise, but value is realized only when faculty, students, staff, or researchers successfully use those services to accomplish their goals.

Managing Costs and Risks

The ITIL definition also highlights costs and risks.

If you wanted to make pizza at home every night, you would need to purchase ingredients, maintain equipment, learn recipes, and accept the risk of poor results.

By using a pizza delivery service, many of those costs and risks are transferred to the provider.

Similarly, when Cornell provides services such as network access, email, payroll, identity management, or research computing, customers do not need to manage the underlying infrastructure, security controls, vendor contracts, or operational support. The service provider assumes much of that responsibility.

Services Are More Than Technology

Let's continue the pizza analogy.

Many people might assume the pizza service is the restaurant's website.

But what happens if the website works perfectly and there are no drivers available?

What if the ingredients are out of stock?

What if no one answers the phone?

What if the pizza arrives cold?

The customer experiences a failure of the service, even though parts of the technology may still be functioning.

A service consists of everything required to reliably deliver the intended outcome, including:

- People
- Processes
- Technology
- Information
- Suppliers and partners
- Policies and governance

Technology is important, but it is only one piece of the larger service.

Why This Matters

As organizations grow, services often span multiple departments, technologies, and teams. Customers rarely care which group is responsible for which component; they simply expect a seamless experience.

Service management helps organizations move beyond managing individual systems and toward managing complete customer outcomes.

At Cornell, this means thinking about services from the perspective of students, faculty, and staff rather than from the perspective of organizational structures or technology boundaries.

When services are designed, supported, measured, and improved as complete experiences, organizations can reduce friction, improve collaboration, and create better outcomes for everyone involved.

In simple terms, a service is not the technology, the ticket, the website, or the support team. A service is the complete set of capabilities that helps someone achieve an outcome they care about. Service management is the discipline of ensuring those capabilities work together to deliver value consistently and effectively.