

Service Management Deep Dive 3 - Article 3: What is ITIL and Why is Cornell Using It?

If you have spent any time around service management discussions, you have probably heard the term "ITIL." Like many industry acronyms, it can sound intimidating or overly technical at first. In reality, ITIL is simply a framework that helps organizations deliver and support services more effectively.

As part of the Cornell Experience Modernization Initiative (CEMI), Cornell has chosen ITIL as the service management framework that will help guide the Service Management workstream. This does not mean every service provider must operate identically, nor does it mean adopting a rigid set of rules. Instead, ITIL provides a common language, shared concepts, and proven practices that can help service providers work together more effectively while keeping customers at the center of everything they do.

Why Do Organizations Need a Framework?

Imagine organizing a road trip involving dozens of drivers, vehicles, destinations, and passengers.

Without a common understanding of road signs, maps, speed limits, and driving rules, every driver would operate differently. The result would be confusion, delays, and increased risk.

Service management can be similar.

Across a large university, hundreds of services are delivered by different organizations. Each group may have its own terminology, tools, processes, reporting methods, and support models. While those approaches may work well within a single organization, challenges often emerge when services cross organizational boundaries.

Questions such as these become difficult to answer:

- Who owns this service?
- Who supports it?
- How do customers request help?
- How are incidents handled?
- How do we communicate changes?
- How do we measure service quality?
- How do we coordinate support across multiple providers?

ITIL provides a common framework for answering those questions.

What Is ITIL?

ITIL stands for Information Technology Infrastructure Library, although today most organizations simply refer to it as ITIL.

ITIL is a collection of best practices for managing and delivering services. It has been adopted by organizations around the world, including universities, governments, healthcare systems, and private industry.

One of the reasons ITIL has endured for decades is that it focuses on principles rather than prescribing a single way of working. Organizations can adapt ITIL concepts to fit their culture, structure, and needs.

At its core, ITIL encourages organizations to think about services from the customer's perspective and to organize people, processes, technology, and information around delivering value.

ITIL Is Not Just for IT

Despite its name, ITIL's concepts apply far beyond technology.

Many of the services provided across Cornell involve a combination of people, processes, policies, and technology. Human resources services, finance services, research support services, student services, facilities services, and technology services all face similar challenges when it comes to delivering a consistent experience and supporting customers effectively.

That is why the CEMI Service Management workstream is looking at both IT and non-IT service providers as part of its discovery and future-state planning efforts.

Understanding ITIL Through a Pizza Delivery Service

One of the easiest ways to understand ITIL is to think about a pizza delivery service.

Most customers do not care how a pizza shop organizes its kitchen, trains employees, manages inventory, schedules drivers, or maintains its ordering system.

Customers care about outcomes:

- Can I order a pizza?
- Will it arrive on time?
- Is it what I ordered?
- Is there someone to help if something goes wrong?

ITIL helps organizations manage everything behind the scenes that makes those outcomes possible.

Incident Management

An incident is an unplanned interruption to a service.

Pizza example:

You place an order, but the online ordering system crashes.

The pizza shop's goal is to restore service as quickly as possible so customers can resume placing orders.

At Cornell, incidents might involve a service outage, system failure, or issue preventing customers from completing important tasks.

Request Management

A request is something a customer needs that is part of normal service delivery.

Pizza example:

You want to order a large pepperoni pizza.

Nothing is broken. You are simply requesting something the service provides.

At Cornell, examples include requesting access, submitting forms, obtaining equipment, or asking for information.

Change Enablement

Changes help improve services but can also introduce risk.

Pizza example:

The restaurant wants to launch a new mobile ordering app.

Before releasing it, they should assess risks, test it, and communicate the change appropriately.

Similarly, Cornell must carefully manage changes to services and systems to avoid unintended impacts on customers.

Problem Management

A problem is the underlying cause of one or more incidents.

Pizza example:

Customers repeatedly report late deliveries.

The incident is the late delivery. The problem might be poor route planning, insufficient staffing, or outdated delivery software.

Problem management focuses on identifying and eliminating root causes rather than repeatedly responding to symptoms.

Knowledge Management

Knowledge helps customers and support teams find answers quickly.

Pizza example:

The restaurant publishes information about delivery areas, hours, menu options, and frequently asked questions.

Customers can solve simple questions themselves instead of calling for assistance.

At Cornell, shared knowledge articles can help both customers and service providers resolve issues more efficiently.

Service Catalog Management

The service catalog describes what services are available.

Pizza example:

The menu is the service catalog.

It tells customers what they can order, how to request it, and what options are available.

Similarly, Cornell's service catalogs help customers understand available services and how to access them.

Why Cornell Chose ITIL

The Service Management workstream evaluated industry approaches and selected ITIL because it provides a mature, widely adopted framework for managing services across diverse organizations.

ITIL offers:

- A common language across service providers
- Proven practices used by organizations worldwide
- Flexibility to adapt to Cornell's unique needs
- A strong focus on customer outcomes and value
- Guidance for managing services throughout their lifecycle

- A foundation for continual improvement

Most importantly, ITIL helps different service providers work together more effectively while maintaining focus on the people they serve.

A Framework, Not a Rulebook

One common misconception is that adopting ITIL means every service provider must follow identical processes or use the same tools.

That is not the goal.

ITIL is a framework, not a rulebook.

It provides guidance, principles, and common terminology that help organizations align where it makes sense while allowing flexibility where differences are needed.

The objective is not uniformity for its own sake. The objective is to make it easier for customers to access services, easier for providers to collaborate across organizational boundaries, and easier for Cornell to deliver a more consistent and connected experience.

Looking Ahead

As the CEMI Service Management workstream continues its discovery efforts, ITIL will serve as a common reference point for evaluating current practices, identifying opportunities, and designing future-state recommendations.

The goal is not simply to improve individual services. The goal is to create the foundation for a more connected service ecosystem—one where service providers can collaborate more effectively, leverage shared capabilities, and ultimately deliver a better experience for students, faculty, and staff.

In short, ITIL provides the map. Cornell's service providers will provide the expertise, partnership, and innovation needed to chart the journey toward Any Customer, Any Service, One Experience.

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.