

SUBJECT Industry Best Practices for IT Support

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CONTEXT Industry best practices such as ITIL, COBIT and ISO equivalents are increasingly being discussed as a way of optimising IT service delivery. This research note looks at how best practices are being adopted in the area of internal IT support and the impact they can have on end user satisfaction.

DATA SOURCE(S) Online research study in which information was gathered from 2,630 respondents, predominantly ITC professionals from a mix of industries and company sizes, via a Web based questionnaire.

OBSERVATIONS Overall, 11% of organisations appear to be committed to industry best practices for internal IT support delivery. A further 25% review best practice guidelines but just extract and apply selected ideas they think are relevant to them. The remainder do not see the relevance, are too busy just getting on with things to take notice, or are simply unaware that best practices exist in this area.

Activity varies by industry, with the highest levels of commitment in financial services and the public sector. We see a slight variation by geography, with Europe generally ahead of the USA and the rest of the world. The most striking differences observed, however, are by organisation size. Large enterprises are five times more likely to be committed to IT support best practices than smaller companies at the other end of the spectrum, who often say finding the time and resource for implementation is too hard.

In terms of effectiveness, indications are that best practice adoption drives a significant increase in end user satisfaction with IT support when applied in a large enterprise environment. The picture for midsize organisations is less conclusive, however, with a suggestion that better results can be achieved from selective adoption of specific ideas rather than full-blown implementation of best practice guidelines.

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS The lesson from these findings is that it is certainly of benefit for large organisations to consider the adoption of industry best practices. Most of the best practice guidelines in this area were originally conceived as a way of optimising processes in larger and more complex environments, so there is a good match, which can give rise to the positive results observed.

Midsize and smaller companies, however, should analyse the cost/benefit very carefully before driving down the industry best practice route and unquestioningly committing to guidelines that may not have been designed with their scale of operation in mind.

The logo for The Register, featuring the text 'The Register' in a bold, sans-serif font with a small globe icon to the left of the word 'Register'.

Reader study sponsored by:

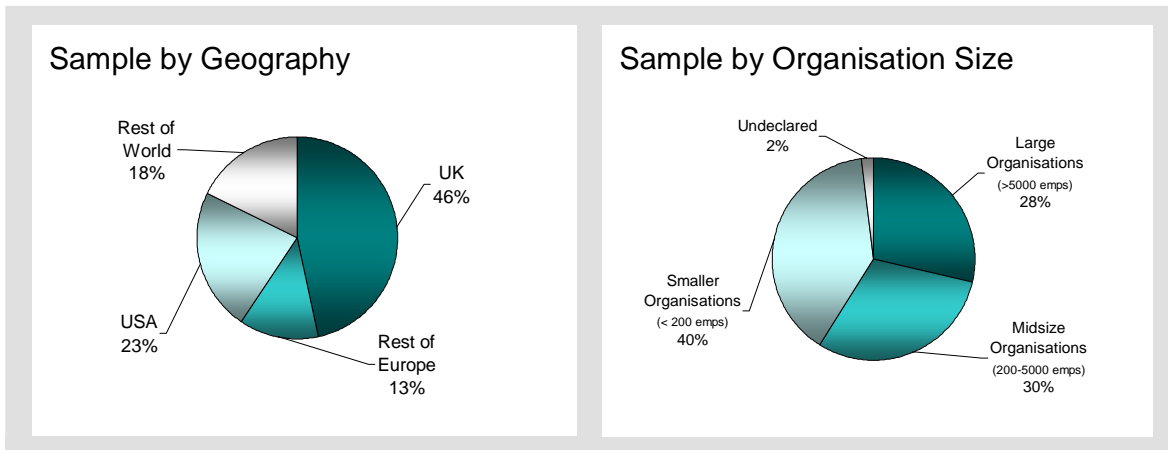
The logo for Numara Software, featuring the word 'NUMARA' in a large, bold, sans-serif font with a blue wave-like graphic underneath, and the word 'software' in a smaller, lowercase font below it.

Over the course of time, it is possible that "light" versions of popular best practices will emerge that are more suitable for adoption by small and midsize organisations. In the meantime, the advice to smaller organisations in particular is to pay attention to developments in this area, extracting useful ideas as appropriate and practical.

OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this research note are a subset of those from a larger study conducted in May 2006 looking more generally at the optimisation of IT support delivery. The study was designed, executed and analysed on an independent basis by Freeform Dynamics, with sponsorship from Numara Software.

An online Web based questionnaire was used to gather information and in total, feedback was received from 2630 respondents, predominantly IT professionals from a cross section of industry sectors. Sample distribution by geography and organisation size is as follows:

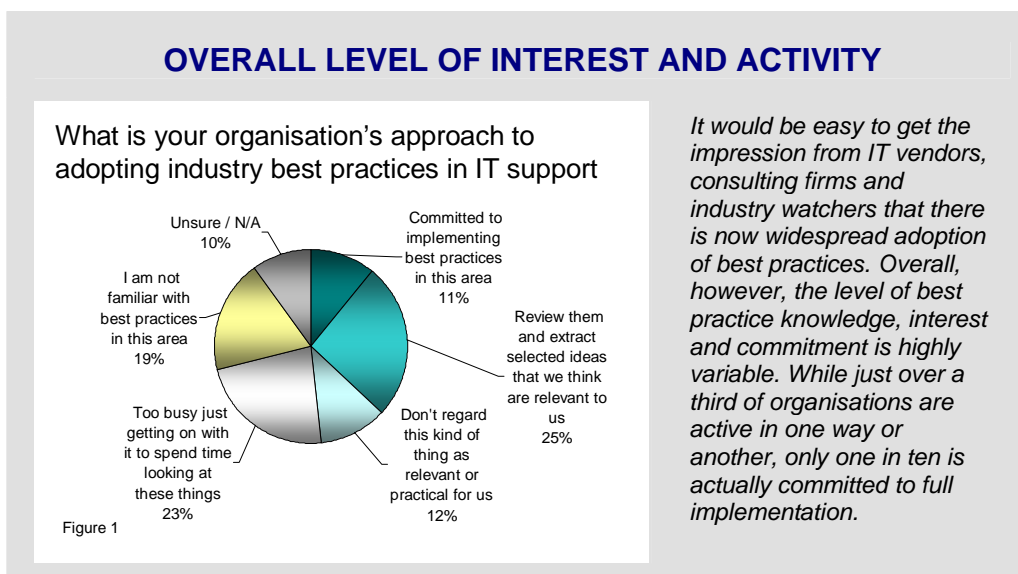


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our thanks go to all those who participated in the study, whose feedback has been invaluable to provide insights into practicalities as well as opportunities in this interesting but complex area.

FINDINGS IN MORE DETAIL

The detailed findings from the research are presented below, with accompanying analyst notes to assist with interpretation.



VARIATION IN COMMITMENT AND ACTIVITY BY INDUSTRY

What is your organisation's approach to adopting industry best practices in IT support

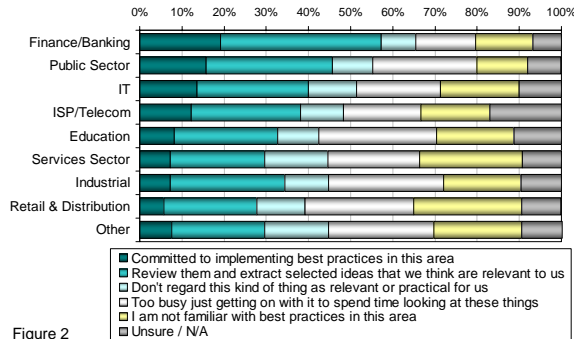


Figure 2

The level of adoption in the heavily regulated financial services sector is significantly higher than average, probably as a result of compliance related initiatives that frequently include IT accountability within their scope. It is also no surprise to see public sector stand out, as one of the most prominent best practices in IT service management, ITIL, originates from UK central government.

VARIATION IN COMMITMENT AND ACTIVITY BY GEOGRAPHY

What is your organisation's approach to adopting industry best practices in IT support

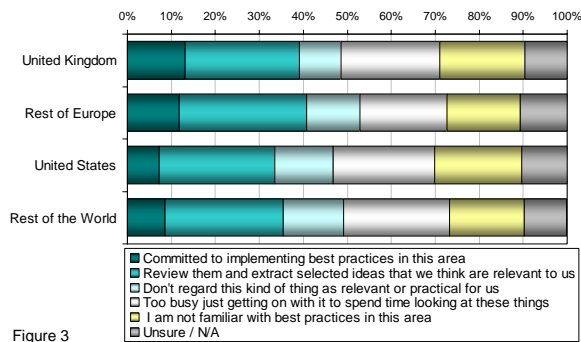


Figure 3

Levels of overall knowledge, interest and activity do not vary that much across geographies, though formal commitment to best practices is notably higher in Europe than in the USA and the rest of the world. Again, the origins of ITIL may be a factor driving this.

GEOGRAPHIC IMPORTANCE OF SPECIFIC BEST PRACTICES

How familiar are you with ITIL best practices for IT support, asset management, etc?

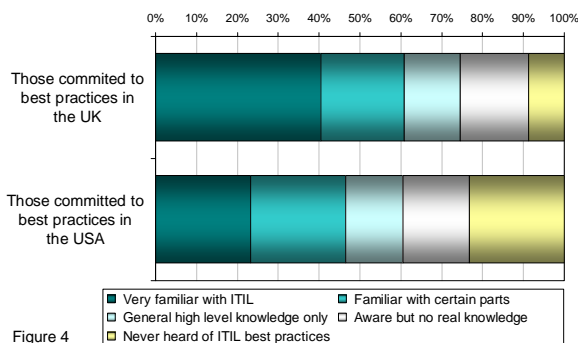


Figure 4

The influence of ITIL on geographic differences is corroborated when we compare the knowledge and familiarity with this particular set of best practice guidelines between the UK and USA. Anecdotal feedback mentions various ISO standards consistently between geographies, with COBIT particularly standing out in the USA.

VARIATION IN BEST PRACTICE ACTIVITY BY COMPANY SIZE

What is your organisation's approach to adopting industry best practices in IT support

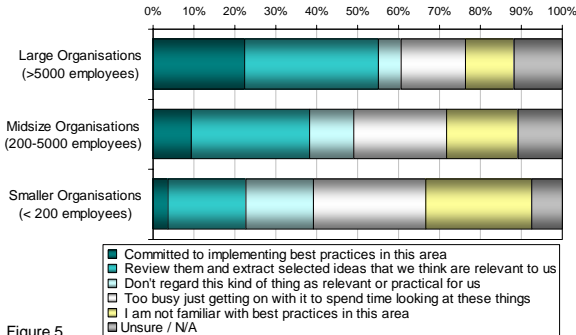


Figure 5

Much higher levels of commitment are seen in the large enterprise space compared to smaller organisations. This is not surprising as most best practice guidelines were originally conceived to deal with the complexities of optimising IT service delivery in a large-scale environment. Large organisations are also much more able to dedicate the resources necessary for implementation.

BLOCKERS TO ADOPTION IN SMALLER ORGANISATIONS

Challenges associated with the implementation of industry best practices (smaller companies)

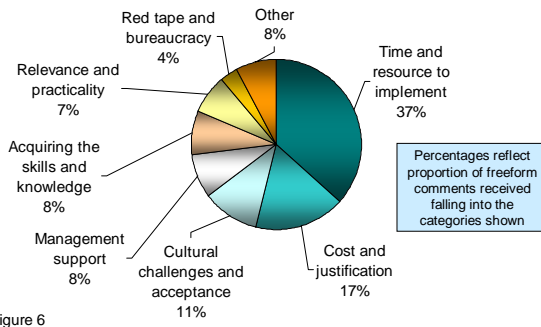


Figure 6

The time and resource challenge is, in fact, highlighted by much of the freeform feedback we hear from smaller companies. Various other challenges are also commonly mentioned, including cost justification, cultural fit and general relevance. As we saw previously, these blockers have resulted in very low adoption rates among organisations with less than 200 employees.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES? (SAMPLE COMMENTS)

“Simply finding the time with the staff available”

“Finding a good reason to implement them other than for the sake of it, also tailoring it to fit the business, and most importantly identifying the benefits you want to realise before you implement”

“Changing processes and procedures without impacting support levels”

“Sometimes strict models like ITIL just don't fit the real world exactly. It's a case of using the processes and acknowledging that there's value to be had, but the processes need tailoring for specific implementations”

“Time constraints, we'd love to implement at least some of these practices and are sure we're (technically) capable, but understaffed for the job”

IMPACT OF ADOPTION IN LARGE ENTERPRISES

Impact of best practice adoption on end user perception rating of IT support services

Large Organisations

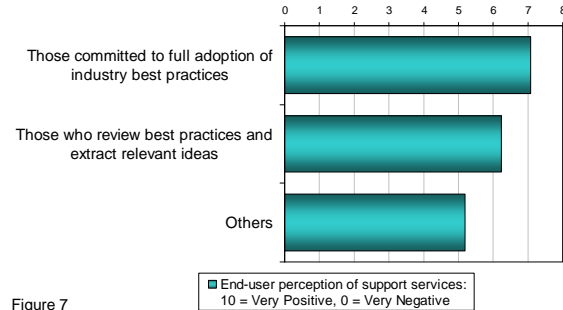


Figure 7

Where adoption rates are higher, it is possible to analyse the impact of best practice related activity on end user satisfaction, as an approximate indicator of IT support effectiveness. When we do this for the large enterprise space, it is clear that results are driven by the level of commitment. Those implementing best practices fully have an end user satisfaction rating 37% higher than those at the other extreme.

IMPACT OF ADOPTION IN MIDSIZE ORGANISATIONS

Impact of best practice adoption on end user perception rating of IT support services

Midsized Organisations

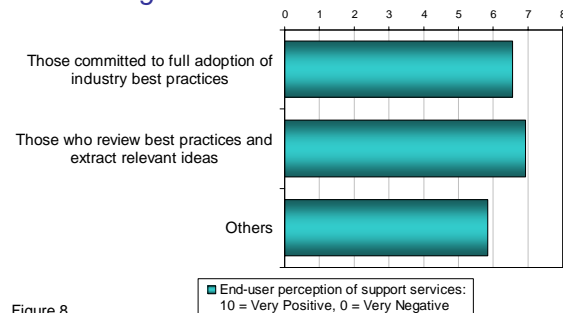


Figure 8

The picture is much less clear-cut with midsized organisations. Those who simply review best practices and extract relevant ideas tend to fare better than companies who commit to adoption. The most likely explanation for this is that best practice adoption at this level can actually lead to a net increase in complexity and overhead with a tendency for the support function to become process bound.

CONCLUSION

The level of attention being given to industry best practices is currently growing. This is being driven by a combination of broader compliance activity, promotion from IT vendors and consultants who see best practice adoption as a catalyst for sales, and the constant quest within most organisations to optimise the way in which IT services are delivered.

As a result of all of this activity, an increasing number of organisations are going to be faced with the decision of whether, and to what degree, they should be taking industry best practices on board. There appears to be little doubt that large and midsized organisations can certainly benefit from implementing at least a subset of best practice ideas that are relevant to their environment. We would therefore encourage those responsible for IT support delivery to at least familiarise themselves with developments in this area.

Moving beyond this to full-blown implementation of ITIL or similar will undoubtedly make sense for many organisations, but others may find it overkill for their environment and counter-productive in the long run. The bottom line is therefore to be absolutely clear on your objectives before embarking on a best practice implementation and make sure you fully understand the cost/benefit before committing.



About Freeform Dynamics

Freeform Dynamics is a research and analysis firm. We track and report on the business impact of developments in the IT and communications sectors.

As part of this, we use an innovative research methodology to gather feedback directly from those involved in ITC strategy, planning, procurement and implementation. Our output is therefore grounded in real-world practicality for use by mainstream IT professionals.

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Numara Software, Inc., (formerly Blue Ocean Software/Intuit IT Solutions), is a global provider of IT management solutions for IT professionals who need to simplify and gain control over their increasingly complex environments.

Numara Software's trusted solutions automate critical IT functions, such as help desk and asset management, software patch and deployment, and network monitoring. Unlike manual approaches and overly complicated or expensive software products, Numara Software's Track-It! delivers proven value based on more than a decade of best practices.

As the most widely installed help desk and asset management solution, Numara Track-It! has helped IT professionals at more than 45,000 customer sites track 14 million assets worldwide.

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