ITIL® Implementation ● Agile Transformation
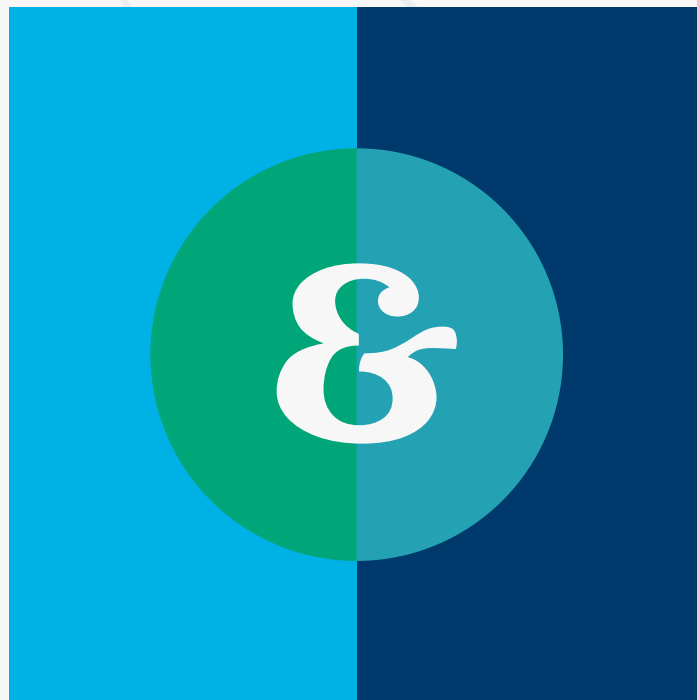
quanta | Training

University of Oxford

Customer in Focus

Meet John Ireland...

Heading up the student and staff-facing side of IT, John Ireland is Director of Customer Services in the University of Oxford's IT Services department. As our Customer In Focus, John discusses the successful Implementation of ITIL within the University of Oxford, the impact of a long-standing relationship with Quanta Training, and how his passion for programming paved the way for a successful career in IT Service Management.

Photo by John Cairns

The early years

John Ireland writes, I've always had an interest in computing, right from the early days. The first thing that I got my hands on was a ZX spectrum 48k. The book that came with it had a fantastic saying inside the front cover, along the lines of 'Experiment. You cannot harm your computer. If it's not doing what you want, push the reset button on the side and it will get you back to the start-up message.' That saying has stuck with me and gave me so much confidence. As my confidence grew, so did my interest.

Through school and other outlets, I gained experience in programming, desktop publishing and other gainful uses for computers. I got my hands on an old Viglen PC and a compiler, and learned to program in C over one summer holiday, and C++ the next.

'Experiment. You cannot harm your computer. If it's not doing what you want, push the reset button on the side and it will get you back to the start-up message.'

ZX Spectrum 48k Instructions

I went to university in the 1990's. By the mid 90's there were many companies trying to set up online websites and presence, when it was a really new thing. There were lots of opportunities to get involved with that sort of work, and I quickly found an interest in writing code to automate the creation of larger sites.

This quickly led to coding server-side functions, underpinning dynamic, responsive websites, such as newly emerging online stores and web ordering systems. I needed to have a system to develop and test my software on, and that saw me taking my first steps in system administration, running RedHat Linux (version 3.2 came on a single CD) and the Apache web server.

1998

John started work at the University of Oxford as the first full-time IT Officer at Jesus College. As a team of one, John managed all aspects of IT support, delivery and oversight. Over the next 10 years, the team grew along with demand for IT and the focus shifted towards shared IT services.

My first job after education was at Jesus College in Oxford, where I was 'the IT guy'. I got to do everything: networks, system administration, software development, user support and training, procurement and strategic planning. One of my initial jobs was replacing the college's aging Sun Microsystems server, and this was the start of a strategic adoption of Linux with automated deployment and configuration.

Within a few years the rapid growth in IT demand had seen our team grow to three. It was a brilliant time, with new requirements and opportunities every day, and the chance to get involved with all areas of the college. At the peak, we had about 20 servers in the college, now running on virtualised infrastructure and extensive fibre optic networks.

But then came a turning point: it was all very technical and I started to think about two things. Firstly: all the times when we'd delivered what was asked, but satisfaction hadn't gone up. Secondly: wasn't it strange that 39 colleges in Oxford were all working independently of each other, each doing their own version of the same thing.

Around this time I took the ITIL 3 Foundation course, and then the PRINCE2® Practitioner course at Quanta Training. Even whilst I was in the training room, I could see how ITIL provided a breakdown of IT and the ideas to address the challenges going round in my head; PRINCE2 on a small scale would provide the structure and engagement I needed to start moving this forwards.

2009

John moved to work in the University's central Computing Services, soon part of a reorganisation of central University IT. During this time, John was part of a leadership group who asserted that an ITIL-based approach was essential to the re-organisation, and would realise the goals of streamlining support work, reducing operational risk and increasing productivity.

I thought, shouldn't we be joining the departments together and working on a bigger scale? That seed grew, and I applied for a role in the University's Computing Services, where I headed up the systems development team who were seriously into Linux, and had a reputation sometimes compared to that of IBM's Black Team.

When I joined the team, there were some hi jinks - all the memory had been taken out of my PC to benefit the other sysadmins, and the key caps had been rearranged into the Dvorak layout "for my own benefit"! The team demanded that every member was extremely technically proficient, and challenged anything that wasn't automated, robust, scalable and thoroughly secure.

My contribution was to introduce an approach to managing "services" rather than "just technology". We adopted ITSM tools and techniques that enabled us to clear our support backlog, that streamlined change requests, and made it easier for new starters to get up to speed. A careful application of project management and development lifecycles helped our customers weigh up the cost of time/effort against benefits, and track progress of larger activities. The implementations worked really well in that team and we built a lot of really positive relationships with the rest of our department.

This ended up being an absolutely fantastic job with an amazing team of people. The absolute dedication to quality has remained with me ever since - the need for open discussion to pin things down logically and ensure that that a solution would be stable, resilient and sustainable.

2012

John became Programme Manager for the ICT Central Coordination Programme, which combined three independent areas of IT into a new, joined-up IT Services department within University of Oxford. John co-led workstreams to develop the future vision for IT service management and IT operations in the new department and was successful in his application to become Director of the newly formed Customer Services Group. His challenge was to implement the vision of moving the whole of IT Services to new shared processes for IT support and operations.

In 2012 the University combined three IT operations into a single new department. The new department had responsibility for shared infrastructure and educational technology as well as business systems and desktops. At the time I remember seeing this as a logical progression from my "scaling-up" thoughts from almost 10 years earlier.

I was appointed as the Programme Manager for the re-organisation, immediately grateful for having added Managing Successful Programmes® (MSP®) to my toolkit - once again courtesy of Quanta Training.

The new organisational structure created new functions and roles, including the Customer Services group and directorship. This was an anchor point for the continued development of ITSM, combined with activities to connect and support the distributed IT teams in departments and colleges across the University. Once again, I saw an opportunity to progress my vision of joined-up, coordinated and efficient IT.

2013-2018

The Customer Services Group evolved in response to University needs. It initially comprised of the central service desk, desktop support and IT Support Staff Service. Support for enterprise applications (Finance, HR, Alumni Relations, Student Systems) came into the group in 2015 ahead of a review which realigned it with the relevant business services in 2017; the IT Learning Centre (digital skills) and Educational Media Services became part of the group from 2016 and 2018, respectively.

The group and my role has changed a lot since 2013. As the department was formed we consolidated 5 customer contact points into an IT service desk, we completed the move of 1,500 staff desktops onto the same Windows OS with consistent login and file/print based on a unified Active Directory, and we introduced the shared processes, information and toolset. My group also has a key role in supporting the local IT teams in our 100+ departments and colleges, both as a professional network of IT specialists and as a distributed but coordinated IT support function.

In 2015, the specialist support teams for our key enterprise applications (Finance, HR, Student Systems and Alumni Relations) moved in from another group. These had been designed as business application competency centres, but their location in IT had never quite worked as planned – and two years later we merged these functions into the relevant administration functions instead. ITSM insight from IT combined with resourcing and decision-making within each function built a collaborative approach that strengthened relations between IT and the other functions.

'It's been great to lead a group that has successfully created shared services that make life easier for other IT teams as well as their customers, and provide the efficiencies and resilience of operating at a much larger scale'

Shortly after that the University's digital skills team (then known as the IT Learning Centre) joined our group. They are responsible for helping academics, students and professional services staff develop appropriate digital skills for the rapidly changing world we work in. We also now include educational media services which provides professional event filming and live streaming, maintain the University's ever-popular podcasts and iTunesU channel, and has recently established a shared audio-visual support service (previously done only by local IT teams).

It's been great to lead a group that has successfully created shared services that make life easier for other IT teams as well as their customers, and provide the efficiencies and resilience of operating at a much larger scale.

The Impact of ITIL within the University

During the ITIL course with Quanta, I recall explaining the background technicalities of the department's operations within the University. (As a side note, I still have my copy of the course manual, which I keep for reference!)

We could do anything with a server that you wanted. We could write any software you wanted. We thought we were being transformational. We were delivering everything that people asked for and they were coming back to report that they were happy with the result of any individual request. However, there was an overall perception that this wasn't enough – in particular there were individuals who raised anecdotes about calls taking a very long time to be resolved.

Incident   **Request**   **Change**

A penny-drop moment occurred during the ITIL course when we were talking about the difference between incidents, requests, and changes.

On my return to the office we made some configuration changes to our IT support system and started classifying calls as incidents, requests or changes. This enabled us to report performance separately for these areas. We found that over 70% of the incidents that came in got resolved same day, with the rest normally covered the following day. We found that of the requests, 90% were resolved in the agreed timeframe. In contrast, changes often took much longer as they often involved development of new solutions, and posed enduring challenges due to their complexity and impact, or dependence on other business functions.

There were still some challengers who needed closer examination of the data to be sure that we had included specific cases from their personal experience. We discussed ways of providing "VIP" access for some of these, but the clearer reporting of general performance raised confidence in our work to the point that these weren't ultimately needed.

'Overall, our tiny ITIL implementation not only improved service delivery but also empowered the college to prioritise effectively, ultimately leading to higher customer satisfaction levels.'

Presenting these findings to senior stakeholders began a series of constructive discussions around how they wanted IT to focus our resources. The clarification of these categories facilitated a better understanding of service expectations. It enabled customers to gauge the anticipated resolution time based on the nature of their issue, leading to enhanced satisfaction without increasing workload.

We also established effective configuration management, change management, and knowledge management across our services. Configuration management tools and comprehensive documentation for procedures and support information made operations more efficient, supported continuous integrity checking, and enabled us to rapidly accommodate new members of staff and new systems.

Overall, our tiny ITIL implementation not only improved service delivery but also empowered the college to prioritise effectively, ultimately leading to higher customer satisfaction levels.

Enabling Amazing Outputs

My current group is part of the IT Services department with around 300 members of IT staff. We have to remind ourselves that although we're in an IT team which is bigger than many IT companies, our "business" is the academic research, teaching and learning that the University of Oxford is famous for!

I regularly meet with the teams, and love to pull up the latest news of ground-breaking research that demonstrates the impact of the academic work that we supported through our service actions.

The events of 2020 really clarified the critical role that IT plays. An overnight pivot to enable online and global communication, as well as deploying large numbers of new laptops, was key to COVID-19 vaccine development. It also provided continuity for the rest of the University, with minimal disruption.

However, even the most seemingly mundane call can be just as important. Sorting out logins and access issues is critical at Oxford as we have such a diverse organisational structure, but excel in inter-disciplinary research. One example was a researcher looking at how to target delivery of drugs to reduce stroke damage in particular parts of the brain.
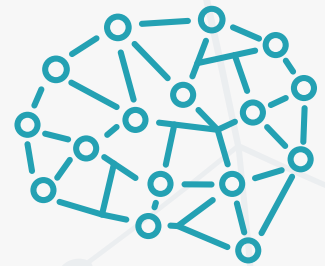
This is really hard because after a stroke, blood flow in the brain has often been disrupted, changing the pathways for drug delivery. But then, there was another department that had been working on logistics and transport networks to work out how to route goods deliveries efficiently when sections of the road network are closed or slow.

Exactly the same problem, totally different application! The two research teams got together and found ways to apply the solutions from the transport network to deliver stroke drugs more effectively. So I like to remind the team that we can be very proud of our underpinning support for world-leading research and education.

Finding the relevant research was facilitated by our online research finder and research archive, and the teams were able to collaborate using shared IT services with appropriate group access.

Working with Quanta

The University of Oxford has recently embarked on a new digital transformation initiative. Much in the same way that ITIL was key to enabling changes in 2012, we're moving to a product-based approach that employs Agile (Scrum) for much of our development work.

''It is a nice feeling being at Quanta's training centre, with trainers and staff who are engaged, happy to discuss your needs and show that they really care'

Quanta are now delivering the Universities on-boarding Agile Awareness training so that everybody has a base level of Agile methodology understanding. Quanta are also providing Scrum Product Owner training for those who are taking on this role. Quanta's 'Raise the Terror Scrum Business Simulation', was a great way to see how this works in practice and could help us achieve some of the goals of Oxford's digital transformation!

'Quanta contextualise and pitch the training so that it not only reflects the University's language, challenges and operations, but is also relevant for the level of learner that is attending the course. The pass rates are also very healthy, which is fantastic'

Quanta's Training Centre is like a home from home. It is a nice feeling being there, with trainers and staff who are engaged, happy to discuss your needs and show that they really care – before, during and after a course.

It is a huge credit that all of Quanta's Trainers are Practitioners, as they can draw on practical examples to show the relevance of something or discuss details of how a practice is applied in the real world.

When we attend training, there is so much value in knowing that it won't be 3 days of 'learn these 17 things and remember them for the examination'. The trainer will engage in discussion around real word examples with a level of granularity and experience, meaning that you can implement a real change when you leave the classroom. We find this incredibly valuable.

'Working with Quanta consistently works really well. We get very high pass rates and I'm confident recommending Quanta to my staff'

Quanta contextualise and pitch the training so that it not only reflects the University's language, challenges and operations, but is also relevant for the level of learner that is attending the course. The pass rates are also very healthy, which is fantastic! Working with Quanta consistently works really well. We get very high pass rates and I'm confident recommending Quanta to my staff.

In the past 24 months, learners from the University of Oxford have rated Quanta a score of 9.14 out of 10 for quality of tutoring.

In the past 24 months, 100% of learners from the University of Oxford have confirmed that their training expectations were met.

100%

100%

In the past 24 months, 100% of learners from the University of Oxford have agreed that they felt prepared for their examination.

*Scores based on all feedback submissions from University of Oxford between August 2022 - August 2024

Considering ITIL? Talk to the Master!

By implementing ITIL's practices, organisations can improve collaboration and communication, mitigate risks, make informed decisions based on data-driven insights, and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Quanta is a PeopleCert on behalf of Axelos accredited training organisation. Quanta's IT Service Management Lead Trainer, Adam White-Bower has over 20 years experience in ITIL and ITSM. Adam is a certified Axelos Global Best Practice ITIL 4 Master. ITIL 4 Master is the highest ITIL Certification. Adam has mastered the theory of ITIL principles, methods and techniques and has been dedicated to delivering transformative ITIL training to UK businesses for over a decade.

To speak with Adam about ITIL Implementation, training or consultancy within your organisation, get in touch!

![Quanta Training logo]

Considering Agile? Talk to the Scrum Master!

Agile is an iterative and incremental approach that supports teams in their goal to build the right product or service quickly, whilst minimising exposure to risk and ensuring quality.

Through Scrum Alliance Quanta is a Certified Scrum Trainer® organisation. Leading their Scrum efforts is Howie Bartrip, a seasoned CST (Certified Scrum Trainer) licensed by Scrum Alliance. With extensive experience, Howie brings a practical approach to Scrum methodology, fostering agility and collaboration within teams. His commitment to excellence has positioned Quanta as a trusted partner in many Agile transformations.
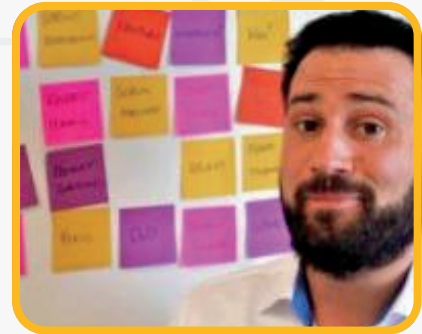
To speak with Howie about Agile Implementation, training or consultancy within your organisation, get in touch!

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