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Enterprise Request Management: An Overview

Abstract

World-class service delivery today means a relentless focus on customer-centricity—delighting internal and/or external service consumers in the fastest, easiest and most economical manner possible. Frameworks like the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) are, if not dead, at least diminishing in emphasis and useful only insofar as they support a customer-centric service delivery approach.

Enterprise Request Management, or ERM, is a strategy that offers fully integrated, cloud-based business process automation delivered in a customer-centric user interface, while employing an integrated back-end delivery model. The goal of an ERM strategy is to allow business service providers to meet enterprise service delivery requirements for shared-service environments in a scalable, cost-effective manner.

This paper explains ERM as a business-efficiency strategy and illustrates how ERM improves both the customer experience and internal service delivery processes. This approach ensures efficient, timely, and cost-effective enterprise service delivery, resulting in lower costs and happier customers.

The concepts presented are based on Kinetic Data's 15+ years of experience focusing on service request management, IT service management, and service automation in the Fortune 1,000, federal government, and Department of Defense sectors.

The problem: Misaligned business processes waste money and frustrate customers

As a recent report from Interactive Intelligence Group puts it, "Many firms perform their business processes with no attempt to delight the customer...Firms have a strong tendency to build processes based on what their internal organization prefers. In many cases, customers have to negotiate Byzantine interactive voice response (IVR) menus and Web pages because they mimic a firm's internal department structure. It makes no sense to the customers—they don't know, nor do they care, how a firm is organized."[1]

In shared-service environments, organizational entities such as functional departments like Information Technology (IT), Human Resources (HR), facilities, marketing, and accounting use various methods to interact with "customers" (internal or external) who need business services. This includes recording and resolving incidents, requesting and finding services, as well as providing for other business needs in order for people to be productive in their jobs.

In general, each business support area has its own systems for managing business services delivery.

- HR uses systems for payroll, benefits administration, case management and candidate tracking/recruiting.

- Operations normally uses an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system for managing the flow of information between business functions internally, and supply chain management (SCM) for coordinating external connections to outside vendors.

- IT utilizes systems for IT service management (ITSM) and automating the delivery of key IT services, as well as for managing systems security and user access privileges.

- Finance and Accounting departments use different systems for managing and reporting the financial components of the enterprise.

- Facilities has systems to manage the moves, adds, and changes required to support the physical infrastructure of the organization.

Organizing service delivery in functional silos may seem logical from a departmental perspective, but it leads to inefficiency at the enterprise level. Arguably, this is worse from a service excellence perspective, since the silo approach is function-centric rather than customer-centric, as can be seen in the illustration below.

Pre-ERM
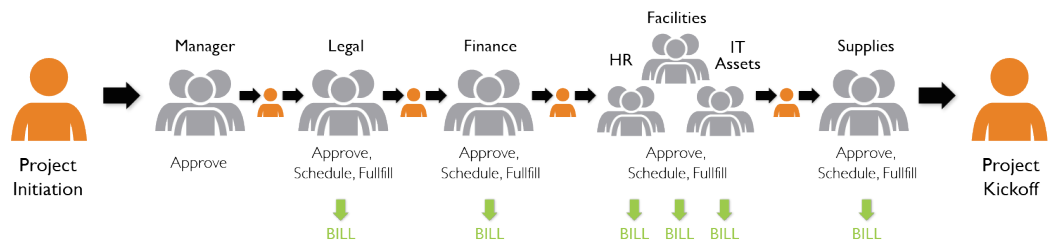
The diagram illustrates how a request to initiate a project might be managed through the fulfillment process today:

- The "requester," or customer (represented by the orange figure), must first obtain management approval.

- Next, the customer might need approval from the Legal Department, which must also schedule their services (e.g. create documentation) and fulfill the service (deliver the documentation).

- Legal documentation in hand, the customer has to obtain approval from Finance, which must then schedule it's fulfillment (budget allocation) and deliver that budget authority.

- From there, it's on to human resources (approval, assignment of employees, authorization for use of outside temporary help); facilities (approval, scheduling of workspace); and, once the space becomes available, IT (delivery of PCs, phone hookup, allocation of server space, setting up user permissions, etc.).

- Then it's time to obtain supplies (pens, paper, Post-Its, whiteboard markers, etc.), which must be approved, pulled from stock and delivered to the work area.

- And at each step in the process, internal charge-backs are levied by each department and applied against the project budget.

Finally, with all of the above steps completed, the project kick-off is ready to go. Throughout the process, the onus is on the customer to consciously and actively manage the workflow through emails, phone calls and meetings, which, unsurprisingly, creates a high level of customer frustration.

Exacerbating this frustration is the fact that in this approach to request management,

enterprises are faced with complex service delivery models that require access to data and processes managed by back-end systems "owned" by other areas. The customer must learn to interface with each of these systems along the way, delaying the project and increasing training costs. And if these disparate functional systems don't "talk" to each other, error-prone manual data entry is required, leading to further inefficiencies as well as redundant and potentially mismatched data in different systems.

The costs of such an onerous request management process are borne by the company in lost productivity, lower employee morale, and higher turnover, as well as in the cost of lost possible business opportunities.

What's needed is a streamlining of the request fulfillment process, taking the onus off of the customer to have to consciously and actively manage the process, learn all of the different system interfaces, and waste his or her time dealing with redundant messages and data entry.

Streamlining Request Management

A better approach to managing request management business processes is ERM. In this federated collaboration approach, a single, easy-to-use request portal (a.k.a. a system of engagement) replaces the hodgepodge of emails, phone calls and disparate department online request form front-ends. And an automated task management "backbone" application eliminates the complexity and the manual processes by automatically managing approvals, scheduling and fulfillment through securely communicating with and between departmental software platforms (systems of record).

The illustration below demonstrates that, with ERM, request management is consciously and actively managed by an automated system—not the customer.

First and foremost, a critical benefit of implementing ERM is obvious: the customer experience is substantially improved. In addition, there are a number of other clear, key reasons to implement ERM. The ERM approach:

1. reduces fulfillment costs;
2. accelerates fulfillment time;
3. avoids redundant data-entry errors;
4. eliminates the need for customers to learn and use multiple system interfaces;
5. prevents needless frustration; and
6. frees customers to work on higher-value tasks instead of managing their requests.

Service request fulfillment is made faster and less costly by use of a consistent, intuitive user interface that requires no training and makes self-help easy—eliminating the need to learn multiple system interfaces, as well as the need to make expensive support calls. ERM is less costly than other approaches to business process automation as it leverages existing software systems to minimize training, implementation and license costs as well as business disruption.

This approach accelerates fulfillment by eliminating the need for duplicate manual data entry into multiple systems, and by validating all data upon entry (which prevents mistakes and attendant rework while also supporting compliance). It provides visibility into fulfillment processes, enabling business managers to identify areas for improvement and eradicate bottlenecks.

ERM dramatically reduces customer frustration not only by simplifying the request process but also by ensuring resource availability and avoiding scheduling conflicts, enabling consistent first-time fulfillment. In addition, the visibility provided throughout the process (think package tracking on Amazon.com orders) virtually eliminates phone calls to "see where things are," empowering users to request services in a faster, smarter way.

Request management tasks (approvals, scheduling, delivery, costing, and even collecting user satisfaction feedback) are automated, freeing the customer to work on higher-value tasks instead of manually managing the request process.

The Enterprise Request Management (ERM) Model

The ERM approach offers fully integrated, cloud-based business process automation delivered in a customer-centric approach while employing an integrated back-end delivery model.

A = Approval, S = Schedule, F = Fulfillment
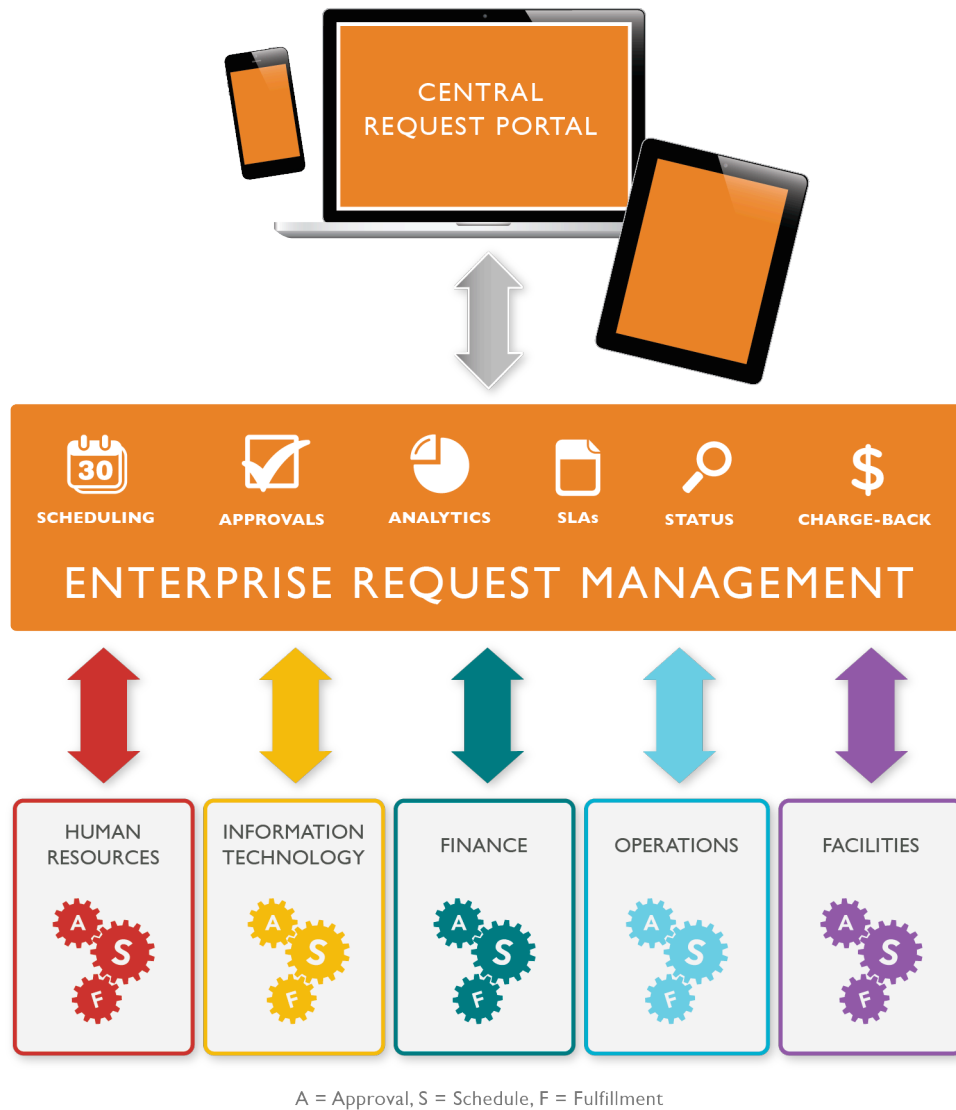
As the diagram shows, ERM replaces old-style, proprietary request management approaches with an open model that leverages information in existing enterprise applications and data sources for a centralized, efficient way to manage service requests throughout the enterprise.

The types of business processes that ERM serves well range from simple tasks (e.g., registering a user for system access) to more complex tasks such as onboarding a new employee. Automation is applied wherever possible (e.g., updating user license accounts for compliance), while manual tasks (e.g., approvals, scheduling of technicians for dispatch) are assigned, tracked, and managed as needed.

ERM is an agile approach to request management that enables organizations to augment their existing tools and processes to be more customer-focused.

Most service requests involve seven essential elements:

1. **Centralized request management:** ERM starts with an action or event that launches a business process pertaining to a defined service item. Most commonly, this is a service request from an internal or external customer (e.g., repair a malfunctioning printer). Rather than requiring the customer to navigate different screens or even different systems, ERM is designed to simplify the process by enabling any type of service request to be quickly entered via a single, intuitive request portal. A process may also be triggered by a form submission or an automated event (e.g., reaching a certain date automatically sends an email message reminding a customer to renew an annual maintenance agreement). A catalog of common service items can be built out quickly using rapid-deployment tools.

2. **Scheduling:** assignment of a task or fulfillment of a request. Depending upon the nature of the action, scheduling may be automated or may require human intervention using a scheduling tool to coordinate schedules for personnel, resources, and facilities.

3. **Approvals:** authorization for a service to be delivered. A manager or system owner may have to approve an order, expenditure, system access or other request. In an automated ERM process, requests for approval (and follow-up reminders, if necessary) are automatically sent to the appropriate individuals for approval before the service request or other task can proceed. This avoids "overlooked" email messages or the need to manually track approval status in a separate spreadsheet or project management tool.

4. **Analytics:** collection and recording of key service delivery metrics. This includes measures that are both automatically recorded within the ERM process (e.g., the elapsed time required to complete each step) and recorded by human input (e.g., responses to automatically generated, context-specific user surveys).

5. **Service Level Agreements (SLAs):** Service fulfillment times, particularly those involving IT groups, are often dictated by SLAs. And SLAs are often the result of negotiation, i.e., the provider and recipient of a service agree on a "reasonable" timeframe for fulfillment. In the ERM approach, SLAs are handled differently in two fundamental ways. First, they are based on actual times (according to analytics, how long does it actually take to deliver the service?) and second, they are a moving target subject to continuous improvement.

6. **Status:** the current state of the progress toward completion of a task or delivery of a service or physical item. This frequently involves automatically reading data from multiple systems or federated data sources and updating information in other systems (e.g., the purchase of a new laptop for an employee requires updates to IT management, accounting, HR, and other enterprise applications). The customer and the managers in charge of service fulfillment alike can view the status of a service request at any time.

7. **Charge-back:** assignment of the cost of the service delivery to the appropriate entity. Depending on who the "customer" is, this may require creating and sending an invoice (billing an external buyer); assigning a warranty cost and noting a zero invoice (for a warranty repair); or logging an interdepartmental charge (for an internal user).

In addition, ERM supports reporting of aggregated and combined service delivery measurements for analysis and decision-making. This enables managers to make data-driven decisions to allocate resources, eliminate bottlenecks, identify opportunities for time and cost savings, and to continually improve service delivery quality.

Note that ERM is "function-agnostic"— at a high level, it can apply to any type of service (IT, HR, facilities, etc.). The service customer has a single interface for requesting any type of service, and visibility into the status of the request, without needing to have any understanding of the specific back-end processes. Tasks are automated wherever possible, minimizing fulfillment time, labor hours, and the risk of errors due to manual data entry.

Benefits of an ERM Strategy
There are four main benefits achieved with the ERM approach:

1. Improved user experience

2. Centralization of business services

3. First-time and automated fulfillment

4. Leveraging existing systems

Improved User Experience
An ERM service request portal is designed so that no training or calls to the service desk are required to make service requests. It's created for casual, non-expert users; built-in rules automatically guide customers through the process of submitting a quality request, gathering all of the data needed to drive first-time fulfillment. The system then automatically routes requests to the correct back-end fulfillment systems or groups.

The request portal is designed to delight customers by enabling them to submit any type of service request—even complex requests requiring the efforts of multiple departments for fulfillment—from a single, intuitive interface. The portal is Web-based and mobile-friendly, so customers can initiate requests from any device, anywhere, at any time.

The system also provides visibility into the status of requests (similar to package tracking) that allows support organizations to communicate "where, what and when" service is expected. This eliminates the need for time-consuming human-generated status updates, improving the overall customer experience.

Centralization of Business Services

With ERM, enterprises use a central Web portal for all business service requests. Services delivered by specific areas can be organized within the portal according to business need and using customer terminology, making it easy for customers to find what they need and make the request without having to search for the "right" request system.

ERM incorporates a task workflow engine that can securely share information among existing enterprise systems to automate scheduling, approvals, cost and activity tracking, and user feedback collection. The workflow engine integrates with calendar tools to enable customers and managers to view the status of requests at any time, and with reporting tools for SLA monitoring and analytics to support continuous process improvement.

The request portal is a system of engagement that interacts with an organization's systems of record (e.g., ERP, HR, ITSM and other application suites) through the task workflow engine.

Department managers can create and modify services and fulfillment workflows with minimal help from IT. New services can be easily created in any functional area and added to the ERM system using rapid deployment tools that can convert forms-based data into properly formatted service items.

First-Time and Automated Fulfillment

A vital characteristic of customer-centricity is correctly and completely fulfilling service requests the first time. Proper fulfillment not only improves customer satisfaction, but also reduces costs by eliminating the wasted time, effort, and costs of rework.

In the ERM approach, complex processes can be coordinated across fulfillment centers (HR, IT, Finance, etc.). When one functional group (such as HR) completes a task, the ERM workflow engine can combine information gathered in the original request with that HR fulfillment data and use it to update the Finance system to appropriately drive charge-backs or update existing software license inventories. The entire process can be

automated, as it utilizes quality data from the request system and validated HR data from the HR system, and passes it to Finance using pre-determined, secure, auditable processes.

Leverages Existing Systems

Functional areas in the organization have invested heavily in specialized systems to manage their needs. A key element of ERM is that it allows enterprises to gain organizational efficiency by leveraging their investments in existing systems—not just financial investments, but the investments in intellectual capital acquired over time while building their fulfillment systems to automate business processes.

The ability to use existing fulfillment systems results in lower capital expenditure by the enterprise, as well as eliminating the need for new system training. ERM allows customers to make requests through a single portal interface and have fulfillment managed by the group best suited for the task. The HR group can continue to manage HR processes in their systems, while IT, Operations, Finance and Facilities use their systems. This reuse enables faster business process transformation while eliminating unnecessary overhead for the enterprise.

Designing Processes to Delight Customers

The ERM approach uses technology to simplify customer service requests and automate fulfillment processes. It will provide less-than-optimal value, however, if used simply to reinforce and automate inefficient, internally focused business processes.

ERM will provide the maximum benefits in cost savings and customer ease of use when processes are first redesigned with the customer in mind. As the Interactive Intelligence Group report recommends:

"Reverse engineer your process: start with the result of a delighted customer...Choose a process that's broken. Articulate how it impacts your customers, and envision how you would change that process to have a delightful outcome…Map out the necessary people, functions, workflow, data, and timing required to achieve the outcome. Leverage the tools to communicate the process, and use this to drive the necessary organizational changes and technology support…Fix it, monitor it, and make sure you're in touch with the "voice-of-the-customer, even if the customers for the process are internal."[2]

Business processes are rarely if ever ideal on the first iteration. A key benefit of the ERM approach is the ability to identify areas for improvement and quickly modify task automation process flows to consolidate tasks, eliminate needless steps, bypass bottlenecks, reduce overall fulfillment time, and improve performance against customer expectations.

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Summary

Too often, enterprise service delivery resembles an organizational chart: Human Resources delivers HR-related services, IT provides technology services, Facilities takes care of building and space requests, and so on. Each type of service must be requested separately, using a different interface or even a completely different system.

Users not only need to know which system to use, but also how to navigate within each interface. For businesses, this means disconnected and inefficient processes, while users face unnecessary waits, frustration, and wasted time.

By employing an ERM strategy, enterprises can put the focus of customer service where it belongs: on the (internal or external) customer. The end-user customer is able to order services of any type (or even services that cross functional boundaries) from a single, easy-to-navigate interface, and to view the status of in-process requests at any time. Functional groups can continue to use their own specific applications and deliver services more efficiently, with fewer error-prone manual processes. While legacy applications will continue to do much of the work, a uniform and user-friendly front end hides the complexity from users who simply want services delivered without having to know or care "what's behind the curtain."

ERM centralizes and automates business processes, leveraging existing systems and knowledge, while improving the customer experience. The end result is faster service delivery and reduced costs for the enterprise, and a simpler, frustration-free experience for service requesters.

About Kinetic Data

Kinetic Data has helped hundreds of Fortune 500 and government customers—including General Mills, Avon, Intel, 3M, and the U.S. Department of Transportation—implement business service management and enterprise request management (ERM) applications aligned with ITIL best practices. Kinetic Data was named "Innovator of the Year" by an independent group of enterprise software users, and the company has also been recognized with awards for its superior customer service and support. Kinetic Data serves customers from its headquarters in St. Paul, Minn., offices in Sydney, Australia, and through a network of reseller partners. For more information, visit www.kineticdata.com.

[1] "Humanizing Business Process Automation: Optimizing Performance for Employees and Customers," Jesse Clark and Rachel Wentink, Interactive Intelligence Group, January 2012.
[2] Ibid.