

Leveraging standards and ITIL-based processes for increased differentiation

Why independent certification in key areas such as quality, information security and IT service management should no longer be confined to larger companies, and is particularly applicable for channel organisations developing complex solutions for their customers

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**Intact Integrated Services
Unit C Silwood Park
Buckhurst Road
Ascot
SL5 7PW**

Tel: +44 (0) 1344 756600
www.intact-is.com

1. Adopting a Quality Management approach for business operations

It used to be that attaining ISO 9001 Quality Management or ITIL IT Service Management certification was the preserve of the larger organisation, however many smaller IT solutions providers are now finding that their customers are starting to demand these standards as a core requirement for doing business.

Looking at the UK channel market we find that the UK partner community is characterised by two main drivers. Among smaller integrators and distribution partners, there is a desire to expand their business portfolios, particularly into higher value advanced technology solutions such as Unified Communications, Security capabilities and Datacentre services.

It's entirely right that partners should look to differentiate their offerings through added value solutions such as Cisco Advanced Technologies. These projects tend to be more complex, margins are consequently higher and there is less fierce price competitiveness. However for more complex Systems Integrator companies, the requirement is often for an increased service and solutions capability to help them scope and deliver their business propositions efficiently and ensure that their solutions are delivered to very high standards of customer satisfaction.

For both kinds of channel organisations, these higher value projects are typically more complex; margins are consequently higher and there is less price competitiveness. But the decision to add these more complex solutions to the portfolio can also have unexpected yet significant bottom line implications with regard to areas such as capital investments, specialist recruitment needs as well as training and sales support.

If UK channel businesses are to address these opportunities successfully, there is a pressing requirement for them to implement clearly established and replicable processes that help to optimise their business performance. In addition, well-defined service management procedures and operational performance guidelines are needed to ensure a consistently high quality offering.

It is important for solutions providers to strengthen their own internal systems if they are to provide their customers with a high quality service each and every time. Service Level Agreements of course are important, but they work so much better when they are actually backed by rigorous quality processes, and a structured service management capability.

That's why Intact Integrated Services encourages organisations to invest a significant amount of their time and resources on securing the range of different certifications that are available to demonstrate their ability to deliver against the most exacting standards. In addition to ISO 9001 Quality Management, Intact believes there are significant benefits that can also be achieved by working towards and adopting ITIL-based IT Service Management and ISO 14001 Environmental Management Systems certification.

Of course there are significant internal costs and resources required in going down the certification route, as well as an ongoing commitment to making sure that initiatives such as ISO 9001 and ITIL become and remain embedded as an integral part of how a business operates. But it's important to match these costs against the ability, when all your key processes are backed by independent certification from BSI - the leading UKAS accredited organisation, to give unequivocal responses to customers seeking quality, information security and IT service management credentials.

Very quickly, partners will find that their customers start to demonstrate real confidence in their technology partner's own processes and, infrastructure and especially in their ability to understand and deliver on project requirements.

2. Turning ITIL into a services asset

However, knowing how complex and time-consuming implementing these Quality Management processes can be, many consultants recommend that organisations think hard about the support they might need to support their own certification activities.

If ISO certification is to be successful it's essential that organisations recognise the scale of the process in front of them. It typically requires hands-on senior management involvement, and the right level of resources allocated to the task. The process demands management attention, but also appropriate buy-in and support from employees throughout the company.

The right expectations also have to be set. Quality certification can help manage a business by streamlining processes, strengthening your brand in the marketplace and also opening up new opportunities. However there are also costs involved, with operational expenses rising because of expenditure on systems and more time spent on processes and checks. Longer term though, the benefits and payback comes through in areas such as reduced staff training, improved inventory procedures and more effective service management.

That's where specialist consultancy and process management can help, particularly for smaller organisations such as channel businesses that typically won't have a good quality manager in place. External consultancy and services can play a key role in planning and driving forward a company's quality management implementation, mentoring internal project champions and guiding the company in the right direction.

External professional support can also help in shortening the timeline for an ISO 9000 implementation from start-to-finish. Depending on the size of the organisation, projects can take anything from nine to 18 months with a key success factor being how closely companies are aligned to their project goals. Time to certification is obviously a variable, but expert help in ensuring that companies are on track and avoiding pitfalls can clearly be invaluable.

Another key certification area is ITIL – a set of best practice concepts and techniques for addressing the effective management of IT infrastructure, service delivery and service support. Originally a public sector initiative, ITIL has been successfully adopted by the corporate sector but is often seen as less appropriate for smaller organisations.

For some channel organisations, however, ITIL-certification can prove a powerful differentiator and confirm their ability to deliver a structured services approach to the growing number of customers who increasingly require more formal service certification. While the process of adopting and implementing ITIL certification can be time-consuming, the benefits for a smaller organisation are that there are typically less staff and processes involved, and that the benefits can be significant in terms of more streamlined support processes and more efficient IT operations.

3. Developing certification and process management skills for channel partners

We're now starting to see how some of those partner organisations that can clearly demonstrate ISO Quality Management certification, ITIL-based processes and Environmental certification are positioning themselves to address higher value business opportunities. Effective adherence with these standards can also play a part in helping to ensure compliance and reduce the longer-term risk of penalties and litigation.

To achieve these kinds of benefits, however, smaller organisations need to consider a number of key service improvement issues. If they can find an organisation or partner that has already addressed these issues, then there's a strong chance they can accelerate their internal procedures and benefit from a fast-track approach to advanced process management and adherence. Three key examples of this would include:

- **Ensuring effective risk assessment** – channel partners should carry out detailed reviews of security threats and vulnerabilities within their organisation’s systems and examine their potential business impact. These will not only relate to IT but will encompass all sensitive and mission-critical information held within their business
- **Matching current and future Best Practice** – it’s important for channel organisations to match their current systems and processes against recognised best practice within their industry - effective Gap Analysis can be an important first step towards achieving ISO certification
- **Support for documentation drafting** – while it’s entirely possible for channel organisations to draft all their own ITIL or ISO documentation, it makes a lot of sense to get in some expert help as specialists know exactly the kind of wording and process-related approach that works – the benefit for channel organisations is that they also will have less requirement to call on their valuable internal resources

Having gone through many of these processes itself, Intact Integrated Services has seen the value in certifying aspects of its business, and is convinced it can be a powerful market differentiator. For channel firms that have previously thought accreditation programmes such as ISO Quality Management and ITIL Service Management were not right for their business, Intact’s advice would be to think again – they might be missing out on a significant opportunity for growth.

4. Specialist Service Improvement programmes for the UK channel partner community

Working closely with its own certification partner convinced Intact Integrated Services – the UK’s leading Cisco Service Extension Partner (SEP) – of the value of professional support through these processes. So much so that Intact has now partnered with the firm in question to develop a portfolio of relevant certification service offerings for its own channel customers. This new initiative is designed to provide channel partners with access to a broad range of certification and process management skills, helping them to address the growing volume of business where compliance with designated standards is increasingly a condition of entry for channel partners. In addition, Intact will also provide resellers with support in a number of key process improvement areas, including Gap Analysis, Risk Assessment and Managed IMS capabilities to ensure continuous service improvement.

Intact is a distinctive organisation in that it never deals directly with end-customers, and its new Service Improvement Programme extends the company's ability to support partners in winning higher value, high quality business through the application of rigorous quality, security, business continuity and environmental certification. Intact's consultants can either help partners embark on formal certification, or work to ensure that their current practices and processes perform to recognised standards. Intact will also work with partners to combine standards accreditation with more integrated management systems, which can deliver significant benefits in terms of more efficient project design, implementation and maintenance.

Helping channel partners to expand their service portfolios

Intact itself has committed significant resources over the last two years to securing its own ISO 9001 Quality Management, ISO 27001 Information Security Management, ISO 20000 ITIL-based IT Service Management, BS25999 Business Continuity and ISO 14001 Environmental Management Systems certification. It's this investment that has allowed the company to expand its services proposition to offer a series of white label solutions that partners can use to increase their own service portfolios.

Intact's Service Improvement Programme is focused on providing Cisco partners with a fast-track approach to advanced process management and adherence. The company has found that those of its partners that can clearly demonstrate ISO Quality Management certification, ITIL-based processes and Environmental certification are now positioning themselves to address higher value business opportunities. Effective compliance can also reduce the longer-term risk of penalties and litigation. Examples of Intact's expanding Service Improvement Programme include:

- **Gap Analysis** – based on pragmatic, business-focused methodologies, Intact's Gap Analysis services help channel partners and their customers to compare their current systems and processes against recognised best practice. This is the first step to achieving certification to specific ISO standards.
- **Risk Assessment** - considers the likelihood and impact on a business of threats, vulnerabilities and exposure – a major component for achieving certification to ISO 27001 Information Security Management, for BS 25999 Business Continuity Management and for UK Government Accreditation. Consultants carry out detailed reviews of security threats and vulnerabilities within your organisation's systems and examine their potential business impact. These will not only relate to IT but will encompass all sensitive and mission-critical information held within your business

- **Certification Project Management** – featuring a full range of services for planning and managing certification with a minimum impact on partner resources. This ranges from drafting documentation to appointing UKAS-accredited certification organisations and assessors, as well as a range of audits to ensure a business is ready for the next ISO Standard stage
- **Business Continuity Management** – the development of Business Continuity plans, Impact Analysis documentation as well as certification for BS25999 Business Continuity Management
- **Managed IMS Services** – range of services including maintaining business continuity plans, support for sustainable development and environmental impact assessment, advice on changing legislation and its impact on standards

Intact is committed to providing its partners with the support they need to broaden their own service offerings. The company's Service Improvement programme extends this initiative, giving partners the ability to differentiate their own business through certification, as well as significantly boosting their sales potential.

5. Intact Integrated Services – the UK's leading Cisco Service Extension Partner

Intact Integrated Services Ltd is an independent provider of project, support and managed services solutions to the ICT industry. The company is an exclusively partner-focused organisation as well as being a leading Cisco Service Extension Partner, providing lifecycle offerings to Cisco partners, systems integrators, telcos and service providers.

Intact is unusual in that it is an exclusively partner-focused organisation as well as the UK's leading Cisco Service Extension Partner (SEP) providing lifecycle service offerings to Cisco partners.

Intact never deals directly with end-user clients and doesn't supply either hardware or software products. Instead, Intact focuses entirely on supporting channel partners in winning and delivering higher value, high quality business opportunities. As a result the company concentrates on proactively developing a number of 'white label' service offerings to broaden the service portfolio of Cisco partners.

Intact places a special emphasis on delivering services to support Cisco Advanced Technologies. These include:

- Unified Communications
- Contact Centre Express & Enterprise
- Rich Media
- Security
- Content
- Mobility
- Routing & Switching
- Network & Application Performance Management
- Datacentre services

Many partners find these Advanced Technologies a particularly attractive sales proposition given they are faced with increasing margin pressure on their more standard product and solution offerings.

Intact's core service capability covers LAN/WAN infrastructures, IP communications, wireless and security, and physical infrastructure deployment to a wide range of server-based computing and application skills including datacentre design and deployment, storage and application development and support. Intact's services are backed by dual 24x7 Managed Service Centres in Slough and Croydon, delivering both support and managed services to a wide range of customers.

In addition, our core service solutions are all now backed by quadruple quality certifications covering quality management, service delivery, information security and environmental management, and we're adding a fifth certification around business continuity. This significant investment in quality, process management and business continuity has allowed Intact to expand its services proposition to include a range of additional consultative professional services including areas such as GAP Analysis, Programme Management for Certification, internal requirements such as Health & Safety and Onward Managed Services.

For more information, please visit www.intact-is.com, or contact the company on 01344 756600.