

# Who needs Release Management?

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## Implementing release management

Adapting to new business demands is always a challenge for the IT divisions of major firms in today's competitive market. The mission of IT and also one of its greatest challenges is providing effective support for the changes required by a business. IT must deliver appropriate tools and processes to enable a business to quickly respond to change while respecting the stability of the business' current operating systems.

Release management is a practical answer to this challenge. It's a process that combines both service design and delivery to ensure the smooth transfer of new services into production. Release management is a central part of modern approaches for the delivery of IT services because it takes into account the needs of both the development and production support departments.

## Needs, needs, needs

We live in a rapidly changing world. This, however, doesn't justify a weak or slow reaction from IT departments in responding to change. Because everything is changing rapidly, companies and IT must be able to respond and adapt quickly and effectively. When IT is slow to deliver, is it because the company's expectations are too high? Or, is it a result of the company's inability to clearly define business requirements, leading to frequent project changes? Or, does the problem lie with IT?

In a lot of cases, blame for a slow, ineffective response to change can be attributed to both the company and IT. So, how can we improve the situation? Is release management helpful? In this article, I will outline the role of release management in an organization and its advantages.

More than 50% of the cost of new service development is related to testing and integration. The remaining portion is related to other activities, such as analysis, design and implementation. There is a perception that because software is "soft" and flexible, it can be changed at any time during a project. But IT professionals know, and it's becoming increasingly known in business, that this is far from the truth. Unfortunately, IT departments often fall victim to this myth, but they are not completely without fault here.

## Stock exchange

The stock exchange symbolizes a place where supply meets demand. Is there such a place between business and IT? Often, the contracting of IT projects within a company takes place independently. Different channels commission projects, and different channels are the end recipients of the work. Often, IT projects overlap each other, fight for the same resources, or force changes that impact other projects.

This is where the benefits of release management come into play. A release manager serves as the owner and organizer of IT projects, but not as an active participant. The active players are the business owners on one side and the IT project managers on the other side who deliver the functionality.

All internal IT projects, such as the implementation of a new technology or a major upgrade, should begin at the same place. The role of release management is to build a release plan that provides an overall timetable for the delivery of each project. Project managers are responsible for sticking to this plan, but the release plan is not the only aspect that must be taken into account. There is much more.

Release management provides an overall framework for the delivery of projects, but business owners must be aware of and create general rules regarding changes that occur during production. Before detailed processes and procedures are laid out, business and IT need to agree on major rules regarding the fundamentals, including how frequently changes will be delivered into production and how many types of release channels there are.

### **"Two Michaels dancing"**

Release management and change management swirl together like "two Michaels dancing." And, as sometimes happens in Tuwim's poetry, one cannot keep up with the second, so it's important to control the scope of changes delivered in a single release.

Release management serves as the main whirlpool, and change management must be carefully added. Release management combines two elements: release planning and deployment planning. The gap between these two elements is covered by change management. A change manager monitors in detail the development process of individual changes while a release manager handles the intertwining business, development and production processes.

A release manager ensures that all necessary software components and configuration items for all projects that make up a release are scheduled to be developed and delivered. Configuration management answers the question of how to install something, but the details of configuration items are developed during the change management process.

Configuration management determines the granularity with which we describe the environment and what elements must be included for uploading new software. It must give guidance to other processes, so that in effect the products prepared by other processes are aligned with the configuration management and the appropriate items are properly placed.

### **Taxis or buses?**

It is a known fact that mass transportation is cheaper than individual transportation. The same is true in IT. A number of changes implemented in production one by one are more expensive than grouping these changes together and delivering them in the form of a release. Savings usually result in the testing phase and when integrating existing software. At the same time, the quality of testing is improved because everything is tested in a similar configuration.

Some simple and obvious rules for grouping changes are to group together dependent changes, changes on the same system or changes that require similar production deadline.

Fast-changing business needs generate new requirements, which in turn require strict deadlines and efficient budget management, management of regulatory changes, etc. This creates the conditions in which most IT departments operate. Add to the mix "time to market" and the picture becomes even more realistic.

How should IT cope? The best approach is a waterfall approach, which results in continuous integration or, in other words, a constantly flowing stream of changes.

In an ideal world, our energy would be used mainly for planning, and all the processes and people would operate flawlessly. But the real world is ruled by other laws and processes, and people in the real world sometimes fail. The most common cause of failure is the lack of communication or poor communication.

In the real world, on top of planning, communication is vital. We are not talking about communication for a single project, but for all IT and business departments. Good communication must also extend to those who are the source and receiver of changes. How do we communicate, and how do we oversee the state of many ongoing parallel projects? Is e-mail sufficient?

Everything depends on the scale of the organization, the number of projects, the number of people involved in the projects, etc. But nowhere is just an e-mail and meeting minutes sent by e-mail enough. We need a tool that supports us. For small businesses, this might be a simple system, adapted to local needs.

For large- and medium-size companies, however, it must be a system that ensures at least some of the basic requirements of document flow, work planning and tracking status are met, and in particular show cross-sectional views of projects at a given point in time and in a given environment. In addition, it must be fairly closely integrated with the existing system that supports change management and configuration management.

### **How to implement release management**

All organizations that have at least one test environment or pre-production environment where they integrate applications from different sources need a release management process. Implementing a release management process doesn't have to be difficult, but it must include several basic elements. It should begin with a description of the development and testing environments. Even if most projects are executed outside of the company, there should be at least one internal test environment before the new software is put into production.

In most cases, however, a mixed approach is used that involves developing and testing internally, while also contracting out. Each environment should be identified and described, so that the rules of promoting releases between them can be determined. Of course, some difficult questions will arise such as when to finish testing and can the date of implementation be based on the quality of the tests?

This presents a good opportunity to establish clear accountability because often it is not even known who makes the decision about implementing in production and on what basis. Situations in which the teams responsible for quality say "no," but business says "yes" need to be taken into account.

### **Who should be a release manager?**

Many elements of project management are used in release management. Release management is more closely related to IT project management, rather than to general project management. It also is dependent on the specific conditions of the company, its IT environment, and its business needs, etc.

Each organization must develop an effective method of providing for changes in production. What works for a particular company should be chosen, and what is unnecessary should be discarded. There is no approach that fits everyone. Something must always be added, modified or removed.

Therefore, a release manager with extensive experience within the organization should be chosen. The release manager serves as the decision-maker, but also as a conciliator, and sometimes as a super project manager or program manager.

His or her responsibility is also to ensure that all elements of software and configuration arrive at the right time for a production environment. The release manager should be someone who can reconcile different interests and understand the requirements of the business. He or she should also have a deep understanding of technology because a major system failure due to the implementation of the wrong technology is the last thing a business or IT wants.

### **Conclusion**

There are always several ways to successfully implement release management in an organization. CGI's approach is based on its vast experience and deep understanding of its clients' needs. Balancing between important business changes and operational stability is one of the main pillars. The other is the ability to improve the whole development process and empower your teams. Release management maximizes the information flow between various teams in the areas of business analysis, development and testing to keep everybody effective while ensuring that all items necessary for implementation are not forgotten and are delivered in time to the right places.

### **About CGI**

At CGI, we're in the business of satisfying clients. For more than 30 years, we've operated on the principles of sharing in clients' challenges and delivering quality services to address them. As a leading IT and business process services provider, CGI has 26,000 professionals operating in 100+ offices worldwide, giving us the competitive advantage of close proximity to our clients. Through these offices, we offer local partnerships and a balanced blend of global delivery options to ensure that clients receive the combination of value and expertise they require.

In the telco sector, CGI specializes in helping operators deliver new revenue streams while improving productivity and customer service. This expertise has led to CGI providing solutions in nearly all major telcos worldwide. CGI defines success by exceeding clients' expectations and helping them achieve superior performance.

### **About the author**

Executive Consultant Piotr Tarzyński has more than 26 years of experience in information technology and several years of experience as a release manager. His expertise covers all phases of medium- and large-scale IT systems development, implementation and integration, and his responsibilities include project management, functional/technical architecture, release management and test coordination.

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