Myth Busting – Generic services for ISO/IEC 20000-1

There is a level of confusion around ISO/IEC 20000-1 as to exactly what it applies to. Yes – it is about service management and applies to services but what type of services?

ISO/IEC 20000-1, as with service management frameworks, originated in the information technology domain. This standard rests in the international standard committee JTC 1 that manages all technically based standards. Its scope is therefore technology-based services. However, ISO/IEC 20000-1 has occasionally been applied outside of IT, just because its requirements are generic. And that is where the confusion begins… What exactly is meant by the term ‘generic’?

ISO/IEC 20000-1 defines the requirements to create, manage, and improve a service management system (SMS). In today’s service economy, what service doesn’t sit on some form of technology? If nothing else, the recent global pandemic clearly illustrated organizations survived the pandemic by exploiting their technical capabilities to connect with their staff and customers. Many services expanded exponentially to support the demand for capacity and functionality. They had to develop and utilize their technical capabilities to continue to support the overall functionality of the government and commercial services, such as healthcare, education, and retail. All these services exploited technology – the digital transformation or digitization of services was pushed forward rapidly to meet demand. Service management, and ISO/IEC 20000-1, was more important than ever to keep these services available and operating reliably. If ISO/IEC 20000-1 was written with specific technology requirements, would the services have been as agile and flexible to support the environment and demand?

ISO/IEC 20000-1, Clause 1.2 Application, begins with the following sentence:

“All requirements specified in this document are generic and are intended to be applicable to all organizations, regardless of the organization’s type or size, or the nature of the services delivered.”

The editors of ISO/IEC 20000-1 deliberately wrote this sentence because of the nature of the requirements. ISO/IEC 20000-1 is based in technology, but the requirements must be generic to be applied to any organization, any service function, any technology, any framework/methodology, etc. It is not possible for one standard, especially in technology, to dictate what technology or automation tools are used. Equally, the many frameworks or methodologies that underpin service management can all be used with ISO/IEC 20000-1, and it is not for the standard to dictate which one to use.

Technology, automation options and frameworks change faster than standards develop. Every organization is unique with their own specific capabilities and customer need. Therefore, the standard must remain generic in order that the requirements can be applied to those organizations who wish to develop a service management system (SMS)...regardless of what technology is used to deliver the services.