IBM: Providing a Community for Service Management Practitioners

IBM's latest (February 28th) release of Service Management Connect (SMC) captured our attention because of its potential for strengthening the relationship between IBM, its customers, partners and potential customers. It generated our interest and enthusiasm because it represents a significant advance by IBM towards an open product development process that directly involves customers in support of a true agile development process. Here's what they announced.

Service Management Connect

Service Management Connect (SMC) is a website (see Figure 1 below) designed to support, involve, and benefit the global technical community of IT service management practitioners. Practitioners as a class include anyone active in the space such as business partners, users, etc. whether IBM customers or not. Practitioners connect with each other as well as IBM Service Management product development and technical experts to learn and share information on products – existing and during development, best practices and technical information about IBM service management solutions.

Figure 1: Service Management Connect (graphic courtesy of IBM)

 The goal of and principles driving SMC are to provide an environment for IT service management practitioners to:
1. Connect – as a community of individuals both interested and involved in service management;
2. Learn – about new best practices and procedures for implementing and applying Tivoli solutions;
3. Try – emerging Tivoli products and product enhancements in continuous, open beta and GA trials at no cost;
4. Share – feedback (along with questions, comments, etc.) to make an impact on IBM product development – through direct communication with the external community of customers, partners, etc. and the IBM internal community of developers, product and marketing staff, etc.

IBM benefits from SMC as well. It is intended to help achieve the long sought 'holy grail' of product managers and developers gaining continuous insight into the most critical needs of their target consumers and helping developers address those needs with a highly successful solution/service, however that success is measured.

Of course, we're familiar with the history and variety of existing customer-oriented, product-focused outreach programs including pre- and actual βeta testing, Customer Roundtables, Focus Groups, Customer Councils, etc. In fact, we've recently seen and commented on the implementation of more concentrated and effective vendor efforts to include customers in product planning, research and development. We've also observed and noted the positive effects such efforts have had on vendor products in terms of their time-to-value, ease-of-use, features, etc. that benefit customers. So, what is it about the SMC that makes this uniquely attractive and attention getting?

SMC uses Social Media + Agile Development = Frictionless Communication

Of great interest to us and we believe even more significant to the IT community at large, is the effective, value-producing application of social media in a business environment. SMC is designed and intended to provide a very visible, very accessible and very public two-way communication platform upon which IBM products are being planned, developed and tested uniquely transparently to participating practitioners. The result is a 'Transparent Development Cycle' where the community participates in a collaborative process IBM calls 'continuous βeta testing', illustrated on the right.

This means that all interested community members have access to 'Milestone βetas', i.e. bundled 'sprints', for their use, examination and testing. Active participants can provide comments and feedback to developers and product managers as well as discuss with each other the contents and their experiences with the release.
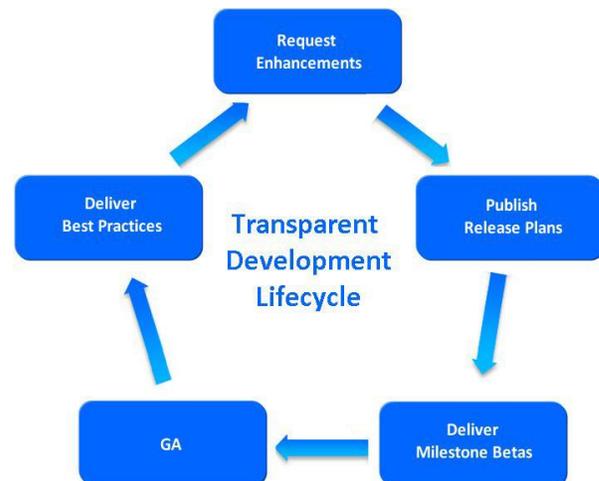
This ongoing dialog enables users to influence development plans, such as features and user-interfaces, so that the software changes more closely reflect what customers need and want. This open approach to product development also means that SMC participants have access to development status, enabling them to monitor the progress of new releases and view solution roadmaps.

Participation is open, voluntary and less-structured than traditional, formal βeta testing programs. Customer comments[1] about the SMC were enthusiastic about the program, open testing and continuous βeta testing.

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[1] During a webinar polling of 38 customers, all indicated they were willing to participate in IBM's open approach to transparent development and 94% indicated a willingness to test IBM code and open defects.

IBM sees the benefit from this open process coming in the form of earlier, faster, more frequent feedback on interim versions of solutions. Continuous feedback during and throughout the development process, enables developers and product staff to react and respond earlier in the process to adjust, enhance or revise solution characteristics and functions. The resulting solution will align more closely with what customers want and need, while minimizing developer time and effort spent on undesired or less attractive features.

In addition to earlier access to sprints, SMC community members will have access to select IBM Tivoli solution trials for free. IBM partners will be able to showcase solutions on the site. SMC will serve as an open forum to share experiences, expertise, exchange information and provide feedback with an audience that includes interested users, partners and IBM SMEs. We all know how difficult it can be to find technical information and documentation about solutions and products. SMC will serve as an integration point for technical content (e.g. Redbooks, product spec sheets, etc.) for service management solutions.

The Final Word

Overall, SMC is designed and intended to provide an interactive, timely forum for discussions, questions, information and data exchanges and interactions among interested and knowledgeable participants. It is a one-stop interactive community where participants have the opportunity to directly impact product direction during and throughout the solution development process.

Many IT vendors are increasingly gathering input from customers as they develop new releases and updates to their software. To date, these efforts have been informal and casual. However, IBM's SMC is unique, as a structured, bi-directional communication community that continuously benefits both participants and IBM.

There are risks, as IBM will not screen participants for general access, so almost all information is viewable by competitors as well. IBM believes the benefits from this open exposure far outweigh any potential risks. This is a win-win all around for IBM, its customers and its partners. Congratulations to IBM on this program. We recommend that you go directly to the new website: http://www.smconnect.net to see and experience the openness, rich functionality and interaction that impressed us.

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