
EA for Everybody

I have rarely found an organization that couldn't benefit from EA - from very small to very large, in every industry, in the private and public sectors and in not-for-profits. Everybody can do it. They can adopt the "core concepts" of EA in order to enhance decision-making frameworks to include an enterprise perspective. - George S. Paras

In my time as an EA Mentor at EAdirections and a researcher and analyst at Meta Group I have had the pleasure of working with a diverse collection of private and public sector organizations with active EA programs. During my tenure as Editor-in-Chief of A&G I also am fortunate to have been exposed to many interesting perspectives on EA written by the magazine's contributing authors. These viewpoints afford me the unique opportunity to analyze both what others are saying about EA as well as how organizations are actually doing EA. Not surprisingly, these perspectives don't often align. This paper consolidates my latest observations about how various audiences perceive and approach the EA discipline.

Opposing Camps

EA has always been a polarizing phenomenon and remains so today. The diversity of opinions on exactly what EA is and how to approach it continues. While there are many variations, two opposing camps dominate.

- The **architecture-driven** camp focuses on creation of the various "architectures" (solution, application, technical, project, business, SOA, Cloud, etc.), usually as implemented in projects.
- The **enterprise-coordinated** camp focuses on the "enterprise" with emphasis on strategic alignment, transformation roadmaps, and other holistic portfolio perspectives.

The best EA programs include both approaches, with the enterprise-coordinated perspective providing context for the various "architectures". That way it ensures that efforts to "get things done" (i.e. projects) are implemented with all of the larger and longer-term goals in mind; to consistently manage complexity, improve integration, increase agility, balance cost and risk, or achieve whatever future-oriented, holistic objectives the leadership team deems important. Too often, though, one camp dominates to the exclusion of the other, causing an imbalance. **The divide between the architecture-driven and enterprise-coordinated camps should not exist, yet it does!** Several factors conspire to amplify the divide, not the least of which is the economy.

The Economy

In our current economy, or perhaps because of it, some organizations still want to improve their EA programs, introduce new ones for the first time or restart past attempts. Why? Both IT and business leaders tell me that their past project-based decision-making has been fragmented and has caused churn, lack of focus and wasteful spending. They are burdened by inflexible, un-integrated solutions and excessively costly and complex portfolios. Forward-looking leaders want a simplified, disciplined and prescribed direction to guide them to trim costs and position for the future, with the objective do so in a strategically targeted fashion; thus the need for EA. The approach they favor is the enterprise-coordinated, portfolio perspective. Many of these

organizations begin by rationalizing their application portfolio against their go-forward strategic objectives and overall enterprise business architecture.

Other organizations have less interest in an enterprise-coordinated approach. Either they tried it and never gained traction with it, or they never started it in the first place, believing it to be “optional” or “nice to have only when things are going well”. With the economy in its current state many leaders would rather deploy resources elsewhere to focus on immediate survival issues. I can’t blame them for thinking that way, especially if they are in critical condition. I would do the same. In cases that aren’t so dire, though, many organizations would be better served with the addition of more EA thinking, not less. Those that believe this and want to do EA better tend to bias their approach to an architecture-driven model with an emphasis on implementation. They focus on applying more narrowly defined architectures to specific shorter-term business opportunities and have highly engaged solutions architects. It takes a strong team to hold it all together and avoid silo’ed behaviors when working from the bottom-up. These groups also tend to get pulled into full-time solution/project architecture work, requiring very strong management oversight and controls to avoid.

Other Issues

Sometimes the way an enterprise chooses to approach the practice of EA can inadvertently work against them, driving them to the extremes of the architecture-driven vs. enterprise-coordinated continuum, with less than optimal results.

One issue is perfectionism and the desire to take little to no risk. I guess it is human nature, but I frequently encounter practitioners and their leaders using too much energy in search of the proverbial “silver bullet” – one that combines canned techniques, a rigorous framework and/or methodology, prescribed deliverables and off-the-shelf reference models. Many dedicate themselves to finding, choosing and implementing this “proven” approach. While most of the obvious choices publicly available have merit, my experience and observations tell me that a perfect approach doesn’t exist. They all have their strengths and weaknesses. The desire by practitioners, specialists and experts to find and pursue an off-the-shelf approach tends, unfortunately, to lead to either a purist top-down methodological approach or to an overly complex and resource-intensive one, both usually unacceptable to the stakeholder community.

Another variation of the silver bullet approach is to presume an end-state based on the latest, hottest industry trends. Many choose to embrace specific architectures with the goal of having a tangible result without the “formality” of doing EA. An example is “SOA (or Cloud Computing) is the answer, let’s just do that and call it our enterprise architecture”. I can just barely begin to describe the problems with this approach in this column, but briefly, it is often a hard sell. It can seem to most stakeholders like technology for technology’s sake, not to mention that it is only a fraction of an enterprise architecture.

In both cases, these issues are complicated by the hype/reputation surrounding EA, which can be both overly positive (“EA is the only answer to our problems”) or overly negative, often a result of previously failed attempts (“tried it, won’t help us”). My advice is to ignore the positive hype and try not to oversell EA. There are no silver bullets in EA - it is hard because EA is a change agent and it takes time to effect change. But it will help. On the negative side, EA skeptics (you know who you are) point to the lack of guaranteed and immediately recognizable results from EA. They are quick to point out that there is no broadly successful and repeatable waterfall methodology, tool set or modeling approach to copy. The result is that some enterprises choose to do nothing. My advice is to ignore the skeptics and find out for yourself just how much EA you can do and how well you can do it.

The reality is that there are several good approaches to EA, ranging from formal and structured to informal and iterative. Choose an approach suited to YOUR enterprise, not one that worked for the company down the street, in the magazine article or in the research report. Adapt the approach to your culture, leadership style and transformation objectives. Success has much more to do with getting objective advice, putting the right team in place, engaging the decision-makers, and creating an enterprise-level dialog by asking the right questions, not just trying to provide all the answers.

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I have rarely found an organization that couldn't benefit from EA - from very small to very large, in every industry, in the private and public sectors and in not-for-profits. Everybody can do it. By "it" I mean adopting the "core concepts" of EA in order to enhance decision-making frameworks to include an enterprise perspective. Implement just enough mechanisms to create processes and deliverables that align strategy with implementation across the continuum from the short to the long term, always sensitive to the balancing act described above. Drive your program with an enterprise-coordinated approach. You don't need to call it "EA", nor do you need to completely implement any particular framework or methodology. Good, or even just "better", will come over time.

Directions: A solid EA leader always adjusts his/her approach with the times, with sensitivity to the biases and needs of their enterprise. Make sure you are focused, delivering value and addressing the needs of leadership. Don't get caught up in perfectionism, avoid the extremes, and take a balance approach. And don't forget to be leaders yourselves – provide enterprise perspective and context so that decisions are consistent with both short term needs and longer term visions. If you make your EA program more transparent and actionable, while focusing on the right balance, you will make a difference for your enterprise.