



Enterprise Architecture Without Governance: Problems, Causes, Mitigation

Introduction



For all the words written about enterprise architecture, there's still a range of definitions floating about regarding what Enterprise Architecture actually is. Of course, there's a definition on the Wikipedia page for it; other organizations have a definition; various analyst groups and pundits have their own definitions. Perhaps my favorite attempt that I've ever seen on the subject was the Gartner report several years ago that debated back and forth on the topic for four pages before finally coming to the conclusion that "Enterprise Architecture is the architecture of the enterprise".

Some will say that the practice of Enterprise Architecture is about attaining a common view of the organization's operations and IT estate. Some will say that the practice of Enterprise Architecture is about standardizing and streamlining the systems within the IT department. Others will say that the practice of Enterprise Architecture is about aligning business and IT. These claims don't contradict each other, but the running theme that appears throughout all this is that it's about supporting the top-level management of the IT department. It's true that this doesn't have to be run out of the IT department (although, let's face it, it's where EA usually lives), but the focus on management and organizational governance is at the heart of the matter.

Considered in the context of this conclusion, it's rather surprising to encounter Enterprise Architecture departments that don't have any involvement in the governance of the IT projects that the organization undertakes. Sure, if you challenge the fact then there's pretty much always official acceptance that governance has to form part of architecture. It's not a new concept - the TOGAF

specification released in 2009 devoted 4 chapters to topics around architectural governance (including compliance and contracts).

So it's likely that there will be some form of architectural approval process – on paper. But in practice organizations often find subtle ways to 'not bother'.

So let's continue and discuss the four main ways that the governance and review process can get subverted, and then consider what steps can be taken to mitigate these kind of problems.



Why Do We Care?

But before doing this, let's be thorough and explicitly consider – why does EA need to involve governance and architectural review? How does doing so support management of IT?

First of all, governance and review is the mechanism by which organizational standards are enforced. If the organization is not reviewing new projects and working to make sure that they comply with the organization's standards, then what's the point in having those standards?

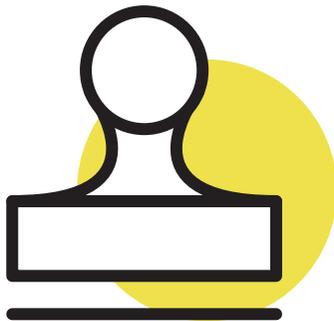
But even if the goals are far more modest, and the immediate goal is simply to understand the current state of the organization. The organization itself is a moving target – new projects come on-stream all the time. So how can the current state be current without visibility of the new projects that are coming into production? And how can you know how these projects align with the vision for the organization?

So regardless of your definition of Enterprise Architecture, if you accept that it's about managing the IT of the organization as a whole, then architectural governance needs to be a part of that effort.



4 ways EA Governance might be subverted

I've seen a number of cases where the governance process gets subverted, and it seems to happen in one or more of four specific ways:



1. The meeting gets turned into a rubber stamp – one that never rejects projects or even applies architectural exceptions.

This is rarely due to deliberate attempts at sabotaging the process. Instead, the review board tends to focus on more reviewing the actual architecture and looking for ways to help. Or just as often, they'll be under pressure in their day jobs and looking to get through this as fast as possible. This is a natural human reaction, but not one that serves the goals of having the review board. A variant is when attendees are allowed to delegate their vote on the grounds of having reviewed the materials ahead of time – the logical conclusion is when I attended one review board where I saw one person sit there and say “Chuck says aye. Dave says aye. Steve says aye. Nick says aye. Joan says aye. Oh yes, and I say aye.” The problem is – did the attendees really review the materials ahead of time? In practice this is a way for people to not attend or participate at all.



2. The meetings don't take place at all.

This is usually a case of them being postponed for one meeting because the architects are under pressure ... and then for another meeting... and then for another meeting... but of course projects have to meet their own deadlines and so work continues without approval. Fairly soon the whole idea of architectural review is abandoned, and so this is an intermediate stage to the whole concept of organizational architecture being if not swept aside, at least ignored for the time being.

4 ways EA Governance might be subverted (cont...)



3. The Enterprise Architecture department is not empowered and has no ability to impose any standards.

This is where principles are not enforced in the review meetings – in other words, when architectural exemptions are always granted because the review board knows that they will always be overruled by the CIO. In truth, this is a very clear signal that the whole idea of Enterprise Architecture (or at least, the group currently implementing it) has lost the CIO's confidence. But regardless, at this point the review meetings have become completely and utterly irrelevant – this is an even worse situation than the second method of subversion.



4. Organizations neglect to follow up on architectural exceptions.

An organization diligently holds the review meetings and diligently reviews projects against architectural principles, applying exceptions where necessary, but then may never follow up on the architectural exceptions. Which is to say that exemptions are granted, but once a project has argued its way past the gate, the exemption stands forever more, forgotten (until another project needs to point to it to gain their own exemption).

Recommendations

So now that we've talked about the various ways that the architecture review process can get sidetracked, it's time to consider what actions we can take to mitigate this risk of subversion.

First of all, if there is to be an architecture review mechanism, then it needs to be supported with an explicit list of review criteria and there needs to be a formal checklist that someone at the review meeting completes. This addresses the issue where the review meetings don't properly review for compliance. Providing explicit guidance mitigates this problem, and the TOGAF specification provides a set of checklists that an organization can adapt for this purpose.

The second action that must be taken is to acquire the right stakeholders. While the architecture review process is usually integrated into the project quality gate mechanism for the organization, it's not always seen as something of importance by the owners of this mechanism (e.g. the project management office). Consequently, getting and keeping the quality office 'on board' with governance is an important activity in protecting the architecture governance mechanism. The third action that needs to be taken is to introduce steps to audit and verify the review meeting records. If review records are never checked, then they will naturally carry much less weight in the mind of those filling them out. So introducing the review records is not enough by itself; someone should check a sample of them now and then.

The fourth action is to introduce a mechanism to track architectural exemptions that have been granted. One of the problems mentioned comes when exemptions are granted but never revisited. So the architecture repository needs a way to

report on the number of exemptions that have been granted, and highlight those exemptions that have expired.

Last of all, and most difficult, the chief architect should actively look for past examples where the architecture review process has avoided problems, reduced risk or saved money for the organization, as part of the ongoing battle to show value. This enhances buy in to the idea of architectural governance.



Conclusion

Enterprise Architecture, even if it doesn't report directly to a C-level employee (and it usually does), affects the whole enterprise and so it naturally becomes a highly political situation. This in turns means that the key touchpoints where EA can affect other stakeholders come under tension or even attack. In this paper I've considered the main ways that one particularly 'soft' area of attack can be subverted – and what steps we can take to mitigate this problem.





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