Is the Business Really Interested in Business "Architecture"?

By Dave Wiltz

November 23, 2008 – Decades ago software development consisted of Design, Code and Test. Requirements were in the mix, but not as formal and structured as today. The term "architecture" wasn't really associated with software until the mid-70's when scientists started explaining the importance of the *structure* of software systems. Since then the terms "architecture" and "architect" have so dominated the IT mindset that many now see architecture as the tool of choice for attacking any problem.

Fundamentally, focusing more on the overall architecture of a company's software assets is sound. Viewing systems from the perspective of an organized set of components and their relationships to each other yields exactly the kind of ease and clarity of understanding that architectural blueprints in the physical building construction world provide. However, having experienced these benefits in the IT department, have we jumped a bit too fast and far into the business realm by trying to apply the "A" word to everything outside of the technological aspect of the enterprise? Does the business really care about its "architecture", or in reality is the business simply placing more emphasis on how to establish a strategy and roadmap for changing the business model and business processes to survive in today's new and evolving climate?

The term "Enterprise Architecture" (EA) was coined by IT to highlight the comprehensive "architecture" of systems (and the company) that included processes, software code, data storage and the physical hardware the systems ran on. Things started to fit into their semantic compartments nicely – software into Application Architecture, hardware into Technical Architecture, databases into Data Architecture. The first iterations of EA placed the business process model into the Process Architecture bucket. However, over the years, as IT began to encompass the entire enterprise into the package of EA, there was a void in the EA model - business strategy, goals, objectives, metrics, drivers, business partners, etc. had no representation in the EA model. Thus, the transition from Process Architecture to a more comprehensive compartment called Business Architecture. It is worth noting that this term was mainly used by those focused on the development and use of EA – the IT department.

While simple words or terminology of a concept should not be a major sticking point, there are some connotations that the business leaders could associate with the word "Architecture", and these connotations have a tendency to be overly technical or IT-centric. As IT tries to secure support from the business for infrastructure and software structural retooling efforts, for Enterprise Architecture

initiatives, and for emerging paradigm shifts into the world of SOA, the business is still looking for *business* results and more focus from IT on how the *business* sees the future. IT has been trying to make inroads into the business for years to improve the requirements gathering process, to gain a bit more trust from the business (in light of all the failed projects of the past), to understand customer needs, etc. Yet IT projects continue to deliver less than expected, at a higher cost than estimated, and behind schedule. At the last company I consulted with, a project was totally scrapped after a year of development. IT failed to effectively monitor and control an outsourced development project, and after $6 million was expended, the deliverables were minimal and the quality was unacceptable. With the past decade of IT focus on architecture, improved development tools and methodologies, infrastructure modernization, and improved requirements analysis, failed projects like the one mentioned above do little to increase business confidence in how valuable "technology" or IT techniques (like EA) are to the business in addressing their needs.

Over the past six years, IT has been trying to utilize Enterprise Architecture to help in the planning, impact analysis and IT portfolio streamlining effort. Formal EA departments have been added with Directors, Solution Architects, Technical Architects, Data Architects, etc. Yet according to Gartner, an estimated 40% of EA programs fail. Once again, the business is being asked to foot the bill for this newest enabling technique, yet they are often seeing little benefit to the bottom line of business needs and customer value. At this juncture, without a great track record of what "architecture" has done for us in the IT world, we may be making a mistake in asking the business to focus on Business *Architecture*. Indeed, the thought of creating or documenting an *architecture* can surface visions of a very intensive, lengthy, theoretical and complex process of gathering masses of information and drawing hundreds of diagrams. This isn't the kind of effort that IT needs the business to mistakenly envision.

The world of business these days is focused on business processes and business process redesign. The last 10 years have seen the Internet rise to power and using all new paradigms for customer interactions, real-time self-service, automated status updates on orders and transfers of funds, customization of portals based on customer preferences, etc. Additionally, the pace of change and globalization have led to agile systems that can be adjusted in days instead of months to adapt to morphing customer desires. Businesses still entrenched in the "old way" of doing business are finally realizing that the only way to be that adaptable and nimble is through customer focused process change. So many business executives have finally concluded that driving business strategy and goals into business process improvement or restructuring is worthwhile.

As noted above, the need for a terminology change may not be as important as the need for IT leaders to put aside their talk of tools and methods and architecture and get down to focusing more on the way the business assesses

the market, develops strategies, sets goals, plans changes, and performs their business processes. They need to see Enterprise Architects as pragmatic thinkers who can put on their business hats as easily as their techie hats. Case in point: I was working with a client recently on a major documentation and assessment of their current claims processing flow. The current process was allowing certain claims to be received yet assigned no formal claim number. A claim image was placed into the database, however, there was no metadata about the claim and there was no record of any claim in the master claim database. No one in the discussions had really focused on how critical an omission this was because it was assumed that this was acceptable since it had been working that way for years and they had not heard of many complaints. Few had considered the frustration of customers/insureds trying to get a status on their claim and hear from the company that no claim had yet been received. And internally, the business had no accurate count of the total claims "in flight" because these scanned claims were not yet included in the inventory.

 After some discussion of the ramifications of this to the business and IT, and some quick whiteboarding of a fairly simple change to the flow and a minor system change, the process was redesigned on paper and a major improvement was in the pipeline for a future project. No talk of architecture took place, the focus was not on systems changes – simply, an Enterprise Architect was putting on the hat of a business person and helping to think of process changes that could lead to business AND customer benefits.

If IT departments want to truly add more value to the business and be fully respected by the business as partners in major business change planning, it's time to cut out the jargon and technical focus and truly act and talk like business owners and leaders. It's time to quit talking in terms of technologies and software systems terminology (SOA, architecture, service enablement, BPM, TOGAF, messaging and middleware, GUIs, clouds/cloud computing). If we're indeed adding value by helping the business document and improve their business processes, let's stick to that term – *process improvement*, not Business Architecture re-engineering. Not only communicate in business terms, but learn to think like the business is thinking and then help them first by understanding their processes and then helping them reorganize some of these processes for greater value to the customer. Then, without the jargon, if system changes are needed, help them form some conclusions on how the systems portfolio can most effectively be enhanced. Lastly, deliver. But that's a whole other subject for a longer conversation.