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Business Architects: The Missing Link Between Six Sigma and IT

The critical role of the "business architect" helps align strategic initiatives with IT priorities and realities, and establishes proper governance methods

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1.   Introduction

In an interesting blog post[1] Dr. Alexander Peters, BPM industry analyst at Forrester Research, noted the increasing prominence of business architects in the enterprise. Dr. Peters points out the importance of the growing trend of such a profile. It is also important to point out that as organizations rise to meet modern IT challenges, much attention has also been (rightly) placed on measuring organizational and employee performance with advanced analytics and business intelligence.

It is equally crucial for organizations to acknowledge the human element when implementing these practices because these business processes are what provides the data to be measured and what drives the business as well. A technology is only as strong as the people—and processes—behind it.

Enter the business architect.

While a myriad of definitions have existed over the years, the role of the "business architect" can best be boiled down as such: they oversee the implementation of unified processes and establish proper governance methods to streamline efficiency. In so doing, they convert business practices into repeatable processes. Their primary responsibility is to align the strategic initiatives from the business side of an organization with their IT priorities and realities.

The overarching idea for the business architect is developing an integrated view of the enterprise using a repeatable approach in a cohesive framework—and doing so with industry-standard techniques. Typically, they are business acumen and experts in process optimizations methodologies such as Lean and Six Sigma, as well as in particular compliance initiatives such as Sarbanes-Oxley (SOX) or Basel II.

2.   Primary responsibilities and duties of a business architect

A business architect must manage several different roles at once; he or she needs to be a visionary, an effective planner, and a highly analytical problem solver. Furthermore, a business architect must be a "people person" with the skills necessary for team assembly and optimization.

A business architect must be adept at solving problems in the organization, since they may come from any direction and involve any number of processes. The architect must quickly determine the nature of a problem when it happens: is a one-time random event responsible for the problem or is it due to a fundamental flaw in an established process?

Where does the problem originate from, what is its scope, and what is the first step that must be taken towards fixing it? On the surface, this sounds like something that would be easy to figure out, but there are many factors behind a problem and each piece must be solved and/or eliminated to find out the real situation. Individual factors are often interconnected, and a problem with one may impact others in ways that are not immediately obvious. A business architect, having the holistic

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[1] Alexander Peters, Ph.D; Forrester, August 9, 2011 http://blogs.forrester.com/alexander_peters_phd/11-08-09-the_business_architect_role_is_vital_in_leading_customer_centric_transformation

understanding, can get to the bottom of each problem and prevent it from causing other setbacks in the future.

3. Using BPMN to Bridge the Gap Between Business and Technical Audiences

Since the role of business architect is essentially a blend between management and technical staff, a business architect needs to be adept at working with others and facilitating teamwork cross organizations.

Processes often have a human component that they rely on to work properly, and each process may rely on several people. For this reason, effective change management and communication in a manner that all involved players are able to understand is essential.

BPMN2 is a business process model notation that delivers on such a promise. Bonitasoft has implemented strong support for the BPMN2 standard. The notation lets you start with core attributes of the business process and move to increasingly technical steps as required.

BPMN2 is neutral towards specific business methodologies and technical implementations, and it offers business architects the ability to arm their organizations with a communication metaphor that can be leveraged equally by the technical and business sides of the aisle. Additionally, Bonitasoft's implementation of BPMN2 allows business architects to use Bonitasoft process templates or develop their own process templates that can be used across domains in an organization, from Human Resources to corporate finance, and so on.

Likewise, a business architect must serve as a visionary and long-term planner in the organization. Each project (or process) factors in key elements like budget, risk management, contingency plans, etc. As such, a business architect should be able to ascertain whether a given strategy is viable. For instance, those in a business architect role often decide whether an objective is reasonable with the current budget or resources or whether it should be postponed until a more opportune time. Such planning helps mitigate undue risk that can adversely affect the organization.

Key Performance Index (KPI) statistics are essential in long-term planning and the diagnosis of problems for the simple reason that improvement is impossible without benchmarks in place. As previously stated, a business architect needs to know whether a policy or objective can be implemented in the near future, but how are such decisions made? The raw data for informed decision making is provided by KPI indicators, which is the critical data derived from process execution. The KPI data provides a gauge of the current situation by displaying how far an actual process implementation has performed from original projected goals. (or how much it exceeded them) If the KPI results are bad, then the original process may never have been viable to begin with. Because of this, a business architect must have the planning ability and foresight to determine whether a process has any real potential to be feasible before implementing it.

A business architect needs to have a deep appreciation for both the business and technical sides of their organization. Fabrice Amory, business architect consultant at RMP Strategy, was a senior

strategy and business planning manager at HP for many years. Mr. Amory's career path is typical of business architects. He started as an engineer and technical project manager; later, he earned a business management master's degree and built strong business management experience.

Mr. Amory said, "There's been a conspicuous uptick in interest for business architects over the past several years. We're in the midst of a great IT transformation; enterprises are adopting new technologies at an aggressive rate, and there's a corresponding demand for change agents capable of using business architecture as a tool to catalyze a more efficient organizational structure."

4. Business Practice Structuring and Improvement

A business architect needs to understand efficiency. Before BPM is introduced into an organization, many current business practices are wasteful and/or inefficient. Therefore, one of the business architect's primary roles is to streamline current unorganized business practices into more efficient processes that can be scaled or modified in the future as necessary.

In evaluating where process improvement is needed, a business architect first does process mapping to get a holistic view of the entire business, then defines the right KPIs for the organization and investigates the scope of the issue in more detail. Typical steps may be:

- Identify key/representative players at all levels of the company, and when applicable, customers, suppliers and partners from outside the company.
- Listen / talk to those key people to understand their objectives, challenges, and issues.
- Get the maximum context: What is the company strategy? What is the impact of those optimization processes on IT and production?
- Determine the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs): what are the crucial pieces of data to be monitored to understand the performance of the business.
- Validate issues with stakeholders.
- Define objectives per KPI. These should be ambitious but realistic.
- Prepare to manage change. Having support from employees and management is a clear key factor of success. Without proper change management it is impossible to maximize project benefits.
- Start project management. Make sure there's enough budget and resources to implement the changes. Estimate any risks involved and create plans to mitigate those risks.

To help achieve this goal, various business methodologies have been devised, most notably Lean and Six Sigma. Although these two methodologies were originally devised as stand-alone solutions, many of the principles are compatible with BPM in general. As such, the business architect can use Lean and Six Sigma tactics to develop and continuously improve processes in use throughout the organization.

For example, Six Sigma requires business practices to be in a state of continued refinement. (continuous process improvement) Once that first step has been achieved, business practices must be audited against predefined goals. (KPI)

While traditional wisdom dictates that business architects must possess a deep understanding of their organization's technology, it is equally important that they are able to separate individual processes from the technology. They need to understand the dynamics of creating business strategies, which is where technical frameworks come into play. To truly bridge the gap between IT and business, business architects need to appreciate how people actually work on both sides, and how that factors into their organization's roadmap plans going forward.

5. How Business Analysis Relates to Lean and Six Sigma

As previously stated, it is recommended for business architects to introduce Lean and Six Sigma elements into their efforts to work towards continuous process improvement. Lean and Six Sigma are two methodologies that were originally devised as standalone solutions for use in a business environment. Even though each methodology was designed to be used independently in an organization, Lean and Six Sigma are still compatible with each other and with BPM in general. Once LEAN and Six Sigma are combined with BPM, they all work together to facilitate continuous process improvement. A business architect must be able to balance the implementation of these methodologies and understand how they can best work together.

Lean is designed to strip business practices down to the bare essentials, with simplicity taking ultimate priority. The main purpose of Lean is to minimize waste (any unnecessary expenditure of action or resources) and extract as much efficiency as possible. The savings can then be reinvested into other areas. Lean also advocates a close connection between people and the processes they manage; this a remnant from Lean's origins in the Toyota Production System. Six Sigma relies heavily on processes, but with a slightly different philosophy.

Rather than stripping processes to the bone, the Six Sigma philosophy prefers reducing as much variation as possible in the business environment. Perpetually streamlining processes by reducing unnecessary variation and removing bloat are the main ways that a business architect can maximize the efficiency of a BPM environment. The business architect must understand that organizations are resistant to change unless excessive sacrifices can be avoided and compromises made where necessary, so it is up to the business architect to come up with solutions that are universally acceptable.

Lean, Six Sigma, and BPM can co-exist in the organization because they all revolve around implementing and improving processes based on current practices. For instance, Lean principles of reducing waste and maximizing efficiency combined with Six Sigma's teamwork emphasis can be easily incorporated into a process that affects multiple workers throughout an organization. Breaking business practices down into simple, highly efficient processes also fits with the Lean philosophy, while removing redundant processes and minimizing unnecessary variation is in line with Six Sigma philosophy. A business architect must understand how to maximize efficiency in an organization by combining Lean and Six Sigma techniques to boost efficiency by removing red tape and other obstacles between individual workers and teams.

6. Conclusion

Business architects are increasingly in demand; what was once considered a luxury is now considered mission critical for enterprises. While it's still a nascent field, it's clear that the role of the business architect is growing fast, and that organizations with experts in that function are facing a clear competitive advantage.

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