

Article

“The business” does not exist! Why Enterprise Architecture is often a mission impossible

By Piet Jan Baarda

Abstract

Successful application of enterprise architecture is not easy. Many books and articles have been written on the subject. They describe how alignment with “the business” is essential and subsequently delve into architecture frameworks, procedures, organization, governance, and the required skill set. This article will show that in general there is no such thing as “the business” and how this represents the major obstacle for successful enterprise architecture and mature IT.

Keywords

Enterprise Architecture, Business-to-Business Alignment, Governance, SOA

USE OF THE PHRASE “THE BUSINESS”

When working on architecture and IT in general the phrase “the business” is used very often.

Some examples:

- “Our architecture principles support the business vision ...”
- “We will align with the business strategy ...”
- “IT should be a business enabler ...”
- “The business wants a single customer view ...”
- “The business needs this application in production in three months time ...”
- “The business wants to reduce the number of screens in this application ...”
- “For this project the business cannot afford to take architecture into account, we will focus on time and budget, maybe next time we fix the architecture ...”
- ...

It is assumed that all these statements are made by the same entity: “the business”. When statements by “the business” seem to contradict earlier statements by “the business” we think this is a matter of progressive deeper understanding, that the pros and cons have been weighed and that more recent statements by “the business” overrule earlier statements.

Many architects are frustrated when their grand vision and architecture framework is accepted by “the business”, but when it comes to actual application of the architecture principles in projects there is never time or budget to do it right.

The particular project focuses on its own goals (that does not include things like re-use, coherence, consistency, and other enterprise-level interests) and cannot be bothered by taking future generations or other projects into account. If you are lucky you get the promise: maybe next time or in the next release.

Also, when designing the user interface the information quality takes second stage compared to ease-of-use for “the business” users consulted. It seems the scope of the project and the overall architecture of the IT landscape has been taken into account in any statement by business representatives. The normal pattern in projects is a narrowing scope from enterprise via project to end user. Ultimately it is the users performing the acceptance test that have to be satisfied.

For IT, it is easiest to behave as if there is indeed one business entity speaking with a single tongue.

All-in-all, the result is the fragmented IT landscape that many find normal and take as a fact of life. Even when the enterprise architecture function has been introduced and is fully functional, often its effect on the IT landscape is very limited.

The explanation is simple: “the business” does not exist.

THE THREE FACES OF “THE BUSINESS”

The diagram below shows a pattern that exists in many organizations. Three separate faces of “the business” can be recognized.

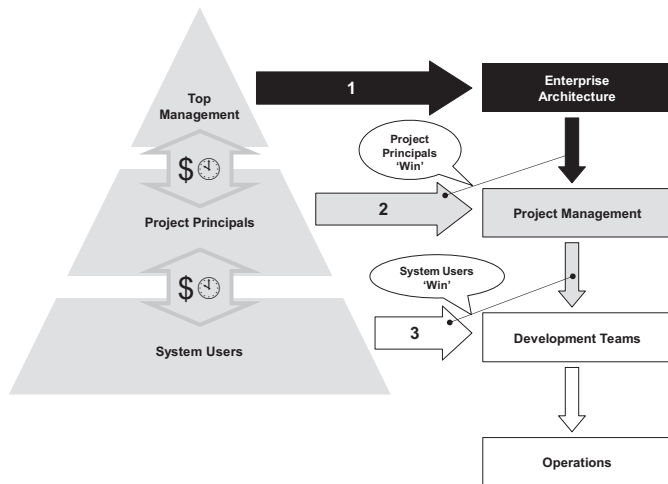


Figure 9: The Three Faces of “the Business”

1. **Top Management:** Top management recognizes the importance of enterprise architecture as a way to increase coherence and agility, reduce complexity, and thus reap the associated financial effects. The enterprise architecture role is introduced together with procedures on how to interact with the development process and what artifacts will be produced. Typically, the enterprise architects formulate reference architectures describing the principles to use during development to ensure the strategy of the organization is supported in a coherent and agile way. To limit the design space for the individual projects they typically produce Project Start Architectures (PSAs).

Top management discusses business initiatives, budget, and timelines with their business subordinates. They receive regular reports on progress in these terms and manage any deviations from the planned activities and spent.

As architecture is in place there is no need for top management to put coherence and agility on the agenda for discussion with their business subordinates.

2. **Project Principals:** Individual projects are launched based on specific business cases. Often annual budgets have already been assigned to organizational units based on historic information and expected developments. Project principals provide input for project managers to plan and execute the project. Business analysts provide detailed business input where required. They report progress to top management in terms of time and money. In some cases project analysts review the input from the enterprise architects. They apply the input where it does not endanger the timelines and

budget through what is perceived as extra work or extra management complexity introduced by enterprise architects. Re-use often complicates project management as other parties will need to be involved. Also developing components positioned for re-use requires extra attention to develop and manage. Coherence often means applying information and technology standards that may again require extra attention. Project managers and project principals, therefore, strongly prefer autonomous single solutions. Following enterprise architecture advice often presents a risk for achieving the project goals as agreed with top management (time, money). As top management does not ask for a contribution to coherence and agility the enterprise architecture input is often wasted. Top management as well as project principals and project managers do not see enterprise architects representing top management (= enterprise-level) interests. They are seen as “bad news”; notorious worrywarts obstructing progress, and spoiling the fun in general.

3. **System Users:** Ultimately, it is business system users that accept the system. They provide the detailed input for the system design and perform the business acceptance testing before the new system can be put in production. Their main worry is their colleagues who will protest if their position or comfort is compromised. Their life must be made easier with the new system. Projects making life harder for system users are therefore hard to implement although there may exist a very attractive business case with strategic goals. On the other hand, projects that make life very much easier for end users are also difficult, as they form a threat for the end-user community as a whole – layoffs may be around the corner. “The business” project principal also focuses on these aspects: the users must use the system no matter what. The result is that the project is within budget, on time, and with happy users. What more can you want? Well, quite a lot actually! This way of working has led us to the fragmented IT landscapes that are commonly found.

This pattern is presented here in black and white to clearly show its nature. Of course, in practice many gray tones may be recognized. This pattern gives an explanation why so many enterprise architecture initiatives have little effect on the IT landscape. It remains as fragmented, costly, and hard to change as before. It frequently even gets worse.

The pattern does provide insight into where essential changes need to be done to make enterprise architecture successful. Not as a goal in itself, but to improve the situation and move in the direction of the

coherent, cost-effective, and agile environment an organization needs to thrive.

In the ideal world “the business” would exist. “The business” really would speak with one tongue. Managers would make sure that their subordinates do the important things in line with their goals and explicitly translated into subordinate goals. This is ultimately reflected in the appraisals for the individuals involved and the associated bonuses.

WHY IS IT DIFFERENT?

Compared to other areas in an organization IT is often perceived as a special case where raising cost and increasing complexity is unavoidable. Still, there is no reason to think IT is generally managed with a lower quality than other parts of the enterprise. It is safe to assume that generally management quality is the same across the board. But, ultimately, it is top management that is responsible for any aspect of the organization including its IT department. IT and IT personnel are not things that are forced upon an organization. The organization is the master of its own destiny. You might say to top management: “You are caught in a prison of your own devise” (Jim Morrison & The Doors 1968) when they are complaining about IT.

Simply put, any organization gets the IT it deserves. Just like it gets the personnel it deserves, the logistics it deserves, the customers it deserves, the manufacturing capability it deserves, the profit it deserves, and so on.

In these cases it is self-evident that management must ensure that the organization does the right things at the right time in the right way. Only in IT the *department* is blamed instead of top management:

“... IT makes things too complicated ...”

“... IT does not speak the same language ...”

“... IT hinders progress, they are anything but agile ...”

“... IT architects must sell their ideas better to projects ...”

But, of course it is up to top management to hire the right people and ensure that the right things happen.

The following quote illustrates the issue very well:

“If we buy a bicycle to improve our personal transport, can we blame the bicycle when the situation does not improve if we just walk next to it?” (Jan Hoogervorst presentation)

The thing that really makes IT different is the fact that earlier IT decisions are not as easily undone as most non-IT decisions.

For example, changing an organization structure can be done relatively easily without any traces of the earlier structure. Bad selling products are replaced by products that do sell. Bad forklifts are replaced by better ones, etc. In IT, bad decisions are often not erased. Instead the IT landscape is extended with new solutions with the existing solutions firmly remaining in place. Often the IT

landscape shows the full history of IT decisions made through the years – the good decisions and the bad ones.

In short, IT is a special case as its history is dragged along, where in other subject areas older mistakes are easily replaced with new ones.

The phenomenon described here is part of a bigger picture with “enterprise governance” and “IT governance”. It is just that IT as a business area of interest seems to be especially sensitive for the reasons sketched above.

Much has been written on enterprise and IT governance. Many approaches focus on the structural side of things and describe frameworks, decision rights, processes, and all kinds of boards. They seem to suggest that as soon as the decision-making framework has been implemented the desired IT developments will follow automatically. This has been noted before (Hoogervorst 2007). We agree and are convinced that the focus should not be on structure but on *content*. The content part is what it is all about; it must be determined what the desired IT developments are together with explicit actions that need to be done.

The remainder of this article will focus on this content and practical ways of how to go about achieving it. Not in any exhaustive way though; the main goal is to create a new mindset for enterprise architects.

There are some specific things we can do. It all starts with awareness, first as an enterprise architect, second as business decision-makers on IT subjects. But first we will describe how to survive as an enterprise architect in a fragmented business world.

ENTERPRISE ARCHITECTURE IN A FRAGMENTED BUSINESS WORLD

Given a three-faced business situation, enterprise architecture still can work on improving the situation and making sure that the different business interests are met in a balanced way. When there is a conflict of interests this must be discussed in an open and transparent way. Very often this is not done and the solution is left to chance. Many architects working in an organization for a long time and wanting to survive have found a way to handle this. Often by ducking and reacting on the most recent instruction of “the business”, no matter which of the three flavors of business is providing this instruction. Others get frustrated and leave the organization for better pastures. Of course it is the responsibility of “the business” to speak with one tongue, and when they don’t it is not IT that is to blame. Ducking is a way to survive and avoid getting seen as a Don Quixote fighting windmills that are unseen by business. Others accept this label and struggle on until they retire. The professional way is for an architect to recognize the

limited maturity of the organization and find ways to make it slowly move towards the next level. A good relation with top management, the level above the project principals, is crucial to make any progress. Maybe at some point top management will start making demands on their business subordinates in other terms than projects, time, and money. When that happens you may see the light at the end of the tunnel. Even then this may prove to be fragile and depending on local heroes instead of a firm engrained phenomenon.

TOWARDS A SINGLE BUSINESS

Again, we will not try to find the general solution, but find a few simple ideas that may improve the situation and may trigger further growth. This big missing thing at the business side of the equation is *content*. In general business management is well aware of what is wrong with their IT. But have a simplified view of the world that is reinforced by IT vendors and many consultancy organizations as well.

In short, they are sold to the idea that for every problem a specific IT solution exists:

- Want customer intimacy? Buy a CRM solution.
- Want agility? Buy an ESB.
- Want integration (finally)? Buy a best-of-breed EAI solution (sigh).
- Want scalability? Put it in the Cloud.
- ...

It is also very safe for an IT department to let business managers suggest a specific vendor. It is safe because in that case business has a high threshold for critique on the new system; they selected it themselves. That threshold would be very low if business suggests Siebel, but IT decides to implement Baan instead. That is how the world works. Why take any risks as an IT department by suggesting another solution than what business proposes?

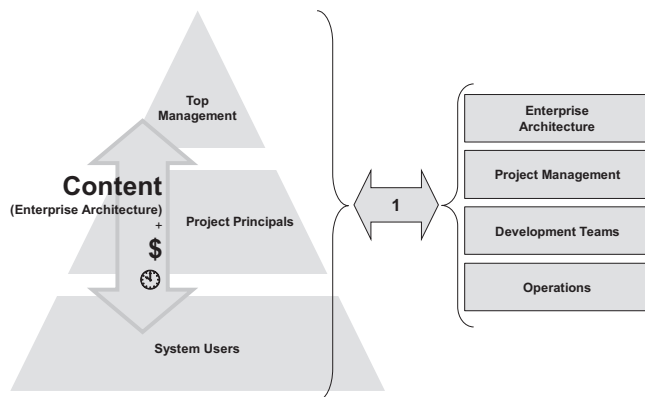


Figure 10: A Single Business Face as Prerequisite for Mature IT

Still this pattern can be broken when business introduces discussions on non-functional aspects of IT solutions, with aspects like agility, information quality, and efficiency.

The solution is of course for top management to determine the right goals and indicators and manage the organization as an integrated whole accordingly; business-to-business alignment. The power is and should be in the line organization and changes need to be applied to make enterprise architecture deliver on its promises. Probably this involves more than “just” architecture and is part of improving maturity in a broad sense. A single business face is seen as a prerequisite for mature IT.

We do not suggest in any way for management to micro-manage IT in a top-down fashion. Strategy remains something for the top; the operational translation in successful implementations is typically done bottom-up. This does not mean though that top management can afford to only discuss time and money when “managing” IT.

It is a matter of also defining what non-functional properties the IT landscape should have in order to be a business enabler instead of a roadblock – properties like agility, consistency, data quality, coherence, re-usability, etc. Not in IT terms but in business terms. These properties should be present in a measurable way. When not measurable they are reduced to hollow phrases: “Do you want agility?” “Yes! (followed by silence)”. The challenge is to translate these properties into specific actions, instead of sound bites.

Most straightforward is applying, what I call, the Mastebroek approach (Mastebroek 1997).

For example:

- A top manager who has introduced the architecture team demands that her (business) subordinates contribute by asking each of them: “What can you do to reduce complexity?”
- One of the answers given might be: “By removing redundant information stores and preventing the introduction of new ones.”
- The top manager then asks: “And how can we measure that?”
- When satisfied with the answers given she may state: “OK, that is what we will do. Your appraisal depends on reducing complexity with an improvement of 50% for the coming year (measured in the suggested way).”
- Each subordinate will do the same to their subordinates. In this case by asking: “What can you do to make sure 50% of the redundant

information stores are removed and no new ones are introduced?”

- and so forth

Or another scenario:

- Top management wants to be better prepared for acquisitions. And asks each of its subordinates: *“What can you do to make us better prepared for acquisitions?”*
- One of them states: *“By defining and implementing a set of services that allow us to integrate any acquisition without disrupting our business processes.”*
- *“How can we measure that?”* Well ... these services are business building blocks and IT artifacts at the same time. A new acquisition means changing the internals of these services only. So ... *“To start with, by showing the definitions and implementations of these business services as autonomous pieces of software ...”* and *“... and of course then the proof of the pudding by showing that our next acquisition can be integrated without changing or re-implementing our processes.”*¹ (SOA in straightforward business terms instead of the latest IT hype).
- *“OK we’ll talk after the next acquisition!”*. But first: *“Keep me posted on the status of the business service portfolio. You need to convince me and demonstrate that our business processes are indeed isolated from acquisitions before we talk bonus.”*

For some, who are used to complex structural architecture and governance approaches, this may seem much too simplistic. We are convinced that is not the case and there is no need to make it more complex than this. The main difference is that business keeps architectural *content* in the line organization and refrains from making it an IT architecture exercise only. This means a move for enterprise architecture from IT into the mainstream business domain.

This is a first step into business-to-business alignment and making business start to behave as one in IT matters. The distinction between business and IT will blur as a side effect.

But, in the meantime, it is very important to be aware there is no such thing as “the business”.

With that awareness open discussion can start on how to improve the situation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Piet Jan Baarda (pietjan.baarda@sogeti.nl) is a Senior Information Architect at Sogeti Nederland BV.

REFERENCES

Baarda: Your SOA Needs a Business Case (2008); refer to: www.via-nova-architectura.org/files/magazine/Baarda.pdf.

Hoogervorst J.: Enterprise Governance & Architectuur, ICT Bibliotheek, Den Haag (2007).

Jim Morrison & The Doors: Unhappy Girl from Strange Days, Elektra Records (1968).

Mastenbroek W.: Verandermanagement, Holland Business Publications (1997).

¹ This is one of the SOA scenario’s mentioned in Your SOA Needs a Business Case (Baarda 2008).