



OrbusINFINITY

Delivering Agile Enterprise Architecture



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Contents

03 Introduction

04 What is Agile Enterprise Architecture?

05 How to achieve Agile EA

06 Is Agile EA right for my organization?

Introduction

Agile enterprise architecture (EA) is a set of values and practices that support the active evolution of the design and architecture of a system, concurrent with the implementation of new business functionality. Having an agile EA function will help deliver high quality business outcomes in a rapidly changing environment.

What is Agile enterprise architecture?

As the name implies, Agile enterprise architecture is all about bringing the agile development concept into your EA capability. By some understandings of EA and Agile, the two concepts don't mix well, with EA being about big, overarching transformation that's carefully planned, while Agile focuses on small incremental change that is quick to react to individuals and interactions.

We should specify here that this does not pertain to enabling Agile DevOps through enterprise architecture, which is a separate (but also useful) idea.

Agile EA is a flexible, easily extended, and easily evolved collection of structures and processes upon which your organization is built.

Main characteristics of Agile EA



A focus on people as the most important asset within the organization.



An EA team that communicates regularly with all stakeholders and is very involved in the work of the development teams doing everything in their power to support them.



An intelligent approach to building the architecture, always prioritizing what's necessary to push the project forward and provide maximum value.



An emphasis on the customer's needs.



Frequent testing of the architecture to try and identify possible improvements.

How to achieve Agile EA

Though it is not an especially complicated idea, the implementation of Agile EA will of course vary hugely based on industry, framework, structure and a myriad of other factors. As such, there is not a simply “5 Step” process to Agile EA, but rather a set of guidelines.



Agile strategy

EA strategies need to adopt an agile mindset that is reactive and incremental, quickly adjusting and iterating where necessary.



Products, not projects

EA delivers transformation projects, but in Agile EA this needs to shift towards a product mindset, with an end-to-end focus that has permanency.



Receptive to requirements

In traditional EA development roadmaps can be set in stone. Agile EA needs to be receptive to new and changing requirements from stakeholders.



Agile leadership

Cultural and Process change cannot be achieved without an architect to guide it; Agile EA teams should seek out an Agile Lead Architect to take control of Agile within the EA function.



DevOps culture

Agile DevOps is not just a set of processes but also a cultural mindset as well, with a focus on small teams that take ownership of their projects. This will need to extend to EA.



“Just-enough” Enterprise Architecture

EA teams can put hundreds of hours into describing architecture, but how much is useful? Just-Enough Architecture means having the minimum amount you need, and no more.



De-centralized team

The organization of EA team involves a host of factors beyond just Agile (see How to Organize an EA Team), but it is safe to say that Agile EA benefits from a de-centralized team working across functions.



Customer-focus

EA tends to focus on the technology portfolio or business capabilities, but in Agile EA the concern should always be delivering outcomes that benefit the customer.



Emphasis on business value

Similarly, the measurement of EA outcomes and KPIs will focus on delivering demonstratable business value, such as application cost savings.

Is Agile EA right for my organization?

Agile has become a buzzword in IT, with every research firm and consultant pushing the need for companies to become agile or fall by the wayside.

However, despite the advantages that an agile approach can bring, it is not going to be the right option in every circumstance. The traditional approach to enterprise architecture has proven valuable across hundreds of enterprises for many years. Despite the changes occurring across the business world, some industries are simply slower paced than others, with fewer customer facing operations to adapt and a need for more careful, long term architecture planning.

But perhaps an even better approach is to avoid getting caught in a dichotomy where EA must either be agile or non-agile. EA encompasses a very diverse set of domains, use cases and practices, some of which will suit a flexible approach and some that won't. Instead of getting hung up on agile, organizations should adopt a pragmatic approach and identify where the needs of the organization will require agility and where it is better left alone. Similarly, agility is not a binary option but likely has degrees of flexibility, with some projects adhering fully to the agile mindset, some perhaps looking several months to the future, and some trying to set the next 5 years in stone.

As an example, Architecture Governance is an area that will benefit from a non-agile approach with adherence to plans and written guidelines, while the implementation of solutions from solution architects is much more likely to follow an agile approach and utilize concepts such as Scrum development. But this is only an example, and there is nothing stopping an organization from having loose adherence to governance on a case-by-case basis or a structured, waterfall approach to a solution!





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