Increasing the Relevance of Enterprise Architecture through “Crisitunities” in U.S. State Governments\(^1\)

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Executive Summary

The common assumption is that an enterprise architecture (EA) program should be incrementally implemented (the maturing approach). But our research found that U.S. state governments are also using two other approaches, both of which take advantage of a “crisitunity,” a term popularized by The Simpsons. When told that the Chinese word for crisis consists of two characters, danger and opportunity, Homer Simpson suggests the word “crisitunity” to describe the situation.

Although EA has been around for many years, the core question that remains unanswered is: How can EA deliver its promised benefits? As described in the full article, the answer lies in an organization choosing an appropriate and relevant EA approach. As well as the maturing approach, the choices are the refreshing and bundling approaches. The first step in building a relevant EA program is to understand and embrace the most appropriate implementation approach for your organization, using the decision process depicted in the figure.

Choosing an Appropriate and Relevant EA Approach

The full article describes a representative case from U.S. state governments for each of the three approaches. Kansas used the maturing approach for its EA program, which started as an IT architecture and evolved incrementally to become a more holistic EA with enterprise-wide technology standards. Michigan, used the refreshing approach, which began with an IT consolidation that sparked an interest in cloud computing, and the existing EA program was refreshed to take advantage of the new opportunities. California used the bundling approach, kick-started by the governor’s reorganization plan, which led to the development of a completely new EA program to support the plan.

The research found that of the 24 U.S. state governments with a formal EA program, six used the refreshing approach and eight used the bundling approach. Both these approaches take advantage of opportunities from radical IT changes to increase the relevance of an EA program.

Notably, states adopting the maturing approach started their EA programs earlier than others (average starting year was 2000). In contrast, states using the refreshing and bundling approaches started later (average starting years of 2003 and 2006, respectively).

Given the pressure for transformation due to ongoing financial crises and market pressures, EA practitioners will likely find the refreshing and bundling approaches appealing. However, this does not necessarily imply the maturing approach is less effective. In the absence of a crisitunity, the maturing approach is the default option for developing and progressing an EA program. Yet, even with a crisitunity, the maturing approach could still be appropriate for organizations that lack the ability to seize the opportunities arising from the crisis. A major

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\(^1\) The full article is published in the December 2015 issue of MIS Quarterly Executive, available online at www.misqe.org.
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benefit of the maturing approach is that, by its nature, it introduces few shocks and therefore does not trigger significant resistance from users. Most of the changes are incremental, making them less complex than changes occurring in the refreshing or bundling approaches.

In the presence of a crisitunity, organizations with existing EA programs can choose to refresh them. However, radically adjusting an existing EA program is a complex process that can trigger considerable resistance or lead to conflict with existing processes, so the EA team must have the necessary resources and support from top managers, significant expertise and business unit involvement. With the right execution, the refreshing approach can provide strong momentum and quick progress as it responds directly to the immediate changes in the organization.

Organizations facing radical IT changes but that do not have existing EA programs can adopt the bundling approach to jump-start their EA programs. This approach requires significant resources and support. As a result of the intensive developments needed by the bundling approach, quick progress can be made and strong momentum built for EA development and use. This is an advantage of a bundling approach because it allows an EA program to quickly address the organization’s immediate needs. In contrast, the rapid and radical changes are complex and can trigger considerable resistance, especially from those who feel threatened by new changes.

Lessons for Building a Relevant EA Program

Four lessons can be drawn from the Kansas, Michigan and California cases on how to make EA a relevant and important initiative.

Lesson 1: Take Advantage of Crisitunities. In the context of EA, crisitunities arise not just from radical IT structural changes (e.g., departmental reorganization), but also from disruptive technologies that impact business models (e.g., cloud computing, business analytics, e-commerce). Advocates of EA can use those windows of opportunity to increase the relevance of EA to their organizations. During crises when performance plummets or market pressures intensify, an EA program can drive the transformation needed to leverage the organization’s IT investments so it can create new business capabilities or do more with less.

Lesson 2: Increase EA Visibility. New EA practices are continuously being developed, and business directions change. These changes require frequent EA updates, which increase the visibility of the EA program and adjust it to the changing needs of the organization. Two lessons stand out from the cases on how organizations use EA updates to increase the relevance of EA. The first is that, when introducing updates, EA teams must recognize that the goal is being relevant, not being perfect. The second is that, although updating EA programs is useful, architects must remember who the end user is. Focusing on the end user keeps EA programs relevant.

Lesson 3: Fix Current Pains Before Building Future Gains. Whether enterprise architects take advantage of a crisitunity or use frequent updates to increase the relevance of an EA program, it is critical that they first address current threats to organizational performance before building new capabilities. Addressing current crises allows an EA program to stay relevant to the needs of user groups. This means the EA team must identify its user groups, their relevant business problems and how to appropriately address them.

Lesson 4: Use Architects Who Also Have People Skills. Much of an EA program’s success rests on the shoulders of EA advocates. Frequently, these are enterprise architects who directly communicate and work with business units to explain concepts and mobilize actions. User groups will not be convinced of the benefits of EA by hearing about perfect frameworks or sophisticated EA artifacts. To make EA understandable and relevant to user groups, enterprise architects must also have the ability to engage in persuasive and targeted communications. Architects therefore need people skills as well as technical skills so they can connect with their user groups.

In conclusion, based on the EA implementation cases in U.S. state governments, we have identified that, in addition to the common maturing approach to EA, organizations can take advantage of crisitunities arising from radical IT changes to adopt the refreshing or bundling approaches. Given the increasing pressure for transformation, the refreshing and bundling approaches provide managers, private and public-sector alike, with new ways to increase the relevance of their EA programs.

Regardless of the approach adopted, we recommend managers adopt the lessons identified from the cases: exploiting opportunities from crises, providing frequent updates based on feedback, relating to the current needs of the user groups and using architects with people skills to communicate the relevance of EA, and increase the chances of success.