The use of Agile Enterprise Architecture to facilitate digital transformation
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This article is the second in a series on this topic.

The previous article in this series, How to get what you need in an agile environment: the Basics, covered the meaning and benefits of an agile environment, an introduction to the process and mechanics of agile software development, and the levers available within Futuregrowth to initiate customised software solutions.

Before moving on to the specifics of developing business requests, I'd like to expand on the concept of enterprise architecture, and how this can be used to effect organisational change.

Our objectives
At a recent strategic planning session our Enterprise Solutions team had three stated objectives:
1. Improve agile processes;
2. Adopt an architectural mindset; and
3. Create an internal consultancy to explore the relative merits of the various initiatives we undertake across the business.

The intention of this approach was to evolve the company's capabilities and competitiveness, by building on an efficient platform.

In order to achieve our objectives, we have turned to a new area of practice called Agile Enterprise Architecture.

What is enterprise architecture?
Enterprise architecture (EA) is defined as "the collaborative and evolutionary exploration and potential modelling of an organization's architectural ecosystem in a context-sensitive manner. The implications are that enterprise architects must be willing to work in a collaborative and flexible manner and IT delivery teams must be willing to work closely with enterprise architects." Ref: Disciplined Agile: Enterprise Architecture

Historically, EA was a very academic exercise with little thought given to ensuring ongoing profitability throughout the development phase. With the advent of Agile EA, the focus is on business objectives from day one, and the models created can demonstrate immediate and ongoing value.

The diagramme below depicts a typical matrixed organisation, and illustrates how an iterative, multi-horizon agile approach plays out.
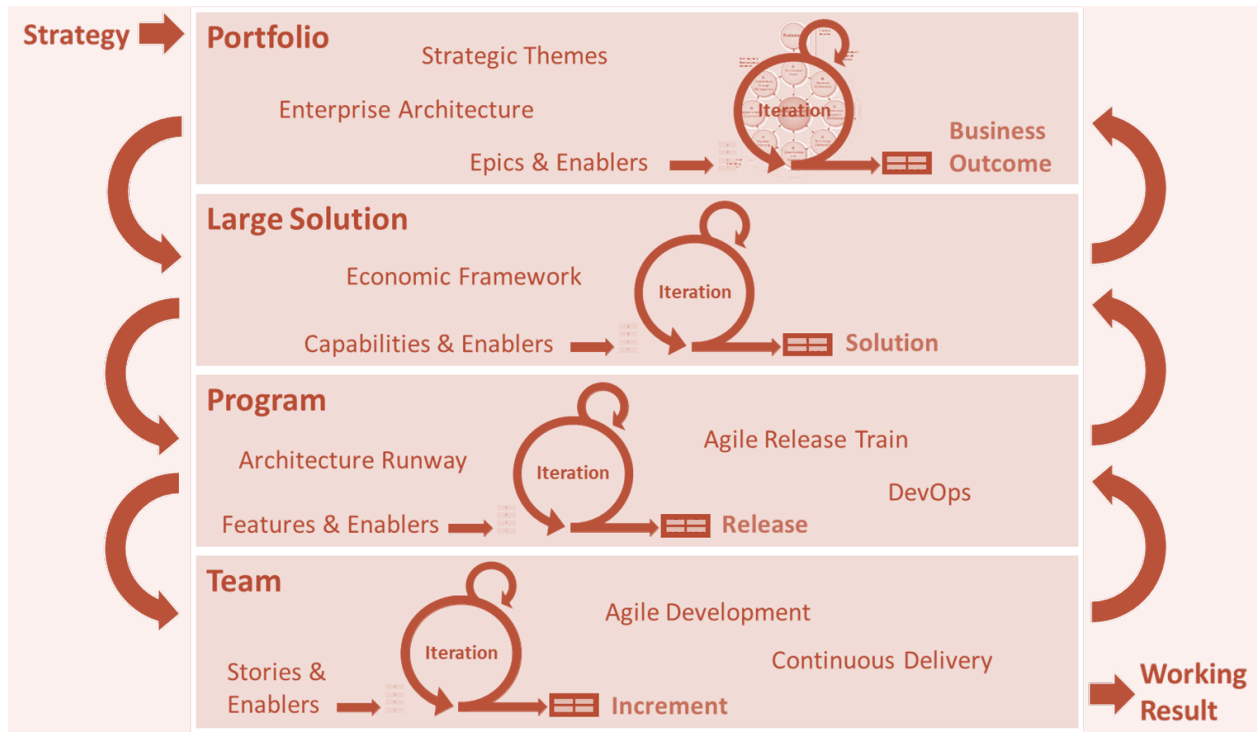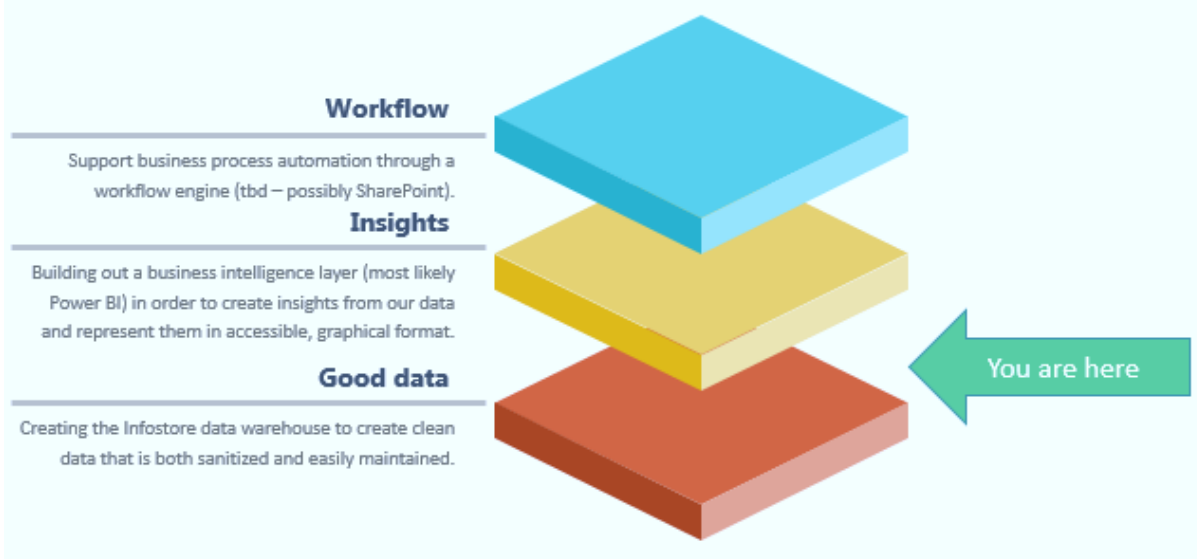
This approach has distinct benefits, even if multiple roles must initially be filled by a core group of staff.

Our approach

It is useful to think of our approach as a layer cake, as illustrated below. In the base layer, we ensure that we have good data – to support the rest of the structure. The next layer involves drawing and modelling insights from the data – the business intelligence layer. An automation layer will then follow, where we put the intelligence layer to good use in automating menial tasks with a workflow engine.

Layered Approach to Enterprise Architecture

Workflow
Support business process automation through a workflow engine (tbd – possibly SharePoint).

Insights
Building out a business intelligence layer (most likely Power BI) in order to create insights from our data and represent them in accessible, graphical format.

Good data
Creating the Infostore data warehouse to create clean data that is both sanitized and easily maintained.

You are here

How should this be applied?

Digital transformation initiatives must focus on achieving business outcomes. This will require a high degree of **collaboration and coordination** between business and IT practitioners. A common trap is to focus on the delivery of tech solutions over enabling business objectives. This creates disparities and discourages collaboration, and must be avoided.

EA should be a strategy with **multiple time horizons**. A link must be established between time spent on strategic planning and outcomes that create value and satisfy organisational objectives. Focusing on "important" rather than "urgent" tasks is the surest way to produce cost-effective, flexible and resilient IT ecosystems.

Capability mapping (a visualisation of the organisation's capability building blocks, their relationship to each other, and where change is required) must be used in order to achieve objectives. This will enable IT to align its initiatives with the required business outcomes.

Successful EA campaigns provide opportunities to learn and solve interesting problems, along a structured career path. It is common for architects to grow into career paths outside of IT, in order to retain this organisational knowledge. This contributes to **staff motivation and retention**.

It is key that all business stakeholders make themselves heard in this process. Without the **input of those on the coalface**, no amount of technical modelling and strategic visioning will achieve an actionable plan with a high likelihood of success.

While everyone needs to contribute to the vision, it is vital to **engage executives as sponsors** of digital transformation initiatives.

Where to from here?

There are several ways in which we can ensure that digital transformation is successful and sustainable:

1. **Make EA accessible to executives** – this will require models that are not based in jargon and can be consumed by people not trained in architectural modelling language.
2. **Create Capability Maps** (this will synchronise IT effort with business needs).
3. **Spend time creating a clear architectural vision** (balance has to be struck between vision-for-the-future and business-as-usual capacity requirements).
4. **Train the personnel who will be playing the role of enterprise architects** in technical documentation, communications, problem solving and coaching. The more well-rounded the architect, the more likely a successful outcome will be achieved.

The business case for such a digital transformation hardly needs reiterating at this stage of global technology adoption. A successful transformation requires a cross-functional approach which must include champions from all aspects of the business. The most successful transformations are not driven by IT teams in isolation, but are team efforts - with business stakeholders steering the direction of the transformation. Employing business strategy within the framework of transformation tools like agile enterprise architecture will ensure that projects are not white elephants and that business decisions are driven both by data and best practice.

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