Four Steps to Start an Information Architecture Practice

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Initiatives: Enterprise Architecture

To enable a data-driven enterprise, EA leaders must build a formal information architecture practice. This research looks at the findings of our information architecture survey and provides best practices to enterprise architecture and technology innovation leaders on how to start an IA practice.

Overview

Key Findings

- Information architecture is fragmented and spread across different organizational functions that often compete and develop information architecture strategies in a vacuum.
- Despite recognizing the importance of information architecture, few organizations have implemented an organizational design that supports a formal information architecture practice.
- The data and analytics function has assumed many of the responsibilities and activities that are typically associated with information architects.
- As enterprises strive to become more data-driven, EA leaders face a critical decision to expand the value proposition of the EA by starting and maturing a formal information architecture practice.

Recommendations

To start an information architecture practice, enterprise architecture and technology innovation leaders must:

- Adopt an information architecture (IA) strategy that prioritizes information initiatives enabling business capabilities and driving business outcomes.

- Collaborate with IA stakeholders to define the formal IA function and determine whether the IA practice's organizational design will be centralized, decentralized or distributed.
- Partner with data and analytics, business and IT leaders to determine and delineate the responsibilities and activities of information architects.
- Construct and pitch a value proposition for a formal IA practice. Brand IA as central to enabling business information strategy, and position it as a vehicle to drive growth and profitability.

Strategic Planning Assumption

By 2024, 85% of EA programs will refocus on information architecture, making it central to all digital initiatives.

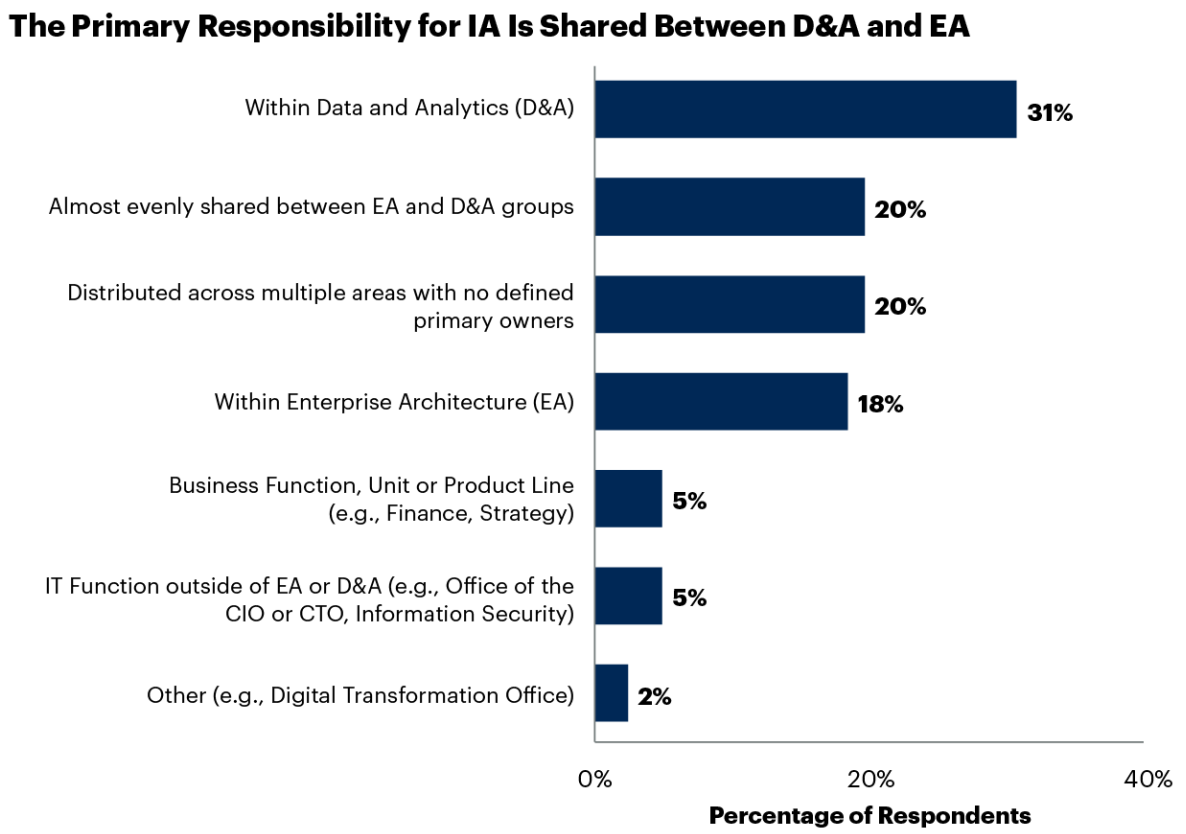
Introduction

This document was republished on 24 August 2021. The document you are viewing is the corrected version. For more information, see the Corrections page on gartner.com.

Information architecture (IA) *focuses on helping stakeholders address interdependencies between the information landscape and business, applications, technologies and solutions (see Note 1). IA is a domain of enterprise architecture (EA). IA and EA are dependent and interdependent of each other, working in tandem and synergistically.*

Information is a critical organizational asset and an essential resource for all business and IT leaders. It enables smarter decisions, provides the basis for new services and experiences for customers and serves as the input to the organizations' ambitions for artificial intelligence (AI) and analytics. [1] To be in a strong position to do these things, however, they need a formal IA practice with domain expertise on the EA team — which unfortunately many do not (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Primary Responsibility for IA Is Shared Between D&A and EA



n = 82

Q: To the best of your knowledge, where is the discipline of Information Architecture primarily located in your enterprise?

Source: Gartner 2021 State of Information Architecture Study

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Our State of Information Architecture From an EA Perspective: Benchmark Data survey shows that there is variation across organizations regarding the activities that fall within the scope of the IA discipline. Additionally, there is also uncertainty regarding the primary responsible party for IA and, as a result, many organizations struggle with building mature IA practices.

Despite the rise of data and analytics (D&A), we have not seen the equivalent rise of IA with the growth of digital business. Surprisingly, EA's response to the D&A trend has been lackluster. Today, 61% of organizations do not have a formally defined IA practice.

Clearly, there appears to be confusion over the roles and responsibilities of IA and D&A, and immaturity of many key and critical practices. These two themes of raising the maturity of IA practices — and even closer collaboration with sister disciplines like D&A — are central to an effective IA practice, and the success of the overall EA practice.

The findings of our IA survey have implications. They beckon questions about the role, value proposition, importance of a formal IA practice and, ultimately, the overall EA practice. Arguably, senior business and IT leaders should demand that their EA practices help drive growth and profitability by linking all IT efforts to business strategy and information.

Since IA is a domain of EA, an EA practice with little to no modern IA expertise is incomplete and immature.

To help deliver the power and value of information, EA and TI leaders must start a formal IA practice that centralizes IA as a center of excellence with a community of practice. To do this successfully, EA and TI leaders must start and continuously improve the maturity and quality of their IA practices, as well as build collaboration between IA, D&A and other business and IT stakeholders.

This research looks at how enterprise architecture and technology innovation leaders can leverage the findings of our survey to start an IA practice by following four steps (see Figure 2).

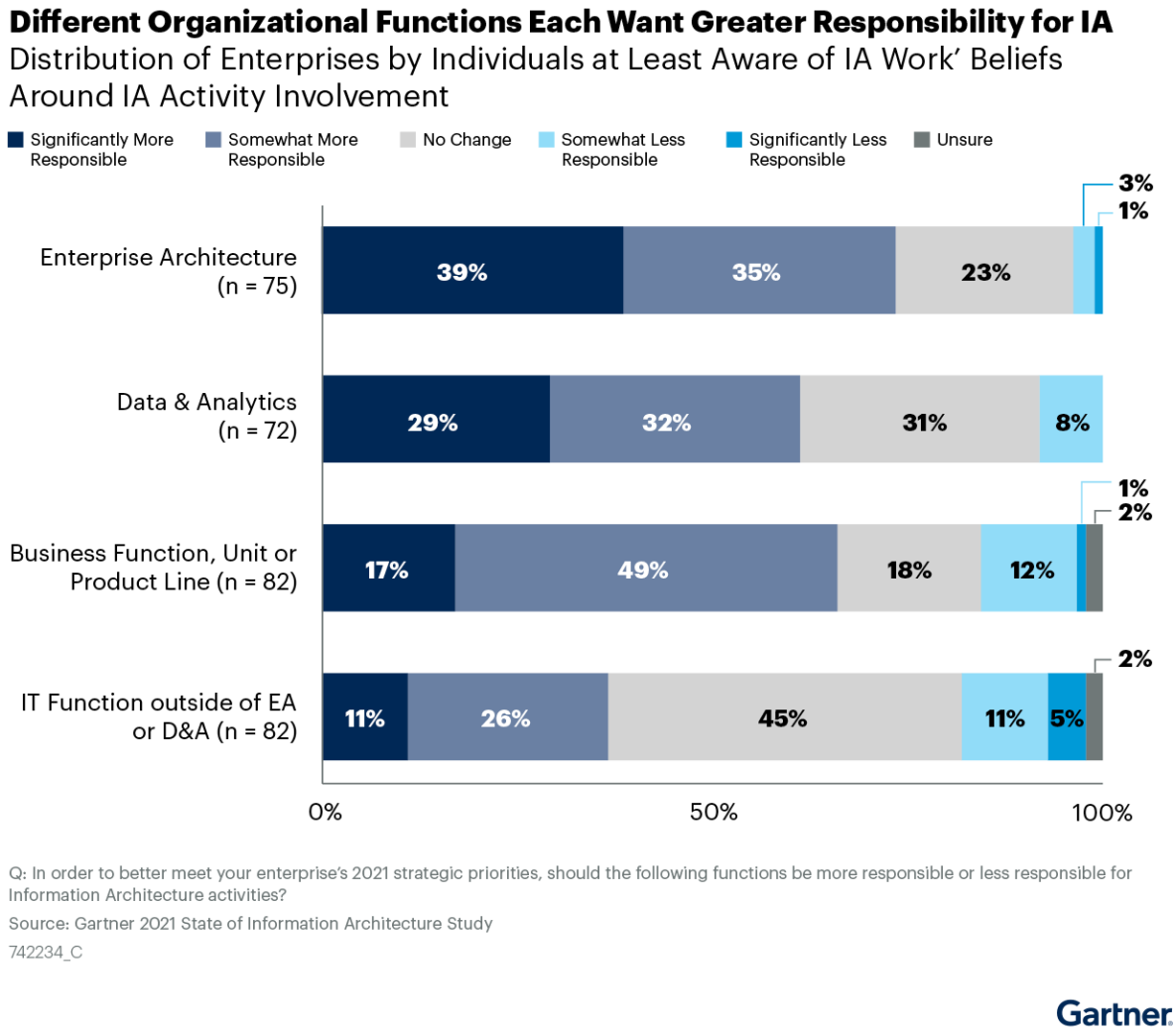
Figure 2: Four Steps to Start an IA Practice

Analysis

Step 1: Define the Strategy

Our survey shows that IA is fragmented, spread across different organizational functions, with each function wanting greater responsibility for IA (see Figure 3). This leads to competing and conflicting IA strategies.

Figure 3: Different Organizational Functions Each Want Greater Responsibility for IA



Gartner PRM Survey - R-21503: State of Information Architecture from a Primarily EA Perspective

To overcome the challenges of competing and conflicting IA strategies, EA leaders must collaborate with IA stakeholders to jointly develop an approach toward IA. More specifically, EA leaders must partner business and IT leaders to jointly develop a Business information architecture (BIA).

Business information architecture (BIA) *is the design and use of information models and practices to link data to business capabilities and business outcomes.*

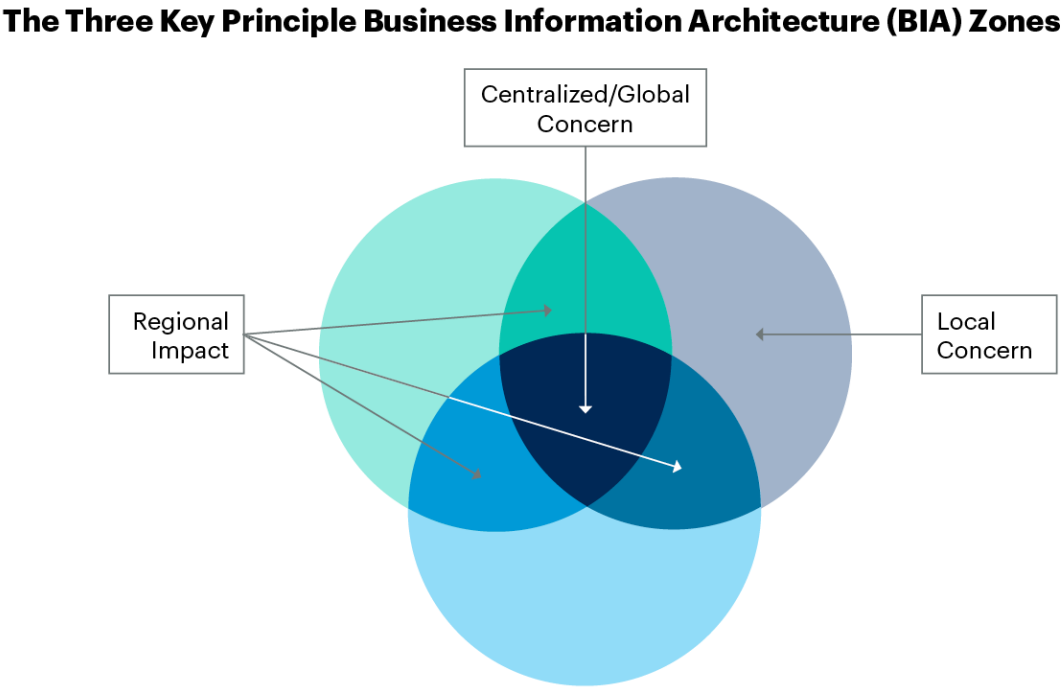
BIA is an agile approach to identify and prioritize information initiatives that are required to enable business strategy. It is accomplished by developing lean information models where unique information assets are explicitly linked to targeted business capabilities and prioritized business outcomes.

BIA is predicated on the notion that the least amount of information will yield the greatest business impact. It is designed to move at the speed of business, eliminating bureaucracy and preventing IA being thought of as something distinct from business. BIA helps prioritize only the data and analytics assets that matter most.

It also improves speed-to-value by eliminating scope-creep associated with traditional IA practices that typically focus on monolithic enterprisewide information models and catalogs. Those practices are time-consuming and costly to produce. Most often, they become obsolete before completion because the business strategy has changed.

BIA uses a three-tier model to align EA, D&A, business and IT by focusing on high-value IA assets and initiatives, while helping rightsize and modernize MDM, and data and analytics governance programs (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The Three Key Principle Business Information Architecture Zones



Source: Gartner
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In Figure 4, BIA is used to:

- Identify structured data, such as master data or application data, and unstructured data like documents, files and digital images, analytics, algorithms and transactional data. It defines information/data by its value, reference and use to enable business capabilities and drive targeted business-outcomes.
- Reveal the information/data that is widely or globally shared (greatest dependency), less widely or regionally shared (less dependency) and least shared (least dependency).
- BIA yields an information model that includes conceptual, logical and physical models to describe the information artifacts that will be central to determining and defining the most important information assets needed to enable business capabilities and drive business-outcomes.
- The BIA is not equivalent to an enterprise data model or enterprise data catalog.

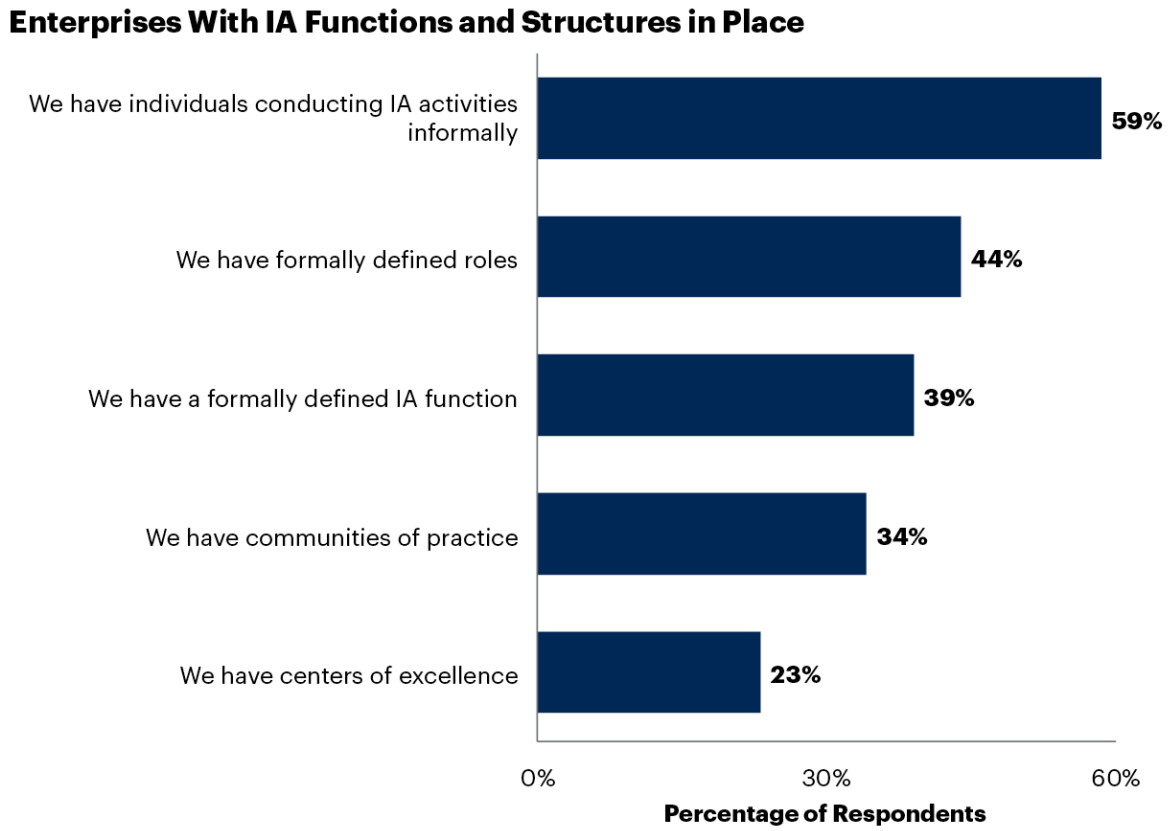
Actions:

- Determine how the role of IA is changing across the enterprise and how business leaders are exploiting IA to make smarter and faster decisions.
- Demonstrate the merits and benefits that D&A, business and IT leaders will realize by adopting a BIA strategy that eliminates competing IA strategies.
- Empower IA stakeholders to participate directly in the development of BIA by forging fusion teams to model information as part of BIA and deploying democratized platform tools.
- Collaborate with business and IT leaders to ensure that the BIA remains updated as business strategy changes.
- Augment the BIA as needed with data catalogs and other metadata enrichment tools to expose and discover the enterprise data model for more general use, such as with analytics, BI and AI.
- Consolidate and reflect BIA investment opportunities and initiatives in EA roadmaps.

Step 2: Decide the Organizational Design

In our survey, 59% of organizations report that they have individuals conducting IA activities informally and only 39% report that they have a formally defined IA function or practice (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Enterprises With IA Functions and Structures in Place



n = 82; Select all that apply.

Q: Which of the following persons/entities within your enterprise are aligned to the discipline of Information Architecture?
Source: Gartner 2021 State of Information Architecture Study
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To enable and execute BIA strategy, organizations require the appropriate organizational design to define how activities — such as task allocation, coordination and supervision — are directed toward achieving goals and objectives. The IA organizational structure will affect organizational action and provide the foundation, on which IA and/or BIA will operate.

To determine what kind of IA and/or BIA organizational design is required, EA leaders must collaborate with IA stakeholders to define the IA function and determine whether the IA practice's organizational design will be centralized, decentralized or distributed:

- If the IA practice is to be centralized (assumed and managed by the EA practice), establish an IA center of excellence or community of practice that spans horizontally across EA and D&A and other business and IT functions.

- If the IA practice is to be decentralized or distributed (primarily run by business and IT teams outside of EA), implement an IA organizational design that supports a product line model. It should ensure that the work of IA is consumed around achieving customer outcomes and controlling the information that supports the business outcome.

EA, business and IT leaders should focus IA and BIA efforts on achieving business outcomes by using a jobs-to-be-done methodology (see Note 2) to identify and deliver differentiated IA services. They should establish governance and assurance mechanisms that enable the interplay of different roles, responsibilities, tasks and activities.

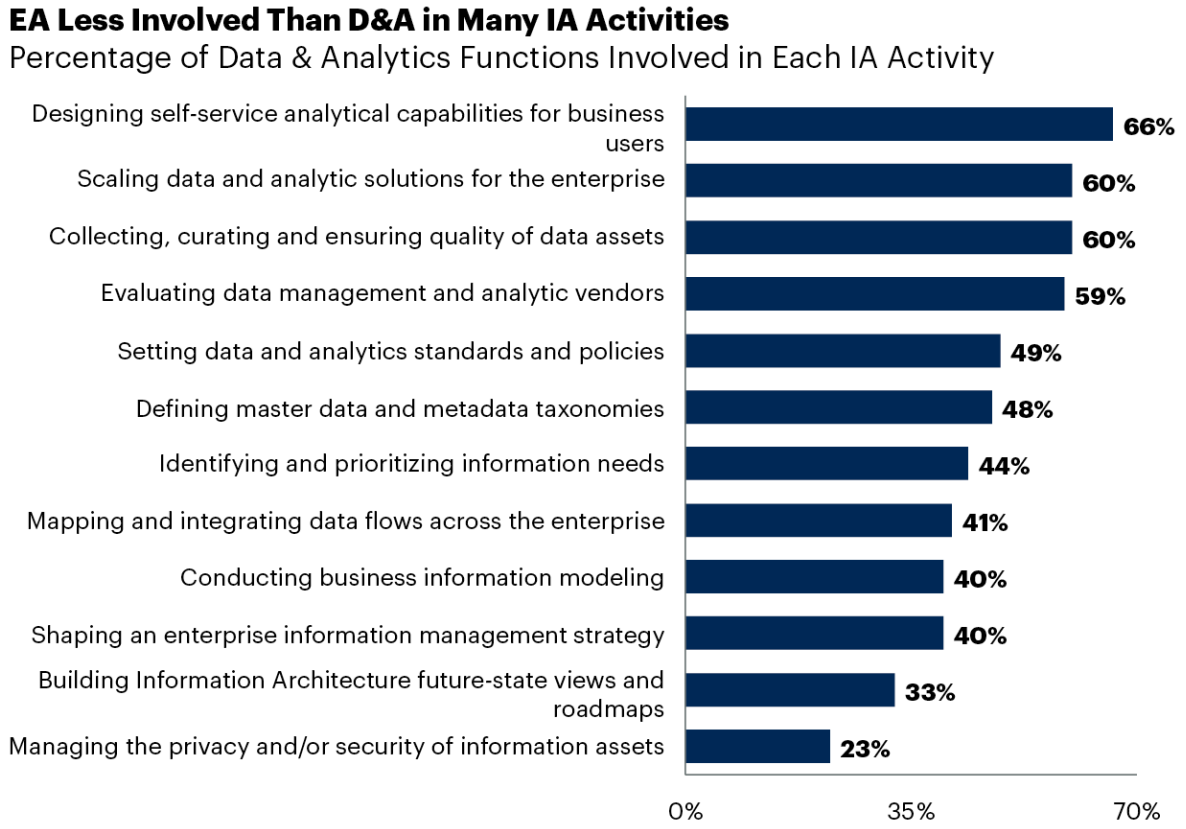
Actions:

- Make sure that IA stakeholders have transparency with the formation of an IA practice.
- Ensure the IA practice's organizational design reflects its efforts to respond to disruptions and changes, integrates new elements, ensures collaboration and allows flexibility round the key digital business concepts of agility, resilience, continuous change, speed to value and time to market.
- Assess the future and current state of the EA operating model, closing the gaps by implementing the new IA organizational design within the EA practice.
- Collaborate with IA stakeholders to determine whether the IA practice will be centralized, decentralized or distributed.
- Implement an IA organizational design that is capable of making IA central to providing new services and experiences for customers — and as an input to organizations ambitions for AI and analytics.

Step 3: Determine Responsibilities and Activities

Our survey reveals that D&A has assumed many of the responsibilities and activities that are typically associated with information architects (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: EA Less Involved Than D&A in Many IA Activities



A lack of understanding and clarity about the responsibilities and activities of information architects leads to inconsistent and disparate IA practices. Defining and delineating their responsibilities sets expectations, enables finding the right person for the job, reduces friction and improves employee's experience and job satisfaction. Ultimately, it supports the efficiency and effectiveness of the EA and IA practice, as well as the overall organization.

EA leaders must partner with IA stakeholders to delineate the responsibilities and activities of information architects. The organization must be clear about who is responsible for what IA responsibilities and activities — especially as they pertain to executing BIA strategy and IA organizational design. In Table 1, we provide sample responsibilities and activities for the role of information architect as part of a formal IA practice embedded within the EA program. Readers should customize accordingly.

Table 1: Sample Responsibilities and Activities for the Role of Information Architect

(Enlarged table in Appendix)

Responsibility	Activity
Influence data and analytics (D&A) strategy	Partner with business and IT leaders and, through the rationalization of the information value chain, provide strategic recommendations to maximize the value of information assets via their creation, access and use.
Maximize value derived from data and analytics	Foster value creation using the organization's data assets, as well as the external data ecosystem. This includes aiding value creation through data exploitation, envisioning data-enabled strategies, as well as enabling all forms of business outcomes through analytics, data and analytics governance, and enterprise information policy.
Surface information priority	Assess the benefits and the risks of information by using tools, such as business capability models, value-stream maps and business process models (and other key business architecture deliverables) This can create an information-centric view to quickly visualize what information matters most to the organization, based on the defined business strategy.
Enhance decision making	Use business information models to provide the organization with a future-state view of the information landscape that is unencumbered by the specific data implementation details imposed by proprietary solutions or technologies. Assist decision design.
Enable effective data and analytics governance	Suggest who can take what actions with what information, and under what circumstances. Assist data and analytics leaders, and business and IT leadership in developing information governance processes and structures.
Conduct business information modeling	Create and manage business information models in all their forms — including conceptual models, relational database designs, message models and others.
Manage risk	Aid the definition of data classifications and data zoning to allow information assets to be immediately identified and proactively managed as more information becomes federated in a digital economy.
Enable EA, IA and D&A Collaboration	Ensure that the architecture is used as a lens and a filter to identify, prioritize and execute the data and analytic initiatives with clear line of sight to enterprise strategies and business outcomes.
Secure data and analytic assets	Aid in the analysis of data and analytics security requirements and solutions, and work with the chief information security officer (CISO) (and CDO) to ensure that enterprise data and analytics assets are treated as protected assets.
Exploit all information assets — not just data and analytics	Aid efforts to improve business performance through investment in solutions and capabilities, such as master data management (MDM), metadata management, content management, records management, data integration and related enterprise information management (EIM) or information infrastructure components. All such information drives analytics, BI, data science and AI programs and projects.

Sample responsibilities and activities for the role of information architect.

Source: Gartner

Actions:

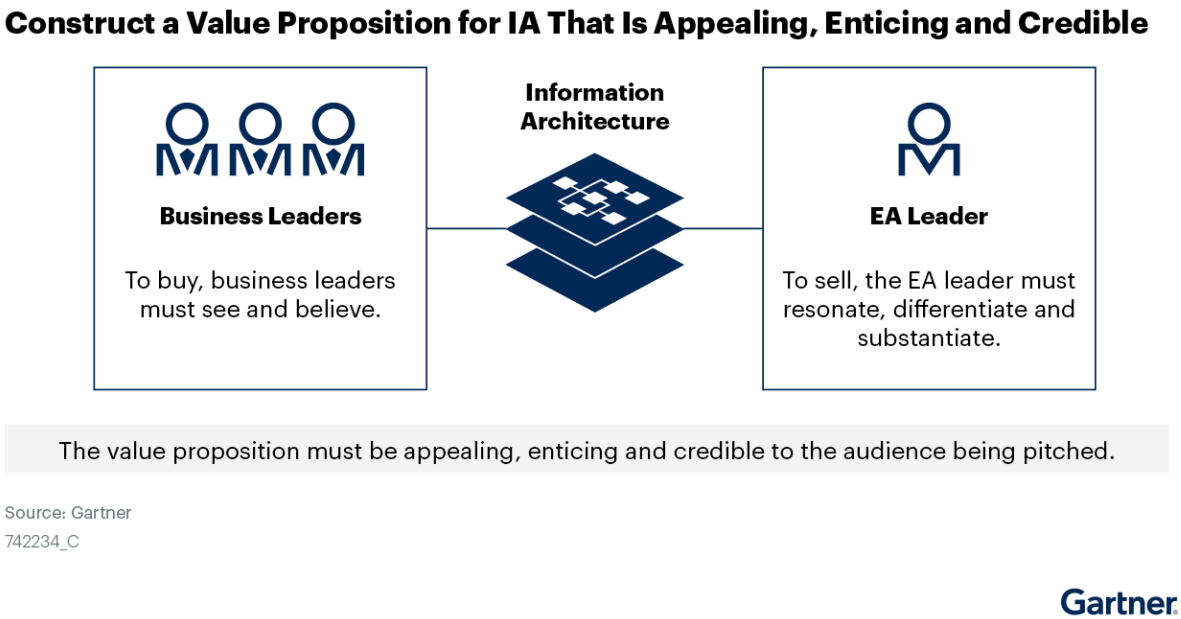
- Partner with business and IT leaders to determine what IA needs will be met by information architects within the EA practice, D&A, and other business and IT functions.

- Avoid the pitfall of staffing the IA practice without fully understanding the roles and activities of information architects in a centralized, decentralized and distributed IA operating model.
- Enable enterprise IA efficiency and effectiveness by defining and delineating IA practitioner responsibilities across centralized, decentralized and distributed operating models.

Step 4: Sell the Value Proposition

To enable a data-driven enterprise, EA leaders must construct and sell a value proposition that motivates an IA practice enabled by a BIA strategy and approach (see Figure 7). This entails leveraging Steps 1 through 3 as inputs to determine what goes into the value proposition. It necessitates using value-based selling (see Note 3) to demonstrate why an IA practice is necessary to help the organization capitalize on the value of information, and to go on a road-show, with key enterprise stakeholders, to get buy-in and mandate.

Figure 7: Construct a Value Proposition for IA That Is Appealing, Enticing and Credible



Actions:

- Determine the tangible benefits of BIA, the business problems it solves, the outcomes it helps achieve and the innovation it delivers.
- Demonstrate how the unified use of information, through a formal IA practice, empowers smarter business decisions across the enterprise.

- Brand the IA practice as central to enabling BIA strategy and approach, and as a vehicle to drive profitability across all digitalization initiatives.
- Position the IA practice as a must-have capability by demonstrating the concept of the "least amount of information will yield the biggest business impact."
- Demonstrate how BIA moves at the speed the business needs, and how it eliminates large massive bureaucracy and prevents architecture being thought of as something distinct from business.
- Show how the IA practice helps D&A, business and IT leaders prioritize only the data and analytics assets that matter most.
- Present the BIA offering as a form of collaborative services and deliverables that can be tracked and measured.

Evidence

The Gartner Research Circle State of Information Architecture Survey 2021 was conducted online with the Gartner ITL Research Circle — a Gartner-managed panel — from 15 through 23 February 2021 with 63 IT leaders aligned or familiar with information architecture work. It was then also conducted online with 20 additional Enterprise Architecture Leadership Council and EA Team Plus Clients from March through April 2021. Across the study, the sample size varies slightly by question to exclude individuals who reported no involvement or awareness of IA work.

[1] 2021 Gartner CEO Survey: The Year of Rebuilding

Note 1: Information Architecture

Information architecture is also sometimes referred to as enterprise information architecture (EIA). It refers to the enterprise architecture (EA) activities that define a company's business information assets (as well as the assets' sources, structure, classification and associations). These assets form part of the company's information strategy, allowing it to respond to disruptive forces and move toward desired business outcomes. The information architect role is not directly responsible for other EA viewpoints. Instead, it focuses on helping others address interdependencies between the information landscape and business, applications, technologies and solutions.

Note 2: "Jobs to Be Done" (JTBD)

In JTBD, "job" stands for what a persona (individual, or group of individuals) hires a service or product to accomplish. JTBD is typically part of the concept of EA as an internal management consultancy and creating EA services with a value proposition for the enterprise to consume (see Quick Answer: How Can Jobs-to-Be-Done Methods Improve EA Business Value? and Evolve Enterprise Architecture Into an Internal Management Consultancy).

Note 3: Value-Based Selling

Value-based selling focuses on understanding and reinforcing the reasons why the IA is valuable to business and IT leaders. It is based on empathy, a deep understanding of customers/business partners and their needs, and shaping offerings — most often in the form of services and deliverables — that meet those needs. It increases the likelihood of conducting transactions between the IA practice, CDO, D&A and other business and IT leaders. It is predicated on six key principles. It:

1. Focuses on the value of solving the problems (needs) of customers/business partners
2. Is specific about the value being offered (how the need is met)
3. Captures mutually meaningful value in every interaction (building the relationship)
4. Clarifies "what is in it for me" — i.e., the purchaser/consumer of the offering/service
5. Facilitates the buying process, not the sales process
6. Is redesigned or eliminated if the offering cannot contribute to perceived value

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Quick Answer: How Can Jobs-to-Be-Done Methods Improve EA Business Value?

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The Foundation of an Effective Data and Analytics Operating Model — Presentation Materials

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Source: Gartner