

Is Enterprise Architecture Completely Broken?

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Remember Milton, the red stapler guy from the movie *Office Space*? Useless to his company, he had been laid off years before, but due to an unexplained glitch, he was never informed and kept getting paid. So there's Milton, showing up for work day after day, clueless about why he has nothing useful to do.

Makes you wonder: are there any Miltons in *your* organization?

Sadly, for some large enterprises, you need look no further than the *Enterprise Architects*. In the years since [John Zachman](#) originated the field of Enterprise Architecture (EA) in his [seminal 1987 article for IBM Systems Journal](#), EA has achieved a surprisingly paltry level of success. Yes, Enterprise Architects have used various frameworks and other tools to document how their organization operates, often with meticulous detail. But to what end? The cost savings and responsiveness benefits that EA has purported to deliver have been few and far between. Stories of stalled or misdirected EA initiatives vastly outnumber bona fide examples of EA efforts leading to measurable business value.

What gives?



In fact, just what an Enterprise Architect is actually supposed to do is curiously still up for debate, more than 25 years after EA's invention. Common to most definitions is the notion that such architects must drive business transformation in their organizations. "Digital transformation is a fantastic way to rethink Enterprise Architecture," reports Angelo Andreetto, who is Senior Enterprise Architect for [Zurich Insurance Group](#) in Zurich, Switzerland and a [TOGAF® 8](#) and [Zachman Certified™ Enterprise Architect](#) and a [Certified ScrumMaster®](#). "Enterprise Architects should be architecting the enterprise."

What, then, does it mean to architect an enterprise? Ken Griesi, a leading practitioner and thought leader in the EA field, echoes Andreetto's perspective. "Unfortunately, EA is often synonymous with the practice of documenting one person's viewpoint of their company's IT," Griesi bemoans. "In reality, EA is about the skillful manipulation of an enterprise's structure and behavior within a complex environment." Griesi is on the boards of the [Center for the Advancement of the Enterprise Architecture Profession](#) (CAEAP) the [Association of Enterprise Architects](#) (AEA) and has worked on several large US Government architecture efforts.

In fact, the notion that the practice of EA has become all about documentation rather than effecting business change is a common theme across many boardrooms and IT shops. EA generally centers on the use of

a framework like [The Open Group Architecture Framework \(TOGAF\)](#), the [Zachman Framework™](#), or one of a handful of others. Yet while the use of such frameworks can successfully lead to business value, frameworks like TOGAF and Zachman “tend to become self-referential,” according to Andreetto, where EAs spend all their effort working with the framework instead of solving real problems. “Frameworks are cocaine for executives – they give them a huge rush and then they move to the next framework,” he adds.

Frameworks seek to break down the enterprise into its component parts, following the theory that you must understand the parts to improve the whole. And yet, according to Griesi, “EA fails when enterprises are treated as discrete systems that can be reduced into smaller problem sets, as traditional engineering approaches or some EA frameworks would have us believe.” The problem here is that the enterprise isn’t an ordinary system like a machine or a building, and can’t be architected or engineered as such. Instead, “businesses are living organisms,” according to Griesi. “EA succeeds when enterprises are treated as complex systems that are constantly changing and adapting.”

If we can’t architect enterprises the way we can architect skyscrapers, say, then what do we need to do to fix the practice of EA? “The community around Enterprise Architecture needs to rethink itself and its role,” according to Andreetto. “The fundamental quality of Enterprise Architecture is its vision of the future.” Griesi takes this vision of the future one step deeper. “With the move toward digitization and mobility, there has never been more data being generated about an enterprise than now,” he points out. “The introduction of Big Data Analytics is a game changer for EA. Truthful data provide EA with the pulse of the enterprise and its environment.”

The writing is on the wall. For all the Miltons in the role of Enterprise Architect, applying frameworks and creating artifacts and generating documentation, the business value they provide is questionable at best. Those EAs who truly embrace change – who work directly with business stakeholders to move their organizations to an increasingly agile state of

[continuous business transformation](#) – will more likely find themselves adding real value to their enterprises. Ironically, people have been able to achieve this level of contribution, but often don't identify themselves as EAs. "People have been successful in architecting enterprises," explains Griesi, "but many of them are not known by the EA title or married to a particular framework."

Treating the enterprise as a complex system like a living organism, focusing more on solving business problems than on extensive documentation, and taking a data-driven approach to business transformation all herald an upheaval in the practice of EA itself. Today's forward-looking executives seek digital transformations of their organizations – technology-enabled business transformation that requires a more agile approach to architecture than traditional EA has offered in the past. The field of Enterprise Architecture must itself transform into a new, Agile Architecture in order to drive digital transformation effectively in today's increasingly wired world.

Let's put down the red stapler, stick that framework in a filing cabinet, and focus on practical steps to achieving the long-term transformation goals of your organization. It's finally time for Milton to go home.

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