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A Day in the Life of an Enterprise Architect

Enterprise architecture examines business needs and the tech available to help the company accomplish its goals.



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Six years ago, Paul Luse was offered an enterprise architect position at Aon, the global professional services firm. “I had to look up the definition of what enterprise architecture actually was, and I even bought a book to learn more,” said Luse, now global CIO, affinity and health solutions at Aon.

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He accepted the post and, over the next 18 months, gained “invaluable” experience as he took in the big-picture view of Aon’s technology ecosystem and how the business served clients across many different disciplines and geographies. “It helped me collaborate and get connected to a wider group of people, and to understand our business and how it operates in a much more comprehensive way,” Luse said.

What Is an Enterprise Architect?

At the most basic definition, enterprise architects are responsible for planning, developing, implementing, and maintaining a business’ tech assets. In practice, enterprise architecture is the big-picture process that knits together a business’ needs and mission with technology available to help accomplish those goals.

That, in a nutshell, describes the work of an enterprise architect: It’s the wide-angle lens on a business that examines business needs and the tech available to help the firm efficiently accomplish its goals. It requires technical skills, the ability to keep up with the ever-changing tech landscape, and, perhaps above all, the desire to keep learning. “I’m always asking questions, I’m always trying to figure out ‘why,’” said Jenn Alons, Groupon principal engineer, whose role encompasses enterprise architecture even if her title does not.

Here, Luse, Alons, and Stephen Johnston, software architect in the Austin, Texas, office of financial-services firm Morningstar, share thoughts about their work days, their career paths, how they keep up with industry trends, and their advice for would-be enterprise architects.

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What Do You Do All Day?

Jenn Alons: The role of an architect is to take disparate information streams and figure out how to put them together to get the result that we want. I keep track of what new initiatives are coming and what kinds of problems teams are running into, mesh that with the current state of the systems, and figure out how we move forward. It's a lot of meetings. My main project right now is moving our infrastructure from on premises into Amazon Web Services. I'm understanding these different inputs: What does the business want to do? What do they want to do long term? What kinds of crazy things might be coming up? What's out there, technology wise? What's the current state for our architecture or for specific technology? How do we make a decision about how to move forward?

Stephen Johnston: It's a good mix of stuff. I'm in a lot of meetings, which cover everything from high-level topics, like strategic planning or roadmap planning, or low-level implementation details. Sometimes we're teaching or showcasing a product that we've built, or sometimes we're learning about new products that another team has built, or maybe we're looking at product evaluations for tools that we can buy. Outside of meetings, there's a lot of cross-team communication with the different squads at Morningstar. I'm investigating new technology and doing proof of concepts. I will come up with architecture diagrams and help document some of the features that we've built out. Sometimes people come to me when they're stuck on a problem, and I'll try to help unblock them.

Describe a Project That Worked Out Well

Paul Luse: We began our Aon United journey a decade ago, centered around the belief that we could deliver more value to clients if we work together across our businesses and geographies. In line with our Aon United principles, we formed an

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on a role of enterprise architect for global health solutions, one of our major solution lines. Growing through acquisitions for many years resulted in a fragmented ecosystem of applications and operating models, and one of the things our group was charged with was to understand the current state and help to chart a



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successfully inventory a view of current assets and efforts, and connect the dots to propose a new business platform strategy that was inclusive of operations, technology, and data and analytics. It was the start of a multi-year journey that comprised my time as an enterprise architect and translated into my role as CIO today.

Alons: I was working with a business unit that was doing a big migration from one system to another. They had a complicated plan that was going to interrupt their workflow for about three weeks. It would have caused them a lot of extra work. Because I understood how their business line worked and what they were trying to do, I was able to script a migration for them over the course of a weekend. They didn't experience any down time at all.

Johnston: Back in 2014, I was in a group focused on commodity data. There was an hour or two gap from the time that a data vendor posted the data to the time that our customers had the data. The goal was to get that data delivered in under five minutes. It took a year to build the whole system, and, ultimately, something like 99.9 percent of the feeds that we processed were delivered in under five minutes.

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Describe Your Career Path

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Alons: I went to the University of Northern Iowa, and worked for the information technology systems department. I moved to Chicago to work for Trading Technologies, doing development on our internal automated testing platform. I've been at Groupon for about nine years. I started off doing software development. I've bounced around in different departments, and really got to try a lot of different parts of the company and parts of engineering.

Johnston: In 1998, I graduated from college. I was a software engineer at the time. I worked my way up at Logical Information Machines (which Morningstar acquired in 2009) to become a lead software engineer. As Morningstar took over LIM, they asked me to help rebuild the database. It used to scale vertically, and they wanted to be able to scale in the cloud horizontally. I was given a lot of freedom to design how that system would work. That was the start of my role as an architect.

What Skills Do You Need?

Alons: I'm good at getting down to how things work and understanding the underlying reasons why we're doing things. When a problem comes up, I'm very good at assessing the situation, figuring out what we need to do, coming up with a plan, and then moving forward. Soft skills wise, probably communication — really being able to read the room, understand what the situation needs, and then get us moving forward.

Johnston: It's the combination of my technical skills — I come from a very technical background — combined with enough communication skill to be able to articulate complex ideas and abstract or complex ideas to other teams.

Luse: The key here is to put pen to paper on your research and recommendations

being much more important than talk. Effectively evangelizing the ideas and recommendations you are passionate about is a highly valued soft skill. And relationship skills are important when establishing your network and managing that network to influence outcomes. Being able to build and maintain relationships is absolutely key to influencing change at the enterprise level.

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How Do You Get Better at Your Jobs?

Luse: Financial acumen is a differentiator for a role like this. If you want your recommendations to become reality, you must understand the broader financial implications and be able to articulate them in your pitch.

Johnston: Continually learning is one of the key things about this job. Technology moves fast, and things are always changing. I frequently take it upon myself to learn a new programming language. I follow a lot of other technologists online, and kept seeing [Rust](#) popping up as a new emerging technology. I wanted to see what it was about, and learned it for learning's sake.

Alons: One of my favorite podcasts is The Knowledge Project. I'm learning about how my brain works and how people make better decisions about problems. I spend a lot of time thinking about how systems work, not just systems in a computer architecture way, but systems in general, and how I can go about making better decisions.

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What's Your Career Goal?

Alons: CTO somewhere. I really like making decisions and being able to marry technology with what the business needs, what the market wants, what's going on, and understanding and digging into larger problems. I'll continue down the same path, digging in and understanding more and more about the business and my role in it. One of the best career moves anyone can make is to identify skills that they want, find whoever has those skills, and learn from them.

Johnston: I'm pretty close to that point. I'm happy where I'm at. I'm focused purely on technology. The next step up for me would be technical fellow. It would be very similar to what I do today — basically being a leader in technology, vision, and direction for where the company should go.

What Shifts Do You See in the Industry?

Alons: Everyone's moving to the [cloud](#), so containerized workloads and moving to the cloud. It's going to free up companies to scale their workloads to meet their demands, versus what companies have had traditionally, which is a static on-premises footprint, which doesn't allow them to adjust what they're running to meet their workloads, either increased or decreased.

Luse: COVID-19 has fundamentally changed how we work — how we share information and interact. It will drive us to accelerate digital transformation and

portfolios. Enterprise architecture as a practice becomes more important in terms of how we knit all of the moving parts and pieces across the enterprise together to accelerate digital transformation. Necessity for change will be more real and require a faster pace than we have seen in the past 10 years.

Johnston: X86 has been the dominant computing platform over the last 20 years. We're starting to see shifts toward ARM based processors, because all our phones have them. Tools like Spark or Redshift or Snowflake will only continue to improve, and new tools will emerge that we haven't even thought of yet.

What Career Advice Can You Offer?

Alons: Always try to understand "why." A lot of people stay super-focused only on their thing and don't realize that they're part of a larger whole. That larger whole is the architecture piece. It's understanding how all the big pieces move together and how to move them around, and then figuring out how to make that all work better. You can't effectively change things until you can understand how they work.

Johnston: Never stop learning. Staying abreast of technology trends is really important. Try to have a broad general knowledge of technology. Lots of times, when you're in meetings or conversations, or you're brainstorming something, having broader knowledge of what kinds of databases, what kinds of programming languages, what tools are available, helps you choose the right tool for the problem at hand.

Luse: Be teachable and realize that at no point in your career do you have it all figured out. Coming to terms with that early in your career will serve you well. And don't forget that a lot of what we do is about people interacting with people and

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