IN SEARCH OF AN INFORMATION ARCHITECT

TWENTY QUESTIONS

Introduction

"How come we have one well, and it exists in 14 well data bases that don't communicate?"
– VP Exploration & Production

"Our warehouse full of dirty data is worse than before. Not only are we are paying for the data warehouse, we are also paying for additional staff to clean it up" – CFO

"Even with our new ERP we still produce conflicting information from our other systems."
CEO

"We are not short of data, we are short of good information." - CIO

"I spend 80% of my time finding data, and only 20% finding oil".- Geologist

Addressing these types of complaints, and the poor practices that cause unmanaged redundancy in information systems is the work of information architecture. The accomplished information architecture specialist thinks beyond individual systems and individual databases. Optimizing an organization's collection of systems, databases, and computers so that they fit together in a manner that drives down both systems development and support costs is the goal of information architecture.

"Application stovepipes" and "islands of data" are the results of non-directed evolution of information systems. Furthermore, organizational politics and independent projects do not promote integration of individual technology solutions and sharing of common data. An information architecture provides an overall "blueprint" that guides individual projects to produce systems that fit together in a way that maximizes the value of individual information technology investments.

The concepts of information architecture have been available for decades. Most organizations of any significant size continue to grapple with implementing enterprise information architecture in hopes of achieving the undeniable prize that would follow if the concepts could be implemented. More often than not, corporate information architecture efforts are a source of conflict, and bottom line results are fleeting and difficult to assess.

Success with information architecture begins with selecting the right person to champion and lead the efforts. The following questions are intended to help organizations identify candidates who will be able to succeed in this complex and rewarding arena.

The Need

The focus and attention of good project leaders is ***doing things right***. Skills in planning, organizing, communications and control are dominant in a successful project leader. In any
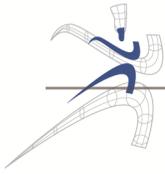
project, including information technology projects, doing things right is only half the challenge. If the all parts of a house don't work together properly on completion, or if all houses in the subdivision don't have sufficient access to utilities, or if the roadway and public transit infrastructure are insufficient or unsafe, it matters little that the individual homes were completed on time, and on budget.

Therefore a second essential component for success is ***doing the right things.*** In building and road construction projects, this accountability falls to architects and engineers who undertake the challenge at several levels, producing architectural and engineering design artefacts targeted to communicate to a full variety of stakeholders from politicians (e.g., 3-d models) to construction trades (e.g., blueprints). In information architecture work, this is the domain of the information architecture professional.

Interviewing Questions
The following questions are open-ended experiential interviewing probes that require the candidate to expound upon their approaches, strategies, tools and techniques that have been successfully applied throughout their career. These are "seed" questions that can be used to initiate a discussion on each subject that should then be pursued to the level of a complete description of real results obtained by the candidate. Expect to dedicate a couple of hours to qualified candidates and you may even consider bringing in an external expert to assist you with the assessment of this complex role.

1. *Approach to enterprise wide information architecture*

   Can you discuss from your experience, successful and non-successful approaches to implementing information architecture within an organization? In answering, describe the characteristics of organizations that impact the viability of different approaches, and why this makes any give approach more or less successful.

2. *Selling the concepts*

   Communicating the relevance and business significance of information architecture to adverse set of stakeholders is a critical component of success in this role. Describe the approaches and techniques you use to get the message of need for information architecture across to individual target audiences. Contrast the approaches for each target group.

3. *Pragmatism and practicality*

   Given that achievement of a well-architected information environment will take some time to achieve, what approach and associated techniques do you use to ensure an effective trade off between short term gain and long term pain is made by information technology stakeholders?
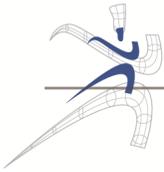
4. Business information integration

One of the promises of information architecture is to deliver meaningful information for business use from a variety of individual solutions (legacy applications, purchased packages, information warehouses, etc.). What is your strategy and approach to encompassing this diverse environment under the information architecture umbrella?

5. Information architecture artefacts

Information architecture concepts are communicated by means of models that depict business needs and associated information management solutions. Describe the set of models that you envisage using, elaborating on how the models interact to form a cohesive body of knowledge, and how different models appeal to candidate groups of stakeholders.

6. Information architecture quality

Many people are not be able to differentiate between effective information architecture models that lead to well defined and effective business information management solutions and "cartoons" that although they use the same drawing techniques don't lead to solutions that work. What techniques do you employ to ensure the quality of models, respecting true business needs and effective business information management solutions?
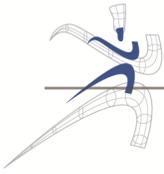
7. Information architecture principles

Do you have a set of principles that you follow in developing information architecture artefacts? List the three most important ones and discuss why each one is important.

8. Stability and extensibility

The information technology community is often criticized for delivering solutions that do not withstand the test of time. Information architectures are often established to address this business issue. What techniques do you use to enhance stability and extensibility of information architecture?

9. Innovation

Can you give three examples from your direct experience where information architecture has led to innovative information management solutions? What were the business outcomes of the resulting solutions?

10. Hardware and software strategy

Given that the fruits of information architecture efforts are only appreciated when business staff achieve effective access to high quality information that is needed in the conduct of their assigned business activities, describe the essential technology environment for levering success using information architecture?

11. Accountability without authority

Success of information architecture is largely dependent on the efforts of those directly involved in the delivery of information technology solutions. The information architecture professional typically offers advice and guidance to projects but lacks the direct authority to make decisions. How do you get the results you need without direct authority?

12. WIIFM

The personal needs of stakeholders are very important in any endeavour requiring collaboration for success. How do you determine what the individual needs of your stakeholder group are? Can you provide any examples of personal success or failure based upon correctly determining "what's in it for me" needs?

13. Motivation

In a large organization, an information architecture team is often required to handle the workload. How do you motivate subordinates to achieve goals and objectives?

14. Conflict

The legitimate pursuit of individual goals with different time perspectives and measures of success can lead to personal conflict. Explain your approach to avoiding and resolving conflict between yourself and others? Include in the discussion conflict with seniors (including your boss), juniors who report to you, and peers.

15. Negativity

Not all information technology professionals are believers in the value of information architecture. How do you accommodate these negative individuals and ensure that their contributions in information technology solution delivery are furthering the goals and objectives of information architecture?

16. Rejection

Not all of your recommendations will be accepted and approved. In some cases, the decision won't be "pay me a little now, or pay me a lot later". How do you handle the personal rejection that could become a part of these situations?

17. Implementation strategy

Information architecture delivers bottom line value only when it directly influences the delivery of information technology solutions. What would be your implementation strategy for realizing the bottom line benefits of information architecture?

18. Success

What are your measures for success of the information architecture function within the organization? What milestones and associated timelines do you use to measure progress?

19. Personal gratification

For you, what makes the role of information architecture professional personally satisfying? What evidence do you seek to fulfill this personal need?
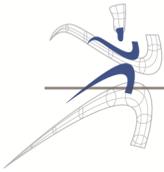
20. Vision

Describe the information management environment for our organization five years from now with the assumption that you have achieved your goals for information architecture. What does the information technology environment look like? What is the attitude of the business respecting the environment? What are you personally known for in the organization?

Responses

For most of the questions, beyond simply confirming technical competence and real experience, the interviewer should analyze the responses to assess how the candidate will relate to a wide range of target audiences, from senior executive to technical staff. The information architecture professional must have the ability to have a meaningful conversation with both business and technical individuals and audiences. Significant value to the business will be delivered through the individual's ability to translate concepts and designs between business and technical staff.

Conclusion

Recruiting an information architecture professional to lead the organization in "*doing the right things*" with Information and Communications Technology is a critical step to optimizing expenditures for both the short and long term. Fully qualified candidates are in short supply. A candid discussion using the questions above as a catalyst will help you separate the

qualified practitioner from the many pretenders. The wrong decision could get you a "backroom analytic" who merely analyses and pontificates in a language few understand. Alternatively, you could hire a visionary guru who might take you down the proverbial (and unbelievably expensive) garden path. The right person will deliver an effective framework that can be immediately used to provide ongoing practical value.

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