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The architecture funding conundrum
Top tips to help you overcome your budget blockers

Whilst working with our Chief Architect clients, we're often asked to help them on some of the more commercial aspects of their role: business case development, effective stakeholder engagement, communications and pitching for all-important budget to fund their ambitions and remit. Suffice to say, we've given our share of pep talks and Skype meetings to help Chief Architects land their message.

We know Chief Architects are in a difficult position. Aside from the expectation that they hold magician-level qualifications in devising the organisation's technology future and protecting against financial waste, they're usually lacking direct access to any considerable budget to carry out these objectives to the extent needed.

They often find themselves wooing project sponsors to fund developments or external expertise that will benefit the whole organisation or appealing to the IT executive committee to develop specialist areas – we're looking at you, business and data architecture! – but developing a comms strategy for each initiative is a huge ask on their already maxed out team.

The Chief Architect often has to make headway against these very powerful tides:

▶ A lack of understanding of the value of architecture amongst key players generally and specifically how it can deliver better outcomes for the organisation within specific programmes.

▶ Other people in the organisation (i.e. programme managers) are measured on diametrically opposed objectives – they need 'it' delivered on time and on budget – and they see architecture's push for quality and enterprise-grade development as a challenge to be obliterated.

▶ The project sponsor has been burnt by irrelevant architecture work in the past and is reluctant to invest in a series of diagrams that they believe will be basically "shelfware".

▶ The Chief Architect is a brilliant architect, loved by their team and respected as a problem solver but isn't necessarily as skilled or trained in some of the more commercial aspects needed to win over sceptics and fight for budget. It's not a criticism as the expectation of a Chief Architect to be all things to all folk is pretty daunting, but they often don't get the support they need from the management chain in this area.

▶ Their best-of-intentions comms packs have not led to engagement at the right level, so they lack the executive sponsorship they need to push their requirements onto individual projects.

In attempting to overcome some of these hurdles, we've observed Chiefs act with great enthusiasm as they line up for the money shot but perhaaps trip themselves up a little in the execution. Our standard tips for struggling Chiefs always follow the same format. We listen to their plans and see the same problems every time…

Lack of unifying Narrative

We all love a good story. That is, a narrative – either true or fictitious – designed to interest, amuse, or instruct the listener or reader.

Every initiative needs a unifying narrative. This stands true whether you're telling a bed time story to your children or trying to get investment for architecture. If you don't put it together in a way that people will naturally engage with, you'll find it harder to get buy in for what you're doing, not only at the start of an initiative but all the way through until the end.

Lack of sponsor WIFM (What's in it for me)

We won't say this often, but we can empathise with business leaders when it comes to architectural interventions. Consider someone telling you that, in order to get the functionality your business unit needs, you need to align to architectural decisions that can run into the millions of pounds on top of your resourcing costs. As a Chief Architect it might be obvious to you what needs to be done and why you need budget, but it may come as a shock to everyone else!

When it comes to selling an idea or a change initiative, we see Chief Architects make a common mistake: they focus all their efforts on communicating the business benefit—which is of course what it should be about, and we whole-heartedly believe it should. But the trouble is, to win the support of others, you must also appeal to raw human emotion by considering the What's In it For Me for the potential sponsor. As much as folk like to think they only invest on fact, many people really buy on feeling and personal gain alone.

Otherwise, there would be no market for smart watches or designer handbags—people buy them because they "feel right." Logic dictates you buy the practical alternative, but where is the fun in that?

Just because the business stands to benefit does not mean the individual you're talking to will. To get their support you need to demonstrate what they stand to gain.

Too Many Decision-Makers

If you're trying to secure funding from different business pots with different vested interests, it's going to be tricky.

Ideally you would seek to find one main sponsor, but if that isn't possible it's important to identify how each of these stakeholders will win and, if possible, align their personal benefits to those of the business. A large part of your role will be to constantly show them what they're getting for their investment, as politics can come and bite you very quickly. When they ask, 'Why should I keep funding a part of so and so's programme', you need to have compelling corporate and personal WIFM answers for them. This task is a lot easier if you develop a comms strategy for each programme/initiative so you can dig up the answers from your records in a jiffy.

Poor Quality of "Presentation" Documentation

Once you've crafted a compelling narrative and decided how to 'spin' it for the potential sponsor(s) being targeted, the whole thing needs packaging. Your comms need to make an impact, so they need to be succinct.

We often see presentations that have gone to CxO level that are 30+ slides. Really, would your CxO ever read all of that? In our experience, they typically want a 1-2-page document that clearly outlines the high-level findings, conclusions, recommendations and a call to action. If they want to go deeper, they will ask for it, but work on the assumption that if they don't specifically ask, they don't care or they already 'get it'.

Within your comms, make sure you set the cost expectations at the right level. If you know you don't have the team in-house to do the work and will need to use an organisation like Konvergent, price accordingly, as going back and getting more budget because you hadn't factored in certain costs is horrendously hard work.

Finally, make sure your CxO or sponsor presentation is delivered in a package that people want to buy. Apple identified that part of the buying experience is a beautifully put together package, so you feel energised as soon as the box is in your hands. Whatever you do, make your comms look good. If you don't have the skills yourself, there's probably a team in IT that regularly sends out comms – try security operations, service management or front-end developers if you have them. Try to get some tips on design and layout to ensure a great look and feel.

OK, we know this sounds like a lot of work, but if you find yourself continually requesting money for the same things and never getting any traction, it's a warning sign that you need to implement some new tactics. You'll still need to develop rapport and credibility, but our tips should help you target the right messages to seal the deal.

Need an aide memoire? Try three S's: develop a Story, devise the Sponsor WIFM and implement a great presentation Style