

OVERVIEW OF OVERSIGHT

Graham Oakes weighs up the best way to manage development projects.



Graham Oakes: structures don't need to be static

Mention project 'governance' and most people think 'bureaucracy'...some central body to define architectural standards. A long-winded approval process. Complex compliance checks at every stage. No wonder they set up skunk works to bypass the controls.

But it doesn't have to be that way. When designing governance structures, we're often balancing the benefits of central versus devolved oversight.

Central oversight makes it easier to ensure standards are applied in a consistent way that aligns with overall organisational goals. It can also allow you to optimise utilisation of specialist skills and resources.

Devolved oversight, on the other hand, means that decisions get made closer to the coal face, where local circumstances are better understood. Decisions can be faster and make better use of local information.

These are all good goals. The problem is finding the point that allows people to see both perspectives. I often find it helps to divide this problem into two separate questions – who defines standards and who implements them? This leads on to four options:

- **Central definition, central implementation.** A central team both defines standards and is responsible for implementing them. Architects live at the centre, but actively work as part of project teams in order to realise compliant architectures.
- **Central definition, devolved implementation.** A central team (probably smaller than above) defines standards. Most architects live elsewhere in the organisation, but may draw on the central team for consultancy, review, etc.
- **Devolved definition, central implementation.** Each project or organisational unit defines its own standards. A central implementation team is responsible for building systems to those standards. This is common in outsourcing, where the customer retains control of the architecture but lets the vendor handle the details.
- **Devolved definition, devolved implementation.** Every team does its own thing. Some people call this anarchy, but there are situations where it's appropriate. A start-up that's working with immature technology might want to explore multiple independent paths while keeping its options open, for example.

There are no fixed answers: each of these structures can work in different circumstances. And the structures are points in a continuum. Perhaps some sort of 'architecture council' could periodically bring together architects from across the organisation to define standards? This combines central deliberation and decision making with local knowledge (possibly at the expense of speed of decision making).

Finally, structures don't need to be static. You could swing from centralised to devolved and back again. Architects bring knowledge from the field and share it with each other when you centralise. They take understanding of organisational objectives back to the projects when you decentralise. Thus you move knowledge through the organisation.

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