

PUTTING THE ARCHITECT CENTRE STAGE

Graham Oakes calls for more focus on a vital role in integration projects.



Graham Oakes: connotations of evil slideware

It's people who integrate systems. They identify the functionality that's needed. They partition it into components. They define interfaces. They write the code that joins it all up. Tools and processes help, but it's the people who do the real work.

So why is the role at the centre of all this activity – the architect – so poorly defined?

In some development teams, 'architect' is even a dirty word. It carries connotations of evil slideware, divorced from the realities of implementation. In other places, people turn regularly to their architects for advice and support. The role is of a visible and highly valued contributor to the team's success. So why is there such a huge divergence?

My guess is that there's no such thing as an architect. Or, more precisely, there are many different types of architect. Simply having an architect doesn't necessarily help – you have to have the right type. It's this classification of architects that is so poorly developed.

In my experience, an architect is constantly pulled between three poles – the product, the team and the client:

- The product pole pulls you towards the 'conceptual integrity' of the system you're building. This is about elegance of design, about balancing technical trade-offs and constraints. To work in this domain, you need deep understanding of the technologies you're working with. Many specialist architect roles – data architect, middleware architect, network architect, etc – map closely to this pole.
- The team pole pulls you towards helping the team implement the system. You mentor people. You help them build skills. To do this well, you need to back off from the technology – for example, letting people write code that you know you could write better yourself.
- The client pole pulls you towards translating between those first two domains and the client. This is about helping the client understand what's possible. A lot of slideware originates here, because people need communication tools in this domain, not design tools. This is where many solution and enterprise architects play, as their role is inherently about melding business with technology.

Every architect does a little of each of these things, but few can excel at all of them. And every project needs them in different degrees.

A very experienced team may need little mentoring, so the architect gravitates towards managing the client. Or a tech-savvy project manager may have that pole covered, so the architect goes deeper into the technology. Architects fail when they misunderstand these three forces and which applies most pressingly in the current situation.

Architectures are the same: they need to be business-aligned, technically sound and implementable with the available team and resources. Architects manage this balancing act.

● SOA, Web Services & Enterprise Integration Evaluation Centre Expert Dr Graham Oakes is the principal of content management, product development and customer service strategies consultancy Graham Oakes Ltd. Email: graham@grahamoakes.co.uk. Website: www.grahamoakes.co.uk.

● If you'd like to comment on this article, please [click here](#) and select 'Feedback'.