

TEAM TALK

Getting engineers and business people to team up is easier said than done. Graham Oakes speaks from bitter experience.



Graham Oakes: the product managers and engineers stayed segregated

In my business we're having a long conversation about the shape of our service portfolio. It's not going well.

The engineers have a clear picture of the services they offer...The billing engine handles payments and related account services. The communications engine provides a range of routing and messaging services. Then there are things like analytics, administration, information management and so on. It's a nicely comprehensive suite of systems.

The product managers also have a clear picture of their offerings. They sell and support product X for this segment of customers, product Y for that segment, product Z for yet another segment. We have the market pretty well covered.

And in between these two views, we have spaghetti.

We know which products connect to which of the underlying services. We know who to talk to about extending any one of these connections. But trying to make any coherent change involves untangling multiple threads of interconnectivity; bringing together a host of specialists who all have other project commitments; and scheduling co-ordinated releases across several back-end systems.

Service oriented architecture (SOA) was supposed to solve all this. So what did we do wrong? Well, here's a partial list:

- We didn't invest in building a clear overview of the architecture. We had plenty of diagrams and models, all of them useful. We had lots of interface documentation. But we never built the clear diagram that integrated it all into a simple view of the big picture. That takes time. More time than we thought we had.
- We didn't invest in building intervening layers to mediate between technical components and business services. No single initiative could ever create the business case for them.
- We didn't invest in refactoring. Once each service had gone live, we realised that we'd learnt something. Given what we subsequently knew, we wouldn't have implemented it quite like this. But we never went back and applied that.

All these things are solvable. They are the technical flaws that we can easily see with hindsight and fix with a little effort. But I don't think they are the core of our problem.

The real problem is that the product managers and the engineers have fundamentally different views of what they're doing. Although we got them together in what we called 'product teams', they never really learned to speak a common language.

They stayed segregated within their specialist expertise. They focused on goals that aligned well to their individual skills. So we built a set of isolated components, not a coherent architecture.

We're profitable. We're growing. We'll solve this. But next time around, we're going to build product teams that really are teams.

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