

THE ABILITY TO EXECUTE

Graham Oakes on why software architects need to stop designing and start building.



Graham Oakes: inch-pebbles rather than mile-stones

I once spent several months helping an organisation develop an architectural vision. We gathered views from a wide variety of stakeholders. We mapped them onto current technologies. We made trade-offs. A vision began to emerge.

Then we uncovered a document setting out the organisation's vision from 10 years earlier. Apart from changes to buzzwords (EAI had become ESB, for example), the two visions were essentially identical.

At this point a light clicked on for me. This organisation didn't need a new vision – it already had a perfectly serviceable one. This company needed to examine why it still hadn't realised the vision from 10 years before.

This is one of the classic traps of strategy development. In some organisations, the strategy group endlessly polish and refine the strategy yet deliver very little real impact to the business. It's little wonder that architects have a poor reputation in such places.

Sometimes, of course, it's necessary to invest a lot of time to define a strategy. Organisations with a very collegiate culture, for example, may need to spend time building consensus before they can act. Communicating and refining strategy is part of this consensus-building process. Once everyone agrees, they can act decisively.

But in many organisations, I think much of the time spent on strategy stems from other causes. In particular, some organisations seem to be afraid of moving into implementation. While they strategise, they don't need to deal with the hard work and risks (technical and political) that come with systems development.

If you find yourself in such an organisation, always writing strategy and never acting, then you need to change the strategy. Your first objective, written explicitly into the strategy, should become something like: 'Build up the ability to execute.'

The best way to do this is often by working in very small iterations and demonstrating regular progress – inch-pebbles rather than mile-stones.

But this is not random iteration. It's being done with a very distinct strategic purpose. For some organisations, this ability to execute may be all they need – on its own, it gives them sufficient advantage over their competition to meet their goals.

Going back to my example, in the end we threw away our new architectural vision and wrote a strategy that was about building software development capability.

Some managers took a lot of time to get their heads around this strategy – they'd expected more pretty pictures about the architecture. But eventually we made the case that the problem here was execution, not strategy.

Or as one of my favourite sayings goes: 'The ability to execute is a strategic capability.' Strategy without execution is just an intellectual exercise.

● 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. His book **Project Reviews, Assurance and Governance** was published by Gower Publishing in October 2008. Email: graham@grahamoakes.co.uk. Website: www.grahamoakes.co.uk.