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— WHITEPAPER

ENTERPRISE ARCHITECTURE

Enterprise Architecture for Decision-Makers

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BY **Richard Jones Onyeneho**

February 2026 · 13 MIN READ · ELDR INTELLIGENCE

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An enterprise architect is sitting in a meeting with the company's chief operating officer. The architect has spent six months producing a detailed application portfolio rationalisation analysis — three hundred applications mapped, categorised, scored across functional fit and technical health. The analysis is rigorous. The recommendations are sound. The COO listens, asks two questions, and concludes the meeting with a polite acknowledgement that the work will be considered as the operational priorities for the year are set. The recommendations will not be implemented. The analysis will not change a single decision. The architect leaves the meeting frustrated. The COO leaves it relieved.

This scene, repeated across enterprises with discouraging regularity, captures the central problem of contemporary enterprise architecture practice. The work is being done. The artefacts are being produced. The tooling investments — LeanIX, Ardoq, Sparx, the various TOGAF-aligned platforms — are being made. And yet, in the great majority of organisations we work with, enterprise architecture is not driving the decisions it is theoretically meant to drive. It is producing documentation that is referenced when convenient, ignored when inconvenient, and rebuilt every few years when the gap between what it describes and what the organisation actually does becomes too embarrassing to maintain.

This whitepaper is not a defence of enterprise architecture as a discipline. The discipline is fine. Its tools are mature. Its frameworks are well-developed. Its practitioners are professionally qualified. The whitepaper is an argument that the discipline, as it is typically practised inside large enterprises, has been organised around the wrong outcome. Reorganising it around the right outcome — decision support — is the structural shift that turns enterprise architecture from a documentation function into a strategic capability.

The two enterprise architectures

What most enterprises operate, when they operate enterprise architecture at all, is what we call governance-oriented architecture. The function exists to ensure that technology decisions comply with established standards, fit within established patterns, and are documented in established ways. Its success metrics are documentation completeness, standard adherence, and review cycle throughput. Its products are the artefacts that satisfy these metrics: portfolio inventories, reference architectures, design review records, technical standards.

Governance-oriented architecture is not a bad thing. It produces useful outputs. It catches obvious errors before they become expensive. It enforces a degree of consistency across an environment that would otherwise drift toward chaos. The problem is that governance-oriented architecture is structurally bad at the activity that gives enterprise architecture its strategic value: informing decisions that have not yet been made.

The alternative, which we call decision-support architecture, exists to inform consequential technology decisions before they are made and to anchor those decisions in a coherent view of the enterprise's technology environment. Its success metrics are decision quality, decision velocity, and decision traceability. Its products are the analyses, options, and recommendations that allow decision-makers to choose deliberately rather than by default.

The structural difference between these two architectures is not, primarily, in the artefacts they produce. It is in their orientation toward time. Governance-oriented architecture documents the past — what is, what has been decided, what has been built. Decision-support architecture analyses the future — what could be, what should be decided, what should be built. The former is responsive to compliance requirements. The latter is responsive to strategic ones.

Why governance-oriented architecture *dominates*

If decision-support architecture is more strategically valuable, why is governance-oriented architecture overwhelmingly the dominant practice? The answer is that governance-oriented architecture is far easier to fund, far easier to staff, and far easier to demonstrate the output of than decision-support architecture.

It is easier to fund because it is justified by visible compliance and risk concerns. It is easier to staff because it requires technical skills (modelling, documenting, reviewing) that are well-supplied in the labour market. It is easier to demonstrate output for because the artefacts — diagrams, inventories, review records — are tangible and countable. None of these advantages is available to decision-support architecture, which requires senior judgment, tolerance for ambiguity, and the willingness to be evaluated on outcomes rather than outputs.

There is also a more cynical reading of why governance-oriented architecture dominates. It is, structurally, a function that reports on decisions other people make rather than making decisions itself. This positions enterprise architecture as a staff function, observably useful but not directly accountable. Many architects and many architecture leaders prefer this positioning, because the alternative — being accountable for the quality of consequential decisions — is professionally riskier. Decision-support architecture is harder, more political, more exposed. It is also, in our view, the only form of enterprise architecture that justifies the investment most enterprises make in the function.

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The decisions enterprise architecture *should* be informing

If decision-support architecture exists to inform decisions, it is worth being specific about which decisions are within its scope. Not all decisions benefit from architectural analysis. Some are operational and should not be slowed by architecture review. Some are too small to justify the analytical cost. The decisions that benefit from genuine architectural analysis are typically:

01. **Platform decisions.** Selecting an enterprise platform — an ERP, a cloud provider, a data platform, an identity infrastructure — that will shape technology decisions for a decade. These decisions are made infrequently but their consequences are enormous.
02. **Build-buy-partner decisions.** Determining whether a capability should be developed in-house, procured from a vendor, or accessed through a partnership. These decisions involve trade-offs across cost, control, risk, and strategic fit that benefit from rigorous analysis.
03. **Portfolio rationalisation decisions.** Deciding which applications to retain, retire, replace, or refactor. These decisions are made under significant political pressure and benefit from defensible analytical foundations.
04. **Integration architecture decisions.** Choosing how systems should connect — through events, APIs, data replication, or other patterns. These decisions are technically detailed but strategically consequential because they shape what the enterprise can do quickly versus slowly.

05. **Capability sequencing decisions.** Determining which capabilities to build in which order to deliver business value while managing complexity and dependency risk. These decisions are where strategy and technology meet most directly.

An enterprise architecture function that is structured to inform these decisions, supported by senior leadership in being accountable for the analyses behind them, and resourced with practitioners capable of producing decision-grade work — that function is strategically valuable. A function that is not structured this way, regardless of how much documentation it produces, is not strategically valuable, even when it is operationally competent.

What decision-support architecture *actually* requires

Building enterprise architecture as a decision-support function rather than a governance function requires changes that are organisationally uncomfortable. The changes are visible in three areas: positioning, staffing, and process.

Positioning

Decision-support architecture cannot be positioned as a downstream review function. It must be upstream. It must be involved in the framing of decisions, not merely the review of decisions framed by others. This requires a reporting structure that gives the function genuine access to where decisions are made — typically reporting to the COO, CTO, or CIO with explicit accountability for major technology decisions, rather than reporting through a governance or risk function.

The positioning shift is uncomfortable because it transfers accountability. A governance-oriented architecture function can produce a review that recommends against a decision, and if the decision is made anyway, the architects have done their job. A decision-support architecture function is accountable for the quality of the decision itself, in ways that include the consequences of getting it wrong. Many architects do not want this accountability. Many leaders do not want to give it to them.

Staffing

Decision-support architecture requires senior practitioners with judgment, business literacy, and the ability to engage credibly with executives who have decision authority. The staffing model that is appropriate for governance-oriented work — a larger team of technical practitioners producing volume — is not appropriate for decision-support work. The latter requires fewer, more senior, more business-literate architects who are paid more and are evaluated differently.

This is a difficult staffing transition for established architecture functions. The existing staff often does not have the skills or seniority. Hiring senior architects from outside is expensive and culturally disruptive. Many architecture leaders, faced with this transition, default to staffing the new function with the existing team — and then wonder why the function continues to produce governance outputs.

Process

Decision-support architecture requires processes that are structured around decisions rather than around documentation cycles. This means analysing options, presenting trade-offs, recommending paths, and recording the rationale for the decisions that are made. It means moving fast enough to be relevant to actual decision-making, which is faster than most architecture functions are accustomed to operating. And it means producing analyses that executives can act on, which is a different output than the technical artefacts most architects are trained to produce.

The strategic stakes

The strategic stakes of getting enterprise architecture right are larger than the discipline's cultural status would suggest. Organisations that have decision-support architecture functioning effectively make better technology decisions, more quickly, with clearer accountability than organisations that do not. They avoid platform mistakes that take a decade to unwind. They sequence capabilities in ways that compound rather than conflict. They have a clearer view of their technology environment and a more defensible basis for the choices they make about it.

Organisations that have governance-oriented architecture without decision-support architecture make technology decisions in the absence of architectural analysis. The decisions are made by the people who happen to be in the meetings — vendors, operational leaders, project sponsors, occasionally the CIO. The decisions are documented after the fact, by architects who arrive after the decision has been made and produce the artefacts that justify it. This is, structurally, why so many large enterprises have technology landscapes that no one can defend rationally and that no one is prepared to fundamentally restructure.

The shift from governance to decision support is not, in our experience, a shift that organisations make easily. It requires senior leadership willing to sponsor the transition, architects willing to take on the accountability, and the patience to rebuild a function that is, in many enterprises, deeply entrenched in its current form. But the alternative is to continue running enterprise architecture as a documentation function while pretending it is a strategic capability — and to accept the technology landscape that produces.

The discipline is fine. The tools are mature. The frameworks are well-developed. What is missing, in most enterprises, is the structural choice to build the function for decision support rather than for governance

compliance. That choice is available to any enterprise willing to make it. Most enterprises do not. That is the real story of contemporary enterprise architecture practice.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

01. Enterprise architecture in most organisations is structurally organised around governance and documentation rather than decision support — and consequently fails to drive the decisions it is theoretically meant to drive.
02. The two architectures differ in their orientation toward time. Governance-oriented architecture documents the past. Decision-support architecture analyses the future. The latter is structurally rarer because it is harder to fund, staff, and demonstrate.
03. Decision-support architecture is most valuable for a specific class of decisions: platform selection, build-buy-partner choices, portfolio rationalisation, integration patterns, and capability sequencing — high-consequence decisions where rigorous analysis pays off.
04. Building enterprise architecture as decision support requires uncomfortable shifts in positioning (upstream rather than downstream), staffing (fewer, more senior, more business-literate practitioners), and process (decision-paced rather than documentation-paced).
05. The strategic stakes are large: organisations with effective decision-support architecture make better technology decisions, sequence capabilities more coherently, and avoid platform mistakes that take a decade to unwind. The shift is hard to make but available to any enterprise willing to make it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Jones Onyeneho · *Senior Principal & Enterprise Documentation Architect*

Richard is the Founder and Senior Principal of ELDR Group Inc., an advisory, intelligence, and technology firm operating across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria. He has led documentation, GRC, and enterprise technology mandates for organisations including Apple, IBM, Mastercard, Capital One, SAP, PwC, ServiceNow, and the U.S. Export-Import Bank.

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