HOW TO SUCCEED WITH BUSINESS ARCHITECTURE

An Interview with Alex Randell, Director of HR Technology at Principal Financial Group

From the podcast "Business Architecture Practice Leader Series (6 of 9)"

WHYNDE KUEHN: It is an honor to introduce Alex Randell. Alex is a long-time business architecture leader and member of the Business Architecture Guild and serves on the Guild board of directors. He now leads the technology group at Principal Financial Group. So, Alex, let's start with positioning. What is the value proposition, a business architecture for your organization and what unique outcomes are you focused on delivering?

ALEX RANDELL: Thanks, Whynde, and thanks for having me. I'd say the value proposition is really around bridging strategy and execution, but we often say that, so we need to look at what that really means. And so when I look at that, I think about having transparency to ensure alignment of our organization. I think it means a focus on the value that the company is truly providing to its customer and its true external customer and also understanding the internal building blocks of the business. So how are we putting our business capabilities together in the best way, and in what ways do we need to optimize those business capabilities when we break those down to people, process data and technology? And so I think when I boil it down to a few words, it really means solving complex problems, something that we need to bring in a specialist on our business in order to solve and focus on the value we're providing.

WHYNDE KUEHN: What would you say are the key factors that have made business architecture successful within your organization and maybe you could speak to how you gain by in and with whom?

ALEX RANDELL: Sure, I've said for a long time one of the most important factors is to gain executive buy-in, and this doesn't mean with all of the executives at your company, but what this often takes is an executive sponsor who's willing to serve as a leader of your discipline, a voice in the executive room, and also able to make the connections so that when you have problems to solve, she or he is able to get our business architecture practitioners in front of the right conversations. A lot of times when we look at this, in order to solve these problems, we need to be in strategic conversations. We need to be in conversations that are up front, not while we're trying to actively solve them, but instead what we're identifying, what those issues are,

what the business impacts may be, and charting a course of action around those initiatives so that we're able to best address those for the company and again, our external stakeholders. When you talk about how we gained buy-in, a lot of times it was that executive sponsor as an entry point. But then you have to have sharp practitioners who are able to quickly understand what the problem is we're facing as a business, decompose that and have the vision to be able to identify the pieces of our business architecture, our alignment to technical architecture, or how we shape up initiatives so that we're able to address the problem, find success and deliver value for our organization.

One thing to keep in mind with this is that a successful executive often changes positions and people in general will be changing positions. And so the way that we gain buy-in, we also have to have a focus on maintaining buy-in. And so we don't want to have business architecture in one spot with one sponsor and focus on one area of the company. Instead, we want to think about how do we socialize the success of business architecture, how do we get it so that other executives are seeing the success one executive might have and saying, I really like to have a lot of that success too. And so then they have an interest in your practice and are able to start to build up some demand for your business or your discipline so that you can sustain that success throughout the different changes we may have in executive sponsors or in business architecture personnel. I think that's one thing that I've found as I've transitioned now to a role that's greater than just business architecture. I'm looking at how do I not only be a sponsor for it, but also understand how to use it and help others use it and then also enable others so that they can be successful on that path that I've been on within the past.

WHYNDE KUEHN: I'm curious, what has surprised you the most about the business architecture journey?

ALEX RANDELL: I like to tell the story of my first surprise with that I was probably in the role for about three months and I actually attended the Business Architecture Innovation Summit, the Business Architecture Guild puts on. And as I stepped into that room and started hearing the conversations, one of the first things that surprised me, and a very pleasant surprise, was looking around the room and realizing that there was a community of people who all thought about things in a similar manner as I did. And so being able to find those people and gain insights and learn best practices and have them show me examples of what they've done was my first kind of pleasant surprise.

As I've gone through my journey, I would say that I'm always surprised by just how many ways business architecture can provide value. I've been in multiple conversations with business leaders, back to how we are here to solve problems, and they're sharing some opportunity they're facing. They've been asked to put together a strategy and they struggle with how they should go about describing their business or they need to get to really understanding the assessment of their business and how it's performing. And they're talking about this problem, yet they don't really know how to address it. And that's where the tools of business architecture can be so valuable. And I realize that what they're talking about is a problem that I can solve. And there's always this moment where I get to look at them and smile and say, you realize that's exactly what my job is? And those have been some of the most fun, the most rewarding successes that I've had in discipline.

WHYNDE KUEHN: One final question, Alex, what advice would you like to share with people out there who are starting and growing business architecture practices within their organizations?

ALEX RANDELL: That's a great question. I would say to not focus on the deliverables. Our role is not to *do* business architecture. While those are important and we absolutely have to have those tools, we absolutely have to know how to articulate our business architecture deliverables, what we need to focus on first and foremost is on delivering value. And so know your company's strategies, know the landscape, the market with within which they operate and really focus on solving those complex problems. The most complex problems, the most strategic problems that you can solve. Your greatest impact will be at that level rather than focusing simply on delivering a capability map or an information map for a particular area. So focus on

how you can best serve your company, produce the most value, and enable the rest of the business to function in such a fantastic manner.

WHYNDE KUEHN: Thank you so much, Alex, for sharing your journey and your words of wisdom with us. Congratulations on all you've achieved. And I just want to thank you for your leadership in the business, architecture, discipline and community and wish you all the best.

ALEX RANDELL: Thank you, Whynde, and thank you to all that I have met in this community. It's a great one to be a part of.