



Assessing and Improving Architecture Competence

Technology Is Necessary but Not Sufficient

While the software and systems engineering world is increasingly realizing the importance of architecture, the focus has been on technical aspects: methods and tools for creating, analyzing, and using architecture. What has received less attention—while holding equal importance—is that these activities are carried out by people, working in teams, within organizations.

Even when your organization knows the importance of maintaining good architecture for meeting business and mission goals, engaging technically qualified architects does not guarantee architecture competence. Your architects must be able to work effectively within a project team, and organization management must support them and their teams with a

The architecture competence of an organization is the ability of that organization to *grow, use and sustain* the skills and knowledge necessary to effectively carry out architecture-centric practices at the *individual, team, and organizational levels* so as to produce high-quality architectures aligned with the organization's business.

culture and practices that let them flourish.

Assessing Competence

The SEI has developed a method to systematically assess your architecture competence at the individual, team, and organizational levels. The method begins with an initial scoping phase to define the boundaries of the assessment, and then a detailed questionnaire is completed by your architects and other stakeholders, including technical managers. Their responses then guide the on-site phase, where the SEI assessment team interviews architects, executives, and stakeholders. During this phase, the SEI team also examines past architectures that have been produced by your organization. The final phase of the assessment presents the results to the architects and assessment sponsors.

The assessment instrument is based on the SEI Architecture Competence Framework, which focuses on the areas of software engineering, technical management, and organizational management. Your architects' and stakeholders' responses to the questionnaire and interview questions will reveal whether your architects have adequate technical and non-technical

skills, as well as the overall value of your architects' outputs to the organization. Responses also indicate the influence of the architects within the organization. For example, does your organization value their input on product feasibility, promote



their frequent interaction with stakeholders, and provide them ample opportunity to communicate, coordinate, and learn? Such opportunities are tied to aspects of your organization's structure and culture. Assessment often reveals attitudes or practices that you may not recognize as influencing your architects' performance. The engrained nature of organizational culture can make it difficult to imagine alternatives; the assessment team's perspective can provide new direction.

Improving Competence

Achieving architecture competence will ensure that you realize the benefit of architecture-centric

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practices, including the alignment of your architecture to your business goals and predictable, routine success in architecture. The SEI research in this area has been driven by the question “How can we help an organization help its architects to do their best work?”

Four Views of Architecture Competence



The SEI Architecture Competence Framework is based on four models, or perspectives, of competence that directly inform improvement strategies. Each model helps you understand your organization’s capacity for competence in a different way.

The *duties, skills, and knowledge* perspective defines what an architect must know and do to be competent. The SEI work on this model involved surveying over 200 resources and cataloging 201 duties, 85 skills, and 96 knowledge areas, many of them non-technical. The competence assessment team pinpoints your architects’ strengths and deficits and recommends activities for improvement. The team may suggest how to better value your architects and enable their best performance.

The *human performance technology* model was developed by Thomas Gilbert, who defined worthy performance as that which “produces value at reasonable cost,”¹ without regard to the processes used to achieve the results. The architecture competence assessment team will help you assess the value of your architectural output as well as its cost and provide recommendations for creating a more favorable ratio between the two.

Organizational learning is defined as a change in an organization’s knowledge, routines, or performance that occurs as a function of experience.² Organizations that routinely produce suboptimal results are not transforming experience into knowledge. A competent organization will recognize opportunities for organizational learning and the types of learning processes best suited for different types of experiences. The assessment team will advise on how various types of learning context affect the transformation of experience into knowledge.

Teams developing a product must cooperate, or *coordinate* their activities. Assessment in this area will show you which coordination

activities are necessitated by particular architectural decisions (e.g., dependencies between modules being developed by separate teams) and the effectiveness of your specific coordination and communication mechanisms, with recommendations for improvement.

Applications

Beyond the proactive targeting of areas for competence improvement, the SEI assessment can be used to determine how architecture competence deficits may be contributing to system failures. It can also be useful for evaluating contractors as part of acquisition decision making.

Related Web Site

www.sei.cmu.edu/architecture/research/competence/index.cfm

For More Information

To learn more, please contact
John Klein
Phone: 412-268-4553
jklein@sei.cmu.edu
Software Engineering Institute
Carnegie Mellon University
Pittsburgh, PA 15313-2612

For General Information

For information about the SEI and its products and services, contact
Customer Relations
Phone: 412-268-5800
FAX: 412-268-6257
customer-relations@sei.cmu.edu
www.sei.cmu.edu
customer-relations@sei.cmu.edu
www.sei.cmu.edu

¹ Gilbert, Thomas F. *Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance*. International Society for Performance Improvement, 1996.

² Argote, L. & Todorova, G. *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2007.