The Concept of Enterprise Architecture

A Modern, Evidence-Based Framework for Business and IT Alignment

Prepared by Digital Enterprise Architecture Advisors (DEAA)

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Abstract

Enterprise Architecture (EA) has long been burdened by the misconception that it should deliver a comprehensive, engineered blueprint of the enterprise. This paper dispels that notion by presenting the modern, empirically validated understanding of EA grounded in the research of Svyatoslav Kotusev and reinforced by leading scholars and industry analysts including Ross, Weill, Robertson, Bernard, Zachman, and Gartner. EA is defined as a communication-centric, decision-support discipline that produces a curated set of purposeful artifacts — not exhaustive models — to bridge the gap between business and IT stakeholders, surface implicit organizational knowledge, and improve the quality and coherence of strategic, operational, and technology decisions. The paper outlines EA's core domains, the characteristics of effective artifacts, the communication model that enables alignment, and the operating principles that allow EA functions to influence real outcomes. It concludes that EA's value is measured not by documentation volume but by the decisions it improves, and that successful EA practices are lightweight, collaborative, embedded in existing processes, and shaped as much by organizational culture as by methodology.

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Executive Summary

Enterprise Architecture (EA) is one of the most consistently misapplied disciplines in modern organizations. Two decades of framework proliferation — Zachman, TOGAF, FEAF — created an expectation that EA should produce a single, engineered blueprint of the enterprise, comprehensive enough to be assembled like a building. That expectation has never matched how organizations behave, and it has produced a well-documented pattern of EA programs that generate elaborate documentation while failing to influence a single meaningful decision.

This paper sets out the modern, empirically grounded definition of Enterprise Architecture. Building on the research of Svyatoslav Kotusev — the most rigorous empirical study of EA practice to date — and integrating complementary work from Jeanne Ross, Peter Weill, David Robertson, Scott Bernard, John Zachman, and Gartner's EA research practice, it establishes EA as a communication-centric, decision-support discipline rather than a modeling exercise. EA does not design the enterprise; it produces a selective set of artifacts that make implicit organizational knowledge explicit, bridge the language gap between business and IT stakeholders, and give leadership teams the structured basis on which to make better decisions.

For organizations evaluating, resetting, or scaling an EA function, the practical implications are direct. Success depends less on framework selection and more on **artifact discipline**, **stakeholder engagement**, and **governance that is lightweight** enough to be used. This is the operating philosophy DEAA applies in every engagement: architecture that earns its keep by improving the decisions an organization makes, not by the volume of documentation it produces.

Working definition applied throughout this paper

Enterprise Architecture is a curated collection of purposeful artifacts — models, diagrams, and documents — that describe the business and IT dimensions of an organization from an integrated perspective, in order to bridge the communication gap between business and IT stakeholders, support information systems planning, and improve business–IT alignment.

1. Introduction: The Persistent Ambiguity of Enterprise Architecture

Enterprise Architecture has suffered from conceptual ambiguity since its inception. The earliest frameworks — most notably Zachman's 1987 classification schema and its descendants, TOGAF and FEAF — implied that an organization could be comprehensively decomposed, modeled, and reassembled according to a master plan, in the way an architect designs a building from foundation to roofline. That metaphor was influential, and it is largely wrong.

Organizations are not static constructs. They are dynamic, political, adaptive systems shaped by market pressure, human behavior, competing incentives, and continuous change. A blueprint captures a moment; an enterprise never holds still long enough for one to remain accurate. Programs that pursued architectural completeness — full current-state and future-state models across every domain — routinely consumed years of effort and produced documentation that was obsolete before it reached a steering committee, let alone before it changed a funding decision.

Kotusev's research, drawn from extensive empirical study of EA practice across dozens of organizations, provides the most rigorously grounded modern definition of the discipline. It reframes EA as a **communication-centric practice**: one that supports **alignment between business and IT** not by modeling the enterprise exhaustively, but **by providing shared, structured descriptions that specific stakeholders use to make specific decisions**. This paper builds on that foundation, integrating a broader body of research that reinforces EA's role as a coordination mechanism, a governance instrument, and a strategic enabler — while remaining unambiguous that the value of EA is measured in decisions improved, not diagrams produced.

> *An enterprise is never static enough to be fully blueprinted — which is precisely why EA's value lies in selective, purposeful artifacts rather than exhaustive models.*

2. Defining Enterprise Architecture

Kotusev's empirically derived definition of EA is the most precise available in the literature:

Kotusev (2021)

> *"A collection of special documents (artifacts) describing various aspects of an organization from an integrated business and IT perspective, intended to bridge the communication gap between business and IT stakeholders, facilitate information systems planning, and thereby improve business and IT alignment."*

This definition is consistent with — and reinforced by — the broader canon of EA research:

Perspective	Contribution
Ross, Weill & Robertson	Describe EA as the "organizing logic for business processes and IT infrastructure," emphasizing coherence across the operating model rather than exhaustive completeness of documentation.
Scott Bernard	Frames EA as a management practice — a structured discipline that supports planning and governance, not an engineering deliverable in its own right.
Gartner	Defines EA as a discipline that proactively and holistically leads enterprise responses to disruptive forces, with an explicit focus on decision support over blueprinting.

Across these independent perspectives, three consistent themes emerge. EA is:

- **a set of purposeful, selective descriptions** — not a master model of the enterprise;
- **a decision-support discipline** — not an engineering or modeling activity in itself;
- **a mechanism for alignment between business and IT** — not a documentation exercise measured by volume or coverage.

Kotusev's specific contribution is to strip EA of its aspirational metaphors and ground it in what practicing organizations actually do — and, more importantly, in what separates the EA programs that influence real decisions from the ones that produce shelfware.

3. The Essence of Enterprise Architecture

3.1 EA as a Communication Medium

Kotusev's central insight is that EA's primary value lies in communication. Every organization is populated by stakeholders operating from fundamentally different mental models of the same enterprise:

- Executives think in terms of strategy, risk, and outcomes.
- Business managers think in terms of processes, capabilities, and customer value.
- IT leaders think in terms of systems, platforms, and technical constraints.
- Project and delivery teams think in terms of deliverables, dependencies, and timelines.

EA artifacts provide the shared language that lets these groups collaborate without first resolving every difference in vocabulary and priority. This is consistent with Ross and Weill's research, which shows that firms with strong architectural discipline exhibit measurably higher strategic coherence and lower operational friction. EA artifacts function as boundary objects: representations concrete enough to be understood differently by different audiences, while still enabling those audiences to coordinate effectively around the same underlying reality.

3.2 EA as a Pragmatic Set of Descriptions

Kotusev is direct that EA has little in common with building architecture as a metaphor. Buildings are engineered from a complete specification before construction begins; organizations evolve continuously, often without anyone having full visibility into the current state. EA does not design the enterprise — it describes it, selectively and purposefully, in order to support the decisions that matter at a given moment.

Bernard reinforces this distinction, arguing that EA is fundamentally a management practice rather than a modeling exercise. Gartner's research notes converge on the same conclusion from an industry-analyst perspective, holding that EA must be lightweight, iterative, and value-driven — prioritizing clarity for a specific decision over completeness across every domain.

3.3 EA as an Instrument for Alignment

Organizations struggle with alignment not for lack of intelligence or effort, but because stakeholders routinely operate with incomplete information and competing priorities. EA

artifacts address this by making implicit organizational knowledge explicit — surfacing dependencies, constraints, risks, and opportunities that would otherwise remain locked inside individual teams or individual heads.

Ross and Robertson's research associates mature EA practices with four consistent, measurable outcomes:

- reduced IT and application complexity;
- improved process standardization across business units;
- faster time-to-market for new products and capabilities;
- more consistent customer experience across channels and geographies.

These outcomes reinforce Kotusev's core argument: EA's primary function is alignment, and alignment is what should be measured — not the number of artifacts produced or the completeness of the model.

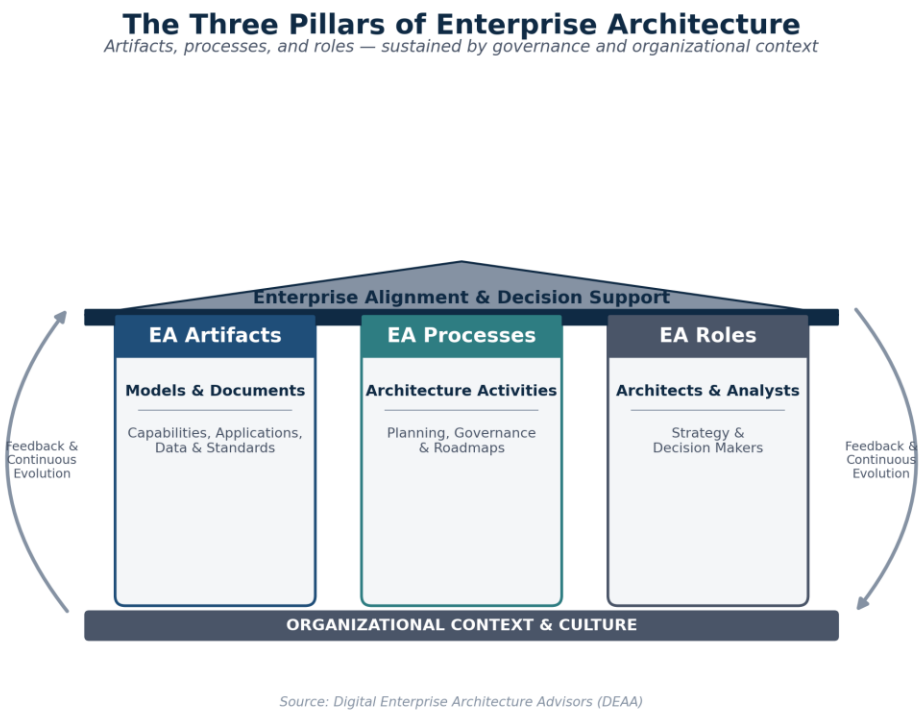

Figure 1 — The Three Pillars of Enterprise Architecture: artifacts, processes, and roles, sustained by governance and organizational culture.

4. The Domains of Enterprise Architecture

EA organizes its descriptions into a small number of domains. These are practical groupings that help stakeholders locate the right artifact for the decision in front of them — not rigid taxonomic categories, and not a checklist to be completed exhaustively before an architecture is considered credible.

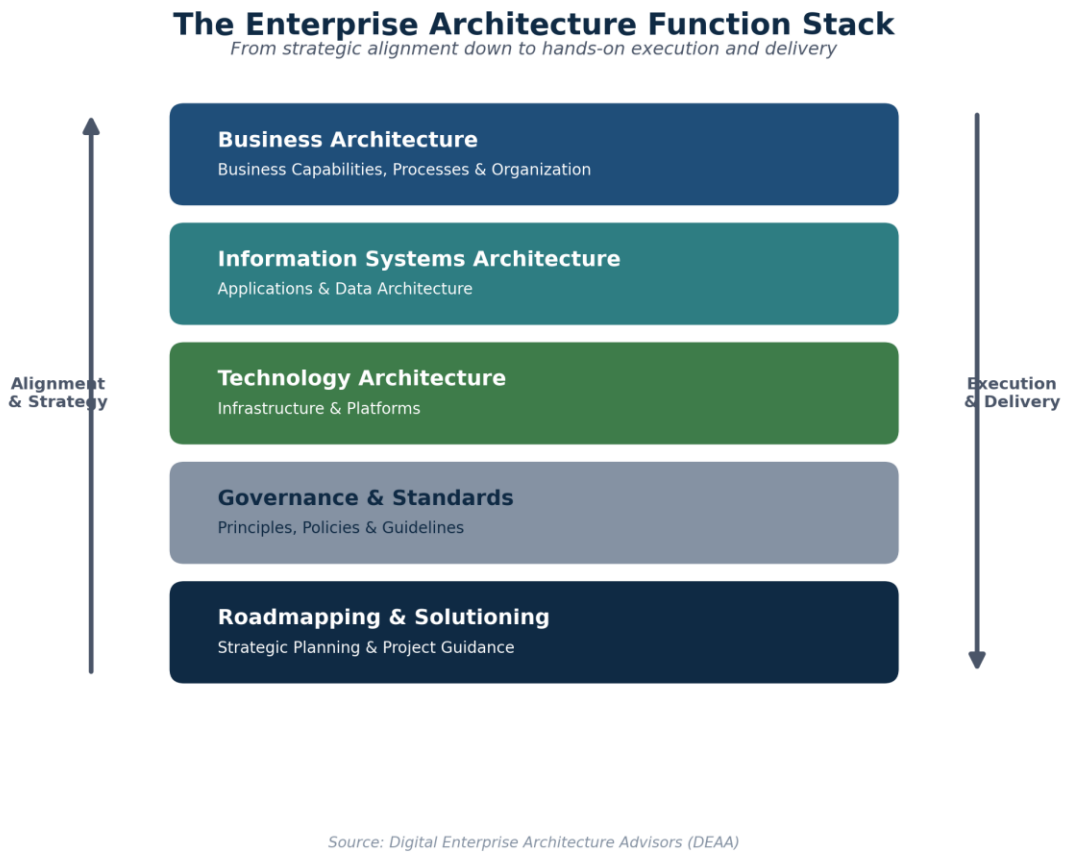

Figure 2 — The Enterprise Architecture Function Stack, from strategic alignment to hands-on execution.

4.1 Business Domain

The business domain describes how the organization creates and captures value. It includes:

- customers, channels, and value propositions;
- business capabilities and end-to-end processes;
- organizational roles, structures, and operating model design.

Ross and Weill treat business architecture as the foundation of EA precisely because it articulates the operating model — the organization's fundamental logic for delivering value — on which every downstream technology decision ultimately depends.

4.2 Application Domain

The application domain describes the software systems that support business operations, including:

- application portfolios and their functional scope;
- system-of-record and system-of-engagement responsibilities;
- interdependencies, integrations, and technical debt.

Kotusev's research identifies application landscape diagrams as among the most consistently used EA artifacts in practice, because they give leadership a direct, visual handle on complexity and a practical basis for modernization and rationalization decisions.

4.3 Data Domain

The data domain describes the organization's information assets:

- core data entities and their relationships;
- data flows across systems, domains, and organizational boundaries;
- ownership, stewardship, and quality accountability.

Bernard and Gartner both identify data architecture as a critical enabler of digital transformation, advanced analytics, and regulatory governance — a dependency that has only intensified with the rise of AI and machine learning initiatives that live or die on data quality and lineage.

4.4 Infrastructure (Technology) Domain

The infrastructure domain describes the technical foundation supporting applications and data:

- servers, networks, and hosting environments;
- cloud platforms and middleware;
- resilience, scalability, and cost architecture.

This domain has grown in strategic weight as organizations shift to cloud-centric and hybrid operating models, where infrastructure decisions directly shape unit economics, resilience posture, and the pace at which new capability can be delivered.

4.5 Additional Domains

Depending on organizational context and regulatory exposure, a mature EA function may also maintain artifacts covering:

- security architecture;
- integration architecture;
- technology standards and reference architectures;
- governance structures and decision rights.

The specific domain set an organization maintains should reflect its priorities and risk profile, not a generic framework's checklist. This is Kotusev's point restated in operational terms: **EA must be fit-for-purpose, not exhaustive.**

5. EA Artifacts: The Fundamental Components

Kotusev's research establishes that artifacts — not frameworks, not governance boards, not maturity models — are the true substance of Enterprise Architecture. They are not abstract representations produced for archival purposes; they are **practical tools that specific stakeholders use, on a recurring basis, to make specific decisions.**

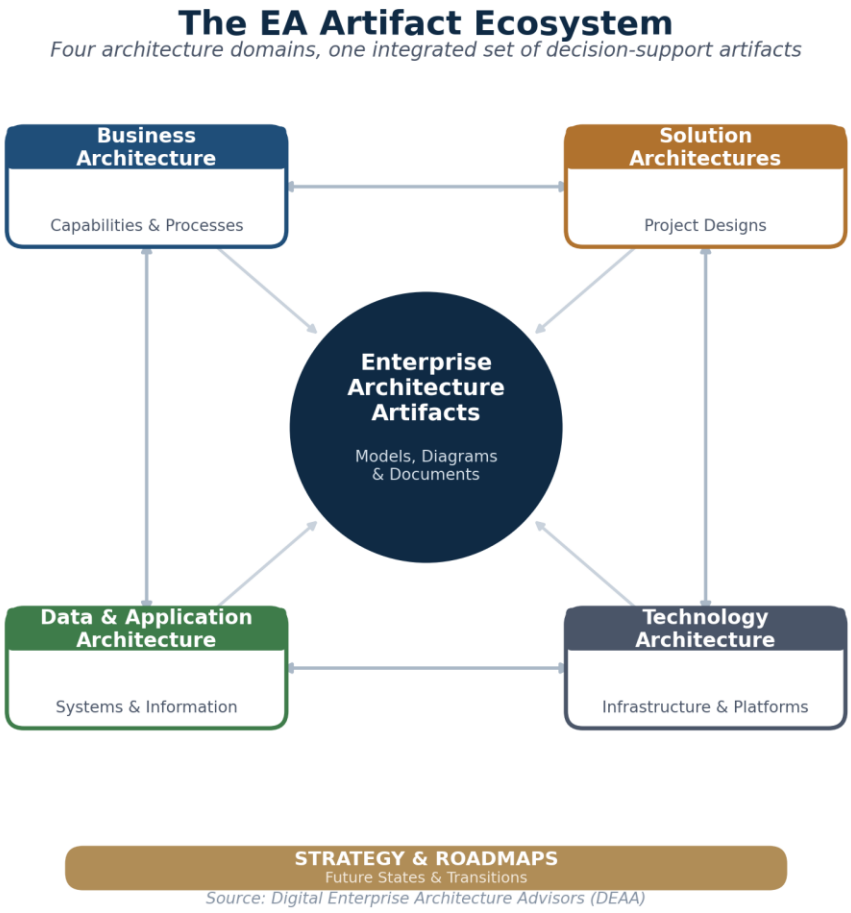

Figure 3 — The EA Artifact Ecosystem: four architecture domains united by a common set of decision-support artifacts and anchored to a strategy and roadmap layer.

Commonly maintained artifacts include:

- business capability models;
- process maps and value stream diagrams;

- application landscape and portfolio diagrams;
- data models and data flow diagrams;
- infrastructure and technology topology diagrams;
- solution architecture documents;
- roadmaps and transition plans;
- architecture principles and standards.

Ross and Robertson emphasize that artifacts must be actionable — directly supporting a decision someone is trying to make. Gartner's research uses the parallel concept of consumability: an artifact only has value if its intended audience can understand and act on it without requiring a translator.

What distinguishes artifacts that succeed

Kotusev's empirical work shows that EA artifacts deliver value when they are:

- **selective rather than exhaustive** — covering what a decision requires, not everything that could theoretically be modeled;
- **collaboratively developed rather than centrally imposed** — built with the stakeholders who will use them;
- **continuously updated rather than static** — treated as living references, not one-time deliverables;
- **purpose-driven rather than ceremonial** — created because a decision needs them, not because a framework requires them.

6. The EA Communication Model

If EA's core function is communication, its operating model must be understood as a hub, not a hierarchy. The EA function sits at the center of a network of stakeholder groups, each of which contributes a different kind of input and requires a different kind of output. Effective architecture practice depends on the EA function actively mediating these exchanges — translating strategic intent downward, and operational and technical reality upward — rather than issuing standards from a single direction.

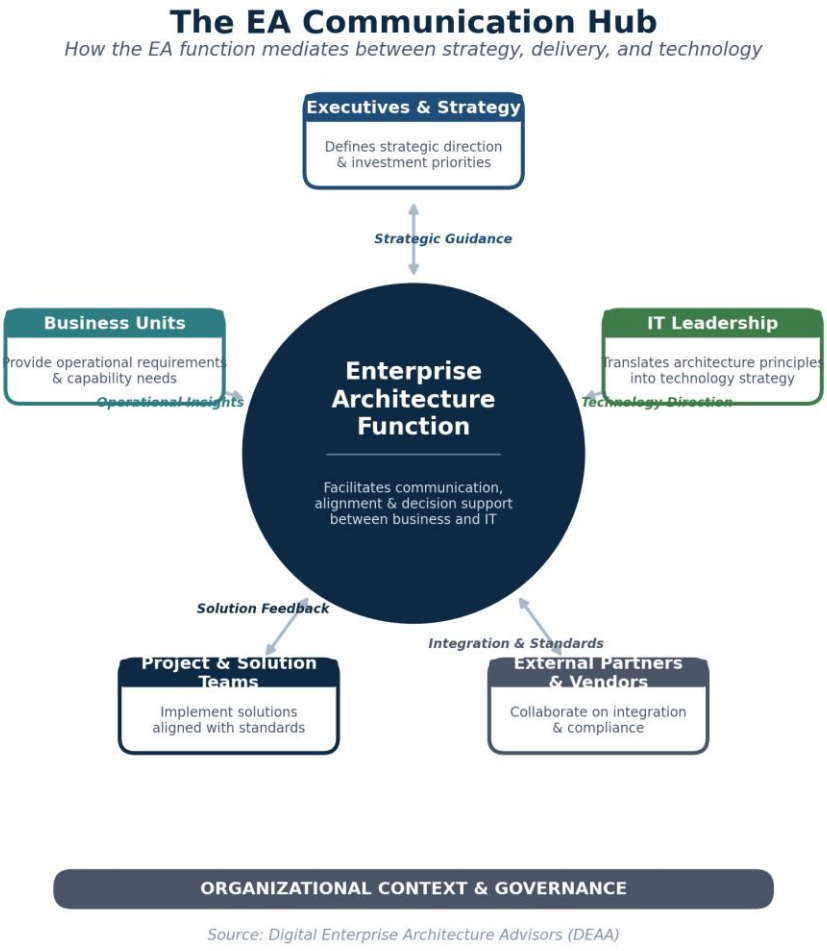

Figure 4 — The EA Communication Hub: how the EA function mediates between executive strategy, business operations, delivery teams, IT leadership, and external partners.

Executives provide strategic guidance and investment priorities; the EA function translates that guidance into capability and technology implications. Business units surface operational

requirements and capability gaps; the EA function turns those into structured input for planning. IT leadership defines technology direction and platform constraints; project and solution teams provide delivery feedback that keeps architecture grounded in what is actually being built. External partners and vendors round out the model, particularly where integration, compliance, or shared infrastructure introduce dependencies the organization does not fully control.

This communication model is what separates an EA function that shapes decisions from one that is bypassed by them. An architecture practice that only pushes standards outward, without a working channel for operational and delivery insight to flow back in, will consistently produce artifacts that are technically correct and practically ignored.

7. The Role of Enterprise Architects

Enterprise architects are not engineers of the enterprise. They are **facilitators of alignment** — practitioners whose value is **measured by the quality of the decisions their work enables**, not by the elegance or completeness of the models they produce.

Their core responsibilities typically include:

- translating business needs into their IT and technology implications;
- developing and maintaining EA artifacts as living, decision-relevant references;
- guiding solution and delivery teams toward coherent, standards-aligned design choices;
- supporting strategic and investment planning with structured, evidence-based input;
- ensuring coherence across concurrent projects and initiatives;
- stewarding architectural principles without turning governance into a bottleneck.

Ross and Weill describe architects as “linking pins” connecting strategy, operations, and technology. Gartner uses a complementary framing, describing architects as influencers who shape decisions through insight and credibility rather than positional authority.

Kotusev's research reinforces both views empirically: architects succeed when they build durable relationships, communicate in the language of their audience, and embed themselves in the organizational processes where decisions are made — not when they retreat into modeling tools and issue documentation from the sidelines.

8. EA Functions and the Operating Model

A mature EA function typically performs six recurring activities:

- strategic planning support;
- application and technology portfolio rationalization;
- standards development and architecture governance;
- solution oversight and design review;
- roadmapping and transition planning;
- capability development and organizational readiness.

Bernard frames these functions as components of a formal EA program; Gartner emphasizes their collective role in enabling digital transformation at pace. Kotusev's distinct contribution is demonstrating that these functions only create value when embedded directly into existing organizational processes — investment planning, project initiation, solution design — rather than run as a parallel, ceremonial track disconnected from where decisions are actually made.

In practice, this operating model is cyclical rather than linear. **EA is not a project with a start and end date**; it is a **continuous discipline** of initiation, development, solution shaping, governance, and realignment, repeated as the organization and its environment evolve.

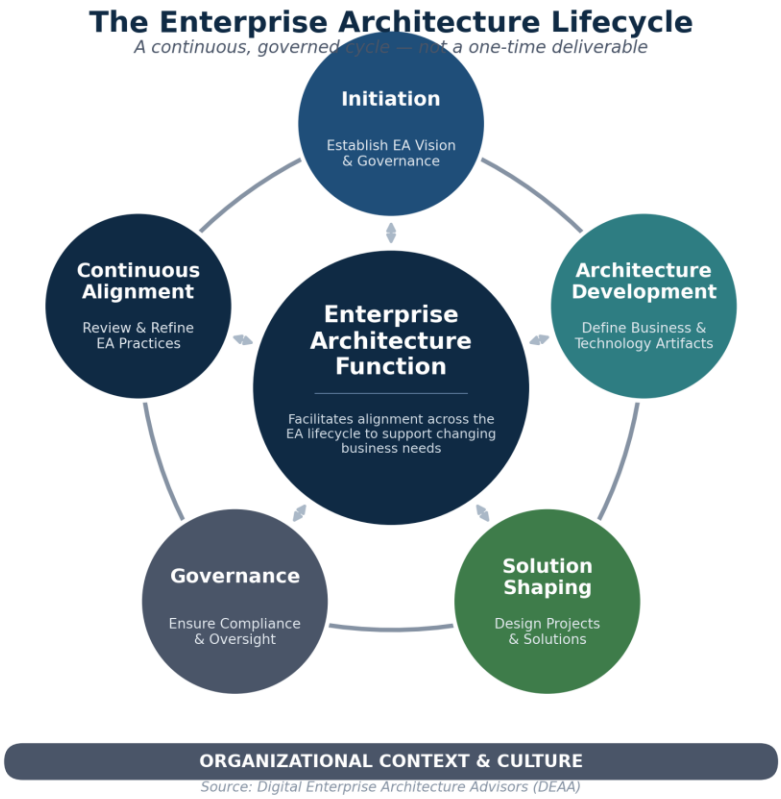

Figure 5 — The Enterprise Architecture Lifecycle: a continuous, governed cycle grounded in organizational context and culture.

9. Enterprise Architecture in the Context of Broader Research

Kotusev's findings do not stand alone. They align closely with four complementary strands of academic and industry research.

Perspective	Contribution
EA as a coordination mechanism	Ross and Robertson demonstrate that mature EA practice reduces complexity and improves coordination across IT portfolios, particularly in organizations with multiple business units competing for shared technology investment.
EA as a governance instrument	Gartner's research emphasizes EA's role in defining decision rights, technology standards, and investment prioritization — the mechanics through which architectural intent becomes enforceable.
EA as a strategic enabler	Bernard and Weill highlight EA's contribution to organizational agility, digital transformation readiness, and structured capability development over multi-year horizons.
EA as a socio-technical practice	Kotusev, Ross, and Gartner converge on a shared conclusion: EA outcomes are shaped by culture, politics, and organizational dynamics at least as much as by models, tools, or frameworks.

Taken together, these four perspectives reinforce a single conclusion: Enterprise Architecture is a **communication-centric, alignment-driven discipline**, and its **effectiveness is a function of organizational engagement** — not framework sophistication.

10. Practical Implications for Leadership Teams

For CIOs, CTOs, and transformation leaders evaluating or resetting an EA function, this research translates into four operating principles that DEAA applies consistently across engagements — the same principles that anchor how we scope and deliver architecture work for clients:

Reduce Complexity

Design target architectures and roadmaps that simplify the landscape and make responsibilities explicit, so delivery teams can move faster with less friction — rather than adding a further layer of documentation on top of existing complexity.

Govern with Intent

Establish lean, effective architecture governance that supports team autonomy, reduces risk, and keeps decisions transparent and traceable — calibrated to the organization's actual risk profile, not a generic maturity model.

Integrate with Confidence

Design integration architectures — APIs, events, and middleware — that enable reliable, reusable, and secure data flows across the organization, without over-engineering for scenarios that will never materialize.

Deliver Outcomes

Tie every architecture initiative to a measurable business outcome: reduced time-to-market, lower operational risk, improved transparency, or better scalability. An artifact that cannot be connected to a decision or an outcome should not be produced.

Organizations under pressure to modernize, integrate, and scale typically arrive at this point through fragmented systems, unclear capability ownership, and a widening gap between strategy and execution. The research reviewed in this paper points to a consistent remedy: not more architecture in volume, but more architecture in the right places — selective, well-communicated, and embedded in how the organization already makes decisions.

11. Conclusion

The modern concept of Enterprise Architecture — grounded in Kotusev's empirical research and reinforced by the broader academic and industry literature — can be summarized in seven principles:

1. EA is a collection of purposeful documents, not a blueprint of the enterprise.
2. EA's primary function is communication and alignment between business and IT.
3. EA artifacts are pragmatic descriptions that support planning and decision-making — not comprehensive models.
4. EA reflects the dynamic, evolving nature of organizations, and must evolve with them.
5. Enterprise architects serve as facilitators of alignment, not engineers of the enterprise.
6. EA functions must be embedded into existing organizational processes to deliver measurable value.
7. EA's effectiveness depends primarily on culture, relationships, and collaboration — not on frameworks or modeling technique.

This conceptualization represents the most empirically validated and practically useful understanding of Enterprise Architecture available today. It is also the operating philosophy DEAA brings to every engagement: architecture that is judged by the decisions it improves, not by the volume of documentation it leaves behind.

About Digital Enterprise Architecture Advisors

Digital Enterprise Architecture Advisors (DEAA) is a boutique enterprise and business architecture advisory practice led by Christian Kobsa, a senior architect with over 30 years of cross-Atlantic experience helping US and EU organizations align business models, capabilities, and technology with clarity and precision. DEAA holds various certifications at the Business and Technology Architecture level and brings direct engagement experience spanning pharmaceutical, logistics, healthcare, government, and financial services environments.

DEAA helps organizations clarify their target state, align business and technology priorities, and accelerate transformation through practical, capability-driven architecture — delivered through fixed-scope diagnostics, project-based operating model design, or fractional chief architect engagements, with a remote-first delivery model built for distributed US and EU teams.

Book a strategy call: calendly.com/digital-eaa/30-minute-intro-call

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