PROFILE

Interview with Sladjan Maras on "Challenges and Needs in Enterprise Modeling"

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Sladjan Maras
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Sladjan Maras is Vice President of Gartner Information Technology Research and Advisory Company. Mr. Maras leads the Enterprise Architecture business in EMEA at Gartner Consulting with focus on ensuring business impact when applying EA with Gartner's key clients. He is responsible for business development, delivery, and management of engagements with key clients in EMEA. In the past he held various management and consulting positions at Gartner and prior to that at IBM.

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BISE: Mr. Maras, enterprise modeling (EM) is a globally discussed topic; from the industry perspective, what do you regard as its greatest challenges?

Maras: Enterprise modeling needs to be placed in the context of problem solving, otherwise it remains theoretical. Due to geo-political developments and monetary crises, economic conditions are not becoming simpler, rather the opposite. All that, and the quarterly economy in organizations, is putting pressure on business and executive management to make fast decisions, thus neglecting to keep in sight the long-term perspective. On the one hand, in order to make business decisions fast you need to have support from different enterprise models, hence it is a perfect match. However, on the other side, if you are forced to act fast concerning tactical aspects rather than strategic ones, then the organization needs to maintain strict discipline to use EM just-in-time and just-enough; and I see very few organizations succeeding with this. To summarize, dynamics of business require support from modeling in order to make decisions; at the same time those same dynamics prevent optimal use of modeling because organizations cannot really match the pace of change with an adequate approach to EM. This is an issue that Gartner encounters in most organizations.

Another important observation is that business and IT architecture teams tend to do modeling because they thus produce appealing artifacts (such as business process models). But this usually does not happen on time, because models are often large, complex, expensive, and take a lot of effort to produce. And hence they do not match the dynamics of the organizational change; even in the best case when a valuable artifact is produced, it is typically not aligned with dynamics and therefore is not used. That means the investment is in "vain" and the business will not make such an investment again.

BISE: Quality assurance of models is becoming an increasingly important aspect of enterprise modeling approaches. What do you expect from model quality? What do you believe is good model quality?

Maras: Quality of a model could mean a model which correctly reflects reality, a model that can be trusted and at the same time is easy to understand for target stakeholders. Model quality is also influenced by the fact that models are not universal but rather tuned towards people and the problems they should solve and, hence, simplify business decision making or simplify creating a final IT solution. It is also important not to put too many aspects in the same model because people often work on a number of architectural layers to split the overall model into according to different views. Then they tend to add additional issues such as security, or governance, and thus at the end we obtain a hybrid model that tries to handle/answer too many aspects at the same time. This results in confusion because if you show this kind of model to a specific stakeholder such as a system architect, he or she cannot find details of his/her domain, while the stakeholder will see many aspects which are not of his/her concern. Hence it is very important that the model is sufficiently atomic and answers a part of the problem, while other views on the problem should be provided by other separate models. And another aspect which is important to emphasize – the purpose of EM is primarily to support change in organizations aligned with BS, i.e. to focus on a future state and not the current state. In this regard, it is a common problem that typically the current state is modeled because it is easier to comprehend, but the added value of modeling the current state is quite limited. So one of the aspects of QA should be to ensure that the models reflect the future state and not the current – in order to support the change of the organization! Also, it is interesting to note that people initially believe that they are modeling the future state, but very soon it becomes obvious that they are modeling what they are looking at right now. Why? Because it is the business stakeholders who decide what the business will look like in the future, but they are very seldom involved in modeling. Without their insights, modelers are not able to look ahead because they are not the ones who are entitled to define it. As a consequence this leads to a low appreciation of the modeling work, making the stakeholders believe that models do not help them take decisions.

BISE: How important are EM tools for organizations? Are there standards, or are custom solutions used more often?

Maras: I have seen very few organizations who have managed to create significant business impact by using EM tools. The main problem is not necessarily the tools themselves. The issue is rather that in order to benefit from EM tools, organizations need to have reached a basic level of maturity regarding EM. This means that at a minimum organizations should understand what models create business value, what level of detail is required to achieve a particular business outcome, and also if an established management process regarding a particular modeling domain already exists, such as information management for information models, business process management for business process models and application portfolio management for the models related to applications architecture.

Without the preconditions above, an EM tool is very often used as a playground for architects that will store different models in the repository but the organization will usually not use them as part of strategic planning processes or even software development projects, thus creating very little tangible value.

Do not start with tools – start with why you need models, what models are required to achieve required business outcomes, how you will manage them. Formalize the management processes, and once you achieve a sufficient level of maturity you will know what tool and modules you need.

If IT is not a part of the strategic planning process (i.e. WHAT models and WHEN), then there will be no alignment. Organizations typically start with requirements at a project level. The enterprise usually has hundreds of projects, and if EM is not part of the project portfolio creation process, projects will diverge. Even if each individual project creates business value, multiple projects that are part of the portfolio might not create value as a whole. If commonalities among projects (on a reasonably high level, because time is limited) exist, they must be seen from the very beginning (because models will project a future state, and each project will see its own role, so they will not diverge). If you are modeling on the individual project level, you are not contributing to the enterprise-wide alignment. Project modeling is not enterprise modeling because enterprise modeling should point the way, on a reasonably high level, to the final goal of the enterprise.

BISE: Why is it difficult to convince organizations to invest in modeling work? Are business people reluctant to use models?

Maras: People are not reluctant to apply modeling, but it is important to have the right pragmatic approach, and that pragmatism is often missing. If you speak to a business executive – it is not only about a model, but it is the right level of approach to communicate the model (pragmatic approach) that is important. Also, most of the modeling initiatives are too "academic" – too broad, and without clear business value which is a large drawback, EM is meant to achieve a strategic transformation (not on project level).

A good model is the one that achieves concrete business outcomes!

BISE: For the last several years we have been facing an important trend in software development – making it "agile". How do you view "agile" enterprise modeling?

Maras: We rarely hear the term "agile" in the context of EM, but there is no doubt – EM must be agile due to aforementioned reasons – dynamics and transformation – just sufficient for and fully aligned with business goals. Agile business processes are commonly faster, simpler, and performed in more optimal ways.

Hence, agility in EM needs to be pragmatic and to provide tangible business value in as short time as possible, and by using optimal enterprise models. Organizations are not agile if they do not try to provide the alignment between business and IT for future directions by using optimal enterprise models, i.e. if they are agile in individual projects, there will be small islands of values, but this does not help organizations to achieve overall business goals while increasing both business and IT complexity. Hence ten agile projects which are not aligned may increase complexity and thus decrease the overall business agility – and the goals of EM are to facilitate simplicity.

BISE: How often is business goal modeling used?

Maras: Gartner experiences that many enterprise architecture initiatives fail because they usually end up attempting a number of models, while not creating/facilitating tangible business results/outcomes. Goals should be defined in tangible terms and linked to KPIs, e.g., "Increase percentage of retention of clients" – agree on this, define the KPIs accordingly (50 % retention), and set a time-frame for the goal.

BISE: We face a number of past and ongoing EU-wide academic projects. Do you have any advice for how to transform an academic method or tool to a commercial?

Maras: My answer is straightforward – testing! All recommendations should be tested as to their added value and usability. Also, the academic community should listen to the business where they need something to be able to model, or model in a better way – they should hence bring corresponding ideas. Academics should support dynamics by realizing the needs of the business in good time as well as by confirming "good practices" in some organizations, then others will quite probably be eager to try it.

Typically, price is not an issue, but a business outcome addressing a real business problem is the deciding factor for the adoption of a particular method or tool.

BISE: How do you see enterprise modeling in the coming future? What are key challenges from your point of view?

Maras: EM is important, and those in charge of business strategy should be able to understand and to construct high-level models. Dynamics are also very important. Alignment is vital; hence IT must be a part the overall strategy planning.

There is definitely an increased interest in EM, and needs coming from increased business complexity as well as complexity in the IT – more IT and more data. This requires EM as a means of simplification of the business design. More and more organizations will use it and will become more pragmatic; but the biggest issue is, and in the near future will continue to be, how to solve the lack of alignment, because IT usually owns or tries to initiate the modeling work, but if IT is not aligned with the business, it probably won't provide earlier mentioned business value. So the alignment needs to be achieved by involving business stakeholders as the primary target. It is important to articulate the business value of modeling to the stakeholders.

BISE: Mr. Maras, thank you very much for your time and for this interview.