

Rationale for a SOA Shared Service Center

BY THAD MARCELLI

Over the past several years, there has been much fanfare regarding the promise of SOA. However, as with any IT-related solution, it is not a magic bullet or cure-all for IT integration. In fact, SOA does not solve business process problems, but rather identifies both the good and bad organizational processes. In most instances, SOA will require additional front-loaded costs until a critical mass of services are developed for reuse. It will require organizational and even process changes that will demand high levels of training, funding, and organizational governance. Even with these challenges, adopting an SOA methodology is recommended.

Building a successful SOA Governance organization requires the attention to assets and capabilities across all service domains or high-level categories of services. Domains typically can focus on a major entity, e.g., customer or employee, the intersection of two entities, or smaller partitions like product pricing. SOAG is an extension of IT Governance, which focuses on the decision rights and accountability framework to encourage desirable IT behavior.

SOAG also balances enterprise needs and departmental goals to create a framework for delivering service-oriented business solutions. It defines individual and group responsibility, accountability, and a structure for identifying, amending, and enforcing governance policies. Conversely, developing SOA without a defined governance model could lead to less-than-desired outcomes. There are the obvious sunk costs associated with the resources, hardware, and software used during the trial and implementation phases, but it goes beyond financial loss.

One of the most efficient means to execute against an SOA Governance plan is to institute an SOA Shared Service Center (SSSC). Generally speaking, a Shared Service Center provides a centralized way to coordinate all SOA-related activities among team members efficiently. It also provides a way to enforce governance processes very similar to the way police enforce state and city laws.

SOA Shared Service Center Rationale

The argument could be made that creating a separate organization to support the SOA Governance program is too much. Those making this argument believe that resources spread across existing organizations could be as effective. While this can sometimes be true, it greatly depends on the scope and goals of the SOA program. The approach still requires a strong central coordination point with managerial power over a variety of resources with differing levels of responsibilities, priorities, and time. It has been found that in most organizations there are many good reasons to establish an SSSC.

Fulfill Customer Needs

A customer can be defined as any individual, group, or organiza-

tion with SOA environment dependencies as either a consumer or provider. It is significantly easier for customers to contact one entity or unit that can consult, develop, guide, and support their SOA needs rather than having to communicate with a variety of individuals with no set guidelines or centralized, consistent communication back to the constituent. A single point of contact simplifies communications as the SOA Program matures.

A simple analogy is a call center where there is usually one phone number and a set of options to choose from once connected. This model is significantly easier than having to dial a different phone number for each individual problem.

One thing to always remember is that success sells. Success for SOA comes from being overly attentive to constituents and ensuring that their concerns are addressed, deadlines are met, and expectations are exceeded. It is also important to document the successes, issues that were overcome, and the expected returns in order to communicate results back to the enterprise. This communication with customers and prospects fosters adoption and raises awareness of the importance the organization is placing on SOA.

A decentralized team will not be able to do this as easily because they are not concentrated on the same set of goals and values. As a result, customer service will suffer, hindering SOA adoption.

Drives Compliance and Consistency and Aligns Priorities

Having the same goals, methodologies, and standards to adhere to creates consistency in standards, policies, processes, and communications. This consistency also leads to customers receiving the same level of support. Without consistency, units and groups will start to have reservations about adopting an SOA approach.

A singular unit driving at the same goals and communicating the same vision is likely to have a much more positive effect than other types of organizational structures. It helps to ensure that the SOA message does not get lost. In the early phases of SOA adoption, SOA Governance can benefit from a high level of structure to ensure the enterprise is receiving the same consistent message.

In addition, a dedicated team eliminates various priority conflicts that would otherwise result in poor customer services, miscommunication between team members, increased workload for program management, and lower productivity. A centralized team also results in higher productivity by reducing the likelihood of redundant activity across the SOA effort.

Cost Verification

When deciding to adopt SOA, many companies require business validation in addition to technical practicability. An SSSC makes

it easier to assess the total cost of implementing an SOA program. Centralizing SOA assets and resources makes it easier to identify the total costs. It also facilitates capacity planning, resource allocation, and identification of training and education needs.

Conversely, if the resources are shared or are not one hundred percent committed to SOA activities, it complicates the applicability of a cost structure. Unless there is a strict time-reporting process in place, the ambiguity of the assets and resources needed to further mature SOA will be present. It is also difficult to cross-train resources, which will lead to support and consistency issues. Ultimately, this could lead to difficulties in gaining additional funding as SOA matures, dampening the effectiveness of SOA.

Experience Drives Expertise

A Federated SSSC will build expertise over time. This is accomplished by the sharing of information, ideas, and understanding of SOA. Cross-training should also take place to reduce the affects of turnover. Turnover is a fact of business and SOA success requires both simple, logical processes and expertise to ensure the right level of technical and business governance is in place.

In addition, an experienced team will be suited to handle new challenges and tasks. An experienced and federated service center could drive toward goals more quickly by finding new and inventive means to achieve objectives.

Finally, a centralized team will be able to explore and digest new technologies, platforms, and methodologies more quickly, providing valuable research and development information back to the Governance Organization. This information could influence long-term planning and decisions.

A decentralized team will ultimately question others' knowledge because they do not communicate regularly. Without strong leadership, teams will begin to question others' authority. It could lead to higher turnover, which will affect overall team performance.

Data Reliability

Data collection and reporting is one of the chief processes for any Shared Service Center. An SSSC will be able to standardize and update the type and data collected for such items as service contracts. This is a pivotal role in ensuring that the right data is collected, maintained, and distributed. This data builds trust in the SOA environment, which is one of the hurdles that any SOA program must overcome. Accurate metrics reporting and metadata modeling will also support policy and process decisions along with identifying gaps in infrastructure, security, and other areas.

Quality

By adhering to governance standards for service and performance, the shared service center plays a key role in ensuring that functional, performance, and overall test management is maintained. It is imperative that services adhere to the highest standards for interoperability and conformance to ensure reusability and that quality and granularity of the services are built for broad adoption.

A decentralized organization will require more transactions between governance bodies, potentially creating process bottlenecks and miscommunication issues that will lower the quality of the services being developed. A decentralized organization will also require adherence to the same report systems and process tools that many organizations lack.

Ownership

As the number of services and the dependency upon SOA increases, it will be important for the Shared Service center to take ownership of some or all of the broadly shared services. By managing the care and feeding of the services, the life cycle, support, upgrades, and management of services will be significantly simplified. Ownership models and costs will also be centralized, creating quicker time-to-market, reduced organizational complexity, and straightforward cost structure.

A decentralized model has the potential to become quite complex and confusing. It may become complex in the processes, organizations, and people needed to agree regarding contract approval, upgrade plans, and orchestrations. It may become confusing with regard to the variations in the process steps based upon different ownership models, decisions points, and people needed for service usage negotiations.

Manage Risk

SOA brings a ubiquitous nature to IT assets and services that were previously viewed as vertical applications contained by the platform for which they were built. As a result of this omnipresent nature, there are risks with the development and use of SOA assets. A Federated Shared Service Center can proactively review and identify various threats and devise solutions to overcome.

A decentralized staff would most likely be very reactive in nature. As a result, potential threats could be missed or overlooked, which could cause issues ranging from loss or corruption of data to theft of highly sensitive or private data.

The SOA shared service center is the hammer in the arm of the SOA governance organization. Moreover, the SOA Shared Service Center executes against the SOA Governance goals and facilitates in driving the SOA roadmap. It also provides important feedback to the SOA Governance committee on the progress of SOA. Finally, it is in most instances the face to the customer, so it is important to ensure that the SSSC is a diverse group of knowledge experts that are committed to achieving the goals of the SOA Program.

As with SOA Governance, an SOA Shared Service Center should be built on an adopted SOA maturity model. This will ensure that the SOA Program, its governance model, and the SSSC are aligned and following the same goals.

Second, identify resources, both existing and new, that will compose the SSSC. These resources should be based on the roles identified that best fit the SOA Program. This step is essential to determine the total budget required.

Third, ensure that existing SOA-related projects and development efforts are being attended to and that these efforts do not experience any pain from the current level of SOA maturity. In many instances, it may make sense to adopt an exception process depending on where the project currently is within the service development life cycle.

Finally, begin to identify future SOA development efforts to exercise new policies, procedures, and standards. This will also assist in refinement and gap analysis. As progress is made, begin to gather and analyze metrics and data that will further establish a solid SOA governance program and appropriate customer service and governance enforcement from the Shared Service Center. ■

About the Author

Thad Marcelli is a principal SOA architect at MomentumSI. He has many years of practical knowledge in the SOA framework space and has faced many SOA implementation challenge.