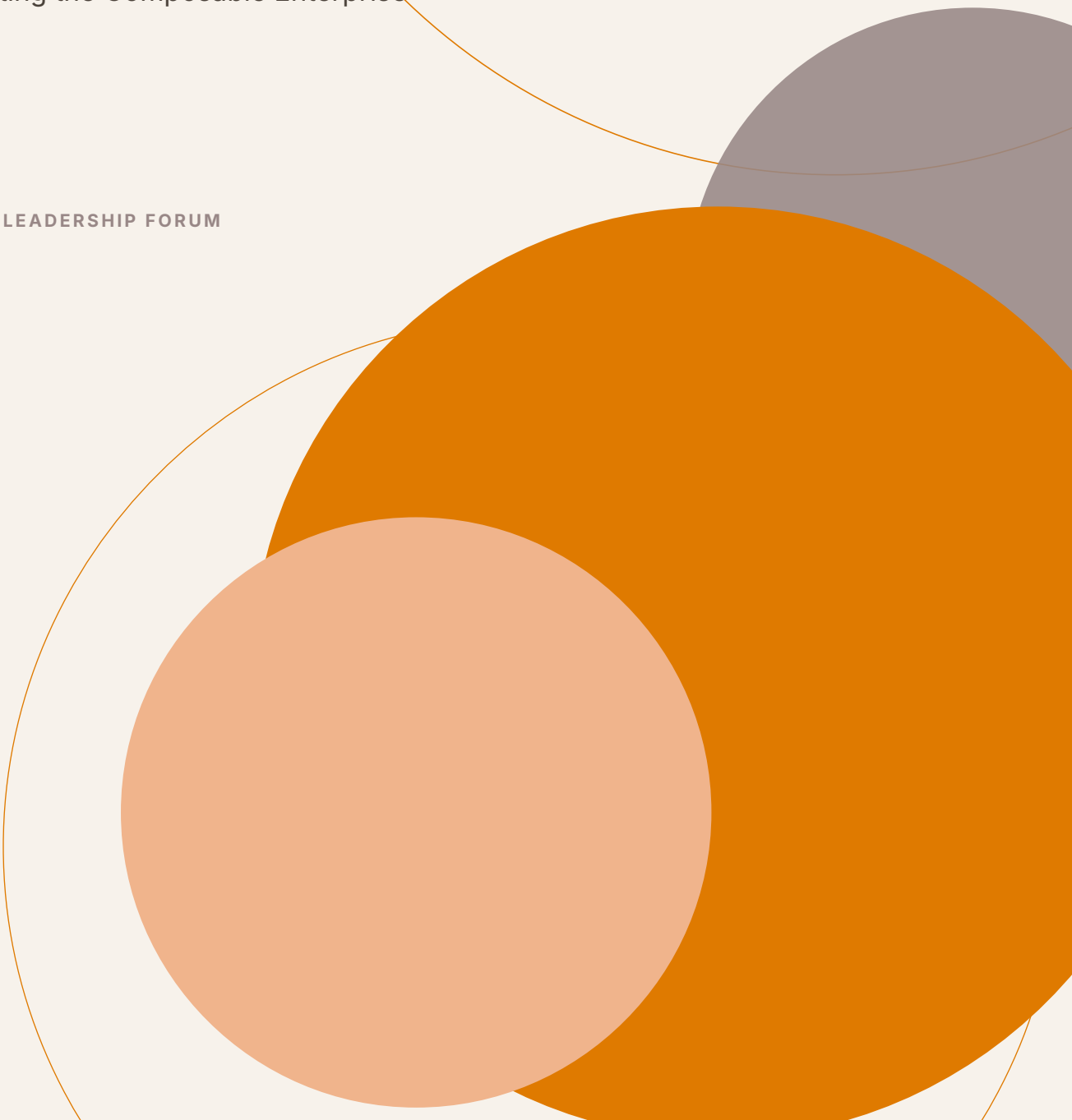
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Architecture is a business issue

Lessons from the CIONET leadership forum, Architecting the Composable Enterprise

A CIONET LEADERSHIP FORUM



ARCHITECTURE IS A BUSINESS ISSUE: LESSONS FROM ARCHITECTING THE COMPOSABLE ENTERPRISE

Most enterprise estates weren't designed to be complicated. They got that way one reasonable decision at a time. That idea ran through our latest CIONET leadership forum, "Architecting the Composable Enterprise", which set out to test whether a decade of investment in cloud platforms, integration and modular architecture has given organisations the adaptability they were promised, or simply swapped one set of constraints for another.

Architecture is a business issue

The question of whether the term composable matters was raised early, and the panel didn't spend long defending it. What came through instead was the point the chair made in his opening remarks. Architecture is part of delivering the business strategy, and not everyone outside technology accepts that. Another challenge is perhaps not everyone inside IT acts as if it's true either.

An estate is the sum of choices about where to standardise, where to allow differences, which contracts to sign and which projects to fund. Many people make those choices, under many different pressures. Getting them right starts with knowing what is driving them.

What composability is for

One panellist remembered composability as a conference buzzword from a few years ago. What matters now, in their view, is assembling whatever delivers value for a product or value stream, whatever name it goes under.

The same panellist described how AI has changed their thinking on consolidation. AI makes it much easier to stitch systems together. Three years ago they would have insisted on a single global instance of a core platform as the one source of truth. Now they are far less concerned, provided the data model is the same everywhere.

> "Standardising processes, simplifying the estate and getting one data model right matter more, because they make it possible to change how the business works when it needs to."

Another panellist made a related point about simplification. It doesn't always mean combining everything into one platform. Sometimes a legacy system is simpler to keep than to migrate into something bigger. Their organisation works on the principle of keeping things as common as possible and only as different as they need to be, starting from the business capability required.

When every project builds its own

The cost of decisions made in isolation was clearest in one description of a large estate. It has thousands of APIs, where 100 or 200 should be enough, and almost none of them are reused. Each was built for a single project with a finite budget and a tight deadline. The estate also has

far more integrations than systems, because many of those systems pass data on to others in ways nobody has documented.

Each API made sense to the people who built it. Reuse wasn't in their brief, and checking whether something already existed hadn't been part of the culture.

This is where architecture stops being a purely technical question. The project sponsor, the budget holder and the delivery partner each made a reasonable call. The organisation was left with the complexity, the maintenance and another set of things to secure. Nobody chose that outcome, and nobody owned preventing it.

Who decides, and on what evidence

One organisation has drawn a clear line. The business decides the capability it needs, and the CIO decides the technology that delivers it. Parts of the business can still buy their own tools, but they then have to integrate, support and manage them, and the practice soon fades.

The same organisation has a way of testing claims that a process is special and needs the system adapted to fit it. The business unit is asked to quantify the case and present it to the executive team. Few remain special by the end.

> "Business units tend to count what they can see, which is usually the IT build. Once the business effort of a change is included, the true cost can be many times higher."

Another panellist starts further back, by asking what problem the business is trying to solve. A process nobody has examined shouldn't be automated, and most of the time the fix starts with the process itself. That conversation has become harder with AI, because many in the business believe they understand it from using public tools.

Clarity about who decides still leaves room for flexibility. A third approach was to architect anything touching core data and IP properly, and accept some technical debt at the edges where it gives the business a real benefit. Deny the business all flexibility and it finds its own workaround, which is usually worse. The same panellist found that building new capability into the workflows people already use took longer than bolting it on, and adoption was far higher.

Suppliers have their own interests

Contracts shape architecture as much as design does. Many suppliers now push for consumption commitments of five or ten years, often opening with figures one panellist described as unrealistic. Negotiation usually reaches something reasonable, but it is hard to agree what reasonable means when no organisation will look the same in ten years. Outsourcers apply the same pressure to services, asking for multi-year commitments to levels of people and services just as AI ought to be making them more efficient.

Some newer vendors bring a different risk. They sell hard to the business and promise a great deal at low cost for the first six months. Within a year they look to move ownership, accountability and cost back to IT.

Cost visibility is another weak spot. Usage-based AI features inside major platforms are hard to track, and one panellist wondered aloud why any vendor would want to tell customers they were overspending. Model choice adds to it. There can be a hundredfold cost difference between the models a user might pick, and most users simply choose whichever sits at the top of the list. Two organisations in the room now give each user a default monthly allowance for AI usage, with more available when there is a good reason.

The pressure to do something with AI

When the audience was asked who had approved an AI initiative this year after being told to do something with AI, a few hands went up.

The panel had some sympathy for chief executives facing pressure from competitors, investors and employees at once. Approving AI to tell a good story still carries a cost. Organisations can end up keeping tools running simply because they've said that doing something with AI matters.

> "Riding the wave of hype is fine, as long as the rigour about what actually makes a difference survives it."

Another compared the current moment to robotic process automation a decade ago. People build automation for single points and report how many bots they have, without being able to say what problem they solved or what it did for the bottom line.

To prioritise, one panellist put four questions to every proposal:

> What business problem does it solve, and who owns that problem?
>
> Is the data ready?
>
> Is it transformational or incremental?
>
> And can you measure it?

If the answer to any of them is no, it goes away for experimentation. The fourth question stops most proposals.

Measurement works best when it's agreed up front. One organisation ran an AI pilot in a sample of a hundred outlets, with success defined in advance as a five per cent sales uplift. The approach was adjusted throughout, and the pilot delivered close to ten per cent. What made the result useful was the agreement beforehand, which made the decision to scale or stop a straightforward one.

Guardrails that keep pace

Governance needs to change too. One panellist described a process where every new AI component on a platform passed between legal, cyber and other teams in turn. It took around twelve weeks and ended with a risk statement to sign. That can't cope when major platform vendors release dozens of agents a month.

The answer was to set guardrails at platform level, and to assess how likely a major vendor is to knowingly release AI that harms its whole customer base. Detailed checks on individual components are kept for the highest-risk areas, such as AI affecting the people the organisation serves, employee data or recommendations based on financial statements.

Another organisation acted early on public AI tools, restricting them for the wider business on security and data grounds while promoting its approved tools. Requests for anything else met four questions.

> How secure is it?
>
> Will it affect our regulatory position?
>
> What will it cost?
>
> Could you do it with what you already have?

In more than 95 per cent of cases, the existing tools were enough or the questions went unanswered.

Know what you have, and whose interest it serves

Asked what CIOs should not get wrong in their 2027 roadmaps, the panel kept it practical.

Know your estate: One panellist was recently asked how many of their systems ran on a particular technology. It took twenty-four hours to answer, when it should have taken the push of a button. Without that knowledge, you don't know your risk profile.

Know where your IP comes from: Code can be bought from many sources, but an organisation's data is its own. And don't assume technology can solve every business problem. Part of the skill is knowing where technology will help and where simplifying or reviewing the process will do more.

The conversation closed with a challenge worth applying to any decision on a CIO's desk. Whose interest is this choice really serving: the business, IT or the vendor? If the answer isn't aligned to the strategy, have the courage to question it, whether the pressure comes from inside the business or from a supplier.

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