Magpies have a reputation – which is quite possibly unfair - as birds that will collect a wide range of shiny objects, and take them back to their nests as trophies. Apparently research shows that this is unfounded [i], but I’m going to go with the stereotype here, and describe a case study of an organisation that used a wide range of EA techniques, culled from many different approaches and sources. This case study is based on the experience of an EA team for an airline. The EA team called their approach “magpie architecture”, because of the many frameworks and methods they used.

I’ll start by looking at some of the pros and cons of a magpie approach.

Pros and Cons

The EA team in this case study, who were following a TOGAF® starting point, looked for other materials that were relevant to their needs - without any prior experience of using the TOGAF®. They had to adapt and customize techniques that were not really right for them.

So the team started their first engagement by following the ADM. They were expected to hit the ground running, and didn’t have any time to customize TOGAF before they got started. They found that they needed to produce a capability map for the business, which TOGAF didn’t include, so they searched elsewhere to find a generic capability reference model that they could adapt to their needs. They soon found that there were plenty of other EA materials and resources that they could plunder, and before long they had quite an arsenal of artifacts – drawn largely from Internet searches.

According to the EA team, the magpie approach helped them by:

• Providing quick just-in-time access to EA artifacts, reference models, and techniques that they needed.

• Allowing them to use materials that were already pretty close to their needs – without having to spend too much time adapting and customizing them.

• Creating a more comprehensive set of materials than those available in any single EA approach.

The main drawbacks, again according to the EA team, were that:

• There was a danger that a search might not result in anything useful.

• The materials they discovered turned out to be inappropriate or distracting.

• It was difficult to integrate the diverse materials into a simple, coherent joined-up approach.
In their search for the “ideal” EA approach, the team found the following magpie trophies most useful:

The Architecture Development Method (ADM) from TOGAF® became a solid foundation for their EA development process. Although they customized and adapted the Phases and Steps to their needs, they found the basic flow around the ADM and the separation between the Architecture Development and Solution Implementation very helpful. They didn’t follow the ADM in a rigorous sequential flow, but used it as a process framework to help guide their development work.

They found the TOGAF metamodel difficult to use and instead adopted the Essential Project metamodel [ii]. They also found it useful that this metamodel came with a tool to support use of the metamodel (Protege), and that it was intended for use with a wide variety of EA approaches and frameworks – which fitted well with their magpie approach.

It took some time to fully appreciate the ideas behind the Enterprise Continuum, but once they understood its underlying principles the EA team decided that they should fully leverage any reference models that were relevant to their needs. They found many useful reference models and architectures through Internet searches. For example, they adapted material from the Oracle airlines data model [iii] and the Airline Industry Data Model (AIDM) [iv] to inform their data architecture. But they also found that there were many reference models in other industries or domains that could be easily adapted to their needs. For example, they found that the ISO/IEC/IEEE 42010 Website gave them a good metametamodel for their EA practice, and that this site also provided a useful survey of other EA frameworks. [v] This survey included links to other websites that were very helpful.

As the EA team matured they felt that they needed a way to draw all of the disparate sources and techniques together. Each of the source frameworks they plundered for their magpie architecture had its own way of describing things, and using these frameworks separately to build their EA architecture would have been impossible. A member of the team discovered some of my research into the eight fundamental factors that form the basis of all EA approaches. [vi] They adopted these eight factors as the basis of their EA ontology. In effect this created an EA metaframework that helped coordinate materials acquired from any source.

There were probably many other important lessons the team learned from their experience, but one of the most important lessons they learned was that it was actually easier and better to adopt a wide range of EA techniques and artifacts than customizing a single pre-defined method or framework.

---

[vi]  Enterprise Architecture - the Eight Fundamental Factors: A practical guide to the eight fundamental factors that are common to all EA approaches and frameworks, by Roger and Elaine Evernden. [v] http://www.amazon.co.uk/