

Service Oriented Architecture

While there are a lot of experts offering guidance on how to begin the SOA journey, they are not consistent on where to start – something that is not overly comforting for anyone trying to convince their Board of Directors or Management team of the value of an SOA implementation. Further complicating matters is the fact that, regardless of which way you go, there is a high initial cost for little initial return.

Investing in SOA

The biggest barrier to SOA is that a lot of new investment may be required before even one web-service can be produced and actively used by another program or composite application.

The major unavoidable cost for SOA is in the integration platform. An integration platform can easily run to the hundreds of thousands of dollars, quickly pushing the cost of the first few SOA-enabled applications beyond what most organisations can afford.

Even if a company has an integration platform in place, they will still need to analyse its suitability and scalability to ensure the adoption of SOA does not affect the Business to Business (B2B) or Application to Application (A2A) integration scenarios currently running.

Start-up costs include the introduction of new languages for the writing of the SOA-enabled application, and repositories for the storing and searching of the web services. When evaluating the cost of new programming languages, there are a number of things worth considering:

- Training is the most obvious and the most easily quantifiable component of the cost
- The initial applications built with the new language are bound to take longer, therefore the budget for these projects is higher and the ROI does not look as good
- Finally and most importantly, there is a cultural aspect to SOA. Programmers are no different to anyone else and don't like change. They will complain the new languages are slower, the old way is better and they have to think harder.

Other costs that will also impact at the early stages of the SOA Adoption are those related to governance and standards. Commonly, SOA programs have been done with pilots to understand the implications and these pilots don't need to address these issues. As governance and standards are at the heart of the gaining the many touted benefits of SOA, they need to be introduced early in your adoption or you risk the danger of creating complexity and unnecessary duplication.

Selling the investment to your organisation

There is a real danger that, with so much cost loaded upfront for what really is SOA's foundation, if the first projects are pitched independently, the ROI will never stack up and the approach will not get off the ground. Therefore, when selling the first projects, there is a need to sell the overall vision and demonstrate that there is a cost to adopting the new approach and the associated technology, but the organisation will benefit from the flexibility and low cost of SOA in the long term.

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One interesting way of selling this - especially in the manufacturing sector - is to use the analogy of installing a faster bottling line. The ROI and cost of the whole machine is not attributed to the cost of the first bottle off the line. Similarly the ROI of and SOA adoption cannot be judged by the cost of the first application written.

Considering your first steps

The key decisions to make at the start of an SOA journey are the approach you intend to use and the sequence of the different stages. Do you start by selecting technology and defining governance and standards, or do you start with a pilot in the knowledge that the standards and technology may both be swapped out? Unfortunately, the guidance offered by experts is often contradictory.

Below is a guideline around the pro's and con's around the different approaches.

First step	Pro's	Con's
Selecting Technology	It will expose you to a variety of technologies, giving you a breadth of basic knowledge and experience	You may not know which technology is best suited to the project until you have more experience
Developing the governance and standards	The cornerstone of any SOA-enabled organisation. If you get this right it will prevent the need for rework	There are still costs associated with this stage and you end up with nothing to show for it initially, so the internal sell is harder
Perform a Pilot	This is a good way to expose your people to a technology and also learn the pitfalls of the approach. It also should deliver some form of output that is tangible to the business	There is a high chance you will have to eventually repeat the pilot with either different standards or technology There is also a risk that the extra time taken to do the pilot will taint any future expectation that SOA can deliver fast efficient changes to business processes
Big Bang Enterprise Scale Transformation	This approach ensures there is no wastage and you are not taking shortcuts that wont work on a larger scale	This maybe politically difficult to achieve. The costs may be very high for one capex which will struggle to be signed off

Whichever sequence you choose, don't forget about selling the vision and making sure your plan is followed through to the end. Otherwise the SOA initiative could be doomed to fail after the first hurdle, as the business fails to see the value of SOA before you've had the chance to get beyond the first steps.

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