KuppingerCole Report

WHITEPAPER

By Martin Kuppinger, Andre Priebe

November 23, 2021

Engineering Successful IAM Projects to Support Digital Business

Success in IAM projects is not a given. It requires careful planning, change management, expectation management, and many more - including sufficient budgets. This whitepaper gives recommendations from the practical experience of both KuppingerCole Analysts and iC Consult on how to make IAM projects a success.

By **Martin Kuppinger**
mk@kuppingercole.com

By **Andre Priebe**
andre.priebe@ic-consult.com

Content

Commissioned by iC Consult

1 Introduction / Executive Summary

IAM projects have some reputations for stalling. Many projects started big and delivered under expectations. There are reasons for that, starting with the complexity of IAM (Identity & Access Management) being cross-divisional. It is about interfacing with IT security, with HR, with IT Infrastructure, with the SAP or Business Applications department, but also with all the other owners of applications throughout the whole organization.

Moreover, IAM affects everyone in an organization. Be it the daily (or more frequent) authentication exercise, be it waiting for approvals of access request, be it the manager's job of reviewing and recertifying access entitlements: All these tasks involve not just the IAM organization, but everyone.

Not only that, but IAM has long extended beyond "workforce IAM" into a discipline that needs to care for the identities of business partners, customers, and consumers, but also non-human identities such as services, software robots, devices, or things. Connecting everything and everyone and providing seamless, yet secure access to every service, regardless of where that service runs, is what IAM is about. IAM is a foundation for successful, well-secured digital business.

Making IAM a success with all the requirements that IAM must serve requires a strong IAM organization, and it requires a plan that is well-executed. It also requires sufficient funding. Experiences from many years of running, guiding, and reviewing IAM projects are compiled into a set of ten recommendations in this whitepaper.

2 Highlights

- Requirements definition must consider trends and foreseeable future requirements, not just the current need
- Stakeholders must be known, expectations must be set realistically, with quick wins and big wins defined
- It is not just about an IAM program and some IAM projects, but also about transition into a powerful IAM
- You need to understand what is done in a project -- ensure that skills are transferred into your organization
- Have a vision in place, a blueprint, but also ensure that policies, guidelines, and processes are well-defined
- Focus on IAM topics and don't try to solve everything -- HR problems better are solved within HR than by IAM, even while they might affect IAM
- Be pragmatic and work with small projects that can be run successfully

3 Understand your requirements - of today and for the future

Requirement analysis is the foundation for success. It must not be limited to the known requirements of the past, but look at the future and incorporate trends and foreseeable and predictable change.

The starting point for each and every IAM project, and, beyond, every IT project is always the same: requirements analysis. If you haven't thoroughly analyzed, listed, and prioritized your requirements, you're lacking the foundation for effectiveness, for doing the right things. Unfortunately, way too often we are confronted with projects that are run based on vague assumptions about the target, or with incomplete, inconsistent, or too coarse-grain requirements lists.

The time taken for planning and for gathering requirements always pays off in the project, by less trouble, less failure, and less delays.

Requirement analysis must not be limited to a combination of what you already have and the known shortcomings and short-term requirements, but take a broader approach:

- What will change in your organization in the future?
- What are the trends in the market and how will the market and the products and SaaS services evolve?
- Are there foreseeable changes in regulations?
- What are others doing?

In many cases, this will require external input, from other organizations, from system integrators and consultancies, from industry analysts.

The long and granular list of requirements, well-structured into functional areas, that derives out of this process, then deserves prioritization. Be careful with must criteria, commonly there should be only a few. Also carefully analyze what is out-of-scope, either because it should be delivered by separate projects or because it is not an IAM requirement at all.

The exercise of creating a comprehensive requirements list will help you in all subsequent steps of your IAM journey, because you will know what you need, why you need it, and because you can use that information to decide about project priorities as well as the tools and services you select.

4 Stakeholder and expectation management - don't overpromise

IAM is a cross-divisional project. The list of stakeholders might be longer than expected. Understand whom to involve, and manage expectations by defining the quick wins and big wins you are really confident to achieve. Overfulfilling is not the problem, underperforming is.

Another key success factor for every IAM project, and equally relevant to other IT projects, is a good stakeholder management and the closely related expectation management.

It's not only about the Quick Wins. Also define the Big Wins you want to achieve.

Stakeholder management starts with compiling the list of stakeholders. In too many projects, that list is unclear or incomplete.

- Who are the sponsors in the management?
- Whom from other departments such as HR or IT Infrastructure to involve?
- Who is the contact in procurement?

Not knowing all the stakeholders will result in improper communication, and frequently ends up in trouble when some start opposing. In many - not all, admittedly - cases, good communication can avoid such challenges before they arise.

Good stakeholder management involves expectation management. Overpromising is what projects quickly brings in trouble. Expectation management is based on a phased approach with defined deliverables and visible quick wins as well as big wins.

Quick wins commonly are in scope: Showing some good and visible progress early in the project helps in building trust into the project team and its work. However, big wins are equally important: What will be the major improvements of a project? Where does it really deliver value to the organization?

Defining and communicating both the quick wins and big wins is important. Appropriate communication to all stakeholders is important. And defining the expected quick wins and big wins realistically, including indicating the potential risks, is important. Don't overpromise.

5 Get a broad buy-in of everyone, based on realistic expectations

Talk with the stakeholders and understand their ideas and their concerns. This helps you delivering on the jointly agreed or at least accepted expectations.

Stakeholder management also involves getting the buy-in of all the stakeholders, based on realistic, well-communicated (including risks and obstacles) expectations. But buy-in is more than just informing everyone about what is planned in a project.

IAM projects are complex. Buy-in of all stakeholders will help in weathering the storms that will come sooner or later in the project.

IAM projects are complex. IAM is a cross-system, cross-organization per se. There, thus, are many stakeholders and many involved (or affected) parties. Success in a project is based on everyone, ideally, fully supporting the targets of the project and the approach chosen, but at least accepting the work of the project team, in contrast to opposing.

This requires communication in the narrow sense, i.e., talking with the stakeholders, not just informing them. It requires listening to others, and it may require to adapting the project scope, the technology, and the project execution. Getting a broad buy-in of everyone, based on realistic expectations, will help in weathering the storm(s) that always come in any complex project. And IAM projects are complex.

6 Create a modern, powerful IAM organization for all of IAM

IAM projects are part of an IAM program, and they need to transition into a defined manner into the IAM line organization. This requires having a powerful, well-defined organization in place. There is a need for a separate IAM organization. IAM can't be run anymore as just a minor part of other departments.

Even while the focus is on successful IAM programs and projects here, there always is a point where the work done by the project team is transferred into the line organization. A significant number of project team members anyway will be delegated from the line organization. While there are some others such as

- External advisors and consultants
- System integrators and developers
- Project managers
- Communication experts

that might be external to the line organization, it is essential that there is a line organization in place to utilize the project work.

Ensure that an IAM organization is in place -- at eye-level with other IT departments, and sufficiently staffed.

- Who will run the technology?
- Who is in charge of governance?
- Who acts as the interface to the business?
- Who cares for the further evolution of the implementation?

The line organization must be well-defined. It is a proven approach nowadays to have a separate IAM department within the organization, at eye-level with other IT departments such as IT infrastructure or IT security. The days where Identity Management and Access Management were split, and where, specifically, Identity Management has been considered a task within IT Infrastructure management, are past.

7 Build your own skills and learn from the experts

You will need external support to succeed in your IAM journey, and you most likely will need external support for running your IAM. However, don't make yourself dependent on the externals, but remain your flexibility in transferring skills into the organization.

A tipping point for many projects is the transfer from project to the line organization. Aside of the challenges in having (or not having) a line organization, this is also about the transfer of

- Accountability
- Responsibility
- Skills

The last bullet point is not the least relevant. Frequently, IAM projects tend to end up in a dependency from system integrators and vendors. While there is a logic in having strong partners that not only support in a project, but throughout the entire lifecycle of the products and services, this is different in being (fully) dependent on them, specifically when it comes to people.

There always must be a good set of skills on the products and services in place in an organization.

The more skills there are in the organization, the lower the dependency on system integrators and vendors. The more skills there are, the easier it will be to weather storms, when something doesn't run as expected, because the own team better understands the cause of problems. The more skills there are, the more likely it is that a product or service will be used effectively and efficiently, but also for a longer period.

8 Don't start with the tool, but with the vision

The biggest risk in IAM projects is to start with the tool, without having a comprehensive list of requirements in place, and without having a plan for the IAM of the future. Planning always pays off.

Too many projects start in a rather simple way: We have a challenge to solve (to avoid the term "problem" here). This sounds like a challenge where we need, e.g., Identity Federation. Let's find some vendors and pick the "best" one.

This approach commonly does not build on a well-thought-out plan. It lacks an overall approach and architecture blueprint. Requirements are commonly incomplete. The market and the trends are rarely well-understood. Not all relevant vendors are considered. Decisions are based on a, frequently, very incomplete set of information.

You don't build a house without an architect and a plan. Why should you run your IAM projects without architecture and plan, though?

There is a strong need for following a phased, top-down approach:

- What is the vision for IAM?
- How does a blueprint for all of IAM look like?
- Where are the biggest gaps to close?
- Which are the IAM processes?
- How do the policies and guidelines look like?
- Is the organization in place?

All these steps are prerequisites for a successful IAM project. This is not about multi-year planning, it all can be done fast, but needs to be updated regularly. But this is about preparing the ground for success in IAM.

9 Prepare for change

IAM is about change management, always. Technology changes, required skills change, the way people work changes. Change management is key to success, but far too often overlooked. Change management also is about proper communication.

IAM is evolving, and IT infrastructures are ever-changing. The perfect plan made three years ago is not the plan which will make you succeed today. There is a need for regularly updating the plans, but there is also a need for supporting the change that comes with IAM.

IAM projects will cause change in the way people work. Have a strong change management in place.

There is a need for a good, strong change management as part of the IAM program, but also for the continuous change and updates within the IAM line organization.

The biggest challenges commonly occur for either organization change - such as building the new IAM organization - or when replacing legacy technology, be it the legacy IAM or be it integrating applications in a new (and, hopefully, better) way.

The challenge of change is that change frequently is perceived as something negative, something that threatens people. Communication, stakeholder management, expectation management and change management must go hand-in-hand with a good plan to succeed.

10 Set focus for IAM

Set your focus on IAM and don't try to solve all the challenges in your organization. Far too frequent, IAM must fix challenges such as weak quality of identity information that are caused by others in the organization. That puts risk at the IAM projects.

Another success factor is focus. Focus within the program and within the project, by understanding requirements and prioritizing. However, it is also about the ability to focus on what is in scope and what not. This scoping exercise has two dimensions, with one being not as prominently discussed as the other:

- One dimension is the scoping within an IAM program, i.e., which projects to focus on and which to not do at this time. This is the common scoping exercise.
- However, many requirements within IAM projects are, when taking a closer look, not IAM requirements, but requirements from other parts of IT. Very common is that IAM has to integrate many HR data sources (which may be considered a task of IAM, but better would be done by HR) and care for a good enough data quality or "Identity Information Quality". Fixing gaps in HR data is not a job of IAM, but of HR. And creating the trustworthy source of identity information by combining all the HR data sources, that then is used again by HR, also is not necessarily the task of IAM.

Understand what is in-scope for IAM and what not - and work with the other departments on agreements about responsibilities, processes, and interfaces.

Solving this challenge requires to have a clear definition and work assignment for IAM, but it also requires a plan for IAM, well-defined processes to interface with others, and a strong IAM organization.

11 Plan for a future-proof IAM, not the IAM of the past

There is constant evolution in IAM. IAM projects commonly run long. Together, it means that you must plan ahead to be modern when your project is done, and not already outdated when you start.

Another common challenge, closely related to the lack of vision and planning, but also insufficient requirements analysis, is that many IAM projects are already outdated when they start. When an IAM project within a program starts, or when the entire IAM program kicks off, then this will be about an exercise for the next years. Some projects will run faster, but others such as typical IGA (Identity Governance & Administration, i.e., User Lifecycle Management, Identity Provisioning, and Access Governance) projects typically take more than a year to complete, sometimes up to three years and even more.

Many IAM projects run long. Plan for being modern when the project is delivered, not for being already outdated when it starts.

Thus, there is - again - the need for having a vision, for thinking about future requirements, for understanding the trends, and for modern architectures that allow to adapt to ever-changing needs that will occur over time.

Two aspects are of upmost importance here:

- Architecture: Build on a modern architecture. Modular. With a comprehensive set of stable APIs (Application Programming Interfaces). Isolate customizations from the vendor's code. Follow the modern paradigms such as microservices architectures and modern deployments, e.g., containerized.
- Concepts: Don't blindly trust all the established concepts. Recertification, as a sample, is perceived as being challenging and cumbersome by virtually all organizations globally. Role management projects tend to stall. Thus, think about how to do it better for the future, together with the experts. Think beyond.

This also requires challenging the consultancies and advisors as well as the system integrators and vendors you work with. Build on the experience, but don't let them do just what they did for the past ten years. It is about delivering for the next ten years.

12 Be pragmatic - define a program with small projects

Pragmatism is another success factor. Don't overengineer, but have a plan and understand which of the small steps you are making are heading in the right direction.

Last, not least, it is about being pragmatic. IAM requires a line organization to execute. Changes in IAM require a program. IAM programs must consist of small projects. This helps in focusing and in delivering on-time to the expectations.

For a small project, quick wins are easier to define and big wins of the overall project are faster and easier to achieve.

Also, be pragmatic. Don't overengineer. This is not about to surrender a vision, a blueprint, a well-thought-out architecture, or a plan. It is about having parallel workstreams, e.g., for defining policies and guidelines, for continuous evolution of the architecture, and for the distinct implementation projects. And, as written beforehand, the vision, blueprint, and high-level architecture must not take years in definition, but weeks or few months. But they then help in running small projects successfully, focused on delivering to the overall IAM strategy and the targets of the overall IAM program.

13 Recommendations

The previous chapters already included a series of recommendations. One more must be added. For the management, it is to give IAM a sufficient budget. For the IAM responsible, it is to acquire sufficient and stable budget not just for individual projects, but for a longer-term program planning.

IAM comes at a cost, but IAM is essential to the digital business. It enables business partners, customers, and consumers to interface with the organization's workforce. It stands at the forefront of security, which is always about identities, the authentication, and the access entitlements. It supports change by delivering the agility for dealing with new types of identities.

Thus, there is a need for budget, and there is -- as final recommendation -- the need for thinking IAM big enough, in the context of the organization's digital journey. It is not just about workforce IAM anymore, but an IAM covering all types of identities, including non-human identities of things, devices, or services, and all types of services.

14 Related Research

The Future of IAM Lies in the Cloud and as a Service
IAM: Globalization & Large-Scale Enterprise
Service Layers Managed IAM

Copyright

KuppingerCole Analysts support IT professionals with outstanding expertise in defining IT strategies and in relevant decision-making processes. As a leading analyst ompany, KuppingerCole provides first-hand vendor-neutral information. Our services allow you to feel comfortable and secure in taking decisions essential to your business.

KuppingerCole, founded in 2004, is a global, independent analyst organization headquartered in Europe. We specialize in providing vendor-neutral advice, expertise, thought leadership, and practical relevance in Cybersecurity, Digital Identity & IAM (Identity and Access Management), Cloud Risk and Security, and Artificial Intelligence, as well as for all technologies fostering Digital Transformation. We support companies, corporate users, integrators and software manufacturers in meeting both tactical and strategic challenges and make better decisions for the success of their business. Maintaining a balance between immediate implementation and long-term viability is at the heart of our philosophy.

For further information, please contact clients@kuppingercole.com.