

GUIDE 01

THE FOUNDATIONS SERIES

Job Architecture 101

What a job architecture is, what it is made of, and why an organisation stops working properly without one.

— CONTENTS —

What this guide covers

01 Why architectures exist
page 3

02 The anatomy
page 8

03 The terminology decoder
page 17

04 What it connects to
page 20

05 What it is not
page 22

06 Glossary and your path
page 25

01

Why architectures exist

Start with the symptoms. Every organisation without an architecture has the same four.

Nobody sets out to build a job architecture.

They set out to fix something that has stopped working. The architecture is what the fix turns out to require.

An organisation accumulates jobs the way a house accumulates possessions — one at a time, each justified on its own day, none of them filed. For a while this is fine. Around a few hundred people it stops being fine, and it stops in a recognisable pattern.

This guide assumes you know nothing about job architecture. It defines every term on first use. By the end you will be able to read the rest of the series, and to tell whether the thing your organisation is calling a job architecture actually is one.

The four things that break first

These arrive in order, and each one makes the next worse.

SYMPTOM 01

Title chaos

Titles are negotiated one at a time, usually at offer stage or in lieu of something else. Two people doing identical work hold different titles; two people holding the same title do unrelated work. Nobody can tell seniority from a business card, so everybody stops trying.

SYMPTOM 02

No career paths

Ask an employee what the next step is and the honest answer is 'wait for someone to leave'. There is no published ladder because there is nothing to publish. Progression becomes a function of manager advocacy rather than demonstrated capability.

SYMPTOM 03

Ungovernable data

The HR system holds several thousand distinct job titles for a few thousand people. No question that starts 'how many people do we have doing...' can be answered without a manual exercise. Every workforce report is a research project.

SYMPTOM 04

Decisions without ground

Restructures, spans-and-layers work, skills programmes and AI-impact analysis all need a stable unit of work to attach to. Without one, each initiative invents its own taxonomy, and none of them reconcile with the others.

— THE DEFINITION —

So what is a job architecture?

A job architecture is the shared structure that describes every job in an organisation using one consistent vocabulary.

It answers three questions about any job, in a way that is comparable across the whole organisation: what kind of work is this (family), what kind of contribution is this (stream), and how big is the work (level).

It is a reference system, not a ranking of people. The architecture describes jobs. People occupy them. A brilliant person in a small job is still in a small job — the architecture records the job, and the performance system records the person. Keeping those two separate is the single most important discipline in this discipline.

— THE THREE AXES —

Every job sits at the intersection of three questions

What kind of work?

Job Family

WORKED EXAMPLE

Software Engineering

What kind of contribution?

Career Stream

WORKED EXAMPLE

Technical (T)

How big is the work?

Level

WORKED EXAMPLE

T3 · Global Grade 5

Answer all three and you have described the job completely enough to compare it with any other job in the organisation. That comparability is the whole point.

02

The anatomy

Six layers, from the broadest grouping down to a single seat. Traced with one running example.

— THE STACK —

Six layers, broad to specific

Each layer below is a subdivision of the one above. Nothing skips a layer.

Job Function

The broadest grouping of work

Family Group

A cluster of related families

Job Family

A discipline with its own craft

Sub-Family

A specialisation inside it

Job

The unit you level and map to

Position

One seat, one person

Job Function

RUNNING EXAMPLE

Technology

WHAT IT IS

The broadest grouping of work in the organisation. Most organisations have somewhere between six and fifteen.

HOW TO TEST IT

If two areas would never share a leadership agenda, a budget conversation or a talent pool, they are probably different functions.

WHAT TO WATCH

Functions are not departments. A department is a piece of the org chart and changes at every restructure; a function is a kind of work and should not.

Family Group

RUNNING EXAMPLE

Engineering

WHAT IT IS

An optional cluster of related families sitting between function and family. Useful in large organisations, unnecessary in small ones.

HOW TO TEST IT

Add this layer only if you have enough families that the function level has become too coarse to navigate. Below roughly 2,000 people, usually skip it.

WHAT TO WATCH

An unnecessary layer is not free — every layer is something to govern, explain and maintain forever.

Job Family

RUNNING EXAMPLE

Software Engineering

WHAT IT IS

A discipline with its own body of craft, its own labour market and its own progression logic. This is the workhorse layer of the whole architecture.

HOW TO TEST IT

Would you hire into it as a distinct capability, and does it have its own recognisable career path? Then it is a family.

WHAT TO WATCH

This is the layer skills frameworks and career paths attach to. Get it wrong and everything downstream inherits the error.

Sub-Family

RUNNING EXAMPLE

Backend Engineering

WHAT IT IS

A specialisation inside a family: same craft, materially different practice. Use it where the distinction genuinely changes how work is done or hired for.

HOW TO TEST IT

Would a hiring manager insist on this specialisation rather than accept any member of the family? Then it earns a sub-family.

WHAT TO WATCH

Sub-families are where taxonomies bloat. Every one you create must justify its ongoing maintenance, not just its initial logic.

Job

RUNNING EXAMPLE

Senior Backend Engineer

WHAT IT IS

A family or sub-family at a specific level in a specific stream. This is the unit you level, catalogue, count and map people to.

HOW TO TEST IT

Two people hold the same job if you would expect the same scope, complexity and autonomy from both — regardless of who their manager is.

WHAT TO WATCH

The job is the atom of the architecture. Almost every downstream capability — planning, skills, analytics — counts jobs, not titles and not positions.

Position

RUNNING EXAMPLE

Seat #4812, Payments Platform, Dublin

WHAT IT IS

A single seat in the organisation: one position, one person (or one vacancy). Positions live in the HR system and change constantly.

HOW TO TEST IT

If it has a headcount number and a cost centre, it is a position.

WHAT TO WATCH

Never level a position. Level the job the position instantiates — otherwise you are levelling the incumbent, which is the cardinal error of this discipline.

— THE FULL TRACE —

One job, all six layers

This is the chain every job in the architecture can be walked up and down.

JOB FUNCTION	Technology
FAMILY GROUP	Engineering
JOB FAMILY	Software Engineering
SUB-FAMILY	Backend Engineering
JOB	Senior Backend Engineer
POSITION	Seat #4812, Payments Platform, Dublin

Only one of these rows is the thing you level, map people to, and count. It is the Job.

03

The terminology decoder

The same six ideas travel under a dozen different names. Here is the mapping.

Everyone means the same things. Nobody uses the same words.

Major consulting and survey frameworks each carry their own vocabulary. None is more correct than another. Read across the row.

The idea	Also called	And sometimes	What it does
Job Function	Discipline	Family Group	Broadest grouping of work
Job Family	Job Group	Functional Area	A discipline with its own craft
Sub-Family	Specialty	Sub-Discipline	A specialisation inside a family
Career Stream	Career Track	Career Band / Ladder	The kind of contribution
Level	Grade	Band / Zone / Tier	The size of the work
Global Grade	Global Level	Reference Level	One scale all streams map onto

Terms are illustrative of common industry usage and are described generically. No framework's proprietary definitions are reproduced.

— THE RULE —

Pick one vocabulary and never mix.

This sounds trivial. It is the most common cause of an architecture failing to land.

When one deck says 'band', the HR system says 'grade', the recruiter says 'level' and the finance model says 'tier', people conclude the architecture is incoherent — and they are not wrong to. The words are the interface. If the interface is unstable, nobody trusts what is behind it.

Choose the set your organisation already leans toward, write it down in one page, and enforce it in every template, system field, and slide. Changing vocabulary later costs far more than choosing carefully now.

04

What it connects to

The architecture is infrastructure. Its value is almost entirely in what plugs into it.

A job architecture is not the deliverable. It is the foundation.

Career pathing

Publishable ladders, lattices and the moves between them

Workforce planning

Headcount and cost modelled on stable units, not titles

Job Architecture

Skills & AI readiness

Skills hang off sub-families; AI impact assessed per job

None of these can be done consistently at scale without a stable unit of work underneath them. That unit is the job.

Org design

Spans, layers and structure analysed on comparable levels

05

What it is not

Three misconceptions that derail more projects than any technical problem.

A job architecture is not a compensation project.

It is the most damaging thing people assume, and the assumption spreads fast.

WHAT PEOPLE FEAR



“This is how they cut my pay.”

- Assumes mapping is a re-grading exercise in disguise
- Invites managers to argue level in order to protect pay
- Turns every mapping conversation into a negotiation
- Guarantees the architecture is gamed before it is finished

WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS



A description of work content.

- Levels describe the size and shape of the work, nothing else
- Pay structures may later reference the architecture — that is a separate decision, separately governed
- Mapping and any pay change are announced and run separately, never together
- This series contains no pay guidance for exactly this reason

Nor is it a titling cleanup, or an org chart.

NOT A TITLING CLEANUP

Titles are an output, not the work.

Tidying titles without a structure underneath produces a tidier mess. Within a year the drift is back, because nothing changed about how a new job gets created.

- Titling is downstream of the architecture (see Guide 06)
- A title cleanup with no governance is a one-off cosmetic fix

NOT AN ORG CHART

Structure and architecture are different things.

An org chart says who reports to whom. An architecture says what the work is. Two people in completely different parts of the chart can hold the same job.

- The chart changes at every restructure; the architecture should not
- That stability is precisely what makes the architecture useful

06

Glossary and your path

Every term used so far, and where to go next.

— GLOSSARY —

Everything defined so far

Job Architecture

The shared structure describing every job with one vocabulary.

Job Function

The broadest grouping of work, e.g. Technology.

Family Group

A cluster of related job families inside a function.

Job Family

A discipline with its own craft, e.g. Software Engineering.

Sub-Family

A specialisation within a family, e.g. Backend Engineering.

Job

The unit that is levelled, catalogued and mapped to.

Position

A single seat. One position, one person.

Career Stream

The kind of contribution: management, professional, technical, and so on.

Level

The size of the work within a stream, e.g. T3.

Global Grade

A single scale every stream's levels map onto, for comparison.

Mapping

Assigning an existing role or person to a job in the architecture.

Calibration

Cross-checking level decisions so they mean the same thing everywhere.

Where this series goes next

Guides 02 to 06 build the architecture. Guides 07 to 09 keep it alive and put it to work.

BUILD IT

Guides 02 – 06

- 02 · Career Streams & Tracks
- 03 · Levels: how many, where to draw lines
- 04 · Leveling Criteria: the six dimensions
- 05 · Job Mapping: the methodology
- 06 · Titling: conventions that scale

KEEP IT ALIVE

Guides 07 – 09

- 07 · Governance & Maintenance
- 08 · Change Management for rollouts
- 09 · From Architecture to Action

THEN GO DEEPER

Industry Playbooks

- Starter taxonomies and track sets by industry
- Banking · Technology · Healthcare
- Manufacturing · Professional Services
- And a free Excel mapping workbook

UP NEXT IN THE SERIES

GUIDE 02

Career Streams & Tracks

Every track an organisation can run, what each is for, and how to choose the four to six you actually need.

Find the full series and the free mapping workbook at hrdigitalplayground.com

HR Digital Playground