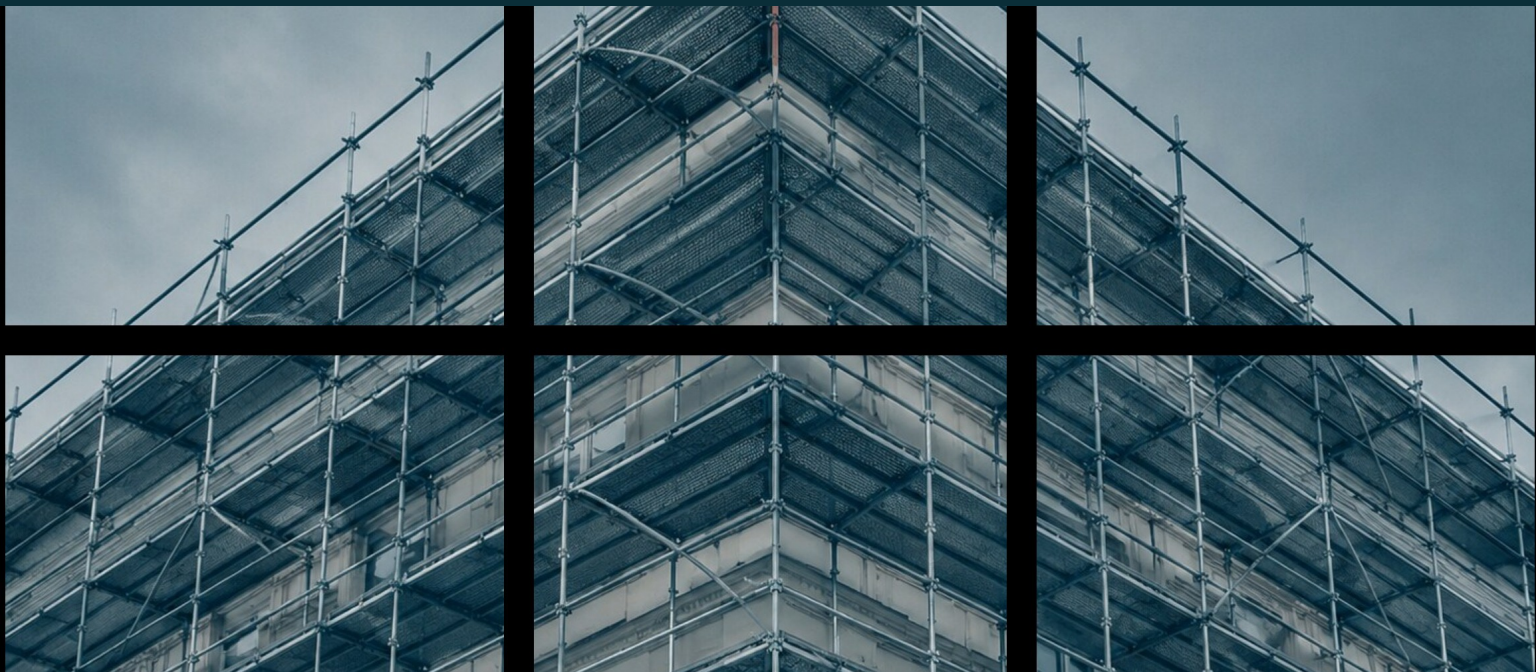


BEYOND THE RESCUE

# Accelerant or Crutch? The Interim Manager and the Capability an Organisation Never Builds

How the fastest way to rescue a stalled transformation can quietly become the surest way to keep it dependent



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bridgekeeper.”*

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## 1. Executive Summary

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There is a particular kind of relief that settles over a boardroom when a seasoned interim is brought in to take hold of a transformation that has been drifting. Momentum returns. Reports sharpen. Decisions that had been deferred for months are suddenly made in a fortnight. This essay is about that relief — and the pattern that so often follows it.

Interim managers genuinely accelerate transformation, and for reasons that are structural rather than heroic. They arrive without local political debt, with the licence to be unpopular, and with pattern-recognition drawn from many programmes rather than one. But the very qualities that make them fast are the qualities that make them hard to leave behind. The knowledge of how the new operating model actually works comes to live in the interim's head rather than in the organisation's, and when the day rate stops, the capability tends to leave with it.

The argument here is that this is not, in the main, a failure of individual interims — most do precisely what they were engaged to do. It is a failure of design: organisations buy momentum and forget to buy the transfer of capability. The essay looks at why the pattern persists even among leaders who can see it plainly — the headcount economics that make a thousand-pound-a-day contractor easier to approve than a permanent manager, the board's appetite for a single name to hold to account, the interim market's own incentives, and the rational disengagement of the permanent staff left standing in the shadows. It takes seriously the strongest case for the defence — that transformation is temporary work, and building permanent capacity for it is waste — and shows where that case is right and where it quietly smuggles in a much larger claim. It closes on the discipline that separates the accelerant from the crutch: designing the exit on the first day rather than the last, and measuring the interim on the muscle left behind rather than the milestone hit.

## 2. The Relief in the Room

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Picture the situation that produces the appointment. A programme that mattered — a back-office consolidation, a systems replacement, a restructuring of a divisional operating model — has been running for the better part of a year. The steering committee papers are thick and reassuring. The milestone chart is a wall of amber that never quite tips to green and never quite falls to red. Everyone in the room can feel that the thing is not moving, and no one can say precisely why. The permanent programme director is competent and exhausted, and has spent so long negotiating with the organisation that he has become part of its weather.

Then someone — usually a non-executive, occasionally the finance director — says the words that change the temperature: we should bring someone in. Within weeks an interim director is in post. She has done three of these before. She reads the milestone chart in an afternoon, has a private conversation with each workstream lead by the end of the week, and at the next steering committee she does something the organisation has not seen in months: she says, plainly, that two of the workstreams are behind because a decision about the target operating model was never actually taken, only discussed, and that she intends to take it by Friday. She takes it by Friday.

The relief is real, and it is earned. For the first time in a year the programme has a spine. I have watched a room exhale at exactly this moment — and it is worth pausing on what, specifically, has just happened, because the temptation is to attribute it to the force of a strong personality when the truth is more instructive than that.

### 3. Why the Accelerant Is Real

The interim did not succeed because she was cleverer than the people around her. She succeeded because of her position, and the advantages of that position are almost entirely structural.

The first is the absence of political debt. Everyone permanent in that programme owes something to someone else in it — a favour, a shared history, a career dependency, a reluctance to be the one who says the operating-model decision has been quietly ducked for eight months. The interim owes nothing to anyone. She can name the ducked decision out loud precisely because she was not in the room when it was ducked, and will not be in the room when the consequences of naming it play out at the next appraisal round.

The second is the licence to be unpopular. A permanent manager who spends his political capital forcing an unwelcome decision has less of it tomorrow, and he knows he must live in this organisation for years. The interim's capital is different in kind: she is paid to spend it, her mandate is explicitly temporary, and being disliked by the people she is there to move is closer to evidence of doing the job than evidence of failing at it. This asymmetry is not a personality trait. Put the same individual in a permanent role and watch how quickly the licence evaporates.

The third — and the most underrated — is pattern-recognition across programmes rather than within one. The permanent team has seen this transformation in enormous detail and no other. The interim has seen a dozen transformations in less detail and can therefore tell, quickly, which of the current difficulties are genuinely peculiar to this organisation and which are the ordinary weather of all such programmes. Most difficulties, she knows, are the ordinary weather. That knowledge is worth a great deal, and it is exactly the knowledge an organisation cannot generate from inside a single programme.

*The interim's advantages — no political debt, a licence to be unpopular, and pattern-recognition across many programmes — are properties of the position, not the person. That is precisely why they are so easy to rent and so hard to keep.*

There is a fourth advantage, quieter and slightly uncomfortable to state: the day rate itself does work. A director engaged at four figures a day is expensive enough that the organisation attends to her. Meetings start on time. Papers arrive before, not during. The sheer visibility of the cost concentrates the collective mind in a way that a salaried

appointment, however senior, rarely does. None of this is a criticism. It is simply the mechanism, and understanding the mechanism is the whole of the matter, because every one of these advantages carries the seed of the dependency that follows.

4. The Quiet Arithmetic of Dependency

Consider a composite that is invented but entirely true to life. A financial-services firm is consolidating three regional operations centres into a single processing hub — the familiar shape of a mid-decade cost programme, driven partly by margin pressure and partly by the compliance overhead that has grown heavier every year since the new reporting regime came in. The permanent programme director has stalled. An interim director is engaged at £1,050 a day. Two interim workstream leads follow, at £750 a day each, to run the migration and the new target operating model. The programme, once it is genuinely moving, takes twenty-two months.

The arithmetic is not, on its own, alarming. At roughly twenty billed days a month, the interim director costs around £460,000 across the programme; the two leads together a little over £650,000. Against a consolidation expected to remove several million pounds of annual operating cost, £1.1m of interim leadership over nearly two years reads as sound value, and at the point the new hub goes live it plainly is. The milestones are hit. The centres are merged. The business case is delivered.

Then the day rates stop, and the second, invisible arithmetic begins.

The three of them leave within a month of go-live, as interims do. What leaves with them is not the process documentation — that exists, in a shared drive, in reasonable order. What leaves is the why: the reasoning behind the forty operational decisions that are not written down anywhere because they were made in corridors and confirmed by nods; the knowledge of which of the new controls are load-bearing and which were bolted on to satisfy a nervous stakeholder and can be quietly retired; the sense of where the new model is fragile. The permanent operations managers who "supported" the programme cannot run the new hub with confidence, because they never owned the decisions that shaped it. They were beside the transformation, not inside it.

Six months on, the hub is underperforming its business case — not dramatically, but enough. The instinctive response is the one the whole essay is about: we should bring someone in. And a new interim is engaged, at a new day rate, to stabilise what the last one built. The revolving door has completed its first turn, and the second, invisible arithmetic — the cost of never having transferred the capability — has begun to dwarf the first.

| What the organisation paid for          | What it actually received                         |
|-----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Momentum on a stalled programme         | Momentum, delivered in full                       |
| A hub merged and a business case hit    | A hub merged and a business case hit              |
| A capable operation it could run itself | A capable operation it could not run without help |
| One engagement                          | The first turn of a revolving door                |

## 5. The Forces That Keep the Door Revolving

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If the pattern were simply invisible, it would be easy to fix — you would point it out and it would stop. What makes it a pattern rather than an accident is that it persists among leaders who can see it perfectly well. The forces sustaining it are structural, and worth naming individually.

The first is an accounting quirk that deserves more attention than it gets. In most organisations of any size, a permanent appointment must clear a headcount ceiling, while an interim is bought from a project or operating budget. When headcount is frozen — and in a cost programme it very often is, because freezing headcount is half the point — the paradox is stark: you may not hire the £90,000 permanent manager who could carry the capability forward, but you may readily approve the £230,000-a-year interim who cannot, because one counts against a number the board is watching and the other does not. The organisation ends up renting, at a premium, precisely the capability it has forbidden itself to own. Nobody designed this. It is an emergent property of how the numbers are kept, and it quietly biases every such decision toward the crutch.

The second force is the board's appetite for a name. A transformation in trouble creates a demand for accountability that a permanent team, diffuse and interdependent, cannot easily satisfy. An interim is a single throat to choke — a person who can be held to a milestone and, if it slips, removed without the internal wreckage of dismissing a long-serving employee. This is genuinely useful to a board, and genuinely corrosive to capability-building, at the same time. The clearer the line of individual accountability, the less the surrounding organisation feels it must own the outcome.

The third is the interim market's own incentive structure, which it would be naive to ignore. An interim's next engagement is easier to win with a reference that says indispensable than one that says left us perfectly able to carry on without her. Extensions are the normal texture of the work; a three-month brief that becomes fourteen is not a scandal but a commonplace. Most interims are honourable and many actively try to work themselves out of a job — but the current of the market runs the other way, and currents do not need bad actors to carry things downstream.

The fourth force is the most human: the rational disengagement of the permanent staff. Put competent permanent managers alongside a highly paid interim who has been given the mandate, the licence, and the board's ear, and they will, sensibly, step back. Why invest ownership in decisions you do not control and will be judged against but not credited for? Their disengagement is not sulking; it is a correct reading of the incentives. And it hollows out precisely the group who were supposed to inherit the capability.

- The headcount ceiling that forbids the cheap permanent hire but waves through the expensive contractor.
- The board's need for a single name to hold accountable.
- A market that rewards indispensability over graceful redundancy.
- The rational disengagement of the permanent staff left in the shadows.

No single one of these is a scandal. Together they form a system that reliably converts an accelerant into a crutch, and it does so quietly, decision by reasonable decision, in organisations full of intelligent people who would each, if asked, tell you they know better.

## 6. The Case for the Defence

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It would be too easy to stop there, and dishonest, because there is a serious argument on the other side and it deserves its strongest form rather than a caricature.

The case for the defence runs like this. Transformation is, by definition, temporary work. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end; when it is finished the specialist skills that delivered it are not needed at the same intensity again for years. To staff temporary work with permanent capacity is simply waste — you would be carrying, at full cost and forever, a capability the organisation needs only intermittently. Interims exist precisely because this is the efficient answer: you rent scarce, expensive, transformation-grade skill for exactly as long as you need it and no longer. The "crutch" critique, on this view, is sentimental. It mistakes the correct outsourcing of intermittent, specialist work for a failure of nerve. You do not keep a permanent bridge-building team on staff between bridges; why keep a permanent transformation cadre between transformations?

This is a good argument, and for a large part of the work it is simply correct. The specialist migration lead, the systems-cutover expert, the restructuring hand who has done thirty redundancy programmes — this is genuinely intermittent skill, and renting it is genuinely efficient. An organisation that tried to hold all of it permanently would be carrying dead weight, and the interim model is the right answer for that layer of the work. So far the defence holds completely.

Where it overreaches is in a single, smuggled step: the assumption that because the transformation is temporary, the capability it creates is temporary too. It is not. The transformation ends; the new operating model it produces has to be run, understood, adjusted, and defended for years. The skill of delivering the change is intermittent and rightly rented. The skill of owning what the change produced is permanent and must, on pain of exactly the arithmetic above, be built in-house. The defence is right that you should not keep a permanent bridge-building crew. But somebody who works for you had better understand how the bridge carries load, where it flexes, and what it must never be asked to bear — and that person cannot be rented, because the moment they leave, the understanding leaves. The error is not renting the builders. The error is renting the bridgekeeper.

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*“The skill of delivering the change is intermittent, and rightly rented. The skill of owning what the change produced is permanent, and must be built.”*

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## 7. Designing the Exit on the First Day

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If the diagnosis is that organisations buy momentum and forget to buy transfer, the remedy is not to stop using interims — that would be to throw away a genuine accelerant out of fear of its misuse. The remedy is to buy the transfer deliberately, and to buy it at the start, because a transfer designed on the last day of an engagement is a transfer that will not happen.

Four disciplines change the outcome, and none of them is exotic.

1. Name the permanent successor on the first day, not the last. Every interim engagement in a transformation should have, written into it from the outset, the

name of the permanent person who will hold the capability when the interim leaves. Not a team, not a function — a named individual, senior enough to matter, whose explicit job is to end up able to do without the interim. If that person cannot be named, that is not a detail to resolve later; it is the single most important thing the engagement has just revealed about the organisation.

2. Make shadowing a deliverable, not a courtesy. The successor should be in the corridor conversations, co-signing the decisions, and — crucially — occasionally making them while the interim watches, well before go-live. Transfer that is scheduled for the final month is theatre. Transfer that is built into every load-bearing decision along the way is real, and it is slower, and the slowness is the price of not paying the second, invisible arithmetic later.
3. Capture the why, not only the what. Process documentation records what the new model does. It almost never records why each contested decision went the way it did, which controls are load-bearing, and where the model is fragile. That reasoning is the actual asset, and it lives in the interim's head unless someone makes its extraction an explicit, resourced task — a decision log with reasons, not a folder of procedures.
4. Measure the interim on the muscle left behind. This is the one that bites, because it runs against the market's grain. The engagement's success criteria should include, alongside the milestones, an explicit test of the organisation's ability to carry on without the interim — assessed shortly after departure, not at the celebratory go-live. An interim measured only on the milestone is being paid to be indispensable. An interim measured partly on graceful redundancy is being paid to build capability, and — this matters — most good interims respond well to being asked, because it is a more dignified brief than the alternative.

None of this abolishes the interim's advantages. The successor still lacks political immunity and cross-programme pattern-recognition, and will still, for a while, be slower and more tentative than the seasoned hand beside her. That is not a reason to keep renting the seasoned hand. It is the ordinary, unavoidable cost of an organisation learning to stand — and an organisation that will not pay it is not saving money, only deferring a larger bill to the next turn of the door.

## 8. The Muscle, Not the Milestone

Return, at the end, to the relief in the room, because it is where the whole pattern begins and where it can be broken. That relief is a signal worth trusting: it tells you the interim is doing exactly what interims do well. The mistake is to treat the relief as the end of the story rather than the middle of it — to confuse the return of momentum with the building of capability, when in truth they are different things that happen to arrive together.

The gap between transformation intent and transformation reality, which every practitioner learns to live with, is rarely a gap of effort or of talent. It is more often a gap of what got measured. We measure the milestone because the milestone is legible, dated, and easy to celebrate; we do not measure the muscle left behind, because it is diffuse, deferred, and visible only in the quiet competence of an organisation that no longer needs to bring someone in. So we optimise, sincerely and repeatedly, for the thing we can see, and we are puzzled when the door keeps revolving.

The interim manager is neither hero nor villain in this. He is an accelerant, and an accelerant is defined by what it is added to. Added to an organisation that has designed its own exit, named its successor, and resolved to measure the muscle rather than only the milestone, the interim is the fastest, cleanest way to move a transformation that has stalled. Added to an organisation that has done none of those things, the same interim —

the same skill, the same day rate, the same genuine relief on arrival — becomes the crutch the organisation leans on until it forgets it ever had legs of its own. The difference is not in the interim. It never was. It is in what the organisation decided to buy.