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Perspective

BEYOND THE CV

Bought and Benched: Why Organisations Hire for Experience and Then Ignore It

The most expensive judgement in the room is usually the least consulted — a reflection on the gap between recruiting experience and actually hearing it

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1. The Warning in Week Three

Three weeks into a programme that had been eighteen months in the planning, the newly appointed delivery director said the thing no one in the room wanted to hear. The integration testing window, he observed, was roughly half of what work of this shape would need, and the dependency on the third-party billing platform would almost certainly slip. He said it without drama, in the margins of a steering committee that had convened, in effect, to congratulate itself on a clean mobilisation. It was noted. The minutes recorded it as a risk, gave it an owner and an amber rating, and moved to the next item. The go-live date had already been promised to the board.

Eleven months later the programme slipped by a quarter and absorbed something in the region of four million pounds of unplanned rework — the overwhelming majority of it traceable, line by line, to the two things raised in week three. The organisation had paid a premium of perhaps fifty thousand pounds a year, over a competent but less seasoned alternative, to bring in someone who had delivered this kind of programme twice before, precisely so that it would be warned of precisely this. It got the warning. It filed it.

I have watched versions of this play out often enough that the specifics have stopped surprising me. What still does is the economics. We spend a great deal of money and effort acquiring experience, and then we run organisations whose working habits are almost perfectly designed to ignore it. Organisations rarely fail to hire experience; they fail to receive it.

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2. What We Think We Are Buying

The last decade has taught executives to talk about people the way they talk about capital. We have a war for talent to fight, human capital to steward, high-potentials to nurture and retain, and — a worry sharpening every year now — a generation of experienced managers drifting towards retirement with a good deal of unwritten knowledge in their heads. Against that backdrop the premium we pay for experience is real and deliberate: the day rate of a seasoned programme director, the uplift on a senior hire's salary, the multiple a firm charges for its grey hair. These are prices paid, explicitly, for pattern recognition. We are not buying an extra pair of hands; junior hands are cheaper and often quicker. We are buying the judgement of someone who has seen this particular film before and remembers how it ends.

Which is what makes the next act so strange. Having paid for the judgement, the organisation proceeds to consult everything except it.

3. The Ways Experience Gets Muted

The muting is rarely a decision. No one convenes a meeting to resolve that the expensive new hire should be ignored. It happens through the ordinary grain of organisational life, and it happens in recognisable ways.

- Experience is hired as a signal, not as a voice. A senior appointment reassures a board, satisfies an auditor, and de-risks a business case on paper. The name on the organisation chart does much of its work the day it is announced. Whether the person behind it is ever genuinely consulted is a separate question the organisation has often stopped asking.

- The most valuable thing experience offers is bad news, and bad news arrives at the worst possible moment. By the time the veteran is in the room, the plan is usually committed, the date is given, and the sponsor's credibility is fused to both. Experience's first and best output — this will not work in the time you have — lands not as insight but as insubordination.

- Governance is built to manufacture consensus, not to protect dissent. A steering committee optimises for a clean status report and a united front. The person saying "we are greener than we ought to be" is friction in a machine designed to remove friction.

- We treat experience as a deliverable rather than a capability. The organisation wanted the CV — the proof that it had hired well — rather more than it wanted the contradiction the CV was supposed to bring with it. A capability that is never exercised looks, in the accounts, exactly like one that was.

- Tacit knowledge is defenceless against a confident deck. Experience often knows more than it can quickly articulate. "This feels thin" is true, important, and rhetorically hopeless against forty pages of plan. In a culture that rewards the well-evidenced case, the unquantified intuition of someone who has been burned before loses every argument — right up to the moment it is proved right.

> *“The organisation wanted the proof that it had hired well rather more than it wanted the argument it had hired for.”*

4. The Case for Not Listening

Honesty requires a turn here, because there is a serious argument on the other side, and to skip past it would be the very complacency this piece warns against.

Experience is not always right. The veteran pattern-matches to the last war and can miss the genuinely new one. "We tried that in ninety-nine and it failed" is sometimes hard-won wisdom and sometimes merely a scar standing in the way of a better idea that has since become possible. A field that deferred automatically to its most experienced members would never change; every methodology now taken for granted was once a young person's heresy against someone's accumulated certainty. Seen this way, an organisation's habit of overruling its veterans looks less like waste and more like an immune response — a healthy refusal to let the past hold a veto over the future.

There is real force in that. But it rests on a confusion between two very different things experience can be asked to do.

	Experience as veto	Experience as counsel
The question it answers	May we proceed?	What will this cost us, and where?
Its effect on the new	Blocks what it has not seen	Prices the risk of what it has not seen
The right response to it	Rightly resisted	Actively sought
Its failure mode	Ossification	Wilful blindness

An organisation is right to deny experience a veto. But that is not what it does. It does not discount the counsel and proceed with open eyes; it mutes the counsel and proceeds as though it had never been offered. There is a world of difference between weighing a warning and filing it. And the tell is simple, and damning: the organisations that ignore experience most thoroughly are usually the ones still paying the most to acquire it. If the judgement were genuinely being weighed and found wanting, you would expect them to stop buying it. They do not. They go on hiring grey hair and go on overruling it — which is not scepticism but theatre.

5. Designing to Be Told

If the failure is one of reception rather than recruitment, then more experience is not the remedy. A different relationship to the experience already in the building is. That is a matter of design, and a handful of moves do most of the work.

1. Separate the assurance voice from the delivery line. Judgement that reports to the person whose plan it must question is judgement already compromised. The experienced sceptic needs a route to the sponsor that does not run through the people whose optimism is on trial.

2. Protect one contrarian seat, explicitly. Name someone whose job in the room is to make the strongest case against the plan, and make clear that doing so is service, not sabotage. Dissent that must be smuggled in as "just playing devil's advocate" is dissent the organisation has already decided to discount.

3. Reward the prevented failure, not only the visible save. Organisations lavishly reward the hero who rescues the troubled programme and quietly overlook the veteran whose early warning meant there was no fire to fight. Until the prevented disaster carries as much credit as the survived one, experience will keep learning that its most valuable contribution is its least appreciated.

4. Ask the counterfactual early, while it can still change anything. Put the question to the experienced hire in week three, not week thirty: where does this go wrong, and what would we have to believe for your worry to be misplaced? The value of foresight collapses the moment the thing foreseen has happened.

> *The measure of whether an organisation values experience is not how much it pays to acquire it, but how uncomfortable it is prepared to let that experience make the room.*

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6. Coda

The delivery director in week three was not being difficult. He was doing the single thing he had been engaged to do, on the first occasion he had to do it. The tragedy of the four million pounds is not that nobody knew. It is that the knowing had already been bought, delivered on schedule, and set to one side. We will go on paying these premiums for as long as the war for talent lasts. Whether we ever collect on them is a question not of hiring but of humility — of building rooms able to bear the discomfort of the very people we went to such trouble to bring into them.