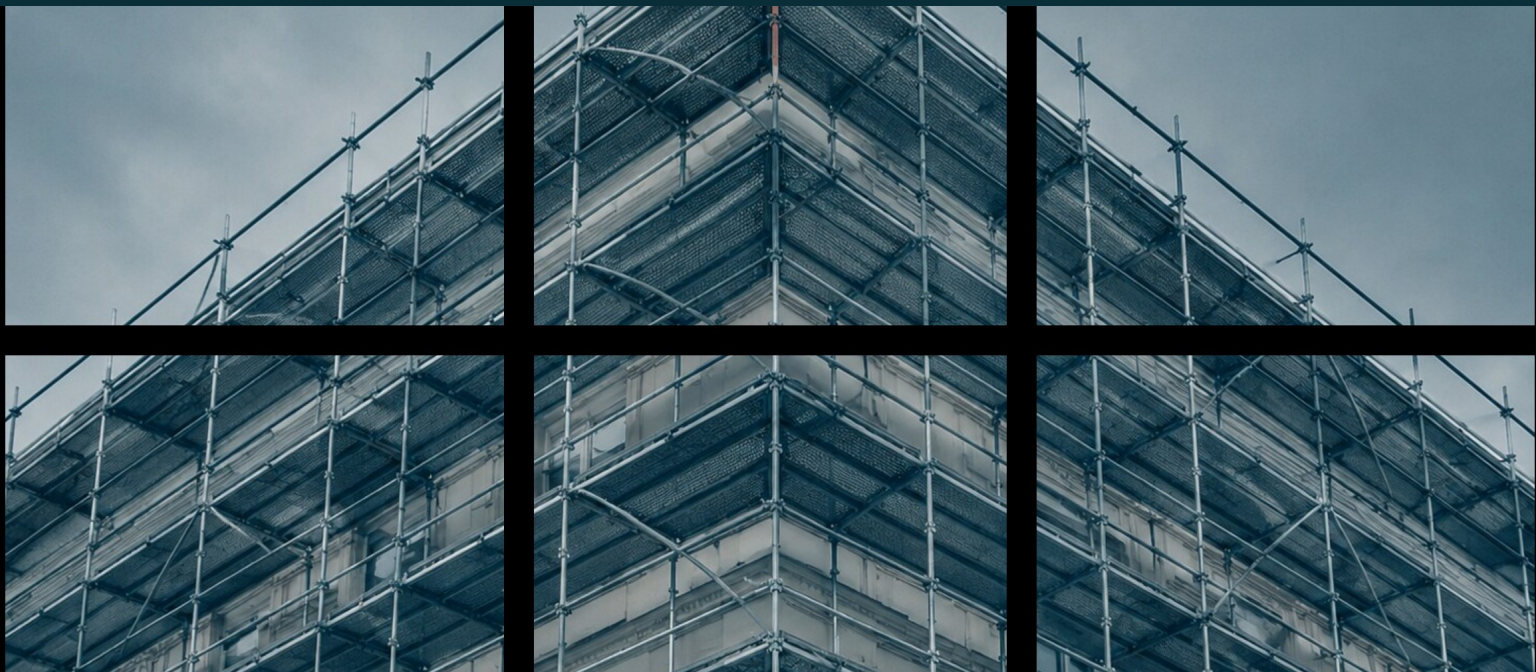


BEYOND THE APPOINTMENT

Bought and Overruled: Why Organisations Hire Experience and Then Refuse to Use It

How the judgement organisations pay a premium to acquire is quietly converted into compliance — and what that reveals about the way they truly decide



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*“The experience was purchased, delivered, recorded, and ignored,
all in good faith.”*

1. Executive Summary

Every organisation of any size pays a premium for experience. It recruits the director who has run the programme before, retains the adviser who has watched the merger unravel, and places the seasoned hand on the difficult account precisely because judgement, unlike enthusiasm, cannot be bought cheaply. And then, with remarkable consistency, it arranges matters so that this judgement changes almost nothing. The experienced voice is heard, minuted, thanked – and quietly overruled by the plan already in motion.

This essay concerns that paradox: not the failure to acquire experience, but the failure to use it. The two are routinely confused. A board congratulates itself on the calibre of an appointment and treats the hire as the achievement, when the hire is merely the invoice. What follows argues that the neglect of experience is not an accident of personality or an unlucky run of weak managers but a structural outcome – the predictable product of how organisations reward confidence over calibration, method over judgement, and momentum over doubt. Experience is most valuable when it arrives as bad news delivered early, and the modern organisation is built, almost lovingly, to defer bad news until it can no longer be denied. Understanding why reveals something uncomfortable about the distance between what organisations claim to value and how they in fact decide.

2. What is actually bought

It helps to be precise about what changes hands when experience is hired, because the confusion begins there. What the organisation is paying for is not information. Information is cheap and getting cheaper; it sits in methods, in benchmarks, in the thick binders that consultancies leave behind. What experience supplies is something the binders cannot: the capacity to recognise a situation before it has fully declared itself. The experienced practitioner knows, often without being able to fully articulate why, that a particular silence in a steering meeting means the sponsor has privately given up; that a plan with no slack in its first eight weeks will not have any in its last eight either; that the third change of scope is the one that kills the programme, not the first. This is pattern recognition assembled from having been wrong before and having paid for it.

The literature has a name for this – tacit knowledge, the knowing that exceeds what can be told – and it has been fashionable for a decade now to talk about capturing it, codifying it, moving it into systems so the organisation need not depend on the individual who holds it. Much of that effort has quietly failed, and the reason is instructive. The most valuable part of experience is not a fact that can be extracted but a judgement that must be exercised in the moment, against the grain of the specific situation. It resists capture

because it is not a possession; it is a performance. You cannot file the ability to smell a failing programme any more than you can file the ability to read a room. This is precisely why it commands a premium – and precisely why it is so easily wasted.

- It is expensive because it is scarce and slow to form.
- It is fragile because it lives in a person's judgement, not in a document.
- And it is inconvenient, because its most useful output is very often the word no.

That last property is the root of the whole problem, and the rest of this essay is really an exploration of it.

3. Experience as unwelcome news

The characteristic product of experience is the early warning. The seasoned hand's first genuinely valuable act is usually to say, in some form, this will not work in the way you currently believe it will – the timeline is fiction, the benefits are double-counted, the integration is harder than the plan admits, the organisation is not as ready as its own maturity assessment claims. This is exactly the judgement that was purchased. It is also, almost always, unwelcome.

It is unwelcome because by the time the experienced person arrives, the plan is usually already sold. A date has been given to the board. A business case has been approved on the strength of numbers that now look optimistic. Careers are attached to the commitment. Into this arrives a newcomer whose informed view is that the emperor is, if not naked, then rather more lightly dressed than advertised. The organisation asked for judgement and received it; but what it wanted, at an unspoken level, was confirmation. The gap between those two things is where experience goes to die.

I have watched this sequence play out often enough to recognise its shape before it completes. The warning is given, clearly and early. It is received with a kind of respectful deferral – thank you, that is very helpful, let us take it offline – and then absorbed into the machinery of reassurance. A workstream is created to "look into" the concern. A mitigating action is logged. The risk is added to a register, where it acquires a status colour and a nominated owner and, by that very act, is domesticated: no longer a warning, merely an item. The programme proceeds. And some months later the thing that was foretold happens, at which point there is genuine surprise, because the organisation had, in the most literal sense, filed the warning away.

An organisation does not ignore experience by refusing to listen. It ignores experience by listening, documenting, and then converting the judgement into a managed item – at which point the judgement has been neutralised while everyone can honestly say it was heard.

4. The forces that sustain the pattern

If this were simply a matter of stubborn managers, it would not recur so reliably across organisations that share almost nothing else. It recurs because several structural forces push in the same direction, and each of them is, in isolation, defensible.

The first is the sovereignty of method. We are living through the high tide of process orthodoxy: the maturity model, the staged gate, the accredited methodology, the playbook that promises repeatable delivery if only it is followed faithfully. There is real value in all of it. But method has a quiet side effect — it relocates authority from the person to the procedure. When the process is sovereign, the experienced individual is demoted from a source of judgement to a mere operator of the method, and their most valuable contribution — the judgement that this is one of the cases where the standard approach will not hold — is precisely the contribution the method has no slot for. The gate asks whether the documents are complete, not whether the person who completed them believes the plan.

The second is the inversion of seniority and standing. Experience hired from outside arrives with authority on paper and none in practice. The organisation's real memory — its map of who actually decides and which commitments are load-bearing — belongs to the incumbents. The newcomer can see what should be done and yet lack any means to make it happen, because knowing the right answer and being able to move the organisation are entirely different capabilities, and only the second is conferred by tenure. Some of the most experienced people I have watched enter an organisation were, in their first year, also among the most powerless — correct, and unable to act on it.

The third is the asymmetry of accountability. Experience speaks in probabilities: programmes of this shape fail in this way about half the time, and here is the tell. Governance, however, rewards confident commitment and punishes calibrated doubt. The manager who promises delivery by the date is advanced; the one who says the date is unsafe is marked as negative, not a team player, insufficiently can-do. When the confident manager's programme fails, the failure is diffused across circumstance and shared ownership; when the cautious one's caution proves right, there is rarely any reward, because averted disasters leave no evidence behind them. The incentive structure quietly selects for the temperament least able to use experience well.

1. Method is trusted over the person, so judgement has no channel.
2. Standing is held by incumbents, so the experienced outsider cannot act.
3. Confidence is rewarded over calibration, so warnings carry a career cost.
4. Averted failures are invisible, so good judgement never accrues credit.

The fourth force is the most human. Listening has a half-life. The experienced hire is heard most attentively in the first weeks, during the honeymoon in which their outsider's clarity is still novel and welcome. As the months pass they are absorbed — invited onto the committees, given the objectives, folded into the culture that hired them — until their judgement, once bracing, has been sanded down to fit the prevailing view. Going native is not a failure of character; it is the organisation working exactly as designed, converting a source of dissent into a member of the team. The very success of the appointment, socially, erodes its value professionally.

5. What it looks like on the ground

Let me make this concrete, because the pattern is easiest to see at close range. Picture a consolidation programme of the kind common in this decade: three regional back offices, each with its own systems grown up over fifteen years, to be merged onto a single platform with a go-live date already announced to the group board. An experienced programme director is brought in, at considerable cost, specifically because the last such consolidation overran by a year and everyone would prefer to avoid a repeat.

In the first month the director does what experience prompts: rather than accept the migration plan, they pull a sample of the source data. Of five hundred customer records examined by hand across the three regions, some twenty-two per cent carry broken or non-conforming address fields, and around nine per cent appear to be duplicates of an identity already held under a slightly different name elsewhere in the estate. Extrapolated across roughly 1.4 million records, that is not a data-cleansing task that can be squeezed into the six-week window the plan allots between system freeze and go-live; it is a programme in its own right, and it needs either a later date or a descoping of the first release. The director says so, in writing, with the numbers attached, in month one.

The response is entirely characteristic. Nobody disputes the figures. But the date has been given to the board, and the cost of moving it is a conversation no sponsor wishes to have, so the concern is routed into a "data readiness workstream" and assigned an amber status. The workstream produces a plan to cleanse the data in parallel with everything else — which is to say it produces a document rather than the eighteen weeks of effort the data actually requires. Go-live proceeds on the original date. Within a fortnight the contact centre cannot reliably locate customers, because their records have merged badly or not at all; complaint volumes climb; a manual workaround is stood up at roughly three times the cost of the cleansing that was declined; and the date, having been protected so carefully, is effectively lost anyway, several months later and far more expensively than if it had simply been moved at the start.

The instructive part is not that the director was right. It is that the organisation held, in its own files, a correct and quantified warning from a person it had paid a premium to provide exactly that — and its operating model converted the warning into an amber line on a register and carried on. Nothing was hidden. Everything was documented. The experience was purchased, delivered, recorded, and ignored, all in good faith.

6. The strongest case for overruling

It would be too easy to end there, with experience cast as the wronged prophet and the organisation as the fool who would not listen. The honest difficulty is that organisations are sometimes right to override the experienced voice, and any account that cannot admit as much is not worth trusting.

Experience has real failure modes. It over-fits: the veteran who once watched an approach fail can spend the rest of a career fighting that particular last war, applying a lesson learned in one context to a situation that only superficially resembles it. It can calcify into a settled pessimism that mistakes every new idea for an old mistake, and thereby resists change that is genuinely warranted. It can be a sophisticated cover for self-interest — I have seen this fail before is a wonderfully unfalsifiable way to defend a status quo that happens to suit the person defending it. And the experienced outsider genuinely does lack the institutional knowledge the incumbents hold; sometimes the plan that looks naïve from outside rests on context the newcomer has not yet earned the right to see. An organisation that deferred automatically to whoever had the greyest hair would make decisions at least as poor as one that ignored them entirely.

So the fault is not that organisations override experience. Sometimes they must. The fault is that they possess no reliable means of telling a warranted override from a reflexive one. They dismiss the stale veteran and the acute newcomer by exactly the same mechanism — the register, the deferral, the reassuring workstream — because that mechanism does not actually engage with the judgement at all; it merely processes it. An organisation that could distinguish the two would be doing something genuinely difficult: weighing the

specific claim on its merits, in the moment, against its own plan. That is hard, and slow, and uncomfortable, and it is exactly the work the machinery of reassurance exists to avoid.

What experience offers	What the operating model rewards
Early, probabilistic warning	Late, definite evidence
Calibrated doubt	Confident commitment
Judgement of the specific case	Faithful application of the method
The word no, said in month one	The word yes, said until month nine

7. What the gap reveals

Set the intent beside the behaviour and the contradiction is stark. Organisations are not lying when they say they value experience; they demonstrate it with money, which is the least ambiguous signal they possess. The intent is real. But intent operates at the level of speeches and hiring decisions, while the fate of experience is settled far below that, in the daily texture of how meetings run, how risks are handled, how careers are made and lost. An organisation is not what it announces; it is what its mechanisms do by default. And by default, this one's mechanisms take the expensive judgement it has just acquired and convert it into documented reassurance – the amber status, the mitigating action, the workstream – because reassurance is what allows momentum to continue, and momentum is what the whole apparatus is tuned to protect.

This is why the neglect of experience belongs in any honest discussion of why transformation so often disappoints. We tend to explain that gap in terms of capability – the wrong method, the missing skills, the immature organisation – and prescribe more of what the organisation already has in surplus: more process, more governance, more assurance. But a great deal of the gap is not a shortfall of capability at all. It is the systematic discounting of the judgement already present in the room, purchased and then declined. The experience was there. It said the useful thing. The organisation was structurally unable to let it land.

“The measure of an organisation is not whether it can hire people who know better, but whether it can bear to be told so in time to act.”

8. The test that matters

If there is a single diagnostic worth carrying away, it is this. The question of whether an organisation can genuinely use experience is not answered by its recruitment or its rates of pay. It is answered by watching what happens the first time a credible, expensive, experienced voice says something the organisation does not want to hear, early enough that acting on it would still be inconvenient. Does the judgement change the plan, or does

it change into an item on a register?

Almost everything else is theatre. An organisation can hire brilliantly, pay generously, and speak movingly about the value of grey hair, and still be, in its bones, an apparatus for converting inconvenient judgement into manageable documentation. The rarer thing — the genuinely difficult thing — is to build the small number of moments in which the machinery of reassurance is deliberately switched off and a senior person's uncomfortable no is allowed to do the one thing it was purchased to do: stop something, in time.

The experience is almost always already in the building. The question is never whether you have bought it. It is whether, on the day it tells you something you would rather not hear, you have built anything capable of listening.

That is a harder capability to acquire than any hire, because it cannot be recruited from outside. It has to be practised, uncomfortably, from within — and it begins with the modest, unwelcome discipline of noticing how often the last warning we filed away turned out, months later, to have been right.