



BEYOND RENTING CAPABILITY

Build What You Keep Buying

A Practitioner's Perspective on Ending the Consulting Dependency Cycle in
Organisational Transformation

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“Speed of mobilisation is not speed of change.”

1. The Bargain We Stopped Questioning

There is a bargain at the heart of modern transformation that almost no one questions any more. It runs like this: when an organisation faces a change too large or too unfamiliar to manage with the people it has, it buys the capability it lacks. It engages a firm. The firm brings method, pace, and — most valuable of all — reassurance. The change is delivered, or at least declared delivered, and the firm departs, leaving behind a revised operating model, a stack of well-produced slides, and an invoice.

Stated once, plainly, the bargain sounds like prudence. Stated a hundred times, across a decade of programmes, it reveals what it has quietly become: a dependency. Organisations no longer buy consulting to close a capability gap they have honestly assessed. Many buy it because they have forgotten how to do anything else — and, worse, have built themselves so that forgetting is rational.

This is a manifesto against that forgetting.

The problem is not that organisations use consultants. The problem is that so many have organised themselves so that they must.

2. The Cycle, Named

Dependency is not a single decision. It is a loop, and it turns a little faster with every rotation. Once you have seen it run three or four times in the same organisation, its mechanics are unmistakable.

1. A change arrives that feels beyond the current team — new, large, politically charged, or simply unfamiliar.
2. Rather than ask whether the team could rise to it with support, leadership reaches for the reflex that carries no career risk: bring in a name.
3. The firm arrives, staffs the programme with its own people, and — reasonably, from its point of view — runs it its way, on its templates, through its governance.
4. Delivery happens around the organisation rather than through it. The client's own people are cast as subject-matter donors and backfill, not owners.

5. The firm leaves. The method leaves with it. The slideware stays; the muscle does not.
6. The next change arrives, and the organisation — now measurably less able than before — reaches for the phone again.

Each turn of that loop is defended as a discrete, sensible act. That is precisely what makes it dangerous. No one ever decides to become dependent. They simply make the same locally reasonable choice until the capacity to choose otherwise has withered.

3. Why It Persists — Follow the Incentives

If this cycle were merely a mistake, it would correct itself. It persists because it pays — for almost everyone in the room except the organisation itself.

- The provider is rewarded for the follow-on, not the exit. A firm that genuinely transferred its capability and made itself unnecessary would be optimising for its own redundancy. Few commercial models survive that. The incentive is to embed, to extend, to leave a gap shaped exactly like the next engagement.
- The sponsoring executive is buying insurance as much as delivery. If an internal team fails, the failure is theirs. If a respected firm fails, the decision to hire it was defensible. Dependency, from a career-risk standpoint, is a hedge.
- The internal team learns the lesson the system teaches: that the interesting, career-defining work goes to outsiders, and their role is to keep the lights on and hand over context. The most capable leave. The dependency deepens.

“Knowledge transfer is the clause every contract contains and almost no programme honours — because no one whose incentives matter is measured on whether it happened.”

The knowledge-transfer clause deserves particular scorn. It appears in nearly every statement of work. It is nearly always the first thing sacrificed when the timeline tightens, precisely because it is the one deliverable with no external audience and no one internally empowered to insist on it. It is theatre. We should stop pretending otherwise.

4. The Economics Do Not Say What We Think

The usual defence of the cycle is economic: building capability is slow and expensive, buying it is fast and flexible. Look closely and the arithmetic inverts.

Day rates are visible, and so we manage them. The far larger cost is invisible: the compounding atrophy of an organisation that has outsourced its own learning. A

capability built once serves every future programme at near-zero marginal cost. A capability rented is paid for again, in full, every single time the need recurs – and the need always recurs, because renting guarantees it will.

Dimension	Buy to Deliver (the cycle)	Buy to Build (the alternative)
What is purchased	Someone else's execution	The organisation's own future capability
Where the work happens	Around the organisation	Through it, deliberately
Who owns the method afterwards	The departing firm	The retained team
Cost profile	Recurrs in full, every time	Falls with each cycle
The provider's incentive	To remain necessary	To become unnecessary
What is left behind	Slides	People who can do it again

The point is not that external help is never worth its price. It frequently is. The point is that we have been measuring the wrong side of the ledger – counting the day rate and ignoring the dependency it purchases.

5. The Myth of Speed

The most seductive defence of the cycle is speed. There is no time to build, the argument runs; the board wants movement this quarter, the regulator is waiting, the competitor is moving. Bring in the people who can start on Monday.

It is true that a firm can start faster. It is not true that the organisation arrives anywhere faster as a result. Speed of mobilisation is not speed of change. A programme that races ahead on borrowed capability reaches its milestones on schedule and then stalls the moment that capability withdraws – because nothing durable was laid down underneath the pace. The organisation has moved quickly to a place it cannot hold.

The pattern that recurs is a transformation that looks triumphant at go-live and hollow at the first anniversary: the new operating model degrades, the new processes are worked around, the new system is used at a fraction of its design intent – because the people who were meant to own it were never built into owning it. Speed bought this way is a loan, and the interest is paid in the quiet unravelling that no one attributes to the original decision. Real speed is the ability to make the next change faster than the last. By that measure, the cycle makes organisations slower with every turn.

6. What This Manifesto Actually Demands

Rejecting the cycle does not mean rejecting help. It means changing what we buy, and how we hold those we buy it from to account. The prevailing model is buy to deliver. The model we need is buy to build. The distinction is not rhetorical; it changes everything about how an engagement is designed, staffed, and judged.

- Make capability the deliverable, not a by-product. If, at the end of an engagement, the organisation cannot do the thing again without the firm, the engagement has failed — regardless of what was shipped. Write that into the contract as the primary outcome, and refuse to let it be the first thing cut.
- Staff the client into the core, not the margins. Every external expert should be shadowed by someone internal whose explicit job is to be able to replace them. That shadow role is not a cost to be trimmed under pressure; it is the entire point.
- Pay for the exit, not the extension. Structure commercials so that the provider is rewarded for leaving a self-sufficient organisation behind — and genuinely worse off for cultivating dependency. Incentives shape behaviour far more reliably than intentions do.
- Commission like a buyer of capability, not a buyer of relief. The executive's job is not to make the discomfort go away by handing it to someone credible. It is to ask, every time: are we buying our way out of this problem, or buying our way out of ever having to learn it?

The test of a transformation is not what was delivered while the firm was in the building. It is what the organisation can still do six months after the firm has left.

7. The Argument We Need to Have

None of this is an attack on consultants. The best of them know all of this better than their clients do, and many would welcome a market that rewarded them for building rather than embedding. The failure is one of commissioning, of governance, of the quiet institutional cowardice that finds it easier to rent competence than to grow it.

An organisation that cannot change without renting the ability to do so has not bought a solution. It has bought a subscription to its own helplessness. The invoice for that subscription never stops arriving, and its true price is not counted in day rates but in the slow forgetting of how to act on its own behalf.

The argument we need to have is not whether to use external help. It is whether we are willing to buy in a way that ends the cycle instead of feeding it — whether we have the nerve to treat our own capability as the thing worth paying for. Until we do, we will keep buying, at ever-rising cost, exactly what we already had the means to build.