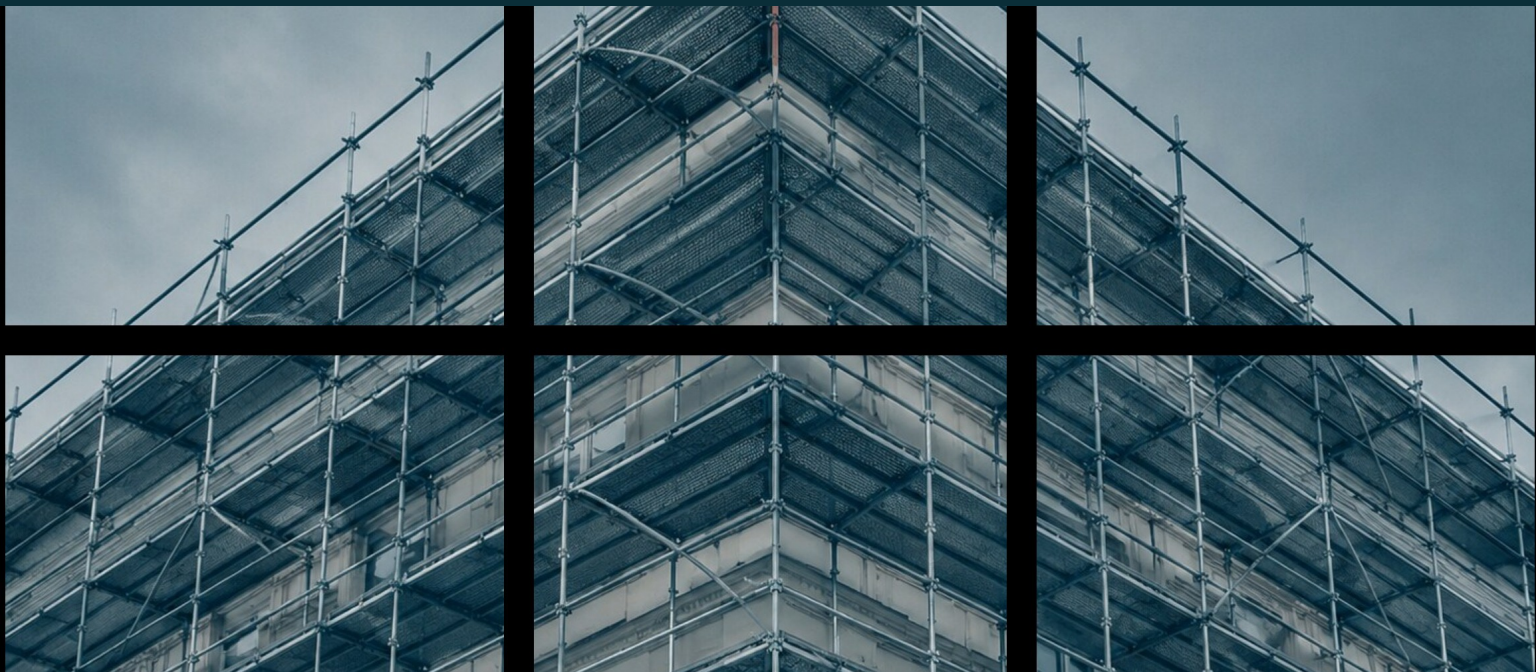


BEYOND THE QUICK FIX

Interim Management as Transformation Accelerator — or Crutch

A Practitioner's Perspective on the Role of Interim Leaders in Organisational Transformation



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1. Executive Summary

The interim management market has grown substantially over the past decade, and nowhere more visibly than in transformation programmes. Organisations that lack the internal leadership capacity to drive complex change increasingly turn to experienced interim managers – senior practitioners who can parachute into a role, take hold of a troubled programme or a stalled change initiative, and deliver results within a compressed timeframe.

The logic is compelling. Interims bring experience the organisation does not have, operate without the political entanglements that constrain permanent staff, and can be deployed and released with a flexibility that permanent hires cannot match. At their best, they accelerate transformation in ways that would otherwise take years of internal development.

But there is a darker pattern. This essay argues that the same structural features that make interim managers effective accelerators also make them potent creators of dependency. The very qualities that enable an interim to drive rapid change – their independence, their pace, their willingness to make decisions that permanent staff will not – can, if poorly managed, hollow out the organisation's own leadership capacity and create a cycle in which the organisation becomes less capable of leading its own transformation with each successive interim engagement.

The essay explores this tension through its structural roots, its most common manifestations, and the practices that distinguish engagements where interims genuinely accelerate from those where they become a crutch.

2. The Rise of the Interim in Transformation

The growth of interim management as a discipline reflects a genuine structural need. Organisations embarking on transformation programmes frequently discover that they lack the leadership capacity to drive the change they have committed to. The skills required to lead transformation – the ability to hold ambiguity, to make decisions with incomplete information, to manage political complexity while maintaining delivery momentum – are not the same skills that built the existing leadership team. Those leaders rose through operational excellence, functional expertise, or relationship management. Transformation demands something different, and the gap is real.

Interim managers fill this gap. They arrive with a track record of leading change in other organisations, a toolkit honed across multiple sectors and contexts, and a psychological freedom that comes from not needing the organisation's approval for their long-term career. They can challenge, confront, and decide in ways that permanent leaders often cannot, because the political consequences that constrain permanent staff do not apply to someone who will leave in six or twelve months.

This is the acceleration case, and it is legitimate. The pattern I have observed across many organisations is that a well-chosen interim can compress the early phases of transformation – the diagnosis, the design, the initial mobilisation – from months to weeks. They cut through the organisational paralysis that often accompanies the early stages of change, when the need for action is clear but no one is quite willing to be the first to act.

3. The Structural Forces Behind Dependency

The problem is not that interims are used, but that the way they are used creates structural dependencies that are difficult to reverse. Several forces contribute to this pattern.

The competence gap widens rather than narrows. When an interim takes hold of a transformation workstream, they bring a level of competence that the permanent organisation typically cannot match. This is, of course, the point. But the effect is that the organisation's own leaders are relieved of the challenge – and therefore of the learning – that the transformation would have forced upon them. The interim does the difficult work, makes the difficult decisions, and navigates the difficult politics. The permanent leaders observe, sometimes participate, but do not develop. When the interim departs, the gap between what the organisation needs and what its permanent leaders can provide has not narrowed; in many cases, it has widened.

The pace creates dependence, not capability. Interims operate at a pace that the permanent organisation cannot sustain. They work longer hours, tolerate less process, and make decisions faster because their mandate is time-bounded and their incentive is to deliver visible results before they leave. This pace is exhilarating and productive while the interim is present, but it sets a tempo that the permanent organisation cannot maintain. When the interim departs, the pace collapses – not because the permanent staff are lazy or incompetent, but because the interim's pace was built on a set of conditions (autonomy, seniority, freedom from operational responsibility) that the permanent organisation does not replicate.

The political clearing is temporary. One of the most valued qualities of an interim is their ability to cut through organisational politics. They can name uncomfortable truths, challenge entrenched positions, and force decisions that permanent staff have been avoiding for years. But the political landscape the interim clears tends to grow back. The power dynamics, the competing interests, the protective behaviours that the interim overrode – these are structural features of the organisation, not personal failings of its leaders. When the interim leaves, the political undergrowth returns, often thicker than before, because the interim's interventions created resentments and anxieties that now lack an outlet.

The succession gap. Perhaps the most damaging structural force is the failure to plan for succession. When an interim is engaged, the implicit assumption is that by the time they leave, either the transformation will be complete (optimistic) or a permanent leader will

have been identified and developed to take over (rarely planned). In practice, neither condition is usually met. The transformation is mid-stream, no successor has been prepared, and the organisation faces an unenviable choice: extend the interim (at increasing cost and with diminishing returns), engage another interim (resetting relationships and learning), or hand the work to a permanent leader who is unprepared for it.

4. The Crutch Cycle

These structural forces combine to create what might be called the crutch cycle – a self-reinforcing pattern in which each interim engagement makes the next one more likely.

The cycle works as follows. The organisation identifies a transformation need that exceeds its internal leadership capacity. An interim is engaged and delivers results. The permanent organisation's leaders, relieved of the challenge, do not develop. The interim departs, and the organisation discovers that it still lacks the capacity it needed. Another interim is engaged, and the cycle repeats.

With each iteration, the organisation's confidence in its own leaders diminishes. The board and the executive team come to associate effective transformation leadership with the qualities that interims bring – pace, decisiveness, political independence – and to doubt that their permanent leaders can develop these qualities. This becomes self-fulfilling: permanent leaders who are never given the opportunity to lead transformation never develop the ability to do so, confirming the belief that interims are necessary.

The financial cost of this cycle is significant but secondary. The deeper cost is organisational: the systematic erosion of internal leadership capability in exactly the domain where the organisation most needs it. Each interim engagement that fails to develop permanent capability is not a solution but a deferral – and the deferred problem grows larger with each cycle.

5. What Genuine Acceleration Looks Like

The pattern described above is common but not inevitable. In my experience, a minority of interim engagements do genuinely accelerate transformation without creating dependency. What distinguishes them is not the quality of the interim – though that matters – but the way the engagement is structured and governed.

The mandate includes succession from day one. In effective engagements, the interim's brief explicitly includes the identification and development of a permanent successor. This is not a transition activity scheduled for the final weeks; it is a core objective that shapes how the interim works throughout the engagement. The interim is evaluated not only on what they deliver but on the readiness of the permanent leader who will take over.

The interim works with, not instead of, the permanent organisation. Rather than taking full ownership of the transformation workstream, the interim operates as a coach-practitioner – doing the work while simultaneously developing the permanent team's ability to do it. This is harder and slower than simply taking charge, and it requires an interim who is comfortable sharing control and tolerating the messiness of learning. Not all interims can or will work this way, and organisations need to select for this quality explicitly.

The test of a successful interim engagement is not what the interim achieved while they were present, but what the organisation can sustain after they leave.

The engagement length is fixed and non-negotiable. One of the most reliable predictors of dependency is the extended engagement — the interim who was supposed to stay six months and is still there after two years. Effective engagements set a hard end date and structure the work to meet it. This creates urgency around capability transfer and prevents the comfortable drift into permanent dependency.

The organisation invests in its own leaders in parallel. The most effective organisations use the interim period as an intensive development window for their permanent leaders. While the interim handles the acute transformation challenges, the organisation invests in building the leadership capabilities that will be needed after the interim departs. This might mean formal development programmes, structured exposure to transformation challenges, mentoring relationships, or secondments to other organisations where transformation is further advanced.

6. The Uncomfortable Economics

There is an economic dimension to the interim dependency problem that is rarely discussed openly. Interim managers are expensive — significantly more expensive per day than permanent staff. This premium is justified by the argument that interims bring skills the organisation cannot otherwise access, and that their temporary nature means the cost is bounded.

But the crutch cycle undermines this economic logic. When one engagement follows another, the cumulative cost of interim management can exceed what the organisation would have spent developing its own leaders. The premium that was justified for a six-month engagement becomes difficult to defend when the organisation has been paying it continuously for three years, with no end in sight.

More troublingly, the money spent on interims is money not spent on permanent leadership development. Every pound invested in an interim is a pound that could have been invested in building the internal capability that would make interims unnecessary. The allocation is understandable — the interim delivers visible results now, while leadership development pays off over years — but its long-term effect is to perpetuate the very gap it was meant to fill.

7. The Role of the Commissioning Organisation

The interim dependency problem is not primarily a problem caused by interims. It is a problem caused by the way organisations commission, manage, and govern interim engagements. The responsibility lies squarely with the commissioning organisation, and specifically with the senior leaders who define the terms of the engagement.

Effective commissioning begins with an honest assessment of why the interim is needed. If the answer is "we lack the internal capability to lead this transformation," then the commissioning brief must address not only the immediate delivery challenge but the underlying capability gap. An engagement that delivers the transformation but does not

close the capability gap has succeeded tactically but failed strategically.

The commissioning organisation must also be willing to accept a different kind of interim engagement — one that is slower, messier, and less visibly decisive than the traditional model. An interim who is developing permanent leaders while delivering results will not move as fast or as cleanly as one who simply takes charge. The board must understand and accept this trade-off, and must resist the temptation to judge the engagement solely on short-term delivery metrics.

The organisation that hires an interim to lead transformation without also investing in developing its own transformation leaders has made a decision, whether consciously or not, to remain dependent.

8. The Interim's Own Responsibility

While the structural forces described in this essay are primarily the commissioning organisation's to manage, the interim manager is not without responsibility. The best interims understand the dependency risk and actively work to mitigate it. They resist the temptation to become indispensable. They share their methods, explain their decisions, and invest time in developing the people around them, even when this slows their own delivery.

The interim who makes themselves indispensable has not succeeded; they have created the very dependency the organisation hired them to break. This is a difficult truth, because the market rewards interims who deliver impressive results, and the most impressive results often come from interims who take full control. The interim who shares control, develops others, and delivers somewhat less dramatic results in the short term is making a choice that the market does not always reward but that the organisation desperately needs.

9. Looking Forward

The interim management market will continue to grow, because the structural need it serves is real and, if anything, intensifying. Organisations face more complex transformation challenges, more concurrent change programmes, and more acute leadership capability gaps than ever before. The interim model is not going away, nor should it.

But the model must mature. The current pattern — in which interims are engaged primarily for their delivery capability and the question of lasting capability transfer is left to chance — is producing a generation of organisations that are simultaneously more dependent on external leadership and less capable of developing their own. This is not a sustainable trajectory.

The shift required is not dramatic but it is fundamental. It requires organisations to commission interim engagements that are explicitly designed to build permanent capability, not just deliver temporary results. It requires interims to accept a broader definition of success — one that includes what the organisation can do after they leave, not just what it achieved while they were present. And it requires the interim management

industry to develop models, methodologies, and incentive structures that support this broader definition.

The question is not whether organisations should use interim managers to accelerate transformation. They should, and they will. The question is whether they will use them in a way that builds the muscle the organisation needs, or in a way that atrophies it further. The answer to that question will determine whether the interim management model becomes a genuine force for organisational development or remains, for too many organisations, an expensive and ultimately self-defeating crutch.