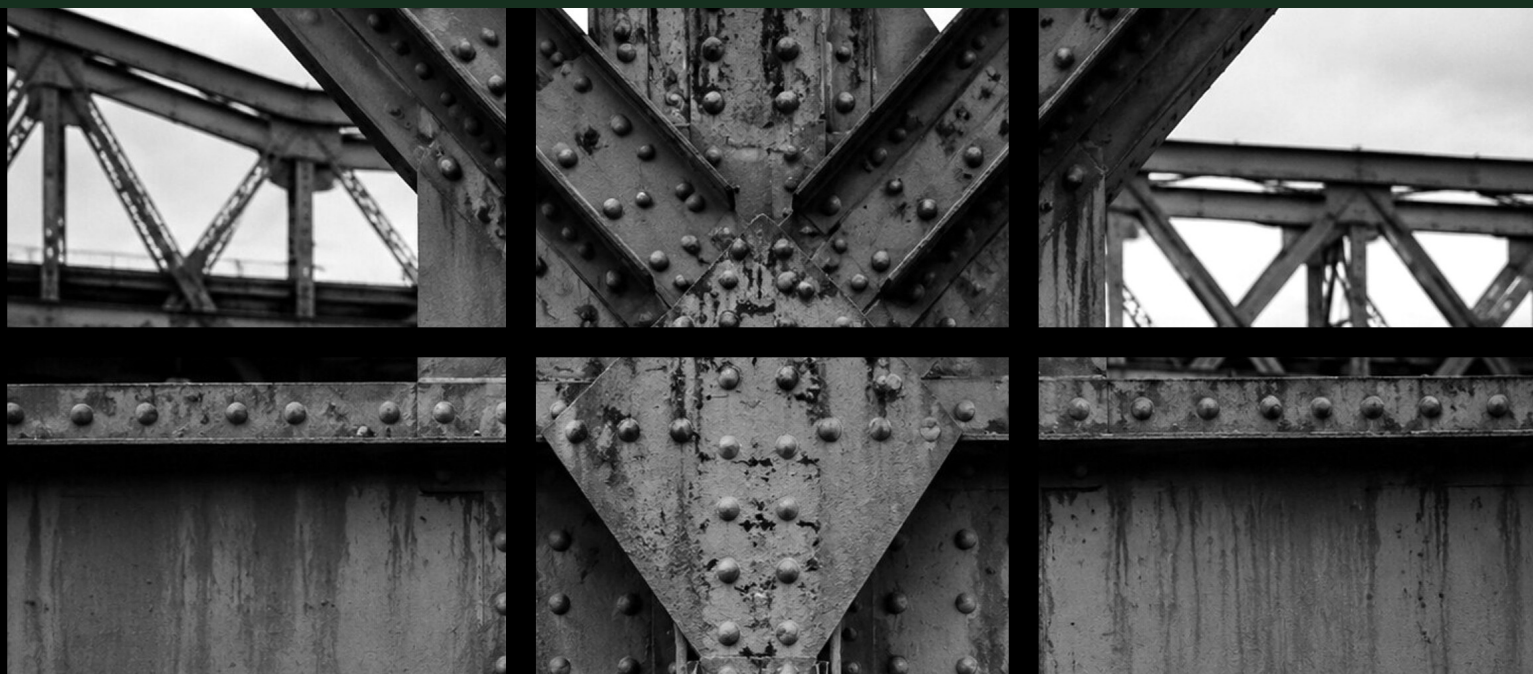


BEYOND THE SLA

Managing the Contract Is Not Managing the Delivery

How the outsourcing wave rewrote the programme manager's job — and why the profession mistook the new job for the old one



Managing the Contract Is Not Managing the Delivery

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“An intelligent client that cannot read the delivery is just a client.”

1. The Report Was Green

The steering committee meets quarterly, and on the morning in question every line on the programme manager's status report was green, or the confident amber that resolves to green by the next meeting. Service levels met. Milestones on the plan. The supplier's monthly report reconciled to the penny. The committee nodded, approved the next release gate, and moved to any other business. Six weeks later the release failed — not narrowly, but in the way that costs a quarter and a reputation — and in the post-mortem a single fact stood out. At no point in that meeting could the programme manager have told you the true state of the build, because he had never seen it. He had seen the supplier's account of it. The status was green because the report was green, and the report was green because the contract obliged the supplier to report, and the supplier reported green.

This is the defining failure of programme management in the outsourcing era: the quiet substitution of contract administration for delivery leadership, and the profession's failure to notice the substitution because, on a status slide, the two are indistinguishable.

2. The Job Changed and No One Announced It

Five years ago the programme manager stood among the people doing the work. He could walk to a developer's desk, look at what was on the screen, and form his own judgement about whether the thing was going to work. The knowledge of the delivery and the management of the delivery lived in the same person.

Outsourcing severed them. The work now sits with a supplier, and the programme manager's day has filled instead with the master services agreement, the statement of work, the change-control log, the schedule of service credits, the monthly service review. These are real skills and they are not trivial to do well. But they are, in truth, procurement skills wearing a delivery title. Nobody circulated a memo announcing that the job had changed; it changed underneath us, one contract at a time. And the professional frameworks we lean on — even the newer programme guidance — still describe a role that leads delivery, while the actual working day has become one of administering a contract and hoping delivery is happening on the other side of it.

3. What a Contract Can and Cannot Carry

A contract is a powerful instrument, but it is powerful only over the things that can be written down in advance. It can specify outputs, service levels, and the remedies that follow a breach. What it cannot capture is precisely the part that matters most in delivery:

the judgement calls, the integration seams where two suppliers' work has to meet, the accumulating sense that an architecture is heading for a wall. No one writes a service level for is this actually going to work, because it cannot be reduced to a threshold in a schedule.

This is why the service-level agreement is a lagging proxy for delivery, never a substitute for it. It reports the month just gone — availability was 99.3 per cent, tickets closed within target — and tells you nothing about the wall the design is quietly approaching, because that was never a measured term. Worse, the remedy the contract offers is compensation, not prevention.

“A service credit is a receipt for a failure you have already suffered.”

By the time a credit falls due, the outcome the programme existed to protect is already lost. The contract will make you whole in cash and leave you ruined in delivery.

4. The Green That Means Red

When the programme manager's only window into delivery is the supplier's self-report, the colour on the slide stops meaning "on track" and starts meaning "the supplier says on track". These are not the same claim, and the gap between them is where programmes die. The supplier's rational incentive is to hold green for as long as green is plausible; red invites scrutiny, service credits, and awkward conversations, so red is deferred to the last responsible moment and often past it. A programme manager who cannot independently test the report has no way to tell the honest green from the hopeful one — until the hopeful green turns red on its own schedule, by which time the runway to recover has gone.

I have watched a programme hold green to within three weeks of a go-live it then missed by four months. The warning signs were real and they were all present — but they were in the build, in the integration test failures the delivery team was quietly re-running, in the defect trend nobody had asked to see. None of them were in the report, because the report contained only what the contract required the supplier to put there. The programme manager was not deceived so much as under-equipped: he was reading the one document that could not, by its nature, tell him what he most needed to know.

5. The Objection: Isn't This Just Specialisation?

The strongest reply to all this is worth stating plainly, because it is a good one. Of course the programme manager manages through the supplier — that is the entire point of outsourcing, and the essence of what we have come to call the intelligent client. You cannot personally inspect every line of work at scale; you delegate, you hold the supplier to account through the instrument built for the purpose, and to demand that the programme manager retain hands-on delivery knowledge is nostalgia for a co-located world that no longer exists. Specialisation is efficient. Let the programme manager specialise in the commercial relationship and trust the supplier, the specialist, to deliver.

The objection conflates two different things: delegating the work, and delegating the knowing. You can — and at scale you must — delegate the doing. But the outcome does not delegate. It remains yours, by the definition of the role; a programme manager is the person accountable for the outcome whether or not a supplier holds the pen. And you cannot own an outcome you have no independent means of assessing.

You can delegate the doing; you cannot delegate the outcome, and you cannot own an outcome you have no independent means of assessing.

The intelligent client earns the adjective precisely because it keeps enough delivery literacy to test what it is told — not because it has swapped delivery judgement for contract management. An intelligent client that cannot read the delivery is just a client.

6. What the Delivery-Literate Programme Manager Keeps

None of this is a call to do the work yourself; that ship has sailed and it was right to let it go. It is a call to retain the capacity to know. In practice that means keeping enough technical judgement to ask the question the report is arranged to avoid. It means insisting on your own line of sight into the build — the defect trends, the test results, the integration state — and not only the supplier's monthly summary of them. It means treating the service-level agreement as the floor of your assurance and never the ceiling, and measuring the supplier against the outcome you actually need rather than only the service levels you happened to be able to write down.

The contract governs the relationship. It was never meant to be the whole of your knowledge of the programme, and the moment we allowed it to become so, we started shipping green reports over red deliveries.

The outsourcing wave has produced a generation of programme managers fluent in the language of contracts and less fluent than it realises in the language of delivery. We have mistaken the ability to manage a supplier for the ability to deliver an outcome, because on a green status slide the two look identical — right up to the moment they do not. The programme manager who is still standing in five years' time will be the one who can read the delivery beneath the report, and who never forgot that the outcome was never something a contract could carry on his behalf.