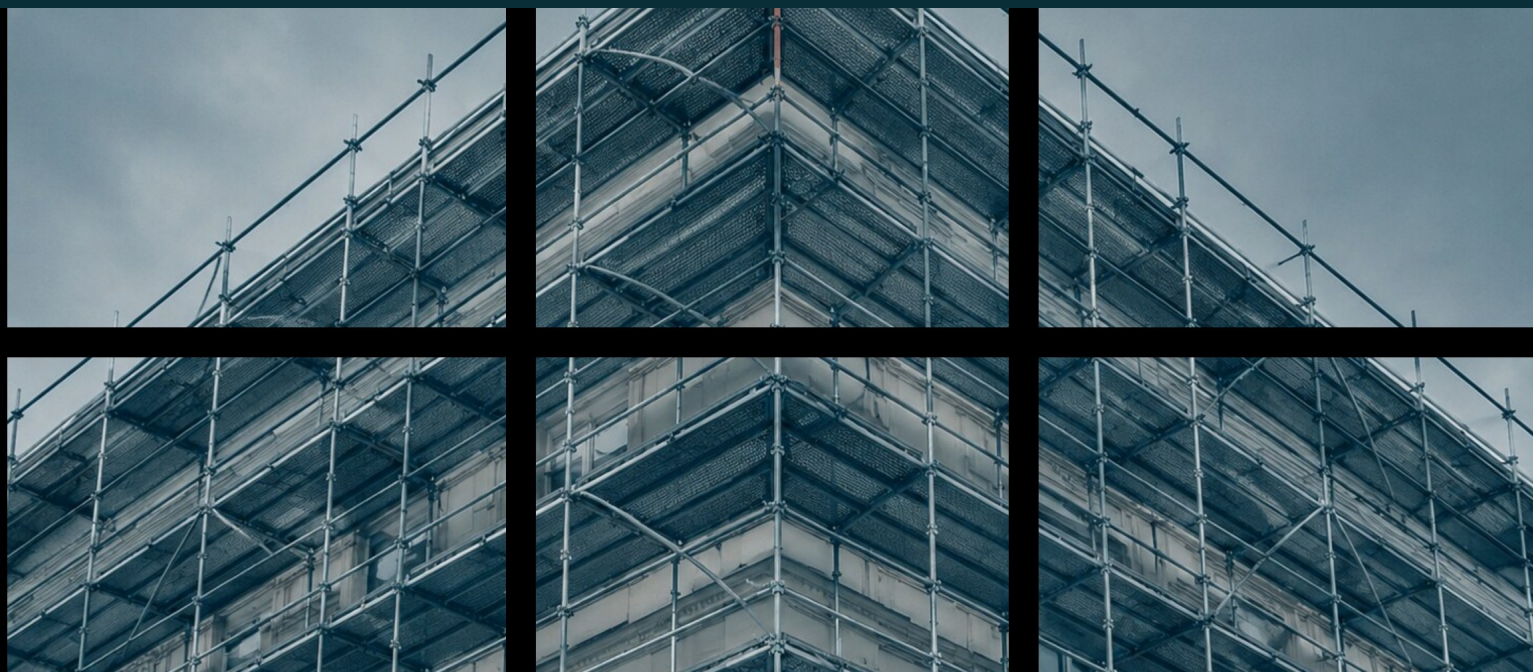


BEYOND THE DAY RATE

The Interim Trap: When Transformation Rents the Capability It Should Be Building

On the difference between buying momentum and renting it — interim leadership on the transformation programme



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“Interim management is an accelerator or a crutch depending entirely on a choice the organisation makes, usually without ever noticing it is making one.”

1. The leaving that nobody planned for

There is a particular kind of farewell that recurs on transformation programmes, and anyone who has spent time near them will recognise it. The interim who steadied the ship is moving on. There are drinks, a card, warm words about the difference made. And then, within a fortnight, a quieter thing happens: the steering committee reconvenes and discovers that no one in the room can quite explain how the supplier negotiation is meant to run, why the governance calendar is shaped the way it is, or who now owns the three decisions that were always, somehow, taken by the person who has just left.

The programme did not lose a contractor. It lost its operating system.

We do not talk about this failure honestly, because to name it is to admit that the interim was doing more than filling a gap — they had become the thing the organisation was relying on instead of building. The uncomfortable truth of the interim market, now large and professional and well past the days when it was a discreet arrangement whispered between headhunters, is that the same engagement can be the best money a programme ever spends or the most expensive way yet devised to avoid growing up. The difference is not the calibre of the individual. It is what the organisation intended them to leave behind.

2. What an interim is actually for

Let me be clear that the case for interim management is real, and I have no interest in the lazy line that day-rate managers are mercenaries who leave the moment the interesting work arrives. The legitimate use is specific and valuable. A transformation programme has a shape that permanent structures are poorly built to serve: it needs disproportionate senior capability at its riskiest moments and almost none in its steady state. Recruiting a permanent programme director for an eighteen-month push, and then finding them irrelevant work for the following three years, is not prudence; it is waste dressed as commitment.

Into that genuine gap, the interim brings things a permanent hire cannot. They arrive without a history in the organisation's feuds, which lets them ask the question everyone has been too political to ask. They have stood up the same programme office half a dozen times and can do in three weeks what a first-timer takes three months to attempt. And because they carry no ambition for the next job internally, they can tell the sponsor an unwelcome truth and mean it. This is the accelerator in its honest form: bought senior judgement, applied at the point of maximum risk, priced to disappear when the risk does.

The test of an interim engagement is not what the organisation gains while the interim is present. It is what remains when they leave. Capability that walks out of the door was rented, not built – and it was probably rented at the price of buying it outright.

3. How the accelerator becomes the crutch

The drift from accelerator to crutch is rarely a decision. No board ever resolves to become dependent on a contractor. It happens through a series of individually reasonable renewals, each of which defers the harder thing.

I have watched a single engagement make this whole journey. An interim programme director is brought in "for three months" to stabilise a stalling programme, at eleven hundred and fifty pounds a day. He is good – genuinely good – and the programme steadies. At the next gate, the sponsor faces a choice between recruiting a permanent successor, which is slow and admits the role is permanent, or renewing the interim, which is quick and keeps the momentum. He renews. This happens at every gate. Twenty-six months later, the interim has billed something close to four hundred and forty days: a shade over half a million pounds for a "three-month" role. Sold a month at a time, each renewal read as prudent flexibility. Totted up over the life of the engagement, it had cost more than three years of a permanent transformation director, fully loaded – and when he finally left, not one permanent manager could run the governance he had built, because it had never lived anywhere but in his head and his relationships.

That is the crutch in its purest form, and the money is the least of it. The deeper cost is what happens to the permanent organisation while it leans. Capable managers who might have grown into the role instead spend two years deferring to someone who will always know more, because he set the thing up. They learn to be administered rather than to lead. The interim, meanwhile, is subject to a quiet and entirely human incentive: the more indispensable the engagement becomes, the longer it runs. Very few people engineer their own redundancy with real conviction when redundancy is the end of the income.

The structure around the decision pushes the same way. A permanent programme director means a headcount requisition, and in most organisations that have spent the years since the downturn holding the permanent line, headcount is precisely what is frozen. A day rate, by contrast, sits in the programme's own budget and clears with a purchase order and a signature. So the approval route that is genuinely harder – hiring a person the organisation will carry – is dressed as the prudent one, while the route that quietly builds dependence is the one that glides through. The interim provider, whose economics reward days billed rather than exits achieved, has no reason to disturb the arrangement. Nobody in the chain is behaving badly. Everybody is behaving locally, and the sum of local reasonableness is a programme that cannot stand on its own.

Accelerator	Crutch
Engaged against a defined outcome and a named exit	Renewed against a feeling that things would wobble without them
Builds structures the permanent team can run	Builds structures only the interim can run

Accelerator	Crutch
Permanent successors are being grown in parallel	Succession is the conversation always deferred to next quarter
Priced as a premium for a bounded period	Priced as a bargain per month, ruinous over its life
Leaves the organisation stronger than they found it	Leaves a hole shaped exactly like themselves

4. The case for dependency, taken seriously

The strongest objection to all this deserves a proper hearing, because it is not foolish. It runs like this: you are romanticising permanent capability. Markets and programmes are volatile; the entire point of the interim model is that you buy exactly the seniority you need, exactly when you need it, and stop paying the moment you do not. Dependency, on this view, is not a defect but the whole value proposition – and building permanent capability for a temporary need is precisely the waste I warned against a moment ago. Why should knowledge transfer be the interim's job at all, when you engaged them to deliver, not to teach?

It is a good argument, and it holds – but only inside a boundary that organisations routinely pretend is wider than it is. The efficiency case is sound when the capability is genuinely non-recurring: a one-off systems migration, a distressed recovery, a specialist skill the organisation will never need again. The trap springs shut when the need is in fact recurring – the ability to run programmes, to govern change, to hold suppliers to account – and the organisation treats it as bounded because bounded is cheaper to book and easier to approve. Most transformation capability is not a one-off. An organisation that transforms once will transform again; that is the age we are working in. To rent that capability perpetually, engagement after engagement, is not flexibility. It is a permanent cost that the balance sheet has simply been arranged not to see.

5. The designed exit

If the difference between accelerator and crutch is what remains, then the discipline follows directly: design the leaving before you design the arrival.

“Engage an interim the way you would light a fuse, not the way you would lean on a post – with the ending already built into the beginning.”

In practice this means a handful of unglamorous commitments made at the point of engagement, while the sponsor still has the leverage to insist on them. Name the outcome that ends the engagement, not merely the date, so that each renewal becomes a decision against a target rather than a reflex against anxiety. Appoint the permanent successor early and make their development an explicit term of the interim's brief, so that the person meant to inherit the role is in the room from the start, not hired in a scramble once it falls

vacant. Insist that what gets built is built to be run by others — documented, transferable, even a little dull — rather than held in the interim's head, where it is worth more to the interim than to anyone else. And measure the engagement, at its close, by the single question the industry almost never asks: is this organisation more capable of doing this for itself than it was before we arrived?

None of this diminishes the interim. The best of them ask for exactly these terms unprompted, because a clean, well-handed exit is the finest reference they can earn, and because they did not enter the profession in order to become a dependency. It is the organisations that resist the discipline — that prefer the comfort of the safe pair of hands to the discomfort of growing their own — that turn a good instrument into a bad habit.

The question in the title is a false binary, and deliberately so. Interim management is an accelerator or a crutch depending entirely on a choice the organisation makes, usually without ever noticing it is making one. The accelerator is bought to leave. The crutch is rented to stay. Almost everything worth getting right about interim management on a transformation programme lives in the distance between those two verbs.