

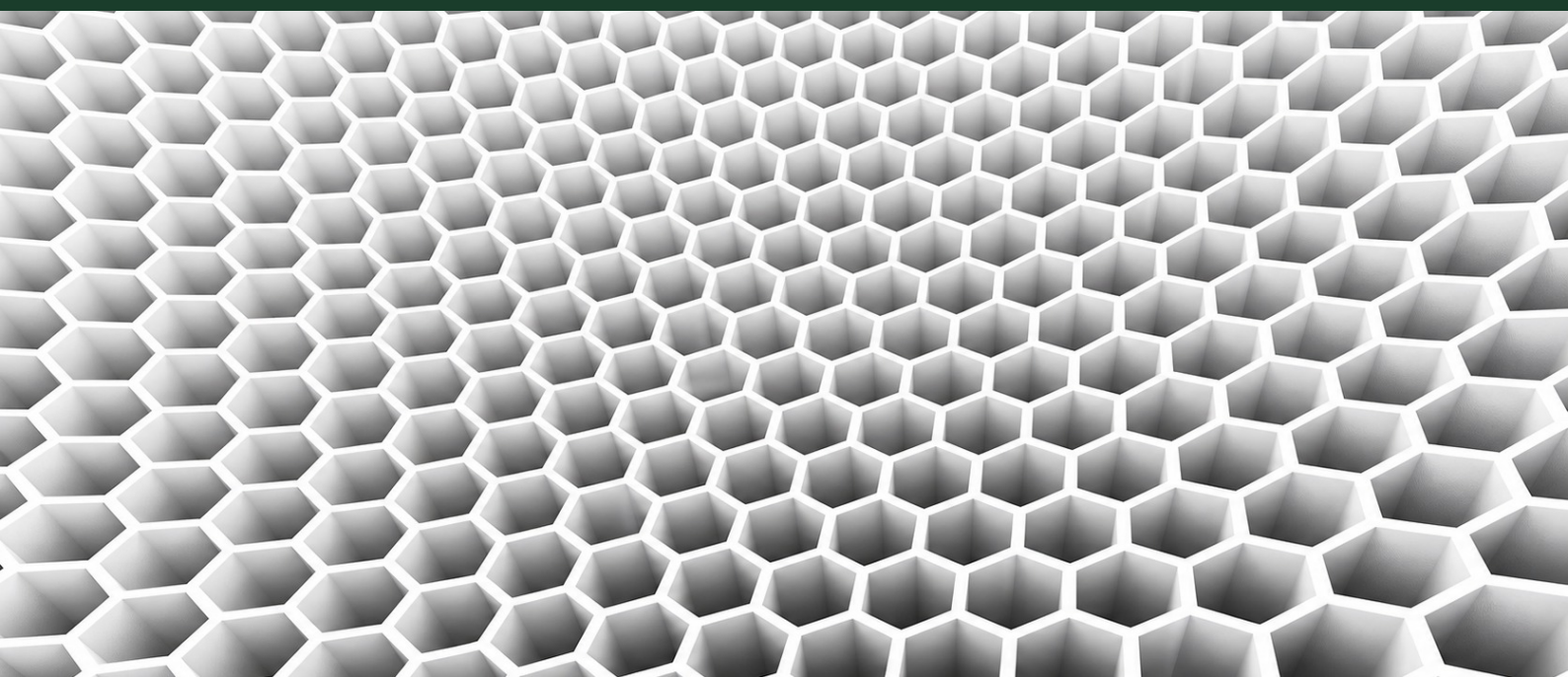
BEYOND THE GREEN REPORT

What Remote Delivery Removed That Nobody Put on the Plan

A reflection on programme delivery without offices, three months into the remote pivot.

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1. The Status That Stayed Green

For eight weeks now the report has read green. The stand-up runs at nine, the same faces in the same grid of small windows. The milestone tracker holds. The steering board met on schedule last Thursday and signed off the phase gate over video without a hitch. By every measure the programme survived the thing everyone feared in March — the week the offices emptied and we wondered, quietly, whether delivery would simply stop.

It did not stop. That is the story most people are telling right now, and it is true as far as it goes. What I want to argue is that it does not go very far, and that the green report is measuring the wrong thing. The programme did not survive intact. It survived visibly intact, which is a different and more dangerous condition, because the part that broke is precisely the part no report was ever built to show.

2. What Travelled Home Intact

Start with the good news, because it is real. The formal machinery of programme delivery moved to the spare bedroom almost without friction, and the reason it moved so easily is worth dwelling on: it was already explicit. A governance cadence is a diary invitation and an agenda. A phase gate is a checklist and a set of named approvers. A status report is a template. A documented handover is a document. None of these things ever depended on a shared postcode; they depended on being written down, and written-down things travel at the speed of a calendar sync.

So the ceremonies held. Reporting held — if anything it tightened, because everyone was anxious and wanted to see the numbers more often. Decisions that had a defined path still followed it. Anything that had already been turned into a process turned out to be portable, and we were briefly, and justifiably, relieved.

The mistake was to read that relief as proof that co-location had never mattered. What it actually proved was much narrower: that the formal layer of a programme — the part we had already made explicit — does not need an office. That was never the part in question.

3. What Stayed at the Office

Sit on an open-plan floor with a large programme running across it and watch what actually moves the work. Very little of it is in the meetings. It is in the overheard half-sentence that makes an analyst realise the figure they are about to put in the report is wrong. It is the architect who leans across and corrects a junior's assumption before it hardens into a design that will cost a month to unpick. It is the delivery lead who reads a supplier's face across a table and knows, before any register is updated, that the date is not going to hold. It is the two workstream leads who collide at the coffee point and discover, by accident, that they have each planned to use the same scarce resource in the same fortnight. It is the new joiner who learns the unwritten rules of the programme by proximity — by absorbing, over weeks, how things are actually done here, whom to trust, what "done" really means on this particular account.

None of that is on the plan. None of it was ever written down, because it was never scheduled — it happened in the gaps, in the corridor, at the desk, in the three minutes before the meeting started and the ten minutes after it should have ended. Co-location did not provide the meetings. It provided the connective tissue between the meetings, and that tissue is exactly what did not travel home. We did not lose it in a dramatic failure that anyone could point to. We lost it silently, and we covered the silence with a tool.

The formal layer of a programme is the part we had already made explicit — so it moved online in a week. The informal layer was never explicit, so we assumed it would simply reappear online. It has not.

The clearest place to see the loss is at the edges of the team. In April a workstream took on two graduate analysts. Competent, keen — and, three months in, still people the team has never actually met. In an office someone would have noticed within a day that both had been quietly stuck for over a week, circling the same problem, too new to know whom to ask and too invisible to be found. Remotely, nobody noticed for a fortnight. Work that used to take a morning of desk-side back-and-forth now takes days of scheduled calls, half of which are spent rebuilding the shared context that a shared desk supplied for nothing. The velocity chart does not show any of this. The velocity chart is being held up by people who calibrated their trust and their shorthand in a room, months ago, and are now spending it.

4. The Reserve We Are Spending

Here is the objection, and it is a fair one: the numbers are fine. Velocity held. Milestones are being hit. Is this not simply nostalgia for the office dressed up as analysis — a reluctance to admit that the old way was never as necessary as we always told ourselves it was?

I would take that objection seriously if the numbers were a leading indicator. They are not. They are a lagging one, and what they lag is social capital — the trust, the shared

shorthand, the working mental models of colleagues — that was accumulated in person before March and is now being drawn down without replenishment. We are living off a reserve we did not know we had and are not topping up. A team that has sat in a room together for two years can run remotely for a long time on that stored understanding, estimating and trusting and correcting each other out of a bank of context built face to face. The bill does not arrive on that team. It arrives on the next programme, staffed by people who have never shared a room, calibrating their estimates and their trust from a standing start over video, guessing at each other's competence from a small rectangle of image. It arrives on the graduate cohort who will never have the apprenticeship-by-proximity that every senior person on the programme quietly relied on to become senior in the first place. It arrives, in other words, later — which is precisely why the green report cannot see it, and precisely why it is dangerous. A reserve that is invisible on the balance sheet is a reserve nobody defends in a budget conversation, and a cost that lands on next year's programme is a cost this year's steering board will never be asked to carry.

*"We are not discovering that the office never mattered.
We are spending down a reserve it built, and mistaking
the balance for income."*

5. Naming the Thing We Dropped

If this is right, then "what we forgot" is not a lament to indulge — it is a work item to pick up. In the scramble of March we dropped the deliberate cultivation of the informal layer, and we told ourselves the tooling had replaced it. The chat channel, the video call, the shared board: genuinely useful, but every one of them is a formal substitute standing in for something informal, and the substitution is lossy. A scheduled call is not an overheard sentence. A message in a channel is not a lean across the desk. What we forgot to do was decide, on purpose, to rebuild the connective tissue that the office used to supply for us by accident.

That decision has a shape, and none of it is exotic. It means giving the informal layer an owner, the way any real risk on the programme has an owner, rather than leaving it to reconstitute itself — which it will not do on its own. It means treating the onboarding of a remote joiner as a designed process with named steps and a named buddy, and not as an afterthought, because proximity is no longer quietly doing that job for us. It means making it somebody's actual task to notice the analyst who has gone dark, because no corridor is going to surface them now. It means manufacturing, deliberately and slightly artificially, the low-stakes contact in which correction and calibration used to happen for free — and being honest that it will feel forced at first, because the thing it replaces never had to be arranged.

None of this is nostalgia. Nostalgia wants the building back. This wants something harder and more useful: to name the specific functions the building was silently performing, and to perform them on purpose now that the walls are not doing it for us. The danger of the

remote pivot was never that delivery would visibly collapse. We can see a collapse, and we are good at managing what we can see. The danger is the exact opposite — that delivery succeeds visibly while eroding invisibly, and that we spend the reserve down to nothing while congratulating ourselves on a report that was never, at any point, designed to show the one thing that is actually running out.