

BEYOND THE HANDOVER DECK

When the Consultant Becomes the Programme

How organisations buy delivery certainty and quietly lose the ability to run their own change



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1. The Question Nobody Asks in the Steering Committee

The programme is two years old and, by the numbers on the wall, healthy. Milestones are green. The integrator's lead partner runs the review with the easy fluency of someone who has done this a hundred times, and the client's own programme director nods along, adding the occasional point of local colour. It is a good meeting. And there is exactly one question that would end it in an instant, which is why it is never asked out loud: if that firm gave notice tomorrow, who on your own payroll could keep this running on Monday?

Everyone in the room already knows the answer. That is the quiet problem I want to name — not the consultant who is incompetent, or the day rate that is too high, or the scope that has crept. Those are visible, and visible problems get managed. The problem is the one that arrives without a decision ever being taken: the moment the consultants stop supporting the programme and simply are the programme, and the organisation paying for all of it has become a spectator to its own transformation.

We have all watched this happen. Most of us, if we are honest, have helped it along. It is worth being clear about how.

2. It Is Built, Not Stumbled Into

The comforting story is that dependency creeps up on you — a slow accretion nobody noticed until it was too late. The truth is less flattering. Dependency is designed in from the first week, and the design is legible to anyone who cares to read the staffing plan.

Take the arithmetic of a typical finance-systems programme of the kind filling the pipeline just now — a new ledger, a group consolidation platform, the whole SAP-or-Oracle apparatus rebadged as “finance transformation.”

Where the work sits	The client's own people	The integrator's people
Design and build	3	84
Testing and data migration	4	40
Programme and coordination	9	16
Total	16	140

Look at where the client's sixteen actually sit. They are in coordination — running the plan, chairing the working groups, drafting the board paper. They are almost nowhere in design and build, which is to say they are almost nowhere in the place where the programme's

real knowledge is being created. At a blended rate that lands north of £1,100 a day once you weight the partners at £3,000 and the offshore analysts at £250, the organisation is spending a fortune to guarantee that the understanding it is buying accumulates on someone else's payroll.

And the single deliverable that would fix this — the transfer of capability from the firm's people to the client's — sits where it always sits: the last line of the statement of work, unquantified, unowned, and first against the wall when the plan slips. "Knowledge transfer" is scheduled as a two-week phase at the very end. It is the phase that never survives contact with a go-live date.

The failure is not that organisations hire consultants. It is that they buy delivery and forget to buy the ability to deliver next time. Capability transfer is everyone's stated goal and nobody's owned deliverable.

3. Why It Persists — Because It Suits Almost Everyone

If this were simply a mistake, it would be rare. It is not rare; it is the standard condition of the large programme. Things that are both damaging and normal usually persist because they are quietly in everyone's short-term interest, and this is no exception.

The firm's commercial model rewards depth and duration, not its own redundancy. No account partner was ever promoted for engineering an early exit. That is not villainy — it is the ordinary logic of a business that sells time, and it is naïve to expect any such business to police itself against its own incentives.

The sponsor wants delivery certainty above almost everything. Building internal muscle is slow, uncertain, and invisible on a board slide; renting a firm that has "done this before" is fast, de-risked, and defensible if it goes wrong. Faced with an immovable regulatory deadline — the SOX remediation, the Basel II programme, the audit commitment that cannot move — the sponsor reaches for whatever most reduces their personal exposure, and that is almost always more consultants, not fewer.

The internal team, meanwhile, has been pared back by years of cost discipline and the running "war for talent." The very people who could shadow the consultants and absorb what they know are the ones too scarce to be released from the day job. So they are not released, and they do not learn, and the dependency deepens by one more turn.

Beneath all of it runs the mechanism that makes the arrangement self-sealing: information asymmetry. The consultants understand the programme better than the client does. That means the client cannot properly judge whether it is being well served, which means it has no choice but to trust — and trust, once it is the only instrument left, is indistinguishable from dependence.

"The more the firm does, the less the client learns; the less the client learns, the more the firm is needed. It is not a slope you slide down. It is a ratchet."

Sitting on top of this is the tacit-knowledge problem, and it is the one the handover deck was never going to solve. The genuinely valuable understanding on a complex programme — why the reconciliation breaks at month-end, which business owner will quietly kill the design if not squared early, where the data is dirty and why — lives in the doing, not in the documentation. It is earned by having been in the room when it went wrong. You cannot hand it over in a workshop in the final fortnight, and the belief that you can is the most expensive fiction in the whole engagement.

4. The Strongest Version of the Other Argument

It would be too easy to stop there, as though the answer were simply "hire fewer consultants." It is not, and the case against my own position deserves to be put at its strongest before I answer it.

You bring in a firm precisely because you lack the capability. Expecting them to leave you fully capable is like expecting a surgeon to teach you the operation while removing your appendix — the whole reason you are on the table is that you cannot do it yourself. For a genuinely specialist, once-in-a-decade task — a complex carve-out, a first-of-its-kind regulatory build — leaning on people who have done it many times before is not a failure at all. It is efficient. Building that capability in-house, for something you may never do again, would be a waste of money that no budget under this much scrutiny could justify. On this reading, "knowledge transfer" is a comfort story procurement tells itself; the honest move is to rent the expertise, get the outcome, and drop the pretence.

Most of that is correct. That is exactly what makes it dangerous, because it quietly licenses the default. Where it fails is that it collapses two very different things into a single word.

Renting capacity is buying more hands to do something you already understand and could, in principle, do yourself. Renting capability is buying an ability you do not possess at all. The specialist carve-out is the second kind, and depending on outside help for it is entirely rational. But the finance transformation, the operating-model redesign, the programme that reshapes how the organisation runs itself — that is not a once-in-a-decade specialism. It is core. And when an organisation cannot run core change without renting the ability to do so, it has not bought a capability. It has leased one, and mistaken the lease for a purchase.

5. The Test, and What Passes It

So the useful question is not "how many consultants?" It is: on the things that are core to us, are we ending each programme more able to run our own change, or less? There is a plain diagnostic for it — the one I opened with. Could you run the next one yourselves? If every programme leaves you less able to answer yes, you are not buying capability. You are hollowing it out and booking the invoice as investment.

The organisations that keep their own capability while still using firms heavily tend to do a small number of unglamorous things on purpose.

1. They put a client name against every consultant role from day one. For each consultant in design and build there is a named member of staff whose explicit job is to be able to do that role when the consultant rolls off — not a coordinator working alongside, but a successor working inside. It costs more today and far less across the next three programmes.

2. They measure the ratio they are trying to move, and govern it like cost. The proportion of the programme the client could run unaided is a number. Put it on the same page as budget and schedule, review it every month, and watch what happens to a thing once it is actually managed.
3. They design the exit at the start, not the end. The point at which the firm rolls off is set against a named client owner being demonstrably able to operate — not against a calendar date that the slipping plan will always swallow.
4. They are honest about which they are buying. Capacity or capability, core or peripheral — and they let that honesty choose the model. Specialist and one-off: rent it, depend on it happily, move on. Core and recurring: buy the ability, not merely the outcome.

None of this is a call to send the consultants home. The good ones earn their rate several times over, and the reflex to insource everything on principle is its own kind of vanity. It is a call to notice the one thing the standard arrangement is quietly optimised to stop you noticing: that you are meant to end each programme more capable than you began it, and that "delivered on time" is no consolation at all if it was delivered by people who are about to walk out of the building with everything they learned.

The consultant who becomes the programme is not the villain of this story. The client who let it happen — without ever quite deciding to — is the one left with the harder questions to answer.