



Session: 2

Room: Turner

Session title : Quick wins for contractors to leave things better than when they joined?

Session leader : Oscar

Volunteer to continue conversation after :

Notes taken by : Sophie Keren

Notes

- Oscar is contacting with HMRC on the tech side. It's inspiring to do public sector stuff and see how much people care, and would be good to hear about other contractors' experiences of giving back.
- On the technical side, one thing that's been good is having templates for making decisions and writing those with the product people, to make sure the people we're working with aren't just deferring to what we say. When things pre-exist you joining the team and you lack context, it's hard. So, templates!
- One thing to be aware of at the moment is to encourage the client that part of the deliverables they need to receive is knowledge transfer or templates - not just 'here's some code, you can work it out and you'll be fine'. Paying for context and encouraging them to ask for that as part of a deliverable as well as the code or operational functional thing is important. The whole idea of contracting is we're going to go away and you're left with it. In six months, when we're gone, what will you do?
- Clients have to trust us, and be prepared. They can't have too much delegation or reliance on an individual because when they're gone it's like, "oh my god!"

- Building relationships with employees or other contractors is paramount. Documentation gets shelved - when a director leaves and a huge wiki you've spent 8 years building gets shelved, there's nothing now to prove your work. New director's in, they've hired new people, and your historic value isn't demonstrated. Sharing knowledge among other people means you're not the only person who's answerable or knowledgeable. Creating relationships with people is probably the most important. Whatever you decide to leave behind.
- The nice thing about being a contractor is you build relationships but let people know you're going to be leaving and you want to leave things in a better place. You go in, essentially recognising you don't know the org as well as you might, and do a lot of learning very quickly. I leave a repository or database of knowledge, glossaries, templates, branding based on the org's branding. You make those connections with people and, usually because it's a deliverable that's org-wide, there will be policies and procedures that need to be reviewed annually. Even if it's just a tick. Then I ride off into the sunset and maybe come back on another project.
- Knowing things exist, keeping knowledge internally, and doing what's in the regulation is key. But how do you retain and communicate that? Central repositories which are open to everyone - confluence and wikis where everyone can add to it or view it. The nice thing about SharePoint is you can see what's there and what's missing, even if you can't access the document.
- The churn is massive in government, so you need to expect that everyone you work with isn't going to stay there. How do you build sustainability into your work? As a contractor you need to make sure that more than one person understands what you're doing and why, so that if someone challenges your work they can explain and maybe defend it.
- A competency for our role is explaining things - what you did and why you did it. That's so important at an individual level, if you struggle to do it that's a problem. With high churn, SMEs get so fatigued and don't want to keep explaining things. If they're getting new contractors chucked at them, asking the same questions because no-one documented things or had overlap for a handover. The handover process should be a deliverable itself - not just building the thing. The admin stuff doesn't look flashy but it's vital. If I pick up someone's work I don't want to assume they made a punt, I want to assume the research came from somewhere, but looking through different styles of documents takes so long.
- Making that part of the process, where everyone explains the reasons behind their work, is important. Otherwise it's a case of deep-diving into documents. There should be longevity to what I've done, and a justification of where I pulled something from, why I mentioned it and what it's for.
- Note: it's interesting to see who was more interested in this session - contractors or buyers - a great subject and bold to be open about. Question: what is the split around the room of people? Mostly contractors. One Civil Servant. Interesting to note who felt compelled to attend, and that we don't want to dilute delivery but want to leave enduring, sustainable delivery and make a graceful exit.
- The fact that we all feel the same way - the vast majority do more than they're paid for because of a high level of integrity. That helps with work because you don't feel you're fighting against the flow. It's nice to see that representation.

- CS: The SoW is an impossible thing. That's why I came - does anyone have sparkling insight into how to better use it? Often we're left with that challenge on how to articulate knowledge transfer. Do you cram a lot of stuff in at the end or at the start?
 - At the start! Usually when I've been contracted, either it's a fixed job and timeline or an open-ended voyage of discovery. When it's a fixed-term thing, I do the estimation, gather the requirements and estimate and schedule. Of course, I like to deal with the risky things first, and you always estimate over what you think it'll be by a third, deliver early, and you say "these things on your wishlist, we can do these now!" and you leave the client happy.
- Procurement is a challenge in Agile teams. As I've started to question the value-add I give as a supplier, the existential question is, "the model of suppliers isn't brand new - have we progressed? Has that been a good model for government?" The change we need is to fundamentally change the mix of how we see suppliers to government. Any large operational department, the percentage of contractors is too high. You have contractors delivering services and capabilities over years as opposed to short-term delivery or capability build. We're all there to do ourselves out of a job, and there's a structural problem to think about. We've referenced IR35/2 year limit (pre-session), there needs to be a legal requirement for knowledge share. The last contract I was in, we discussed that and what else would effect that metric. There's a trust element, and a lot of problems but not many solutions - but how can contracting be a 6month-2 year solution?
- Introducing a can of worms: Handovers between competitors, where one company doesn't want to give another an 'advantage' and management get in the way of an effective handover.
 - As a freelancer - screw management - the person that will say 'you've done the work' is the client. Sometimes you have to be ready to be let go, so work based on delivering the deliverable and keeping the client happy. I err on the side of making sure the client say I've done what I've done, so I'll get paid.
 - As a contractor, specific clauses about capability build, knowledge transfer etc is a big missed opportunity and a legal issue. The social value act can force organisations to make promises and be held to them re: social value. I would have more pressure from senior management to genuinely build capability if that's what I was held to account to by my contract. We need to engage with contractors when we see a capability gap, and the focus has to be on capability build. We would solve that problem by getting contracts right.
 - As part of big bids we have a section on handovers and knowledge transfer - how we'll do it, what we'll do. It's built into those contracts that we say what we'll do. I think a lot of governments probably do that. I think we're all here trying to do the best job we can because it's what we do, it's why we contract. It's one of the reasons why - I think there's a shortage of people who left contracting because of IR35 who are doing projects with deliverables instead of managing. Most people in an org should be permanent, it allows lots of long-term things like buying a house, maybe not, but a lot of contractors are in

contracting because they love new things, shiny things, and learning. I learn all the time.

- I think the difference is that exit/transition plans are baked into services even at bidding stage. When it's a person / individual and it's a provision of capability that's far more difficult because you don't know what you need to do to hand over effectively, but there should still be a checklist. It's the little things, you never want to leave a project without ownership and think it's going to degrade or devalue. I think government are doing a lot to tackle proactively the exits and transition plans, but it's much more difficult when it's freelance contractors.
- Often the client forgets they own that process, and you have to say 'the knowledge shouldn't be in my head, you own this process, you paid us and this is yours.' So you can say, 'where is my capability, where is my knowledge?' and if that's something you knowingly asked for up front, you can expect it to get delivered.
- CS who are 18 months in a job before they move on don't help matters!
- CS: Procurement has got stronger recently. Have seen some recent, messy exits, and some very professional. The downside of the procurement team being strengthened is that you want a team to work on an important thing, you want to deliver value early, but you need to decide what the valuable thing is as a team when the people are here. But Procurement want deliverables and specifics up front - which takes the fun out of things and takes the creativity away.
 - As a contractor I'm seeing less of that approach, and more 'we need 2 years of capability please!'
 - What I'm getting from this room is, we've got a broad idea of how we solve these problems. We talk about data sharing, better contracts. How do we leapfrog some of these problems? Open data seems to be something we think is a good idea - I looked to social value as it's a legal mechanism to force people to do the right thing. How do we force people to see contracting as a thing, solve the CS recruiting crisis, and accelerate this so next year we're talking about the next step of the problem?
- Different contexts have different problems, and work in different ways.
- On the acceleration point, throwing out ideas: if we looked at the budget of a government department and took the money spent on non-CS procurement, halved it and put that half into the capability/incentivisation of permanent staff, what would that look like? Something like 66% of HO was not permanent at one point which raises a theoretical point - there's been a general understanding in the West that delivery is done best by private sector providers.
- CS: I've got 13 staff in my team and contractors managing contractors. I think that's the challenge we want to solve and it's possibly a political question rather than a CS question, in terms of headcount. I don't know if you might explain more about the Social Value Act?
- In 10 seconds: Social Value Act 2015 requires suppliers to set out social value. It's been slow, lots of problems, hard to get right, questions are gamed, but it forces suppliers to act which is a good thing. There are lessons we can learn from that.

- To the point about enabling perm staff - that would make my life better. I have a history of being in long contracts and watching perm staff getting hacked off, leaving, then there's change and you have to deal with that. I've outlived directors, POs, for years and years. There was a contract that went great for a few months then we realised there was only one supportive stakeholder and when he left, the project went dark and had no champions. What would improve my life would be spending money on training perm staff, which is wasted on some contracts.
- People in banks are there for 30, 40, 50 years, because they're paid incredibly well. It's not the same in other industries, people leave because it's harder to move up the tree so people leave. Recognising that people are an asset to an organisation - more pay for Civil Servants could help!
- If the capability was owned by CS and delivery be contractors, that might be better. But when contractors own capability and are getting other contractors to do delivery, you have a problem.
- If we did the radical idea of 25% budget cut in contractors, 25% investment in permanent, a lot of services would fall over tomorrow, but we could work towards that. Some roles shouldn't be a contract role. This is all political because it's about how we organise our public services. There's some radical thinking we need to do because the answers are in front of us.
- Looking at pay for perm staff vs contractors - we're not incentivised to go perm because the pay is a fraction of what we get. Unless you're agency, when you have job security as opposed to money.
- Anecdote: Some CS know they can up their salary by going into contracting, so write a role for a contractor then give notice and take the role, getting a huge pay uplift.
- Austerity has been a problem. Workers' co-ops sparking up - technical workers' co-ops are coming again, from an old hippy idea of housing co-ops. So, just a thought - as contractors who work from home and remote, it's a really good solution to the problem of either working on their own or with an agency.
- There's an age-old problem of 'if I want to get my G6 job I need to move departments' - needs to be addressed.
- It goes back to money, with housing and cost of living going up, the people who can afford to work for local government are probably contractors right now. The problem is getting security cleared - you have it, it lapses, and the process of getting it again most recruiters will go 'nah'. If you do an on-the-job background check that's one approach.
- If there's no-one with technical understanding to give your handover to, it's a challenge, especially if outside IR35. It's slightly disheartening because you could solve it but the CS near me are thrown in the deep end out of their depth, fast stream coming in to be leaders with no-one to teach or support them. A lot of imposter syndrome or over-confidence. Outsourcing and privatisation are a massive problem.