

Why Every Modernisation Programme Starts With Discovery

Neal McCormick

Semantic Foundry

At some point in the last thirty years, the discovery phase became normal.

Not good. Not desirable. Not something anyone would design into a programme if they had the choice. But normal. Expected. Budgeted for. The accepted first act of any serious attempt to change how an organisation works.

Legacy replacement programmes start with discovery. Cloud migrations start with discovery. ERP implementations start with discovery. Regulatory change programmes start with discovery. Every time an organisation wants to change something significant, it first has to spend months understanding what is already there.

This has happened so consistently, across so many programmes, in so many organisations, that the industry has built an entire methodology around it. There are frameworks for running discovery phases. There are consulting practices that specialise in it. There are tools designed to support it. The discovery phase has been so thoroughly normalised that questioning whether it needs to exist at all feels almost naive.

It is not naive. It is the right question.

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Discovery is not a methodology.

Discovery is evidence that the organisation lacks an authoritative understanding of itself.

That distinction matters. A methodology is something you apply by choice because it produces better outcomes. Evidence of a structural absence is something that happens to you because the alternative — the thing that would make it unnecessary — does not exist.

Organisations do not run discovery phases because they have decided that spending six months reconstructing institutional knowledge is the best way to start a programme. They run discovery phases because they have no other way to find out what they need to know before they start building. The discovery phase is not the first step of a good process. It is the consequence of not having the thing that would make it unnecessary.

Think about what the discovery phase is actually doing.

It is asking the organisation's most experienced people to explain, in workshops and interviews, how the business works. It is reviewing documents that were produced on previous programmes to understand decisions that were made years ago. It is reverse-engineering processes and systems to understand what they were designed to do and whether that design still reflects what the business actually needs.

None of this knowledge is new. The organisation already has it. The discovery phase is not discovering anything. It is recovering something that already existed but was never captured in a form that survived.

The business rules that are being documented were enforced by the previous system. The process steps that are being mapped were followed by the operations team before the programme started. The domain knowledge that is being extracted from subject matter experts was in those experts' heads before the first workshop was scheduled. The discovery phase is not producing new knowledge. It is producing a temporary, partial, immediately-aging record of knowledge that the organisation has always possessed.

There is a pattern that anyone who has been involved in enough programmes will recognise.

A programme ends. The artefacts it produced — the process maps, the requirements documents, the architecture assessments, the domain models — are stored somewhere. A shared drive. A document management system. A project repository that the next project team may or may not know exists.

Time passes. The organisation changes. People move on. The systems that the artefacts described are modified, extended, patched. The artefacts are not updated because nobody is responsible for updating them. They age. They become partially accurate and partially misleading. They become the kind of document that a new team member is warned not to rely on too heavily because it might not reflect the current state.

The next programme starts. Its team looks at the artefacts from the previous programme and concludes that they cannot be trusted as a starting point. A new discovery phase is commissioned. The process begins again.

This is not a failure of programme governance. It is not a failure of documentation standards. It is the predictable consequence of producing artefacts that are not designed to persist — that are scoped to a project, owned by a team, and retired when the engagement ends.

The modernisation industry has responded to this problem by making the discovery phase more efficient. Better tools. More structured workshops. More experienced consultants. Faster ways of extracting and documenting what the organisation knows.

This is the wrong response to the right diagnosis.

Making the reconstruction faster does not address the fact that reconstruction is happening at all. A more efficient discovery phase is still a discovery phase. It still consumes months of programme time and a significant proportion of programme budget. It still produces artefacts that will age and be partially superseded by the time the next programme needs them. It still recovers only the knowledge the team knew to ask about, and leaves the rest buried.

The right response is to stop accepting the premise.

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The premise is that every programme needs to start from incomplete knowledge because there is no alternative.

There is an alternative. It requires building something that most organisations have never built — not because it is technically impossible, but because nobody has been sufficiently clear about what it is or why it is the thing that everything else depends on.

The discovery phase is not the first step of a modernisation programme. It is the symptom of a missing layer.

A layer that sits between what the organisation has decided to do and what its operations actually carry out. A layer that has always been implied by good practice but almost never made explicit in a governed, persistent form that survives the programmes that build it.

That layer has a name.

The next piece is about what it is and why its absence is the structural cause of everything described in this series so far.

*Neal McCormick is the author of *The Last Great Dig*.*