EQUAL EXPERTS

# “People are more complex than computers”

Mairead O’Connor
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## Making Software. Better.

Simple solutions to big business problems.

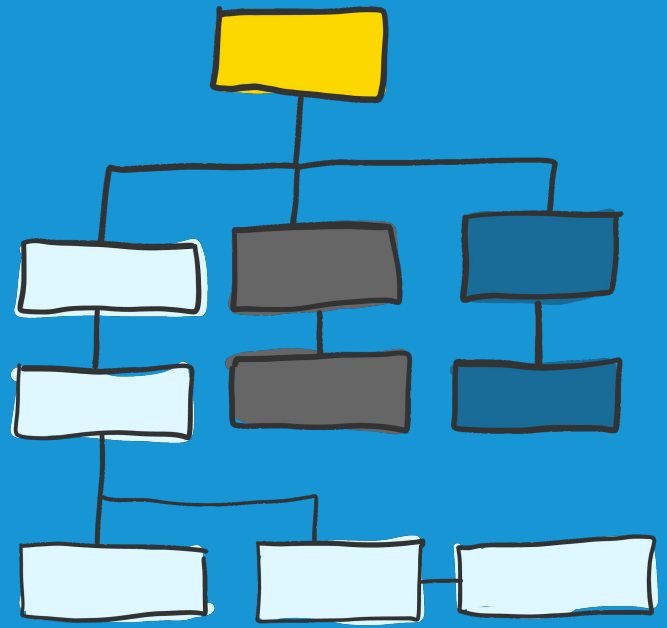
# We’re trying to find better ways to work

# Command and control hierarchy doesn’t work for us

We are all grown ups who don’t need to be told what to do.

We solve problems by collaborating.

We believe good decisions are made by the people with the right context.



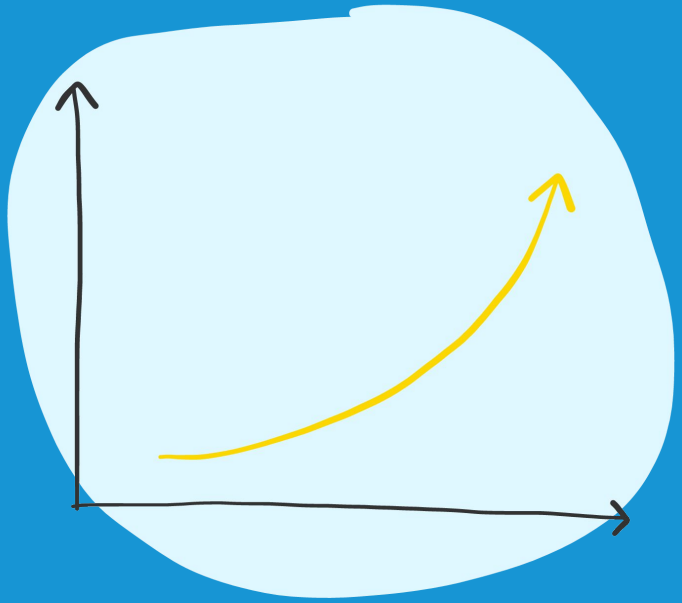
# We have grown rapidly in just over a decade

1,500 people in the Equal Experts network

800 active consultants

290 employees

80 current clients



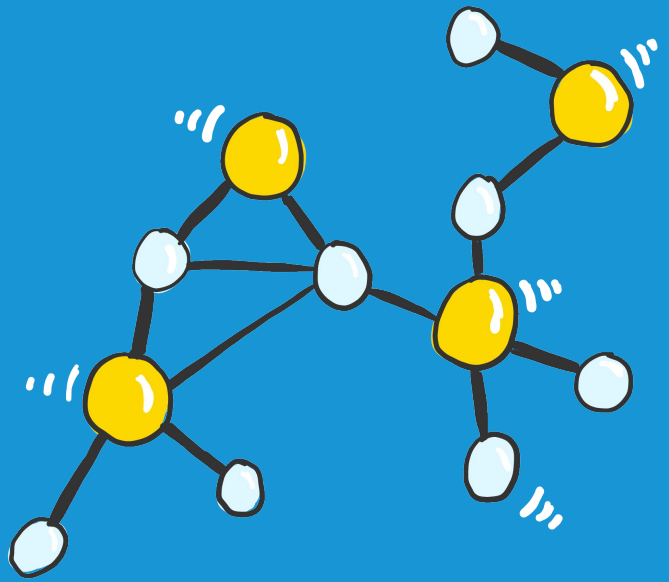
# The network is what makes Equal Experts special

We’re a network of people.

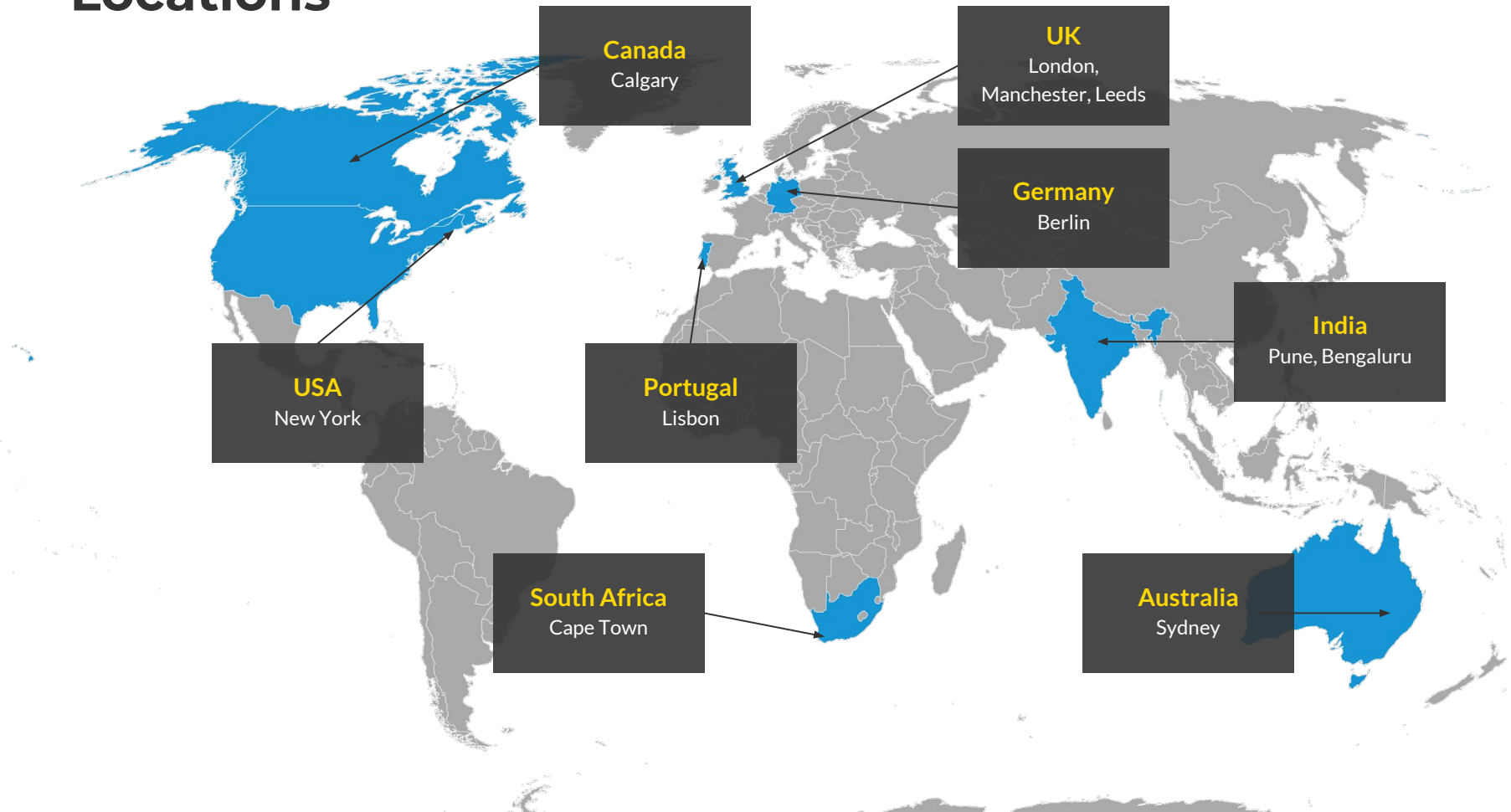
Everyone contributes something different.

We need and support each other.

We’re stronger together.



# Locations


Canada
Calgary
UK
London,
Manchester, Leeds
Germany
Berlin
India
Pune, Bengaluru
USA
New York
Portugal
Lisbon
South Africa
Cape Town
Australia
Sydney

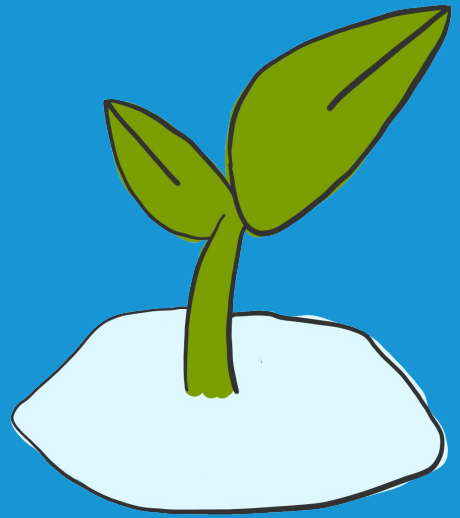
# Bigger is different

# Early companies are undefined and relatively simple

When Equal Experts first started we didn't know what we would become.

The company structure was malleable.

The network grew opportunistically and unpredictably.

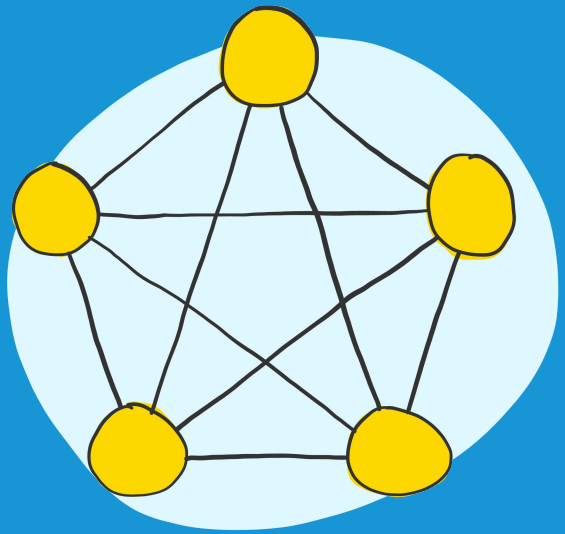


# The number of potential connections grows - fast!

There’s only so much complexity can fit inside a human head!

It quickly becomes unmanageable for everyone to know everyone else.

“No structure” really means “implicit structure” and that’s dangerous.



# How do you grow without losing what makes you special?

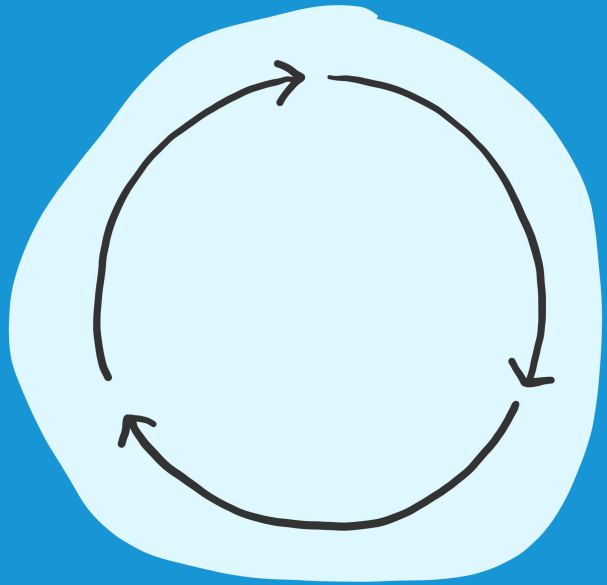
# We try to run our company the way we run software

Break a problem into smaller pieces.

Tackle it with a self-organising team.

Don’t just build; also think about how things will operate in the future.

Inspect, learn, adapt, iterate.



# Distributed decision making - “The Advice Process”

# Every business problem is a comms problem

We need to make good business decisions, quickly and efficiently.

People most affected by the decision (usually) have the best context.

You can’t predict who is going to need to know something, or who can contribute.

# Decentralised decision making with the Advice Process

- State your intention
- Collect feedback
- Make your decision

*Sylvain Pierre,*

*'Making decisions, the Advice Process way'*

# Here's an example of an Advice Process I started


Pre-Engagement Team in UK South

What I want to do and why

- Related activities
- How this team could operate
- Risks
- Concerns raised

Who is the decision maker

Who do I need feedback from

Next Steps

Forecast Cost Impact

Does this need to go onto the investm...

Measure of success

Result

Learnings

Review history


## Pre-Engagement Team in UK South

Produced by Mairead O'Connor
December 2018

### What I want to do and why

I want a team to experiment with more pro-active sales and brand awareness efforts in the UK South region. I will commit to be a member of this team for an initial period of time.

### Related activities

### How this team could operate

### Risks

### Concerns raised

### Who is the decision maker

Jon Dickinson - exec sponsor
Mairead O'Connor - proposed member of this team

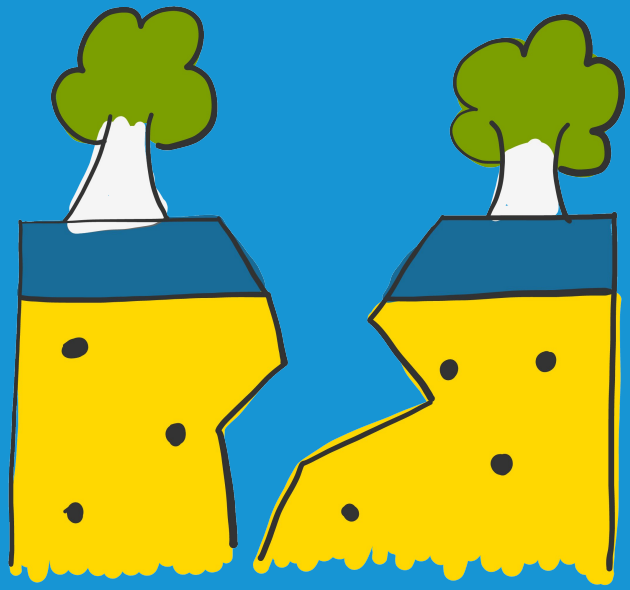
### Who do I need feedback from

# How does the Advice Process work for us in practice?

Things fall between the cracks if everyone assumes “someone else is doing it”.

We still need exec leadership and escalation routes.

We need to make an active effort to spread information widely.



West O
114

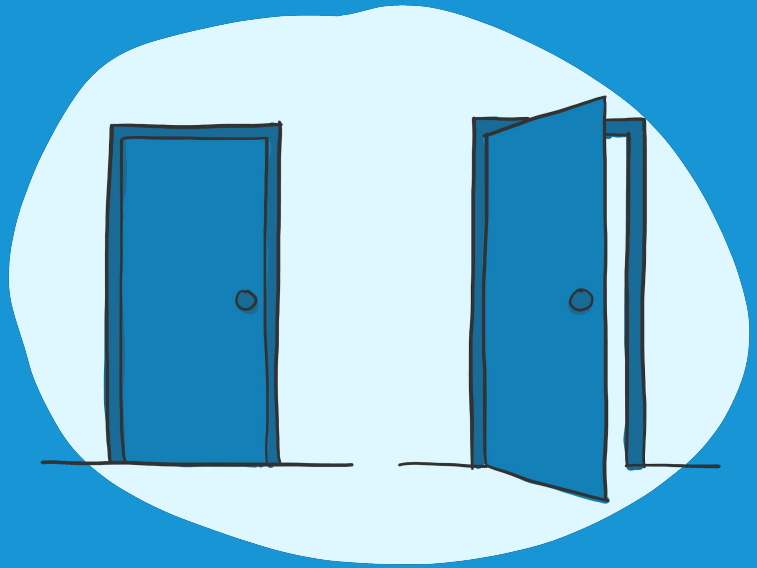
# Open communications where we can

What sort of info must be private?

What sort of info could be public?

What about everything else in between?

We are ‘Open’ where it helps us, but not where it can hurt people.



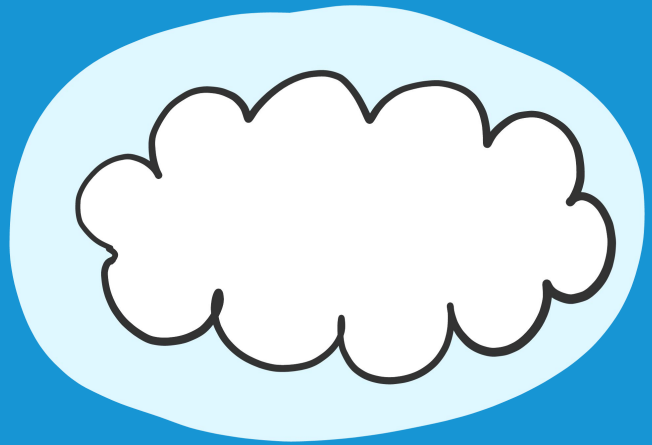
# Running a business is like running a dev team. Mostly.

# Scale intelligently, when and where you need to

Some of the best people don’t want to be your employees, but it’s great to work with them on their terms.

The Associate model is the best of both worlds.

We can change shape and size as and when required.



# Use distributed systems to build resilience

Use talent from all over the world.

“Follow the sun” delivery.

Balance our exposure to market forces.

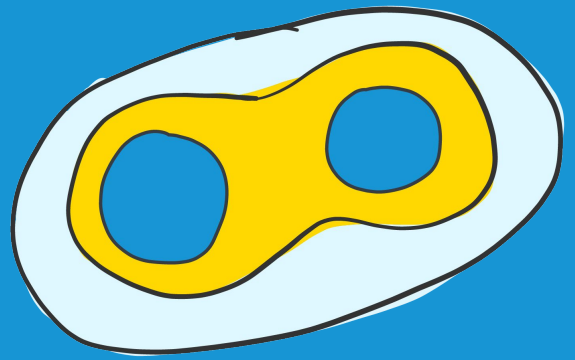
Go where the interesting work is.

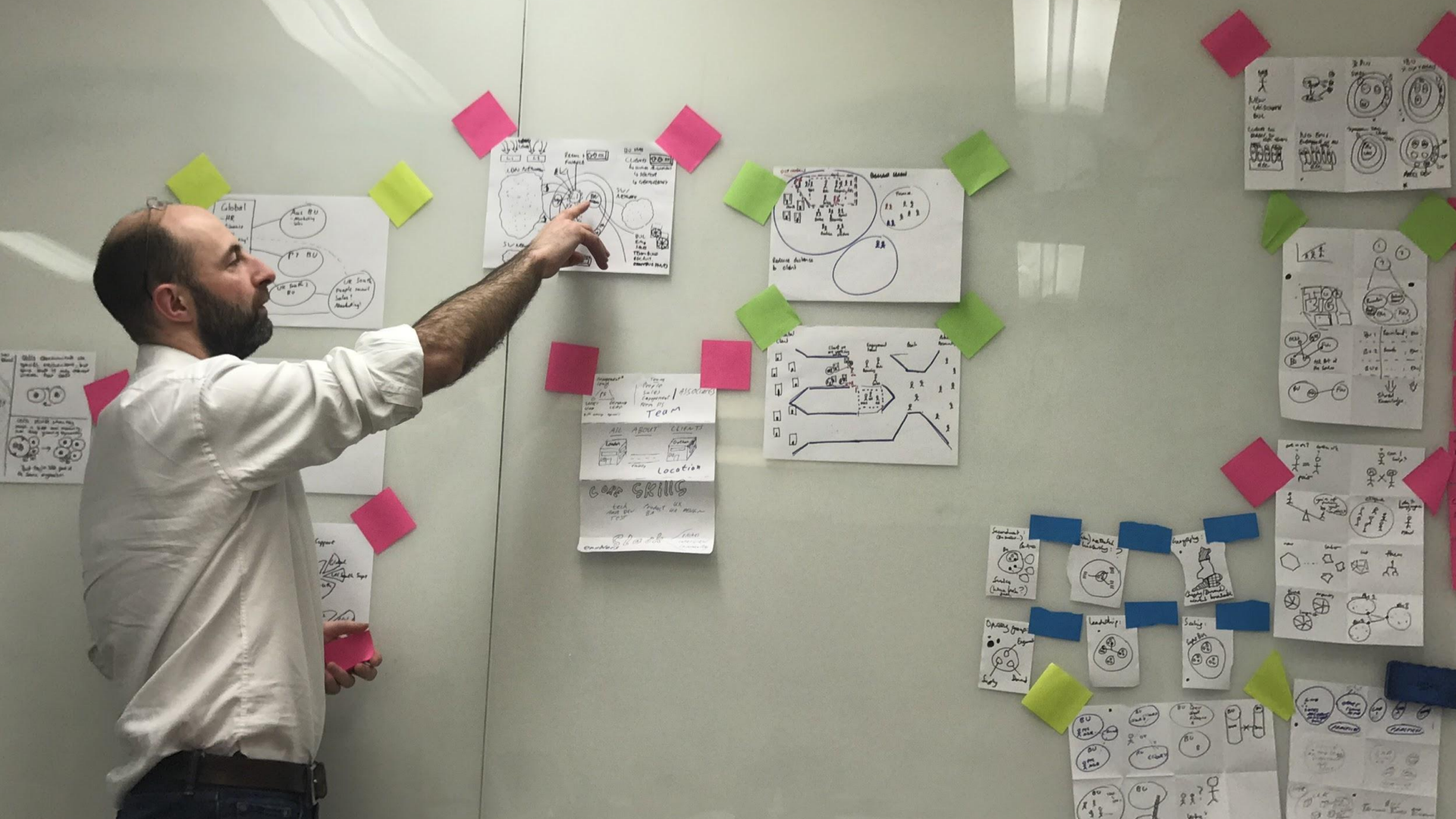
# Break up organisational monoliths

We've managed complexity by dividing into business units, practices and shared services.

We 'refactor the organisation' to make it more maintainable.

How do we decide where to divide? That's the hard bit...




Global
Team
ALL ABOUT CLIENTS
Location
CORE SKILLS

# We accept that things will go wrong

Don’t build for control; build for adaptability.

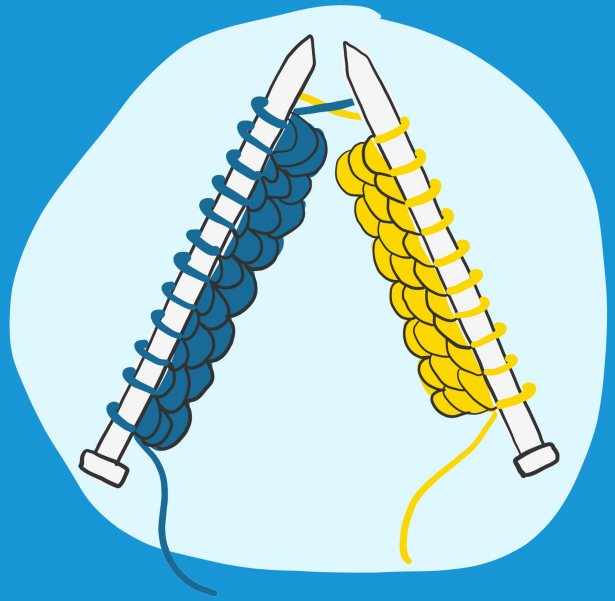
We don’t pretend that we can control or prevent everything.

We need to be able to limit the impact, fix things when they break and learn from the outcome.

# Cross-functional teams are better at solving problems

We like cross-functional delivery teams. Can we run the business this way?

Operations are not second-class citizens.



# People are more complex than computers

# Culture debt is hard to pay back

We’re not as diverse as we’d like to be.

Short term pressure to grow quickly is hard to handle.

Interviewing people is difficult.

It’s really slow and difficult to change behaviours.

# The software metaphors only take you so far

There is consequence to change.

There is no staging environment for life; you're always testing in prod.

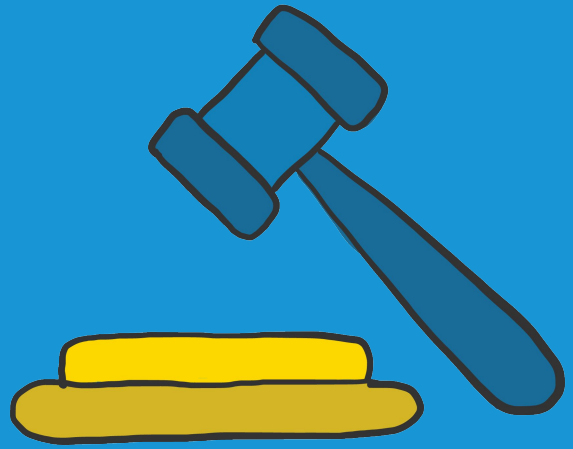
How do you stop making the same mistakes in the future? Is there an automated test for that?

# Is hierarchy a dirty word? Not entirely

We’re not a “Flat Hierarchy”; we want ‘just enough’ hierarchy to function.

But we don’t have line managers, we don’t set performance targets and we don’t do appraisals.

We trust that people will act in Equal Experts’ interests.



# There are lots of things we're finding difficult

Finding the right balance between freedom and accountability is hard.

Diversity and inclusion is hard.

Growth isn't linear or predictable.

We have a tendency to be introspective.

# What have we learned so far?

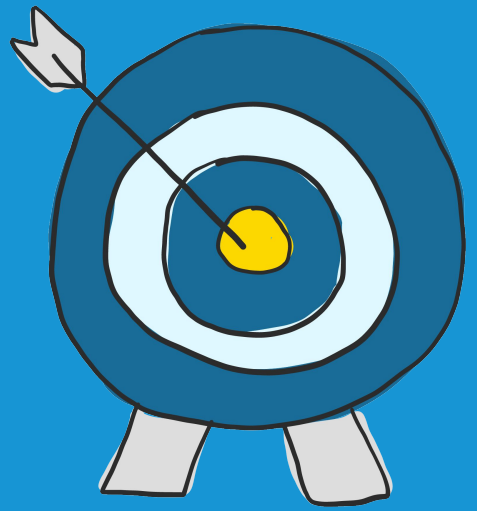
# Bigger is different

# We are making this up as we go along!

There’s no one right answer, and the target moves all the time anyway.

New people will make the network grow stronger.

We strive for continuous improvement.



# We are getting better at using The Advice Process

Where should we open new offices?

Should I go to this conference?

Shall we rename our Slack channels to fit a naming convention?

Shall we send a plane into space?

# Space Plane Record Attempt

## Equal Experts Space Agency (EESA)

EESA Director of Rocket Science: Tim Squires

EESA Director of Space Operations: Nick Porthouse

# What could you try?

# The Advice Process is hard, but powerful

Create an environment where the impact of failure is small and reversible.

Start small and experiment.

If you can’t trust your people to make good decisions, why are you working with them?

# Try trusting people

# Thank You

Simple solutions to big business problems.

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# Thank You


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