

An Easy Way to Tell Experts from Amateurs ...

Imagine That

"By the age of twenty, the elite performers had each totaled ten thousand hours of practice. By contrast the merely good students had totaled eight thousand hours, and the future music teachers had totaled just over four thousand hours."

In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell is writing here about violinists, but he might as well be writing about ECM consultants. Seriously, stay with me here.

Gladwell is exploring what circumstances create "outliers" – those truly outstanding performers who score off the charts compared to others who at first glance seem to be in the same class.

He goes on to say, after laying out many more examples across different cultures, eras, and professions, "In fact, researchers have settled on what they believe is the magic number for true expertise: ten thousand hours."

I know how glib that round number might sound if you don't have the benefit of the rest of the book, but think about it. What is your particular expertise? When did you first get that feeling that you were really, really good at it? Now swag the hours you had put in on it at that point. Something like ten thousand hours? Eight to ten years elapsed time when you've been hard at it, really learning it, for several hours a day?

This book helped me solve a puzzle. If you've ever worked with me, you know I'm not one to criticize the competition, but the fact is, some of our biggest engagements come to us after the client first brought in a much larger company that tried and failed to meet the client's needs.

I get that. Big companies, especially big banks, value heft in their vendors - financial heft, resource heft. Big companies can make claims that sound a lot like ours. "Our image/workflow experts are deeply experienced... They are familiar with these systems and those business lines, etc., etc."

But there's a cost to all that heft. When they propose a project, they can't be sure who will really do the work. They have to source the work as best they can.

So now I get the rest of it, too. When the client makes that urgent call to us, offering us the business they first awarded to the big guys, confident that we can quickly and expertly do what the big guys couldn't, here is what they are saying: I know you have "ten thousand hour" people in the main skill areas this project requires for it to be successful. Send me those people!

And they are right. The main skill areas for ECM projects are business process consulting, system engineering, and solution architecture. When we make a proposal, we can say exactly which of our ten thousand hour people from each discipline will belong to the client.

What would happen in if you put this question in your next RFI: How many of the people you will assign to this project are ten thousand hour people and in what disciplines?

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rick Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "R".

Rick Smith is CEO of Imagine Solutions. When he hit his ten thousand hours in ECM, it was still called imaging.