



PERSPECTIVE 01

Reducing Operational Friction

*Why established organisations gradually become harder to work in —
and what can be done about it.*



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ABSTRACT

Operational friction is rarely the result of poor management or inadequate staff performance. More commonly, it emerges gradually as organisations evolve in response to growth, technological change and operational demands. Over time, workflows become more complex, knowledge becomes fragmented, and informal workarounds become embedded within everyday practice. The cumulative effect is an increase in unnecessary cognitive effort, administrative burden and process variability.

Drawing upon organisational psychology, systems thinking, knowledge management and behavioural science, this paper explores why operational friction develops, how it influences organisational performance and why understanding workflows should precede the implementation of technology, including artificial intelligence. It argues that meaningful operational improvement begins not with digital transformation, but with understanding how work actually happens.

KEYWORDS

Operational friction · Workflow design · Organisational psychology · Systems thinking · Knowledge management · Cognitive load · Organisational learning · Artificial intelligence

Introduction

Every established organisation develops its own way of working.

Processes evolve. Technology changes. Documentation expands. New services are introduced. Responsibilities shift between individuals and teams. These changes are often signs of a successful organisation responding to new opportunities and challenges rather than indicators of organisational weakness.¹

Yet organisational evolution carries an unintended consequence.

As organisations become increasingly sophisticated, so too do the systems that support them. Information becomes distributed across multiple locations. Processes adapt incrementally. Decisions require additional approvals. Individuals develop personal workarounds to compensate for inefficiencies that may never have been formally recognised.

Over time, these adaptations become embedded within the organisation's culture and are accepted simply as '*the way we do things*.'

Defining operational friction

Operational friction describes the unnecessary effort required to complete work that could reasonably be performed more simply, consistently or efficiently.

It does not refer to the productive effort associated with solving complex problems or delivering high-quality services. Rather, it reflects avoidable barriers created by fragmented workflows, duplicated activity, inconsistent information, unnecessary approvals or poorly integrated systems.²

In practice, operational friction most commonly manifests in the following ways:

- Searching for information that should be immediately accessible.
- Duplicating work because existing information cannot be located.
- Manually transferring data between systems.
- Waiting for approvals that add limited value.
- Relying on experienced colleagues for knowledge that has never been formally captured.

These examples share a common characteristic: they represent effort that consumes time and attention without contributing meaningfully to the quality of the work itself.

Organisations as evolving systems

Traditional management thinking often viewed organisations as relatively stable structures whose processes could be designed once and maintained indefinitely.

Contemporary organisational theory suggests otherwise. Organisations are increasingly understood as complex adaptive systems that continually evolve in response to internal and external pressures.³ Workflows, knowledge structures and communication patterns are therefore not fixed assets but dynamic responses to changing organisational demands. Consequently, operational workflows rarely remain static — and the friction that accumulates within them is a natural product of organisational growth rather than a sign of management failure.

"Operational friction is not a sign that an organisation is failing. It is frequently a sign that it has been succeeding."

Cognitive load and organisational performance

One consequence of operational friction is an increase in unnecessary cognitive load. Cognitive Load Theory proposes that working memory possesses limited capacity.⁴ When individuals are required to search for information, remember undocumented processes or compensate for poorly designed workflows, mental resources are diverted away from higher-value thinking.

The organisational consequence is significant. When cognitive capacity is routinely consumed by navigating unnecessary complexity, the capacity for creative problem-solving, considered decision-making and sustained attention is correspondingly reduced. Reducing operational friction therefore represents not merely an administrative improvement, but an investment in the cognitive capacity of the people the organisation depends upon.

Knowledge as an organisational asset

Knowledge Management research distinguishes between knowledge held by individuals — tacit knowledge — and knowledge embedded within organisational systems — explicit knowledge.⁵ Organisations become increasingly resilient when important knowledge is documented, shared and integrated into everyday workflows rather than residing primarily within experienced members of staff.

When knowledge remains concentrated in individuals, organisations face a compounded risk: the departure of key staff creates operational disruption that extends well beyond the loss of their direct contribution. Workflows that depend upon undocumented individual knowledge are, by definition, fragile. Transforming tacit knowledge into explicit, accessible organisational knowledge is therefore a meaningful form of operational risk management.



Technology is not the starting point

Artificial intelligence has generated considerable interest as a means of improving organisational efficiency. However, technology rarely resolves poorly understood workflows. Instead, it often accelerates existing processes — whether those processes are effective or inefficient.^{2,6}

Consequently, organisations should first understand how work currently happens before determining whether automation or artificial intelligence can meaningfully contribute to improvement. Implementing technology within a friction-laden environment does not eliminate friction — it embeds it more deeply and, in many cases, makes it considerably harder to address.

"Understanding how work actually happens is not a preliminary step before improvement begins. It is where improvement begins."

Implications for practice

Operational improvement should begin with observation rather than assumption. Understanding how work genuinely happens frequently reveals opportunities that remain hidden within formal process maps or organisational charts.⁷

Small improvements introduced consistently and thoughtfully often produce greater long-term value than large-scale organisational change programmes. This is particularly true when improvements are designed around how people actually work rather than how formal processes suggest they should work. The distance between these two things is frequently where operational friction lives.

Conclusion

Operational friction rarely emerges because organisations fail.

More commonly, it emerges because organisations succeed.

*Success creates growth.
Growth creates complexity.
Complexity creates friction.*

Recognising this relationship enables organisations to approach improvement without attributing blame. The question is not who is responsible for the friction that has accumulated — it is how that friction can be identified, understood and reduced in practical, sustainable ways.

The organisations that manage this best are not necessarily those with the most resources or the most sophisticated systems. They are the ones that remain genuinely curious about how their people actually work — and that treat the gap between how things are and how they could be not as a failure to be explained away, but as an opportunity to be understood and acted upon.

'How could this be simpler?'

Perhaps the most useful question any organisation can ask.

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Christian Adshead brings more than twenty years of experience across operational leadership, organisational psychology, service development, project management and knowledge management. He founded Clarity Workflows to help established organisations identify and reduce operational friction through practical, human-centred workflow improvement. His work is grounded in the belief that capable people are rarely held back by a lack of commitment – more often, they are slowed by unnecessary complexity in the systems and processes around them.

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If this paper has raised questions relevant to your organisation, the Clarity Workflows Business Check offers a complimentary structured conversation to explore whether practical improvements could make everyday work simpler and more consistent.

To continue the conversation, please contact christian@clarityworkflows.com or visit clarityworkflows.com