

Why You're Working Around Your Systems (And How to Fix It)

You've invested in systems. But somehow... the real work is still happening outside of them. Despite your organization's commitment to streamlined workflows and centralized processes, employees continue finding alternate paths—from Excel files quietly living on desktops to email chains replacing proper workflows and departmental trackers existing in isolation. This document explores why these workarounds persist, the risks they pose, and practical solutions to bring work back into your systems.



The Signs: Spotting "Workarounds" in the Wild

Workarounds are easy to spot once you know what to look for. The most common manifestation is the proliferation of "off-system" spreadsheets—those Excel files that track critical business information but exist only on individual computers. These spreadsheets often contain the "real" data that teams rely on, despite having enterprise systems designed for that exact purpose.

Another telltale sign is approval processes happening via email rather than through workflow systems. Instead of using the ticketing or approval features built into your platforms, managers and team members exchange a flurry of messages with attached documents, creating confusion about which version is current and whether approval has actually been granted.

Departmental "side trackers" are equally problematic. These are tools or documents that a single team maintains to compensate for perceived gaps in company-wide systems. Marketing might have their campaign tracker, while Sales maintains a separate customer database, and Operations keeps their own inventory counts—all outside the CRM, ERP, or inventory management system the company invested in.

Digital Smoke Signals

Look for phrases like "I'll just track this myself" or "Let me send you my version" in team communications—these are verbal indicators of workarounds.

Multiple Sources of Truth

When meetings include debates about whose numbers are correct or teams constantly reconcile different datasets, you're seeing workarounds in action.

Technical Debt Clues

Requests for data exports that are then manipulated offline before being used for decision-making point to systemic workarounds.

These workarounds aren't limited to any particular department or level. From C-suite executives requesting special reports to front-line workers creating their own checklists, workarounds permeate organizations vertically and horizontally. Recognizing these patterns is the first step toward addressing the underlying issues that cause employees to work outside your carefully designed systems.



Why Do We Work Outside the System?

Despite significant investments in enterprise systems, employees consistently find reasons to circumvent them. Understanding these motivations is crucial to bringing work back into your systems. The disconnect between intended and actual workflows stems from several factors that frustrate users and drive them to create alternatives.



Poor User Experience

Systems with clunky interfaces, excessive clicks, or unintuitive designs push users to find faster alternatives. When completing a simple task takes five screens and dozens of fields, employees will create shortcuts.



Slow Response Times

When approvals or workflows take too long, teams create parallel processes. If a system-based approval takes three days while an email gets a response in an hour, the choice becomes obvious.



Inflexible Configurations

Systems that can't adapt to departmental needs or unique scenarios force users to work around limitations. When essential fields or functions are missing, Excel becomes the fallback solution.



Inadequate Training

Users who don't fully understand system capabilities resort to familiar tools. Without proper onboarding, employees default to methods they already know rather than learning new processes.

Research indicates that approximately 70% of employees admit to using shadow IT solutions—unauthorized applications or workarounds—to accomplish their tasks. This staggering figure highlights the gap between organizational intentions and operational reality. Even more concerning, leadership often remains unaware of the extent of these workarounds until problems arise.

The psychological aspects shouldn't be overlooked either. People naturally resist change, especially when new systems seem to complicate rather than simplify their work. Additionally, there's a sense of ownership and control when managing your own tracking systems—a feeling that can be lost when work moves into centralized platforms where visibility and accessibility are broader.



The Risks of Shadow Workflows

Working around official systems might seem harmless—even necessary—in the moment, but the cumulative effects can be devastating to organizational efficiency, security, and compliance. These shadow workflows create vulnerabilities that often remain hidden until they trigger significant problems.

Data Silos

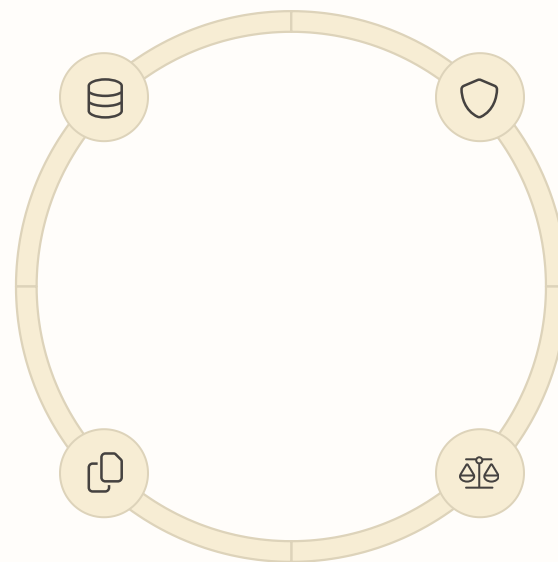
When information lives outside central systems, it becomes inaccessible to those who need it. Decision-making suffers because no one has the complete picture.

- Critical data becomes unavailable during emergencies
- Teams make decisions based on partial information
- Institutional knowledge walks out the door with departing employees

Duplicated Work

When multiple systems track the same information, errors and inconsistencies multiply.

- Teams waste time reconciling conflicting data sources
- Duplicate data entry increases error rates
- Inconsistent versioning leads to confusion



Security Vulnerabilities

Shadow systems rarely maintain the same security standards as enterprise solutions.

- Unencrypted sensitive data stored on local drives
- Unauthorized sharing of proprietary information
- No backup systems for critical business data

Compliance Failures

Regulatory requirements can't be enforced on systems outside your governance framework.

- Inability to prove data handling compliance during audits
- Missing audit trails for critical business decisions
- Inconsistent application of retention policies

Real-world consequences of these risks include missed deadlines when critical information isn't accessible to the right people at the right time. Companies have failed audits when they couldn't produce consistent records of decisions or actions. Customer satisfaction suffers when service representatives lack visibility into the complete customer journey because information exists in departmental silos rather than integrated systems.

Perhaps most costly is the impact on analytics and strategic decision-making. When leadership can't trust the data in official systems because they know significant work happens elsewhere, the organization loses its ability to make confident, data-driven decisions. This erosion of trust creates a vicious cycle: people work around systems because they don't trust them, which makes the systems less trustworthy, encouraging more workarounds.

The Root Causes: System, Process, and Culture Gaps

Behind every workaround lies a deeper organizational issue. Addressing these fundamental gaps is essential for creating sustainable solutions that bring work back into your systems. These root causes typically fall into three interconnected categories: system deficiencies, process misalignments, and cultural challenges.

System Gaps

The most obvious root cause is when systems simply don't meet users' actual needs. This mismatch typically stems from:

- Requirements gathered from management rather than end users
- Systems designed for idealized workflows rather than real-world scenarios
- Insufficient customization capabilities that force one-size-fits-all approaches
- Poor integration between different enterprise systems, creating friction at handoff points
- Technical limitations that make necessary functions difficult or impossible

Process Gaps

Even well-designed systems fail when surrounding processes don't support their adoption:

- Inadequate onboarding and training for new users
- Missing documentation for complex or rare workflows
- No clear ownership for system maintenance and improvement
- Approval workflows that don't match organizational authority structures
- Failure to update processes when business needs evolve

Culture Gaps

The most challenging root causes are cultural issues that undermine system adoption:

- Leadership that exempts themselves from using systems
- Insufficient change management when implementing new platforms
- Lack of consequences for working outside approved systems
- Department-centric thinking that prioritizes local efficiency over organization-wide effectiveness
- Resistance to transparency that systems often create

These gaps don't exist in isolation—they reinforce each other in complex ways. For example, a system gap might initially drive workarounds, but over time, those workarounds become embedded in the culture, making it difficult to bring work back into the system even after technical improvements. Similarly, process gaps like inadequate training can make users perceive system problems that don't actually exist, further cementing workaround behaviors.

Understanding which specific gaps exist in your organization requires honest assessment and user feedback. The most successful organizations directly engage with users across departments and levels to identify why workarounds persist. Often, the simple act of acknowledging these gaps and demonstrating commitment to addressing them can begin shifting behaviors back toward system adoption.



Solutions: Bringing Work Back into the System

Successful organizations don't just identify workarounds—they systematically address them through targeted interventions across system design, process refinement, and culture change. The goal isn't to eliminate all flexibility but to create systems that support rather than hinder productivity.



Assess Current State

Start by documenting existing workarounds without judgment



Prioritize User Experience

Redesign based on actual workflow patterns



Implement Technical Fixes

Customize and integrate systems to match real needs

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Strengthen Training

Provide role-specific guidance for system utilization



Measure Adoption

Track metrics that show workflow returning to systems

System-level solutions focus on making official platforms more appealing than workarounds. This includes implementing user-suggested customizations that address specific pain points, such as creating simplified interfaces for common tasks or adding missing functionality. Integration improvements that eliminate the need to switch between systems can dramatically reduce workarounds, as can performance optimizations that make systems more responsive.

Process improvements complement system changes by creating smoother workflows. Streamlining approval chains, establishing clear data governance policies, and developing realistic service level agreements all help bring work back into systems. Many organizations find success by creating "super user" programs that provide peer support and champions within each department.

Executive Sponsorship

Leadership must visibly use and advocate for systems. When executives request reports from official systems rather than accepting spreadsheet outputs, behavior throughout the organization changes. Create clear expectations that work will happen in systems, with consequences for persistent workarounds.

Feedback Mechanisms

Implement regular user feedback sessions and act quickly on suggestions. When employees see their input resulting in system improvements, they're more likely to work within those systems. Create easy channels for reporting issues and requesting enhancements.

Celebration & Recognition

Recognize teams that successfully transition from workarounds to system usage. Share success stories highlighting improved outcomes like time savings, error reduction, or better collaboration resulting from system adoption.

Organizations that excel at bringing work back into systems take an iterative approach—tackling one workflow or department at a time rather than attempting organization-wide change at once. They recognize that some quick wins build momentum for more challenging transitions. By demonstrating value at each step and continuously refining based on feedback, they create a virtuous cycle where system usage becomes self-reinforcing as benefits accumulate.



Inspiring Change: What Good Looks Like

When organizations successfully bring work back into their systems, the transformation extends far beyond technical improvements. These success stories share common elements that demonstrate what "good" truly looks like and provide inspiration for your own system reinvention efforts.

Before: Project Delivery Department Chaos

A national engineering firm struggled with managing projects across disconnected systems. Project managers used separate tools for scheduling, resource planning, and budgeting—none of which integrated with their financial systems. Status updates lived in spreadsheets and email threads, while leadership had no centralized dashboard to track progress or forecast revenue.

Critical project milestones were often missed because teams operated in silos. Executives spent hours each week manually consolidating reports from different departments to get even a partial view of project health. Billing delays were common because invoicing relied on manual data handoffs between project managers and finance.

Team members were frustrated by redundant data entry and unclear accountability. New project managers took months to ramp up because there was no standardized workflow across teams.

After: Integrated Project Management Hub

After a transformation initiative completed in less than a year, the firm implemented a centralized project management hub tailored to their unique workflows. The system integrated scheduling, resource management, financial tracking, and executive reporting into a single platform—eliminating the need for manual data consolidation.

Project status updates now flow automatically from the field to leadership dashboards in real time. Invoicing happens seamlessly at key milestones, triggered by project workflows rather than email requests. Teams collaborate within the system, reducing reliance on spreadsheets and improving data consistency.

The firm reduced project reporting prep time by 80%, accelerated invoicing by 30%, and improved on-time project delivery by 25%. Leadership gained real-time visibility into project pipelines, enabling proactive decision-making and more accurate revenue forecasting.

Key Success Patterns

Organizations that successfully eliminate workarounds share several patterns in their approach and outcomes:



"The breakthrough moment came when we stopped thinking about 'proper system use' and started asking what would make our team's lives easier. Once we redesigned around their actual needs instead of some idealized process, adoption happened naturally." — CIO, Manufacturing Company

Successful organizations also recognize and celebrate teams that make the transition. They share user stories highlighting both personal benefits (time saved, frustration reduced) and organizational gains (better collaboration, improved outcomes). By creating visibility around these successes, they inspire other departments to undertake similar transformations.

Perhaps most importantly, organizations that succeed in bringing work back into systems don't treat it as a one-time project but as an ongoing commitment. They establish regular check-ins to identify emerging workarounds, continuous improvement processes to address system gaps, and governance structures that balance standardization with necessary flexibility.

Conclusion & Call to Action: Start Your System Reinvention

Working around systems isn't inevitable—it's a symptom of fixable problems in your organization's approach to technology, processes, and culture. By understanding why these workarounds exist and addressing root causes systematically, you can reclaim the full value of your technology investments while improving employee experience.

The journey to system reinvention begins with awareness. Recognize the signs of workarounds without judgment, understanding they represent adaptation rather than defiance. Then move to diagnosis, identifying whether the root causes stem primarily from system limitations, process misalignments, or cultural factors. Finally, implement targeted solutions that address specific gaps while creating an environment where working within systems becomes the path of least resistance.



Conduct a Workaround Audit

Gather a cross-functional team to document existing off-system workflows. Focus on understanding rather than eliminating, asking "why" rather than "what" to uncover root causes.



Pilot a System Reinvention

Choose one department or process with significant workarounds and apply the principles outlined in this document. Create a showcase example that can inspire broader change.



Establish a User Experience Council

Form a standing committee of power users from different departments to evaluate system changes, suggest improvements, and champion adoption within their teams.

Remember that system adoption isn't about enforcing compliance—it's about creating such compelling user experiences that workarounds become unnecessary. When systems truly support how people work rather than forcing artificial constraints, users naturally gravitate toward them.

The organizations that succeed don't just have better technology; they have a deeper understanding of their users' needs and a commitment to continuous improvement. By applying the principles in this document, you can transform system usage from an obligation into an advantage, unlocking productivity and insights that drive competitive advantage.

Ready to begin? Share this document with your leadership team, schedule your workaround audit, or contact us for a personalized workflow strategy session. Your journey toward seamless system adoption starts now—and the results will transform how your organization works.



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