

Where Does the Work Go?

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A request reaches the person who knows what needs to happen next, but one piece of information is missing. Rather than stop the work, she checks another source, finds what she needs, and continues. The request moves forward without delay. From where anyone else is standing, nothing unusual happened. The work encountered something it needed, someone found a reasonable way through it, and the work continued.

A few days later, another person encounters a different problem in the same workflow. This time, the information is available, but accessing it takes longer than expected. He knows just the person who can help, gets what he needs, and keeps going. Again, the work continues. The circumstances were different and so was the response, but each person did something capable people do every day. They adapted to what they encountered and found a way to move the work forward.

There is good reason to call both responses successful. Neither person allowed an ordinary obstacle to become an unnecessary interruption. Both used what was available to them, solved the immediate problem, and kept the work moving. If we were watching for a delay, missed result, or visible failure, there would be little here to hold our attention.

In both scenarios the work moved forward. But where did it go?

The answer may seem obvious. The work went where it needed to go. What needed to happen next happened, and the work continued. Why look any further?

Step back from these individual situations and something else becomes visible. Information that should be available is found somewhere else. A question that could be resolved within the work is taken to the person outside the work because they know the answer. A process that takes too long is worked around so the next step can begin. Each response makes sense in the circumstances, and each one allows the work to continue.

What begins to emerge is not a collection of problems. It is the way the work is actually getting done. The search, the conversation, the workaround, and the decision are not separate from the work simply because they were never part of the intended process. They have become part of *how* the work moves.

Perhaps the information was intended to be readily available to the person completing the work. Perhaps questions at this level were intended to be resolved within the role. Perhaps the process was intended to support the next step without requiring another path around it. None of those intentions changes what happened. The information was found, the questions were answered, and the work continued to move. Stepping back exposed the work people are *actually* doing and how that may differ from the work the organization *intended* its conditions to support.

A difference between intended work and actual work does not necessarily mean something is wrong. People adapt because work requires it. On any given occasion, doing something different from what was intended may be exactly what the situation requires. The searches, conversations, decisions, and workarounds are no longer only responses to individual situations. They are now part of the actual work. As that work develops over time, it becomes the work performance.

Organizations expect the conditions they design to support work that produces the performance that matters within that environment. The question isn't whether the actual work looks exactly like the work that was intended. It is whether the work performance developing through adaptations is moving toward what the organization expects...or *away* from it.

And nothing has to stop working for this to happen.

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