



The Operational Drag Audit

A 25-question self-assessment for finding the friction your dashboards can't see.

Operational drag is the gap between how fast your people work and how fast your business moves.

From the series at infernalmechanery.com/insights

Drag is not failure. Failures trip alarms and get fixed. Drag hides in the seams between systems, teams, and processes, where each instance is too small to escalate and the sum belongs to no one. It never appears on a financial statement, which is why it survives in otherwise well-run companies. The purpose of this audit is simple: make it visible.

How to run it

The audit covers the five types of operational drag. Each section has five statements. For every statement, mark how often it is true in your organization: Rarely (0 points), Sometimes (1 point), or Constantly (2 points). Score what actually happens, not what the official process says should happen. The honest answer is the useful one.

It takes about twenty minutes. For a sharper picture, have two or three people at different levels complete it independently, then compare. If two totals differ by more than ten points, that gap is itself a finding: it usually means leadership can no longer see the friction the front line lives inside.

When you finish, total each section on the profile page, read your band, and use the sequence table to decide what to do first. One rule above all: nothing gets automated until it has survived Remove, Simplify, and Standardize.

01 *Information drag*

Time spent finding things that already exist: the document, the decision, the current number

For each statement, mark how often it is true.

Rarely - 0 Sometimes - 1 Constantly - 2

People ask a colleague for information that already lives in a system, because asking is faster than finding.

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When someone needs the latest version of a document, there is doubt about where it lives or which version is current.

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Decisions get re-litigated because nobody can find where, or why, the original call was made.

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Onboarding a new hire depends on tribal knowledge more than on anything written down.

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People lose part of each day searching across email, chat, and shared drives for something they know exists.

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Information drag subtotal:

/10

02 *Duplication drag*

The same data entered, formatted, or verified more than once because systems do not talk to each other.

For each statement, mark how often it is true.

Rarely - 0 Sometimes - 1 Constantly - 2

The same customer, order, or project information is typed into more than one system by hand.

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People maintain private spreadsheets that mirror data already held in an official system.

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Recurring reports are rebuilt manually from exports instead of refreshing themselves.

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When two systems disagree about a number, a person has to reconcile them by hand.

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Work has been done twice because two people did not know the other was already on it.

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Duplication drag subtotal:

/10

03 *Coordination drag*

Meetings, messages, and check-ins whose real function is transferring status a system should surface.

For each statement, mark how often it is true.

Rarely - 0 Sometimes - 1 Constantly - 2

Recurring meetings exist mainly so people can find out where things stand.

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Quick status check messages are a normal part of every workday.

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Work sits idle between handoffs, waiting for the next person to notice it arrived.

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Projects depend on someone whose main job is chasing updates from everyone else.

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If a key person is out for a week, their work stalls because status lives in their head.

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Information drag subtotal:

/10

04 *Approval drag*

The distance between how long a decision takes to make and how long it takes to happen

For each statement, mark how often it is true.

Rarely - 0 Sometimes - 1 Constantly - 2

Routine approvals take days when the actual judgment takes minutes.

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Some approvals exist that nobody can fully explain. It has always been routed that way.

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People batch, delay, or avoid requests because the approval process itself is painful.

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Approvers wave things through without real review, which means the step is theater.

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Employees quietly work around the approval chain whenever something is urgent.

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Duplication drag subtotal:

/10

05 *Tool drag*

The tax of switching itself: every jump between applications forces a small mental reload

For each statement, mark how often it is true.

Rarely - 0 Sometimes - 1 Constantly - 2

Completing one routine task requires touching four or more applications.

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Copying and pasting between tools is a daily activity.

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People must monitor tools they barely use, just in case something lands there.

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Notifications from multiple tools interrupt focused work throughout the day.

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New tools have been added in the last two years without any old ones being retired.

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Information drag subtotal:

/10

Before you total: capture the worst offenders

While scoring, a few specific moments probably came to mind. A report someone rebuilds every Monday. An approval that sat for a week. Write them down before they fade.

These are the first three entries on your friction map.

Your drag profile

Copy each subtotal, then add them up.

SECTION	SUBTOTAL
Information drag	/10
Duplication drag	/10
Coordination drag	/10
Approval drag	/10
Tool drag	/10
<i>Total:</i>	<i>/50</i>

Your highest-scoring section is your dominant drag type. That is where the audit's attention, and your first fixes, should go. The total tells you how urgent it is.

What your total means

0 to 12	LOW DRAG: A tuned operation. Fix your single highest-scoring section and protect what is working. This is the right time to automate, because you would be amplifying a design that already works.
13 to 25	MODERATE DRAG: Friction is quietly taxing growth. Work the top two sections through Remove, Simplify, and Standardize before buying anything new. Most companies live here without knowing it.
26 to 38	HEAVY DRAG: Drag is now a strategic cost, roughly the equivalent of a hidden team on payroll. Run a full audit before adding tools of any kind, and treat AI purchases as premature until the map exists.
39 to 50	SEVERE DRAG: Managing work has overtaken doing work. This calls for leadership-level operational redesign, not software. The good news: companies in this band usually recover the most, fastest.

What to do about it

The fix follows a strict order: Remove, then Simplify, then Standardize, then Automate. Skipping ahead is how companies end up automating their own confusion.

DRAG TYPE	REMOVE	SIMPLIFY	STANDARDIZE	AUTOMATE
Information	Kill reports and updates nobody reads.	One source of truth per fact.	Naming, storage, and ownership conventions.	Search and retrieval that spans systems.
Duplication	Retire mirror spreadsheets.	A single point of entry for each record.	Shared definitions for every field.	Integrations so nothing is re-keyed.
Coordination	Cancel status-only meetings.	Fewer handoffs per workflow.	One visible board per process.	Status that surfaces itself, with alerts.
Approval	Delete approvals nobody can justify.	Raise thresholds, shrink the chain.	Written criteria and response times.	Rule-based auto-approval within limits.
Tool	Retire overlapping tools.	Fewer steps inside each task.	One tool per job, and only one.	Integrations that carry context across.

Where AI fits

AI belongs in the last column, and only there. Pointed at a process that has survived the first three steps, it compounds the advantage. Pointed at an unmapped process, it simply accelerates the drag. If your total landed above 25, the highest-return move available to you is not a tool. It is the map.

Want the rigorous version?

This checklist finds the shape of your drag. Our operational review measures it: a private, structured assessment of where your business loses time, what it costs, and the exact order of fixes, with and without AI.

Start at infernalmechanery.com/review or book a conversation at infernalmechanery.com/schedule.

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The research behind the five types lives at infernalmechanery.com/insights.