

MANAGEMENT

Rid Your 

Organization of

Obstacles

That Infuriate

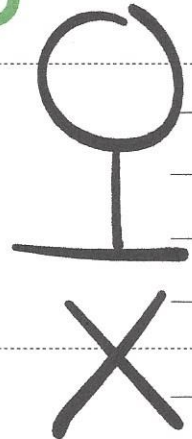
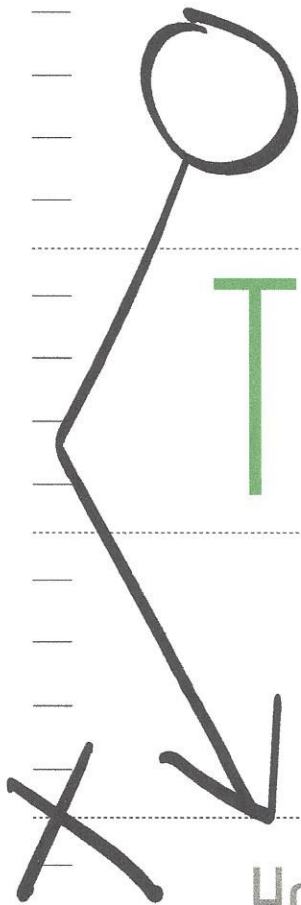
Everyone



AUTHORS

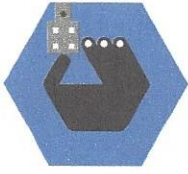
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How every company can fight the
“addition sickness” that complicates work





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ABOUT THE ART

Michael Barker's photography showcases views from U.S. college football stadiums—including from seats with views obstructed by pillars, press boxes, or walls. Barker runs the website *College Football Campus Tour* and uses his platform to warn fans about these less-than-ideal seats.

In

August 1940, as his country prepared for waves of attacks by German planes, Britain's prime minister, Winston Churchill, set out to address a different enemy: lengthy reports. In his 234-word "Brevity" memo, he implored the members of his war cabinet and their staffs

to "see to it that their reports are shorter." Churchill urged them to write "short, crisp paragraphs," to move complex arguments or statistics to appendices, and to stop using "officialese jargon."

We devoted eight years to learning about how leaders like Churchill serve as trustees of others' time—how they prevent or remove organizational obstacles that undermine the zeal, damage the health, and throttle the creativity and productivity of good people. We call our work "the Friction Project." It consists of our own research, case studies, workshops, and classes; interviews with 22 guests on our *Friction* podcast; hundreds of interactions with our sprawling network of leaders, researchers, and other savvy people; and an analysis of the academic and practical work of others.

Along the way, we learned that friction can be both bad and good: Not everything ought to be quick, easy, and frictionless. Activities that involve good friction include developing deep and trusting relationships, making complex and irreversible decisions under uncertainty, and doing creative work that's messy, inefficient, and failure-ridden (if

you're doing it right!). Skilled leaders are bent on eliminating unnecessary obstacles, in large part because doing so gives them more time to focus on those many things in organizational life that should be slow, hard, and complicated. (See the sidebar "What Ought to Be Easy or Hard in Your Company?")

In this article we focus on *addition sickness*: the unnecessary rules, procedures, communications, tools, and roles that seem to inexorably grow, stifling productivity and creativity. We show why companies are prone to this affliction and how leaders can treat it. The first step is to do a *good-riddance review* to identify obstacles that can and should be removed. The next step is to employ *subtraction tools* to eliminate those obstacles or make it difficult for people to add them in the first place. This article unpacks both steps.

Why Companies Are Plagued by Addition Sickness

Our project uncovered three forces that fuel these behaviors. First, we humans default to asking, "What can I add here?" and not "What can I get rid of?" Studies by Gabrielle Adams and her colleagues discussed in a 2021 *Nature* article found that this "addition bias" shapes the solutions that people generate to improve universities, edit their own and others' writing, modify soup recipes, plan trips, and build Lego creations. When one university president asked students, faculty, and staff members for suggestions to improve the place, only 11% of the responses entailed subtraction.

Second, organizations often reward leaders for additions: Kudos, cash, perks, and titles are heaped on those who implement new technologies, launch initiatives, or build bigger fiefdoms. In contrast, people with the wisdom



IDEA IN BRIEF

THE PROBLEM

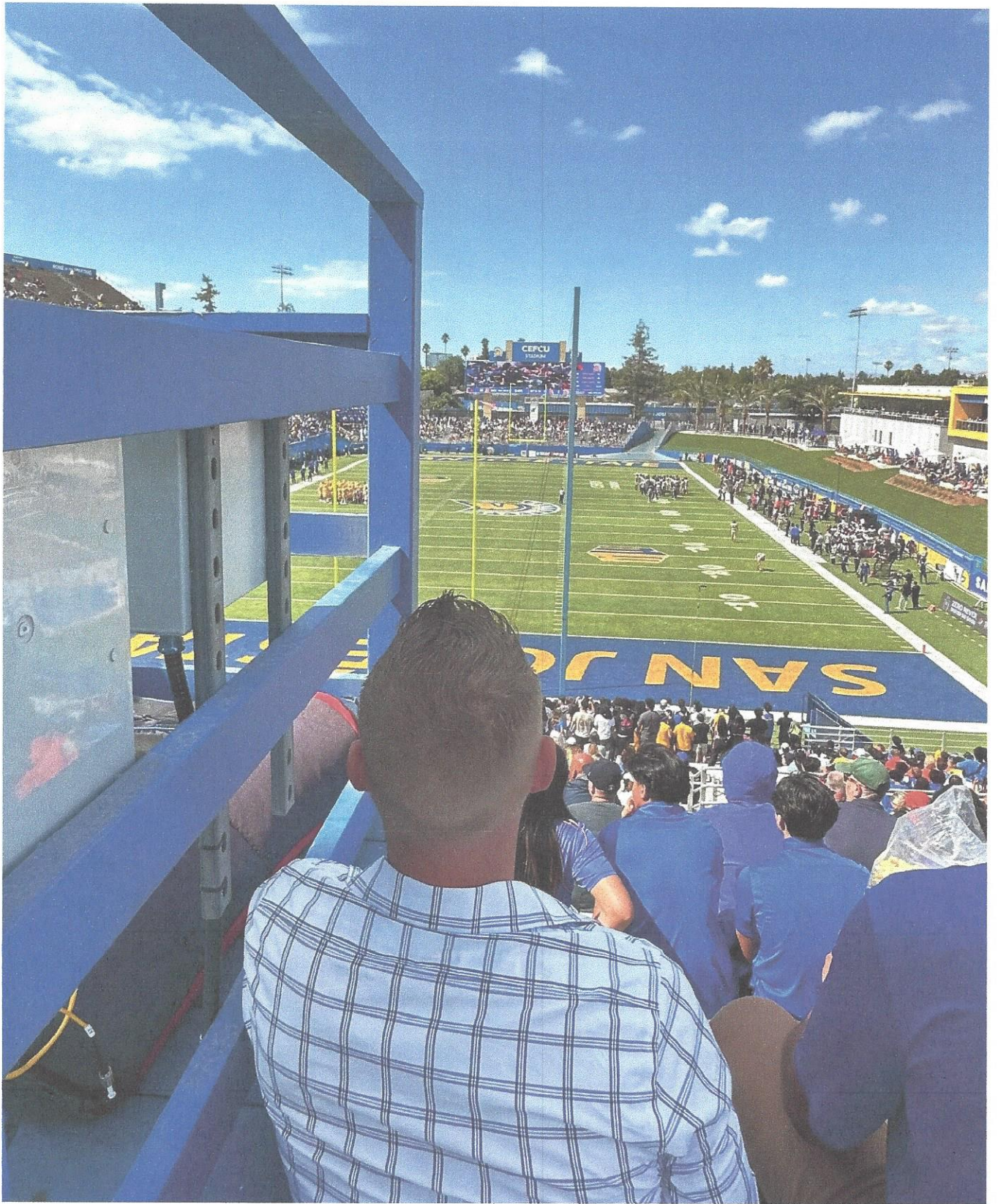
Virtually all organizations are plagued by addition sickness: the unnecessary rules, procedures, communications, tools, and roles that seem to inexorably grow, stifling productivity and creativity.

THE ROOT CAUSE

People default to asking, "What can I add here?" not "What can I get rid of?" Organizations reward leaders for additions—implementing new technologies, launching initiatives, building bigger fiefdoms. And leaders often have a limited grasp of their "cone of friction"—how their actions and decisions burden others.

THE REMEDY

Conduct a good-riddance review to identify obstacles that can and should be removed. And employ subtraction tools to eliminate those obstacles or make it difficult for people to erect them in the first place.





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and discipline to avoid adding unnecessary stuff are rarely noticed or rewarded. These incentives help explain why, although many of us believe that other people need to engage in subtraction, we object to eliminating our own pet projects or reducing our own budgets. As the late, great comedian George Carlin put it, “Have you noticed that their stuff is shit and your shit is stuff?”

Third, leaders often have a limited grasp of their “cone of friction”—how their actions and decisions burden others. Part of the reason for such friction blindness, as Dacher Keltner’s book *The Power Paradox* documents, is that when people feel powerful, they tend to focus more on what they need and want and less on the challenges and inconveniences faced by others (especially people who are less powerful than they are).

So leaders may not realize how their failure to remove, or to avoid adding, unnecessary impediments makes life harder for “the little people.” At Stanford University, for example, a senior administrator sent a 1,266-word email with a 7,266-word attachment to more than 2,000 faculty members, inviting all of us to devote a Saturday to brainstorming about a new sustainability school. Apparently it never occurred to her that the email could have been trimmed by at least 500 words and the attachment by thousands of words. Such edits would have saved time for thousands of people in her cone of friction.

The good news is that leaders can do much to reverse addition sickness. They can begin by turning attention to identifying what can be removed (or not added). Gabrielle Adams’s team found that when people paused to consider solutions or were reminded to think about subtraction, they were less likely to default to addition. Venture capitalist Michael Dearing fires up this way of thinking by urging leaders to act as editors in chief of their organizations. He explains that, like skilled text and film editors, the best leaders relentlessly eliminate or repair things that distract, bore, bewilder, or exhaust people.

Good-Riddance Reviews

Savvy friction fixers assess what they should and can remove from their organizations and identify where and how to create mechanisms such as rules, review processes, and financial penalties that make it harder to add unnecessary stuff. Here are some methods they employ.

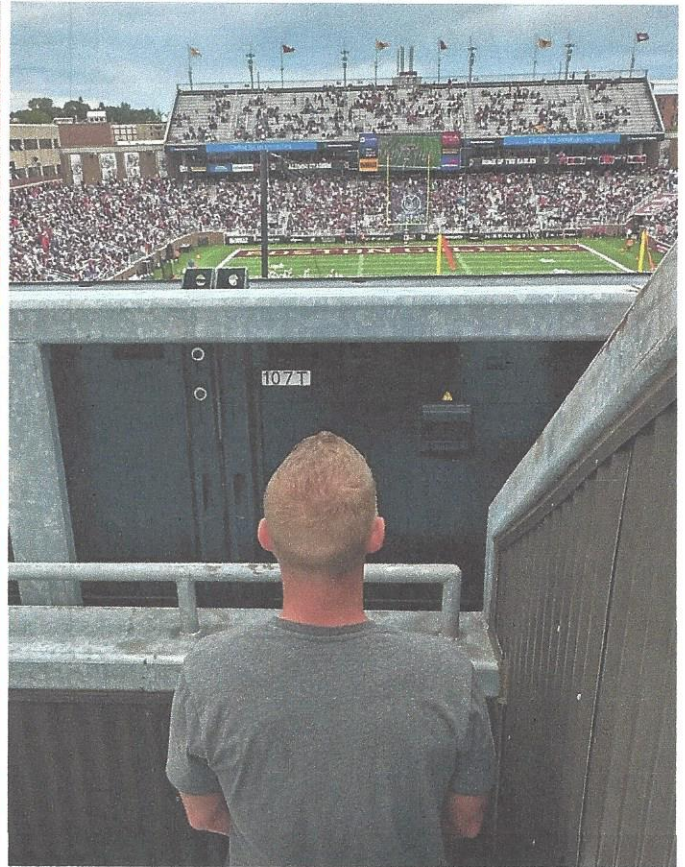
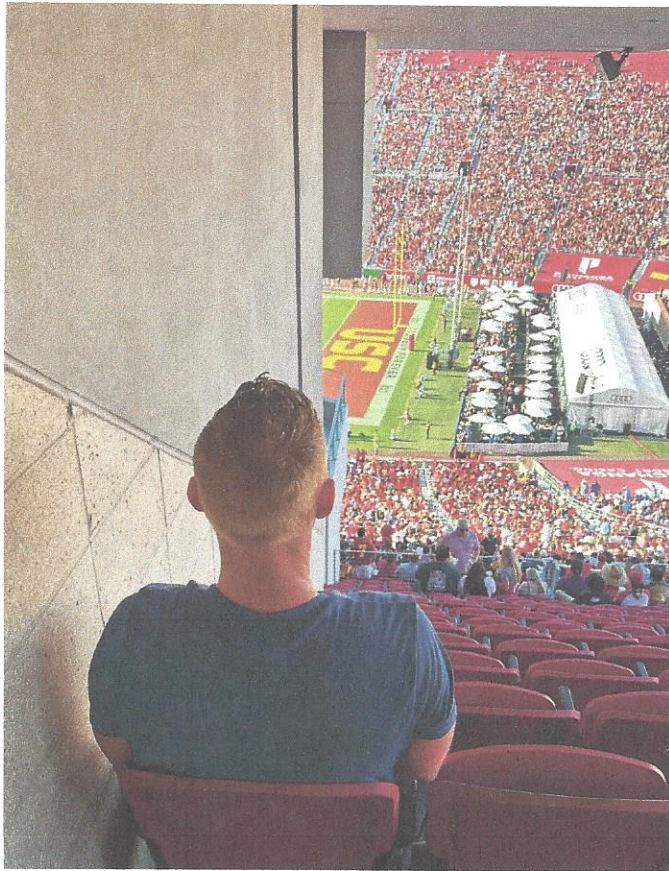
Ask colleagues and customers to identify unnecessary obstacles. When Melinda Ashton was the chief quality officer at Hawaii Pacific Health, the largest nonprofit health care system in the state, she was troubled because clinical staffers were devoting too much time to updating patients’ electronic health records and too little time to examining, treating, and comforting patients.

To address the problem, Ashton and her team launched the Getting Rid of Stupid Stuff program in 2017 (yes, the acronym is GROSS). As Ashton reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, one of the first steps was to ask nurse assistants, nurses, and doctors to nominate anything in the system that “was poorly designed, unnecessary, or just plain stupid.” Hawaii Pacific employees identified 188 subtraction targets, which sparked 87 improvements. Subtracting all that stupid stuff freed up a lot of time. In response to one nomination, Ashton’s team eliminated a mouse click that every nurse and nurse assistant was required to make for every patient during hourly rounds. That saved 24 seconds per click—which, Ashton reports, “consumed approximately 1,700 nursing hours per month at our four hospitals.”

You can also ask clients to identify subtraction targets. Our students Saul Gurdus and Elizabeth Woodson spent 10 weeks helping administrators at a California social services agency identify and remove pain points for clients—especially obstacles that caused unnecessary delay and despair among applicants. Gurdus and Woodson used client interviews to identify junctures in the application process—usually handoffs between silos—where clients reported “waiting” and “still waiting” and feeling “invisible” and “this is too hard.” Then they worked with administrators to remove impediments to communication across silos, which, in turn, reduced waiting times and clients’ frustration.

Calculate the burdens of performance measurement. Are you spending so much time evaluating one another that you don’t have time to do your work? When Marcus Buckingham and Ashley Goodall crunched the numbers at the global services firm Deloitte, they discovered that the 65,000 employees were collectively spending nearly 2 million hours a year on performance management—completing the forms, attending meetings, and creating the ratings (see “Reinventing Performance Management,” HBR, April 2015).

Assess the burden imposed by meetings. As part of the Friction Project, we worked with Rebecca Hinds, the head of Asana’s Work Innovation Lab, on a “meeting reset” intervention with 60 Asana employees. We asked participants to rate the value and importance of each recurring meeting on their calendars. They assessed 1,160 standing meetings and identified more than 500 that were of low value. Hinds guided those colleagues to remove or revamp those meetings. As a result, on average, each employee saved more than four



hours a month. Canceling meetings had the biggest impact (37% of total minutes saved). Making adjustments to format, such as scheduling meetings less often, shortening them, and relying more on written communication and less on presentations and conversations, accounted for the other 63%.

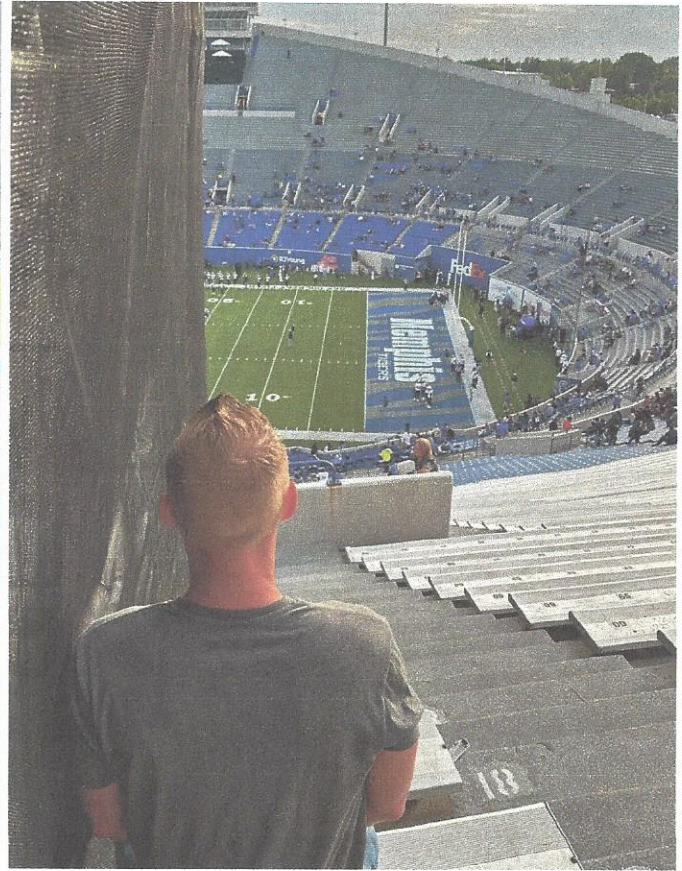
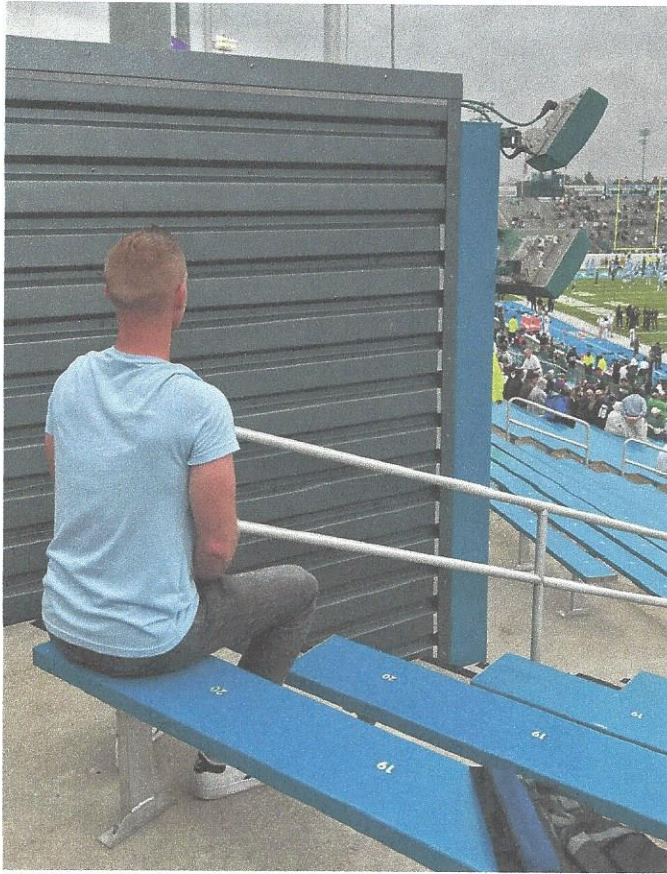
Catalog email overload. A 2019 Adobe survey of the email usage of 1,002 U.S. adults found that they spent, on average, more than five hours a day reading and responding to work email (three-plus hours) and personal email (two-plus hours). As John Lilly, the former CEO of Mozilla, put it to us, “After all these years, email is still the internet’s killer app, and keeping up with it crushes productivity and creativity in every company I know.” You can begin to fight back by reviewing the number, length, recipients, and timing of the emails that people send and receive and by developing solutions to lighten the load. A policy like the “zzzMail” rule instituted at the consulting firm Vynamic might help: Employees are asked not to send internal emails between 10 PM and 6 AM Monday through Friday, on weekends, and on all Vynamic holidays.

Count how many people report to each leader. An unfortunate side effect of flat structures is that executives

sometimes have so many people reporting to them that their jobs become impossible. In *Beyond Collaboration Overload*, Rob Cross describes “Scott” as an executive who was “flying up the hierarchy” of a large company until he took charge of three big units—some 5,000 people. Scott had had just a few direct reports in past roles; he had 16 this time. He wanted to be “less hierarchical,” so he urged people “to bring him problems and concerns or to include him in discussions.”

By the time Cross was called in to help, Scott was working 16 hours a day, seven days a week, and still falling behind. When Cross examined the networks of the company’s top 10,000 people, Scott “was the Number 1 most overloaded person.” Some 120 people came to him every day for information. Cross found that 78 of the 150 top managers in one unit Scott ran “felt they couldn’t hit their business goals unless they got more of Scott’s time.”

Interview and observe users. Leaders at the nonprofit Civilla conducted more than 250 hours of interviews and observations with residents, civil servants, and leaders to identify needless and confusing questions on a benefits form. More than 2 million Michigan residents had to complete the convoluted document each year to apply for



childcare, food, and health care support from the state. It contained 18,000 words and more than 1,000 questions—many of which were unnecessary and intrusive.

A turning point in Civilla's Project Re:form came when leaders met with executives from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), the organization responsible for the form, and asked them to fill it out. As a Civilla cofounder, Adam Selzer, told us, none of the executives had attempted to complete the 42-page form before. Terry Beurer, the department head at MDHHS, got no further than page eight before giving up. Beurer told Civilla's CEO, Michael Brennan, that it was among the most humbling experiences of his career. To Beurer's credit, rather than getting defensive and making excuses, he signed up for the project on the spot and provided his time and department resources throughout the challenging, but ultimately successful, four-year effort to drastically shrink the form.

Subtraction Tools

During our research for *The Friction Project*, we discovered an array of tools that help leaders rid their organizations of

unnecessary burdens—and make it harder to add needless impediments in the first place. Savvy leaders experiment with different combinations of tools to develop the right portfolio for tackling their company's particular friction troubles.

Simple subtraction rules. Crisp constraints help people remove unnecessary impediments from organizations. One example is the rule implemented by Laszlo Bock when he led people operations at Google, which is "dedicated to staffing, development, and a distinct and inclusive culture." Bock told us that tremendous burdens had been heaped on employees and job candidates by the company's tradition of conducting eight to 12, and sometimes 25, rounds of interviews with a candidate before making an offer (or not). Bock responded with a simple rule: If more than four interviews were to be conducted with a candidate, the request for an exception had to be approved by him. It worked like a charm. The excessive rounds of interviews that exhausted employees and drove away good candidates disappeared instantly.

The "rule of halves" is another simple subtraction tool. We ask people to imagine how they could reduce each work burden by 50%—such as the number of standing meetings they attend, the length of the emails they send, the number



Identify and remove “jargon monoxide,” the hollow, convoluted language that undermines communication, collaboration, and coordination.



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of recommendations they require for new hires, and the number of digital collaboration tools they use. People rarely cut 50%, but they do reduce their workload.

That’s what happened when Rob Cross coached Scott, that deeply overextended executive, and suggested that he cut back his direct reports, meetings, and emails by about 50%—targets that Scott actually hit. His direct reports felt more empowered (and less overloaded) because they made more decisions without checking and coordinating with him. And because Scott had fewer people to deal with—and resisted jumping into every decision—his unit operated more efficiently. He worked fewer hours, his health improved, and, Cross tells us, he saved his troubled marriage.

The subtraction game. We have played this game with more than 100 organizations. It starts with solo brainstorming. We ask people, “Think about how your organization operates. What adds needless frustration? What scatters your attention? What was once useful but is now in the way?” Next, people meet in small groups to discuss the impediments identified and name additional subtraction targets. Then they select two or three targets and outline rough implementation plans—who might lead the charge, whose support they would need, and which people or teams might quash the change. Some groups pick a practical idea (one CEO vowed to keep his emails under 500 words) and an impractical one (engineers proposed to disband HR). Others select something easy to subtract (one team reduced the number of communications apps it was using) and something tough (the members of a top team agreed that their company would run better and their mental health would improve if they removed two micromanagers from the board of directors).

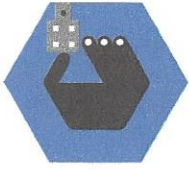
Groups sometimes act on the spot. While playing the game with 25 colleagues at a software firm, one vice president disbanded a troubled project and shifted his weekly team meeting to every other week. The CEO of a financial services company jumped up and told his top 80 people that within a week he wanted an email from each of them with two subtraction targets. Within a month he wanted the changes implemented—and he offered each person a \$5,000 bonus for making that happen. Nearly all 80 managers earned the bonus. Their changes included ending poorly performing product lines, eliminating meetings, and terminating contracts with unreliable vendors.

Subtraction specialists. Not all friction fixers tackle all problems. Zeroing in on one category of challenges can yield big results. The Friction Project focused particular attention on people who take responsibility for identifying, removing, and repairing what we call “jargon monoxide,” the hollow, convoluted, and incomprehensible language that undermines workplace communication, collaboration, and coordination.

Take the team of seven workers from New Zealand’s Nelson Hospital who replaced medical jargon with plain language in letters from physicians to patients. According to an article in *Internal Medicine Journal*, the team ran an experiment with 60 patients suffering from chronic health conditions. All 60 received the usual jargon-filled letter from a doctor that described their condition and suggested treatment, but the team randomly selected 30 patients to get a “translated” letter two weeks later—with common terms substituted for technical terminology. For example, “peripheral oedema” was translated into “ankle swelling,” “tachycardia” into “fast heart rate,” and “idiopathic” into “unknown cause.”

Patients appreciated the clarity: Seventy-eight percent preferred the translated letter to the jargon-filled one, 69% said it had a positive impact on their relationship with their physician, and 80% reported that it increased their “ability to manage their chronic health condition.” Patients were also asked to circle any terms in their letters that they didn’t understand. Patients with untranslated letters circled eight terms, on average; those with translated letters circled two. The team’s efforts to banish jargon monoxide eliminated unnecessary friction for patients.

Subtraction networks. Savvy friction fixers build, join, and activate networks to help them subtract obstacles. Civilla’s leaders worked with numerous residents, community leaders, civil servants, and government officials during Project Re:form. Selzer told us that at first he made the mistake of stereotyping civil servants and officials as uncaring and unimaginative. But when he and fellow cofounders Michael Brennan and Lena Selzer started working with them, they found caring and conscientious people who despised that 42-page form—and were determined to fix it. Once those civil servants and officials realized that Civilla could help and had the wherewithal to stick with the problem, they served as supportive partners.



What Ought to Be Easy or Hard in Your Company?

Not all inefficiencies are bad. Many challenges in organizational life—making tough trade-offs, building deep and enduring relationships, accomplishing creative work, deciding to adopt measures that would heap yet more burdens on employees and customers—often are best dealt with slowly and by difficult and sometimes complicated methods. Eliminating friction in those situations can be soul-crushing for the people who do the work and can undermine productivity, safety, innovation, and commitment. Answering the following five questions can help you decide where to remove versus inject organizational friction.

1 Are you certain or uncertain about the right things to do?

In his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, the Nobel Prize-winner Daniel Kahneman argues that when people are in a “cognitive minefield”—when they are confused or overwhelmed, or when things are falling apart—it’s wisest to pause and assess the situation rather than do something rash. When you find yourself in such circumstances, implore your people to slow down and think about the

right thing to do. A CEO who led an impressive turnaround at a multinational explained to us that when a leader takes charge of a troubled company, “you have to assess the situation rather than act quickly.” The CEO continued, “Everyone wants you to do something, so the first thing you say, very calmly, is, ‘We’re not going to do anything today.’”

2 Are you doing routine or creative work?

The best routine processes, such as getting an expense request approved or canceling a magazine subscription, are so frictionless that, to paraphrase the IDEO cofounder Bill Moggridge, you notice that you don’t notice using them. In contrast, creative work requires constant struggle, frustration, confusion, and failure. There are ways to make creativity less inefficient—such as pulling the plug on bad ideas faster. But piles of studies show that streamlining creativity too much will kill it. As the psychologist Dean Keith Simonton has noted, geniuses such as Picasso, da Vinci, and Richard Feynman had far more successes and failures than their unheralded colleagues. In every occupation Simonton studied, including composer, artist, and inventor, “the most successful creators tend to be those with the most failures!”

3 Will the fast eat the slow, or is it better to pause and learn from others’ mistakes?

Sometimes life is like a mousetrap: The first mouse gets crushed and the second (or third or fourth) mouse gets the cheese. Research on launching new businesses and products, for example, shows that the so-called first-mover advantage is sometimes a myth. When markets are treacherous and uncertainty is high, first movers often flounder because consumers aren’t ready for their ideas yet or are put off by flawed early offerings. Companies that launch their products or services later win, in part, because they learn from the missteps of antsy early movers. Amazon, for example, wasn’t the first online bookstore; the defunct Books.com and Interloc were earlier entrants.

4 Do people have the bandwidth to take on more work, or are they overextended or burned-out?

Too much of a good thing can be terrible. One exasperated service rep showed us that to serve just one customer, she had to switch among at least 15 applications and 20 windows on the 13-inch screen of her laptop. Her company had adopted so many efficiency tools to “help” its workers that it rendered them inefficient. Making it harder for

that rep’s IT team to add apps would have reduced her digital exhaustion.

5 Is your goal to develop quick but shallow or deep and enduring working relationships?

Teams of strangers with well-trained members who understand their roles can develop “cognitive trust” swiftly, which enables them to do good work—such as flight crews on commercial airlines and teams of doctors and nurses in emergency departments who have never met but perform complicated tasks together. Yet the best work happens after collaborators develop deep “emotional trust,” which requires working, talking, and failing and succeeding together over long stretches of time. That’s why teams and networks of people who start new companies, develop products, do surgery, and put on Broadway musicals perform better when they have worked together again and again. Sure, old teams can become stale and need injections of fresh blood. But it may take years before that becomes necessary. And some enduring relationships never lose their spark. Warren Buffett, the “oracle of Omaha,” and Charlie Munger, his partner at Berkshire Hathaway, produced a remarkable record of financial performance for more than 50 years.



One companywide effort saved thousands of hours: changing the default meeting length on Outlook software from 30 minutes to 15 minutes.

They helped the Civilla team navigate through hundreds of pages of government documents in order to develop a shorter and clearer form that still complied with regulations and laws. Civilla then worked with two offices of the MDHHS to test a prototype. After that successful pilot, Civilla helped train more than 5,000 field staffers in 100 department offices. The new form is 80% shorter than the old one, and the end-to-end processing time for frontline staffers has dropped by 42%—partly because they have 75% fewer errors to correct. Applications from residents have increased by 12%, yet because fewer need help completing them, lobby visits have dropped by 50%.

Subtraction movements. Sometimes efforts to reduce friction coalesce to become something greater than a series of activities—they become a movement. These enduring initiatives draw on the ideas and efforts of many people in an organization. Our case study on how pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca scaled up simplicity is one example. It started when senior executives offered the senior director Pushkala Subramanian an intriguing job: to head an effort to simplify how the multinational’s 60,000 employees worked. Subramanian couldn’t resist the challenge, and in 2015 she launched the Simplification Center of Excellence. Her team was small, only four other employees, but their ambitions were big: The “million-hour challenge” aimed to give back 30 minutes a week to each employee in order to free up more time for clinical trials and serving patients.

Subramanian’s team knew that a purely top-down approach would backfire because AstraZeneca is a decentralized company, where local leaders have substantial authority to accept, modify, or ignore orders from on high. So her team took a two-pronged approach. They made some companywide changes. In many parts of AstraZeneca, for example, it took days for new employees to get their company laptops. Subramanian’s team worked with HR, hiring managers, and IT leaders to launch a program to ensure that every new employee had a functioning laptop and access to technical support on day one. Her team also led an effort that saved thousands of hours: changing the default meeting length on Outlook software from 30 minutes to 15 minutes.

At the same time, Subramanian’s team waged a campaign to entice employees throughout the firm to make changes in


their jobs, teams, and units. These efforts included identifying and recruiting “simplification champions” in major units who volunteered to lead local, grassroots changes. The simplification team provided websites, workshops, and coaches to help champions and other employees identify obstacles that frustrated them and their customers and supplied tools to help them implement local repairs.

In Brazil, for example, the simplification champion Roberto Uemura ran a two-week “waste hunters” contest that garnered 52 suggestions. One winning idea entailed streamlining a complex form and redesigning the system so that employees could more efficiently input information concerning patient safety issues from calls received through their unit’s 1-800 number into a single database, rather than into different systems for transmission to headquarters, the local health agency, and other relevant parties. In Mexico the IT team cut paperwork in half, saving 690 hours a year. Meeting-free days were introduced in Taiwan and Thailand. Each employee in Japan simplified one thing, saving a collective 50,000 hours a year.

On May 17, 2017, AstraZeneca held World Simplification Day to celebrate saving two million hours in less than two years (twice the original goal!) and to spread time-saving practices throughout the company.

BAD FRICTION IS a plague that undermines productivity and creativity, raises costs, and frustrates employees, customers, and other stakeholders. It happens in large part because we default to asking, “What can I add here?” instead of “What can I get rid of?” But this penchant can be reversed by leaders who keep talking about and doing subtraction, teaching people how to practice it, and heaping kudos, cash, and other goodies on coworkers who remove unnecessary stuff. ☺

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