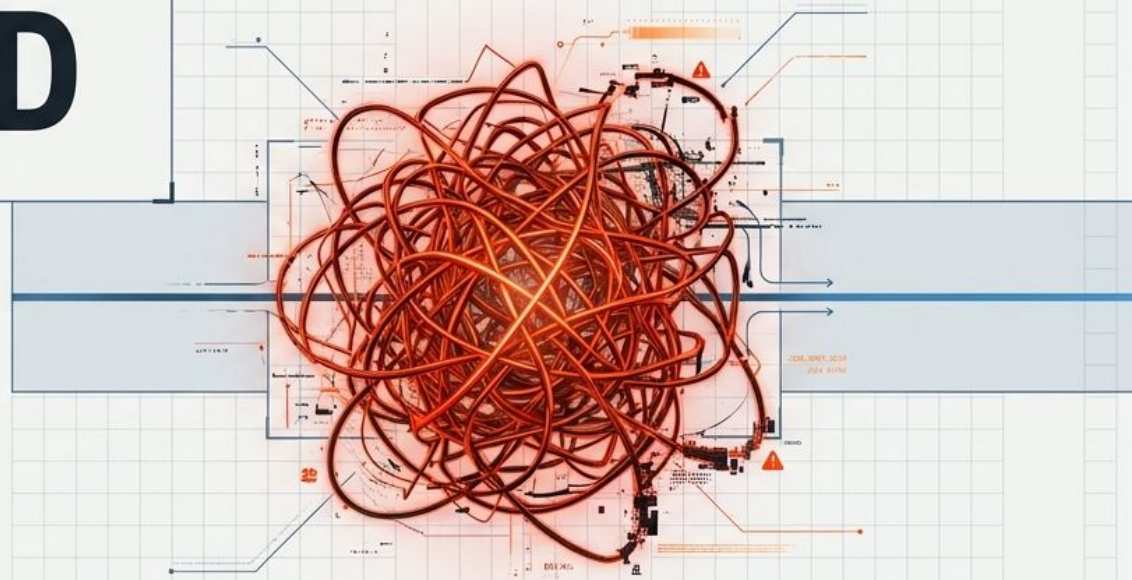
DEATH BY A THOUSAND CLICKS



How leaders can design burnout out of the system.

Based on research from the Nexus Institute for Work and AI, Infinite Potential, and Microsoft telemetry.

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BURNOUT IS A SYSTEM DESIGN FLAW, NOT AN INDIVIDUAL FAILING

THE OLD PARADIGM

NATURE OF PROBLEM	Individual weakness or lack of resilience.
FOCUS	Resilience training, yoga, mindfulness apps.
MEASURE	Lagging engagement surveys and absenteeism.
OUTCOME	Negligible ROI (large UK study of 46,000 workers showed no subjective wellbeing improvement).

THE NEW PARADIGM

NATURE OF PROBLEM	Structural accumulation of work friction and sludge.
FOCUS	System design, workflow audits, and tool integration.
MEASURE	Leading indicators (cognitive load, interruption frequency).
OUTCOME	Recovered organizational capacity and speed.

friction

sludge

"COMPLEX WORK IS NOT WHAT IS BREAKING PEOPLE; FIGHTING THE SYSTEM IS."

– Infinite Potential 2026

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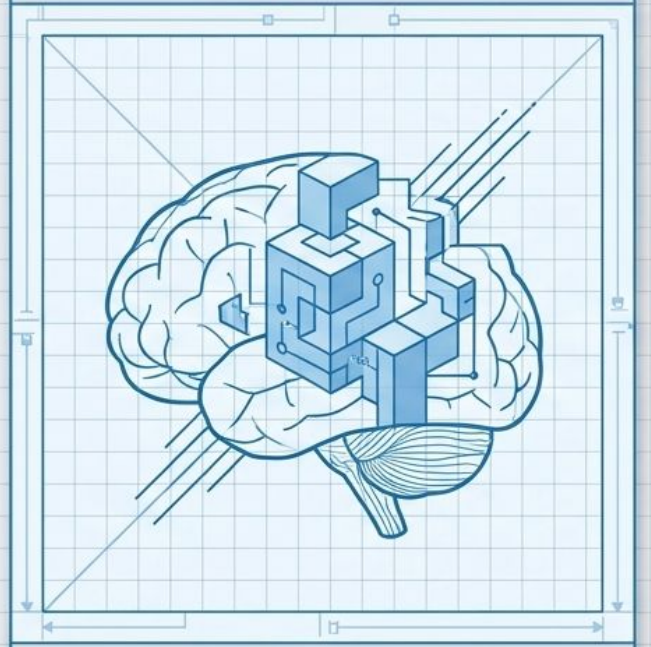
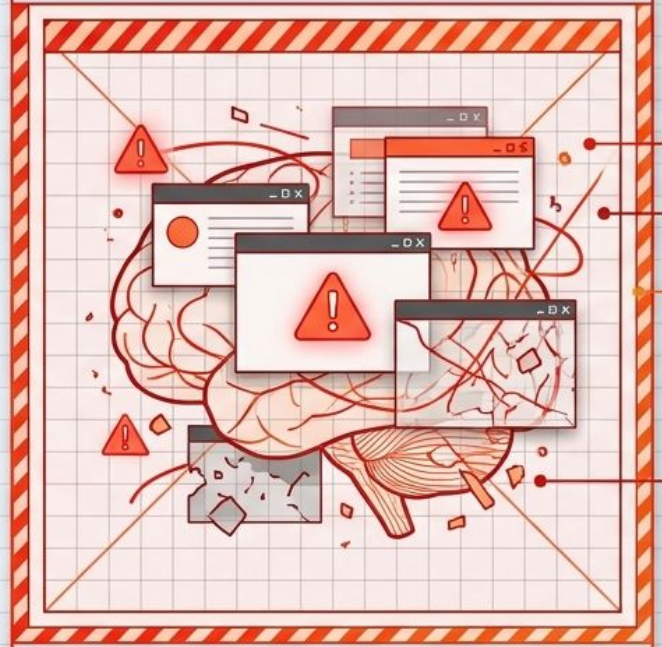
DEFINING THE **INVISIBLE ENEMY** OF PRODUC**TIVE** WORK

VALUE-ADD DEMAND



Inherent Task Complexity
(Engaging)

FRICTION & SLUDGE



Demand Adding No Value
(Depleting)

SLUDGE:
Excessive or unjustified frictions that cost people time.

RED TAPE:
Rules that remain in force without advancing their legitimate purpose.

ILLEGITIMATE TASKS:
Tasks employees correctly perceive as fundamentally unnecessary.

COGNITIVE LOAD:
The mental tax of reconstructing context after an interruption or tracking fragmented systems.

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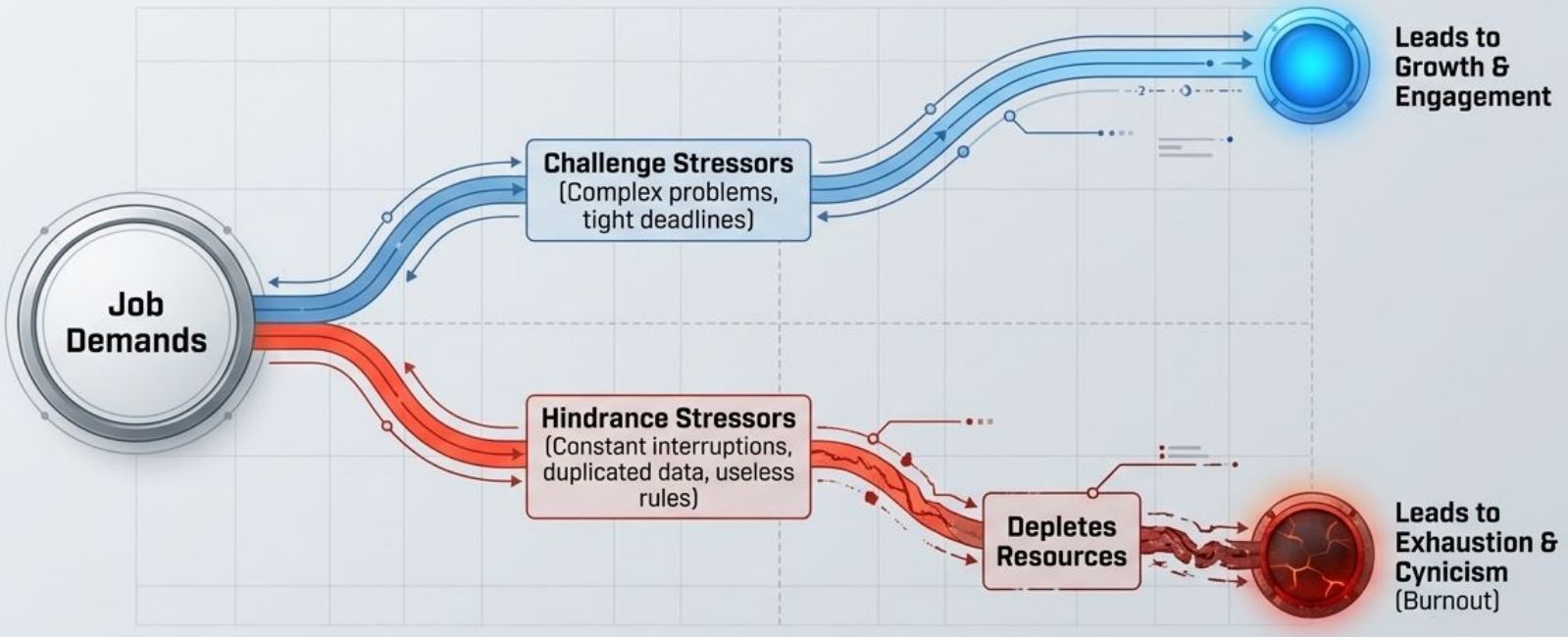
How small frictions compound into clinical burnout



Friction acts exclusively as a hindrance stressor. It consumes vital cognitive energy without offering any reciprocal sense of growth, accomplishment, or meaning.

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Quantifying the macroeconomic and daily drag of poorly designed work

$10 Trillion

Global Cost

Estimated cost of low engagement / 9% of global GDP — Gallup 2026

71%

The System Tax

Australian workers who regularly must work around poorly designed systems — Infinite Potential 2026

25%

Information Blindness

Amount of the workweek lost entirely to searching for information — Atlassian 2025

117 / 153

The Daily Barrage

Average daily emails and chat messages per employee — Microsoft 2025

2 Minutes

The Fragmentation Rate

Average frequency an employee is interrupted by a digital ping — Microsoft 2025

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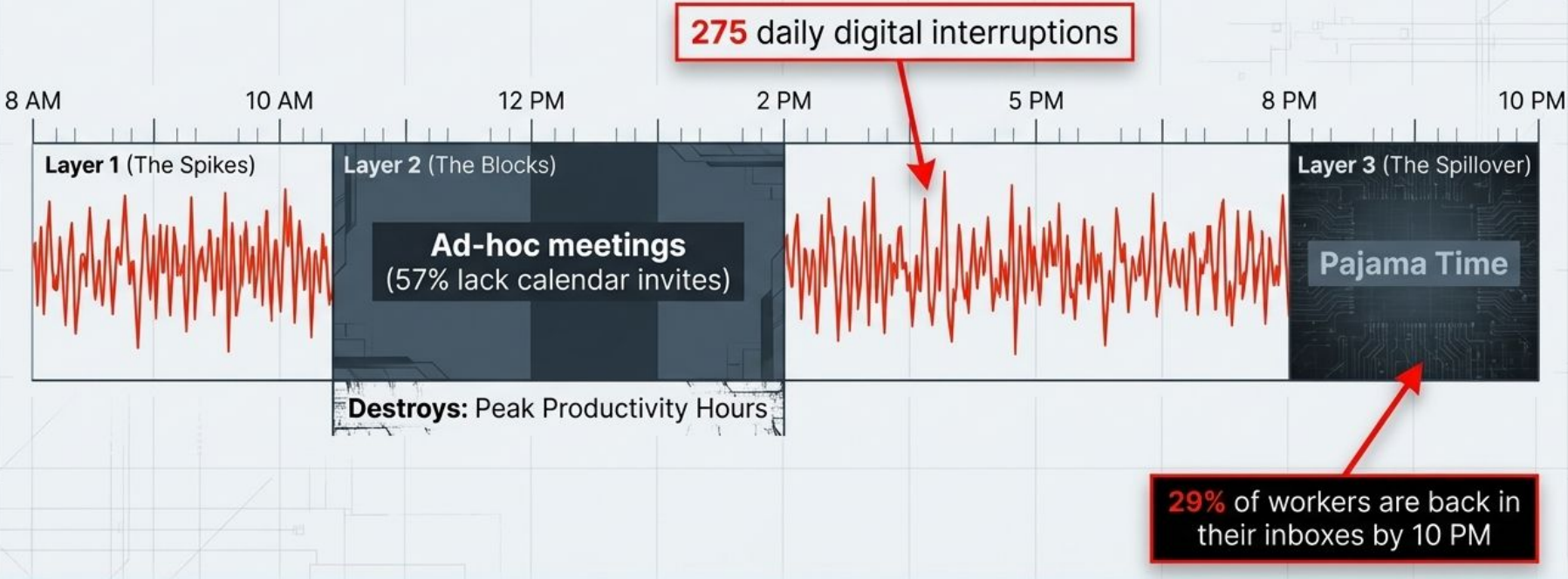
The fragmentation of focus across an average workday



When meetings and system sludge consume the core day, actual productive work is forced into evenings, completely eroding the psychological detachment necessary for recovery.

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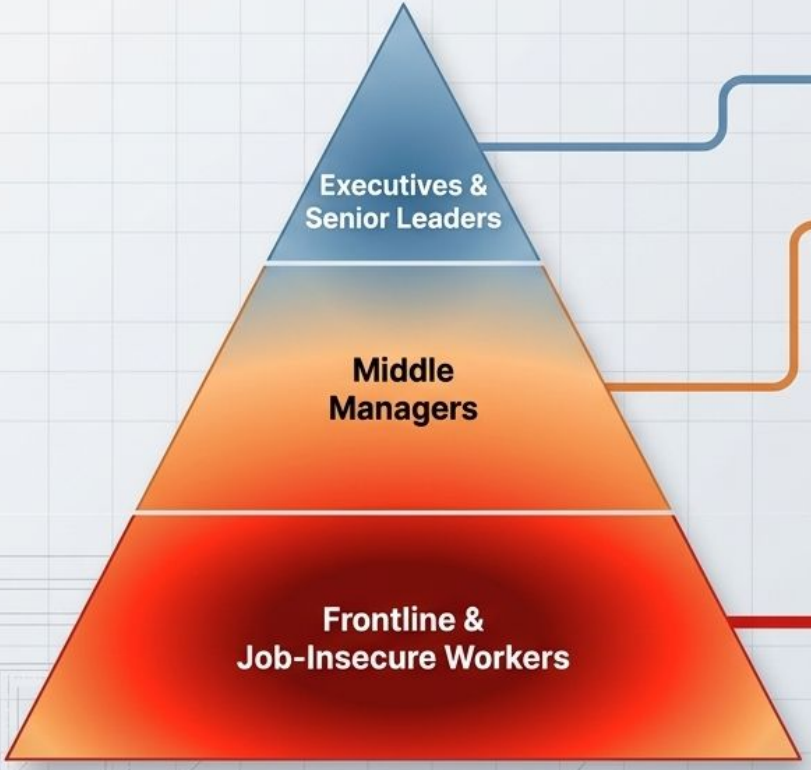
Systemic friction is highly concentrated at the front lines



Shielded by assistants, high autonomy, ability to bypass red tape.

The integration layer; absorb friction from above and attempt to buffer teams below.

Forced to navigate fragmented software and layer upon layer of inherited rules.

68% of job-insecure workers meet burnout criteria, compared to just **20%** of highly secure workers (>3x multiplier).

Insight: Insecure workers feel unable to push back against point pointless steps, absorbing the sludge to protect their roles.

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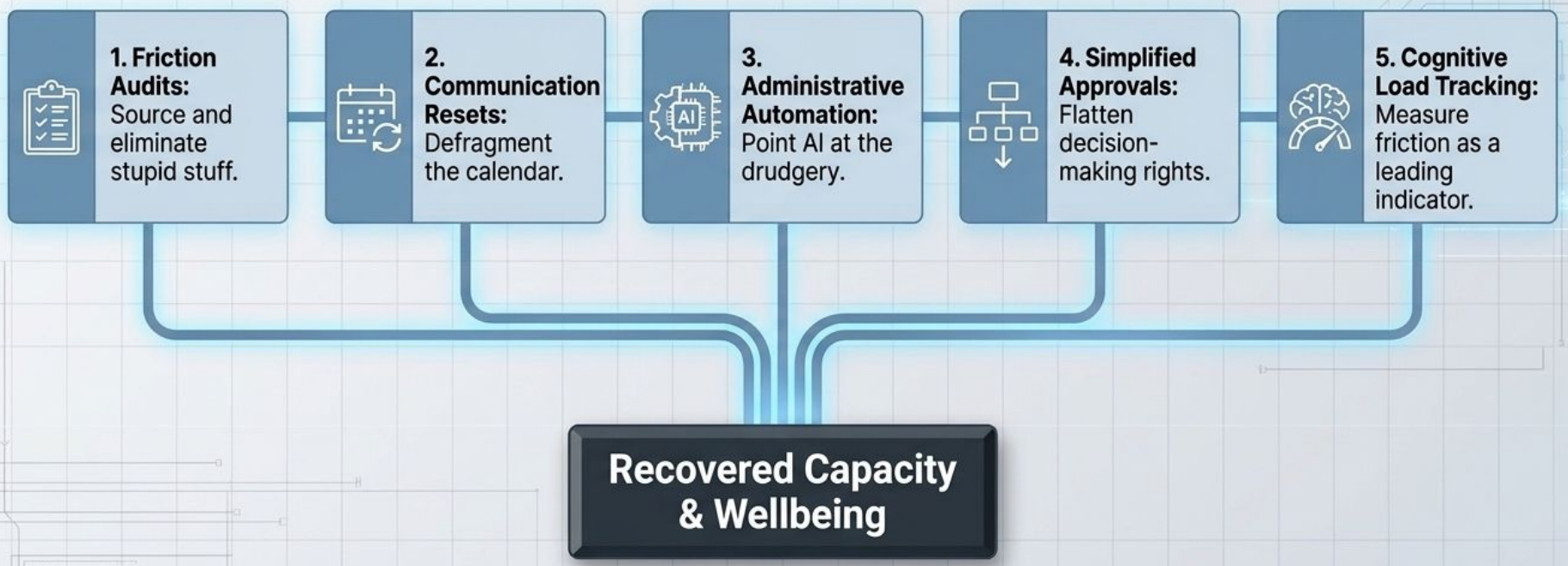
Five architectural interventions to design friction out of work



Because friction is designed, it can be redesigned. These are the five evidence-based responses.

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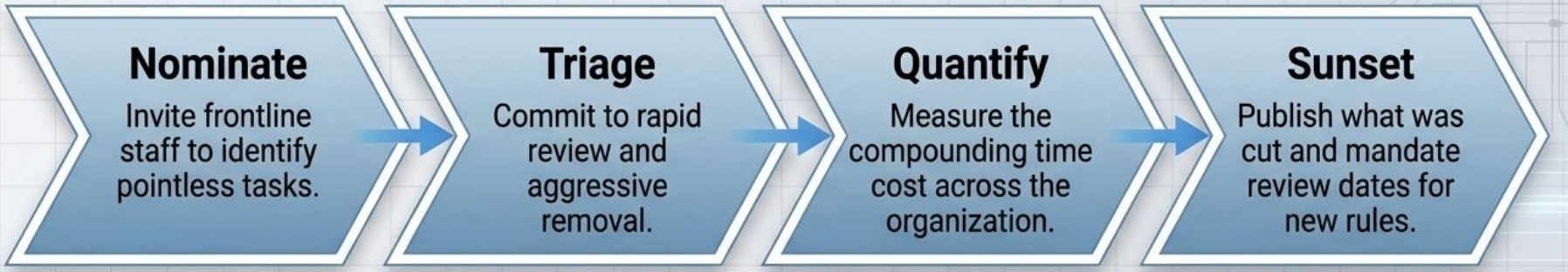
Sourcing and eliminating useless tasks from the frontline up



Proof Point: Hawai‘i Pacific Health

Launched the Getting Rid of Stupid Stuff initiative to target electronic health record documentation.

The Micro-Friction: Identified one unnecessary documentation row that took a nurse just 24 seconds to complete.

The Macro-Impact: Removing that single 24-second step step saved **1,700 nursing hours per month** across the hospital system.

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Defragmenting the workday to protect deep work

Before: The Swiss Cheese Calendar



After: The Consolidated Calendar



Proof Point Panel

Shopify's Useful Subtraction

A bot deleted all recurring meetings with 3+ people. Staff waited two weeks before selectively restoring them.

Result: 322,000 hours of meetings eliminated (equivalent to adding 150 employees).

Dropbox's Virtual First

Meetings are strictly concentrated into 4-hour core collaboration windows, preserving the rest of the day entirely for focused execution.

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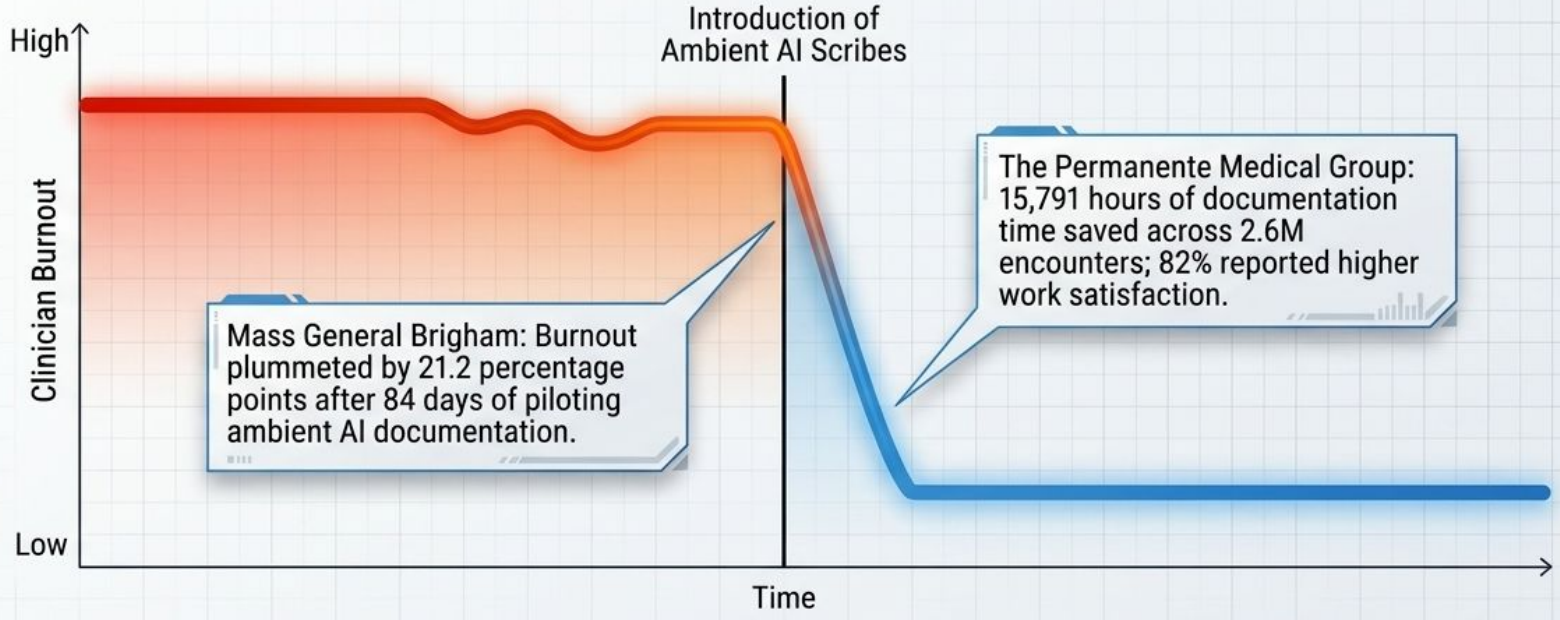
Pointing automation at administrative burden, not meaningful work



⚠ Design Rule

Evaluate new tech on total friction reduction, not just task speed. Beware of adding new review, correction, or notification sludge.

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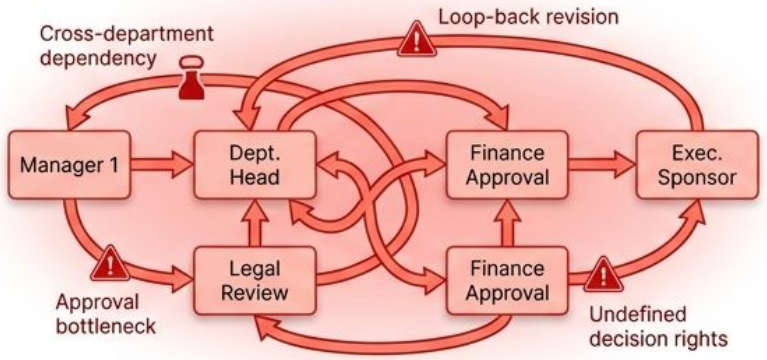
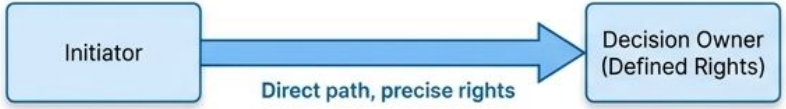
Collapsing complex approval chains and unclear decision rights

Before: Escalation Default



After: Flattened Rights



System Intervention Tactics

- Establish explicit bureaucracy reporting channels.
- Map approval chains for common decisions and ruthlessly cut non-value-add steps.
- Define precise decision rights to prevent default escalation.

Proof Point Callout

Amazon launched a dedicated bureaucracy mailbox in 2024 to report unnecessary pre-meetings and red tape. It yielded **1,000+ submissions** and drove **375+** direct process changes.

Source: Company Reports

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Tracking cognitive load before burnout occurs

Lagging Indicators



Absenteeism
Turnover
Annual Engagement Surveys

Insight: By the time these move, the talent is already gone or broken.

Leading Indicators



System workarounds, interruption frequency, perceived illegitimate tasks, cognitive load

Insight: These signal systemic strain in real-time.

High cognitive load is associated with a **1.7x increase** in the likelihood of burnout. Frequent interruptions increase odds by 53%. Treat **rising load** as a **trigger for process review**, not a wellness program.

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Building the structural pillars of a a low-friction organization



Friction Ownership & Governance

Friction lives in the gaps between IT, HR, and Operations. Assign cross-functional executive authority to broker trade-offs and own end-to-end workflows.

Design Standards for New Tools

Mandate a 'Total Effort Test." Before deploying a new tool, require proof that it removes more end-to-end effort than it adds in training, logins, and verification.

Protecting Slack & Recovery

Efficiency drives that remove all slack create brittle organizations. Time reclaimed from friction removal must not be filled with new volume.

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The organizational friction redesign diagnostic

☐	Do we have a mechanism for frontline staff to report stupid stuff?
☐	Have we audited and purged recurring meetings in the last 12 months?
☐	Does our deployment of AI specifically target administrative drudgery?
☐	Have we mapped and collapsed our most frequent approval chains?
☐	Do we measure cognitive load and interruptions on our monthly employee pulses?
☐	Is a specific executive accountable for cross-functional system friction?

You cannot yoga your way out of poor work design. Removing friction is the only intervention that simultaneously improves employee wellbeing, operational speed, and organizational cost.

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