

When Employees Work Around the Change



The new system has launched. Employees have completed training, usage is high and the project dashboard is green. Then an experienced employee takes a week off, and the customer service team starts missing commitments.

The system hasn't stopped working. The employee's private spreadsheet has stopped being updated. It contained the information the official workflow didn't capture and the reminders that kept unusual orders moving. Management hadn't known it was part of the process.

That scenario illustrates a weakness in how organizations assess change. A process can appear successful because employees are quietly compensating for its shortcomings. Login rates and training completion won't reveal whether the system works reliably, how much additional effort it requires or what happens when the person maintaining the workaround leaves.

HR should help bring that work into view. The objective is to understand what the organization depends on, decide which adaptations are useful and correct the gaps that employees have been carrying without recognition or control.

Adoption doesn't establish that the new process works

A requirement to use a system can produce high adoption even when the system creates extra work. Employees may enter the official record, then recreate part of it elsewhere so they can do their jobs. Management sees compliance. Employees experience duplication.

Consider a team that must use a new customer platform but can't retrieve information in the order needed for a service call. Representatives may keep separate notes, check an old application or message a colleague who knows the account. The visible transaction is completed in the new platform. The effort needed to complete it remains largely invisible.

HR can improve the assessment by distinguishing use from performance. Ask whether employees can complete the process at an acceptable standard, with the information and authority available to them. Then ask what additional steps they take to make that possible.

These questions apply to changes beyond technology. A centralized approval structure can create informal pre-approvals. A new scheduling model can depend on supervisors negotiating swaps outside the official process. A revised job structure can work only because employees continue performing duties that supposedly moved elsewhere.

Start by asking what employees are protecting

A workaround often has a purpose that makes sense to the person using it. It may protect a customer commitment, prevent an error or help the team meet a target the new process makes difficult to achieve.

That doesn't make every workaround acceptable. An employee might bypass a safety control, store sensitive information insecurely or make a commitment without authority. Those situations require prompt action. Understanding the reason helps the employer correct the underlying problem while addressing the immediate risk.

Ask what happens if the employee follows the official process exactly. Does the order stall? Does a customer receive an incomplete answer? Does the employee miss a performance target? The answer can reveal a conflict between the workflow and the expectations management has set.

Also ask whether the workaround existed before the change. An old habit that persisted through implementation has a different explanation from a new step introduced to address a design defect. The organization needs that distinction before attributing cost or blame to the project.

Distinguish adaptation from a control failure

A useful adaptation improves how work is performed within appropriate boundaries. An approved shared reference guide may help employees find information faster. A local checklist may reduce omissions while preserving the required records and approvals.

A temporary compensating process addresses a known deficiency until a correction is implemented. It should have an owner, a defined scope and a review date. For example, a supervisor may approve an additional reconciliation while an integration issue is fixed. The employer should understand its workload and limitations.

A control failure is different. Employees may bypass authorization, alter records or move personal information into an unapproved service. Calling those activities innovation won't make them safe. The appropriate process owner, security team or other qualified adviser needs to assess the exposure.

HR should help the organization make these distinctions consistently. A blanket ban can suppress useful information and leave employees without a workable method. Automatic acceptance can institutionalize a dangerous practice. The response must follow the actual risk, the operational need and the available alternative.

Calculate the work that the dashboard misses

Imagine a Canadian business with 80 employees using a new workflow. Each spends an additional 15 minutes a day checking records or maintaining a separate tracker. Across an assumed 220 working days, that consumes 4,400 hours annually.

At an illustrative loaded employment cost of \$45 an hour, the annual value of that capacity is \$198,000. This is a hypothetical calculation in Canadian dollars, not evidence that all implementations create that burden.

The amount isn't automatically a payroll saving available if the workaround disappears. Employees may remain on the same salaries. The business might recover capacity for other work, avoid additional hiring or reduce paid overtime. Each outcome requires separate evidence.

Suppose a proposed correction costs \$55,000 upfront and \$10,000 a year to maintain. If it removes only half the additional work, it releases capacity valued at \$99,000 annually under the assumptions above. The first-year capacity value after those costs would be \$34,000. That can inform a decision, but it isn't a cash return calculation unless the employer can show how expenditure falls or incremental financial benefit is realized.

Compare the corrected process with a credible baseline. Some checking might have been necessary before implementation, and some may remain necessary afterward. Count only the incremental burden or improvement attributable to the change. Finance should also ensure the same hours aren't counted again as both labour savings and additional revenue.

The purpose is to make the decision honest. A system may still be worth keeping even if it creates extra work, provided the benefits justify the full operating cost and the remaining risks are controlled.

Observe the work without turning the review into surveillance

An investigation can lose employee trust quickly if HR announces a process review and managers use it to rank individuals by time spent in applications. Employees may stop explaining what they do and start protecting themselves from the measurement.

Begin with a defined question. For example, the employer needs to understand why routine customer requests require information from three sources after implementation. A process walkthrough, a small sample of de-identified cases and voluntary employee explanations may answer that question without invasive monitoring.

Tell employees what information will be collected, who will see it and how it will be used. Don't promise anonymity if a small team or a distinctive case makes identification likely. Explain the limits of confidentiality and provide another route for sensitive concerns.

The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada emphasizes that privacy interests continue to exist at work and recommends clear policies governing the collection and use of monitoring information. The applicable legal framework varies by jurisdiction

and sector. [1]

Ontario's Employment Standards Act also requires certain employers with 25 or more Ontario employees on January 1 to have a written electronic monitoring policy before March 1. The government explains that this policy requirement doesn't itself create a right not to be monitored or authorize every monitoring practice. [2] Employers must assess the other requirements that apply to their proposed collection and use.

Ask for a walkthrough of a difficult day

A polished demonstration often follows the intended process under favourable conditions. HR needs to understand what happens when information is missing, demand is high or the request doesn't fit a standard category.

Ask employees to walk through a recent case using approved records. Where did they wait? What did they check outside the main workflow? Who did they contact? Which step required knowledge that wasn't documented?

Include employees from different shifts, locations and experience levels. A process designed around head office hours may depend on an unavailable approver during an evening shift. A confident specialist may solve a problem so quickly that management doesn't realize a new employee would be unable to proceed.

Compare the official instructions with the actual sequence. Record the difference in neutral language. Instead of saying an employee failed to follow the process, describe the missing information or approval and the action taken. Evidence can then establish whether the issue concerns design, training, conduct or a combination.

Employees may also reveal adaptations that should become standard practice. A better checklist or handoff method can improve the process across the organization once it has been reviewed and approved.

Examine the incentives before blaming the employee

If employees are rewarded for response speed, they may avoid a slow approval route. If managers are assessed on low escalation volumes, they may encourage teams to resolve issues informally. If performance targets haven't changed during implementation, employees may maintain the old process to protect their results.

HR should review those incentives with the process owner. The employer can't credibly require careful checking while setting a workload that assumes checking takes no time. Nor should employees be penalized for using a necessary escalation route merely because it delays a transaction.

Correcting an incentive doesn't require suspending accountability. Define what good performance looks like during the transition, including quality, appropriate escalation and reliable records. Where targets temporarily change, explain the rationale and establish when they'll be reviewed.

A useful question for managers is whether their best-performing employee could meet every target while following the approved process exactly. If the answer depends on unpaid extra work or unofficial shortcuts, the operating model needs attention.

Give each workaround a disposition

Once the organization understands the practice, decide what happens next. An adaptation may be approved and incorporated into the official process. A temporary measure may continue under defined controls until a fix is delivered. A risky practice may need to stop immediately, with an approved alternative provided.

Record the business need, risk assessment, accountable owner and decision date. Include who will validate the correction and what evidence will establish that the temporary step is no longer needed. Without that detail, a short-term patch can become an indefinite operating dependency.

Don't ask HR to approve technical or safety arrangements outside its competence. HR can ensure affected employees are consulted, workloads are understood and responsibilities are clear. The relevant qualified owner must determine whether the control is adequate.

When a workaround involves personal information or a possible incident, follow the applicable privacy and incident response process. A change review shouldn't delay containment or other time-sensitive obligations.

Remove the dependency before removing the workaround

A common mistake is to delete the unofficial spreadsheet as soon as management discovers it. If the spreadsheet supports a real operational need, that action can remove the only functioning control before the replacement is ready.

Assess and contain immediate risks first. Then identify the information or activity the business depends on, transfer it to an approved process and test the result. Where continued use is unsafe, provide a controlled alternative rather than assume the dependency can be ignored.

Ask another employee to complete realistic cases using the corrected workflow. Include the exceptions the original workaround handled. A vendor confirmation that an issue is fixed isn't enough if employees still can't perform the work reliably.

Retire duplicate records in accordance with approved retention, security and records-management requirements. Employees should know which source is authoritative and what they should do when it appears wrong. Otherwise, uncertainty will encourage a new unofficial copy.

Track the cost of keeping the process working

After a correction, monitor the effort required to complete the work, the quality of outcomes and the number of exceptions. A temporary increase in reports may mean employees now trust the review process enough to explain problems. It doesn't necessarily mean the system has deteriorated.

Use results that reflect the process rather than relying exclusively on employee sentiment or system usage. Useful measures may include reconciliation time, repeated

data entry, reopened cases and dependence on particular employees. Choose a small set that connects to the identified problem.

Be cautious about declaring success because the number of reported workarounds falls. Employees may have stopped reporting them. Follow up with a small sample of actual cases and ask what has changed in practice.

HR should also recognize the contribution employees made while the process was unstable. Quietly compensating for a defective workflow can be demanding work. Acknowledging that contribution, while providing a sustainable replacement, is more credible than praising adaptability and leaving the burden untouched.

Make hidden work part of the implementation review

During the first month after launch, choose one process with high usage but disappointing results. Bring HR, its operational owner and a few employees together to examine actual work. Cost the additional steps, address immediate risks and assign decisions on the main gaps.

Return to employees with the outcome. Explain which adaptations will remain, which will change and why. Where a requested fix isn't feasible, identify the approved method and account for the time it requires. Silence after consultation encourages people to solve the problem alone again.

A successful change should remain workable when the most experienced employee takes leave. HR can help leadership test that condition by looking beyond visible adoption to the effort and judgment that sustain the process. The question worth asking at the next implementation review is straightforward: what are our people still doing to make this work that our plan hasn't accounted for?