Three flow killers

The forces that slow down businesses, clog processes and inhibit growth

Friction

Noise

Drag

CONDUENT™
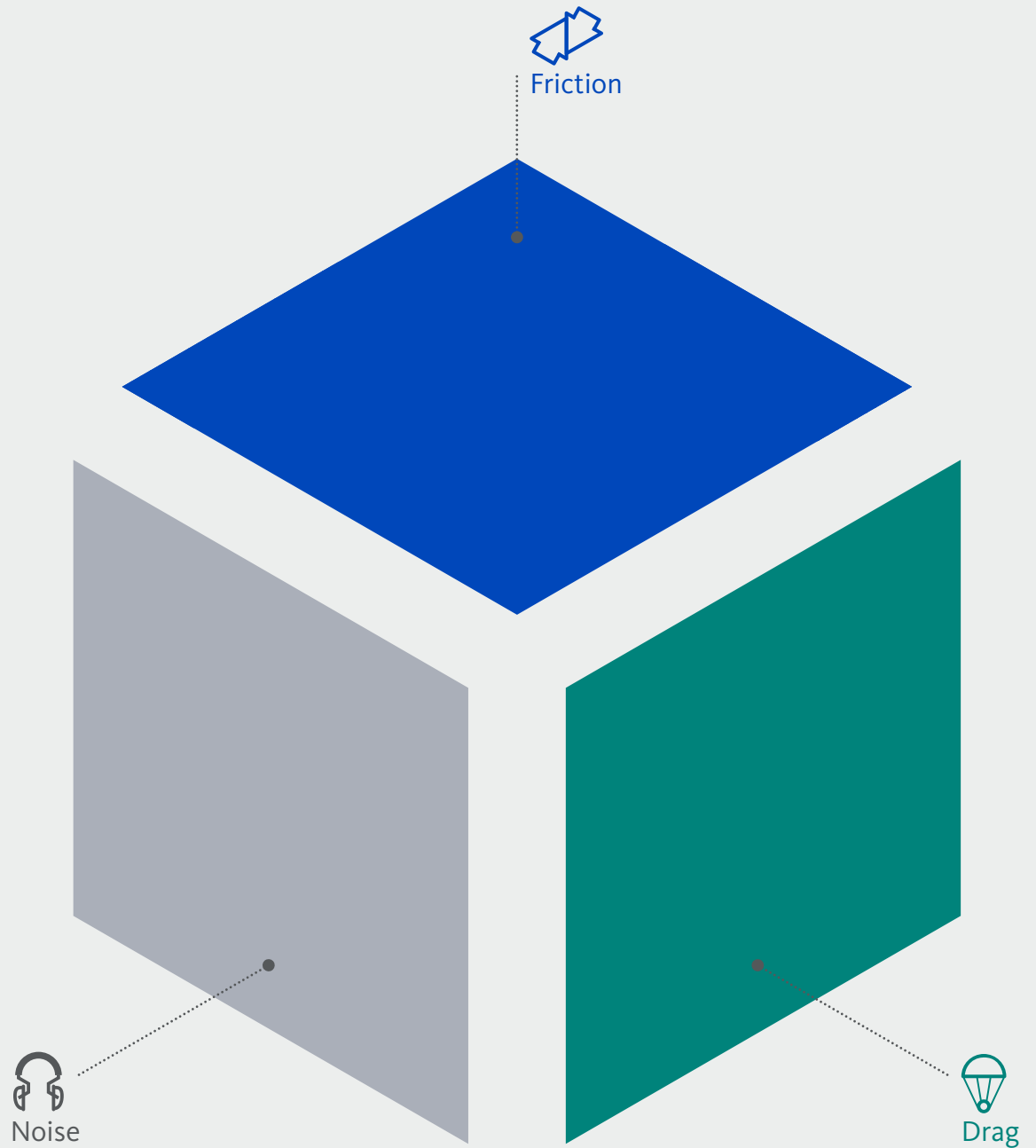
Flow is
what makes
it all work

You know the feeling.

When a team is firing on
all cylinders.

When process and people and
technology seem to slip into
place and make everything
feel effortless.

When things at work just work.

We call it 'flow' and we're starting
to think it's what separates the
very best performers in any market
from the also-rans.

The flow dividend

Flow isn't just a great feeling; it's also one of the most important contributors to the success of any project, any team and any company.

But, surprisingly, very few companies think much about flow. That's a big missed opportunity, because:

Teams that achieve flow dramatically out-perform teams that don't.

Processes that flow are faster, more elegant and more efficient.

Projects with flow seem to self-actuate.

The benefits of flow reach into every corner of the organization, touching sales, marketing, customer service, manufacturing, finance, retail, HR, IT and operations of every kind.

In short, flow is how things are supposed to work.

Flow is user-centric

When a process is designed around the people who will use it – or be affected by it – it's infinitely more likely to achieve flow.

And when a process is designed on a whiteboard in a back office by people who have never met a user (or a customer or a patient or a citizen), achieving flow is as likely as winning the lottery.

That's the first rule of flow.
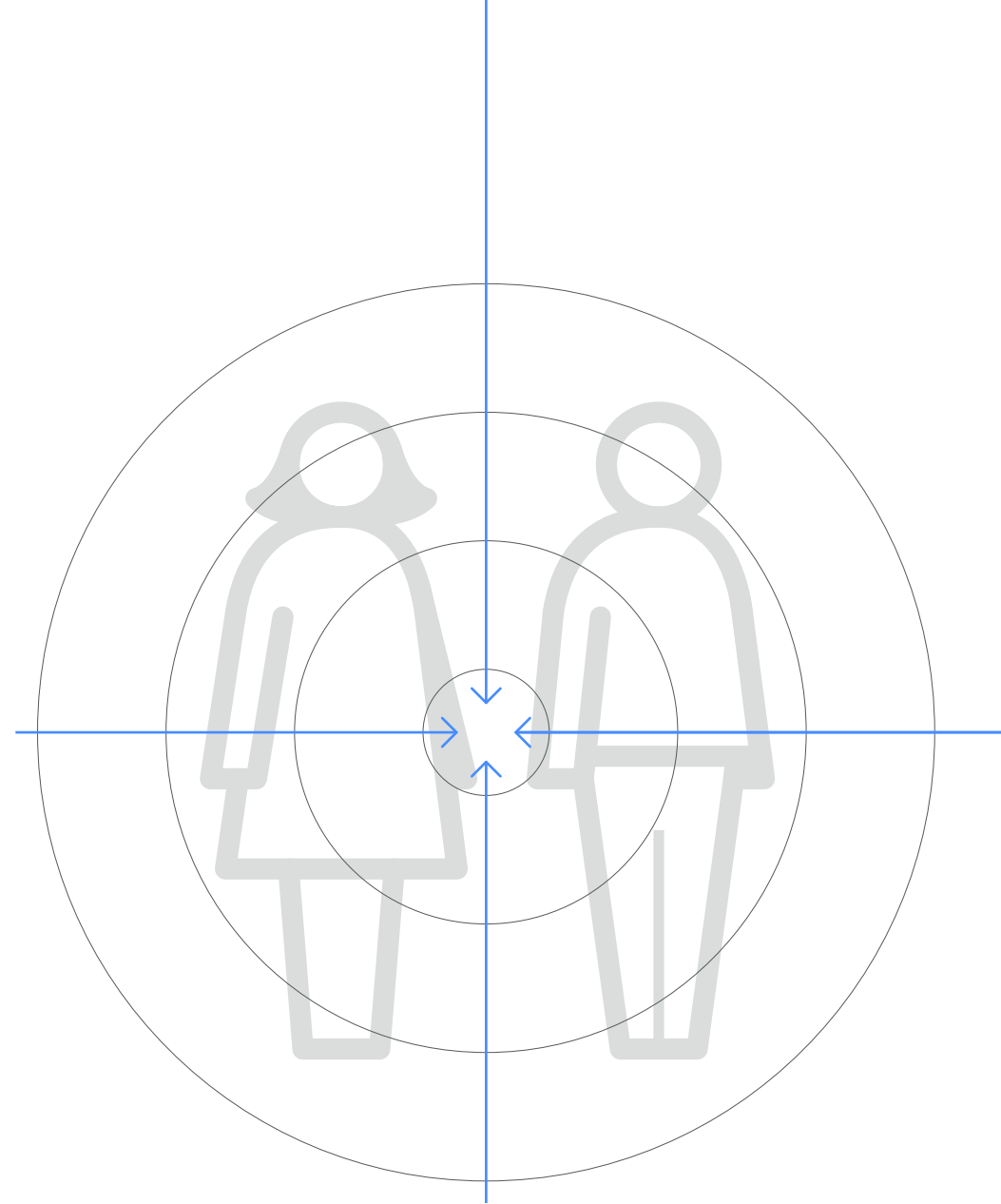
When flow breaks

Unfortunately, flow is a hard thing to achieve and a fragile one when it arrives.

Without it, everything slows down.

Deadlines slip past and budgets bloat.

People get irritable and the blaming starts.

The weird thing is that no single person is responsible for destroying flow. And nobody knows where it went or why. So nobody really has the perspective needed to get it back.

We think that's worth fixing.
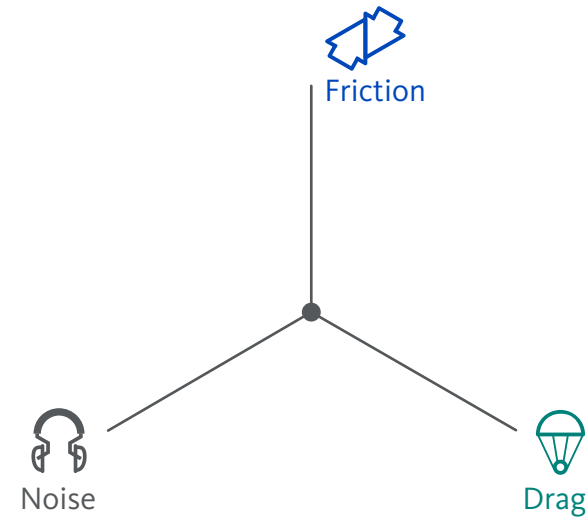
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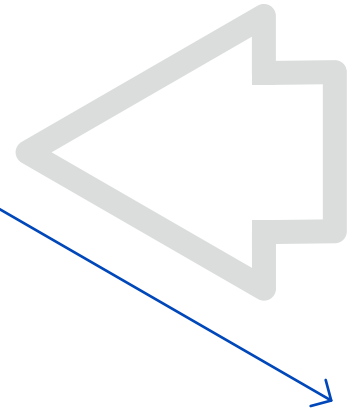
The three flow killers

At Conduent, we've been a part of thousands of intensive process improvement projects, outsourcing programs and systems re-engineering journeys.

We've seen flow blossom in a hugely diverse range of organizations and markets – from massive healthcare systems to city parking departments and from customer care centers to commercial printers.

We've also seen the forces that act against flow. That drag teams down and glue up processes.

Three of these forces – the big three flow killers – are especially destructive and all too common:

Friction
Inefficiency caused by poor process design or communication dynamics.

Noise
Information overload and the resulting 'data blindness'.
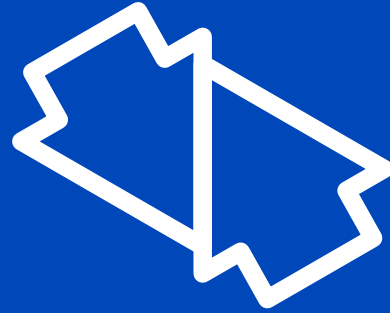
Drag
Getting held back from doing the things you're best at.

Every organization – large or small, public sector or private – suffers to varying degrees from all three of these flow killers.

And every organization can benefit from exposing them, identifying their impact on critical processes, and working to minimize them.

Let's look at them one at a time.

Friction

Friction

All processes include a certain amount of friction. But when the friction levels get too high, efficiency, productivity,performance and job satisfaction suffers. The symptoms of excessive friction include:
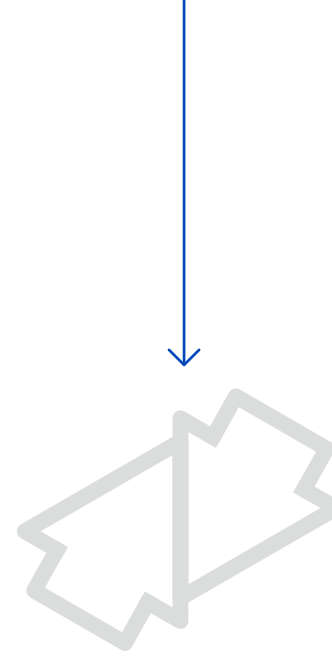
What friction looks like:

- Too many steps in a process
- Too much manual intervention or too much paper
- Chronic bottlenecks and delays
- Recurring errors
- End-user frustration
- Customer or stakeholder complaints
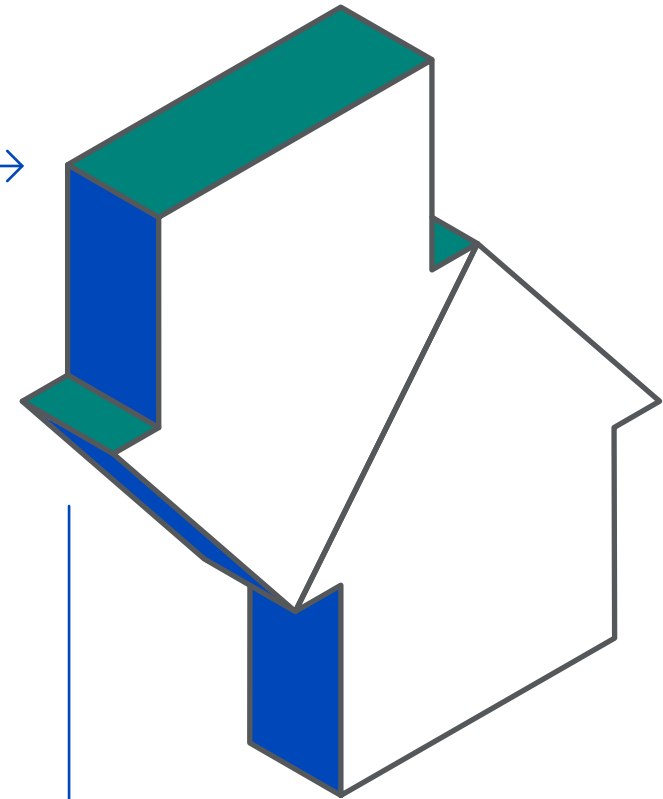
Friction

What causes friction:

Poor process design – processes that aren't user-centric or goal-driven; out-dated processes; processes that don't scale well...

Ineffective communication structures – ad hoc workflows; de-centralized knowledge stores; excessive email...

The wrong technology for the job – the wrong applications; mis-configuration; poorly integrated apps...

Why friction kills flow:

- Lead times and lag times soar
- Projects and departments go over budget
- Morale sinks and finger-pointing starts
- Things fall between the process cracks
- Users develop clunky workarounds
- Processes are un-documented and not measureable

" Data becomes useful knowledge of something that matters when it builds a bridge between a question and an answer. This connection is the signal."

CIO Magazine
November 2014, citing AtTask Survey

The trouble with jams

At the extreme end of the friction spectrum is the jam.
The paper jam in a printer.
The traffic jam on a highway.
The logjam at the customer service desk.
Jams are when all flow stops.
All work grinds to a halt.
And everything that's supposed to happen... doesn't.
We've spent hundreds of person-years analyzing jams.
So we could find better ways to eliminate them.
Because nothing kills enthusiasm like a jam.

What you can do about friction

Reducing friction is a major challenge for every leader. Fortunately, once it's recognized, there are many process lubricants available, including these:

Isolate and analyze critical processes in detail – mapping where they touch other processes, technologies and people.

Relentlessly remove steps – a shorter process is almost always a better one (with exceptions).

Automate what you can – human touches are expensive and error-prone; use them only when they add value.

Ask your users – they know the most about processes and their weaknesses. Consult them early and often.

Measure what matters – develop process metrics that reflect actual goals; track them and share the insight.

Design best-fit collaboration tools – different processes demand different workflows and communication platforms (hint: email is rarely the best choice).

Benchmark your processes – work with partners who share your outlook and experience.

Consider a framework – formal systems like Six Sigma, TQM and Lean are powerful ways to spot and solve friction in complex processes.

Run through this checklist for any of your processes. There is real, measurable improvement hiding in these simple steps.

Think lean

One of the most effective friction-fighters known to business is the Lean manufacturing methodology.

Lean is all about identifying the things that contribute to value (defined as anything the customer will pay for) and eliminating everything else.

Designed specifically for manufacturing, lean ideas have started to help create cultures of improvement across a wide range of industries and disciplines.

For more on Lean, visit lean.org.

Noise

Noise

In the era of 'big data' and next-generation analytics, noise is an occupational hazard. Some call it 'data smog'; others call it 'information overload' – but everyone experiences it.

What noise looks like:

- Slow decision-making or insight that arrives too late
- Inaccurate decisions based on bad data
- Complex reports that people stop using
- Excessive meetings
- Data silos and conflicting applications or reports
- Lack of visibility into critical functions
- Inability to 'connect the dots' to get a holistic view
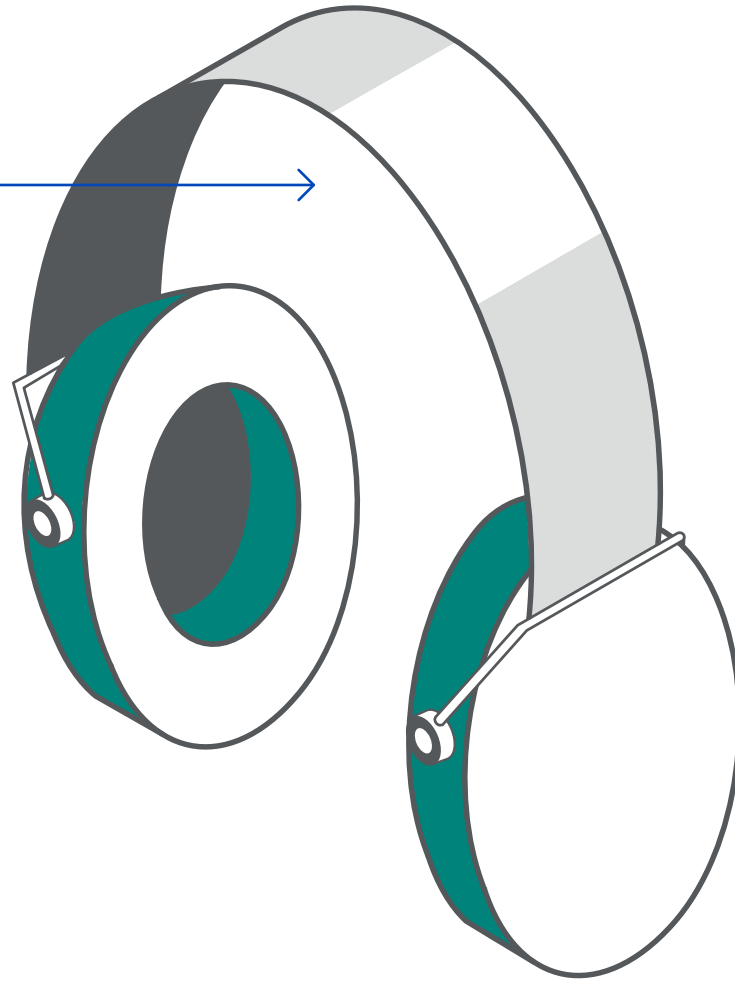
Noise

What causes noise:

Both signal and noise are generated anywhere data is generated – which is pretty much everywhere, these days. But signal turns to noise when:

Data is collected for its own sake – instead of for a good reason.

People take data quality for granted – raw data is almost never ready for use; it needs to be cleaned and validated.

Data sources are incompatible – and no one does the hard work of integrating them properly.

Too many applications are in use – instead of consolidating around a small core of key apps.

Applications are poorly integrated – with hand-coded wlinks instead of robust interfaces.

People fall in love with eye candy – not seeing that the pretty dashboards mask irrelevant or untrustworthy data beneath.

Why noise kills flow:

- Insight doesn't make it to the point of use
- Management can't measure or manage what matters
- Mistakes are repeated rather than lessons learned
- Customer-facing people can't personalize interactions
- Decisions about optimizing operations are 'blind'
- People spend more time wrangling data than analyzing it
- Teams don't know if they're going in the right direction

What you can do about noise

There's a certain amount of noise in every system. But when the noise drowns out the signal, you need to take action:

Agree on a small set of key metrics – decide as a team what you really need to track and why.

Limit your data sources – just because it's available doesn't mean it's necessary.

Apply a little data governance – make sure there's a process for cleaning and integrating your data so it's valid and compatible.

Rationalize your application portfolio – reduce the number of apps and retire the unused.

Align your data scientists with your business users – get the data geeks to sit down with the process owners; supply the pizza; do it often.

Capture and market your best insights – let everyone know what the data is telling you and why it matters; 'celebrate the signal'…

Think about 'need to know' – use roles-based access to reports and data to keep the noise down.

Apply these ideas to any of your processes, teams or departments and you will reduce the noise and bring out the signal.
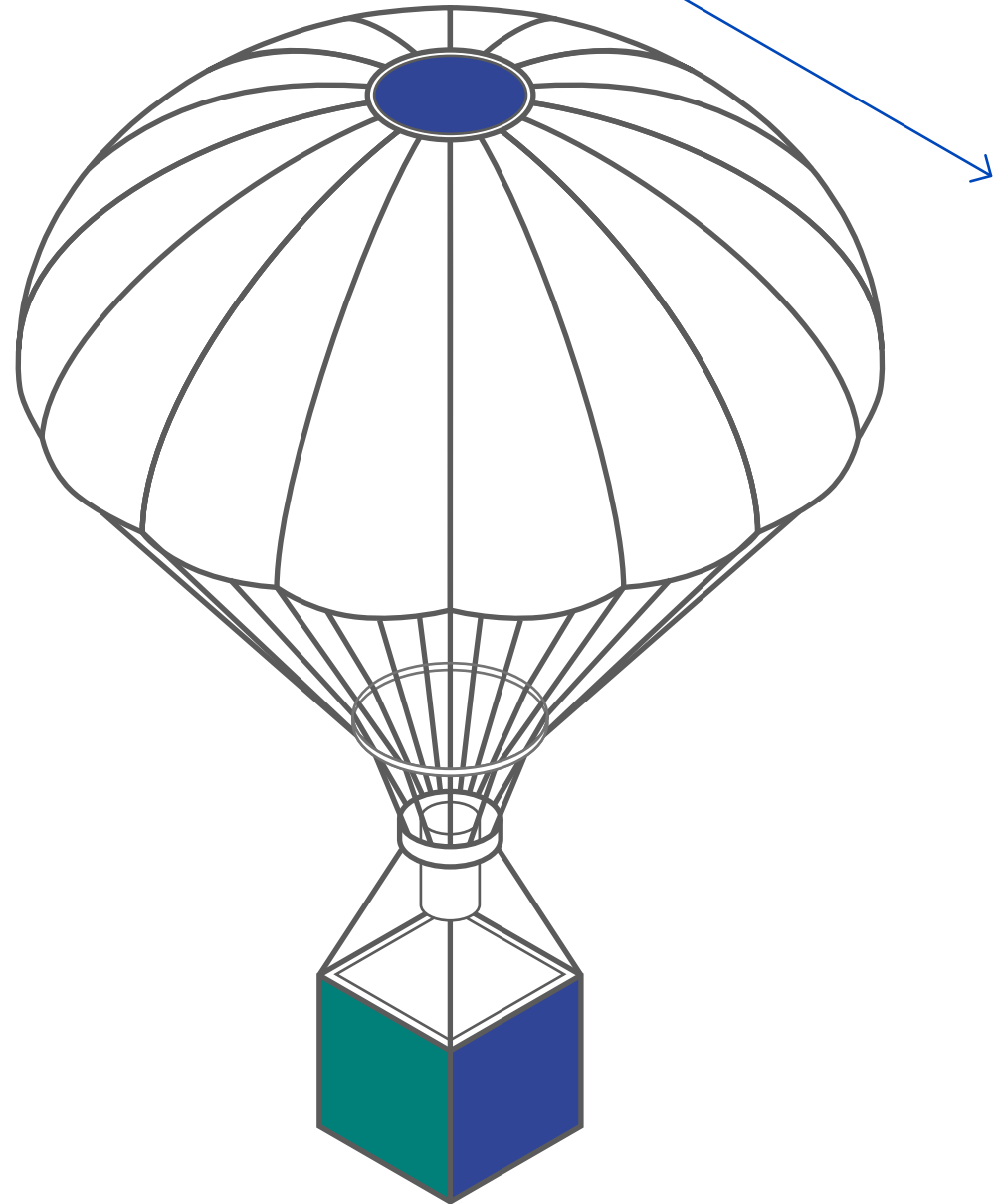
Drag

Drag

Drag is the dead weight that keeps organizations from soaring. Whenever an expert, team or department is pulled away from the things they're best at, drag is at work.

If your resource allocation is balanced, you've got just the right amount of drag. If it's out of balance, it can slow you down.

What drag looks like:

- Managers spend too little time on critical tasks
- Costs spiral in administrative areas
- Performance suffers in important but non-core areas
- Bottlenecked processes slow down dependent ones
- Real experts waste time on housekeeping
- Process improvement slows down

Drag

What causes drag:

Drag comes from doing things the way you've always done them. Its roots lie in:

Failing to identify core competencies – no clear direction from above about what business you're really in.

Missing outsourcing opportunities – whole processes that would be better performed by a supplier.

Fiefdoms – power centers grow up around departments and disciplines – and they defend their turf.

Fear of change – the perceived risk of moving keeps leaders stuck to the status quo.

Failure to benchmark – not knowing what good looks like.

Why drag kills flow:

It diverts resources – with high overheads in the wrong areas and lean budgets where you ought to be spending.

It wastes management time on non-core activities – diverting them from areas where they can really add value.

It saps morale – with your best people saying, "I wasn't hired for this".

It turns real experts into housekeepers – knowledge workers are too important (and expensive) to waste on drudgework.

It causes under-performance and over-spend – in the areas that would be better managed elsewhere.

Low-value processes slow down the high-value ones – acting as a drag on productivity and efficiency.

What you can do about drag

Reducing drag is a major challenge for every leader. Fortunately, once it's recognized, there are many process lubricants available, including these:

Decide what's core and what's not – make it clear to everyone exactly what business you're in, what your strengths are and what you will always do in-house.

Benchmark your most expensive processes – find out whether you're really as good at them as you think.

Ask your stakeholders – discover which processes frustrate them the most and which they need to keep close.

Identify outsourcing opportunities – list all the processes or sub-processes that look like good candidates for moving out of house.

Prioritize the low-hanging fruit – decide which processes will generate the quickest and greatest returns with the least risk.

Invite potential partners in – to discuss the way you do things and how they might change that.

Do a business case – show your management team the value of outsourcing and minimizing drag.

Getting your flow back

Flow is far too important to leave to chance.

And the three flow killers discussed here are far too common to leave unchecked.

Discussing friction, noise and drag in the abstract, as we've done here, may make them feel less urgent than they really are. But when you apply the thinking to a specific process or department or project, you start what needs fixing.

We'll be publishing more ideas about flow and its inhibitors on conduent.com.

Do share your experiences with us.

About Conduent

Conduent is the world's largest provider of diversified business process services with leading capabilities in transaction processing, automation, analytics and constituent experience. We work with both government and commercial customers in assisting them to deliver quality services to the people they serve.

We manage interactions with patients and the insured for a significant portion of the U.S. healthcare industry. We're the customer interface for large segments of the technology industry. And, we're the operational and processing partner of choice for public transportation systems around the world.

Whether it's digital payments, claims processing, benefit administration, automated tolling, customer care or distributed learning – Conduent manages and modernizes these interactions to create value for both our clients and their constituents.
Learn more at www.conduent.com.

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