workfront

10 Work Management Problems and How to Solve Them

EBOOK

Introduction

If your fellow executives ever engaged in a discussion about digital transformation without inviting you, you may have doubted how your IT department could ever achieve true transformation—shifting from bottom-rung laborers to a team that demonstrates it deserves a seat at the strategy table.

Rapid changes in both technology and business barrage IT departments with new projects—whether it's delivering the systems that keep the business running or implementing new infrastructure for mobile applications. It's a challenge to keep up, let alone demonstrate that your department is capable of more than simply providing support. You know you stand in the best position to lead digital transformation efforts, but if you worry that your team struggles to demonstrate growth and initiative you're not alone. Whether it's inefficient processes, poor reporting, trouble prioritizing work, disconnected teams, or lack of visibility into work, IT teams fumble to get work done on time and within budget, while IT executives are struggle to demonstrate their value as strategic leaders.

To demonstrate the effectiveness of your team and that your initiatives align with business goals, your team needs better processes as well as ways to prove successful outcomes. This ebook examines the top 10 obstacles that prevent IT teams from getting work done and offers new and trusted solutions for improving productivity and demonstrating your value.

1. Global teams are disconnected and out of sync.

Your teams developed a new web application. They outsourced code to a team in India and requested architectural and design elements from a team in Poland. Your team in the United States covered testing and implementation. The problem is that they struggled to effectively filter information and ensure that all steps of the project happened in sync. In fact, some days it felt downright impossible. The separation of resources and time zones creates frequent disconnects about the work to be done and who works on what. Unless you find a resolution, you risk losing sight of the project—missing deadlines and potentially running over budget.

Bringing everyone together under one roof might seem like the ideal solution, but that's not likely to happen. With 43% of employees saying they work away from their team some of the time,[1] and thousands of companies now outsourcing IT work to teams across the world, collaborating on a whiteboard in the conference room down the hall is simply not an option.

One way to solve this problem involves unifying the communication and collaboration process. True collaboration comes not from email and status meetings, but from learning how to work together on the right things at the right time.

How to accomplish this across a virtual landscape:

- Collect information into a single online location, visible and accessible to all stakeholders and team members.
- Give your global teams a reliable way to see the priority of all work that needs to be done.
- Show who is working on what and their capacity to accept work assignments based on their own availability.

Your team, however geographically disconnected, will be in sync and you'll be able to ensure teams and stakeholders are accurately informed, reduce bottlenecks, and increase overall team productivity.

2. Too much time spent in spreadsheets.

Your team uses spreadsheets—in all of their projects and for a variety of purposes. One outlines the project timeline and work responsibilities, another covers all the requirements, and a third tracks all the bugs. Each spreadsheet has a "gatekeeper," but the process fails to work like it should. Team members create and update their own spreadsheets or update different, older versions. This means that to get an up-to-date view of the project, the gatekeeper must run around collecting all the various versions of spreadsheets and merge them together to create a new, up-to-date spreadsheet. This hustle may burn calories, but it's not an efficient way to work. And it's costly.

According to one study, 80% of companies still use tools like spreadsheets as part of their work processes.[2] When your organization charges you with digital transformation, but your own department is stuck using archaic processes, it might be time to look for a better way to manage information. Rather than seeing team members run sprints across the building to collect information, imagine using some of that time for innovation and project completion. Spreadsheets can be useful, but modern demands require more from these limited tools.

To eliminate time spent updating spreadsheets and to increase productivity, implement some best practices for work management within your department. These include:

- Using templates whenever possible
- Establishing an agreed-upon version and naming system
- Providing centralized access
- Collecting data in a way that allows you to run ad-hoc reports across multiple projects

Your teams can reduce maintenance and update time by employing best practices and taking the time to set up systems correctly. This leaves you time for something else—like getting real work done.

3. Tracking and prioritizing work requests is a struggle.

Your team plans to deploy a website management solution across your organization. The project manager outlined the requirements and determined each team member's workload capacity. But now that the project is in full swing, changes and clarifications need addressing. Some departments decided they want to use the opportunity to expand their sites. Others built their sites with a different solution and want yet more information. These requests come at you in a variety of ways, such as emails, hallway conversations, instant messaging, and sticky notes, and they come from a variety of people, from stakeholders to other team members. This kind of chaos makes it hard to keep track of and prioritize all requested changes.

The key to keeping up: standardize work request practices. The Project Management Institute reports that when organizations use standardized practices, successful work performance measures are almost three times more likely. In addition, these organizations achieve more success than organizations that don't standardize.[3]

Standardizing a process for receiving, tracking, and prioritizing all work requests allows everyone to:

- See what work is outstanding and who has been requested to work on which projects
- Know which resources are available
- Easily bundle interdependent work requests for increased efficiency
- Prioritize requests based on the highest overall business return

Whether teams use a dedicated email address such as teamworkrequests@company.com or a collaborative calendar, any work request not submitted in the correct manner doesn't go into the work pipeline. Stick to your guns on this and work requests can be standardized and managed effectively.

4. Difficulty delivering real-time updates.

You want to know the status of a software development project, but the last report is outdated and you know it takes a while to get a new one since several different tools track various components of the project. Each tool must be checked, then updated in the spreadsheets, then data must be compiled in a manner that allows you to see everything going on, and finally, you get a report. That takes time. Time you don't have. If you decide to walk over and ask for the current status, you see members of your team duck into their offices or frantically trying to look busy.

You just want the big picture for your meeting with fellow executives to show you know the details of everything going on in your own department. You wonder if the executive team thinks your team works too slow, so when work finishes on time or ahead of schedule, you want to report that. Unfortunately, you don't always know where projects stand.

So how do you start getting your team to provide you with real-time updates?

- Develop a clear "up and down the organization" communication plan.
- Ask teams to put all action items into one central online location that is visible to all team members, including you.
- Designate the use of a simple dashboard or report that provides you with the big picture in a single snapshot.
- Let teams know which data you need and how it correlates to real problems and solutions you want to know about.

Think about what's coming down the pipeline next. Unhappy stakeholders typically approach you first. So, access the critical information you need when you need it.

5. Not enough visibility into the process.

Your team currently works on developing a hotel reservation website. They work hard to get through the long list of requirements in the project, but everyone else wants to check in on progress at their leisure. But right now, these stakeholders have no way to know where their priorities stand in the process and they grow tired of “waiting their turn.”

Disgruntled, stakeholders begin to work around the process by going directly to the engineers or developers and requesting they work on their priorities.

Before the project manager loses complete control, they have to find a way to rein stakeholders in and provide them the visibility they want. Here’s how your team can do that:

- Involve stakeholders from the beginning so they have realistic expectations about communication, timeline, and budget.
- At the initial kickoff meeting to gather requirements, explain that everyone involved must document everything in one centralized place, not in separate places on their own desktops.
- Work back through the project schedule in detail to thoroughly understand time frames and touch points so that when change requests come in later, they can show what it will mean to deadlines and cost.
- Consider developing the project in “sprints” or short periods of time where specific features are developed.
- Cut back on having meetings for round robin status reporting. Use meetings to discuss real issues, such as changes to the requirements, etc.

6. It's difficult quantifying business outcomes.

You can keep telling the executive team that the IT department is working hard to get projects finished, but how do you show them the value of that work? Only half of organizations say their project benefits align with business goals.[4]

To measure outcomes, you need a way to track what your team is achieving. Some ways to help quantify business outcomes are:

- Understand the organizational goal driving the project.
- Determine the desired outcomes of the project and how to measure success.
- Outline project scope and resources needed.
- Track time and cost and how they measure against the project scope.
- Establish the delivery date as a key performance indicator.
- Create a system to measure the quality of deliverables and their alignment to goals.
- Create and deliver reports to stakeholders based on the agreed upon goals.
- Identify additional benefits and capabilities created by the project.

Taking those steps help you accomplish more than simply show your team gets their work done. You concretely show how their work benefits the organization and helps it reach strategic goals. Quantifying results cause other executives and teams to view the IT department as more than transactional and establish you as a strategic leader.

7. IT teams are burned out.

It's the same old story day after day. Your team has too much work and not enough time to get it all done. The work keeps piling on and working longer hours barely makes a dent. It's not just overwhelming; it's downright discouraging.

A recent study shows that most employees are working over 40 hours a week, and 40% of workers feel burned out. If you don't get things under control, you and your entire team face burn out.[5] In addition, the quality of work suffers. Instead of ensuring they do things right, your team just tries to get things done. They are too busy to accurately track work or anticipate what's coming down the pipeline. This means tasks often get repeated or logjams occur due to poor planning.

Fear not. There is a way to gain control of the situation and for your team to get their life back.

To reduce commitments, start by better tracking the work and the time needed to do the work right. With a clear understanding of the time it typically takes to complete a standard request, they more realistically forecast it into the schedule. But make sure they have a realistic understanding about unexpected work requests and priority changes.

They should:

- Only allocate 60 to 70 percent of the team's time to planned work.
- Work in smaller chunks or "sprints" to help teams have flexibility to take on urgent work as it arises.
- Make it okay to say "no" or "later" when the request is a lower priority business objective.

8. The department is addicted to meetings.

You start of the day with the daily "stand-up" meeting, then the project-specific meetings, then meetings to discuss the requirements with stakeholders, and meetings to discuss the budget. You attend meetings for everything, yet they fail to truly move work forward. The CFO missed the budget meeting and, in the hotel intranet project meeting, one engineer talked the entire time about a bug he's trying to fix and the meeting ends before anyone else discusses the other critical issues. The outsourced team works in a different time zone so they never participate in the stand-ups, but without knowing their status, your team stands still, unable to move on to the next set of requirements. With so many meetings and so little of the right things being accomplished in each one, your team dreads meetings. It's time better used to actually get work done.

More than half of enterprise workers say "wasteful" meetings get in the way of work.[6] The good news is that with a strong communication plan in place, you can significantly reduce meetings. A plan that allows for frequent dialogue with key players will keep everyone up-to-date without the need for meetings.

A good communication plan should set the context for communicating with the team and stakeholders about both requirements and expectations. It should include:

- What types of things will be communicated
- How frequently updates will be pushed out and by what method/channel (email, Slack, etc.)
- How changes will be addressed
- Who has what role and when to talk to that person

Once the plan has been established, create a central place for accessing and updating the items in the communication plan. This helps keep teams up to date and eliminates some meetings altogether. When necessary, keep to a strict agenda for your meeting and follow time limits.

9. Can’t allocate resources effectively to meet priorities.

Your team manages a mid-size IT consulting firm specializing in setting up enterprise networks. One of your team’s responsibilities is to effectively allocate resources. This means knowing who is working on what, if they have the resources they need, and if the work will be done on time. Yet, despite their best efforts, projects are often over budget because resource hours were greater than planned or projects are behind deadline because resources were overcommitted.

Resource allocation involves several steps: inventorying the work you know about and estimating the work you don’t; determining how many hours each piece of work should take; and logging all tasks for all team members. It may not be rocket science, but it’s difficult.

Consider these best practices for your team to become more effective and efficient at resource allocation:

- Track actual hours against planned hours so they know if they’re on budget.
- Make sure project plans are kept up to date.
- Mark completed tasks.
- Allow resources to provide input on the projects being assigned to them.
- Include holidays, time off, and internal work in resource plans.
- Have a clear understanding of your team’s available hours.

Effective resource allocation is complex and requires in-depth analysis on many levels. Ask your team to track historical data on resource capacity in order to estimate how much time needs to be budgeted for upcoming projects. Also, make sure they prioritize and rank tasks based on overall business strategy and deadlines. Resource allocation is most effective and efficient when teams take the time to analyze information and make it visible and accessible to all team members, executives, and stakeholders.

10. Too many tools managing too many processes.

The executives tasked your team with managing the firm's global infrastructure upgrade. The team uses project management software to manage the project, but it only meets a fraction of their needs. They add another tool to improve bug and ticket tracking, and another to improve online collaboration. Next thing you know, they're using five different tools to manage one project. Other teams also use different tools to manage their pieces of the project and how they communicate and track issues among themselves.

Working on a project is a coordinated effort. When too many tools crowd the project, it creates large silos between different enterprise teams and stakeholders because the tools don't integrate well or allow data sharing. This also makes it difficult for senior managers to get all the information they need. Information lies scattered among the different tools and collecting it consumes time and makes the task more difficult. It also makes it hard to see who works on what and when, so in the end, no one is on the same page.

What you need is one tool that truly "does it all." One tool that provides a single, central place to:

- Better manage and control the chaos of work
- Improve visibility and productivity by integrating tools and processes
- Eliminate unnecessary meetings
- Better allocate resources (people)
- Create true collaboration
- Provide real-time updates to everyone
- Fortunately, there is such a tool...

Be a master of modern work.

Workfront is an enterprise work management solution that changes the way teams across the enterprise work. Developed to address the unique pain points of IT departments, Workfront allows you to:

- Work with increased visibility
- Implement more efficient processes
- Establish better priorities
- Gain clear insights into your teams
- Make better business decisions

Visit us at workfront.com/it to learn more about how Workfront empowers enterprises like yours to thrive in the digital world.

WORKS CITED

1. "State of the American Workplace," Gallup, 2017.

2. "Today's State of Work: The Productivity Drain," ServiceNow, April 2015. https://www.servicenow.com/content/dam/servicenow/documents/whitepapers/sn-state-of-work-report.pdf

3. Langley, Mark A. "The High Cost of Low Performance." Project Management Institute, Inc. Pulse of the ProfessionTM, March 2013.

4. Cotgreave, David. "Don't confuse project outcomes with business outcomes." CMO. Dec. 20, 2016. https://www.cio.com/article/3151122/project-management/dont-confuse-project-outcomes-with-business-outcomes.html.

5. White, Sarah K. "Why your employees are overworked, burnt out and unmotivated." July 19, 2016. https://www.cio.com/article/3097283/leadership-management/why-your-employees-are-overworked-burnt-out-and-unmotivated.html.

6. "The State of Enterprise Work." Workfront, 2017-2018 U.S. Edition.

workfront®