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Insight brief

bi-analytics

How Work Really Gets Done? What Official Processes Don't Tell You

The real operating model of a company is not always the one documented in its procedures or encoded in its systems. Spreadsheets, side calculations, informal approvals and manual checks often reveal gaps between the official process and the work people must actually perform.

Shadow processes emerge when employees need to handle exceptions, combine missing information, apply undocumented business rules or reach decisions faster than the official environment allows. Some are poor habits or control risks, but others preserve legitimate knowledge that formal processes overlooked. Removing them without understanding their purpose often causes users to recreate them after a new ERP, BI or transformation project goes live.

Key ideas

01 A shadow process is any step that operates outside or alongside the designed workflow, from an Excel tracker or email approval to a local calculation or knowledge held by an experienced employee

02 These workarounds should be treated first as evidence. They may indicate a slow process, an unsupported exception, fragmented information or a missing view of the business.

03 User resistance is not always irrational. If a new solution removes a useful tool without replacing the function it served, continued use of that tool may be valuable feedback rather than simple rejection of change.

04 BI is especially vulnerable because a dashboard can match the ERP perfectly yet omit adjustments, classifications or business rules behind the number management trusts. Multiple unofficial definitions eventually create multiple versions of reality and undermine trust.

05 AI makes the gap more consequential. It can use only the processes, definitions and knowledge made visible to it. It cannot resolve conflicting KPIs or inherit exception logic that remains in employees' heads.

What this means in practice

Before removing, formalizing or automating a workaround, investigate why it exists, what information or rule it contains, what would happen if it disappeared and whether it addresses a real exception or creates unacceptable risk. In BI, ask not only where the data is stored, but how the business currently arrives at the number it trusts. The answer can guide a governed definition rather than preserve competing spreadsheets.

Closing takeaway

The objective is not to eliminate every shadow process. It is to prevent important business meaning from remaining invisible. If an unofficial step affects a number, a decision or the interpretation of performance, it is already part of how the business works.