

**NOT ALL WORK IS:**  
***CREATED***  
***THE SAME***



Most of us don't think too deeply about the way we get our day-to-day work done; we just do it. At the same time, though, we know there are things we could do better—steps we could take or processes we could implement that would make our operations smoother, more efficient, or more innovative.

So at the beginning of the year, we'll set some ambitious goals about those things we plan to improve on. But we never quite get there. There always seems to be something getting in the way. And when we look in the rear-view mirror at the end of the year, we realize that, yet again, we didn't fully accomplish any of those goals.

Many organizations, tired of being disappointed countless times, have solved this annual dilemma by giving up on having those goals and aspirations altogether. But avoiding the problem doesn't make it go away. If you're not improving, your organization is falling behind every year. Your internal reputation, your ability to compete, your employee engagement levels—all are at risk.





**WORK  
ISN'T  
JUST  
WORK**

Most managers approach work as interchangeable. As such, managing work is fairly straightforward: You find good people and assign them the work. The assumption is that their experience in the organization will equip them to do the job successfully.

Whether it's conscious or not, this approach is based on the belief that all work is “just work” and that, as a result, all work is created the same. But there are only a few things every type of work will have in common:

- **Resources** — People need to be assigned to do the work.
- **Results** — The work is expected to achieve specific outcomes.
- **Duration** — There's a time limit to complete the work.

The reality is, every organization is responsible for tackling two distinct and very different kinds of work—operational and initiative. But as long as managers continue treating them as interchangeable, the work that's intended to make the organization better will never get done.

# WORK VS. WORK: OPERATIONAL WORK

Operational work is the day-to-day work of your organization or department. Because this is the work that produces the value your organization was created to provide, the efforts are mandatory; it has to get done. And if something's not getting done? It's an urgent issue. This work cries out for attention in the moment.

Even if what you're doing is largely knowledge work, operational work is "mass produced" work, in that it generally involves doing the same or similar activities over and over again.

Because this work is repetitive in nature, there are specific workflows and processes in place for evaluating and maximizing time and effort. With results produced in hours, days, or weeks at most, efficiency is always the driver, and we're always looking for ways to produce more with less.

We qualify the success of operational work with performance metrics that measure output over time. These are quantifiable results, typically based on performance standards established by industry and/or internal benchmarks.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF OPERATIONAL WORK

- Efforts are mandatory
- Repetitive, "Mass Produced"
- Always top of mind
- Always needing more output
- Success is quantifiable

## EXAMPLES OF OPERATIONAL WORK

- Providing customer service
- Writing up sales orders
- Shipping products
- Maintaining equipment
- Manufacturing a product
- Evaluating inventory
- Publishing reports
- Generating invoices
- Paying bills
- Writing blogs
- Reviewing contracts
- Fixing bugs in software
- Financial analysis

# WORK VS. WORK: INITIATIVE WORK

## CHARACTERISTICS OF INITIATIVE WORK

- Efforts are discretionary
- Temporary, one-time endeavors
- Always on the wish list
- Always lower on the priority list
- Success is based on whether the end results “hits the mark”

## EXAMPLES OF INITIATIVE WORK

- Creating/refining a process or product
- New marketing campaign
- Client appreciation conferences
- Office moves
- Selecting and installing new software tools
- Establishing yearly budgets
- New training course curricula
- Six Sigma efforts

Initiative work, on the other hand, is focused on making operational results better. That can take many forms, from doing something to increase output or quality or to decrease costs. It’s always related to making your organization better at what it does.

Success of initiative work is determined by whether or not it “hits the mark,” and coming close isn’t enough. The end result has to meet the business need.

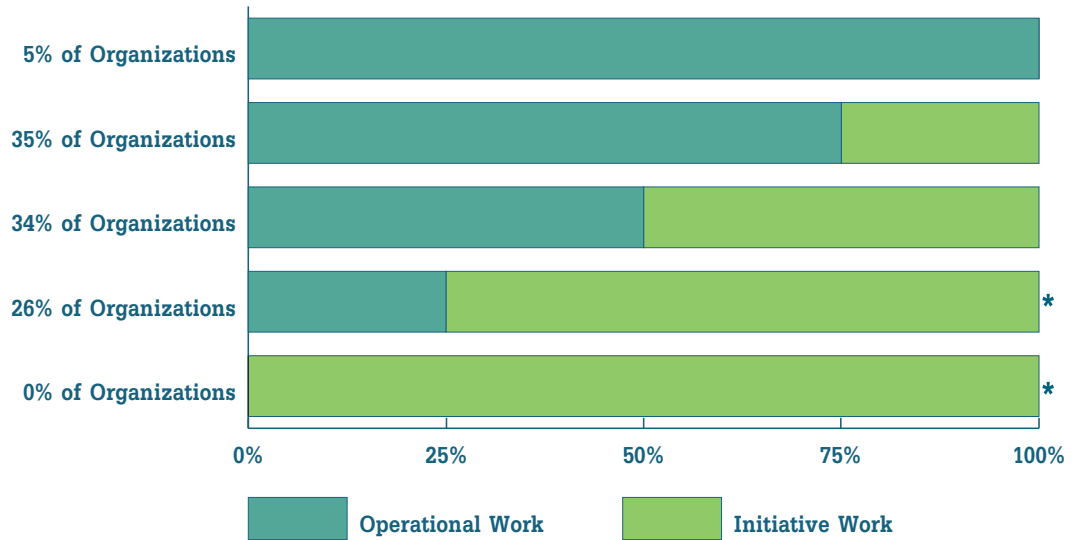
Unlike operational work, it’s not repetitive work that’s driven by how efficient you can be; it’s a one-and-done scenario, driven by getting the desired results. Instead of routine workflows, initiatives are typically managed in phases of activities. And unlike operational work, the efforts are discretionary. You can choose to take it on or not.

That doesn’t mean it’s not important. In fact, initiatives are often critical for long-term organizational success and viability. But they typically won’t drive resource priority—especially when that operational

work is crying out for attention—so if you don’t have the resource capacity to take an initiative on, it won’t get done. Ultimately, in the battle between operational and initiative work, operations always wins out.

# THE SPLIT BETWEEN OPERATIONAL VS. INITIATIVE WORK

What does the division look like in most organizations? The graph below shows the split between operational and initiative work based on a survey we conducted in 2015.



\*Note: Once organizations spend 75% of their time on one-time initiatives, we change the terminology to projects. Organizations that have that many one-time efforts are typically project-based—serving other internal departments or external clients heavily.



**HOW THE  
UNFULFILLED  
WISH LIST OF  
INITIATIVES  
AFFECTS YOUR  
ORGANIZATION**



**When operational work doesn't get done, the organization feels it instantly. Failure to complete an initiative may not be all that painful right away. But sooner or later, it will affect your organization. Here's how it often plays out:**

## **“SHINY OBJECT” SYNDROME**

It's not uncommon for employees to start working on an initiative, and then, before they finish it, management tells them to switch gears and focus on something else—a new idea or, at the time, a higher priority initiative.

This typically happens because the initiative work was never given an adequate amount of resources, and the priority was not well founded. Since it's taking longer to complete than expected, the manager moves on to the next “shiny object.” If that initiative work had been completed in a timely manner, management may still have another shiny object on deck, but the team would be ready for it.

## **DEMOTIVATED, DISENGAGED, BURNED-OUT STAFF**

Many organizations consistently take on more initiatives than can be done, to the point that employees simply feel there is no way to succeed. When that happens, management loses the ability to rally the troops. After all, what's the point of trying when you have a mountain of work you know you'll never realistically be able to get through?

And yet, all too often, the management response is to pile on more. Some managers assume their employees aren't working hard enough, so they just keep adding to the load. What's a much better method of resource allocation? Knowing what it takes to complete the work, and then getting better at your forecasting and estimates.

## YOU NEVER GET BETTER

If the initiative work doesn't get done, eventually your organization is going to fall behind. Others in the business may work around you to get things done as your reputation and effectiveness continue to drop. Depending on the function or service you provide, there could be other, significant business consequences. With so much change in the world today, no one can afford to stick with the status quo indefinitely.

### What's Not Getting Done

Less than 37% of the respondents in our survey said their organizations complete more than 75% of their yearly initiatives. In other words, **most are producing less than 75% of what they set out to achieve**—and who knows if the work they complete even represents the highest quality work.

- 58.6% of respondents believe employees are *20% or more over capacity*.
- When asked what the biggest inhibitor to their organization accomplishing all of its work demands:
  - \* 36.9 said rapidly shifting priorities
  - \* 33.8% said too few resources

The good news? Address these inhibitors, *and* you'll be able to get more initiatives completed and reduce employee burnout.

# GETTING MORE WORK DONE: THE IDEAL ORGANIZATION

**Clearly, both kinds of work are important, but they need to be managed differently if you want to get them both done. What does an ideal organization do to make that possible? Here are a few critical steps these managers take:**

- 1. Correctly identify the operational and initiative capacity available.** In ideal organizations, managers recognize how much capacity they have for operational work so that they know what they will have left over for initiatives. Remember: You can't "steal" from operations to use on initiatives. The operational pull is too strong. Balance the capacity for work with the work that needs to get completed, ensuring operational performance requirements are met. They know how to forecast operational demand and then meet that demand with a set of resources. This also means they have a clear idea of how many resources they have available for initiative work, and they don't overburden those resources with too much initiative work.
- 2. This inevitably means they'll have to say "no" to some initiatives or delay their start.** While many managers claim that they don't have this prerogative, if that's the case, then they're not really managing; they're victims of circumstances. Effective managers learn how to engineer the work and clearly present their plans to their leaders.
- 3. Ensure higher priority initiatives get completed ahead of lower priority ones.** This is a real discipline. It requires managers to prioritize all of their initiatives based on departmental strategy and goals. They then move forward with the higher priority initiatives before the lower priority ones.
- 4. Gain visibility into what is being accomplished, and hold people accountable for results.** In an ideal organization, there is no chaos. The manager has clear visibility into who's doing what, what's on track, and what's not. These managers recognize that you can only manage what you can monitor and control. If you try to do too much, all you do is jump from fire to fire.

# WHAT'S STOPPING YOU? AN ACTION PLAN FOR GETTING MORE WORK DONE

If you're tired of never getting the full value of all your good intentions, the answer isn't to stop trying to get better. Instead, you need to master some simple work management strategies, including:

- Identifying resources capacity through metrics
- Forecasting operational demand in detail
- Launching initiatives that increase operational capability and efficiency
- Prioritizing initiatives
- Establishing realistic initiative resources and schedule estimates
- Allocating resources for nominal operational demands
- Splitting resources to accommodate peak operational situations
- Securing resources to deliver initiatives on time

All work isn't created the same. Getting more work done starts with knowing the difference and then learning how to manage each to get the results you need.

**Systemation** is a results-driven training and consulting company that optimizes the performance of individuals and organizations by instilling practical, work and initiative related processes and techniques across the enterprise. With unparalleled expertise in work management, project management and business analysis, we help transform the way people perform to maximize overall businesses success.

Our best-in-class services portfolio includes a broad range of measurable, observable and reliable performance improvement learning solutions, including individual assessments, workshops, certificate programs, coaching and post-training support. And unlike most other training companies that provide highly theoretical advice, Systemation provides only practical, immediately-usable learning solutions that get desired business results!

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