

FIELD NOTES FOR THE COO · DEPLOYMENT STRATEGY

The Tow the System Calls Idle

Why minutes the time standard has no category for are charged to the operator, and five steps to let the floor contest them

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Cover: Caspar David Friedrich, The Sea of Ice, 1823-1824

The argument in one page

A forklift stuck on frost in a cold store took two drivers and a tow strap to free. The record called it idle, or a slow driver.

It is easy to file that under bad luck, or under a standard that needs tuning. My reading is that the standard was missing a category. A system can only book a minute under a name it has. Standards carry delay codes and allowances for what someone put on the list; the trouble is the fact that is not on it. Its minutes do not disappear. They go to whatever category is left, and at that site that was idle time or below standard, charged to the person who was driving.

1. **A minute needs a name.** A fact the standard has no category for goes to whatever category is left.
2. **The error has a direction.** It lands on the driver, and in the report it looks like idle time, not like a missing name.
3. **So let the floor contest the record,** and count the reasons that come back: each one is a name the standard is missing.

Idle is what is left over

A time standard gives every task a clock: so many minutes to put a pallet away, so many to pick one. The system knows a minute by the task, code or allowance that explains it.

No list covers everything a floor can produce. When the floor produces a fact the list does not cover, the minute does not vanish. It goes to whatever category is left: idle time, or a task that ran past its standard, which reads as the person’s low performance. Nobody chooses that. The list does.

The error has a direction. It does not spread over the shift; it lands on whoever was driving. And in a report it does not look like a missing name. It looks like idle time, and a column of idle time looks like a fact. Idle is not something the system sees. It is what is left when the list runs out of names.

My manuscript measures this kind of gap in the product catalog in the system, as the share of transactions that need a person to interpret them. I apply the same measure to time. The cold store that follows is only the scene: the claim is about the list, not about the frost.

Two drivers and a tow strap

In a cold-storage distribution center, with chambers at −18 °C and −25 °C, I worked on the dock and in the storage halls. When the flow backed up or people were out sick, I drove conventional and high-reach forklifts and loaded and unloaded trucks.

Two things happened there that the time standard had no name for. At the door, crossing the air curtain into the −25 °C chamber, the driver's glasses fogged over at once, as breath met a lens cooling in the mist of the air curtain, and for something like 20 to 40 seconds the driver could not see. On the floor, near the doors and in the frozen-goods aisles, frost left a thin film of ice on the concrete. A high-reach forklift's polyurethane wheels lost their grip; it slid, lost steering and stopped dead, or got stuck. The fix was physical: the driver climbed down, found another driver who was available, and they pulled the forklift free with a tow strap.

Industrial engineers handle this with delay codes, a cold allowance and a separate element for crossing the door. As far as I could tell, none of them was in that standard. It gave no allowance for the blind seconds, so they read as unexplained delay, and drivers were tempted to move while blind. Nothing in it fit a tow either, so the minutes it took two drivers and a tow strap were booked as idle or as below standard.

Nobody falsified anything. Read the report without the frost, and the coldest aisles look like the place where drivers rest.

Five steps to contest the clock

Most controls protect the record from the operation. My manuscript also asks for the inverse: the operation must be able to challenge the record. For time, this is my design; I have not run it.

STEP	HOW IT WORKS
The driver flags it	One reason code tapped on the forklift’s terminal before the shift ends, no typing in gloves. One reads “none of these fits”
The supervisor confirms	The shift supervisor confirms what happened and, when no code fits, writes the reason down
The minutes are frozen	Only what the supervisor confirmed stays out of the driver’s figures until someone decides. The original entry stays, with the challenge attached
Someone else decides	Someone outside the team that owns the standard, within 48 hours; a rejected challenge puts the minutes back. If challenges pile up, decide a sample by reason and door, and apply it to the rest
The standard learns	Upheld minutes by reason, door and aisle, read monthly, beside each driver’s challenge rate against peers at the same door. A reason that keeps coming back is a missing name

Start before the procedure exists. Pull last month’s idle and below-standard minutes by door and aisle. Where they pile up, ask what happens that the list has no name for.

What moves the record. A name for the fact, or a floor where it stops: anti-fog lenses at the door, no frost on the concrete. Retuning the standard does neither: the tow still has no name.

What this does not prove

- **This is one site, from memory.** The 20 to 40 seconds are my estimate, not a time study, and the case gives no count of tows, so I claim no frequency.
- **The case shows where the minutes landed, not the standard's documentation.** What it lacked is what I could see from the floor.
- **The measure was written for the product catalog.** Using it on time is my extension.
- **It would fail** if, once drivers could contest their minutes, no upheld reason came back and nothing clustered by door, aisle or season. Then the idle time would be noise, not a missing name.

One question for the next go-live. In the first 90 days after a warehouse-system go-live, can the floor challenge what the system records? Start with what your time standard calls a forklift that is being towed.

About the author

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I grew up on a sheep ranch in Patagonia, where my father's rule was simple: reading is worth nothing if you can't see it on a working day. I still work by it: I measure before I cut, and no tool or method beats what works on the floor.

Thirteen years in Chile, Argentina and Australia taught me that supply chain is not just logistics: it is the whole pipeline, which is why it ends up putting out fires that start elsewhere. A promotion planned in marketing becomes expedited orders in purchasing and a blocked aisle in the warehouse. I would rather find where the leak starts. On one gemba walk, mixed, short and damaged orders led back to a per-operator productivity KPI tied to a bonus; I retired the metric and measured customer satisfaction instead.

I have worked most of that pipeline: planning for more than 200 stores, a three-site logistics operation, a USD 30M cross-border e-commerce P&L and a 50,000-SKU warehouse-system cutover, where I stayed on the floor until the shortcuts died and order processing time fell 20%. Deployments live or die inside that pipeline, and that is where I work. I learned to code in C; today I build with AI coding agents, keeping the math and the rollback in my hands.

Available for pre-cutover forensic audits, deployment strategy, and Forward Deployed roles.

From my manuscript, *The Deployment Chasm*.

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Sources. No study is cited here. The argument rests on one field case and on my manuscript.

Image. Public domain: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Sea of Ice*, 1823–1824. Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg. The wreck is small, at the right, half under the ice, easy to miss. My reading: a logbook with no column for ice would record it as idle.

Field case. My own observation, written after the fact; its figures are estimates from memory. The employer is described, not named.