

FIELD NOTES FOR THE COO · DEPLOYMENT STRATEGY

Who the Form Is For

A quality record can be built to catch the people who fill it or to help them handle what goes wrong. What each design teaches the floor, and four questions for yours

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Cover: Rembrandt van Rijn, The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild, 1662

The argument in one page

A record the dock fills for the auditor teaches the dock to fill it, not to use it. The same fields, built to help the person at the door, start telling you what happened.

In 1996 two organization researchers, Paul Adler and Bryan Borys, argued that written procedures differ not only in how much they control but in what they are built for. Some are built to catch: they treat the employee as a source of error and show superiors who complied. Others are built to help: they give the employee what it takes to handle what goes wrong.

One of their examples of the first kind is an organization proud of a new ISO 9000 certificate.

1. **A procedure signed like a contract buys an audit trail.** In the organization they describe, covert workarounds were everywhere.
2. **Four features tell the two designs apart:** whether people can fix a breakdown, see the reason for a rule, see where their work goes, and deviate in the open.
3. **Use can undo design.** A procedure built to help can still be used to catch people. One manager they quote wanted procedures used as tools, not weapons.

Signed like a contract

Adler and Borys describe one organization they studied, proud of its recent certification to ISO 9000. Engineers wrote the procedures and handed them to employees, who had to sign them as if they were a contract. Management's reason was an audit trail in case of quality problems. The employees saw the same arrangement as a way for the people above them to cover themselves.

One worker put the asymmetry plainly: the engineers discussed the procedure with them, but they did not get to discuss it with the engineers. The procedures did not give operators the reason behind the work instructions. That reason, the authors write, belonged to the engineer. Covert and inefficient workarounds, they report, abounded.

Nothing in their account says the procedures were wrong. What made them coercive, in the authors' terms, is what they were built to do: show superiors who had complied and who had deviated.

My reading: a record built for that answers the auditor's question, which is who is accountable. It says less about the work, because the work that did not fit the procedure went on in the workarounds, where no record follows it.

Built to catch, built to help

The authors took the split from the design of machines. In the 1970s Xerox copiers grew so complex that users walked away from a paper jam rather than clear it, at the cost of downtime and service calls. One answer was a foolproof machine. Xerox instead redesigned its copiers to mobilize the user's intelligence, showing how the machine worked at each stage. Even with jams as frequent as before, they became much less of a problem.

Procedures, Adler and Borys argue, are the same kind of technology. They do not have to be designed to make the work foolproof. They can be designed to help people deal with what inevitably goes wrong, and to carry the organization's lessons.

A design built to catch gets something back. Where a breakdown must wait for a specialist, they argue, people return the distrust: breakdowns become welcome breaks and suggestions dry up. Where any deviation is suspect, the deviation does not stop. It goes out of sight.

Design does not settle it alone. In one company they studied, a tracking system built to make the engineering change process more transparent was turned by some managers, under deadline pressure, into a way to press their own engineers. A senior manager stepped in: procedures had to be used as "tools, not weapons."

On the receiving dock

The paper's examples come from copiers, machine shops, engineering offices and an auto plant. The dock is my reading.

Take an illustrative sheet that a receiver fills for each chilled pallet: temperature, seal, condition, signature. Built to catch, it is written away from the door, read by the auditor and signed at the door. When the probe reads high with the truck still waiting, the sheet has a box for the number and none for the decision, which belongs to someone who is not there. The number gets written, the truck leaves, and the record is complete, whatever was decided.

Built to help, the same fields come with the limit and its reason beside them, the move the receiver may make on the spot (hold the pallet, photograph the seal, call the carrier), and room for what the form did not expect. The record then shows what happened at the door, not only that a box was filled.

Adler and Borys make a related argument about automation. As routine work moves into machines, what is left to people is more of the unexpected, and downtime costs more, so procedures built to help pay more.

One step further, still my reading: a value typed by hand can be typed without looking. Where the value already exists in the work, in the pallet scan, the trailer's temperature logger or the photo of the seal, the record can be taken from there, and the receiver's minutes go to the exception instead of to copying.

Four questions for a record your auditor reads

Take one record the floor fills for an audit and put it through the four features Adler and Borys use to tell the two designs apart.

WHAT YOU SEE ON THE RECORD	WHAT IT IS, AND WHAT TO ASK
The receiver can write down a breach but not act on it; a high reading waits for quality to come	No repair: the breakdown stops the work until someone else arrives. Ask what the receiver may decide at the door, and whether the record shows that move or only the breach
A list of fields and duties, with no limit or reason beside them	No internal transparency. Ask the person who fills it what each field protects. If they cannot say, the reason lives with whoever wrote the form
The receiver never hears what the record was used for: the claim, the recall, the audit finding	No global transparency. Ask when the last record that mattered came back to the dock, and in what form
Whatever the form has no box for goes in the margin, or nowhere	No flexibility. Ask how a deviation gets recorded and who reads it. When an engineering procedure the authors describe offered four routes and rules for choosing, engineers took short-cuts without workarounds

Start with the person who fills it. Ask what the record is for. If the answer is the audit, it was built to catch.

What turns it. Who writes the procedure. Given training and resources, the authors expect better morale and better procedures where the people who use them help write them. At NUMMI, the auto plant in Fremont, California, that used Toyota’s methods, workers and supervisors wrote the standardized work together, and workers timed themselves.

What this does not prove

- **Adler and Borys propose a typology, not a measurement.** The ISO 9000 organization is one case they studied, told in two short passages. It shows the mechanism, not how often it happens.
- **It is not a case against certification.** Listed US manufacturers that got their first ISO 9000 certificate beat similar uncertified firms on financial performance, Charles Corbett and colleagues found. The question here is what one record is built for.
- **The case is from the standard's early years.** I have not checked what today's version asks of a procedure, and nothing here depends on it.
- **The dock is my reading.** The illustrative sheet, and the idea of taking values from the scan, the logger or the photo, are mine, not the paper's, and untested here.
- **It would fail** if records built to catch drew as few workarounds, and told you as much about the work, as records built to help. Then the design of the form would not matter, only the discipline behind it.

One question for the floor. Pick one record your auditor will read next month. Ask the person who fills it what they do when the record and the pallet disagree, and whether the record would show it.

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

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- Corbett, C. J., M. J. Montes-Sancho, and D. A. Kirsch. 2005. "The Financial Impact of ISO 9000 Certification in the United States: An Empirical Analysis." *Management Science* 51(7): 1046–1059. doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.1040.0358

Image. Public domain: Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Sampling Officials of the Amsterdam Drapers' Guild, known as 'The Syndics'*, 1662. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (SK-C-6), on loan from the City of Amsterdam, via Wikimedia Commons. The guild's officials, who checked the quality of cloth, sit at a table with an open sample book on a Persian rug and look out at whoever came in. My reading: in a room built to check, whoever walks in gets checked.

Field case. None. The receiving dock on page 5 is an illustration, not a case.