

# Why Good Initiatives Stall

Four lenses to close the gap between effort and outcomes



Value



Flow



Quality



Experience



**Paulina Kotowska**

*“I’m a connector of people and technology, helping the human side of change keep focus and pace with the tools.”*



**Bertrand Potier**

*“I’m a builder at heart, helping people get fresh, creative perspectives and feel comfortable experimenting.”*

*“Early 2026, together with Stefaan Van Royen, we co-founded **INCEPTI** to help organisations grow, scale and adapt by improving their system of work”*

**INCEPTI** 



## Looking back at 25 years of technology-driven initiatives: outcomes do not materialise at the scale of the effort



### one structural pattern:

leading with the technology **before understanding the problem to solve**  
and accounting for **its many - non-technological - perspectives**

# The Four Lenses



## Value

Are we solving a real, important and clearly defined problem?



## Flow

How does our work iterate from idea to delivered value?



## Quality

How are we minimising risks, waste, and rework?



## Experience

Are we creating better experiences for our clients, our people and us?



# Value



are we solving a real, important and clearly defined problem?

## DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

**“Can we describe the problem we address without naming the technology or the solution?”**

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

### **Solution before problem**

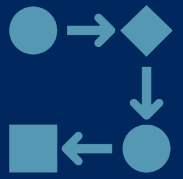
we chose the technology or vendor before the problem was fully understood

### **Misaligned objectives**

we measure delivery activity and progress, rather than business outcomes

### **Scope creep as signal**

we let the scope expand meaning the original value hypothesis was never clear



# Flow

How does the work iterate from idea to delivered value?



## DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

**“What is the shortest cycle that produces a usable, testable output?”**

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

### Experiments without end

we keep a project or pilot going without a clear point where we decide to stop, scale, or change course

### Slow feedback loops

we work in big batches or long iterations, so we only find out what isn't working once it's nearly done

### Lost continuity

the work keeps changing hands between people, tools, or our own focus so context is lost at every switch



# Quality

How are we minimising risks, waste, and rework?



## DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

**“What could we track as we progress to know whether our output is working and valuable?”**

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

### **No definition of "good"**

we never agreed what "good enough" looks like, so we can't tell whether we're hitting it

### **Good only on a good day**

we built it on assumptions, so it breaks the moment it is put to real use in ways we did not expect

### **Looks done isn't done**

we judge progress by what's been produced, not by evidence it works for users and delivers them value



# Experience



Are we creating better experiences for our clients, our people and us?

## DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

**“Can our outputs be delivered by our people and used by our clients without friction?”**

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

### **Built without users**

we shaped the output without the people who use it, so it doesn't fit how they really work

### **Running on heroics**

we only keep this going through long hours and firefighting, which can't last

### **Friction as the norm**

we've normalised clunky tools, workarounds and rework, so the work is harder than it should be





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are we solving a real, important and clearly defined problem?

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— WHAT TO LOOK FOR —



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### **Looks done isn't done**

we judge progress by what's been produced, not by evidence it works and delivers value to users / clients



## Experience

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# You are the Leadership team!



**B2B SaaS  
startup**



**Legal  
& Advisory**



**Retail /  
Home Goods**



**Digital  
Agency**



**HR-Tech  
Scale-up**



**Online  
Marketplace**

# You are the Leadership team!



choose your company, head to your office for a **20 min crisis meeting**

A



## B2B SaaS startup

Builds project management software for construction firms

👥 23

You shipped an AI feature your clients asked for, but almost **no one turns it on**

B



## Legal & Advisory

Delivers financial due diligence of startups, prior to funding

👥 31

You automated the busywork to free up your experts, and **now they are busier than before**

C



## Retail / Home Goods

Sells home goods online across 3 European markets

👥 64

You're switching to a new system, but **your operations team does not trust the data**

D



## Digital Agency

Builds client portals for mid-size logistics companies

👥 9

You delivered a portal on time and on brief and **the client still emails for Excel reports**

E



## HR-Tech Scale-up

Builds HR and people management software for scaling companies

👥 100+

The single-source-of-truth dashboard you wanted was built, and **you don't leverage it**

F



## Online Marketplace

Runs a marketplace to connect interior designers with clients

👥 17

Your AI matchmaker scores well in testing but **bookings have fallen since it launched**

# You are the Leadership team!



The agenda: **assessing your struggling initiative using the Four Lenses**

**1**

## **Apply the four Lenses**

Go through the signals for each Lens: tick the signal if you see it in your case.

**10 min**

**2**

## **Set your key priority**

Which lens is creating the most friction or which signal needs your attention now?

**5 min**

**3**

## **Define one Experiment**

What would need to change in how the work is structured to address the friction you prioritised?

**5 min**



**20 min**

## Situation

Your startup builds project management software for small construction firms.

Eighteen months ago, in sales calls, you started promising an AI assistant that would automatically draft weekly progress reports from job-site data. Clients loved the idea in demos. You built it. It shipped four months ago, on time and within budget.

Adoption is at 11%. The colleague who handles your accounts reports that site managers find the drafted reports "not quite right" and say it is faster to write them manually.

Three clients have raised it in renewal conversations. The feature cost roughly six months of your lead engineer's time. Sales has already moved on to pitching the next feature.

## The Tensions

- Was the problem ("clients want better reports") clearly defined before the solution was chosen? (**Value**)
- Were site managers, the actual end users, involved at any point in the design or testing? (**Experience**)
- What signal would have told you, before launch, whether this feature was going to work? (**Quality**)
- What does the team do now, and who decides? (**Flow, Value**)

## The Changes to consider

- Define with site managers what a usable progress report looks like before building anything further, then ship a thin version to a handful of them before widening. (**Experience, Value**)
- Set a clear adoption signal and a date to judge it: if usage among target sites is not past an agreed line by then, decide to rework or retire rather than drift. (**Quality, Flow**)
- Move customer success feedback from internal escalation into the build cycle, so what clients say reaches the people specifying the feature. (**Experience, Flow**)

## Atmosphere in the Room

defensive and a little weary, sales is adamant the feature is fine and it is just an onboarding problem.



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How does our work iterate from idea to delivered value?



How are we minimising risks, waste, and rework?



Are we creating better experiences for our clients, our people and us?



## Situation

Your firm runs financial and operational due diligence on startups, ahead of funding rounds.

Six months ago, you launched an automation platform to automate client reporting using structured templates. The intention was to cut report preparation time by 60% and free up your senior people for analysis and more missions. The tool works. But the time saved has been consumed by new overhead: keeping templates updated as client requirements vary, debugging edge cases, and bringing new joiners up to speed.

Your senior people now spend as much time supervising the automation as they previously spent writing. Junior colleagues' growth is slower because they no longer do the manual work that taught them the craft. Two clients have also flagged formatting inconsistencies in recent deliverables.

## The Tensions

- Was the time-saving hypothesis tested in a small, bounded way before full rollout? (**Flow**)
- What feedback loops exist to know whether the tool is delivering its intended value, and are they being used? (**Flow, Quality**)
- Who defined "quality" for the output, and was that definition shared with the tool's configuration? (**Quality**)
- What would it take to decide whether to fix, replace, or retire the tool? (**Value, Flow**)

## The Changes to consider

- Test any future automation on one report type in a bounded pilot, with a measured before-and-after on total time, including the new maintenance and supervision overhead. (**Flow, Quality**)
- Agree who owns template upkeep and edge-case handling as a named, resourced responsibility, rather than leaving it to absorb senior consultants' time invisibly. (**Flow, Experience**)
- Define what "good" looks like for an automated deliverable and check outputs against it before they reach the investor, not after a complaint. (**Quality**)

## Atmosphere in the Room

quietly frustrated, with no one wanting to say the tool was a mistake, and the managing partner insisting the problem is how it was implemented, not the tool itself.



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## Retail / Home Goods

Sells home goods  
online across 3  
European markets



You're switching to a new system, but  
**your operations team does not trust  
the data**

### Situation

You run an online retail business selling home goods across three European markets.

Three months ago, you began migrating from a heavily customised platform to a modern cloud-based inventory and order management system. The new system is supposed to unify stock visibility across warehouses, improve order fulfilment speed, and reduce the need for manual reconciliation. Both systems are running in parallel. The migration was supposed to take two months.

Your operations team does not trust the stock figures in the new system: twice this month, it showed stock available that had already been committed in the old system, leading to overselling. The migration partner says the data sync issue is "almost resolved." The old system vendor's contract expires in six weeks.

### The Tensions

- What criteria were agreed upfront for "the new system is ready to go live", and are those criteria being tracked? (**Quality**)
- What is the minimum evidence the operations team needs to trust the data? (**Quality**)
- How long is the parallel-run period expected to last, and who has the authority to call it? (**Flow**)
- What would you do differently in the first month if you started again? (**Value, Flow**)

### The Changes to consider

- Agree explicit go-live criteria for data trustworthiness (for example, zero stock-availability mismatches across an agreed window) and track them openly before any cut-over date is set. (**Quality, Value**)
- Decide who holds the go / no-go call and on what evidence, so the contract deadline does not make the decision by default. (**Quality, Experience**)
- Treat the parallel run as a deliberate, time-boxed learning period with a defined exit, rather than an open-ended safety net. (**Flow, Quality**)

### Atmosphere in the Room

tense, with a deadline looming, and the head of operations refusing to go live until the stock data can be trusted.



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## Situation

Your digital agency built a client portal for a mid-sized logistics company, a custom web app that gives the client's staff real-time visibility into delivery performance, exceptions, and carrier SLAs.

You delivered it on time, on budget, and exactly to the agreed brief. It launched three months ago.

The client's people are not using it. They continue to request manual Excel reports by email. When you asked why, they said the portal "doesn't show the numbers the way we need them" and that they don't have time to learn a new tool in the middle of peak season.

The colleague running the account has been re-running the manual reports by hand to keep the relationship alive. The client's contract renewal is in four months.

## The Tensions

- Who was the real end user of this system, and when were they first involved? (**Experience**)
- What problem were the Excel reports solving that the portal does not? (**Value**)
- What would a meaningful "pilot" of the portal have looked like before full delivery? (**Flow**)
- What does the team owe the client now, and what is realistic to offer? (**Experience, Value**)

## The Changes to consider

- Bring the client's operations staff into the next iteration directly, starting from the reports they rely on, rather than designing through the IT lead alone. (**Experience, Value**)
- Rebuild the smallest useful slice of the portal around one real operations task and confirm it replaces the Excel report before adding anything else. (**Flow, Value**)
- Make "the named end user has been involved" a standing condition before sign-off on future client work, so the gap that caused this cannot recur silently. (**Experience, Quality**)

## Atmosphere in the Room

anxious about losing the client, and the designer is quietly certain this was predictable because the real users were never in the room.

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## Situation

Your company, a growth-stage HR-tech business, spent four months building an internal analytics dashboard to support management decision-making.

The dashboard consolidates data from all your systems. The head of data led the project. It launched five months ago.

Leadership does not look at it. Weekly management meetings still run on slides assembled manually from the same underlying systems. When the head of data asked why, the answers were vague: "it's not quite what I need," "I'm not sure I trust it," "I don't have time to learn a new tool." One VP said the dashboard shows the right numbers but not the right questions. The head of data is frustrated and considering leaving.

## The Tensions

- What specific decisions was the dashboard supposed to support, and was that agreed before build? (**Value**)
- Why do the manual slides still exist, and what do they provide that the dashboard doesn't? (**Value, Experience**)
- What would it take for leadership to trust the dashboard numbers? (**Quality**)
- Is this a technology problem or a problem with how decisions are made? (**Value, Experience**)

## The Changes to consider

- Agree, as a leadership team, the specific decisions the dashboard is meant to support before reworking it, so it is built around questions rather than available data. (**Value**)
- Reconcile the dashboard figures with the manual slides once, openly, so leadership can see why numbers differ and decide which is the source of truth. (**Quality, Experience**)
- Retire the manual slides on an agreed date once trust is established, so the dashboard becomes the working tool rather than an optional extra. (**Flow, Experience**)

## Atmosphere in the Room

polite but stuck, and the head of data is demoralised and close to concluding leadership never agreed what the dashboard was for.



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## Online Marketplace

Runs a marketplace to connect interior designers with clients



Your AI matchmaker scores well in testing but **bookings have fallen since it launched**

### Situation

You run an online marketplace connecting independent interior designers with clients.

You launched an AI recommendation engine that matches clients to designers based on style, budget, and project type. The model performs well in testing, with high match quality scores.

Conversion from browsing to booking has dropped 18% since launch. Clients feel less in control: they receive a shortlist of three designers and are unsure why those three were chosen. Some designers report fewer leads despite strong portfolios. Your team now spends significant time explaining the algorithm to sceptical clients. One enterprise client, a property developer who books regularly, has asked to opt out and revert to browsing the full directory.

### The Tensions

- What problem was the recommendation engine solving, for clients, for designers, or for the business? (**Value**)
- Was the conversion impact foreseeable, and what signal would have caught it earlier? (**Quality**)
- What is the shortest path to recovery without abandoning the model entirely? (**Flow**)
- Who has the authority to make a product decision here, and what is blocking it? (**Value, Experience**)

### The Changes to consider

- Run a hybrid model (browse plus recommendations) as a fast, reversible test against the full-algorithm version, and let the conversion data decide. (**Flow, Value**)
- Make the recommendation logic visible to clients (why these three) as a small change, before committing to a two-month explainability build. (**Experience, Value**)
- Define upfront which signal would tell you the engine is helping or hurting the business, not just scoring well in testing, and watch it from launch. (**Quality, Value**)

### Atmosphere in the Room

divided and a bit urgent, the founder wants a fast fix because deals are being lost right now.



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# You are the Leadership team!



Let's debrief and **discuss your findings**

1

## Your Key Priority

Which lens or signal did your team decide to prioritise and why?

2

## One Experiment

What have you decided to try to address that friction?

3

## Bonus Question

How will you assess if your experiment is working?



Value



Flow



Quality

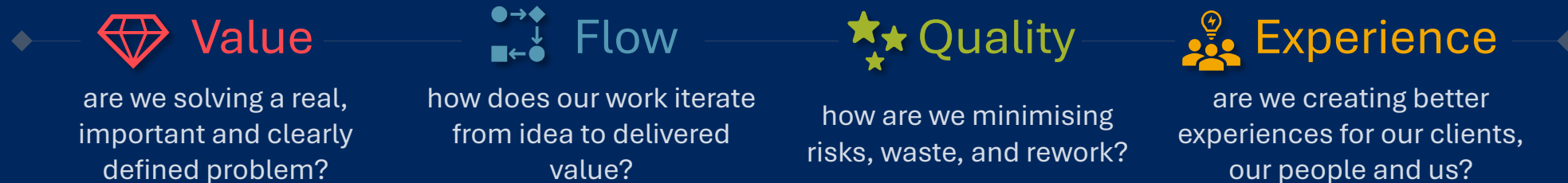


Experience

# The Four Lenses



a pragmatic tool to create the conditions for your initiatives and venture(s) to succeed



## Solo or Freelance

A quick gut-check before you commit time and effort to a new mission or work

## Startup or Scale-up

A shared language to pressure-test what you're building, as a team

## Small Businesses

A framework to help surface systemic tensions and what to adjust

## Mentors and Investors

A fast, structured way to size up a venture you're backing or advising



# INCEPTI

## Start **your** Journey



Contact us to explore how we can help you  
**grow, scale and adapt by improving your ways of working.**

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