AVT BUSINESS SCHOOL

RADICAL PRACTICALITY · PRACTICE 05

The Organizational Stop-Doing List

Why the most productive thing you can do is stop doing something

WHITE PAPER — 25TH ANNIVERSARY PROGRAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Practice of Purposeful Subtraction

Every organization has a to-do list. Almost none have a stop-doing list — a structured, recurring process for identifying and eliminating practices, meetings, reports, approvals, and processes that no longer serve a purpose. The result is organizational bloat: an accumulation of yesterday's solutions to yesterday's problems, quietly consuming the time, energy, and attention that should be directed at tomorrow's opportunities.

Peter Drucker called this "systematic abandonment" and considered it the first step in any serious effort to improve organizational performance. His test was a single question: "If we did not already do this, would we go into it now?" If the answer is no, the next question is not whether to stop, but how. Jim Collins later popularized the concept as the "stop-doing list," arguing that it is at least as important as the to-do list. Jack Welch built a strategy around it at GE, shedding any business where GE was not first or second.

Gary Hamel and Michele Zanini's Bureaucratic Mass Index research, drawing on over 7,000 respondents surveyed through Harvard Business Review, found that excess bureaucracy costs the U.S. economy more than $3 trillion in lost economic output per year — rising to nearly $9 trillion across the OECD. The seven categories of bureaucratic drag they identified — bloat, friction, insularity, disempowerment, risk aversion, inertia, and politicking — are almost entirely composed of things organizations should have stopped doing years ago but never did.

This white paper explains why stopping is so hard, why it matters so much, and how to build a stop-doing practice your organization can use starting this week.

CHAPTER 1

The Accumulation Problem

Organizations are exceptionally good at starting things. They are catastrophically bad at stopping them. A new process is introduced to solve a problem. The problem evolves or disappears. The process remains. A report is created because a senior leader once asked a question. The leader moves on. The report lives forever. A weekly meeting is scheduled to coordinate a project. The project ends. The meeting continues, because nobody has the authority — or the inclination — to kill it.

Over time, these accumulated artifacts create what Drucker called "the weight of yesterday." He observed that executives, whether they like it or not, are forever bailing out the past: "Yesterday's actions and decisions, no matter how courageous or wise they may have been, inevitably become today's problems, crises, and stupidities."

The Invisible Tax

The cost of accumulated bureaucracy is largely invisible, which is why it persists. Nobody writes a line item in the budget for "time spent on activities that no longer matter." But Hamel and Zanini's BMI research makes the cost concrete. Their survey of over 7,000 HBR readers revealed that the average respondent spends between 20% and 30% of their time on bureaucratic chores — preparing reports, attending meetings, complying with requests, securing sign-offs, and interacting with staff functions. Nearly two-thirds of respondents said bureaucracy was getting worse, not better.

The seven categories of bureaucratic cost they identified paint a picture of organizational life that will be immediately recognizable to anyone who has worked in a large company:

CATEGORY	WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE
Bloat	Too many managers, administrators, and management layers. Resources consumed by coordination rather than production.
Friction	Excessive approvals, handoffs, and sign-offs that slow every decision and process.
Insularity	Silos, turf wars, and internal competition that prevent information from flowing to where it's needed.
Disempowerment	Frontline employees lack the authority to make decisions, solve problems, or act on opportunities without escalating.
Risk Aversion	An institutional bias toward the safe and familiar. New ideas are inherently suspect.
Inertia	The inability to change direction, even when the need is obvious. Processes continue because they have always continued.
Politicking	Time and energy spent on internal positioning, blame avoidance, and managing up rather than managing work.

Every one of these categories is, at its root, a failure to stop doing something. Bloat is a failure to stop adding layers. Friction is a failure to stop adding approvals. Inertia is a failure to stop doing what has always been done. The stop-doing list is the simplest possible antidote to all seven.

CHAPTER 2

Why Organizations Can't Stop

If stopping is so valuable, why is it so rare? The barriers are psychological, social, and structural — and they reinforce each other.

The Sunk-Cost Trap

We have invested time, money, and political capital in this process. Stopping it feels like admitting the investment was wasted. The logic is flawed — the investment is gone whether we continue or not — but the feeling is powerful. Sunk-cost bias is one of the most robust findings in behavioral economics, and it operates as strongly in organizations as in individuals.

The Ownership Problem

Every process, meeting, and report has an owner — someone whose identity and status are tied to its continuation. Proposing to eliminate it feels like a personal attack on the person who created or maintains it. Organizations avoid this discomfort by leaving legacy processes in place, even when everyone privately agrees they serve no purpose. The social cost of killing something is higher than the organizational cost of keeping it.

The Risk Asymmetry

If you stop a process and nothing bad happens, nobody notices. If you stop a process and something goes wrong, you are responsible. This asymmetry means that the rational strategy for any individual is to keep everything running — even the things that add no value. The risk of stopping is personal and visible. The cost of continuing is diffuse and invisible. Drucker understood this perfectly: "The first step in a growth policy is not to decide where and how to grow. It is to decide what to abandon."

The Absence of Permission

In most organizations, no one has explicit responsibility for stopping things. There is no "Chief Abandonment Officer." There is no quarterly review of what should be killed. There is no budget line for subtraction. Starting things has champions, budgets, and timelines. Stopping things has nothing. The stop-doing list is the structural corrective: it creates a formal process for something that would otherwise never happen.

> *"All living organisms must have a functioning system of elimination, or they will soon perish." — Peter Drucker*

CHAPTER 3

Drucker's Test: Systematic Abandonment

Drucker wrote about abandonment across four decades of work, from *The Effective Executive* (1967) through *Management Challenges for the 21st Century* (1999). He considered it the first of four steps in leading organizational change — ahead of continuous productivity improvement, exploiting success, and innovation.

His method is characteristically direct. For every product, service, process, policy, or practice, ask: **"If we did not already do this, would we go into it now, knowing what we now know?"**

If the answer is an unequivocal yes, the next question is whether the practice needs strengthening. If the answer is no, the practice should be abandoned — not studied further, not improved, but stopped. Drucker was emphatic that the answer "let's study it some more" was almost always a disguised form of saying no while avoiding the discomfort of actually stopping.

Drucker identified three categories of candidates for abandonment:

— **Things that have outlived their usefulness.** They worked once. They no longer do. But because they once worked, they have defenders and institutional memory that keeps them alive.

— **Things that were never productive.** They were launched with good intentions and never delivered results, but nobody has been willing to declare them failures.

— **Things that have become distractions.** They may still produce some value, but the resources they consume would produce more value elsewhere. Drucker's principle: "Feed the opportunities and starve the problems."

The critical insight is Drucker's linking of abandonment to concentration. They are, he wrote, opposite sides of the same coin. Every practice you stop frees resources — time, attention, people, money — for the things that actually matter. Subtraction is not a defensive act. It is a precondition for growth.

CHAPTER 4

The $3 Trillion Problem

Hamel and Zanini's Bureaucratic Mass Index research puts a number on the cost of organizational accumulation. Their estimate: excess bureaucracy costs the U.S. economy more than $3 trillion in lost economic output per year. Across the 32 OECD countries, the figure rises to nearly $9 trillion.

The BMI is a ten-question diagnostic, scored on a 0–100 scale, that measures bureaucratic drag across the seven categories described in Chapter 1. Their survey of over 7,000 HBR readers found:

- **The average BMI score was approximately 65 out of 100** — meaning the typical respondent's organization is carrying significant bureaucratic weight.
- **Nearly two-thirds of respondents said bureaucracy was getting worse,** not better — despite decades of lean, agile, and digital transformation initiatives.
- **20–30% of the average employee's time** is consumed by bureaucratic chores: reports nobody reads, meetings that produce no decisions, approvals that add no value, and compliance rituals that serve the system rather than the customer.

The implications are stark. If a fifth of your organization's capacity is consumed by activities that add no value, you do not have a productivity problem. You have an abandonment problem. The stop-doing list is the lowest-cost, highest-impact intervention available — because it does not require adding anything. It requires only the discipline to subtract.

> *Hamel and Zanini: "Upending cultural norms isn't easy. It takes courage, a dose of righteous indignation, and, perhaps most critical, data. People pay attention to things that can be measured. The first step in dismantling bureaucracy is to be honest about how much it's costing your organization."*

CHAPTER 5

The Project Overload Epidemic

The stop-doing list applies to processes, meetings, and reports. But some of the most costly items organizations fail to stop are entire projects. Antonio Nieto-Rodriguez, the world's leading authority on project management and author of *Powered by Projects*, has spent two decades documenting what he calls project overload — and argues that the inability to kill projects is one of the most damaging leadership failures in modern organizations.

In his consulting work, Nieto-Rodriguez encounters the same problem in almost every organization he advises: far too many projects, and far too few that truly matter. In one vivid example, a company of 900 employees was running 1,200 projects simultaneously — more projects than people, with everyone expected to do operational work as well. The result was not ambition. It was gridlock.

Why Organizations Can't Kill Projects

Organizations struggle to kill projects for the same reasons they struggle to stop anything else — sunk costs, ownership, and risk asymmetry — but with projects the problem is compounded by two additional forces. First, projects have sponsors, and sponsors have status. Killing a project is perceived as a judgment on the person who championed it. Second, organizations lack what Nieto-Rodriguez calls a "stopping culture": there is no mechanism, no rhythm, and no reward for freeing up resources by ending work that is no longer the highest priority.

> *A big part of projects fail because leadership doesn't know what their role is. Deciding which projects go and which projects don't go — or how to cancel projects — should be very natural. It doesn't happen.*

Seven Habits for Ruthless Prioritization

In his 2025 Harvard Business Review article, Nieto-Rodriguez proposes a cultural shift: treat stopping projects as a sign of leadership, not failure. He outlines seven practical habits for building this mindset:

- **Time-box initiatives.** Every project should have a built-in expiration date or review point. If it has not delivered by then, it must justify its continuation — not the other way around.
- **Reward leaders who free up resources.** Most organizations reward people for launching things. Almost none reward people for killing things. Flip the incentive.
- **Reassign staff to high-priority projects.** When a project is killed, its people are not punished — they are liberated to work on what matters most.
- **Maintain a project inventory with owners.** You cannot stop what you cannot see. Many organizations have no centralized view of how many projects are running simultaneously.
- **Cap the total number of active projects.** Start with a rule: no new project begins until an existing one ends. This forces the prioritization conversation that most organizations avoid.
- **Sponsor projects actively, not passively.** Project sponsors should be accountable not just for launching projects but for deciding when they should be stopped.
- **Start small.** Nieto-Rodriguez advises leaders not to attempt a portfolio-wide cull overnight. Take one transformation initiative, empower the team fully, and let it demonstrate what focus produces. Then expand.

The connection to the stop-doing list is direct: the same discipline that kills a useless meeting should be applied to projects that have outlived their strategic relevance. As Nieto-Rodriguez writes, success comes not from starting more, but from stopping what no longer matters.

CHAPTER 6

How to Build a Stop-Doing Practice

The Quarterly Abandonment Review

The stop-doing list works best as a recurring practice, not a one-time exercise. Drucker recommended that systematic abandonment happen every few months. Here is a practical format:

STEP	WHAT HAPPENS
1. Inventory	Once per quarter, list every recurring meeting, standing report, approval process, and ongoing practice owned by your team. Be comprehensive. The goal is to see the full weight of accumulated activity.
2. Test	For each item, apply Drucker's question: "If we were not already doing this, would we start it now?" If the answer is no, it is a candidate for the stop-doing list.
3. Categorize	Sort candidates into three categories: Stop immediately (no risk), Trial stop (pause for two weeks, see if anyone notices), and Redesign (the need is real but the practice has become bloated).
4. Act	Kill the "stop immediately" items today. Launch the trial stops with a clear two-week window. Schedule redesign conversations for the items that need rethinking, not just eliminating.
5. Measure	After two weeks, review the trial stops. If nobody noticed the absence, the practice is dead. If something broke, restore it — but investigate whether a simpler version would serve the same need.

The One-Question Version

If a full quarterly review feels like too much process (ironic, given the topic), start with a single question at your next team meeting:

> *"What is one meeting, report, or approval process we could stop doing tomorrow with no negative consequences?"*

Ask every team member to write their answer independently before sharing (to prevent anchoring). Collect the responses. You will almost certainly find that the same item appears on multiple lists — a meeting everyone attends but nobody values, a report everyone produces but nobody reads. Stop it. Try living without it for two weeks. If nobody notices, it was dead weight. If someone notices, you have learned something about what actually matters.

The Two-Week Trial

The two-week trial is the critical design element that makes the stop-doing list safe. Stopping something permanently feels risky. Pausing something for two weeks feels like an experiment. Experiments are psychologically easier to approve, and they produce data rather than arguments. After two weeks, the question is no longer "should we stop this?" (which invites debate) but "did anyone miss it?" (which invites evidence).

CHAPTER 7

What to Target First

Not everything is equally ripe for the stop-doing list. The highest-value targets share a common profile: they consume time, they are visible, and their absence would not cause harm. Here are the most common categories:

Meetings Without Decisions

The average professional spends 15 hours per week in meetings. Research consistently shows that roughly half of that time is considered unproductive by the people sitting in the room. The stop-doing list should target any recurring meeting that does not regularly produce a decision, an action item, or information that could not be shared more efficiently in writing. Ask: “What would happen if this meeting didn’t exist?” If the answer is “nothing,” it should not exist.

Reports Nobody Reads

Many organizations produce weekly or monthly reports that were originally requested by a specific person for a specific reason. The person has moved on. The reason has evolved. The report continues. A simple test: stop sending the report for two weeks. If nobody asks where it is, nobody was reading it.

Approvals That Add No Value

An approval step is justified only if the approver regularly changes the outcome — if they catch errors, redirect resources, or add information that improves the decision. An approval that is rubber-stamped 95% of the time is not an approval. It is a delay. Remove it and monitor whether error rates change. In most cases, they do not.

Legacy Processes from Departed Leaders

Every leader who passes through an organization leaves behind processes, preferences, and rituals. Some are valuable. Many are artifacts of a particular person’s management style that persisted out of inertia long after the person left. These are among the easiest items to stop, because they have no current champion — only the ghost of a past one.

CHAPTER 8

The AVT Challenge

The organizational stop-doing list is Radical Practicality at its most subtractive. It costs nothing — in fact, it saves money. It requires no new tools, no new processes, no new hires. It requires only the willingness to ask Drucker's question and act on the answer.

The orthodoxy it challenges is deep and pervasive: that productivity means doing more, faster. The stop-doing list says the opposite. Productivity means doing less — less of what doesn't matter — so that you can do more of what does. Subtraction is not retreat. It is concentration. As Drucker wrote: abandonment and concentration are opposite sides of the same coin.

Our challenge to every AVT member:

1. At your next team meeting, ask: "What is one thing we could stop doing tomorrow with no negative consequences?" Have everyone write their answer independently before sharing.
2. Pick the most-mentioned item. Stop it for two weeks.
3. After two weeks, assess: did anyone miss it? If not, it is permanently dead. Celebrate the subtraction.
4. Schedule a quarterly abandonment review. Inventory every recurring meeting, report, and approval process. Apply Drucker's test to each one.
5. Share one thing you killed — and what happened afterward — with the AVT community.

Drucker advocated this practice for fifty years. Hamel and Zanini have shown that the cost of not doing it runs into the trillions. Jim Collins put it on the same level as the to-do list. And yet it remains vanishingly rare. The reason is not that it's complicated. The reason is that nobody has given you permission. Consider this your permission.

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This white paper is part of AVT’s 25th Anniversary Program: 25 Practices Nobody Uses (But Should). The organizational stop-doing list is Practice 05 because it addresses the root cause of organizational bloat: not the failure to do more, but the failure to stop doing what no longer matters. Every practice you kill frees capacity for one that does.