

## Why is the simplest answer usually the best answer?

Fans of old movies may remember “Contact” where the lead scientist paraphrases Occam’s Razor as “the principle that, all things being equal, the simplest answer is usually the right one.” We can learn from Occam because employers add wasteful complications to our workplaces every day.

### The Problem

Most of us naturally enjoy new products, solutions, complexity and variety. The problem is, these things often fail to bring in more than they cost. Far from a source of new productivity, this type of complexity could be called “the silent killer.”<sup>1</sup>

Complexity just happens as we look for ways to increase sales, reduce costs, solve recurring problems or address policy abuses. Common signals of wasteful

complexity include higher percentages of time spent on lower value tasks, significant increases in rules and procedures over time, the dominance of internal needs and conveniences over customer-focused measures and the growing inability to accomplish basic functions without the same trappings and processes of more complex functions.

The Pareto Principle (80/20 rule) is likely alive and well in your workplace. Roughly 80 percent of your revenue

comes from 20 percent of your customers. Twenty percent of any given employee’s effort and time produces 80 percent of their results. Twenty percent of your products/services bring in 80 percent of your revenue. Eighty percent of your health insurance claims come from 20 percent of your employees. Wow! A lot of time and dollars are spent inefficiently.



### MY PREDICTION:

I believe you (and we) have layered in many well-intended, opportunity-seizing complexities. How many times have we tried to solve a problem with more words and more rules? Adding a complication is often easier than solving the baseline issue.

Internal processes around people issues (recruiting, hiring, onboarding, managing, reviewing, governing, paying, firing) are prime candidates for simplification. Much like the government regulators many of us rail against, why is it that we are good at adding and bad at subtracting? Why are we bad at replacing tangled webs of rope and string with a single bungee cord? Why does an attendance policy have to run three pages when two of those pages are aimed at abusers (and often serve only to give abusers a road map for how far they can go)?

I know. “We have to be sure we stay consistent.” Do we mean consistently confused and consistently wasting lots of time on the least important of our job functions? I exaggerate (a little bit) to make a point.



### HOW TO PREPARE:

From a workplace perspective, why do we have complex rules that apply to broad categories of employees (if not everyone) only to find the rules are not followed by some (many) managers? We successfully obtain the worst of both worlds: a rigid one-size-fits-all system with many features/exceptions that is hard to understand and administer, counter-productive in its one size nature **and we failed to achieve consistency**. This is a poster child for wasteful complexity.

Only you can judge if a particular complex policy or process is required. Maybe a simple one based on clear expectations, good ongoing communication and a “deal with the worst first” process will not work for you. But, if you find yourself defending every complex process in your shop as necessary, please take a harder, more objective look. The goal is to spend less time on the least valuable activities and more on the important things we seem to never have time to tackle.

“It is more important to do the right things, than it is to do things right.”<sup>2</sup> Employers that find simpler ways to move faster and say yes more often to real business needs will be the winners in the all-important war for the best talent and the best customers.

<sup>1</sup>Luepker and Elliott, *Complexity: The Silent Killer*, Kepner-Tregoe, Inc., 2003

<sup>2</sup>Peter Drucker as quoted by Luepker and Elliott.

Contact me directly if I can help you or your team.

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