

EXECUTIVE GUIDE

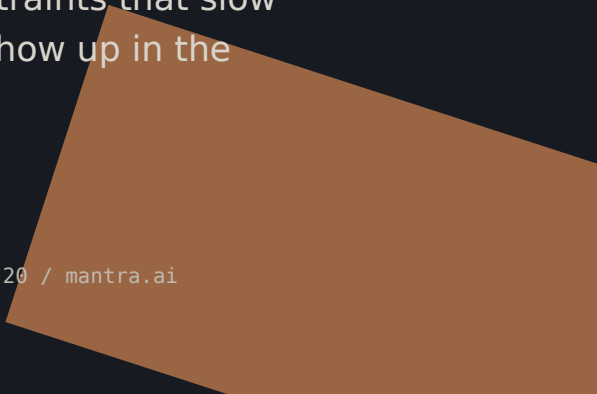


Operating model debt compounds silently.

A field guide to the workflows, ownership gaps, decision delays, and system constraints that slow enterprise progress before they show up in the numbers.

Mantra Labs

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HOW TO USE THIS PUBLICATION

A decision aid, not a substitute for operating context.

An operating-model diagnostic informed by current research on workflow redesign and organizational readiness. The debt categories are Mantra's applied framework.

Use the models to structure a leadership conversation, identify the first workflow or system boundary worth examining, and define what evidence would be needed before committing to implementation.

01 THE DEFINITION

Operating model debt is the gap between how the business is supposed to work and how work actually moves.

It builds when new tools are added faster than workflows are redesigned. When teams grow but decision rights stay unclear. When data expands but trust does not. When platforms change, but operating habits remain the same.

At first, the debt is invisible. People absorb it through meetings, spreadsheets, reconciliations, manual checks, side-channel approvals, and heroic follow-up.

Then the workaround becomes the operating model.

Debt begins as workaround. It becomes architecture when no one removes it.

02 THE SIGNALS

You can see the debt in the work before you see it in the dashboard.

Handoffs multiply Work crosses more teams than necessary, but no one owns the end-to-end outcome.	Decisions wait Approvals depend on escalation, meetings, or institutional memory instead of clear rules.
Manual work returns Teams export, reconcile, re-enter, or validate data outside the system.	Tools overlap Multiple platforms solve adjacent problems, while the end-to-end flow remains fragmented.
Data loses trust Teams debate which number is right instead of acting on what the signal means.	Change stops scaling A pilot works in one team, then breaks across geographies, systems, functions, or compliance boundaries.

03 THE MODEL

Five forms of operating model debt.

Workflow debt The work has too many steps, handoffs, exceptions, and off-system fixes. Where do teams leave the system to get the work done?	Decision debt The business has not defined who decides, when, with what evidence, and under which rules. Which decisions still move at meeting speed?
Data debt The enterprise has data, but not enough trust, access, structure, or context to act on it. Where does the business slow because teams do not trust the signal?	Platform debt Core systems are stable enough to run the business, but too rigid to keep pace with it. Which systems are carrying more complexity than they were designed for?
Governance debt Risk, compliance, consent, and ownership controls sit outside the flow of work. Where does control arrive after the decision instead of shaping it in real time?	

04 WHY NOW

AI makes operating model debt harder to hide.

AI does not repair the operating model around it. It inherits it.

If the workflow is unclear, intelligence inherits ambiguity. If the data is fragmented, intelligence inherits doubt. If ownership is unresolved, intelligence inherits politics. If governance sits outside the flow, intelligence inherits risk.

The enterprises that create value with AI will not simply add models to old work. They will redesign the work so intelligence has something useful to connect to.

AI does not remove friction from the business. It reveals where the friction has been absorbed.

Where is the debt showing up?

Workflow Manual follow-ups, duplicate steps, unclear handoffs. Journey maps, service blueprints, ticket paths.	Decision Escalation loops, approval delays, inconsistent calls. Decision rights, rule logic, exception handling.
Data Conflicting numbers, stale reports, low confidence. Source systems, definitions, lineage, access.	Platform Slow releases, brittle integrations, duplicate tools. APIs, architecture, dependencies, workflow ownership.
Governance Late reviews, manual controls, audit scramble. Consent, retention, risk rules, accountability.	

Operating model debt taxes the business in ways finance cannot always see first.

Speed tax The business waits for handoffs, approvals, reconciliations, and missing context.	Attention tax Senior people spend time moving work through the system instead of improving the system.
Trust tax Teams create their own numbers, rules, and workarounds because the shared system is not believed.	Change tax Every new initiative has to pay for the unresolved complexity of the last one.
AI tax Models and agents inherit weak workflows, thin context, unclear permissions, and unmanaged risk.	

Do not start by replacing systems. Start by tracing the work.

Follow one high-value journey end to end. Start with a real flow of work, not a function, tool, or org chart.	Find where momentum breaks. Look for delay, re-entry, rework, escalation, low trust, and off-system effort.
Clarify the decision path. Define what can move by rule, what needs judgment, and what requires escalation.	Put data at the point of action. Make the required signal available where the decision or workflow step happens.
Modernize the narrowest system path first. Fix the integration, interface, or platform constraint that unlocks the highest-value flow.	Move governance into the work. Controls should travel with the workflow, not arrive after the fact.

What the operating response usually requires.

Experience Where user journeys, service moments, and workflow interfaces affect adoption.	Intelligence Where data needs to become guidance, automation, and action.
Foundation Where systems, platforms, and integrations need to support scale.	Governance Where consent, compliance, auditability, and risk controls need to move with the data.

SOURCES & EVIDENCE

The evidence behind the publication.

External claims are grounded in the sources below. Mantra frameworks and recommendations are identified as applied interpretation rather than original quantitative research.

01 The operating model advantage: Why AI winners are rewiring their organizations

McKinsey & Company

Guidance on decomposing work, assigning human and AI roles, and redesigning workflows before selecting technology.

02 2026 Work Trend Index: Agents, human agency, and the opportunity for every organization

Microsoft WorkLab

Research on organizational readiness, workflow redesign, governance, and human-agent operating models.

03 The state of AI: How organizations are rewiring to capture value

McKinsey & Company

Survey evidence linking workflow redesign with reported enterprise value from generative AI.

Continue the work

Find the constraint before you fund the next initiative.

Bring us one journey, workflow, or decision path that feels slower than it should. We'll help map where the operating model is carrying debt.

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