THE WORK THAT LOOKS LIKE WORK IS EATING THE WORK THAT MATTERS

Dennis Nørmark argues that meetings, reporting, approvals, and policies expand until they consume the capacity meant for value creation. HR can reverse the pattern by treating people like adults and making subtraction a management discipline.



THE ARGUMENT

"What we got instead is a lot of meetings."

Pseudo-work is activity without value creation: work that could disappear without anyone noticing. It grows because good intentions become systems, exceptions become rules, and support becomes control.

BY HR WEEK EDITORIAL

Ideas by Dennis Nørmark

HR WEEK Warsaw 2026

THE PRODUCTIVITY PARADOX

Pseudo-work is stealing the future

The problem is not that knowledge workers have too little to do. It is that work around work can expand indefinitely while useful output stands still.

Nørmark begins with a missing promise: the flying car. Science fiction expected it; reality produced an ever-growing calendar. He uses the contrast to ask what happened to the time, talent, and research capacity that should have created more ambitious progress. His answer is deliberately uncomfortable: much of it is absorbed by the work that surrounds the work.

In the presentation, he said roughly 60% of work now consists of message notifications, unexpected meetings, and constant email. More hours will not solve that problem. The places where people work the longest do not necessarily produce the most, because knowledge work does not behave like an industrial line. Time at a desk is not a unit of value.

That is why the first management task is diagnostic. Before adding people or hours, leaders need to look at what people are actually doing: which activities move the product, customer, decision, or mission forward, and which merely demonstrate that work appears to be under control.

Cyril Northcote Parkinson named the dynamic in the 1950s: work expands to fill the time available for its completion. A meeting booked for an hour tends to take an hour. A report can become more detailed, a stakeholder list can grow, and a risk analysis can always discover another hypothetical risk. The internet never says a subpage is full.

Nørmark calls the result pseudo-work: activity that sounds legitimate but creates no value, improves nothing, and could be neglected without anyone noticing. A market analysis can be real work. If nobody reads or uses it, the same analysis is theatre. A newsletter button can consume a month once enough functions, templates, and strategic interpretations become attached to it.

Front-stage work eventually runs into reality: a bus route, a patient, a factory line, a customer. Back-stage knowledge work can keep finding more numbers, decimals, stakeholders, communication, KPIs, and assurance. The tragedy is not that these practices are always useless. It is that they have no natural stopping point.

PARKINSON'S LAW

TIME does not simply contain work. In open-ended knowledge roles, available time invites work to expand.

VALUE must therefore be defined before activity is added. Otherwise motion becomes the evidence of contribution.

COMPLEXITY IS A CHOICE

The organisation did not become complex by itself

Layers, scorecards, approvals, coordination bodies, and reporting routines are the accumulated record of human decisions.



Dennis Nørmark at HR WEEK Warsaw: added activity becomes added complexity.

Complexity is often described as an external fact: the world is complex, therefore the organisation must be complex. Nørmark rejects the inevitability. Compliance did not arrive as a law of nature. People chose each layer, approval, scorecard, interface, coordination forum, and reporting request - usually for a reason that sounded sensible at the time.

The cumulative result is visible in the figures he presented. Across 1,000 organisations observed over 15 years, measures of organisational complexity rose by 50% to 350%. The proportion of people spending more than 14 hours a week in meetings doubled. Reporting increased by 40%, and email volume tripled.

Those increases do not mean every meeting, report, or email is pointless. They show why local decisions need a system-level test. Each addition may be small; together they can turn execution into a permission-seeking and status-reporting process.

Nørmark's pandemic example exposes how much of the delay is optional. A US retailer launched curbside delivery in two days after previously planning an 18-month implementation. The crisis did not make the work less important. It removed the time available for checking, milestone design, responsibility mapping, hypothetical risk mitigation, and repeated reporting.

The lesson is not to operate permanently in emergency mode. It is to notice the contrast. When purpose was clear and the cost of delay was visible, the organisation could act. The barriers that had looked necessary became negotiable.

This is the real cost of pseudo-work: not only the hours it consumes, but the opportunity it displaces. Organisations lose speed, people lose a sense of usefulness, and ambitious work is postponed while control rituals multiply.

"Complexity does not happen automatically. It happens because humans make choices."

If complexity was added through choices, it can also be removed through choices.

WHEN GOOD INTENTIONS SCALE BADLY

A policy is not a substitute for leadership

Pseudo-work often begins with a legitimate aim. The trouble starts when every deviation receives a system response.

THE LEADERSHIP TEST

Does this problem need a policy - or a conversation?



Dennis Nørmark speaking at HR WEEK Warsaw.

The sources of pseudo-work are not usually cynical. Organisations want communication, documentation, quality assurance, development, certainty, and fewer mistakes. Yet each good intention can produce a shadow system: emails instead of understanding, box ticking instead of quality, solutions without a problem, and detail without better judgment.

The same pattern appears after exceptions. Stress produces a stress policy. A person who misuses remote work produces a company-wide rule. Misconduct produces a code that asks every employee to read what one manager should confront. A tool error produces another report and mandatory instruction.

Nørmark's challenge is not to ignore problems. It is to choose the response at the right level. A leader may need to speak directly with the person who is underperforming, harming colleagues, or never showing up. When managers avoid that conversation, they can become bureaucrats: inventing policies and procedures that distribute the burden of one case across everyone.

Rules also crowd out common sense. The more completely a system tells people what to do, the less it expects them to think. Over time, low expectations can become self-fulfilling. Removing a rule is therefore not simply deregulation; it can be a signal that judgment and responsibility are part of the job.

GOOD INTENTION / SYSTEM SHADOW

COMMUNICATE	**More messages**	DEVELOP	**Solutions without problems**
DOCUMENT	**More reporting**	AVOID MISTAKES	**Rules for everyone**
ASSURE QUALITY	**More box ticking**	CREATE CERTAINTY	**Detail without judgment**

TREAT ADULTS LIKE ADULTS

Principles create judgment; rules create compliance

The more responsibility is escalated upward, the more paperwork and control travel downward.

Nørmark points to self-organising traffic spaces in the Netherlands where signs and rules were removed. Accidents fell and movement improved. The example is a reminder that visible control is not the same as effective coordination. People often perform better when a situation requires attention, eye contact, and judgment.

He connects that principle to Netflix's well-known effort to reduce policy. Instead of writing a detailed rule for every expense decision, the company asks people to act in the organisation's interest. The point is not that judgment never fails. It is that most employees will make a reasonable decision, while a control system designed around the few who might not imposes cost on everyone.

Principles force people to think. Rules can allow people to stop thinking. That distinction matters because responsibility follows the problem. When every issue is escalated to senior management, the top of the pyramid can respond only with broad instructions, new policies, and more monitoring. Local intelligence is replaced by remote control.

Nørmark includes himself in the critique. As vice chair of a large Danish media company, he sometimes asked questions that produced 30-page PowerPoint decks he never read. The unnecessary work was not caused by malicious employees. It spread because nobody felt authorised to say: pick up the phone and ask the person who knows.

A simpler organisation therefore needs more than fewer documents. It needs the psychological safety to challenge a request, the clarity to decide locally, and leadership that protects people who use judgment responsibly - including when the result is imperfect.

RULE-BASED

Prevent every exception

Detailed instructions, escalation, uniform control, and proof that procedure was followed.

PRINCIPLE-BASED

Expect adult judgment

Clear intent, local responsibility, room to think, and direct accountability for the outcome.

THE ESCALATION LOOP

Problem moves upward; management asks for information; reports multiply; policy moves downward; local judgment shrinks; the next problem moves upward.

"If people are expected to think, they will start to think."

HR AS A REMOVAL FUNCTION

Remove stones from the path

Support functions create value when they make work easier. They destroy it when every improvement arrives as another obstacle.



Dennis Nørmark at HR WEEK Warsaw.

The burden of bureaucracy is not experienced evenly. In the survey Nørmark cited, customer service, sales, and production saw the organisation as more bureaucratic than HR, strategy, and planning did. That difference is a warning: support functions may not feel the friction they create for operational teams.

His test is concrete. Is HR placing a stone on somebody's path - another template, workshop, mandatory read, approval, or colour change - or removing one? The aim is not to eliminate standards. It is to ask who needs the information, what decision it supports, and whether the same outcome can be reached with less interruption.

Good enough can be a strategic choice. Not every presentation must be perfect, not every report must be refreshed, and not every issue needs intervention. A monthly report that nobody responds to may be a candidate for a controlled stop: pause it, observe what breaks, and let actual demand reveal its value.

Nørmark describes a German bakery study in which employees identified unnecessary protocols and checklists. Locations that removed them achieved an average sales increase of 2.6%, with gains of up to 5%. The reported effect was associated not simply with less documentation, but with people feeling that they were treated like adults.

THE REMOVAL INTERVIEW

PURPOSE

Who asked for this, what decision does it support, and what happens if we stop?

RELEVANCE

Who truly needs to read, attend, approve, or receive it - and who does not?

FRICTION

Does this practice make the work easier, or is it a stone people must jump over?

MAKE SUBTRACTION MEASURABLE

One rule in, one rule out

Complexity accumulates quietly. Removing it requires visible ownership, employee evidence, and goals that reward less as deliberately as organisations reward more.

Nørmark closes with a role for HR that is both practical and political: identify pseudo-work by asking the people who do it. Employees often know which report is ignored, which checklist repeats another control, which approval changes nothing, and which meeting exists because it has always existed. Their irritation is operational data.

The process needs permission as well as questions. People must be able to challenge a request without being labelled unhelpful, and leaders must accept that subtraction creates uncertainty. The aim is not a dramatic purge. It is a series of controlled decisions: stop, test, observe, and restore only when the missing value becomes visible.

This approach turns simplification into learning. If nothing breaks, capacity has been released. If something does, the organisation discovers the real purpose and can design a lighter mechanism around it.

What gets measured also matters. Nørmark proposes anti-bureaucratic performance goals: count rules, policies, handbook pages, recurring reports, and standing meetings; set targets to remove them; and apply a one-in, one-out principle when new controls are introduced. Without a stock measure, additions remain visible while accumulated burden disappears into the background.

The deeper point is cultural. Organisations are accustomed to proving ambition by launching, adding, expanding, and communicating. Subtraction can look like inactivity even when it creates more value. Leaders need to recognise the person who removes a redundant approval with the same seriousness as the person who launches a new programme.

The flying car remains Nørmark's metaphor for displaced possibility. Smarter work will not arrive from squeezing more activity into the day. It begins when organisations decide that capacity is finite, judgment matters, and work should earn its place.

THE MANAGEMENT QUESTION

Which recurring meeting, report, rule, approval, or mandatory communication will you stop for 30 days - and what evidence will decide whether it deserves to return?

EDITOR'S NOTE

This article develops ideas shared by Dennis Nørmark at HR WEEK Warsaw 2026. It is based strictly on the recorded presentation; examples and figures are presented as attributed in the talk and have not been independently verified.