

NORTH STAR RESEARCH · 2026 · WHITE PAPER

# Where the time goes

How knowledge teams spend the week, what they would change, and the three decisions that move the number.

**41%**
of the week goes to coordination

**2.6×**
more rework without a named owner

**11 h**
saved per report when text and layout stop blocking each other

06 PAGES

# Most teams measure activity. The ones that improve measure outcomes.

**41%**

of the week goes to coordination: status, handoffs, waiting.

**2.6×**

more rework in teams without a named owner per document.

**11 h**

saved per report when text and layout stop blocking each other.

We asked 412 people in product, finance and communications to log one ordinary week. Not a busy one, not a quiet one. The picture that came back was consistent across industries and company sizes: the work people were hired for fills about half the week. The rest is coordination.

Coordination is not waste by definition. A review that catches a wrong number is worth an hour. But the logs show most of it is friction: the same change made in three places, a layout waiting for words, words waiting for a layout, and a final version that nobody is sure is final.

> **"We don't have a writing problem or a design problem. We have a hand-off problem."**
>
> HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS, LISTED INDUSTRIAL COMPANY

This paper sets out what the week looks like, where the hours go, and the three decisions that, in the teams that made them, moved the number most. None of them required a new tool. All of them required deciding who decides.


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# Where the hours go

Share of logged hours by activity, all respondents. Coordination includes status updates, hand-offs, waiting on others and reconciling versions.

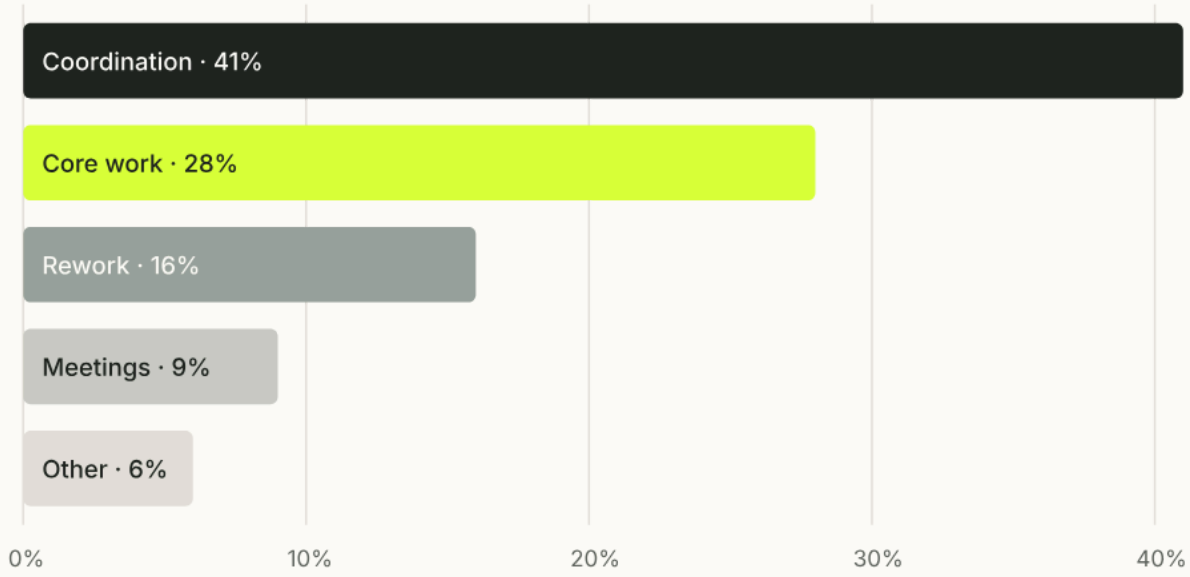



Fig. 01 — Share of the week by activity. n = 412. One logged week per respondent, March 2026.

Coordination is the largest block in every group we cut the data by. It is larger in bigger companies, but not by much: a twelve-person agency logged 36%, a listed industrial company 44%. The shape is the same; only the names of the tools change.

Rework is the number that surprised the respondents themselves. One in six hours is spent redoing something that was already done once: a paragraph pasted into the wrong version, a chart rebuilt because the numbers moved, a page re-laid because a sentence grew.

## 1 in 6 hours

is spent redoing work that was already done once. Across a 40-hour week, that is most of a day.



# The document is where the hand-offs pile up

Ask a team where their week goes and they point at meetings. Ask them to log it and the answer is documents: the proposal, the quarterly report, the white paper, the board deck. Each one passes through several hands, and every pass is a place where time leaks.

The pattern is familiar. The writing is done first, in a word processor, because that is where writing is easy. Then the layout is done, in a design tool, because that is where pages look good. Then the review starts, and every comment on the words has to be carried into the pages by hand.

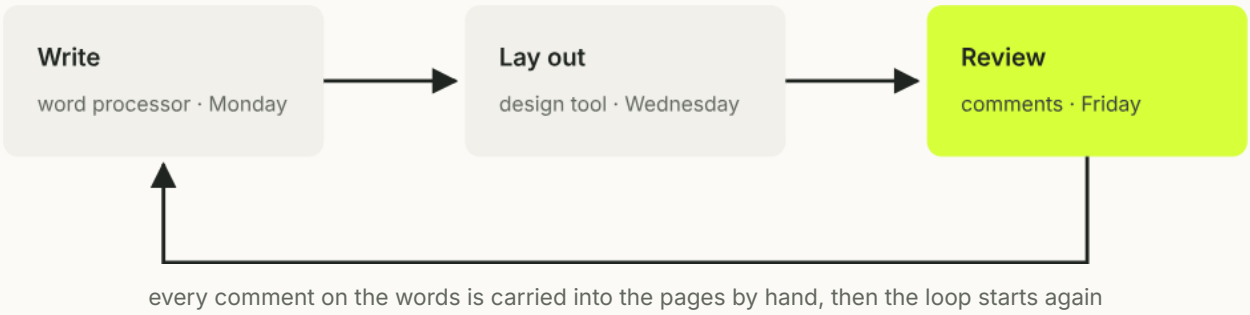



Fig. 02 — The hand-off loop as respondents described it. The review step restarts the loop on average 2.4 times per document.

> **"The layout was finished on Wednesday. The words were finished on Friday. Guess which one shipped."**
>
> PRODUCT MARKETING LEAD, SOFTWARE COMPANY

Teams that broke the loop did not do it with a new tool. They did it by deciding, once, who owns which part of the document and when the words are allowed to change. The tool follows the decision.

Three decisions came up again and again in the teams whose numbers improved. The next page sets them out.

# What the teams that improved decided

**01**

### Name an owner for each hand-off.

Not a committee, a person. The owner decides when the words are final and when the pages are final, and the two dates are allowed to differ.

**02**

### Measure outcomes, not activity.

Count the documents that shipped on time and were read, not the drafts produced. Teams that switched the metric cut rework by a third within a quarter.

**03**

### Keep the words and the pages apart until the end.

Write in one place, design in one place, and bind them as late as possible. Every team that did this stopped losing afternoons to pasting.

None of this is a technology decision. But technology makes it easier or harder, and most document tools make it harder, because they ask one person to do two jobs in one box.

The teams in our sample that kept words and pages apart reported the lowest rework share, 9% against a median of 16%, and the shortest time from final comment to shipped file: under a day, against four.

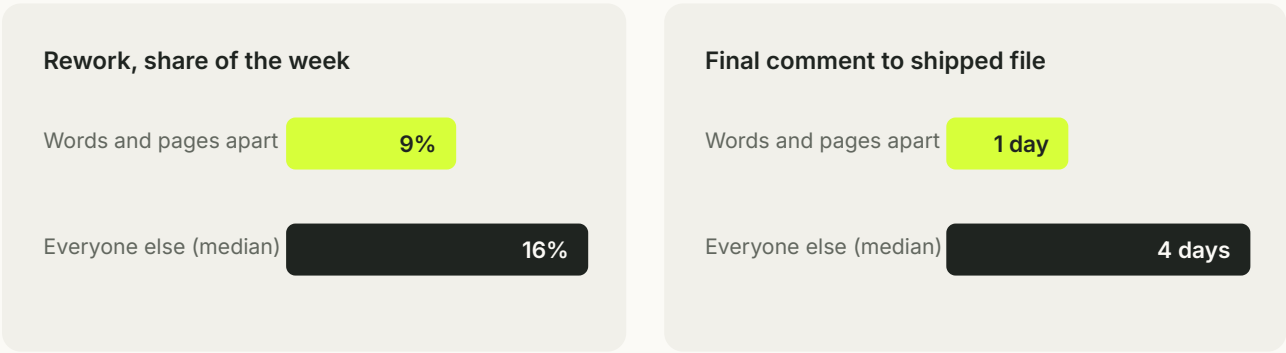



Fig. 03 — Teams that kept words and pages apart (n = 71) against the rest of the sample.

## Three decisions, no new tool.

Every team whose numbers improved made at least two of the three. The tool followed the decision, never the other way round.

# About this research



**412**
respondents, one logged week each

**38**
organisations, 12 to 4,000 people

**3**
regions: the Nordics, Germany, the UK

**24**
follow-up interviews

412 respondents logged one working week between 2 and 27 March 2026 using a shared template with eleven activity categories. Respondents came from product, finance, communications and consulting roles in 38 organizations across the Nordics, Germany and the United Kingdom.

Logs were cleaned for days under four hours and weeks under three days. Shares are reported as the median of respondent-level shares, so one unusual week does not move the picture. Quotes are from follow-up interviews with 24 respondents and are used with permission, unattributed by name.

North Star Research is an independent studio. This paper was written, designed and produced by two people in one week.