

CASE STUDY

When following the procedure starts the fire

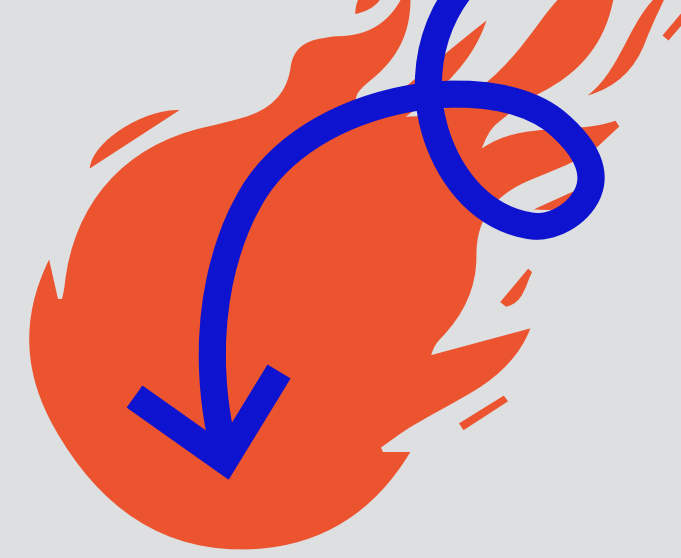


How an **F1000** utilities company defused a **\$718,692–a-year SOP** problem and got field confidence to 90%.



we de-risk your
documentation.

01



***The complaint:* The client came to us with** ***The wake-up call:* A contractor, a pipe, and 100 firefighters.**

An F1000 multinational utilities company was concerned about its standard operating procedures (SOPs): employees weren't following them, and while nothing major had happened, leadership was concerned that it eventually would. The week before the company came to us, one of their contractors, following the company's own SOPs, drilled into a pipe and caused a fire. Two homes were "significantly damaged" and it took 100 firefighters to put out the fire.

Employees had been vocal about the SOPs: they were difficult to follow, contained a lot of unnecessary information, weren't standardized, and were difficult to find. Because the primary users were trying to access and use these SOPs out in the field, the company knew that disaster could be around the next corner.

02

A merger, 600 SOPs, and a Big Four fix that didn't fix usability

This utility company had merged with a larger utility and had to merge SOPs as part of that transition. The merger of more than 600 SOPs was so cumbersome that the company brought in a Big Four firm to help. That firm cataloged the SOPs and rewrote some of them, but according to the utility company's own leadership, the work hadn't improved usability.

03

***The risk beneath the SOPs:* workers trusted a phone call more than the procedure**

During our PROS Readability Risk Assessment™, we identified several root causes:

- Users were worried about losing their jobs if they made a mistake, and many were convinced that following the SOPs would inevitably lead to a mistake (and their dismissal)
- The team writing and revising the SOPs had no formal experience doing so
- No one vetted the SOPs for usability
- The cataloging system was based on department name, which changed frequently
- The SOPs had never been vetted by the people who actually used them
- Users were calling one another for help completing tasks rather than relying on the SOPs

Why the SOPs were failing: **Built without the people who use them**

■ Tasks written in an order no one works in, stored where no one can find them

Users disagreed with how the procedures themselves were written: tasks weren't laid out the way they were actually performed, creating confusion and increasing the risk of errors. Users also struggled to locate the SOPs while working in the field, a serious problem, since finding the right information at the right time can be a matter of safety.

"Some of my direct reports struggle with finding SOPs. I get calls daily instructing them on how to locate the procedure for the process they are conducting in the field."

SUPERVISOR



■ Untrained SOP writers, an outdated template, and pages before the process

The team merging the two companies' SOPs had no formal training in SOP writing and was using an outdated template that front-loaded regulatory content at the start of every document, pages and pages of material before users ever reached the actual process.

■ No updates, no alerts, no way to know a document was current

The company had no process for analyzing SOPs, updating them, or identifying gaps. Updates were rare, and when they did happen, nothing alerted users or indicated what had changed. Users often had no way of knowing whether they were working from the most current version.

■ When finding the SOP takes longer than the job, workers stop using it

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■ Multiple-choice quizzes for hands-on work

Training on SOPs consisted of an online, multiple-choice quiz tied to each employee's role. While that approach can work for some SOPs, it isn't well suited to hands-on tasks, since a multiple-choice format can mask real gaps in understanding.

■ Ten pages of front matter before the first step

The language and terminology in the SOPs were difficult even for experienced employees to follow, which was especially problematic given that these documents were often used in the field. In addition, most SOPs ran to ten or more pages of front matter, including links to regulations, which the user didn't need, and other SOPs, before the actual procedure began.

■ The verdict: not a writing problem, the absence of a system

The difficulty finding and using SOPs pointed directly to the absence of a real system: the SOP system was built around compliance documentation, not around the people who had to use it. Procedures were structured to satisfy regulatory reference requirements rather than to guide a worker through a task in the order they'd actually perform it. The result was a library of documents that technically existed but functionally failed at the one moment they mattered most, when someone in the field needed a fast, clear, trustworthy answer.

The consequences compounded. Untrained writers working from an outdated, front-matter-heavy template produced procedures that were hard to follow even when found. Poor findability meant workers wasted more time searching than executing. Lack of version control meant that even a successful search left users uncertain whether they were following current practice. And a multiple-choice training model gave the organization false confidence that competency had been verified, when in practice it had only verified recall.

Faced with these barriers, workers did what any reasonable person would do under time pressure: they stopped using the system as designed. They called colleagues instead of consulting documentation, relying on informal, undocumented knowledge transfer in place of the formal process built to ensure consistency and safety. That workaround may get the job done in the moment, but it quietly erodes the entire purpose of having standardized procedures—consistency, auditability, and safety—and introduces real risk of injury, property damage, or regulatory exposure.

JHW



Fixing this required more than a document cleanup. It called for rebuilding SOPs around task-based structure rather than regulatory front-loading, training writers in clear procedural design, implementing real version control with change alerts, improving searchability so the right document is faster to find than a phone call, and replacing knowledge-recall testing with competency validation suited to hands-on work. Until those changes were made, the organization would continue to carry risk it believes it has already mitigated.

05

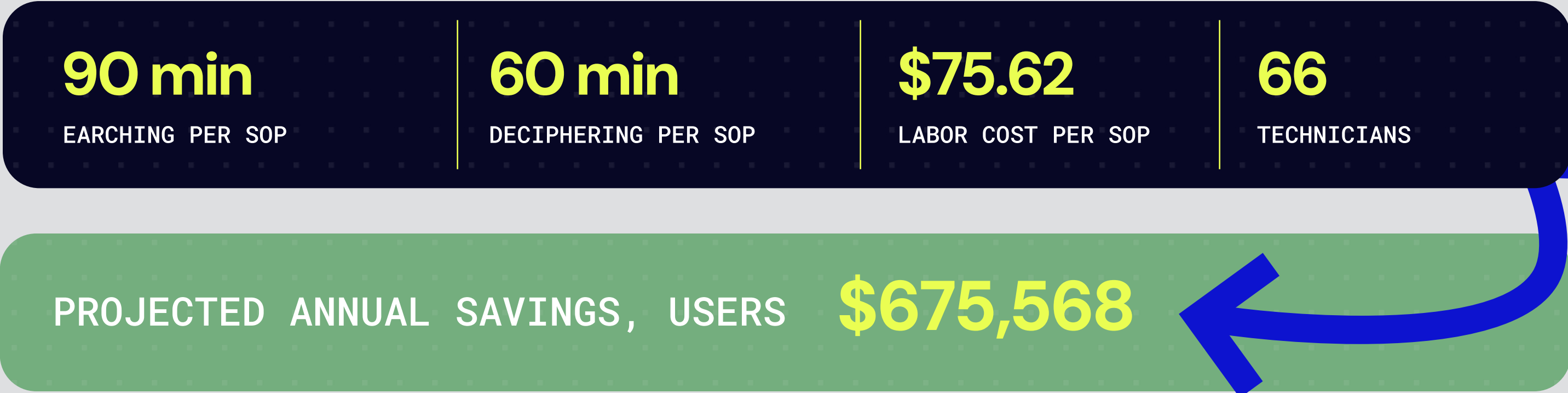
What the risk was costing:
*\$718,692 a year just to find and decipher
SOPs in one department*

■ **Users**

Our investigation found that users could spend up to 90 minutes searching for the correct SOP, plus another 60 minutes working through lengthy documents to find the information they needed.

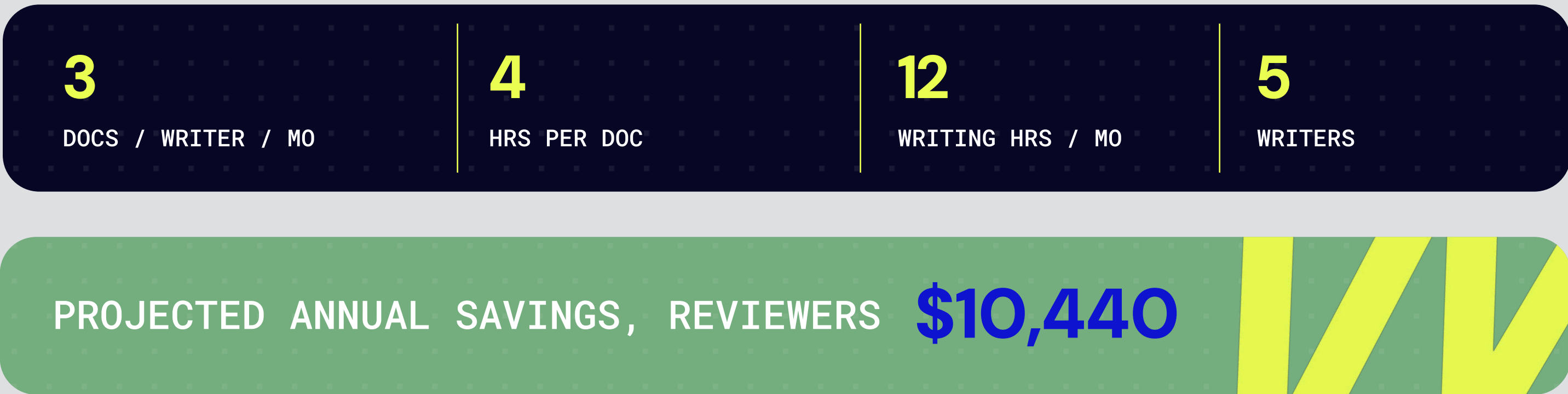
Technicians at this company average \$30.25 an hour and use roughly three SOPs a week for any job they perform. That works out to \$75.62 in labor cost for every SOP a user searches for and uses, \$226.86 per technician per week. Across this department’s 66 technicians, that totals \$14,972.76 per week, \$59,891.04 per month, and \$718,692.48 per year, just for finding and deciphering SOPs in one department.

Based on similar work on other projects, we estimated that our plan could reduce search time to five minutes and usability time to ten minutes, a savings of 135 minutes per SOP. Projected across the department, that’s \$14,074.33 per week, \$56,297.34 per month, and \$675,568.08 per year in savings, again in just one department,



■ Writers

Our survey found that SOP writers write, revise, or update roughly three documents a month, at an average of four hours per document, 12 hours of writing per person each month. The average annual salary for these writers is \$120,000. Based on similar work on other projects, we showed the company how it could reduce writing time by 25%, saving each writer three hours a month. At an hourly rate of \$58.00, that's \$174.00 per writer per month, or, across the department's five writers, \$870 a month and \$10,440 a year in savings, in just one department.



06

The 18-month de-risking plan

We put an 18-month plan in place that included:

- A standardized process for managing and merging SOPs
- A series of writing workshops for SOP writers focused on technicality, best practices, and usability
- Group sessions in which users tested the usability of the SOPs
- Methodical, hands-on training for SOP users
- A new system for housing SOPs, including search and indexing features
- Revised, easy-to-use templates and guidelines for SOP writers



The turnaround:

search time down 89%, field confidence at 90%

After the company implemented our plan:

90%

confidence rate reported by users
in their ability to follow the new
SOPs and avoid mistakes



10 min

TIME SPENT SEARCHING FOR SOPs

Down from 90 minutes

“Much better”

USER RATING OF THE NEW TRAINING

Versus the previous quiz format

15 min

TIME SPENT REVIEWING AN SOP

Down from 60 minutes

–33%

WRITING TIME FOR SOP WRITERS

With work continuing on older SOPs

- Users spent 10 minutes searching for SOPs, down from 90
- Users found the revised SOPs easier to use and reported spending roughly 15 minutes reviewing an SOP, down from 60
- Users rated the new training “much better” than what they’d had before
- Users reported a 90% confidence rate in their ability to follow the new SOPs and avoid mistakes
- Users reported feeling “heard” about the SOPs and their usability, which increased morale
- SOP writers reduced writing time by 33%, and are continuing to work through older SOPs with our support, including a plan to use AI to help merge and eliminate redundant documents
- Users rated the new system for housing SOPs an improvement over the old one

■ Beyond the numbers

- Users felt empowered to comment on SOPs and flag inaccuracies or better ways to complete the work
- Writers reported that the tools we helped them build, including new templates, made writing the SOPs easier