

The process that waits for one person to come back

The request is ready, the form is complete and everyone agrees. It will move when she is back. Nobody has asked what exactly she does that nobody else can.

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Published	October 22, 2026
Reading time	8 min read
Online	https://xonik.com/insights/perspectives/the-process-that-waits-for-one-person-to-come-back/

IN BRIEF

A process waits for one person when that person holds a step the process never names: a test, an exception or a route. Work queues, then gets guessed at, then is redone on the return. The dependency forms through quick help and nobody deciding it, and it shows in the work well before the absence.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Nobody decides the dependency, and each turn of the loop is a sensible response to the one before.

The person who resolves awkward requests fastest receives all of them, so no one else meets the cases or learns what she knows. The knowledge stays unwritten because, from the inside, the step does not feel like a step.
2. The unnamed step is a test, an exception or a route, and each is recovered differently.

A test can be added to the form, an exception listed with its reason and its owner, and a route drawn as a directory. None of them survives staying in one head.
3. While she is away the work is held, not failed, so nobody sees a failure.

Her cover cannot tell complete, correct requests from the rest, and a pending item reports no error. On her return the held work arrives in a day, and decisions made by guessing the rule have to be found and checked.
4. The dependency costs the business its ability to change and costs the person their time off.

A redesign built from the written map is faster and wrong in exactly the cases she used to catch. A step taken by one person is also never checked by another.
5. Make each hidden step explicit, and rehearse the absence while she is still reachable.

The work goes better when she is asked to lend her judgment than when she is asked to document herself. Some judgment will not reduce to a rule, and for that the aim is a second person who has made

the decision often enough to be trusted.

How does a process come to wait for one person?

Nobody decides it. Someone in the process resolves awkward requests faster than anyone else, because she has met them before. The people sending requests learn that the quickest route runs through her, and they take it. Because the awkward cases now arrive at one desk, no one else meets them, so no one else learns what she knows. After a while the step she performs has no name and no second performer. Exhibit 1 shows the loop. Each turn of it is a sensible response to the turn before, which is why it is never questioned.

The knowledge also stays unwritten for reasons that have nothing to do with carelessness. From the inside, the step does not feel like a step. It feels like reading a request properly, and a person cannot easily list what they do by habit. Writing it down takes time from work that is already waiting. And a document has no reader until the day it is needed, so there is never a moment when writing it looks more urgent than the queue.

EXHIBIT 1

How a dependency on one person forms



The loop reinforces itself. Nothing in it is a mistake, so nothing in it triggers a review.

What is the step that has no name?

It takes one of three shapes. The first is a test: a check the form does not contain, such as noticing that a request is complete and still wrong for a reason that only shows when you know the customer. The second is an exception: a rule that applies to some requests and not others, usually learned from a past incident, whose reason is often lost even to the person who applies it. The third is a route: knowing whom to ask, and in what order, when the form is silent.

In the invoice case, the test is noticing that a mismatch looks like an error and is really a rebate the supplier nets off each quarter. The exception is a supplier whose invoices are always paid against the delivery note, for a reason agreed after a dispute long ago. The route is the name of the person at the carrier who will confirm a delivery by telephone. None of the three appears in the written procedure, and each would be obvious to the person who holds it.

The three are worth separating because they are recovered differently. A test can be added to the form. An exception can be listed with its reason and its owner. A route can be drawn as a directory. What none of them can survive is staying in one head.

A test, an exception and a route can each be written down. None of them survives staying in one head.

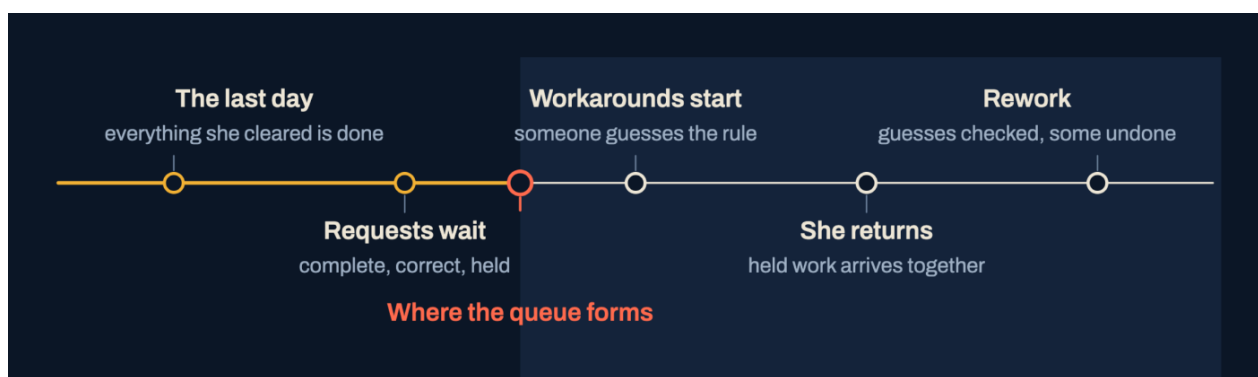
What happens to the work while she is away?

Take a retailer's finance function in which supplier invoices that do not match their orders are resolved by one person. She knows which mismatches are only timing, which are errors, and which suppliers always invoice in a particular way. While she is away, her cover reads the written policy, which says mismatches go to the buyer. That is correct and useless, because the buyer does not know either. Exhibit 2 follows what happens next.

Requests that are complete and correct are held, because the cover cannot tell them from the ones that are not. Nobody sees a failure. Every item is simply pending, and a pending item reports no error. Some of the cover's colleagues, under pressure from suppliers, make a decision by guessing the rule. When she returns, the held work arrives in a single day, and the guessed decisions have to be found and checked. The cost is not only the delay. It is that the queue she comes back to makes the next absence harder, and that decisions were taken on rules nobody could state.

EXHIBIT 2

What a queue does during an absence



The break comes early and quietly. By the time the delay is visible, decisions made on guesses are already in the work.

What does the dependency cost beyond the delay?

The delay is the visible cost and not the largest. The first hidden cost is to the business's ability to change. A team that redesigns or automates the process works from the written map, and the written map leaves out

the hidden step. The new version is faster and wrong in exactly the cases the person used to catch, and it is the person, back from leave, who finds out. The second is to the person. Someone who knows nobody else can do the step never fully leaves, answers messages during time off and carries a duty that the organization has never acknowledged. That is a poor return for being useful.

The third is to the quality of decisions. A step taken by one person is never checked by another, so the rule she applies is never questioned, even where it has stopped being right. A step that two people can perform is, by that fact alone, one a second mind has read.

How do you see the dependency before she is away?

It shows in the work. Look for requests whose comment thread holds one name and nothing else. Look for exception lists kept in a personal spreadsheet or a mail folder. Listen for "ask her" as the answer to a question in team chat. Look at a process map for a box labeled review or check that gives no criteria. Compare how long a step takes when she does it with how long it takes when anyone else does.

Then run the test that settles it. When the next awkward request arrives, ask the person who would be her cover to make the decision while she watches and says nothing unless asked. Write down every question the cover asks. Each question is a hidden step, stated by the one person who needs it stated. The test works because the cover does not know what to leave out.

A public catalog of controls shows that the assumption is built into careful planning. NIST Special Publication 800-53, in control PS-4 on personnel termination, requires an organization to retain access to the information and systems formerly controlled by the individual, and its guidance notes that an exit interview may not be possible, for reasons that include illness. The plan does not rely on the conversation taking place. Neither should a process.

What changes it?

Make each hidden step an explicit one, in the form that suits it. Put the test on the request form as a question the sender must answer. Keep the exceptions in one shared list, each with its reason, its owner and the date it was last checked. Publish the routes as a directory with a first and a second contact. These are small changes, and the work of making them is mostly the work of listening to the person, so it goes better when she is asked to lend her judgment than when she is asked to document herself.

Be plain with the person about the purpose. If the request sounds like preparation for replacing them, the answers will be guarded and short. If it sounds like what it is, a recognition that the organization has been leaning on them without choosing to, the answers are specific and often generous. Credit the knowledge by name when it is written down, and give the person the first review of what is recorded, since they are the one who will notice what is wrong.

Then rehearse the absence. Choose a quiet period in which the cover runs the step without consulting her, and review afterward what was decided and what was held. A rehearsal finds the gap while she is reachable. Some judgment will remain that cannot be reduced to a rule. For that, the aim is a second person who has made the decision enough times to be trusted with it, not a better document.

What does this rest on?

This is observation from process and systems work, offered as a method and not as a measured result. The one external document was read on 20 October 2026. The piece does not say how common the dependency is.

1. [NIST, control PS-4 on personnel termination, in the OSCAL catalog of SP 800-53 Revision 5.2.0 as published on 11 May 2026](#)

USE THIS

[Use the digital transformation roadmap template](#)

[Read what your team cannot do while one person is on leave](#)

Find one request that is waiting for a particular person now, and ask what they will do to it that someone else could not.

This document was made from the article at

<https://xonik.com/insights/perspectives/the-process-that-waits-for-one-person-to-come-back/>. The online article is the current version.