

INSIGHT 02

Where automation actually delivers ROI — and where it doesn't

Jaques Fouché, Founder · Via Clara · 2026

Automation is one of the most overused words in transformation. It's also one of the most misapplied. The organisations that get it right don't automate more — they automate better. Here's what that actually looks like.

The insight most people miss

“Automate the handoffs between people, not just the tasks themselves. That's where the real cycle-time gains live.”

One of the most surprising ROI wins in practice comes from what I call “low-value but high-friction administrative loops” — particularly approval chasing, status reporting, and exception handling in procurement and finance workflows.

Individually these don't look expensive. But when you automate the handoffs between people, not just the tasks themselves, you often unlock cycle-time reductions of 30–60% without changing the core system at all.

The most common mistake

The biggest automation failure I've seen, repeatedly, is automating a broken process exactly as it exists. Organisations take a slow, unclear, exception-heavy process and digitise it. The result is a faster version of the same mess — just harder to fix because now it's “systemised”.

The second common issue is overbuilding edge-case logic too early. Simple workflows become fragile mini-applications that only the person who built them can maintain.

A REAL EXAMPLE

- We inherited a 14-step invoice approval process. The request was to automate it.
- We didn't — we redesigned it to 4 steps first.
- The automation then took two weeks instead of three months.
- And it actually worked when it went live.

The rule of thumb

I use a simple test before recommending automation for any process:

Strong automation candidate: High-frequency, rules-based, with clear start and end points.

Automate only parts of it: Interpretive, exception-heavy, or relies on tacit human judgement.

“If you can’t explain the happy path in one sentence, the process probably isn’t ready for full automation.”

Where to start

Before investing in any automation initiative, map where your team’s time actually goes. In most organisations, the highest-friction processes are hiding in plain sight — in email threads, approval chains, and manual status updates that nobody has questioned because they’ve always been there.

Download the Execution Clarity Diagnostic at viaclara.co.nz or contact us to discuss where automation could create real ROI in your operation.