A SHORT BRIEF FOR FOUNDERS AND OPERATIONS LEADS

The Status Gap

Your team ticks tasks done and the reports still say In progress. Status means something different on every board, and the field meant to fix it goes stale on its own.

TEN TASKS TICKED DONE THIS WEEK

Every checkbox says finished. Now read the status column.

3 agree	7 say something else, or nothing
☑ Complete	☑ Delayed
☑ In progress	☑ In progress
☑ In progress	☑ No status
☑ No status	☑ Complete
☑ Complete	☑ Not started

Two fields both say whether a task is done, and they disagree.

The checkbox says finished. The status says In progress. Every report has to guess which one is true.

Done should mean one thing.

One checkbox, one short status list, and a small sweep that stops the two from contradicting each other.

From practice, banded. Research inside from Microsoft, McKinsey, Atlassian, PMI, MIS Quarterly and MIT Sloan Management Review.

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WHAT THE EVIDENCE IS AND IS NOT

The time lost to status is measured. The cause is not.

Large surveys agree that people lose a real share of the week hunting for information and asking where things stand. None of them can tell you why your own board says In progress on finished work, so I keep the two apart.

62%

of workers surveyed say they struggle with too much time spent searching for information in their workday

Microsoft Work Trend Index, 2023

~20%

of the workweek spent looking for internal information or tracking down colleagues who can help

McKinsey Global Institute, 2012

25%

of their time, leaders and teams say, goes on searching for answers

Atlassian State of Teams, 2025

WHO MEASURED

Two software makers and one research institute

Microsoft surveyed 31,000 people in 31 countries in early 2023. Atlassian surveyed 12,000 knowledge workers and 200 executives. Both sell collaboration software, so read their numbers as honest surveys with an interest attached.

WHAT IT MEASURES

Self-reported time, not audited time

McKinsey's figure is an estimate for "interaction workers" from 2012, and the others are what people say about their own week. Useful for scale. Not a measurement of your team.

THE FIGURE I WOULD NOT USE

"Project managers write biased reports 60 percent of the time"

It is widely repeated and credited to Snow and Keil's research on status reporting. I could not trace it to the primary text, so it stays out of this brief, and I use only what the published studies say directly.

STATED PLAINLY

The surveys show the cost of not knowing where work stands. This brief is about one cause of it you can fix in a day: a status field that contradicts itself.

HOW IT LOOKS VS WHAT IS HAPPENING

Owners see lazy updates. The real problem is two truths.

Most owners read stale status as a discipline problem and respond with reminders. The reminders do not work, because the tracker itself is set up to contradict people who are doing exactly what they were asked.

How it looks

Tasks say In progress weeks after they finished. Reports disagree with what people say in meetings, so the owner asks in person, and the team gets asked, again, to keep their boards up to date.

What is really happening

People tick the checkbox, which is the natural way to finish a task. The status field keeps its last value. Some boards also carry a Complete status, so part of the team sets that instead and the two drift apart.

TRUTH ONE

The done checkbox

Built into the tracker and used by everyone. It is the only thing the filters, the due-date views and the overdue counts actually respect.

TRUTH TWO

A Complete status on some boards

Familiar from spreadsheets. Set by some people, ignored by others, and never in step with the checkbox for long, so every report has to guess which one to believe.

THE RESIDUE

Finished tasks that still say In progress

Nobody goes back to change the status of a task they have already ticked. Every report built on status counts them as live work, and the owner stops trusting the report.

THE SECOND PROBLEM

The one-line comment that says where a task stands goes stale the same way. Its newest update usually sits in the comment thread, where no report reads it.

WHY REPORTS LEAN GREEN

Status drifts optimistic even when nobody lies.

There is a long line of research on why project status reports run more hopeful than the work. Most of it is about people. The part a small team can act on is structural.

US$75m

at risk for every US$1 billion spent on projects, due to ineffective communications

PMI Pulse of the Profession, 2013

561

project managers surveyed: optimistic biasing degraded reporting quality, and reporting quality tracked project performance

Iacovou, Thompson, Smith, MIS Quarterly, 2009

14

studies over 15 years reviewed on status reports, misreports and how leaders respond

Keil, Smith, Iacovou, Thompson, MIT SMR, 2014

THE MUM EFFECT

People soften bad news on the way up

Snow, Keil and Wallace describe it plainly: reports are biased both optimistically and pessimistically, and the reluctance to carry bad news is one of the reasons. It is human, and it is not fixed by asking harder.

THE PMI CAVEAT

A large survey of practitioners, not of small teams

PMI's figure comes from 742 project practitioners plus sponsors and owners, surveyed in March 2013, mostly on capital projects. It shows that communication failure is expensive, not what it costs you.

THE STRUCTURAL VERSION

A field that defaults to its last value always reads hopeful

In progress is the last thing most tasks were before they finished. Leave it there and the board reports more live work than exists, with nobody ever choosing to mislead.

WHAT THIS MEANS

You cannot train optimism out of people. You can remove the places where a field quietly keeps saying something nobody meant.

THE OPTIONS I CONSIDERED

Three ways to handle Complete, three ways to fill the line.

Each option is honest about its cost. The first question is about the status list; the second is about the one-line comment that says where a task stands now.

OPTION 01

Keep a Complete status

Familiar, and nobody has to learn anything. But it leaves two sources of truth for done, and in my experience they drift apart within a week. Every report then needs a rule for which one wins.

OPTION 02

Checkbox only, no Complete

One truth for done, and nothing to set up. But finished tasks keep their last status forever, so every completed task still reads In progress to anyone filtering by status.

OPTION 03

No Complete, plus a sweep

No Complete state, and a small automatic sweep clears status on completed tasks every few minutes. One truth and clean data, for the cost of one small script someone has to own.

LINE, OPTION 1

Human-written only

Always meaningful, because a person chose the words. It can go stale when people forget, and that staleness is visible to anyone who looks.

LINE, OPTION 2

Copy the newest comment automatically

Always fresh, but noisy. A "thanks!" in the thread becomes the status of the task, and the owner reads it in the weekly review.

LINE, OPTION 3

A guarded nightly fill

Copy only the first line of the newest comment, only into empty or auto-marked fields. Some freshness, some complexity, and a rule people must understand and trust.

THE HIDDEN COST

Option 1 for the list costs nothing to set up and a little accuracy every day after. Option 3 costs one afternoon, once.

THE CALL I MADE AND WHAT TO WATCH

One truth for done. A line people write themselves.

Option 3 for the status list. Option 1 for the comment line, with a dated review that decides whether the guarded fill ever gets built.

CALL ONE

No Complete state, and a sweep that clears status on done tasks

The checkbox is the only done. Every fifteen minutes, the sweep finds completed tasks that still carry a status and clears it, so a report can read status as live work every time.

CALL TWO

The comment line stays human-written, with a review date

Build the guarded nightly fill only if the review shows the line going stale. The detail stays in the comment thread, where it belongs.

WHY

Automation would hide whether the habit exists

A line people write themselves is a habit worth building. If a script fills it, the line always looks current and you lose the one signal that tells you whether anyone is paying attention.

WATCH 01

Sweep failures

A sweep that stopped running looks exactly like one that is working. Check once a week for done tasks still carrying a status; any result means the sweep needs attention.

WATCH 02

Tasks reopened

A reopened task comes back with no status. That is correct, but it needs one set the same day or it quietly drops out of every status report.

WATCH 03

Boards made without the fields

New boards are where standards leak. A template board carrying the three fields closes the gap for every board made after launch day.

> Automate the bookkeeping. Do not automate the judgement, or you will never find out whether the judgement is happening.
>
> From the decision log

EVIDENCE, NOT ADJECTIVES

From one task in four to every board in a day.

This is the standard I put in place on a small team's shared tracker, across a few dozen client accounts. It is evidence that a small, decisive rule can land everywhere at once without a training session.

STANDARDISED

Three fields on every board

Status, a one-line comment and a critical-this-week flag, on every active board within one working day. On arrival, roughly 1 in 4 owner tasks carried any status at all.

SWEPT

Done means one thing

Five single-select states with no Complete, blocked states that name who is blocking, and a sweep every fifteen minutes. A template board so new boards inherit the kit.

WRITTEN

Rules a busy person can apply

Start date is the Monday of the due week, overdue tasks move to today, critical only when due this week and actionable. I applied them to my own tasks first, in bulk, on day one.

THE HABIT

Fix what the field means before asking people to fill it

Reminders treat stale status as a people problem. I look for the place where the tool contradicts the person first, and remove it, before I ask anyone to change how they work.

CREDENTIALS

Google Project Management Professional Certificate and Google AI Essentials

Plus Anthropic AI Fluency and Model Context Protocol. 31 certifications in total, every one independently verifiable.

> Paul is proactive, attentive and invested. And he will provide immediate value and accountability to those with whom he works.
>
> Ajay J. Harding · Sr. Digital Producer · ATG · Client-side contact on the Foxhole QA work

HOW TO START

Count the tasks that are done and not done.

Filter for tasks with the checkbox ticked and a status still set. That number is your two-truths problem, and it takes about five minutes to find.

STEP 01

Remove Complete from the list

Agree five states, single-select, with blocked states that name who is blocking. Create the fields once and attach them to every active board on the same day, so nobody works to two standards.

STEP 02

Install the sweep

One small script that clears status on completed tasks every few minutes, with a named owner. Then build a template board so every later board inherits the fields without anyone remembering.

STEP 03

Write the line yourself

Publish the rules, apply them to your own tasks first, and book a dated review for the comment line. Then rate each client account weekly from the clean data with the free Client Health Rater at me.kabuhayan.app/tool-client-health-rater.

WHAT I WOULD EXPECT YOU TO FIND

Most tasks with no status, finished work still marked In progress, and at least one Complete status that contradicts its own checkbox.

Available now for remote work

Chief of Staff · Operations · Senior Executive Assistant · Project Manager
Tell me how many of your finished tasks still say In progress.

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me.kabuhayan.app

Sources: Microsoft Work Trend Index, "Will AI Fix Work?", 2023; online survey of 31,000 full-time employed or self-employed workers in 31 countries, 1 February to 14 March 2023, by Edelman Data x Intelligence; used: 62 percent struggle with too much time spent searching for information. McKinsey Global Institute, "The social economy", July 2012; an estimate for interaction workers, used: nearly 20 percent of the workweek looking for internal information or tracking down colleagues. Atlassian, State of Teams 2025; survey of 12,000 knowledge workers and 200 executives; used: 25 percent of time searching for answers; Atlassian sells collaboration software. PMI Pulse of the Profession, "The High Cost of Low Performance: The Essential Role of Communications", 2013; 742 practitioners plus sponsors and owners, March 2013. Iacovou, Thompson and Smith, MIS Quarterly 33(4), 2009, 561 project managers. Keil, Smith, Iacovou and Thompson, "The Pitfalls of Project Status Reporting", MIT Sloan Management Review, 2014; a review of 14 studies. Snow, Keil and Wallace on optimistic and pessimistic biasing, as summarised in that literature. Deliberately excluded: "60 percent of status reports are biased", widely attributed to Snow and Keil but not traceable to the primary text. Figures are third-party research, not results I am claiming. Practice figures are banded from real work and describe patterns, not a client.