

The Builders Paradox

Operational dependence and constrained development access

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Abstract

The builder's paradox is a proposed organizational condition in which strong current-role contribution creates operational dependence that constrains a contributor's access to development, mobility, or leadership work. This is a narrower and more falsifiable claim than saying technical excellence prevents advancement. The proposed mechanism is a transfer cost: moving a capable contributor exposes the organization to disruption unless capability is shared or replacement capacity exists. The paper distinguishes this mechanism from inaccurate recognition, employee preference, role mismatch, and ordinary resource scarcity. It proposes a longitudinal test using documented dependencies and a trial of protected capacity with knowledge transfer. Existing task-allocation and promotion research constrains the argument but does not establish a general builder penalty. The practical implication is to examine work design and succession capacity without making the individual responsible for correcting every structural barrier.

1 A precise version of the paradox

An organization may value an employee's work while repeatedly postponing that employee's development assignment because the current operation depends on them. The employee's success then increases the immediate cost of releasing their time. This creates a potential conflict between local continuity and longer-term development. The paradox concerns the organization's use of scarce capability, not an inevitable flaw in being technically competent.

CVT defines operational dependence as a documented concentration of tasks, knowledge, approvals, or response capability such that temporary absence would impose a material continuity risk. A title such as expert or indispensable does not establish it. Evidence might include recovery procedures that only one person can execute, unresolved backup coverage, or repeated requests to defer a rotation because no replacement is available.

The outcome is development access, measured as a specific requested or offered opportunity, its eligibility criteria, its decision date, and whether it actually begins. Promotion is a more distant outcome influenced by vacancies and role fit. The primary claim can fail even if some contributors experience delayed promotion, because their delays might arise through a different mechanism.

2 A proposed transfer cost mechanism

The mechanism begins with concentrated capability. A manager anticipates a near-term service or delivery risk if the employee moves. The manager defers an opportunity, perhaps while acknowledging the person's contribution. Deferral preserves the concentration of capability, making the next transfer similarly costly. The feedback loop can persist without any participant intending to suppress a career.

The employee may respond by doing more rescue work, documenting less because of time pressure, or accepting responsibility to protect colleagues. Those responses are hypotheses rather than diagnostic signs.

An employee may also prefer specialist work and reject leadership tasks. A credible study records preference and invitation separately. Declining a managerial role is not evidence of blocked advancement.

Influence could interrupt the loop by securing replacement capacity or an agreement about time. It could also simply redirect burden to a colleague. CVT therefore evaluates the team consequences of development access. An intervention that improves one employee's opportunities while creating unpaid overload for others has not solved the organizational problem.

3 Relationship to adjacent research

Babcock et al. (2017 [R06]) examine unequal allocation of low-promotability tasks. That work motivates tracking the assignment of maintenance and service obligations but does not show that all such work has low value or falls on builders. Task importance and career promotability are separate properties that a study must measure rather than assume.

Benson et al. (2019 [R07]) analyze how current job performance and managerial matching can conflict in promotion. Their findings challenge a simple prescription to promote the best current performer. The builder's paradox instead asks whether a person receives a fair opportunity to develop or demonstrate relevant skills and whether continuity concerns explain a delay. Accurate recognition of current contribution can coexist with a rational decision about a different role.

The novelty claim is limited. Capability concentration, succession planning, and career constraints are familiar organizational concerns. CVT's proposed contribution is to specify a measurable sequence linking dependence to documented opportunity decisions while separating it from attribution errors. Without that separation the paradox would become an unfalsifiable story about every disappointing career outcome.

4 Distinguishing competing explanations

Explanation	Expected observation	Evidence that differentiates it
Operational dependence	Deferrals explicitly cite continuity risk	Coverage records, absence tests, decision timing
Prospective role mismatch	A candidate lacks stated role requirements	Criteria established before reviewing the candidate
Employee preference	The employee declines or does not seek the opportunity	Confidential preference and offer records
General scarcity	Many eligible employees lack access	Vacancy, training capacity, and comparable applicant records
Unequal opportunity	Access differs under inconsistent criteria	Within-role comparisons and documented exceptions
Missing recognition	Contribution evidence is absent from the decision narrative	Episode evidence and evaluation content

These mechanisms can coexist. A manager may cite continuity to conceal a preference, or an employee may express disinterest because prior requests failed. Interviews add context but do not establish motives with certainty. The audit should record what evidence would change its interpretation and should preserve unresolved cases rather than force one explanation.

Operational dependence can itself be endogenous. A favored employee may receive the most important tasks, then gain both dependence and opportunity. A highly capable employee may create better documentation and become less dependent on continued personal involvement. A study that treats dependence as a fixed personal trait would miss both possibilities.

5 Measurement and temporal design

The proposed observational design records relevant contribution evidence, dependencies, backup coverage, workload, employee preferences, and access eligibility at baseline. It then observes opportunity requests and decisions during a fixed follow-up. The primary outcome is commencement of a qualifying development assignment among eligible employees. Explicit deferrals and their stated reasons form secondary process outcomes.

Dependence should combine concrete indicators while retaining their identities. Examples include the number of critical procedures without demonstrated backup coverage and whether a planned absence requires unusual intervention. A composite, if proposed later, requires validation and must not count preventable organizational underinvestment as a defect in the employee. The current protocol favors a prespecified indicator of documented uncovered critical work and reports alternative indicators separately.

The main association compares otherwise similar eligibility contexts while accounting for role family, level, prior opportunity, team capacity, and relevant prior contribution. Team and organization differences matter. Conditioning on post-baseline workload could block part of the mechanism, so controls require a temporal rationale. The observational result cannot eliminate unmeasured manager preferences or assignment selection.

H4 in the protocol predicts lower development access when documented dependence is greater, conditional on the specified baseline factors. H5 examines whether an intervention combining protected capacity and knowledge transfer improves access. H5 estimates the effect of a package. It cannot identify whether documentation, staffing, managerial attention, or time protection is the active ingredient without another design.

6 An intervention that can fail

A feasible pilot offers an agreed block of development time, removes a corresponding operational obligation, and funds or schedules backup practice. Both employee and manager identify a bounded opportunity with observable eligibility and a start date. The comparison condition retains ordinary access and receives the intervention later if the reviewed design permits. No employee loses an existing entitlement or necessary support for research purposes.

The primary outcome is actual commencement of the agreed development assignment within the follow-up. Secondary outcomes include continued service quality, workload for the participant and colleagues, completion of the assignment, and employee preference about continuation. Knowledge transfer is demonstrated through a backup performing a relevant task, rather than by counting documents produced.

The intervention could fail because managers revoke the time, tasks are not genuinely removed, backups lack authority, or the development assignment has little value. It could also have no meaningful benefit because operational dependence was not the binding constraint. A process evaluation records these possibilities. A positive testimonial is insufficient to establish effectiveness.

7 Predictions and disconfirming evidence

The central prediction concerns conditional access, not a universal career penalty. Evidence against the proposed direction would include a precise positive relation between dependence and access in the specified population, especially if high-dependence employees systematically receive more funded transition support. A precise negligible effect would constrain the mechanism's importance. An imprecise estimate should be reported as inconclusive.

If the access disadvantage disappears after accounting for preference, role eligibility, and available opportunities, the data favor those rival explanations. If knowledge transfer reduces dependence but leaves access unchanged, the organizational barrier may lie elsewhere. If protected capacity increases access while team quality deteriorates beyond a prespecified guardrail, the intervention requires redesign even if its primary outcome improves.

The model should also test heterogeneous contexts. A team with established specialist progression may reward expertise without requiring managerial transition. A small organization may have few positions but offer valuable external development. CVT should not treat hierarchy as the only legitimate career. Pay, autonomy, expertise, mobility, and chosen scope are distinct outcomes.

8 Implications for leadership practice

The leadership kit asks participants to document a recurring dependency, select one meaningful learning opportunity, and negotiate a transfer of work with their manager. The management kit assigns responsibility for capacity, backup access, and decision criteria to the organization. Coaching an employee to become more visible cannot substitute for addressing an uncovered critical service.

Managers should explain whether an opportunity decision reflects current continuity, prospective role requirements, budget, or another criterion. Where continuity is the reason, they should identify a review date and an owner for reducing the constraint. Repeated deferral without such action is a process finding that deserves review, even when intent remains uncertain.

The framework must not shame employees who prefer to remain specialists or who cannot take on extra work. Development should occur within agreed capacity. The value of a leadership exercise depends on consequences for the team and on the participant's goals, not on displaying a more managerial identity.

9 Conclusion

The builder's paradox proposes a specific loop: valuable concentrated capability raises transfer cost, transfer cost delays opportunity, and delay preserves dependence. Its plausibility is not proof of prevalence. Separating it from recognition failure, preference, and role matching makes the claim more useful and more vulnerable to evidence. A successful intervention would expand chosen development access while maintaining team welfare and operational quality.

References

- [R06] Babcock, L., Recalde, M. P., Vesterlund, L., & Weingart, L. (2017). Gender differences in accepting and receiving requests for tasks with low promotability. *American Economic Review*, 107(3), 714-747. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.20141734>
- [R07] Benson, A., Li, D., & Shue, K. (2019). Promotions and the Peter Principle. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 134(4), 2085-2134. <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz022>