NOVA Workforce Solutions



NOVA WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS

Taking Control of the Extended Workforce Starts at the Point of Entry

NOVA
Workforce Solutions

Introduction

Most extended workforce problems get named late. They surface as a difficult statement of work, a supplier no one can fully account for, a compliance gap, or spend that never quite reconciles. By the time any of these appear, the decision that caused them is often months or years old.

The decision that matters happens right at the start, when a business need is turned into a route of work. Someone settles on a contingent worker, a statement of work, or a call to a familiar supplier, and that choice is usually made before anyone has properly asked what the work actually requires.

In critical infrastructure, that early choice travels further than it does elsewhere. Capital programmes here often run five or ten years, sometimes longer, and there's rarely a natural point to unwind a workforce decision once the asset is live. What gets set up in month one tends to still be the structure in place at handover in year five. A contingent worker brought in as a quick fix can still be off procurement's radar two years later. The mistake does not resolve itself. It compounds quietly while attention moves on to the next request.

This whitepaper works back to that first decision. Drawing on **£38 billion extended workforce spend** managed across critical infrastructure, our consultants look at why the wrong route gets chosen so easily, why workarounds take hold, and how earlier triage and better decision support give organisations a firmer grip on their extended workforce from the point of entry.



01) Where the Route Actually Gets Decided

The route into work is usually chosen **before the business need has been properly understood**. Picture a project lead facing a fixed maintenance window who needs three engineers on site within the fortnight, engineers who also need site clearance that normally takes longer than that to process. The quickest thing they know how to do is call a supplier who already has cleared engineers on their books and raise it as a statement of work because that's the contract they can get signed this week.

Nobody on that call is deciding how the person will actually be managed once they're on site, but that's the detail that decides whether this is a genuine statement of work or contingent labour wearing an IR35 workaround.

The routing decision is effectively made in that phone call, and so, usually without anyone noticing, is the compliance risk sitting underneath it.

This pattern surfaces repeatedly in conversations with procurement and workforce leaders across energy, utilities, nuclear, transport, and defence. The details change from one organisation to the next, but the sequence does not. Our workforce specialists move away from asking if the route was approved, to whether the business had the **right guidance at the moment the route was chosen**, and whether that route was ever the best fit for the outcome needed.

When the answer is no, the cost surfaces later as reduced visibility, weaker accountability, and compliance that is permanently a step behind.

The typical decision process

01) Business need appears	*02)* Initial route is chosen	*03)* Work begins on that route	*04)* Consequences surface later
A time-critical need emerges.	• Permanent hiring • Contingent labour • SOW • Consultancy • Outsourced delivery • Freelance or specialist partner • Redesign or automation	The request is raised to fit the route that's already been chosen.	The impact shows up later, in governance, compliance, or delivery.

Governance layer across all routes



Visibility



Accountability



Compliance



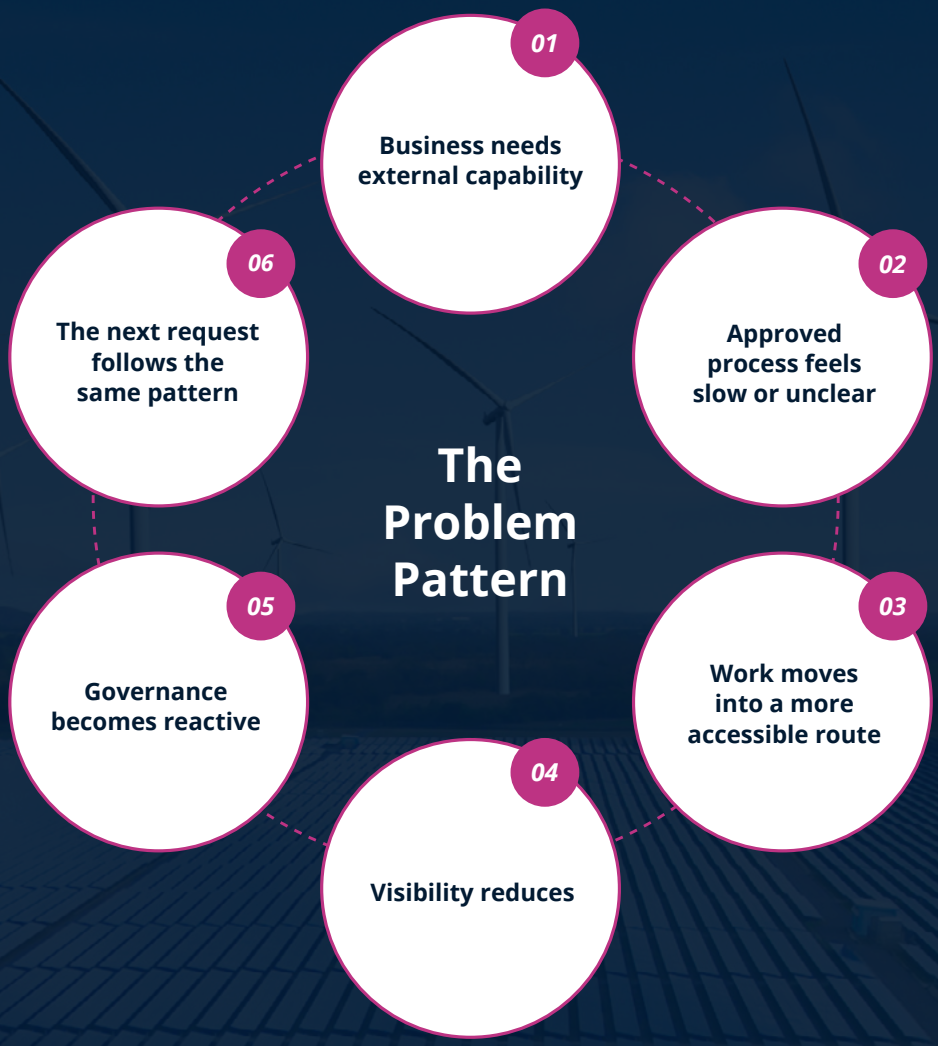
User Adoption

02) Where Workarounds Start to Creep In

Workarounds are rarely an act of defiance. They take hold because the approved process feels slow or awkward, and someone under delivery pressure finds a route that gets people working sooner. **The intent is to keep the programme moving, not to dodge governance.**

The difficulty is that once a workaround is easier than the formal process, it becomes the default. Each time it is used, visibility drops a little further and governance shifts from setting the rules to reacting after the fact. The next request follows the same path, and the pattern sets.

Critical infrastructure adds a particular twist. Where roles need security clearance and vetting, the lead times are long and largely fixed, so a workaround that looks like a time-saver usually just relocates the delay to a stage where fewer people are watching for it. The clearance still has to happen. **Skipping the proper route does not remove the wait,** it hides it until it resurfaces closer to delivery, where it is far harder to absorb.



03) Why SOW Becomes the Pressure Point

A statement of work is a good tool when it is used for what it was designed to do: paying for a defined outcome, holding a supplier to that outcome, and keeping delivery risk with the party best placed to manage it. Used that way, it gives an organisation real control over specialist and project-based work.

The pressure appears when a statement of work is reached for because it is the easiest contract to raise, not because the work suits it. When the outcome has not been thought through, the paperwork ends up **paying for time rather than results**, a set of activities that look like milestones but don't actually prove anything got delivered. And risk lands with whoever signed, regardless of who can actually influence the result.

This is especially common in engineering and technical delivery. A scope might promise a completed system upgrade, but the milestones underneath it are really just monthly sign-offs for however many engineers are on site, with a deliverable attached at the end to make the contract look outcome-based.

When that happens, the statement of work has stopped being a strategic choice and become a sign that **the original need was never triaged**.

A genuine milestone in this environment looks like a safety-case submission or a completed commissioning stage. A monthly invoice with a project name attached to it is not the same thing, even when the paperwork is styled to look alike. It's often not the cheaper option either. The same IR35 workaround can end up **costing more per person** than engaging them properly through an agency worker contract, once the premium built into SOW rates is weighed against the compliance exposure it creates.



This pattern is consistent with what we've seen across **70+ services procurement programmes** we've supported for critical infrastructure clients.

The checklist below is a fast way to tell the two apart before a contract gets signed, not after delivery has already gone sideways.

Question	What it reveals
Is the outcome clearly defined?	*Whether the work is genuinely suited to SOW*
Who owns delivery risk?	*Whether accountability sits in the right place*
Are the milestones meaningful?	*Whether progress can actually be managed*
Is supplier performance measurable?	*Whether value can be proven*
Was SOW chosen before other options were considered?	*Whether it is really a workaround*

04) Why Triage Matters Before the Route Is Chosen

Triage is the step that decides what kind of work is genuinely needed before anyone picks how to buy it. It separates a permanent role from a project outcome, and a real specialist requirement from work that could be **redesigned or automated**. Do this well and the route follows naturally from the need, rather than the need being bent to fit a route someone already had in mind.

Without triage, requests tend to arrive with the answer attached. The route is assumed, and every question after that is really about approving a choice already made. With triage, the organisation can weigh speed against risk and set the right level of governance **before any commitment is made**. However, like any framework, triage can be answered to fit a route someone already wanted rather than the route the work actually needs. That's why it still depends on a person with the judgement to spot when an answer has been shaped to reach a particular outcome.

The same principle holds when an AI tool is the one recommending a route. If a tool shortlists a supplier or suggests a contract type, that recommendation still has to satisfy the same procurement regulations a person would have to follow, it doesn't get a lighter-touch process just because software made the suggestion.

In critical infrastructure sectors such as utilities, route selection is rarely a purely commercial decision. Procurement choices often sit inside the Utilities Contracts Regulations, and increasingly within the transparency and conflict-of-interest obligations introduced by the Procurement Act 2023.

That gives the decision around how external work is engaged a compliance dimension that is less pronounced in many corporate procurement environments.

Getting the route right at triage is how an organisation stays on the right side of its procurement obligations. This is something we've seen consistently across more than **190 MSP implementations**: the organisations that triage well before choosing a route are the ones that stay compliant without having to work at it.



05) Making the Compliant Route Easier to Use

Governance only works if people can actually follow it. A process can be well designed on paper and still fail the moment it feels slower than picking up the phone to a supplier someone already knows. When the approved route is hard to use, people route around it, and every workaround chips away at the visibility the governance was meant to protect.

So improving compliance is mostly a question of **improving the experience of doing the right thing**. The approved route needs to be clear enough to follow without a guide, and quick enough that reaching for it is the path of least resistance.

Expectations have shifted, and procurement leaders feel it. The people raising requests spend their days with consumer apps where an order takes a few taps and tracks itself to the door, and they carry that expectation into work. A workplace route that is quick and obvious to use has become the quiet benchmark the approved process gets measured against. The compliant route has to win that comparison, because if it does not, the workaround will.



> *The compliant route has to be **easier** to follow than the workaround.*

If the approved route feels like this...	The business may do this instead...
Slow to start	Move the work into SOW or consultancy
Hard to understand	Ask a familiar supplier directly
Too many handoffs	Bypass the formal process
Poor to use	Avoid the system next time

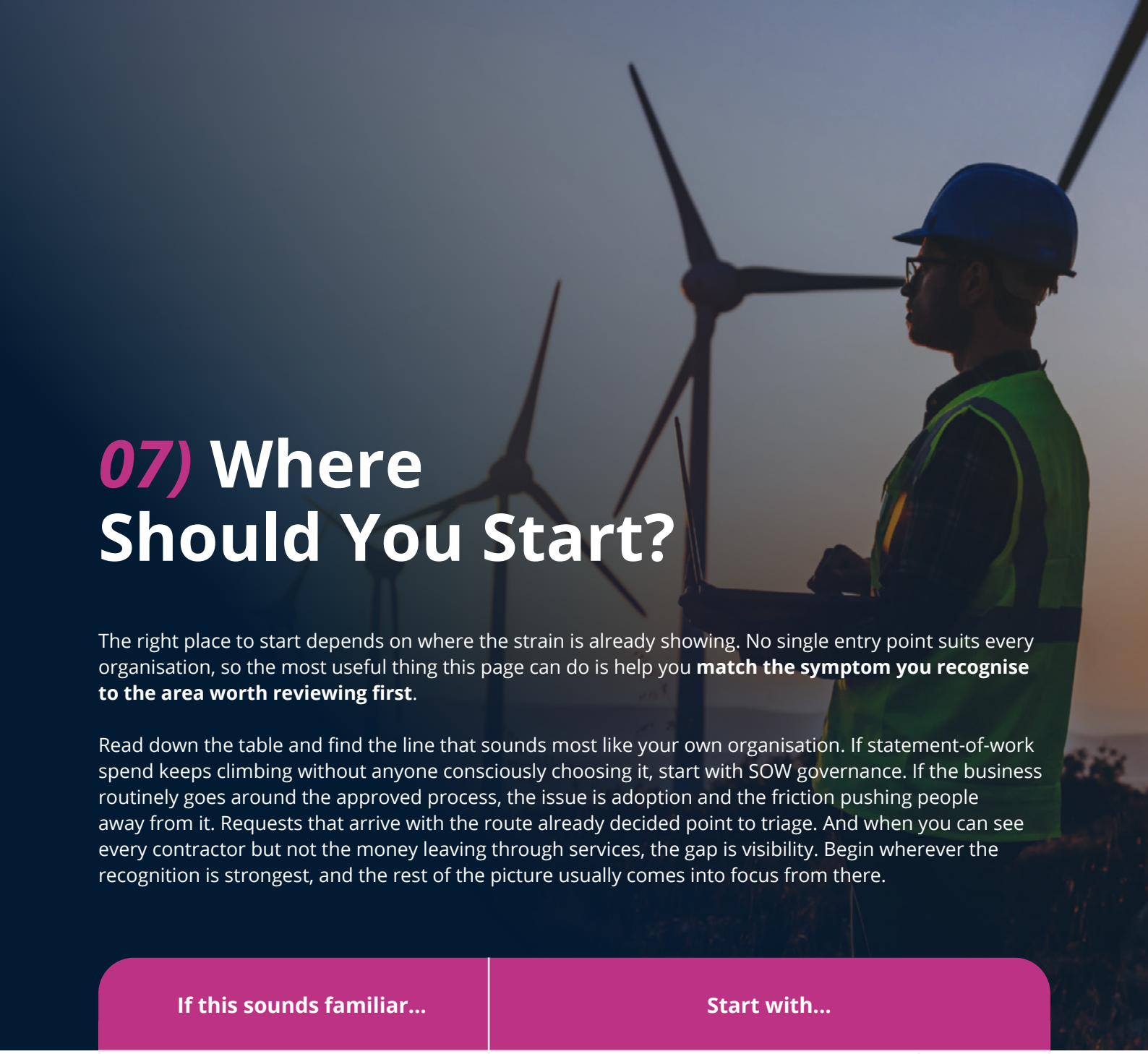
06) Where AI Helps, and Where It Doesn't

AI earns its place in extended workforce governance and ***workforce planning*** when it helps people decide **better and earlier**. It can pull together the right information, take weight off the triage step, and reduce administrative load. What it can't replace is the person weighing that information and owning the call, **accountability has to remain with a human judgment and expertise**, whatever the tool recommends.

What it cannot do is rescue a process that was **badly designed to begin with**. If the route into work is unclear, AI will not clear it up for you. It will carry out the same weak decisions faster and at larger scale, which makes the underlying problem **harder to spot and quicker to spread**.

Good use:	Risky use:
Helps gather better information earlier	**Speeds up a poor process**
Supports triage	**Hides weak governance**
Reduces admin without removing accountability	**Creates decisions people cannot explain**

> *"If you apply AI to the wrong process, you just make the wrong process faster. You end up with the same bad decision, just made more often and at a larger scale before anyone notices. Judgement was always the missing piece, and that still has to come from people."*
>
> **Lindsay Harrison, Managing Director | Nova Workforce Solutions**



07) Where Should You Start?

The right place to start depends on where the strain is already showing. No single entry point suits every organisation, so the most useful thing this page can do is help you **match the symptom you recognise to the area worth reviewing first**.

Read down the table and find the line that sounds most like your own organisation. If statement-of-work spend keeps climbing without anyone consciously choosing it, start with SOW governance. If the business routinely goes around the approved process, the issue is adoption and the friction pushing people away from it. Requests that arrive with the route already decided point to triage. And when you can see every contractor but not the money leaving through services, the gap is visibility. Begin wherever the recognition is strongest, and the rest of the picture usually comes into focus from there.

If this sounds familiar...	Start with...	
"Work keeps moving into SOW unexpectedly."	*SOW governance*	→
"The business avoids the approved process."	*Adoption and process friction*	→
"Requests arrive with the route already decided."	*Early triage*	→
"We can see contingent labour but not services spend."	*Extended workforce visibility*	→
"We are talking about AI but the value is unclear."	*Decision support*	→

NOVA
Workforce Solutions

If these challenges feel familiar, you are not alone.

Many critical infrastructure organisations are now managing increasingly complex extended workforces through disconnected models that have not kept pace with operational demand.

Nova Workforce Solutions helps organisations reduce complexity, improve visibility, and strengthen control.

Managing the extended workforce is complex.
The model you use to manage it doesn't have to be.

Get in touch with the team

novaworkforcesolutions.com

marketing@novaworkforcesolutions.com

Nova Workforce Solutions

A more connected approach to workforce delivery

Nova Workforce Solutions brings together MSP delivery and services procurement into one integrated model for managing the extended workforce.

To find out more about the alliance visit **novaworkforcesolutions.com**

