A FIELD GUIDE FOR OWNER-OPERATORS

ROI Over Hype

Find where time and capacity disappear, price the burden honestly, and test whether a process change can earn its keep before you buy a tool.

> **Operating rule:** Fix the constraint before shopping for technology. A convincing demo is not a business case.

Light in the Dark Analytics

THE PORTFOLIO

Put most effort where the evidence is strongest.

Use 70% to improve existing work, 20% to strengthen decisions and visibility, and 10% for bounded experiments. Adjust the exact split when the evidence supports it, but do not let speculative work crowd out known operating needs.

70%

Make existing work faster

Start with repetitive work your team already understands. Remove re-entry, handoffs, and waiting without changing the operating model.

- Move order details between systems without retyping
- Generate consistent production or client status updates
- Route approvals and exceptions to the right owner

20%

Improve decisions and visibility

Once the underlying data is dependable, use it to spot constraints and decide where attention creates the most value.

- See which work center is restricting throughput
- Flag jobs or accounts that need attention
- Compare planned work with actual completion

10%

Run bounded experiments

Reserve a small share for promising ideas whose value is not proven yet. Set a budget, an owner, and a stop condition.

- Test an assistant on a narrow internal knowledge set
- Pilot a new forecasting method on one workflow
- Prototype a customer-facing feature with human review

TIME-WASTE AUDIT

Look for five recurring patterns.

1. **Duplicate entry**
   The same facts are typed into two or more systems.
2. **Status chasing**
   People interrupt one another to learn where work stands or what happens next.
3. **Manual assembly**
   Reports, quotes, schedules, or updates are rebuilt from scattered inputs.
4. **Approval waiting**
   Work sits because the owner cannot see the decision or lacks the needed context.
5. **Exception recovery**
   A missing field, late handoff, or avoidable error creates rework downstream.

Measure the burden in four steps.

1. **Observe the work**
   Follow one real task from trigger to completion. Record every handoff, wait, correction, and system used.
2. **Count frequency and time**
   Measure how often the task occurs and how many total staff hours it consumes. Use a representative period, not a best day.
3. **Price the full burden**
   Multiply time by loaded labor cost, then add delay, rework, outside services, and missed capacity when those can be supported.
4. **Test a conservative recovery**
   Estimate the portion a change can realistically recover. Keep review, exceptions, training, maintenance, and implementation in the model.

ROI WORKSHEET

Show every assumption.

Recovered time creates capacity first. It becomes financial value only when the business uses that capacity to reduce cost, increase throughput, prevent loss, or complete higher-value work.

Formula, in plain language

- Annual hours recovered = hours per task × tasks per week × working weeks × recoverable share
- Annual gross value = annual hours recovered × loaded hourly cost
- First-year cost = license + implementation + training + annual maintenance
- First-year net value = annual gross value − first-year cost
- Payback in weeks = first-year cost ÷ average weekly gross value

Input	Your observed value
Staff hours per task	
Tasks per week	
Working weeks per year	
Loaded hourly cost	
Realistically recoverable time	
Annual license cost	
Implementation cost	
Training cost	
Annual maintenance cost	

Use the browser-local calculator at lightinthedarkanalytics.com/guides/roi-over-hype. Entries are not submitted, saved, or included in analytics.

REALITY CHECK

Seven ways an ROI case goes wrong.

1. Buying a tool before identifying the operating constraint
2. Treating every saved minute as cash that immediately reaches the bank
3. Ignoring implementation, training, maintenance, and exception handling
4. Using a perfect-week estimate instead of observed work
5. Automating a broken process and making the failure travel faster
6. Counting benefits twice across overlapping projects
7. Keeping a project alive after the evidence no longer supports it

Use this six-part tool checklist.

□ Clear problem owner

One person is accountable for the workflow and can decide what good looks like.

□ Observable baseline

Current time, frequency, error rate, or throughput can be measured before work starts.

□ Dependable inputs

The information needed is available, permitted, and consistent enough for the task.

□ Defined exception path

Unusual cases go to a person with enough context to resolve them.

□ Named adoption plan

Users know what changes, how they will learn it, and who handles questions.

□ Stop or scale rule

The team agrees in advance what evidence earns expansion, revision, or shutdown.

Bring one stubborn workflow.

We will examine the constraint, the evidence, and the economics with you. If there is no sound case for a change, we will say so.

Book your free operations review