From DIY Sprawl to Connected Intelligence:

The Hidden Cost of Generic Systems and Spreadsheet-Based Workflows in Modern Enterprises

A White Paper by Showrunnr, Inc.

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“WHITE PAPER” - ORIGIN

The term “white paper” originated in early 20th-century British government. Long-form policy reports were bound in blue covers; shorter summaries intended for leaders were bound in white—hence “white papers.” The term migrated into business and technology to signal a structured, evidence-driven document used to explain a complex problem, outline its implications, and propose a clear path forward.

WHY THIS PAPER EXISTS

Entertainment production companies, studios and suppliers today rely on a patchwork of spreadsheets, tables, bases, Smartsheets, shared drives, Notion workspaces, Monday boards, and other improvised systems. These tools enable fast problem-solving but create massive fragmentation, duplicated labor, and hidden operational cost. This document explains the real cost of DIY digital infrastructure and outlines the shift toward connected, intelligent production systems.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Modern entertainment companies operate in an environment shaped by rising project volume, compressed timelines, distributed teams, and increasing operational complexity across nearly every department. To keep pace, teams have relied on a growing constellation of spreadsheet-based and no-code tools—Excel, Google Sheets, Airtable, Smartsheet, Monday.com, Notion—to construct the production systems they cannot obtain quickly from enterprise technology.

The use of these generic tools emerged organically. They spread because they were familiar, accessible, flexible and deceptively powerful. They enabled coordinators, managers, and department leads to build what they needed without waiting on IT. This dynamic is not limited to spreadsheets; even powerful platforms such as Salesforce, while highly configurable, remain fundamentally generic frameworks that require costly customization to function as domain-specific systems.

Yet the rise of these generic tools has also created an unexpected structural challenge. What began as tactical solutions to isolated problems has grown into a sprawling layer of operational infrastructure—one that introduces duplicated schemas, inconsistent data, siloed knowledge, and a heavy burden of ongoing human maintenance.

Today, many companies find themselves dependent on hundreds of spreadsheets and disparate databases, thousands of views, and custom trackers built and maintained by employees. These systems solve immediate needs, but they do so in ways that dilute institutional knowledge, fragment data, and impede organization-wide visibility.

This paper examines the real cost of these DIY ecosystems—and outlines the path toward a more connected, intelligent foundation for modern operations: a production-native infrastructure where data, workflows, vendors, crew, approvals, and AI tools operate cohesively across shows.

THE PROBLEM BENEATH THE SURFACE

Entertainment companies have long relied on the ingenuity of their production teams to compensate for the lack of unified, purpose-built operational systems. Over time, those teams have built impressive structures inside general-purpose tools. But the cost of sustaining those systems is almost entirely borne by human effort. Every week, across every show, teams spend hours and days:

- Making custom databases on generic platforms
- Making grids
- Rebuilding lists every season
- Copy/pasting vendor and crew data
- Managing email invites
- Hunting down availabilities
- Maintaining outdated spreadsheets
- Duplicating vendor lists across shows
- Asking “who do we know?” repeatedly

None of this work advances the creative or strategic goals of the enterprise.
All of it is required simply to keep fragmented systems functioning.

- This is not the business’ product.
- This is not the business’ core competency.
- Yet it consumes significant time, attention, and operational bandwidth.

The issue is not the talent or commitment of the teams—it is the absence of a shared, scalable infrastructure capable of supporting the complexity of modern production. Across the industry, coordinators, production managers, and producers spend hundreds of cumulative hours maintaining DIY systems that should exist as shared infrastructure.

HOW WE GOT HERE: THE RISE OF DIY DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Companies adopted spreadsheets and no-code tools for good reasons:

Excel & Google Sheets

- Universal, flexible, fast to duplicate
- Effective for budgets, crew lists, dailies tracking

Airtable & Smartsheet

- More structure, relational modeling
- Democratized lightweight database building

Monday.com & Notion

• Workflow-centric
• Adaptable for cross-functional collaboration

Each wave solved real problems. But none were designed for enterprise-wide, industry-wide global operations. Because they are not connected, standardized, or governed at the enterprise level, companies now operate atop a patchwork of manually maintained systems that cannot scale with the demands of the business.

WHY DIY TOOLS FLOURISHED

The industry embraced DIY tools because they:

- Enabled rapid digitization
- Empowered non-technical teams
- Reduced dependency on IT queues
- Adapted quickly to production realities
- Supported experimentation across shows

These benefits are real. But they created a hidden cost: every local solution eventually becomes technical debt.

THE REAL COST OF DIY SYSTEMS

DIY tools are **construction kits that provide building blocks**—tables, fields, formulas, automations—**not production logic**. Every approval flow, every data model, every permission scheme must be created and maintained manually.

The result is not a cohesive system, but a constellation of bespoke mini-systems, each optimized for local use but incompatible at scale.

- **DEPARTMENT-DRIVEN BUILDS -** Every team builds its own version of the truth. Vendor lists proliferate. Crew databases diverge. Data definitions differ structurally between shows.
- **MANUAL WORKFLOW CREATION -** Approvals, automations, dashboards, and conditional flows require human setup and upkeep.
- **CONTINUOUS HUMAN STEWARDSHIP -** Power users become irreplaceable and overloaded. Schema changes, updates, and corrections pile up. Tools must be “fed” constantly to remain accurate. This forms an internal software ecosystem built by accident — and maintained through invisible labor.
- **INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE RELOCATES INTO PERSONAL SPREADSHEETS -** As teams build their own systems, critical institutional knowledge becomes embedded in private or semi-private documents—stored on individual drives, personal databases, or custom trackers known only to one or two people.

TYPICAL YEAR-ONE COST (REAL COST, NOT JUST LICENSE FEES)

Departmental Pilot (<100 seats)

- $60–$70/mo licenses + design + training
- $180K–$275K total

Multi-Department Rollout (400–600 seats)

- $70–$80/mo licenses + configuration + admin
- $550K–$950K total

Enterprise-Wide (1,000–1,200 seats)

- $80–$85/mo licenses + consulting + governance
- $1.3M–$1.8M total

These costs are rarely budgeted, because they do not appear as line items—they manifest as labor across coordinators, managers, and supervisors who must continuously “feed” the systems to keep them working.

At portfolio scale, this operational drag becomes material.
The enterprise pays more for systems that deliver less value over time.

THE ILLUSION OF LOW COST

Most DIY deployments begin under $100k. But the viral proliferation of tables, Sheets, bases, and workspaces rapidly drives real cost into the seven figures. Shadow IT becomes inevitable. Complexity compounds every quarter.

AI INSIDE DIY TOOLSETS: POWER WITHOUT CONTEXT

Many modern spreadsheet and no-code platforms now include built-in AI features. These tools provide conveniences such as summarizing fields, generating formulas, or drafting updates. But they operate with a constraint that is fundamental:

AI can only see the data inside the specific sheet, base, or workspace where it is used.

It cannot:

- connect insights across productions,
- interpret vendor performance trends across the slate,
- anticipate scheduling conflicts across shows,
- identify systemic operational risks,
- or combine information across departments.

Local AI helps individuals.
It does not elevate the enterprise.

Enterprise-grade intelligence requires shared, structured, cross-production data—something DIY ecosystems cannot deliver.

OPERATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The consequences of maintaining dozens of parallel systems are significant:

- **Fragmentation -** Each department maintains its own version of vendor lists, crew data, templates, and workflows. None align by default.
- **Knowledge Concentration -** If a single power user leaves a company, entire workflows can collapse.
- **Governance Gaps -** Sensitive data is distributed across tools without consistent security controls.
- **Reduced Agility -** Every new production rebuilds logic that should already exist at the enterprise level.
- **Hidden Labor -** Time spent maintaining systems is rarely tracked, but always consumed. This model places the studio at constant operational risk and prevents meaningful institutional learning.

STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

The impact extends beyond day-to-day inefficiency.

- **STRATEGIC FRAGMENTATION -** Without unified systems, leadership cannot easily compare performance of productions, vendors and workforce, show health, or spending patterns.
- **OPERATIONAL FRAGILITY -** DIY systems degrade quickly when staff turnover occurs.
- **COMPLIANCE RISK -** Decentralized systems make content-security and data governance more difficult.
- **CULTURAL DRAG -** staff who should be spending their time on creative work are routinely diverted into administrative maintenance.
- **OPPORTUNITY COST -** Teams spend time maintaining basic systems instead of innovating workflows or improving planning. Over time, this erodes competitive advantage.

THE INDUSTRY TURNING POINT: CONNECTED INTELLIGENCE

Entertainment companies now face a critical moment. The complexity of modern production requires infrastructure capable of supporting the full lifecycle of content—from development through delivery—not ad hoc systems built in generic tools never intended for entertainment production.

The next evolution: **connected intelligence**.

A shared, production-native foundation where:

- Vendor and crew info is verified and maintained by owners
- Workflows are standardized and flexible
- AI operates across shows
- Each new production contributes institutional data
- Setup time collapses
- Governance is embedded
- This is how studios build cumulative advantage.

In this model, each new production becomes an input that strengthens the organizations's intelligence. Processes become more consistent. Decisions become better informed. Operational burden is reduced across the portfolio. The organization becomes adaptive, resilient, and measurably more efficient.

INTEGRATION, NOT REPLACEMENT

The shift toward connected intelligence does not require organizations to abandon the tools they have already built. In practice, most studios and production companies have invested years of effort in spreadsheets, databases, and enterprise platforms that reflect real operational needs.

The challenge is not that these systems exist - it is that they operate in isolation.

Connected intelligence is best understood as an orchestration layer, not a wholesale replacement strategy. Rather than asking teams to discard tables, spreadsheets, or enterprise systems, a unified operating layer connects to them, normalizes critical data, and allows intelligence to operate across workflows that were previously fragmented.

The path forward is not replacement - it is coordination. Connected intelligence succeeds precisely because it works with the reality studios already live in, while removing the invisible labor required to hold that reality together.

COST-EFFECTIVENESS REDEFINED

Traditional cost comparisons focus on software price.
But the real differentiator between DIY systems and connected infrastructure is the **rate of institutional learning**.

DIY Tools:

Knowledge resets each season.
Workflows must be recreated.
Data must be reconciled.
Labor increases with each production.

Connected Infrastructure:

Knowledge compounds.
Setup time decreases.
AI improves as data grows.
Operational discipline becomes scalable.

Two systems may cost the same per seat.
One becomes more expensive every year.
The other becomes more valuable.

CONCLUSION

Spreadsheet-based and no-code tools played an essential role in the digitization of production. They filled a gap when no unified production infrastructure existed.

But their limitations are now structural.
At modern scale, the burden of maintaining dozens of fragmented systems has become unsustainable - generating fragmented data, hidden labor, and isolated AI.

The industry is moving toward connected intelligence—a production-native foundation that reduces complexity, improves governance, and strengthens decision-making by connecting data and workflows.

This shift allows teams to redirect their time and talent toward high-value creative and strategic work, rather than building and maintaining spreadsheets and manually reconstructing systems that should exist as shared infrastructure.

The future of entertainment organizations will be defined not by the ingenuity of individual spreadsheets, but by the intelligence of the network they replace.

Studios should stop spending operational labor maintaining lists—
and start spending it making shows.

ABOUT SHOWRUNNR

Showrunnr is the connected production infrastructure built specifically for entertainment production. It unifies vendor and crew ecosystems, eliminates duplicated effort, and delivers intelligence that compounds with every production.

Every show makes the network smarter.
Every production becomes faster, more informed, and more resilient.