DIAGNOSTIC GUIDE · NO. 01

The 10 signs your warehouse has a *process problem, not a people problem.*

A short diagnostic guide. The most common signs found across PainKiller audits — and what they almost always indicate when you look closely.

AUDIENCE	Operations directors, warehouse managers, ops leads
READING TIME	12–15 minutes
BUILT FROM	Patterns across audits in retail, 3PL, FMCG and manufacturing

INTRODUCTION

Most warehouse problems are not what they look like.

When overtime keeps climbing and output doesn't follow, it feels like a headcount issue. When pick rates plateau, it feels like a people problem. When error rates stay stuck at an annoying-but-tolerable level, it feels like a training issue. Most of the time, none of these diagnoses are right.

What looks like a people problem is almost always process waste — poor flow, wasted movement, invisible bottlenecks, structural design choices that quietly repeat themselves across every shift. The kind of thing that only becomes visible when someone stands on the floor and looks for it properly.

This guide lists 10 of the most common diagnostic signs we encounter in PainKiller audits — and what they usually mean when you look behind the symptom. None of them are exotic. Most operations directors will recognise at least three of them. If you recognise five or more, your operation almost certainly has structural improvement potential that internal fixes haven't been able to reach.

HOW TO READ THIS

Three parts to each sign.

What it looks like — the symptom, in the words operations directors actually use when they describe it.

The pattern explained — why this symptom usually points away from the obvious cause and towards something structural.

What it usually is — the underlying structural causes that show up again and again in audits.

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No. 01

Overtime that never fully clears, no matter how many people you add.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"We added headcount last quarter and overtime is still running at 15%."

The pattern looks like a labour shortage. More people, fewer hours per person, problem solved — that's the logic. Except it doesn't work, because the structural causes weren't labour-shaped to begin with. New starters absorb capacity for the first few weeks before they're productive, the existing inefficiencies stay where they were, and overtime drifts back to its previous level inside two months.

Sustained overtime usually points to one of three underlying causes: planning lag (volume hits the floor before it's been scheduled for), handover failure (each shift inherits problems from the previous one and spends the first hour fixing them), or poor flow design (the work is sequenced in a way that creates artificial bottlenecks).

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Planning gap between forecast and floor*

→ *Cross-shift handover breakdown*

→ *Process flow that creates artificial bottlenecks*

RELATED KPI: Overtime % of total hours · Weekly trend, by shift

No. 02

Pick rates that plateau regardless of training or incentives.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"We've retrained the team twice. Pick rate moved for three weeks then settled back at the same level."

When pick rate stalls and training doesn't shift it, the assumption is usually about the people — motivation, skill, attention. Almost always wrong. People plateau at the level the operation allows them to plateau at. The ceiling is structural, not personal.

The two most common structural causes are slotting (high-velocity SKUs in low-accessibility locations adds travel time to every order) and routing (pick paths that backtrack, or that force pickers through congested zones). Neither is visible from a dashboard. Both are obvious within

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twenty minutes on the floor with a stopwatch.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Slotting that doesn't reflect SKU velocity*

→ *Pick paths with backtracking or congestion*

→ *WMS pick logic out of sync with floor reality*

RELATED KPI: Lines picked per hour · Average travel time per pick

No. 03

Goods-in backlogs that ripple into every other part of the operation.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"Receiving is constantly behind. Putaway is slow. By the afternoon, intake is queuing into the yard."

Goods-in is the most under-engineered area in most warehouse operations. Picking gets attention because it's measured constantly. Goods-in gets attention only when it breaks — by which point the downstream effects are already cascading. Late putaway means picks can't find stock. Picks chasing missing stock means error rates climb. Errors mean rework. Rework means overtime.

Goods-in backlogs are almost always solved by tiering — separating the high-trust, repeat suppliers (process them through fast, with minimal check) from the new or high-risk ones (process them through slower, with full check). Treating every inbound consignment identically is the single most expensive intake design choice an operation can make.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Untiered intake process — everything checked the same way*

→ *Dock door allocation that doesn't reflect supplier mix*

→ *Putaway prioritisation absent or arbitrary*

RELATED KPI: Goods-in to putaway hours · Dock waiting time

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No. 04

Error rates you've quietly accepted as normal.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"We run at about 1.5% error rate. It's been roughly that for as long as I can remember."

Error rates settle at the level the operation tolerates. If 1.5% has been the number for two years, it's not because the operation can’t do better — it's because nothing in the operation is set up to make it do better. The number is a system output. Changing it requires changing the system, not the people.

The most common structural cause is a feedback loop that's too slow. Errors discovered at the customer (returns, complaints) feed back to the pick team weeks later, by which point the picker can't remember the order. Errors discovered at QC the same day are correctable — and over time, preventable. Closing the feedback loop is usually a process change, not a tech investment.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Feedback loop on errors too slow to be actionable*

→ *QC checks happening too late in the process*

→ *Error categorisation absent (so root cause is unknown)*

RELATED KPI: Order accuracy % · Days to error feedback · Error category mix

No. 05

Bottlenecks that appear to move but never disappear.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"We fixed the bottleneck at picking. Now it's at packing. We'll fix that next."

In an operation with a structural design issue, bottlenecks behave like air pockets — squeeze one out and the next one appears. The temptation is to chase the visible bottleneck, fix it, then chase the next one. The truth is that the bottleneck moving is the system telling you something about its overall capacity balance, not about any one stage.

When bottlenecks rotate predictably between the same 2-3 stages, the system is capacity-balanced incorrectly across those stages — usually because labour allocation or shift

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design doesn't reflect the work volume mix that's actually arriving. Fixing the design (not the individual bottleneck) makes it stop.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Labour allocation that doesn't match volume mix*

→ *Shift overlap design creating artificial peaks*

→ *Equipment capacity assumptions stale*

RELATED KPI: Throughput by stage · Hours of bottleneck location per week

No. 06

KPIs that look acceptable on paper but feel wrong on the floor.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"The dashboard says we're hitting targets. But everyone on the floor will tell you something's off."

When operational instinct conflicts with the dashboard, the dashboard is usually wrong. Not in the data, but in what it's measuring. Most warehouse KPIs were designed for an operation that doesn't quite exist anymore — they measure averages where the variance matters, they measure outputs where the process behaviour matters, they measure totals where the distribution matters.

The most common mismatch: measuring average pick rate when the issue is the bottom-decile pickers slowing the whole shift, or measuring total throughput when the issue is throughput variance hour-by-hour. The dashboard isn't lying — it's answering the wrong question.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *KPI design lagging the operation it measures*

→ *Averages hiding variance that matters*

→ *Lagging indicators with no leading indicators behind them*

RELATED KPI: Variance metrics alongside averages · Hour-by-hour throughput distribution

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No. 07

A site that runs fine — until it doesn't, and no one's sure why.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"For three weeks everything's smooth. Then one Tuesday it falls apart and we spend two days catching up. No one can explain it."

When an operation has unexplained collapse days, the cause is almost never the obvious thing that happened that day. The cause is a fragile design that absorbs minor disruptions until it can't, then fails all at once. The reason no one can explain it is because the operation has no early-warning indicators — only failure-after-the-fact indicators.

Fragile operations look fine 80% of the time and catastrophic 20% of the time. Robust operations look the same every day, with smaller daily peaks and troughs. Moving from fragile to robust requires identifying the absorption points — the buffers (people, time, equipment) that normally hide the problem — and either reinforcing them or surfacing them as the actual constraint they are.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *No early-warning indicators for known failure modes*

→ *Hidden buffers absorbing slack until they can't*

→ *Single points of failure undocumented*

RELATED KPI: Number of incident-driven days per month · Days since last incident

No. 08

High-performing staff being asked to fix problems that aren't theirs.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"Sarah on shift A is the only one who knows how to clear the Friday backlog. We're just relying on her."

Every warehouse operation has at least one person who quietly compensates for a structural problem. Sarah comes in early on Fridays. Mike stays late on Mondays. Jenny knows where the spare scanner is. When a structural problem is being absorbed by a single individual, the problem itself becomes invisible — until that individual leaves, takes sick leave, or burns out.

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Heavy reliance on specific individuals to make the system work is a leading indicator, not a strength. It tells you exactly where the structural problems are. Identifying who's carrying which problem is one of the highest-value 30 minutes an operations director can spend.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Hidden single points of failure in human form*

→ *Process gaps absorbed by individual workaround*

→ *Tribal knowledge that isn't documented*

RELATED KPI: Process documentation coverage · Cross-skilling matrix

No. 09

Improvement initiatives that don't survive the third month.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"We launched a new picking process in January. By March it was back to how it was before."

When operational changes regress, the cause is rarely the change itself. The cause is that the change wasn't embedded — the new process wasn't supported by new measurement, new training reinforcement, or new supervisor accountability. The old process had structural support; the new one didn't. The system reverted to the version it was built to run.

Sustained operational change requires three things in parallel: the process change, the measurement change (so people can see whether it's working), and the accountability change (so someone's responsible for sustaining it). Most internal change programmes deliver the first one only. The other two are where outside support usually adds the most value.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Process change without measurement change*

→ *No accountability owner for the new process*

→ *Supervisor capability not uplifted to sustain it*

RELATED KPI: Adherence % to new processes 60/90 days post-launch

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No. 10

Operations directors who can't take a holiday without things going wrong.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

"I went away for a week and came back to a fortnight's worth of catch-up."

If the operation only runs smoothly when the operations director is present, the operation is structurally dependent on one person's daily attention. That's not a sign of a strong director — it's a sign of a system that can't self-regulate. A robust operation should be able to run without its director for a week without measurable degradation.

The fix is rarely "better delegation" or "better deputies." The fix is identifying which decisions the director makes implicitly that the system has no other mechanism for making — and either building those mechanisms, or accepting that the role is operationally tactical, not strategic. Most directors who can't take a week off are doing two jobs and being paid for one.

WHAT IT USUALLY IS

→ *Implicit director decisions with no systemic equivalent*

→ *Supervisor decision authority too narrow*

→ *Escalation paths absent or undocumented*

RELATED KPI: Director-required decisions per week · Supervisor-resolvable issues %

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WHAT NEXT

If three or more of these sound familiar.

Most warehouse operations recognise at least two or three of these signs. That's not unusual. When five or more apply, the underlying cause is almost always structural — and unlikely to be resolved by internal fixes alone, because the people closest to the problem are usually too close to see it for what it is.

PainKiller exists to apply outside perspective at floor level — by people who've actually run operations like yours, not consultants who've read about them. We have three structured ways to help, depending on where you are.

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→ painkillerconsulting.co.uk/scorecard.html (£99 self-diagnostic)

ABOUT

Where this guide comes from.

PainKiller Consulting was founded by Sam — 15 years inside warehouse operations in the UK, including running an Aldi regional distribution centre through the Covid-19 lockdown era and project leadership across 14 Lidl regional distribution centres. The patterns in this guide come from operations that were run, not read about.

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