004 The Default Is Not Neutral

Perspective Book · https://kb.jeffreysummers.com/docs/004-the-default-is-not-neutral/

Every system in your building is running a decision right now that you may not have made.

The scheduling template that defaults to eight-hour shifts. The POS that defaults to suggested tip percentages. The training checklist that defaults to completion as the standard. The role titles that default to geography. The pre-shift format that defaults to announcements. The approval workflow that defaults to the most senior person available. Every one of those is a default — and every one of them is producing behavior, right now, in your building, whether you designed it or not.

The behavioral science is unambiguous: people accept pre-set options at an overwhelming rate. Not because they are lazy. Because the brain treats deliberation as a cost and defaults as free. The option that requires no effort to select has a structural advantage over every alternative, regardless of whether it is the best choice. The operator who inherited a building inherited a set of defaults built by someone else — and those defaults are running the building until the operator examines and replaces them.

[By Design Or By Default] has always named this. What the behavioral science adds is the mechanism: the default is not the absence of a decision. It is a decision already made, by whoever built the system, actively shaping behavior every shift. The operator who has not examined their defaults has not avoided making choices. They have delegated those choices to whoever was in the building before them — or to the software vendor, the industry norm, or nobody in particular.

The most consequential defaults in a restaurant are not the ones in the POS. They are the ones in the culture. The default response to a Guest complaint. The default posture in a pre-shift. The default standard for what "good enough" looks like on the floor. The default amount of candor in a post-shift debrief. None of those have a checkbox. All of them are running.

The operator who wants the building they intended has to do one thing before anything else: inventory the defaults they inherited and decide, deliberately, which ones to keep.

The default is not neutral. It is a choice someone already made. The only question is whether it was yours.

What Changes Tomorrow

Before your next system runs on autopilot tomorrow, pick one default — the comp policy, the reorder point, the schedule template — and ask who actually decided it and when. If you can't answer, it's an inherited default, not a decision. Keep it only if you'd choose it again today, on purpose.