

# From Outputs to Business Outcomes with OKR: The Elsevier Journey

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*Imagine it's 1995*

You are a print publishing  
company founded in 1880

Then this happens...



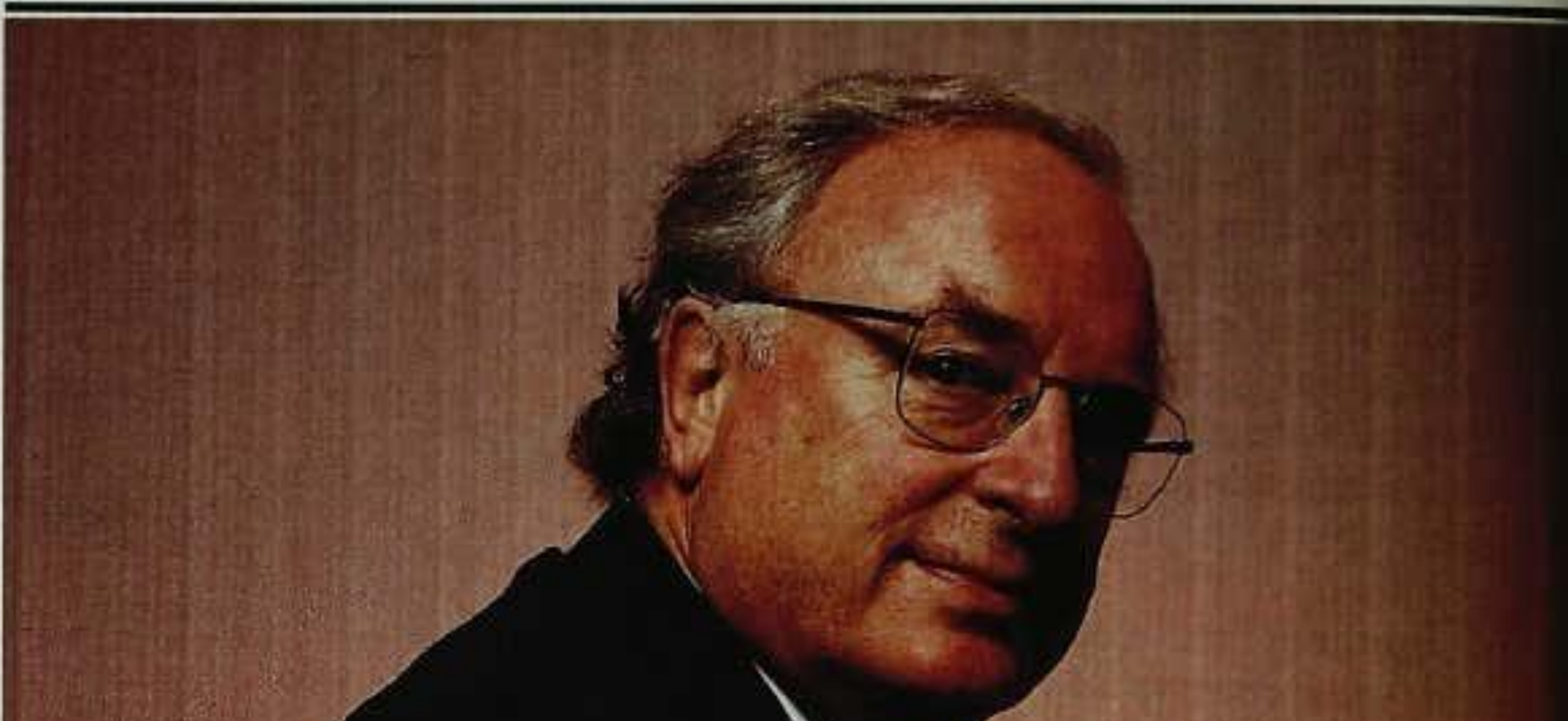
# The Internet's first victim?

Forbes Magazine  
December, 1995

By John R. Hayes

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE a sweeter business than publishing academic journals. The editorial content is contributed free of charge by scholars desperate to publish to get tenure. School libraries are automatic customers—professors insist on it. A one-year subscription to *Neuroscience*, published 24 times a year, costs \$3,775. The 34-times-a-year *Gene* costs \$5,500. And *Brain Research*, at 114 issues a year, costs \$14,000.

The titles mentioned above are just 3 of the 1,100 academic journals published by Reed Elsevier, the largest





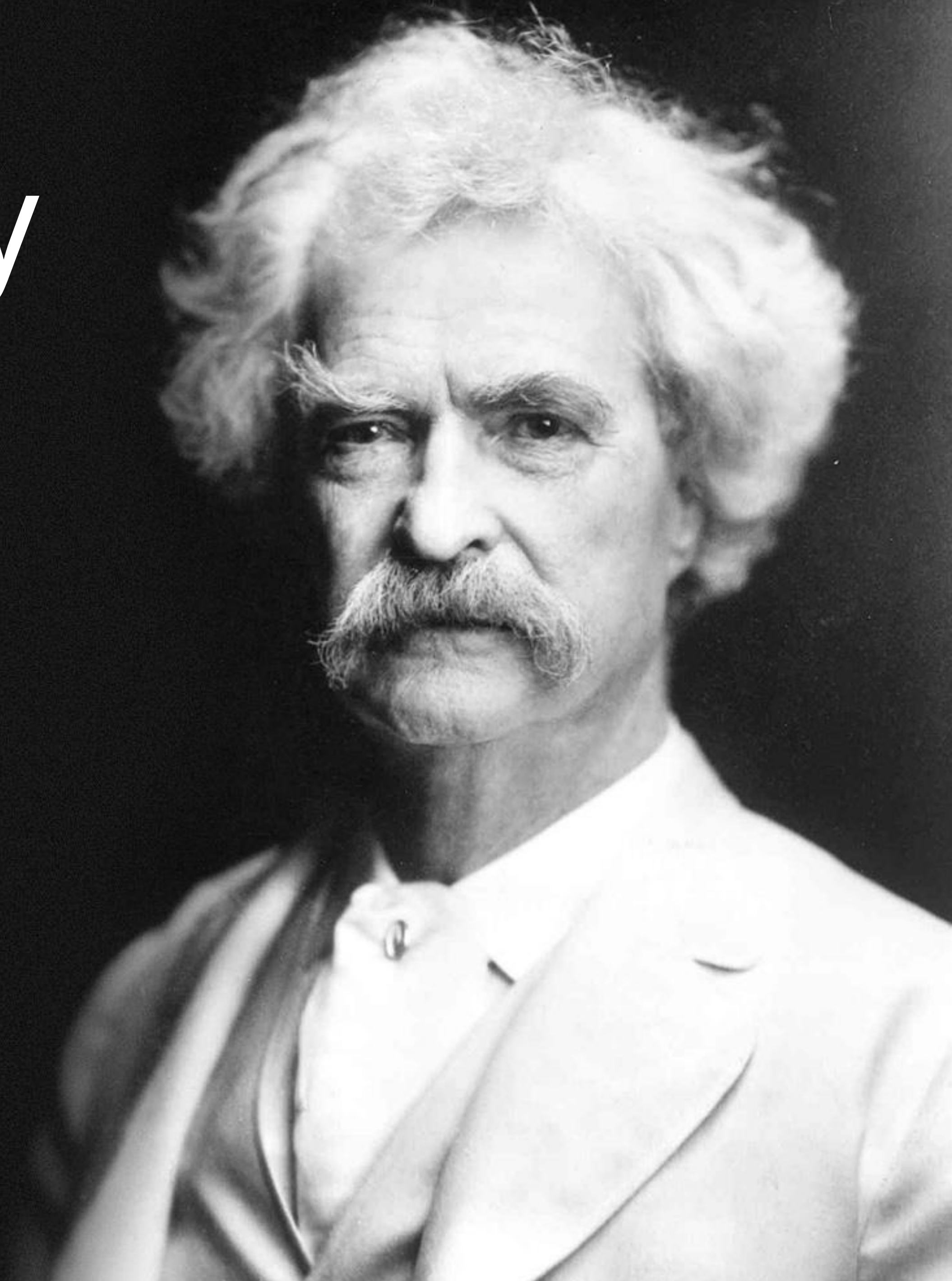
# The Existential Threat

- In 1995, Elsevier was primarily a print publisher of scientific journals
- Forbes and many others, thought the company was doomed
- **In 1998 Forbes doubled down on their claim**

“They haven't been able to capitalize on the Internet.”

“The reports of my  
death are greatly  
exaggerated.”

**Mark Twain**





# The Elsevier Journey: the First Wave

- The company survived despite Forbes 1995 prediction
- They flourished through the move from paper to digital
- They embraced the internet and the opportunities it brought
- Started the journey from publisher to analytics company
- **But that was not enough**

Competition has never  
been tougher. Change  
has never been faster.

# The Existential Threat Continues

Competition and change only **intensifies**

Established publishers

Start-ups

*Bad actors*

Analytics providers

New trends

And **competing for the best talent** with all tech organisations



# The Elsevier Journey: the Second Wave

- Adopted agile techniques
- Its most important product embraced DevOps and has thousands of releases per annum
- They invested heavily in training in modern product management techniques with SVPG (Silicon Valley Product Group)
- **But that was still not enough**

# The Need for Clarity



# In Search of Goal Clarity

- The company held a conference for its top 100 managers
- That group identified Goal Clarity as a critical next step
- To drive **better alignment** and **employee engagement**



# #1 factor for job satisfaction:

“clearly defined goals that are written down and shared freely...Goals create alignment, clarity, and job satisfaction.”

**Study by Deloitte**

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# In Search of Goal Clarity

- A team with a goal of making everyone aware of how they aligned with Elsevier's strategy
- The team identified that the best approach was OKR (Objectives and Key Results)
- And hired Felipe Castro



# The Underlying Problem

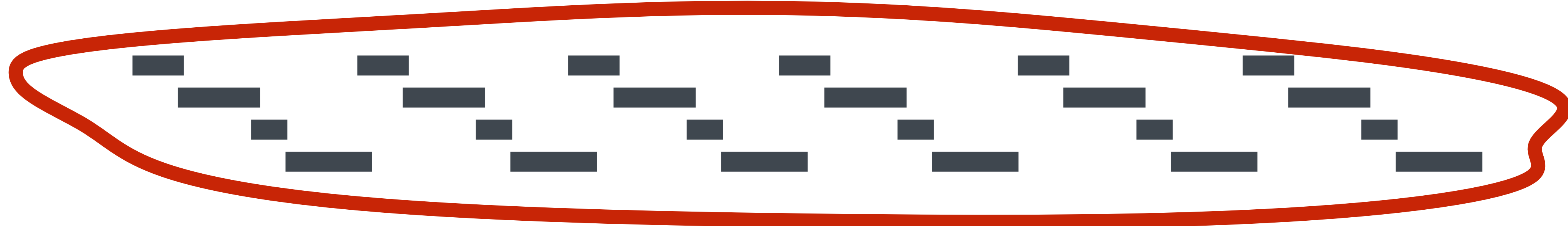


# Where the Lack of Goal Clarity Comes From?

Strategic  
Objectives



Projects



Delivering the projects  
becomes the goal



# We Are Agile!

Build



Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec



Business  
case

*No measurement, no learning*

Did we deliver the  
promised benefits?



**“[Teams have] little regard for whether the [projects] actually solve business problems. Progress is measured by outputs, not outcomes.”**

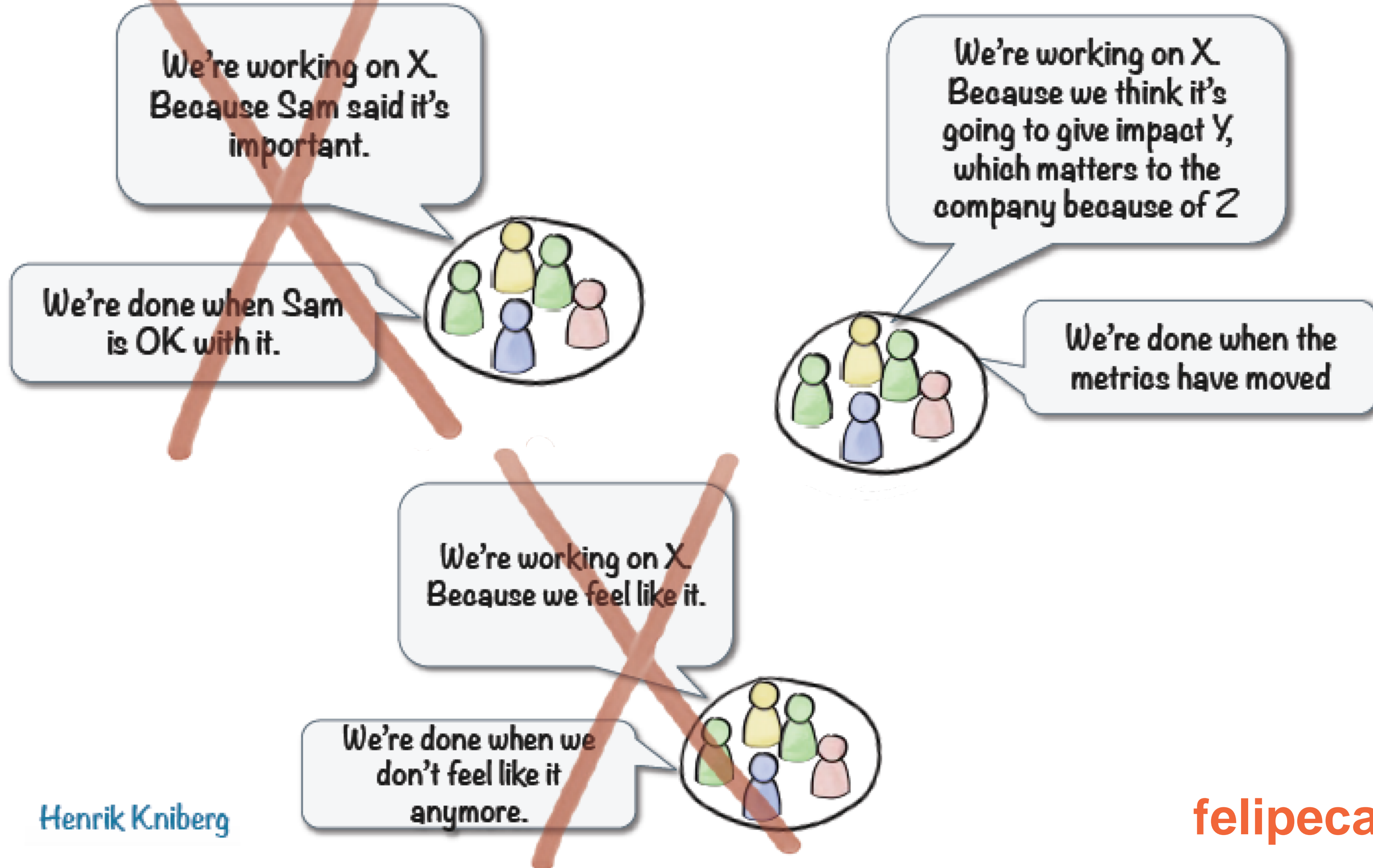
**Marty Cagan,  
Silicon Valley Product Group**





Why should teams  
care about business  
problems?

# The magic question: “What are you working on, and why?”





A man in a dark sweater and jeans stands on a stage, gesturing with his hands while speaking to a large, seated audience in a modern auditorium. The stage is lit with blue light, and the audience is visible in the background. The quote is overlaid in white text on the right side of the image.

**“If you are only using your  
engineers to code, you are  
getting half their value.”**

**Marty Cagan,  
Silicon Valley Product Group**



# A Better Way

# Build



Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec



Do this  
instead:



Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sept Oct Nov Dec

*Fast Iterations, Frequent Measurement*



# Creating Shorter Feedback Loops



Cupcake



Cake



Wedding cake



# The Solution



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# OKR: Objectives and Key Results

- Silicon Valley's agile approach to goals.
- Created by Intel, adopted by Google, Spotify, Twitter, Expedia, and others.
- Includes a qualitative description of the goal (the *Objective*) and a set of quantitative measures (the *Key Results*).



**In general, OKR uses**

**3-month**

**planning  
cycles**

# As Measured By

I will \_\_\_\_\_ as measured by \_\_\_\_\_

# As Measured By

I will Objective as measured by those Key Results



# Example: OKR

## Objective:

**Create an Awesome Customer Experience**

## Key Results:

- Increase Repurchase Rate from X to Y.
- Improve Customer Satisfaction from X to Y.
- Maintain Customer Acquisition Cost under Y.

# Buckets

# Activities

**S** *Things you  
are going to  
do. (Outputs)*



# OKRs

*The outcomes you  
want to achieve.*



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**Agile**

**Activities**

**S** *Things you are going to do. (Outputs)*

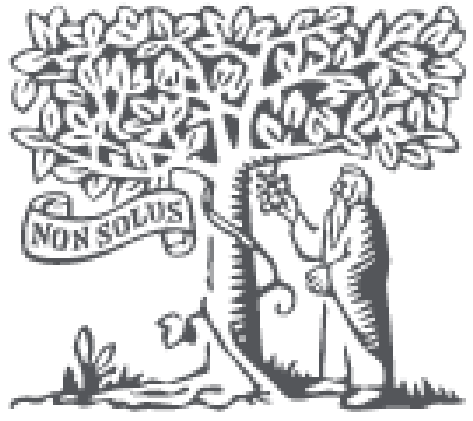
**OKRs**

*The outcomes you want to achieve.*



**Agile Frameworks**

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# ScienceDirect

- Science Direct is the gateway to Elsevier's content
- A billion dollar business
- One of the first groups to adopt OKR
- Like most teams, found it challenging to start with



# Outputs vs Outcomes

## Before

### Improve user experience on journal pages

- Add access info to journal archive page
- Test new mobile designs with users
- Improve navigation on JHP - 2nd card redesign

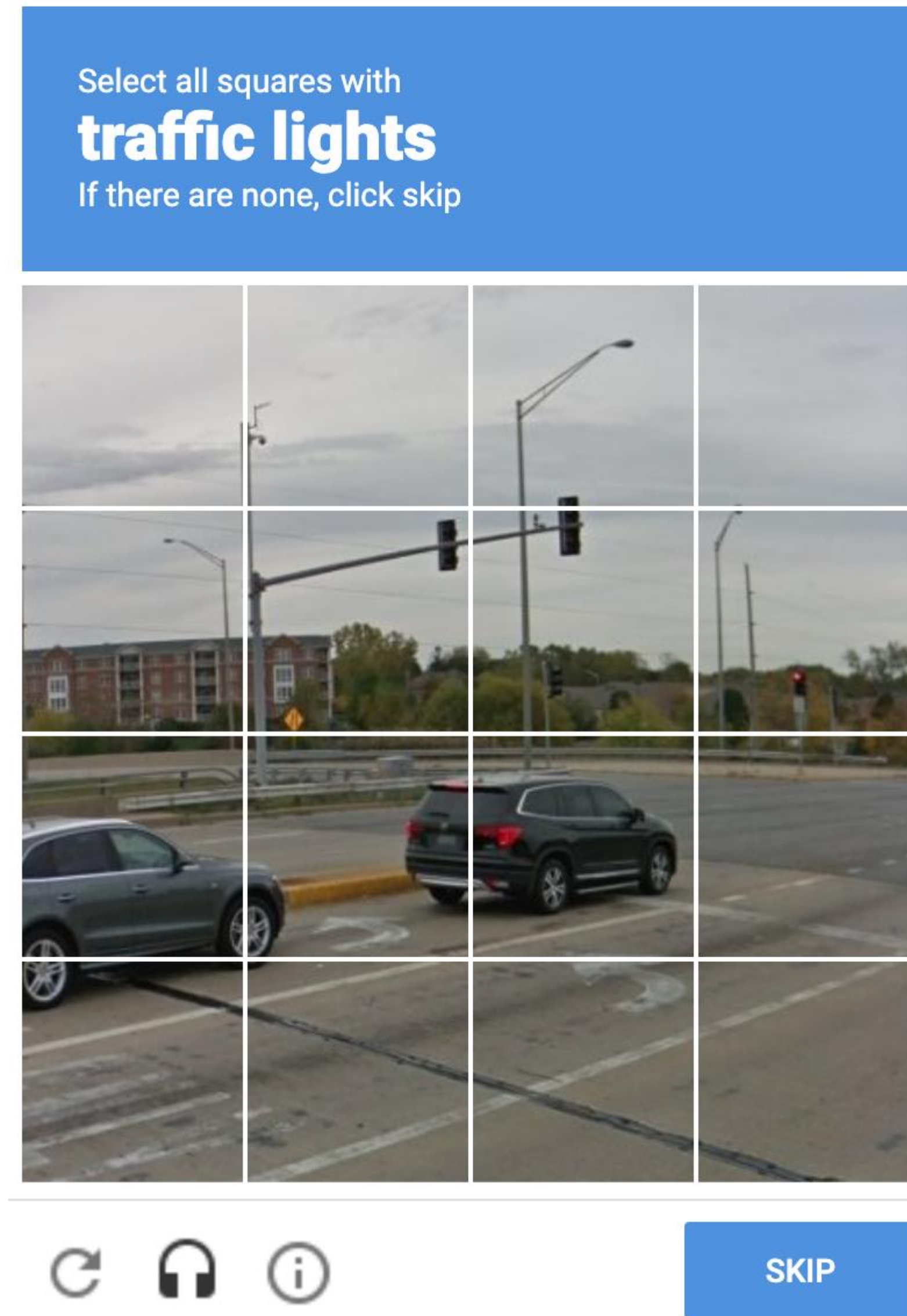
## After

### Protect the crown jewels

- Reduce illicit access from x to y
- Reduce support tickets related to stopping illicit access from x to y
- Reduce captcha popups from x to y

# re: Captcha Popups?

- Those annoying popups that ‘prove’ we’re human
- Useful to identify illicit access, but users hate them (just like we do).







**The Results:  
One Example**



# Science Direct Now

- An empowered team, driven by outcomes led by a great product VP Rose L'Huillier
- The team focuses on solving user problems and driving business outcomes, not building features
- 20/30 mins check in each week focusing on each OKR, deeper dives where needed
- OKRs are driven daily, and are always a topic of the VP's 1:1s



Rose L'Huillier



# Science Direct Now

- Having clear Key Results keeps the team focused on their priorities
- Clear dashboards and easier to measure Key Results
- More time freed up for experimenting
- Focus on customer experience and using experiments to prove that their planned features delivered outcomes

# The Business Outcomes

User sentiment for a key new  
feature went from

**-45 to +20**



# The Business Outcomes

**50%** reduction in captcha popups  
while reducing illicit access

# The Business Outcomes

**40%** reduction in support calls  
related to access restrictions



# The Business Outcomes

Improvement in employee  
engagement

# The Business Outcomes

Culminating in Science Direct  
best in class NPS by 20 points



# Some Final Thoughts

- Adopting OKR is a *journey*. It involves developing different “muscles.”
- The Science Direct team had the right context to succeed: DevOps, Modern Product Management, Experiments, a VP with the right mindset, and support from the C-suite.
- There is still a long way to go.

# Contact

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