

Your R&D Results Depend on Your R&D Readiness – Not Just Your R&D Spend

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In the previous piece we looked at a pattern that shows up consistently across manufacturing and engineering companies: similar R&D investment, very different commercial outcomes. The gap isn't usually in the quality of the technical work. It's in the conditions surrounding it.

This piece looks at what those conditions actually are – and why measuring them changes what you do next.

Two things that look the same but aren't

When companies talk about their R&D capability, they're usually describing their technical strength – the expertise of their engineers, the sophistication of their processes, the ambition of what they're working on. That's a legitimate thing to measure. But it's only half the picture.

The other half is the organisational environment in which that capability operates. Culture, leadership engagement, how R&D is funded and governed, how knowledge is protected and built upon. These aren't soft considerations – they're structural conditions that either accelerate or slow down everything the technical team produces.

A company with strong technical capability but a weak organisational environment will do good R&D that goes nowhere commercially. The work happens, but it doesn't compound. It doesn't get evidenced properly, doesn't connect to funding strategy, doesn't feed into the innovation story the business needs to tell customers and partners.

A company where both dimensions are strong moves faster. The same technical work produces more – more funding recovered, more credibility in the market, more leverage in commercial conversations.

What low readiness actually looks like

It rarely looks like failure. That's what makes it hard to spot from the inside.

Low R&D readiness typically looks like a busy, capable engineering team doing genuine work that is largely invisible to the rest of the organisation. R&D updates happen verbally, in meetings, or not at all. Documentation is retrospective – assembled under pressure when a claim deadline arrives or a grant report is due. Leadership knows R&D is happening but couldn't describe what the company is trying to learn, or what the current state of play is across projects.

The result is that when the company needs to evidence its R&D – for a tax credit claim, a grant application, a due diligence process, a customer conversation about innovation capability – it's starting from scratch each time. The work was real. The evidence isn't there.

David, the R&D manager or CTO who lives this operationally, knows the feeling well. Chasing engineers for updates. Rebuilding project histories from email threads and Jira tickets. Producing reports that feel like archaeology rather than management.

What high readiness looks like

The contrast is striking once you've seen it.

In a high-readiness organisation, R&D activity is captured as it happens — not reconstructed after the fact. Leadership is genuinely engaged with the R&D agenda, not just briefed on it quarterly. There's a clear connection between what the technical team is working on and the company's funding, IP, and commercial strategy. When a claim is due or an audit comes, the evidence is already there.

This doesn't require a large team or a formal R&D department. Some of the highest-readiness organisations we work with are SMEs with a handful of engineers. What they have is structure — a way of operating that makes R&D visible, fundable, and defensible without adding significant overhead.

Readiness is measurable

This is the part that surprises most founders and senior leaders when they first encounter it.

Organisational R&D readiness isn't a vague quality — it's a quantifiable state. It can be assessed systematically across the two dimensions described above: technical capability (whether activities qualify as R&D, whether evidence is being built, whether the right people are doing the right work) and organisational environment (whether leadership, culture, governance, and strategy are creating the conditions for that capability to deliver).

The framework that does this is called the Research Readiness Level — RRL. It was developed over several years of applied work with Irish and international companies, grounded in the OECD's Frascati and Oslo frameworks, and refined through academic validation and practical deployment across sectors including manufacturing, engineering, software, and life sciences.

The output is a clear picture of where a company sits across both dimensions — not as a report to file, but as a basis for making better decisions about R&D investment, staffing, funding strategy, and commercial positioning.

What this means in practice

The most common response when companies first see their RRL assessment is recognition. The picture it produces matches what leadership already suspected but couldn't articulate — or confirms that something they thought was a technical problem is actually an organisational one.

From that position, improvement is targeted rather than broad. Instead of investing generally in "more R&D," the company addresses the specific constraints holding back its current capability. The k-factor — the degree of resistance to change in the organisation — becomes visible and manageable rather than an invisible drag on everything else.

For Mark, the founder or CEO who has always known the company's R&D is stronger than its commercial outcomes suggest, the RRL provides what's been missing: a structured way to see the gap, name it, and close it.

In the next piece we'll look at how the assessment works in practice — what it measures, what the output looks like, and what decisions it supports.

[How to Assess Your Company's R&D Readiness — and What to Do With the Result](#)
