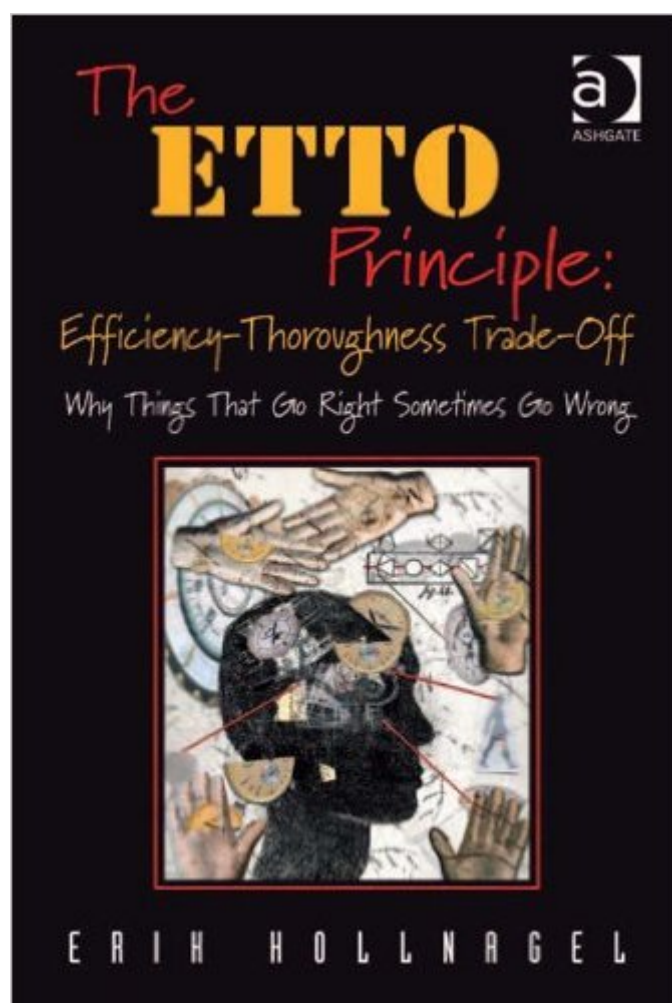


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# The ETTO Principle: Efficiency-Thoroughness Trade-Off: Why Things That Go Right Sometimes Go Wrong



## Synopsis

Accident investigation and risk assessment have for decades focused on the human factor, particularly the "human error"™. This bias towards performance failures leads to a neglect of normal performance. It assumes that failures and successes have different origins so there is little to be gained from studying them together. Erik Hollnagel believes this assumption is false and that safety cannot be attained only by eliminating risks and failures. The alternative is to understand why things go right and to amplify that. The ETTO Principle looks at the common trait of people at work to adjust what they do to match the conditions. It proposes that this efficiency-thoroughness trade-off (ETTO) is normal. While in some cases the adjustments may lead to adverse outcomes, these are due to the same processes that produce successes.

## Book Information

File Size: 974 KB

Print Length: 163 pages

Publisher: Ashgate (October 1, 2012)

Publication Date: October 1, 2012

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B009KOA6LA

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #870,871 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #38

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Engineering & Transportation > Transportation > Aviation >

Repair & Maintenance #113 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Business & Money > Industries >

Insurance > Risk Management #144 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Engineering &

Transportation > Transportation > Aviation > Commercial

## Customer Reviews

Hollnagel describes a general principle, the efficiency-thoroughness trade-off (ETTO), that he believes almost all decision makers use. ETTO means that people and organizations routinely make choices between being efficient and being thorough. For example, if demand for production is high,

thoroughness (time and other resources spent on planning and implementing an activity) is reduced until production goals are met. Alternatively, if demand for safety is high, efficiency (resources spent on production) is reduced until safety goals are met. Greater thoroughness is associated with increased safety.ETTO is used for many reasons, including resource limitations, the need to maintain resource reserves, and social and organizational pressure. In practice, people use shortcuts, heuristics and rationalizations to make their decision-making more efficient. At the individual level, there are many ETTO rules, e.g., "It will be checked later by someone else," "It has been checked earlier by someone else," and "It looks like a Y, so it probably is a Y." At the organizational level, ETTO rules include negative reporting (where the absence of reporting implies that everything is OK), cost reduction imperatives (which increase efficiency at the cost of thoroughness), and double-binds (where the explicit policy is "safety first" but the implicit policy is "production takes precedence when goal conflicts arise"). The use of any of these rules can lead to a compromise of safety. As decision makers ETTO, individual and organizational performance varies. Most of the time, things work out all right but sometimes failures occur.Failures can happen when people, going about their work activities in a normal manner, create a series of ETTOs that ultimately result in unacceptable performance.

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