

AI Growth and Impact Stories: A Community Collection

FROM CHAOS TO CLARITY



How 25 AI Professionals Are Integrating
AI Into Their Lives and Organizations

2026 edition

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These narratives reflect the experiences and opinions of individual contributors.

Any references to companies, products, tools, or outcomes are shared by the authors as part of their stories.



Table of Contents

Introduction

Introduction - AI Community

Section 1: Identity, Clarity, and Reinvention

Thinking at Full Power - Lina Calia

When the Future Becomes the Present - Erin Callihan

From Routine to Reflection: AI in My Consulting Practice - Olivier Gers

The Clarity Effect: How AI Helped Me Surface, Strengthen, and Structure My Work - Nancy Myrland

From Layoff to Launch: Making AI My Operating System - Kim Owens

Becoming Someone Who Can Help Shape the Future - Susan Roth

Section 2: From Tool to Teammate: Daily Collaboration

From Knowledge Keeper to AI Collaborator - Al Boyle

Aligned: When AI Finally Matched How I Think and Create - Dan Nestle

Getting the Human Parts Back - Ryo Suzuki

Less Doing, More Designing: Using AI So I Can Focus on the Most Human Parts of My Work - Lisa Wright

Section 3: Building Systems That Scale (for teams and solos)

Three Years Since ChatGPT: Building AI-Backed Marketing Systems - Kathryn Good

From Constraint to Capability: How AI Transformed What Organizations Can Build - Jordache Johnson

Working Alongside AI: Becoming a Superhuman Consultant - Michael McGreevy

From Reactive Consultant to Strategic Partner - Gabe Olsen

From Dashboards to AI Collaborator: My Journey with Generative AI - Brian Piper

From Marketing Leader to AI Systems Architect - Brian Radichel

From Starting From Zero to Confident Creation - Victoria Torrano

Section 4: Leading AI Adoption at Work

From Fear to Fuel: Redefining Leadership in the Age of AI - Jason Cabrera

Becoming an AI-Forward Leader - Devin Carlson-Smith

Progress, Not Perfection: Leading Through AI Uncertainty - Heather DelCarpini

From Funnels to Foundations: How AI Rewrote My Role as a Leader - Amanda Long

From Three Months to Three Weeks - Bob Mitton

Section 5: Human-Led, Future-Focused

AI Is Our Newest Colleague: Teaching With Empathy in the Age of AI - John Bustard

AI-Powered, Human-Led - Maria Elena Duron

Preparing for Agent-to-Agent Commerce - Michael J. Goldrich

Reader Action Plan - SmarterX Community

Foreward

Over the past several years, we've watched artificial intelligence evolve from an emerging concept to a catalyst, partner, and advisor; a shift not just in technology, but in how people think, work, create, and lead. At SmarterX, our AI education is focused on piloting, scaling, and AI mastery, and I see those themes reflected across the industry every day. Some of the clearest, most inspiring examples of these themes have emerged organically from the connections formed within a community we built simply to help people learn together.

This publication was created by a remarkable group of professionals who met inside our SmarterX Slack community and discovered something rare: a human-centered space where AI experimentation and vulnerability coexist; where expertise is shared generously; where people navigating change don't just trade tactics; they support, cheer, and collaborate.

What you'll read in these pages are contributions from 25 community members across industries, continents, and career stages, collaborating on their own, each sharing a pattern we're seeing everywhere:

AI doesn't replace people. It reveals them.

It surfaces strengths and blind spots, stretches thinking, returns time and energy, and prompts deeper questions about identity, leadership, and the future of work. In many cases, it reconnects people with the parts of their jobs, and themselves, they feared they might lose.

These stories echo familiar themes we've heard in our work, conversations, and partnerships: Chaos turned into clarity.

Fear transformed into possibility.

Burnout replaced by renewed ambition.

Individuals stepping into roles they never imagined for themselves.

Leaders rethinking not just workflows, but the very nature of human potential.

What strikes me most is how personal the shifts are. These aren't polished case studies; they are lived moments of reinvention. People using AI not simply to move faster, but to think deeper. People building new systems, new identities, and in many cases, new careers. People discovering that the real power of AI isn't automation; it's augmentation. And people fumbling along the way.

Though these contributions are from individuals, the through-line is clear: transformation happens faster, more sustainably, and more confidently when we learn together. Community reminds us we're not alone, even when the future feels uncertain. It accelerates learning, expands perspective, and grounds innovation in real humanity.

A community proves its strength when it flourishes without the organizers' constant presence, and this is a perfect example. I'm incredibly proud of the space we've created through our [SmarterX community](#), but even more inspired by what this group of members has built on their own. Their curiosity, generosity, and courage reflect exactly what we hope to ignite: smarter teams, smarter leaders, and a global network of people who are not just adapting to change but shaping it.

To the authors: thank you for your openness, your leadership, and your willingness to share the messy middle.

To the readers: I hope these stories not only inform you, but embolden you. AI is changing quickly, but humans who learn, experiment, and support one another will always be at the center of meaningful progress.

Here's to clarity...and to the communities that help us find it.

Cathy McPhillips, Chief Marketing Officer
SmarterX & Marketing AI Institute

Introduction

This book is a collection of 25 real-world AI growth and impact stories from an independent group of colleagues of an AI membership community.

Across industries and roles, these contributors share what shifted when AI moved from “interesting tool” to “daily collaborator” and what it took to integrate AI into their work, their leadership, and their lives without losing what makes the work human.

This ebook, titled "From Chaos to Clarity," is the result of a collaborative project involving 25 early AI adopters. Conceived in November 2025 as a way to share collective experiences since the 2022 launch of ChatGPT, it quickly grew into a completed publication within 3-4 weeks.

The book serves as a foundational benchmark, documenting how these individuals learned and integrated various AI tools and platforms into their companies and organizations over the past three years. To organize the content, a CustomGPT was employed to structure the project and ask pre-determined questions of each contributor.

Significantly, while generative AI aided in the organization of the ebook, the thoughts and words of every author remain entirely their own.

You'll see recurring patterns: people finding clarity in chaos, accelerating learning, rebuilding systems and workflows, leading adoption inside organizations, and using AI to create more time and space for judgment, creativity, and connection.

These stories are intentionally personal. They're not case studies written from a distance. They are lived experiences, written in first person, by professionals who are in the messy middle of change.

Use the chapters however you like: read straight through, jump to the section that matches your moment, or treat the final action plan as a practical “start here” guide you can apply immediately.

Special Note: The authors come from a variety of industries and professions. If you have any questions, we have included LinkedIn URLs for each of them so you can follow, connect, and/or contact them.

What you'll take away

- A clearer picture of what “integrating AI” looks like in day-to-day reality—not a hype cycle.
- Mindset shifts that reduce fear and increase confidence when the tools (and expectations) keep changing.
- Practical patterns for workflows, decision-making, and experimentation that scale for individuals and teams.
- Leadership lessons for adoption, change management, and human-centered implementation.
- A simple action plan to turn inspiration into a repeatable practice.

SECTION 1

Identity, Clarity, and Reinvention

Thinking at Full Power

Lina Calia

"AI didn't replace my thinking, it returned it to me at full power."

The Before State

I spent 35+ years as the strategist who could also run the play, deep dives, rigorous research, and translating complexity into action. As a CMO/consultant and teacher inside every room I entered, I pulled from best practices, layered on experience, and led teams to innovate. I prided myself on being the one who would sit with the problem until the path emerged. That identity is still mine. But in late 2022, as generative AI arrived in the mainstream, I realized something bigger than marketing had landed, a second brain that could meet me at the speed of thought.

My curiosity started earlier. I was amazed by the story of AlphaGo transforming strategic thinking, and AlphaFold signaling a coming era of AI transforming biotech. Then I discovered The Marketing AI Show (now The Artificial Intelligence Show) which made AI complexity understandable and digestible for non-technical people like me. By the time ChatGPT launched, I could see, and actively participate in, the breakthrough clearly: this was not a gadget or a set of tools, it was a new way to work, learn, and lead.

The Turning Points

- **First real collaboration.** Early ChatGPT felt glitchy, but even then it acted like a strategist, creator, and editor who never tired. I used it to storyboard campaigns, pressure-test messaging, spin up alternatives in minutes, and rethink strategies and executional marketing deployments from every vantage point. I could bring in a broader breadth and depth of experience to my immediate situation than ever before. The trick was realizing early on that I didn't know it all, but I could take everything I did know and add to it the harnessing of the experience of the brightest minds for whatever I was working on. The surprise wasn't output, it was acceleration. I could explore five paths before lunch and still have energy to explore five more. I could create and innovate like never before, something that I have adored doing throughout my entire career.
- **Building my first CustomGPT.** That was the moment I felt unstoppable. I designed a model that embodied how I think and teach, then used it to help everyone in my orbit:

clients, peers, friends, family, my gardener, my neighbors running local services, my friends' adult kids, my relatives in Italy, and women in their 50s through 80s. It became an incredible elevation engine of both my capacity and my confidence. The only obstacle was my patience, accepting that mastery would come from practice, not magic. The mountain of quick wins, and the breadth and depth of people I was able to help transform, flowed, and nothing has been the same since.

- **Choosing solopreneurship, again.** I stepped out of a CMO consultancy and returned to being a solopreneur partnering with a constellation of seasoned collaborators. Like me, they were “all-in” on AI from the start, and come from every vantage point, industry, job level, and career path. Some had significant technical skills and others didn’t. Together we turn decades of perspective into precise, in-the-moment transformation for leaders and their companies. AI didn’t change who I am; it widened what I can do with others.

The After State

Today I don’t “teach tools.” I sit 1:1 with executives and we solve real problems, in real time, hands on-keyboard. The CEO’s franchise decision, the CFO’s global expansion, the COO’s supply chain choke point—we tackle it live. My process is bespoke, fast, and deeply human. It leaves leaders more capable, not more dependent. Executives and their teams enter eager to learn, then get their own superpowers so that they can become more clear, aligned and ready to drive their own momentum with AI fluency, competency and direction.

My Why is simple: brilliant executives shouldn’t have to abdicate their thinking. AI gives them their power back—to think faster, clearer, and lead with confidence instead of drowning in meetings or waiting for someone else to tell them what to think. Once all leaders really, really get the power of AI at their core, then they can transform their companies and help others.

I didn’t become someone new. I became more *me*. AI is not my replacement; it’s my instrument. And my work now is to place that instrument in the hands of leaders so they can hear, and trust, their own best thinking.

The Human Impact

AI lowered my cognitive load and raised my creative ceiling. I feel more spacious, generous, and effective. The teacher in me found a better classroom: every session is a co-creation. I’ve also added guardrails, cite sources, pressure-test with a red-team prompt, and let human judgment have the last word before anything ships. Trust is the currency; speed is a bonus.

And I keep “no-AI zones” for walks, whiteboards, and long conversations that shape the work behind the work.

The Lessons

- **Use AI to sharpen judgment, not replace it.** The win isn’t faster drafts, it’s faster discernment. My value is deciding what matters, not typing quicker.
- **Solve one person’s real problem, then scale the pattern.** Start 1:1 with a leader’s live issue. Once it works, turn it into a small system, a CustomGPT or a simple playbook.
- **Let people feel one real win.** Adoption sticks when leaders experience clarity and agency. One meaningful session beats a dozen demos.

The Future

By 2026, I expect:

Workflows will revolve around faster, better decisions. Marketing, finance, product, ops, teams will orbit around the quality and speed of judgment, not just producing things better, cheaper, faster. Innovators will emerge who leverage AI for 10x benefit by rethinking what they thought they knew or was possible, instead of only playing at the margins of 10% improvements in optimizations of work being done today.

Roles will flex: fewer handoffs, more cross-functional “decision squads.” Tools will get simpler at the front door. Expect fewer dashboards and more natural-language front ends with secure, task-focused helpers. Shadow stacks will fade as governance and ROI become board-level priorities.

Measurement will shift. Instead of “content volume,” leaders will track time-to-clarity, time-to-choice, and lift in results, the metrics that actually move the business.

What breaks: brittle brand governance, linear approval chains, and cultures that equate activity with value. These will buckle as the pace keeps stacking up.

What gets easier: pattern discovery across silos, rapid scenario planning, and upskilling at the moment of need.

My plan to stay rare and valuable: remain a CMO at heart with an AI cross-functional executive strategist’s toolkit, continuously training people and models, curating a guild of expert collaborators, and protecting the human practices (listening, framing, ethics) that no

model can replace. I plan to continue to help, lead, teach, grow and fundamentally change businesses and each other for the better everyday.

BIO

Lina Calia is a veteran marketing executive turned AI Executive Strategist with 38 years at the front edge of business transformation. Now a solopreneur, she partners 1:1 with CEOs, CFOs, CMOs and their teams to solve real problems in real time, using AI to return leaders' thinking to full power and accelerate decision velocity. A lifelong teacher and collaborator, she's known for turning complex challenges into clear, confident action, and for helping everyone from enterprise boards to neighborhood businesses harness AI responsibly.

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When the Future Becomes the Present

Erin Callihan, J.D.

"The only way I can describe it: immediate possibility disquieted with the blunt discomfort of dependence."

The Before State

Before generative AI arrived, I had already spent decades in higher education learning to improvise inside an environment that mixed urgency, creativity, and complexity in equal measure. I was the sort of person who happily tore into the guts of early websites, reverse-engineering other people's code just to see how things worked. Honestly, this was probably built into my DNA, or at least deeply nurtured, by the fact that my father was an engineer and used to bring home broken computers and fix them back before most of the world knew personal computers existed. Technology was never something sacred or scary; I poked at it, broke it, repurposed it, folded it into my work. So, yeah, November 30, 2022 was exciting.

The Turning Points

When generative AI first appeared, the feeling was immediate and palpable; it was obvious the ground had shifted. But one moment I was marveling at what it could produce; the next, I was baffled by its limitations. That swing—from profound empowerment to deep irritation—became the emotional tempo of those early moments, and ultimately deep irritation prevailed, steering me away from ChatGPT for a few months. It wasn't until October 2023, specifically the attacks of October 7, that, for me, the technology moved from interesting to indispensable.

At that time at NYU, I was responsible for reading and responding to the emails sent by alumni and donors. People engulfed in fear, grief, outrage, a lack of control, and political tension—people looking to us to provide comfort and/or answers. Our large Jewish and Muslim student populations were hurting, alumni and donors were sending thousands of emotionally charged messages, and every word our institution released felt like it was sitting

on a fault line. I responded to nearly 600 messages in those first two days. Reading others' pain was visceral and unmistakable.

At the end of that second day, I was on fumes. I remember leaving work to go home around 4pm ET. The plan was to take a nap and then eat, regroup, and start again. But just as I was about to lie down, I received an email asking me to ghostwrite a message to support our staff. I wasn't sure I was capable of generating anything of the needed merit in that moment, but our team deserved care and clarity. Exhausted and particularly vulnerable, I sat down and opened ChatGPT for the first time in months. I asked it to do something I hadn't done before: help me draft something from scratch. As tired as I was, I think the prompt was probably the most natural one that I've ever written. What came back wasn't perfect, but it was a huge "wow" moment: the moment I discovered a lifelong partner that was going to change nearly everything about the way I work.

The After State

After that, the breakthroughs started arriving unexpectedly, like little jolt-of-electricity surprises in the middle of ordinary days. Uploading multiple PDFs and getting back a perfectly alphabetized table of 300 universities in a blink. Extracting text from a screenshot with a single prompt. Feeding raw survey data and receiving clean analysis in seconds instead of days wrestling with Excel. These weren't abstract technical wins; they were inexplicable, unexpected moments that sent me into wormholes and drove me to think even further outside the box and to test the limits that sometimes seemed boundless.

But the highs came with low lows. I've spent most of my career writing for large audiences and often in other people's voices, so fact-checking isn't optional for me, it's instinct. What surprised me, and revealed the real complexity, was realizing how many people didn't share that instinct. They took the output at face value. Seeing colleagues assume the model's answers were true was more unsettling than anything the model itself produced.

Even so, the surprises kept coming. A coloring book generated by Gemini from a simple prompt. A full song created through the combination of Suno and ChatGPT. Gamma produced a beautiful website in minutes... causing me to reminisce on the sheer absurdity of time that we used to burn hand-coding webpages back in 2002. Perhaps the most quietly meaningful shift was watching people in my personal orbit, like my law school friends, my partner, my family—the same people who dismissed AI as irrelevant just a few months earlier—start to report that they were using ChatGPT and advanced voice-to-text tools in their daily lives. Seeing that evolution was the most rewarding part of the past three years.

The Human Impact

As AI became part of my daily rhythm, the change wasn't just external—it was cognitive. I found myself thinking differently, working differently, relying on these tools dozens of times a day. Nearly every task now unfolds in concert with ChatGPT or Gemini. The only way I can describe it: immediate possibility disquieted with the blunt discomfort of dependence.

When I go without these tools for even a day, it's jarring. But, I also feel capable in new ways, like someone whose reach has greatly expanded. I always joke: I feel like I have a superpower. But, as in Spider-Man, great power comes with great responsibility. I'm driven by a compelling need to bring others along, to help them understand and learn, to make sure this technology doesn't become another divide between those who have access and understanding, and those who do not.

These tools also reshape my restless mind. I've always been full of ideas, unable to turn off the stream; now suddenly I have somewhere to put that information. That, too, brings a kind of unease: not needing to shut off, having "someone" there at all hours of the day or night to "talk" things through, to look things up, to dig deeper, to linger.

Alongside that intensity, an unexpected and beautiful side effect emerged: community. The same people I built websites with twenty years ago—those early explorers of digital identity—were back in the trenches together again, now navigating generative AI. I found pure joy and a sense of grounding in this unexpected continuity and reuniting with old connections.

The Lessons

First, AI's arrival isn't optional or avoidable—it's already fused into the fabric of daily work and life.

Second, the power of these tools comes with instability, responsibility, and a constant need to verify, experiment, and stay grounded.

Finally, there's a real, hard-earned optimism in choosing to engage rather than pretend you can stand outside of the inevitable.

The Future

Looking ahead to 2026, I see both the turbulence and the promise. Midterm U.S. elections, job displacement, environmental strain, and the concentration of AI power among billionaires, who ultimately have significant influence in determining “truth” through their model training, will change the human dynamic—trust will no longer be inherent. Trust will need to be earned... and that saddens me.

The political narrative will be loud, distorted, and emotional. Bringing people along on this journey will take patience, empathy, and realism. At the same time, the tools will grow more accurate, more aware, more accessible—and more prevalent and powerful. But alas, the trajectory cannot be reversed.

What has changed most in me is a kind of informed optimism. I’m still the wide-eyed kid who loves new technology, but now I understand the stakes. AI isn’t something you opt into or sit out. It’s already threading through every corner of our lives. We can debate it, critique it, regulate it—but we don’t get to avoid it.

I sit with that truth every day.

BIO

Erin Callihan is an award-winning communications and marketing strategist whose work sits at the intersection of storytelling, technology, and organizational transformation. At New York University, she leads development, campaign, and crisis communications for University Development and Alumni Relations, and guides the division’s generative AI strategy for a 250-person team. With more than 25 years in higher education, she has twice launched new offices from the ground up, helped position NYU as an early national leader in higher education digital engagement, and led communications and engagement efforts for NYU’s 60,000+ students, 700,000+ alumni, and donors on six continents. Her work has twice earned CASE Grand Gold Circle of Excellence recognition, as well as AMA Marketer of the Year honors. She holds a law degree and is a recognized voice in AI adoption, workflow integration, governance, and responsible-use frameworks in higher education.

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From Routine to Reflection: AI in My Consulting Practice

Olivier Gers

"Before generative AI entered my world, my consulting practice ran on a constant hum of routine demands. Now, my work is undergoing a quiet but profound redesign."

The Before State

Before generative AI entered my world, my consulting practice ran on a constant hum of routine demands. The work was meaningful, but the pace often felt unforgiving. My days were filled with tasks that needed to get done yet offered little space for deeper thinking or strategic reflection. There was always a sense of being slightly behind—of knowing I could offer more value if only I had more time, sharper tools, or a bit more mental bandwidth. I approached AI initially the way many independent consultants did: cautiously, curiously, and at the urging of friends whose enthusiasm outpaced my understanding. Early experiments were more frustrating than liberating. I didn't have training, I didn't know what I was doing, and the results were inconsistent enough to make me wonder whether the whole thing was overhyped. But something in me kept tugging at the thread, sensing that the technology was too significant to ignore.

The Turning Points

The turning points weren't cinematic. They were small, quiet inflection moments—when an AI-generated draft gave me a head start I didn't expect, or when a complex idea became clearer because I could iterate with a system that never tired. Bit by bit, the friction decreased. The quality of the prompts increased. And eventually, the sense of wrestling with a mysterious black box shifted into the feeling of being in conversation with a powerful, adaptable tool. Mastery came not all at once but through repetition: learning how to ask better questions, spotting where AI could accelerate me, and discovering where human expertise remained irreplaceable. As the fog cleared, excitement replaced skepticism.

The After State

Now, my work is undergoing a quiet but profound redesign. Routine tasks that once consumed disproportionate energy are being streamlined or reimaged entirely. I have

reclaimed time—time to think, to strategize, to create, to envision broader possibilities for my clients and my practice. More than productivity, the biggest shift has been in capability. AI has become a kind of cognitive multiplier, expanding what I can deliver without expanding my hours.

The Human Impact

The identity shift is equally real: from someone simply trying to “keep up” with technological change to someone who feels equipped, informed, and empowered to lead others through it.

The emotional landscape has changed, too. My relationship with AI is a mix of excitement and fear—an honest, grounded awareness of both the promise and the profound societal questions ahead. I feel energized by the possibilities and sobered by the implications.

There is a new sense of responsibility. Education and awareness feel urgent, not optional. Being part of a community of learners and practitioners has amplified that urgency, showing me how essential collective understanding will be as AI reshapes not just industries but identities. Yet beneath the concern is a thread of hope: the belief that with thoughtful adoption, this technology can enhance human potential rather than diminish it.

The Lessons

1. Mastery is a mindset before it's a skill. The moment I shifted from frustration to curiosity, the technology began opening up to me. The breakthroughs followed the mindset shift, not the other way around.
2. AI rewards iteration, not perfectionism. The most transformative gains came from trying, adjusting, and exploring—treating AI like a partner in thought rather than a machine that must get it right on the first try.
3. The biggest value is time reclaimed for high-level thinking. Productivity improvements are nice, but the real impact has been the return of cognitive space—the room to think more deeply, create more strategically, and operate more intentionally.

The Future

As I look ahead, I expect AI to become even more integrated into the workflows of consultants and clients alike. By 2026, many routine aspects of knowledge work may feel almost fully automated, forcing us to lean even more heavily on our human strengths—judgment, presence, empathy, contextual and emotional intelligence. I anticipate both disruption and expansion: new opportunities for those who adapt, and real challenges for those who resist or underestimate the pace of change. My role may evolve into not just delivering insights, but helping clients make sense of the accelerating world around them. On a personal level, I expect to be even more deeply engaged in communities focused on responsible adoption, helping people navigate the same fear-excitement tension I've felt myself.

I am in equal parts scared and excited about our future, and learning to navigate that tension has reshaped not just my work, but my identity.

BIO

Olivier Gers is a seasoned global executive with over two decades of experience leading media, sports, and entertainment ventures. He has driven fan engagement, commercial innovation, and digital growth for top-tier properties like American Idol, Big Brother, Team Liquid, Wave TV, and World Athletics.

Currently acting as strategic advisor and interim GM to organizations across the digital media and sports landscapes, his clients include The Overlap (home of the #1 US soccer podcast It's Called Soccer!), health and wellness brand Ageist, and various sports organization. He also helped lead WePlay's acquisition by rEvolution and has consulted for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

As CEO of World Athletics, Gers led a major reorganization, and oversaw seven global championships. He previously held leadership roles at Publicis Groupe's LiquidThread and Endemol Worldwide Brands, scaling content marketing operations and global IP monetization. He is now working on helping organizations bring Artificial Intelligence solutions into their processes in an AI-forward but human-centered approach.

Gers is a dual French-American citizen fluent in four languages. He has lived in New York, London, Los Angeles, and now resides in Park City, Utah.

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The Clarity Effect: How AI Helped Me Surface, Strengthen, and Structure My Work

Nancy Myrlan

"AI did not just speed up my work. It helped me see the full shape of the business I had been building for years."

The Before State

I have spent my entire career advising professionals on marketing and business development. After corporate leadership roles at Time Warner and The Berry Company, and then as the senior marketer at a major law firm, I launched my own business in 2002 with intention and clarity: I wanted to operate as a business of one. I chose to not have employees. I wanted the freedom to work directly with clients and the ability to shape my business around my strengths and quick decision-making abilities.

That choice suited me. I built a reputation for delivering high-level strategic thinking, content, coaching, and direction with depth, critical insight, and scale. I became known in the legal and professional services world for helping others stay ahead of all things social and digital, long before those platforms became standard.

Yet the reality of being a business of one meant that most of my intellectual capital lived in my head and in the thousands of pieces of content, notes, client conversations, and strategies I had produced over the years. I had the capacity to deliver for clients, but consolidating decades of intellectual capital was time-intensive. I often knew what I wanted to build next, but gathering and shaping all of the underlying ideas often took a back seat to client projects.

That was the only ceiling I felt before late 2022 when ChatGPT launched to the masses: not skill, not creativity, not confidence; just the practical pace of organizing years of thinking.

The Turning Points

When ChatGPT launched on November 30, 2022, I approached it with the same curiosity and passion that had drawn me to social and digital media platforms back in 2005. But the impact this time was different.

Several moments stand out:

- Seeing my work organized with clarity. AI can take years of ideas, content, and strategy and surface the patterns within them. It reflected my thinking back to me in a way that made the structure of my expertise easier to see and easier to use.
- Strengthening and expanding my intellectual property. AI supported the development and refinement of several major frameworks and brands, including:

The PROMPT Framework™, which teaches professionals how to communicate effectively with AI.

Gain The AI Edge™, my overarching brand for all of my AI education and advisory services.

The Relationship Continuum™, which explains how print, audio, and video accelerate the relationship-building process.

These weren't new ideas. They were concepts I had been developing for years. AI simply helped me crystallize them faster and bring them to market with greater clarity.

- Recognizing that scale does not require staff. Because hiring a human staff or team was not in my plans, finding a tool that could support my thinking, accelerate my processes, and help me package ideas was not only helpful, it aligned perfectly with how I have always chosen to work. My recent creation of NancyGPT and my Co-CEO and Co-CMO models will help me to continue growing and scaling strategically and efficiently so that I can help my clients to the best of my ability.

These turning points have been steady, practical shifts rather than dramatic disruptions. They clarified my direction and continue to open new possibilities.

The After State

Today, AI serves as a strategic partner that helps me:

- Consolidate and make sense of many years of ideas.
- Build clearer, more teachable frameworks for clients.
- Package and repurpose intellectual property more efficiently.
- Move from concept to execution with less friction.
- Maintain a high level of strategic leadership as a business of one.

It has not replaced any part of my expertise. It has simply helped me access it faster and present it in ways that create more value for the people I serve.

The Human Impact

The introduction of AI did not reduce overwhelm or prevent burnout. Those were never issues for me. Instead, it created more room for clarity and innovation.

It has brought a stronger sense of momentum to my work and supports my identity as a lifelong learner.

It helps me think more deeply about my ideas and bring them to life quicker.

It also expands the ways I can support my clients and community by helping them learn AI right alongside me.

AI has not changed who I am. It has helped me to see more of what I can do to help my clients.

The Lessons

Here are the four insights that have mattered most:

- AI is a tool for clarity. It helps create the structure within long-developed expertise, making it easier to use and teach.
- Cognitive load is the real constraint. We have too much to think about everyday. AI reduces the friction of switching roles and tasks, which allows for deeper, more consistent strategic thinking.
- Scale can come from focus and expansion and does not always require more people. Sometimes it simply requires better tools to organize and elevate your thinking.
- AI can be most helpful when it becomes a strategic partner. Yes, it can help make sense of creating content, but its strength is in becoming a senior-level strategist and business partner.

The Future

I expect AI to advance in ways that reshape the technology itself, the competitive landscape, user behavior, and the systems we rely on to stay secure. My predictions are grounded in what I have observed as both a longtime advisor and an early adopter.

The Technology

I believe large language models will evolve rapidly. Although this feels like a stretch, much like number portability was developed for competing mobile companies, we *may* see technology that allows one model to absorb or transfer memory from another, making it easier for users to switch LLMs. At the same time, many people will likely commit more deeply to a single model because training multiple systems will feel inefficient.

The output we see from AI will become better organized and easier to manage. I do not expect generative AI to resemble what we use today. Agents may be significantly reconfigured as developers respond to user skepticism, concerns about client confidentiality, and real-world needs. In short, the ideas that sound far-fetched now may become the ones that define the next phase of AI.

Competition and Market Dynamics

I anticipate some form of consolidation among the most advanced models. Some AI labs and other AI providers may struggle to find sustainable footing and could become acquisition targets. The competitive race will remain aggressive, and continued experimentation will create both innovation and confusion.

Education and use will improve as more people become familiar with and learn how to use these tools effectively. More AI experts will admit to reaching “AGI.” Whether or not that is accurate will be up to the definitions each expert has established for AGI and ASI.

Security and Governance

Security will become a defining issue. Providers will need to prove they can truly safeguard confidential information or risk losing entire segments of the market. Regulation will be messy and influenced by politics. I expect at least a few significant security incidents that will force the industry to pause and reassess.

The governance challenges we face today with custom GPTs and prompts may reappear with agents and AI-powered browsers. The systems we rely on will require new safeguards, combined with people who care about those safeguards.

Social and Professional Environment

In-person events will grow even more important for business development and professional connection. As AI becomes more complex, people will increasingly value real-world interaction, trust, and community.

Beyond the business world, I expect some of the most profound benefits of AI to appear in science and medicine. I expect to see breakthroughs in disease prevention and treatment that once felt impossible and otherworldly.

Overall, I expect AI to be more powerful, more integrated, more secure in some areas, and more fragile in others. I expect human judgment, relationships, and discernment to matter more than ever because of growing overreliance on automation in online communication.

BIO

Nancy Myrlan is the President of Myrlan Marketing & Social Media and the Founder of The Lawyers' Marketing Academy. She is an Integrated Marketing and Business Development Advisor to law firms, and legal and business professionals.

Blending her experience in corporate America with Time Warner and The Berry Company, Nancy became the senior marketer at Baker & Daniels before leaving to start her own consultancy to help legal and business professionals grow their reputations, their relationships, and their practices.

As the 2023 inductee into the Legal Marketing Association Hall of Fame and a LinkedIn Top Voice, Nancy helps lawyers, legal marketers, law firms, and other business professionals grow their reputations and relationships through the intelligent use of content, social and digital media, LinkedIn, podcasting, video, and artificial intelligence.

A frequent writer, blogger, speaker, trainer, and podcast host, she is the creator of the Gain The AI Edge™ brand and LinkedIn Course for Lawyers™. Known for making the complex simple, Nancy blends many years of legal marketing and business development experience with her early adoption of technology to deliver forward-thinking insights on business, management, sales, technology, and communication.

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From Overwhelmed to Optimized: Growing a Lean, Ethical AI-Powered Agency

Kim Owens

"This has changed the footprint of my business. I can scale thinking and growth without scaling headcount and overhead. I can move faster without burning myself out. And I've created boundaries around where I let AI in."

The Before State

As a solo business owner of Buzz Boulevard, the operations and success of my consulting company is all on my shoulders. Growth is dependent on the number of hours in a day, my stamina, and my ability to juggle everything, from client management and business development, to operations, marketing, accounting, and the list goes on.

Before generative AI became part of my day-to-day workflow, the less glamorous parts of running a business slowed me down. Research and transcription was time consuming and tedious. Pushing through repetitive tasks drained me. Being a creative with a touch of ADD, I often procrastinated on tasks that didn't energize me. Not great when you're the only one in the seat to Get Things Done.

The Turning Points

Investing in my AI education has been one of the best decisions of my multi-decade career and as a business owner.

Working in the marketing field for decades, I was already familiar with machine learning and how algorithms are baked into social media, SEO, content, and advertising. When OpenAI released ChatGPT, this was a big leap into a consumer-facing genAI tool. Now AI was conversational and accessible by those not skilled in data analytics or engineering tasked with pulling answers from the data.

Reflecting back on my early days with ChatGPT, it felt like using a search engine but with a

personality. The breakthrough was really learning how to prompt with specific intention and context instead of just word-salad questions. Being a writer helped during my trial and error phase (which is ongoing, it's just more evolved) of prompting. The next leap in capability was learning about different prompt frameworks and learning from others, from use cases and processes, to experiencing mistakes and discovering resolutions.

Then, I wasn't just getting answers—I was experiencing a back and forth collaboration. Brainstorming content strategy. Generating new ideas and solutions. Client research became quicker and more robust. And while tasks that previously took hours were shortened in a big way, I had to also learn about building safeguards and oversight practices to ensure the final outputs were free from hallucinations or citations that didn't actually exist.

The After State

Now I'm building what feels like a small internal ecosystem—a team of custom GPTs/Gems and workflows that enable a solo business to operate like a bigger agency. Co-CFO and co-CMO minds, an operational COO partner, a co-CEO strategic counterpart—all available when I need them. All working alongside me.

This has changed the footprint of my business. I can scale thinking without scaling headcount. I can move faster without burning myself out. And I've created boundaries around where I let AI in.

Writing is part of my identity. So when I'm drafting LinkedIn posts or crafting longer-form storytelling, that's all me. But for emails? For prospect research? For ICP-specific outreach? That's where AI is my efficiency partner.

The shift has been both operational and personal—less friction, more creativity.

The Human Impact

These past three years, as the prevalence of AI has spread significantly, its bias, harms, and risks have increased. This led me to learn more about the calls for alarm started years ago by leaders in the ethical AI space such as Cathy O'Neil and her book "Weapons of Math Destruction," "Algorithms of Oppression" by Dr. Safiya Noble, "The Age of Surveillance Capitalism" by Shoshana Zuboff, or the work of Joy Buolamwini's Algorithmic Justice League.

I got involved in leading local in-person and virtual events and conversations around Responsible AI in practice and by industry within my local tech community. I've become a fan

and virtual participant in the many monthly discussions led by Women in AI Ethics.

Staying on top of and spreading awareness of how AI has amped up citizen surveillance capabilities, the impact of AI on privacy, and the huge investments in massive AI data center build outs affecting energy, water, climate, and local communities is a high priority. Overall, and in line with my social advocacy work, practical RAI governance is woven not only into my consulting business and the services I deliver to clients, it's a key part of my continuing AI education and journey.

The Lessons

- Prompt craft is essential. The moment I truly learned the ins and out of prompt frameworks, when and how to apply each one, everything changed.
- Delegation no longer requires headcount. Building out AI “roles” gave me leverage for growth that previously required more capital investment.
- Responsible AI is a strategic business position. Weaving RAI frameworks and practices into every facet of your business not only says a lot about who you are and your value statement, it can protect you from unneeded risk to your company and your brand.

The Future

Looking ahead, I hope more organizations will invest in their teams instead of just seeing AI as way to reduce headcount. First and foremost: invest in education. Give them time to not only test and run pilots, but provide support through thoughtfully rolled out change management processes. See transparency and AI guardrails as a brand benefit.

For my own work, I will continue to optimize my AI “team” to cautiously become more autonomous as accuracy improves with model updates. This will continue to free up more time for higher-level creativity and client relationship-building, and where operational drag is significantly reduced. AND more time for writing and volunteering my time to my Latiné and LA community.

2026 will also be a big year for visible movements of money by Silicon Valley and AI tech leaders into politics, especially around the midterms and into 2028. This will clash with already existing NIMBY pushback on AI data centers and overall AI sentiment by the public. Layoffs are also expected to continue. But my other hope is that, similar to other times of troubled employment, new businesses will be born by entrepreneurs who can now do much

more with much less by tapping into the AI advantage. That those jobs created by AI that we hear so much about are actually new opportunities for new endeavors.

BIO

Kim Owens is a seasoned multidisciplinary professional, writer, speaker, and entrepreneur. Her agency, Buzz Boulevard, delivers strategic marketing services to SMB and nonprofit clients, and event tech consulting to experiential agencies and major brands—all guided by Responsible AI frameworks and best practices. Her passion for ethical AI and representation in tech intertwines with her social justice advocacy for the Latiné community, as an advisor for Re-Imagine, an anti-recidivism program, and as a board member of B-Konected, a tech nonprofit addressing community housing.

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Becoming Someone Who Can Help Shape the Future

Susan Roth

"AI has become a strategic thought partner—one that challenges me and helps me see patterns I once missed. Instead of feeling behind, I now feel at the forefront of something transformative. I'm not chasing the future; I'm becoming someone who can help shape it."

The Before State

Before generative AI reshaped my relationship with work, I was leading global marketing for a B2B tech digital transformation company—an organization that could transform other businesses but struggled to transform itself. The pressure was relentless: do more with less budget, less headcount, fewer resources. My team was stretched thin, drowning in minutiae, and creativity was dying under the weight of constant urgency. I carried the responsibility of protecting them from burnout while still delivering results, and the feeling was one of mounting constraint. The work was meaningful, but the pace and demands had begun to erode the joy I once took in leading.

The Turning Points

The first major shift came about six months after the November 2022 "ChatGPT moment." Seeing no one take the lead internally on AI adoption, I created an AI literacy program for my global marketing team. The goal wasn't just upskilling—it was to relieve fear. People were worried AI would replace them, and I knew that if we didn't take action quickly we would fall behind.

The next turning point arrived in mid-2024, when I was laid off. In the moment, it felt like a gut punch. But with distance, I've come to see it as the greatest professional gift I've ever been given: the gift of time. Time to go deep into AI, experiment without constraint, and rethink what I wanted my career to look like next.

Two months later, I attended MAICON 2024. During Paul Roetzer's workshop, I encountered "ProblemsGPT," a custom GPT that could analyze, prioritize, and articulate business

challenges. That experience was the real unlock. Suddenly, AI wasn't just a collection of tools or prompts—it was a structured way to surface and solve real business problems. It reframed AI in my mind from novelty to necessity, from "nice to have" to "strategic operating system" for my next chapter.

The After State

In the last six months, I've immersed myself in AI-driven problem solving, agent creation, and agentic workflows. Understanding how to design custom agentic teams to solve real business challenges has been an unlock not only intellectually but emotionally. My work feels more expansive rather than constrained. My creativity is back. My sense of agency is sharper. My ability to scale impact has multiplied.

AI has become a strategic thought partner—one that challenges me and helps me see patterns I once missed. Instead of feeling behind, I now feel at the forefront of something transformative.

The Human Impact

AI changed more than my workflow; it changed my internal landscape.

It relieved fears by revealing possibility. It created new fears, too—mostly about keeping pace with change and staying adaptable. But even those fears have become fuel.

I learned to get comfortable being uncomfortable, a mindset shift that has reshaped how I approach learning, leadership, and entrepreneurship. The ambiguity that once felt threatening now feels like a doorway.

AI rekindled my ambition. It restored my optimism. It expanded my sense of identity—from a marketing leader under pressure to a consultant, strategist, and guide for others navigating the same uncertainty.

And perhaps most importantly, it reminded me that reinvention is possible, even in the moments that feel like endings.

The Lessons

AI expanded what I believed was possible. Working with AI didn't just accelerate tasks—it rewired my sense of scale, showing me how quickly ideas could turn into prototypes and how strategic thinking could be amplified rather than constrained.

Skill doesn't beat adaptability anymore. The people who thrive are those who embrace discomfort and learn visibly. Becoming adaptable is now a competitive advantage.

Agentic thinking is a force multiplier. Designing systems of AI agents—not single prompts—unlocked exponential capability and redefined what I consider possible in a day's work.

The Future

I see AI becoming more autonomous, more context-aware, and more deeply integrated into workflows. Agentic systems will shift from experimental to expected, quietly restructuring how businesses operate and how individuals make decisions. Entire roles will evolve—not through replacement, but through redesign—as humans move toward higher order judgment while AI handles more of the orchestration.

By 2026, the people who flourish will be those who treat AI as a collaborator, not a competitor.

For myself, I expect to deepen my specialization in agentic systems, expand my consulting work, and continue guiding leaders through the mindset and identity shifts that rapid technological change demands. The journey will require courage, curiosity, and humility—and I'm excited to meet all three.

BIO

Susan Roth is a senior marketing leader in the data center industry and the Founder of Compass Consulting, where she helps service-first businesses accelerate growth through strategic, human-centered AI adoption. With more than a decade of experience leading global B2B marketing in technology and digital transformation, she blends deep expertise in go-to-market strategy, content, and customer experience with a practical understanding of how AI can reshape the way teams work. Susan specializes in architecting custom multi-agent systems that streamline operations, elevate creativity, and deliver measurable efficiencies. Through her consultancy, she brings this expertise directly to clients: engineering

intelligent, scalable agentic workflows that reshape processes, elevate performance, and empower people teams to thrive in an AI-driven era.

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SECTION 2

From Tool to Teammate: Daily Collaboration

From Knowledge Keeper to AI Collaborator

Al Boyle

"Viewing AI as a collaborator rather than a tool didn't just change how I work. It changed how I think."

The Before State

Content operations used to run on human capacity. Growth was linear. Scaling meant adding people, hours, and oversight. As a knowledge manager leading content teams, I lived in constant motion with stakeholder meetings, collaborative efforts, workflow refinements, and the editorial work that filled the gaps between everything else.

I enjoyed the work while recognizing its ceiling. Every content system I built had the same constraint: it could only move as fast as the people operating it.

The Turning Points

When OpenAI released ChatGPT in late 2022, I signed up immediately. Curiosity drove me more than expectations. I wanted to see if it could write. It couldn't—at least, not at a level that satisfied my editorial standards—but what it could do was eye-opening: take a few lines of input and generate a somewhat coherent draft in seconds.

That single experience reframed what "possible" looked like. The output quality didn't matter as much as the responsiveness. For someone who spent years designing and using content workflows, the speed revealed something fundamental: idea to expression with almost no friction. Say goodbye to the blank page.

As GPT-4 emerged and competitors followed, I stopped treating AI as a drafting tool and started having conversations with it. I'd ask how the model approached a task and what I could do to improve the results. That shift from user to collaborator changed everything. The models became thinking partners. I could test editorial perspectives, simulate stakeholder reasoning, or explore variations instantly. What once required days of iterative team dialogue could now happen in a single morning's guided exploration. My knowledge

management background prepared me to see this clearly: AI wasn't replacing editorial judgment; it was amplifying the speed at which I could apply it.

The After State

This collaboration felt liberating. For the first time, I could stretch ideas in multiple directions without worrying about capacity. Instead of focusing on execution limits, I began designing systems where insight and structure mattered more than throughput.

Working alongside AI challenged my cognitive habits, forcing precision in how I defined tasks, communicated context, and evaluated quality. "Thinking out loud" with a model became a discipline in itself, and one that sharpened my own reasoning.

The Human Impact

By 2025, those experiments transformed into a consulting practice. I now help content-driven organizations build AI workflows, such as custom GPTs that generate on-brand content or Skills that automate repetitive editorial tasks, so they can scale output without compromising quality. Clients who once saw content bottlenecks as inevitable now see them as solvable systems.

The conversations I have with these organizations fall into a comfortable shorthand quickly. I understand their world: the editorial review cycles, the stakeholder approval layers, the tension between speed and quality. That fluency matters. When they describe their content challenges, I don't need them to translate. I'd navigated around those same constraints for fifteen years.

The Future

Looking ahead to 2026, I expect even greater acceleration. The tools are maturing, and my fluency in working with them is evolving. I anticipate producing more, smarter: adaptive workflows, semi-autonomous editorial systems, and human teams freed to think strategically rather than execute repetitively.

The Lessons

Three lessons stand out from this journey:

Don't underestimate the value of talking to the model. Just as a good leader will ask a direct report, "What do you need from me?", you can ask the model what it needs from you. And you don't have to stop there. Ask the model how you can work best with it.

AI doesn't replace editorial judgment. The best outcomes emerge when humans and models build on each other's reasoning. Challenge the model's outputs when you disagree, and have the model challenge your thinking. This can confirm strengths while revealing gaps and blind spots.

There's power in precision. Prompting well isn't about hacks or tricks; it's about structured thinking. The clearer your framing, the better the output.

Generative AI didn't change what I know about content operations. It changed what I can do with that knowledge. That ceiling is now a horizon.

BIO

AI Boyle is an AI consultant specializing in content-driven organizations. He brings 15+ years of knowledge management and content operations expertise to AI implementation, building scalable content systems through process-first AI workflows.

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Aligned: When AI Finally Matched How I Think and Create

Dan Nestle

"AI didn't just change how I work—it finally aligned the way I think with the way I create."

The Before State

Before generative AI entered my world, I was a strategic communications leader operating inside the tightly structured rhythms of corporate life. Campaign cycles, executive priorities, and predictable PR patterns shaped my days. I thrived on strategy, yet the constant pressure to dive back into tactical writing often felt like friction—something I performed well, but didn't love.

Even as a senior leader, I was always scanning the horizon for tools that could help teams work faster and smarter. But despite the evolving technology landscape, the *work itself*—the cadence of content creation, corporate communications, and brand storytelling—remained fundamentally the same. I delegated much of the hands-on writing, and though I was deeply curious and tech-forward, creativity often took a back seat to urgency.

I had the instincts of an innovator, but not always the means to experiment.

The Turning Points

When ChatGPT launched in late 2022, something clicked immediately. I recognized the magnitude of the shift before many around me did, and I moved fast.

- **Discovering the power of roles in prompting.** I realized early that assigning roles to AI transformed the quality of its responses. Suddenly, the models met me at the level I needed—analytical, strategic, nuanced. And the iterative back-and-forth, the interrogation and refinement? That process mirrored the way I naturally think. I had, in a sense, found a cognitive partner.
- **Claude Projects altered the trajectory.** No offense to ChatGPT, but Claude became the tool that revolutionized my writing workflows. For the first time, I could design structured environments that reproduced voice, tone, and style with striking accuracy. It unlocked a level of creative efficiency I had been chasing for years.

- **NotebookLM opened an unexpected frontier.** By creating focused, walled-garden RAG systems, I could finally do something meaningful with years of podcast transcripts. The archive wasn't just an archive anymore—it became raw material for new ideas, new products, new storytelling channels.

These weren't just new tools. They were inflection points that changed my relationship with creativity, writing, and even ownership of my past work.

The After State

Today, as the founder of Inquisitive Communications and a globally recognized leader in CommsTech, I operate with a radically expanded set of capabilities.

I no longer choose between strategic or tactical work—AI lets me do both at exceptional levels. I prototype ideas faster. I write in voices I once had to labor over. I build systems that scale my impact. And as a solopreneur, this means I can deliver enterprise-grade work without enterprise-scale friction.

My workflow is cleaner, my creative confidence is higher, and my ability to transform raw content into meaningful, multi-channel output is unparalleled.

The Human Impact

AI has done more than accelerate my work. It has shifted my identity. There's less pressure and more curiosity now. Less frustration, more flow. Where writing once felt heavy, it now feels expansive—an iterative conversation with tools that amplify my thinking.

AI also opened up emotional space: room for deeper creativity, for rediscovering the joy of building something from scratch, for reconnecting my innate inquisitiveness to my daily craft.

The transformation isn't just about skills—it's about alignment. AI let me work in a way that finally matched who I am.

The Lessons

- AI works best when treated as a collaborator, not a shortcut. Assigning roles, interrogating outputs, and iterating deeply produces insights far beyond surface-level prompting.
- Structured environments elevate AI from tool to system. Claude Projects and NotebookLM didn't just improve outputs—they changed the *shape* of my workflows.
- Your past work becomes exponentially more valuable when AI helps you repurpose it. Years of podcasts, notes, and writing became a living, evolving content engine.

The Future

By 2026, I foresee a communications and business landscape reshaped not just by AI's capabilities, but by how humans rise—or fail to rise—to meet them.

- **Domain expertise becomes the new gold standard.**
Organizations that laid off experienced practitioners in 2025 will realize AI can't replicate the wisdom, judgment, or intuition they lost. 2026 becomes the year of corporate mea culpas: "Oopsie! Never mind—please come back." Companies will scramble to rehire the very expertise they undervalued.
- **Solopreneurs gain unprecedented leverage—but uneven outcomes.**
AI becomes a true business partner, taking on the functions of COO, CTO, CSO, and CIO. But that power cuts both ways: many solopreneurs will outsource too much thinking to AI and build hollow, unstable businesses. The ones who thrive will be those who pair AI with constant iteration, strong discernment, and rigorous critical thinking.
- **The Authority Gap becomes an Authority Canyon.**
Experts who ignore AI will continue to cede visibility and influence to individuals with stronger content engines but less substantive knowledge. AI accelerates this imbalance. Yet experts who embrace AI and turn it into a personal creative force will not only defend their authority—they'll expand it.

For my own work, I expect a future where my deep domain expertise, sharpened by AI-enabled systems, becomes an even greater strategic advantage—allowing me to experiment, lead, and build with more freedom and impact than ever.

BIO

Dan Nestle, Founder of Inquisitive Communications, is an award-winning strategic communications executive, communications technology leader, and host of The Trending Communicator podcast. Named to PRWeek's Dashboard 25 in both 2023 and 2024 and recognized on the Propel 100 list of the Most Influential PR Tech Leaders in the World for 2025, he is at the forefront of AI and innovation in communications.

With over two decades of corporate and agency experience, Dan brings proven expertise in corporate and brand communications, integrated marketing, content strategy, social media, and brand storytelling. His deep understanding of emerging trends like Generative AI and CommsTech enables him to bridge the gap between strategy and innovation, helping organizations adapt and thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Born and raised in New Jersey, Dan spent 16 years in Japan and speaks Japanese—a reflection of his adaptability and global perspective. This curiosity and ability to connect ideas across disciplines drive his passion for empowering PR and marketing leaders to confidently embrace AI and unlock its full potential.

Whether coaching executives, training teams, or developing AI-driven strategies, Dan focuses on making complex ideas simple and actionable. His work has been recognized by industry leaders and global organizations, but what motivates him most is helping clients stay ahead of the curve with clarity, confidence, and strategic insight.

Dan doesn't just talk about content strategy—he uses the Content Engine himself. He's built an entire ecosystem of blog posts, newsletters, social media, and long-form content by reimagining and repurposing his own past work—proving that this approach works in the real world.

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Getting the Human Parts Back

Ryo Suzuki

"AI is a mirror, not a crutch. It reflects the quality of our thinking and questions back to us. The better I think, the better it performs."

The Before State

In late 2022, my professional life was defined by exhaustion and uncertainty. I had just stepped into new leadership roles, trying to navigate a complex landscape at both the Nebraska Safety Center and the College of Business and Technology. Every day felt like wading through a fog of information, reading, researching, and repeating the same tasks in search of clarity that never quite came. Nights blurred into mornings as I pored over documents that didn't make sense, trying to piece together the history of my position and understand the people I now led. It was isolating. I was surrounded by work but often felt alone in it.

The Turning Points

My first real encounter with AI began modestly through Grammarly, a quiet assistant helping refine my writing. But the true inflection point came with ChatGPT. The first time I used it, the experience felt familiar yet revolutionary, like the first time I held an iPhone. That same feeling of discovery surged through me: the realization that this wasn't just another app or upgrade. It was a shift in how I could think, lead, and create. What began as a tool for improving my writing quickly became a thought partner, one that didn't just give answers but challenged me to ask better questions. I realized AI could push me to look beyond surface-level tasks and into deeper strategic thinking.

The After State

AI became woven into my daily rhythm. I now use it to ideate, plan, and clarify complex challenges, not to replace my judgment but to expand it. The hours I once spent buried behind a desk have transformed into time spent with people: my staff, students, and community stakeholders. I feel more present, more intentional. The work that once drained me now feels purposeful again. Instead of wrestling with repetitive tasks, I focus on creativity, strategy, and the joy of human connection. ChatGPT EDU License at the university unlocked

even more possibilities, allowing me to integrate AI into institutional systems and workflows with ease. It was a true turning point.

The Human Impact

The biggest transformation hasn't been in my productivity but in my identity. AI helped me rediscover balance and belonging. I no longer feel that isolation from my early leadership days. I found community—most profoundly when I attended MAICON in 2025, surrounded by over 1,500 people who shared my belief in the positive potential of AI. That moment shifted something deep inside me. For the first time, I didn't just feel like a user of AI; I felt like part of a movement. It gave me a sense of belonging that I hadn't expected from technology. AI didn't just make me more productive; it gave me back the human parts of my work that matter most.

The Lessons

AI is a mirror, not a crutch. It reflects the quality of our thinking and questions back to us. The better I think, the better it performs.

Efficiency is meaningless without purpose. AI can save hours, but what we do with those reclaimed hours defines our impact.

Community amplifies innovation. Discovering a network of people who believe in the promise of AI made me realize that transformation isn't a solo act; it's a shared journey.

The Future

By 2026, I believe AI will become as natural and integrated into our work as email once was. The conversation will shift from whether to use AI to how we use it responsibly and creatively. Some jobs will change, some will disappear, and entirely new ones will emerge. But the real breakthrough will be in human capability—how AI allows us to think bigger, connect deeper, and focus on what truly matters. For me personally, I see AI as an ongoing collaborator, helping me lead with clarity, create with intention, and continue building bridges between people, ideas, and technology.

BIO

Ryo Suzuki, MBA, is a higher education leader, educator, and strategist passionate about connecting people, ideas, and innovation to create opportunities that transform lives and communities.

As Senior Director of Strategic Marketing & External Relations for the College of Business and Technology and the Nebraska Safety Center at the University of Nebraska at Kearney, he leads storytelling, brand strategy, and partnership development that strengthen the college's impact across Nebraska. His work focuses on creating authentic engagement through digital innovation, workforce partnerships, and hands-on learning that prepares students to lead in a rapidly changing world.

Outside of UNK, Ryo serves as Chairman of the Nebraska Commission on Asian American Affairs, where he helps elevate voices, build trust among communities, and foster civic leadership statewide. He also serves on the boards of the World Theatre, Kearney Family YMCA, and the Kearney Airport Advisory Board, continuing his commitment to local service and growth.

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Less Doing, More Designing: Using AI So I Can Focus on the Most Human Parts of My Work

Lisa Wright

The Before State

Before generative AI was part of my daily tool set, my work was defined by two parallel tracks: consulting with startups and PE-backed companies and co-founding Gradience Labs, where I run live small-group and one-to-one coaching to help students craft ATS-ready resumes, outline LinkedIn plans, and build networking snapshots. While this particular story focuses on how AI has reshaped Gradience Labs' workflows, AI is now woven through both sides of my work and is a big part of how I'm able to do both.

On paper, my job was about strategy and transformation. In reality, a noticeable portion of my week went into repetitive tasks: note-taking during sessions, summarizing conversations afterward, and processing forms so students could walk away with an ATS-ready resume foundation. There was still a lot of manual work in that intake process, even though it was all in service of helping students tell their authentic stories.

The Turning Points

The first turning point was simple: I started using ChatGPT for organizing ideas and drafting language. What began as small experiments quickly became infrastructure.

The bigger shift came when I created custom GPTs:

Thought-partner GPTs that I could bounce ideas off of, like having a strategic co-founder who never gets tired or distracted.

A **specialized AI assistant** that supports well-defined parts of our process, mainly formatting and consistency checks, using anonymized data, while keeping a human in the loop from a quality standpoint.

For example, instead of wrestling with layouts, I was reviewing and refining. The work didn't just get faster; it got calmer. That was when I realized: this isn't just about saving time. This changes how I design my business, my offers, and my role inside the system.

The After State

AI helps ensure documents are clean, consistent, and well-structured, keeping my focus on context and judgment. Students still get a strong foundational document we use in teaching and refinement sessions, but my energy is now spent on what only I can do: better coaching, sharper insight, more encouragement.

In my consulting work with various types of companies, AI acts as both analyst and collaborator. It helps me summarize information, explore options, and stress-test ideas faster. The result: I show up to conversations better prepared, with clearer thinking and more mental space. That same infrastructure is what makes it possible for me to balance being both a consultant and running Gradience Labs, without feeling like one role has to come at the expense of the other.

My identity has shifted from "person who does all the steps" to "designer of systems that scale my judgment." That's a quiet but profound change.

AI didn't just save me time, it forced me to stop being the bottleneck and start creating practices where my humanity is the point, not the constraint.

The Human Impact

Emotionally, the impact has been mixed—but mostly expansive.

On the positive side, I feel less buried. The mental load of repetitive work has dropped, and I can focus more on being present with students. There's more room for curiosity and creativity in how I develop programs and refine our processes.

At the same time, I keep at the forefront the line between "AI-accelerated" and "no human needed." I don't think humans can fully leave the loop. That tension keeps me intentional: I'm not just asking, "Can I automate this?" but "Should I?" and "What part of this process is fundamentally human?"

The Lessons

The bottleneck wasn't time—it was identity. I thought I couldn't scale because there were only so many hours in a day. In reality, I was attached to being the one who personally executed every step. Letting AI handle some of the groundwork helped me to redefine what my real value is.

Custom beats generic. The biggest gains didn't come from "using ChatGPT more," but from designing custom GPTs that mirror specific workflows. The closer the AI mirrors a real business process, the more transformative it becomes.

Human in the loop is a design choice, not a temporary compromise. By becoming well-versed in using AI ethically and keeping a person involved at key decision points, I'm able to teach students safe, realistic ways to work with these tools in their own careers.

The Future

What makes me most excited is the possibility of combining scale with depth: reaching more people while still feeling genuinely present in the process. I'm committed in my work to use AI to amplify the human experience, rather than replace it, thereby creating a much more powerful end result for my clients.

BIO

Lisa Wright is a hands-on marketing leader and consultant with experience in startups, PE-backed organizations and Fortune 1000 companies. She has scaled early-stage teams from launch to traction and led global marketing organizations. Serving in several executive roles, she is passionate about building and mentoring high-performing teams.

She is also the co-founder of Gradience Labs, where she brings clear frameworks and a human-plus-AI approach to help students define outcomes, quantify impact, and keep their voice unmistakable.

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SECTION 3

Building Systems That Scale

(for teams and solos)

Three Years Since ChatGPT: Building AI-Backed Marketing Systems

Kathryn Good

"AI gives me a place to think out loud. It listens as long as I need, which frees the people around me from having to carry every idea I process."

The Before State

I led a marketing agency that supported small businesses and nonprofits. My days were filled with tabs, research, and scattered tools. I compared platforms, studied audiences, and built plans by hand. Work moved in slow steps. Brainstorming took effort. Even simple tasks, such as planning trips or outlining a workshop, required long thought processes, extensive searches, and repeated questions.

The Turning Points

Everything shifted in a small town in Germany in the summer of 2023. I stepped off a river cruise and asked AI for restaurant ideas and things to do. I assumed it would have no useful answers for a place that small. Instead, it mapped a full day from morning to evening. It gave clear choices, grouped by interest, and organized by time. It surprised me with its speed and accuracy. I knew right then the marketing world would change fast.

I returned home and used AI in my work. I used it to sort research, outline plans, review drafts, build workshops, and brainstorm strategy. By the end of 2023, we rebuilt our products and processes to include AI at every stage.

I used AI to plan client strategies, refine messaging, update teaching materials, and guide teams through structured workflows. These moments showed me where I add the most value: strategy, clarity, judgment, and direction.

The After State

My work runs with less strain. Research time dropped. Drafting takes fewer steps. Brainstorming feels lighter with support at each point. I help teams use AI without confusion. My role shifted from marketer to advisor on AI-supported systems and decisions.

The Human Impact

This year, we have seen a 24% increase in revenue, a 4% decrease in expenses, and hired two contractors to assist with AI development for our clients and the company. AI reduced the mental load I carried each day. I focus on strategy and direction. I use AI for the steps that used to drain my time. This freed space for rest, family, and projects that matter to me. It strengthened my confidence in building clear systems that others can follow. I feel pressure to stay current and to protect the parts of my work that need a human voice. These questions keep me learning.

The Lessons

Your brand guides everything, so training ChatGPT on it gives your business a strong foundation.

The organization leader decides how AI fits into daily work, so real progress depends on leadership's direction, communication, and implementation.

Building GPTs creates faster workflows and shows your team how AI supports consistent results.

AI gives me a place to think out loud. It listens as long as I need, which frees the people around me from having to carry every idea I process.

AI does the tasks. People bring the meaning.

The Future

AI tools will feel more natural in daily work. Expect more focus on trust. Accuracy will matter. Oversight will matter. Teams will need simple rules, practical training, and a culture that keeps people at the center.

My work will focus on building AI systems that small teams understand: clear policies, safe tools, and practical training. I will help leaders grow confident in using AI while maintaining their message and mission's integrity.

AI can multiply good work, not replace the people who create it. My goal is to help teams reach this future with clarity, confidence, and consistency.

BIO:

Kathryn Good is a marketing strategist and AI advisor who helps small businesses and nonprofits use AI in ways that strengthen their message, support their people, and simplify their work. After transforming her own agency with AI in 2023, she created a Good AI Consulting product to give leaders the structure, clarity, and confidence they need to use AI without losing their voice or values. Kathryn leads with clarity and encourages teams to see both marketing and AI as a multiplier of their good work.

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From Constraint to Capability: How AI Transformed What Organizations Can Build

Jordache Johnson

"If I can build a Python bot in four hours when I didn't even know what Visual Studio Code was this morning—what else can I build?"

The Before State

Before late 2022, I was stuck on what I call the "concentration hamster wheel"—juggling client fulfillment, growing my own skills, and doing all the business development work that actually drives growth. There was never enough time for all three.

The frustrating part? I always had ideas. Tools I wanted to build. Workflows I envisioned. Automations that could transform my agency work. But I'd hit the same wall every time: *"I'm not a developer, so my ideas will always be limited by the resources I don't have."*

I could see the system. I could explain the system. I could orchestrate people to build the system. But I wasn't the person who could actually build it. Beyond basic HTML and CSS, I couldn't code. The ideas would pile up—like my "Friends System," a personal CRM concept I'd fully designed with developer friends—but they'd die at the resource constraint. No budget for developers meant ideas stayed ideas.

Here's what most people don't know about my AI journey: it didn't start in 2022. Back in 2012-2013, I was co-founder of a software startup with an IBM partnership during the Watson era. I sat in product meetings with their Blue Mix team, watching them explore machine learning use cases across healthcare, environmental research, biological applications. I remember thinking: *this technology could solve problems at a humanity level.* The adaptability across industries blew my mind.

But commercialization was the challenge—same as any breakthrough tech. So I stayed AI-curious for a decade, experimenting with early tools like Conversion.ai (which became Jasper), Copy.ai, and others for agency client work. They felt like good brainstorming tools,

but I never unlocked their real power. The gap between my imagination and the results was too wide.

When ChatGPT launched, I jumped in immediately—pure curiosity and excitement, like always. But those early experiments? I thought AI would just read my mind. It didn't. The outputs weren't pretty. They didn't leave my computer. Looking back, it was partly the models being early, but mostly me not understanding context.

And that's where everything changed.

The Turning Points

The breakthroughs came in three waves—each one cracking open a new realization.

Wave One: The Context Engineering Breakthrough

Everyone kept saying "you need to get better at prompting." So that's what I focused on. But I was still frustrated—AI was taking me LONGER than just doing the work myself. I'd spend forever prompting, then even more time editing outputs. I'd think, *I could've just done this without AI.*

Then it clicked. It wasn't about prompting at all. It was about context.

I can't remember the exact project, but I remember the feeling. AI suddenly started understanding ME—my voice, who I serve, how I think. I'd brain dump with it, struggling to articulate something, and it would extract the thought FROM my brain. That "holy shit" moment: *This is what I was missing all along.*

I became obsessed with one question: *If I need AI to help me do this, what are the vital pieces of information, data, and examples it needs for me to set it up for success?*

I realized I was using 3-5 core context pieces over and over. So I asked: How do I create this ONCE and have it reusable? That's when I developed what I call "the system before the system"—or as I used to call it, the AI Chef System. How do I prepare the cast-iron skillet before I'm ready to cook? What ingredients do I need?

I started creating what I now call DICE reports—Data, Information, Context, Examples. Once I figured that out, I started getting emails and content pieces that were 85-95% drafts in my words. The emotion I felt was relief. And confidence. This pressure I'd been carrying just

lifted. I could do MORE now because I wasn't starting from scratch—I was editing my own articulated thoughts.

That's when the floodgates opened.

Wave Two: Intelligent Automation

Next came automations. I built systems to automatically take my Zoom calls, extract transcripts and chat logs, structure them into notes with timestamps, auto-delete from Zoom to save storage, then extract testimonials, content ideas, topics—all the stuff I'd been doing manually for YEARS.

I'd push a button or two and it would just... do it.

But here's what made it click—it wasn't just automation. It was intelligent extraction. It identified patterns I could actually use and put into action. Those outputs could feed the inputs for new systems. My systems-thinking brain lit up. I wasn't just saving time—I was creating compound value.

Wave Three: Becoming the Builder (The Rule-Changer)

But the third wave—that's when the old rules completely stopped applying. I had this problem I was curious about—I wanted signals based on certain blockchain interactions. I knew there were tools I could pay for, but I thought: *Wait. Can I just build something myself? Can I learn how to do this?*

My FIRST question wasn't even about code. It was: *"I have a MacBook Pro—what tools do I even need to open a Python file?"*

I didn't even have the software. I asked AI: "What is Visual Studio Code? Where do I download that?" That's how far outside my skillset this was.

I spent four or five hours going back and forth with AI, troubleshooting, having it walk me step-by-step through building a WhatsApp bot, writing Python code—something I had ZERO experience with.

And then... it worked.

I sat there staring at it thinking: *Holy crap. It worked. I just CREATED this. I never even knew how to do any of this beforehand.*

That's when it hit me: If I can do THAT—something I literally didn't have the tools or knowledge to do this morning—what ELSE can I build?

The constraint I'd carried my entire career—"I'm not a developer, so I need resources or people to build my ideas"—just evaporated.

The question shifted from "What CAN I build?" to "What SHOULD I build?"

The rules had changed. I wasn't limited by skills I didn't have anymore. I could learn anything, build anything, just-in-time. This wasn't just a tool I was using. This was a partner.

An extension of my thinking.

The After State

The ripple effects have been massive—professionally and personally.

Professionally: I've never been able to operate as effectively as I can now. I feel 100% more capable in almost every aspect of my work. There's nothing that feels impossible anymore. The challenge now—and this is a good problem—is that I've had to shift from "What's possible?" to "What do I need to say NO to?" There's so much opportunity.

My creativity exploded. I can expand my thinking outside my own mind—outside what's limited by my experience, environment, and knowledge. AI gives me different perspectives and helps me communicate better.

My ambition changed too. I'm going after bigger things—things I would've needed other people's skills or money to pursue before. Now I can at least start the process myself.

Personally: I'm just happier. That's the simplest way to put it.

I'm less stressed about FOMO or keeping up. I have dedicated experimentation time on my calendar multiple times a week, and I can track the value that creates. That removes the anxiety. The tingling feeling when I step away too long? I've reframed it from "another thing I GOTTA do" to "another opportunity for growth."

My relationships deepened. AI helps me stay more PRESENT with people because I can capture context from conversations and act on it later. I can meet people where they are and build deeper connections.

How I think has completely changed. When I face a problem now, it's not "*Oh, that's a problem I have to figure out.*" It's "*How can AI assist me with this?*" Then I ask: How can I combine what I already know? Who do I need to know? How can I learn this?

I've always had a passion for self-education, but now I can do it much more effectively, much faster, and—most importantly—translate knowledge into action and implementation immediately. Not just knowledge for knowledge's sake.

The Human Impact

But the biggest transformation was internal.

For years, I was the "quiet builder who stayed in his own bubble." That identity served me well. It kept me safe—especially watching overnight "AI experts" emerge, marketers and grifters claiming authority they hadn't earned. I thought: *I don't want to be associated with that. I don't want to ruin my reputation.*

So I stayed small. I stayed private. If I didn't claim expertise publicly, I couldn't be challenged or lumped in with people I didn't respect.

But then people I trusted started telling me: *"You need to be talking about this. People need to hear from you."* Two people reached out and literally asked if they could pay me just to meet weekly and help them make sense of AI.

That's when I realized: Staying quiet wasn't humility anymore—it was withholding value. If people are going to listen to somebody about AI, I'd rather they listen to someone who genuinely has their best interests at heart, someone offering a different perspective than the hype and fear dominating the conversation.

Letting go of that old identity felt liberating and vulnerable at the same time. Liberating because, for the first time in my life, I could combine ALL my passions—business strategy (from my agency work), technology (from my startup, IBM days, and Masters in Technology Commercialization from UT Austin), and human behavior (which I've always been curious about)—into one cohesive identity.

But vulnerable because now I was visible. I was claiming a position. I was subject to judgment.

There was also relief, though. Relief that I didn't have to carry everything myself. That I could be visible AND maintain my integrity. That I could teach and guide others without becoming one of the grifters I didn't respect.

And maybe, at the deepest level, permission—permission to stop waiting for "enough" credentials, "enough" proof. Permission to say: *"I have something valuable to offer, and people need to hear it now, not when I feel 100% ready."*

Because if I'd waited until I felt 100% ready, I'd still be waiting.

The Lessons

Three non-obvious insights changed everything:

- Mastery comes from context, not prompts. Everyone obsesses over prompting techniques. But the real unlock is context engineering. Once I understood how to create reusable, structured context (DICE reports—Data, Information, Context, Examples), AI became an extension of my thinking, not a tool I fought with.
- Capability isn't a skill gap problem—it's a constraint problem. For years, I thought "I can't build this because I'm not a developer." But that was a constraint, not a truth. Once AI removed that constraint, I realized I could learn anything just-in-time. The only real limit now is focus—what I CHOOSE to build, not what I CAN build.
- Visibility isn't about ego—it's about stewardship. I resisted being a public voice because I didn't want to be seen as another AI grifter. But staying quiet meant people who needed an authentic, human-centered perspective on AI transformation weren't hearing it. That realization shifted everything. If you have value to offer, withholding it isn't humble—it's selfish.

The Future

We're moving into the agentic age—AI agents and agent orchestration where ecosystems of agents collaborate across systems. But I think we're going to see serious challenges around privacy, security, and ethics. Unfortunately, it'll probably take some incidents to push organizations toward privacy-first, on-device AI processing and stronger security measures. Synthetic data will be widely used for training. Generative AI has dominated the last couple years, but other aspects—robotics, cross-functional scientific applications—are going to start

having breakthroughs. We'll see early iterations of AGI for specific use cases and the beginning of regulatory oversight.

In workspaces, human-AI collaboration will evolve rapidly. Interfaces will become more intuitive. And I think we're at the beginning—not the end—of transitioning away from just chat windows. AI will embed into hardware in our personal lives. That's going to be a big shift.

For my work, I'll continue helping organizations and leaders navigate these transformations by understanding the patterns—because every breakthrough technology throughout history has faced the same adoption challenges. My role is to help people recognize those patterns, decode resistance as intelligence rather than obstruction, and build cultures where AI and humans reach their highest potential together.

The future won't belong to people who fear AI or blindly chase it—but to those who partner with it thoughtfully, creatively, and courageously.

BIO

Jordache Johnson is a practical futurist and technology adoption strategist who helps organizations successfully navigate AI transformation by understanding the patterns of how breakthrough technologies actually get adopted. With a Master of Science in Technology Commercialization from UT Austin's McCombs School of Business, experience as a software startup co-founder, and a background scaling digital businesses through his growth agency, Jordache brings a unique perspective combining historical pattern recognition, organizational psychology, and systems thinking. As an international keynote speaker and strategic advisor, he's known for making complex technological concepts accessible through frameworks like The ADAPT System™, The 5 Invisible Forces™, and The AI Ascension Ladder — helping leaders build AI-powered cultures where humans and machines thrive together.

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Working Alongside AI: Becoming a Superhuman Consultant

Michael McGreevy

"Before ChatGPT showed up, I was a solo consultant helping small businesses solve problems, map growth strategies, and redesign customer experiences."

The Before State

Before ChatGPT showed up, I was a solo consultant helping small businesses solve problems, map growth strategies, and redesign customer experiences.

I genuinely loved the work. But as a lone operator, there were limits to my output. I could only take on so many clients at once. Every workshop or strategy session was just me, myself, and I.

What I really wanted was a partner. Someone to challenge my thinking and hold the details while I focused on the big picture.

The Turning Points

Then, in late 2022, I opened ChatGPT for the first time.

I actually grabbed my phone and took a photo of the screen. I wanted to mark that exact moment because something deep down told me: *everything's about to change*. I'd never seen a tool respond with that kind of nuance, fluidity, and what felt like genuine understanding.

At first, I treated it like a playground. I threw at it the kinds of questions I usually wrestled with alone:

Could it help me stress-test a growth strategy?

Could it structure a workshop outline?

Could it spot patterns in customer behavior faster than I could?

Turns out? Yes. To all of it.

One of the first "wow" moments came while working with a residential construction company. Their growth was stagnant and profits were thin.

Using AI as my thought partner, we:

Dialed in their ideal customer profile and put new words to their positioning.

Mapped their entire customer journey in vivid detail.

Redesigned every touchpoint—from initial inquiry to post-project follow-up.

Created a brand-new revenue stream by actually charging for estimation and preliminary design work that they'd been giving away for free.

What normally would've taken six months of incremental workshops was knocked out in three weeks. Each session with their team felt like three meetings in one. I was still the one facilitating and translating for the leaders—but it was like I had a team of strategists and creative problem-solvers backing me up.

That's when it hit me: *I'm not a solo consultant anymore. I'm like a superhuman team because of AI.*

The After State

Since that moment, AI has amplified my strengths and covered my weaknesses.

Where I'm naturally strong—strategy, systems thinking, customer experience—AI helps me go faster and dig deeper. Where I'm weaker—tedious documentation, exploring every possible angle, restructuring content—AI just quietly handles it.

My work with leaders and teams has shifted in some big ways:

I cover way more ground in a single engagement.

I bring sharper insights and richer options into every conversation.

I deliver in weeks what used to take months, without burning myself out in the process.

Clients see faster momentum and clearer decisions. I feel like the conductor of a highly capable, advisory team.

The Human Impact

AI hasn't just changed what I can do—it's changed the energy I have about my work.

There's a genuine fire in my day now. I want every leader I cross paths with to experience what it's like to have this kind of thought partner sitting next to them. I genuinely believe every leader in every business should be working alongside AI in some way that makes them better at what they already do.

Of course, there are some heavier emotions underneath all that excitement:

Urgency: I see how fast the gap is growing between AI-enabled businesses and the ones resisting the shift.

Responsibility: I'm not just playing around with cool tech—I'm guiding leaders whose livelihoods, teams, and customers are on the line.

Quiet worry: That some truly great businesses might quietly drift into irrelevance, not because they're bad at what they do, but because they never made the cultural shift to become AI-enabled.

At the same time, there's a new clarity in my own identity. I'm not just a consultant anymore. I'm an AI integration guide for small businesses—someone who helps them step into this new way of working without losing their humanity or their soul in the process.

The Lessons

A few high-impact, less obvious lessons have landed hard from this journey:

AI doesn't erase your limits—it reveals them. When you remove the constraint of time and capacity, you quickly see where your real bottlenecks are: courage, clarity, decision-making, and culture. AI can't fix a lack of ownership or alignment—it just brings those gaps into brutal focus.

Culture is the real AI infrastructure. Tools matter, but they're not the main thing. The businesses that are going to win aren't just the ones "using AI"—they're the ones that normalize curiosity, experimentation, and learning in the day-to-day. AI adoption is way less about software rollouts and way more about shifting habits and mindsets.

Working with AI turns solo work into a team sport. When you suddenly have what feels like a team of strategists around you, you have to change how you think, plan, and communicate. You design better prompts, structure clearer problems, and create processes that let this invisible team actually contribute. It forces a whole new level of intentionality.

The Future

When I look ahead to 2026, I see two very different paths businesses could take.

Path 1: The Strategic Adopters

These businesses invest real time and energy into AI education for their teams. They don't just chase cost savings—they explore new revenue streams, new ways of working with customers, and entirely new forms of value that AI makes possible.

Their leaders learn to work with AI as a trusted thought partner, not a shiny toy.

I'll be equipping more teams to live in this new reality.

Path 2: The Spectators

Then there are the businesses that delay. They tell themselves they'll "get to AI later." They treat it as a side project instead of a cultural shift.

These businesses will be at a competitive disadvantage—not because they lack talent or heart, but because the world around them has accelerated. At best, they've only used AI to speed up the old playbook instead of imagining entirely new ones.

My Hope

I'll be spending the next few years pulling as many leaders as possible into that first path. A guide who can walk through the messy middle with them as they learn to become truly AI-enabled.

BIO

Michael McGreevy helps business leaders turn AI into their superpower. As founder of ZoomOut Group, he combines 20+ years of sales, marketing, and operations experience to make AI practical and profitable for small and mid-size businesses—no tech jargon required.

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From Reactive Consultant to Strategic Partner

Gabe Olsen

"I shifted from being a reactive consultant to a strategic partner — and in that shift, AI became not just a technology story, but a personal one about purpose, scale, and impact."

The Before State

Before generative AI broke into the mainstream in late 2022, life at my firm was defined by steady progress and deliberate modernization. As part of the IT organization, my world revolved around large, structured initiatives: migrating to a new ERP, standing up a data lakehouse, improving enterprise reporting, and supporting design technologies that drove our transportation projects. We already engaged in applied AI and data science work for clients — things like traffic prediction, toll optimization, and machine learning for infrastructure analysis — but those were specialized use cases. AI lived in the data science teams, not in everyone's daily workflow. It was something we did, not something we *were*. My own role was that of an in-house IT consultant: reactive, responsive, and often embedded in solving the next immediate problem. I thrived on solving puzzles, but I was starting to feel restless. I wanted something that re-lit the spark of curiosity and creativity I felt earlier in my career. I didn't know it yet, but AI was about to become that catalyst.

The Turning Points

When ChatGPT appeared, I watched from the sidelines at first. There was plenty of hype, and my instinct was to observe, not jump in. But as conversations about generative AI started bubbling up in leadership circles, I saw an opening — not just to learn something new, but to help shape how we approached it as a company.

The first real inflection point came when our IT Architecture team partnered with Microsoft to get early access to Copilot. The moment I began exploring what large language models could actually do — analyzing, writing, reasoning, and integrating knowledge — the lightbulb went on. My brain flooded with potential use cases. This wasn't just another productivity tool; it was a paradigm shift in how people could access and extend intelligence.

I started carving out nights and weekends to learn, experiment, and map the implications for our firm. I didn't feel skepticism as much as responsibility — to design, guide, and govern this well. Within months, I knew this was the next chapter of my career. It took nearly two years for that conviction to become official, but eventually I transitioned into a full-time role as AI Service Delivery Manager, helping lead enterprise AI strategy and enablement across the company.

The After State

Today, my role sits at the intersection of innovation, governance, and leadership. I've shifted from being a doer to being a strategic partner. Instead of waiting for problems to arrive in my inbox, I'm proactively engaging leaders across every business unit to help them understand what this AI wave means for their people, processes, and data. Our team developed an AI Strategic Plan and I now lead large portions of its implementation — ensuring that AI in our firm is not a fad, but a framework.

Personally, the change has been profound. I think on multiple altitudes at once — toggling between a 50,000-foot strategic view and ground-level conversations with engineers, designers, and analysts. Over the years, I've learned how to tailor communication to diverse audiences, and this role has allowed me to put those skills fully to use: meeting people where they are, framing AI in ways that connect to their realities, and helping each audience see both the opportunity and the responsibility that come with this technology. I've also learned that leadership in the AI era isn't just about knowing the technology; it's about pacing change so people can absorb it.

The Human Impact

The excitement I feel each morning "going to work" is the kind of energy I didn't realize I was missing. There are moments of awe and moments of anxiety — when I look at the existential questions generative AI raises for work, creativity, and society. But more often than not, it feels like standing at the edge of something historic. I still shake my head that I'm excited for work on a Monday, or after coming back from a vacation - what an incredibly fortunate state to be in.

On a personal level, I think often about my children and the world they'll inherit. I want them to thrive in a future that is both intelligent and humane. I hope AI can help us tackle the climate crisis, even as I wrestle with the irony of its energy demands. Beneath it all is a quiet

conviction: I've been given the chance to make a meaningful impact — not on the whole world, but in the communities, clients, and people within my reach.

The Lessons

Curiosity is a career catalyst. What began as casual exploration turned into a defining professional pivot. Staying curious opened doors I didn't know existed.

Leadership is translation. In the age of AI, the most valuable skill isn't just technical literacy — it's the ability to communicate clearly across fear, hype, and misunderstanding.

Pacing matters more than perfection. Change fatigue is real. Success comes from designing AI adoption with empathy, not just efficiency.

The Future

By 2026, I see my firm with a mature AI operating model — a culture where AI literacy is embedded, and AI tools are woven naturally into design, planning, and delivery. We will have an expanded AI team, more refined governance, and a clearer sense of where human creativity and machine intelligence intersect. The industry itself will continue to evolve and prepare for ongoing rapid change, and so will I.

Wherever my career leads next, I know this experience — helping a leading transportation engineering firm evolve into an AI-enabled enterprise — will be foundational. The mix of strategy, ethics, and human understanding required to lead through this moment has changed how I see myself, and what kind of leader I want to be.

BIO

Gabe Olsen is the AI Service Delivery Manager at one of the nation's top infrastructure solutions firms. Born and raised in Kansas City, he lives there with his wife and two amazing children. When not working on AI strategy and implementation he enjoys reading, the outdoors, sports, and working with Lead to Read to improve literacy across the community.

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From Dashboards to AI Collaborator: My Journey with Generative AI

Brian Piper

"AI, when it arrived in late 2022, did not enter my life through strategy decks or innovation committees. It walked in through the kitchen."

The Before State

I used to think my job was mostly about content. For eight years at the University of Rochester, my days were defined by dashboards, spreadsheets, and performance reports. As Director of Content Strategy and Assessment, I lived in the space between what we published and how our audiences responded.

Most of my time was spent sifting through data. Which pages were working? Which campaigns were falling flat? Were we reaching the right students, families, and stakeholders, and were we saying anything that meaningfully moved them? It was thoughtful work, but also heavy and slow. Insights came, but only after long stretches of analysis and manual pattern-hunting. I often felt like I was spending more time *proving* impact than actually increasing it.

AI, when it arrived in late 2022, did not enter my life through strategy decks or innovation committees. It walked in through the kitchen.

My wife and I have six kids, and I'm the cook and the shopper. That means every week used to start with the same mental marathon. Planning meals, juggling preferences, stretching the budget, and trying not to make the same five dinners on repeat. When I first opened ChatGPT, I didn't ask it to transform higher ed marketing. I asked it to help me organize groceries and plan meals for eight people.

And it worked.

But it only worked when I gave it enough context, dietary preferences, schedules, leftovers, what we actually had in the pantry. I learned quickly that the quality of the output was directly tied to the clarity and depth of the input. That simple household experiment quietly

taught me one of the core truths I now build an entire consulting practice around: AI isn't magic, it's collaboration.

The Turning Points

The professional turning point came when I pointed that same collaborative mindset at my university work.

I started feeding AI the kind of data I'd been manually wrestling with for years, content performance metrics, audience behavior, campaign outcomes. Instead of spending months combing through the numbers, I suddenly had an assistant that could help me summarize, compare, and surface patterns in days. One week, I did what would previously have taken me three months.

That wasn't just a productivity win, it was a proof point.

I took those results to my boss and said, essentially, "This isn't hypothetical. This is already changing how we work." That conversation opened the door to launching the Marcom AI Committee at the university, a formal recognition that AI wasn't a side experiment anymore, but a capability we needed to develop as a team.

The After State

Today, as founder of AlrFlow Solutions, I help higher education institutions and SMBs integrate AI into their content marketing workflows. But I don't start by asking, "Which AI tool do you want to try?" I start with, "How do you work now, and where does your expertise truly matter?" From there, we design ways for AI to augment that expertise, whether that's accelerating analysis, generating structured drafts, or creating decision-ready summaries.

And it's important to ensure that organizations are focused on responsible, ethical, and safe integration of these technologies. Awareness and education are the keys to understanding and mitigating the risks.

On a personal level, AI has shifted my identity from "content strategist who analyzes data" to "translator between human expertise and machine capability." I spend more of my time coaching, reassuring, and re-framing than I expected. It's as much leadership and change management as it is technical integration.

The Human Impact

Emotionally, this shift has been a mix of excitement and responsibility. Excitement, because I've seen people reclaim hours of their week and refocus on higher-level work. Responsibility, because I know that if we roll this out poorly, without support, training, and honest conversations, we risk burning people out or making them feel obsolete.

Over the last few years, a few non-obvious but high-impact lessons have emerged for me.

The Lessons

The biggest gains come from rethinking workflows, not adding tools. Dropping AI into a broken process just makes you faster at being inefficient. Redesigning the process around human-AI collaboration is where the real leverage lives.

People don't resist AI; they resist identity threat. When someone feels like their value is being questioned, no tool will feel "safe." Framing AI as a way to *amplify* their expertise, not replace it, is essential.

Prompting is less about clever tricks and more about operational clarity. The better you understand your own goals, constraints, and definitions of success, the more powerful AI becomes. Ambiguous thinking leads to ambiguous outputs.

The Future

Looking ahead to 2026 and beyond, I see another identity shift coming, this time not just for individuals, but for organizations.

I expect we'll move into an era dominated by AI personal agents that mediate how we encounter information. Instead of going directly to websites or search engines, more of us will ask our agents, and they'll pull, filter, and contextualize content just for us. That means businesses will increasingly need to think in terms of B2A (business-to-agent) or even A2A (agent-to-agent) communication.

Websites won't disappear, but their purpose will slowly change. They'll be less like digital brochures and more like structured knowledge hubs that AI agents can parse, interpret, and repurpose for the humans they serve. The real "audience" for much of our content will be machines acting on behalf of people.

That prediction is, of course, speculative, but if it's even partially right, it raises both opportunities and challenges. On the plus side, people could get more relevant, less noisy

information, tailored to their context. On the downside, brands will have less direct control over how they're represented, and the gap between organizations that prepare their content for AI agents and those that don't will widen significantly.

For me personally, I expect my work to keep moving further into the space between strategy, operations, and human psychology, helping leaders not just "adopt AI," but redesign their systems, expectations, and skill sets around it. Most teams will start with efficiency, but the real goal is innovation. I went in thinking AI integration was about tools, and discovered it was really about redesigning how people work, and how they see themselves.

BIO

Brian Piper is an award-winning author, international keynote speaker, and consultant who has been optimizing digital content since 1996. He co-authored the second edition of *Epic Content Marketing* with Joe Pulizzi, wrote *Epic Content Marketing for Higher Education*, and hosts the *AI for U* podcast.

He helps higher education and mission-driven organizations collaborate with AI to make their work smarter, faster, and more human, bridging the gap between innovation and impact.

When he's not creating data visualizations, he teaches wingsuit skydiving and spends time with his wife and six children.

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From Marketing Leader to AI Systems Architect

Brian Radichel

"From Marketing Leader to AI Systems Architect. AI didn't make me less of a marketer. It finally let me build the version of marketing I always knew was possible."

The Before State

Before the AI wave hit in late 2022, I was already running a complex machine.

As VP of Marketing for a major industrial distributor, I was responsible for eCommerce, training, and MarCom — all layered on top of legacy systems, entrenched processes, and the constant reality of people, products, and expectations. My days were fast, self-directed, and heavy with operational gravity.

I came into marketing through engineering. My background in electrical engineering and systems integration trained me to think structurally — inputs, outputs, constraints, failure modes. Traditional marketing, by contrast, often felt ornamental. Too slow. Too manual. Too focused on surface-level polish instead of systems and leverage.

I could see the tools I wanted — systems that connected data, insight, and execution — but building them always ran into the same wall: time, cost, or organizational readiness. I lived in the gap between what I knew was possible and what the business was prepared to support.

Efficiency, at that point, was something you earned through effort. Bandwidth was the hard limit.

The Turning Points

That changed in late 2022 with the release of ChatGPT.

Like most people, I started out experimenting. GPT-3 was interesting — clever, even fun — but not yet essential. The shift came in early 2023 when I started using it for real work:

solving engineering problems, pressure-testing ideas, and eventually — almost as a joke — asking it to build a strategic marketing plan.

The output stopped me cold.

What I saw wasn't just content generation. It was a thinking partner. A way to externalize cognition, test assumptions, and accelerate planning. When GPT-3.5 arrived, the line was crossed. This wasn't a novelty anymore — it was infrastructure.

I began integrating AI into how I planned, decided, and created. Then I brought my MarCom team in. From there, things accelerated quickly: custom GPTs for internal users, secure internal workflows, containerized environments, and a steadily growing group of AI-enabled employees.

AI stopped being a tool I used occasionally. It became the nervous system of how I operated

The After State

Today, I don't just *use* AI — I design systems around it.

My workday runs on an ecosystem of models and tools: Gemini handling continuous research, VS Code paired with Claude for rapid “vibe-coding,” and a custom-built Co-CMO model — now in its fifth iteration — inspired by Paul Roetzer’s framework and tuned specifically to how I think and lead.

I'm currently building two major AI-driven platforms:

- a company-wide CRM
- a total addressable market (TAM) calculator to guide sales and marketing strategy

The objective is clear: by 2026, marketing is fully digitized. Executives and sales leaders won't wait for reports — they'll ask questions and get answers. AI becomes the analyst, the strategist, and the connective tissue.

AI is now my quiet force multiplier. Wrike project plans are generated and stress-tested automatically. Power Automate delivers daily industry intelligence. Marketing is no longer a promotional function — it's a real-time intelligence engine shaping how the company understands its market.

The Human Impact

This transformation hasn't just changed my workflow — it's changed me.

For the first time in my career, the systems I used to sketch mentally can be built immediately. No budget cycles. No external dev teams. If I can describe it, I can build it. That capability reawakened the engineer I thought I'd left behind.

Stress — once a constant — has dropped dramatically. Firefighting has been replaced by clarity, structure, and proactive design. Not everyone sees it that way. Some still view AI as a fad, and I'm sure a few see me as an over-caffeinated nerd chasing shiny objects.

That's fine.

My response is simple: ship value. Fast. Every automated report, every reclaimed hour, every insight delivered ahead of schedule makes the case for me. This isn't about tools. It's about leverage.

The Lessons

Three lessons stand out — none of them obvious at the start:

1. AI doesn't replace leadership — it amplifies it.

AI reflects the discipline and systems thinking you bring to it. It magnifies strengths and exposes gaps just as quickly.

2. Speed creates credibility.

In organizations that change slowly, visible results delivered faster than expected are the strongest argument you can make.

3. Marketing is now an intelligence function.

Messaging still matters — but the real value is situational awareness. Markets move at machine speed now. Companies have to as well.

The Future

By 2026, I expect to be operating inside a fully digitized sales and marketing ecosystem — one where insights, actions, and strategy are continuously informed by data and AI.

Our website will evolve from a B2B catalog into an intelligence platform. The systems I'm building — CRM, TAM modeling, automated research pipelines — will act as the brainstem of an adaptive organization.

There will always be resistance. That's normal. But resistance fades when results compound.

As for me, I've settled into something that finally fits: part engineer, part strategist, part translator — an AI systems architect wearing a marketing title.

BIO

As Vice President of Marketing and Business Development at Purvis Industries, I lead a team of technical specialists and marketing professionals focused on delivering practical, high-impact solutions and exceptional service across a wide range of industrial markets. With more than 26 years of experience spanning system integration, control engineering, and business development, I've built a career around driving growth, improving operational efficiency, and creating measurable value for both customers and the business.

My background includes deep hands-on experience in automation, PLCs, and AC & DC drives, along with serving as a certified trainer for ABB LV drives. I also bring broad expertise across IoT, material handling, fluid power, power transmission, and gearing. I'm passionate about staying ahead of emerging technologies in industrial automation and applying them in ways that meaningfully improve processes, systems, and decision-making. My focus is on building a culture of collaboration, innovation, and accountability — internally at Purvis and across our partner and customer relationships.

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From Starting From Zero to Confident Creation

Victoria Torrano

"Curiosity led me to create my own AI-powered "Online Chef," a harmless experiment that sparked something bigger — a sense that AI could extend my capabilities rather than replace them."

The Before State

Before generative AI became part of my daily life, my work in marketing and communications at an international K-12 school in Switzerland was defined by repetition. Articles took long stretches of focused time, and the constant demand for polished, timely communication left little room for creativity. Much of the job felt like wrestling with the same tasks over and over again, always starting from zero.

I considered myself capable and dedicated, but I also felt the natural limits of time, energy, and human output. Some tasks — especially those requiring structured analysis or spreadsheet fluency — felt like barriers I had learned to tolerate rather than overcome. Creativity required bandwidth I often didn't have.

The Turning Points

The shift began almost accidentally, with a marketing webinar where Brian W. Piper used AI to generate simple family menus. It was playful, yet profound: if AI could simplify everyday life, why couldn't it also reshape my work?

Curiosity led me to create my own AI-powered "Online Chef," a harmless experiment that sparked something bigger — a sense that AI could extend my capabilities rather than replace them.

The real inflection point happened when I recorded an interview at work and fed the transcript into ChatGPT. Within moments, it produced a polished, full article that matched

our tone, structure, and intentions. It didn't feel like cheating; it felt like breathing room. I realized my work didn't have to be bottlenecked by time-consuming processes anymore.

The After State

Today, AI is embedded in how I think, learn, and operate. I've become more agile in adopting new technologies and more strategic in how I shape my team's workflows.

I'm not afraid that AI will take my job; I'm convinced that without it, I would already be falling behind. Instead, AI has amplified my professional value.

One of the biggest shifts has been building an AI-powered Communications Assistant for our entire team. It helps us maintain the school's tone of voice across all channels while producing high-quality copy at speed. This has strengthened our brand consistency and reduced the creative burden on individuals.

AI has also become our quiet partner in data analytics — a previously painful area, especially for a team that never felt naturally fluent with spreadsheets. Now, insights that used to take hours (or were simply avoided) can be surfaced in minutes.

Finally, my custom GPT "Co-MarCom" is my strategic advisor for all sorts of business decisions and our custom GPT parent personas are great sounding boards that we check before launching impactful changes in our school.

Without embracing AI, my skillset would have already become obsolete, but with it, I've become more capable, confident, and creative than I ever imagined.

The Human Impact

Emotionally, AI has made me feel more empowered, not less. I no longer measure my worth by how long I can grind through repetitive work. Instead, I measure my impact by the clarity of ideas and the strategies I can now focus on.

There's also a sense of relief — the kind that comes from realizing I no longer have to be an expert in every technical skill to make meaningful contributions. AI fills the gaps without judgment.

Confidence has grown alongside capability. I'm no longer intimidated by emerging tools or new concepts. I feel more future-proof, more adaptable, and more aligned with where my profession is heading.

The Lessons

Here are the top three non-obvious insights I've gained:

AI doesn't replace expertise — it reveals where your expertise actually matters. Once AI took over the repetitive tasks, I could finally see the strategic parts of my job clearly.

Embracing AI isn't about speed; it's about identity. I had to shift from being the person who *does everything manually* to the person who *designs smarter systems*.

Teams don't need technical skills to benefit from AI — they need psychological permission. Once we normalized using AI for writing and data work, people contributed more confidently, even in areas they once avoided.

The Future

By 2026, I expect AI to be fully woven into our workflows — not just as a writing assistant, but as a suite of proactive agents managing tasks, surfacing insights, and automating processes end-to-end.

I see us moving beyond one-off prompts into true workflow automation, where the work itself flows more naturally from idea to execution.

I also anticipate the cultural shift becoming even more important than the technical one. The teams that thrive will be the ones who embrace AI emotionally — who see it not as a threat but as a collaborative force.

For my own career, I expect to become more strategic, more systems-focused, and even more centered on shaping AI adoption within my organization.

BIO

Victoria Torrano is a marketing and communications leader based in Basel, Switzerland. She currently serves as Head of Marketing and Communications at the International School Basel

(ISB), where she oversees the school's communication, with a specific focus on creative content production and brand storytelling. Previously, she held various leadership positions in Communications at the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), a financial international organisation that fosters financial global stability.

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SECTION 4

Leading AI Adoption at Work

From Fear to Fuel: Redefining Leadership in the Age of AI

Jason Cabrera

"At the time, I was a senior marketing specialist. AI had been on my radar, but I hadn't yet seen its real-world potential. My first thought wasn't excitement, it was fear."

The Before State

December 14, 2022: It was supposed to be another marketing webinar — *The Future of B2B Marketing* with Paul Roetzer — until ChatGPT 3.5 changed everything.

At the time, I was a senior marketing specialist. AI had been on my radar, but I hadn't yet seen its real-world potential. My first thought wasn't excitement — it was fear.

"If this tool can research, write, and analyze," I wondered, "what happens to my role?" But within hours of experimenting, that fear flipped into fascination. I realized this wasn't a threat to my work. It was a doorway to reimagining *how* we work. AI wasn't just an automation tool; it was a framework for creative and cognitive reinvention.

This is how one marketer's curiosity about ChatGPT ignited a journey from anxiety to innovation, and sparked a company-wide transformation toward AI enablement.

The Turning Points

That spark ignited a year-long learning sprint through 2023. I immersed myself in every course, podcast, and resource I could find — from *Piloting AI for Marketers* to *AI for Content Creators*.

I studied under experts like Ann Handley, Andy Crestodina, and Christopher S. Penn, who revealed how AI could amplify creativity, precision, and empathy. Andy's insight still resonates:

"AI can build your personas — but it's your job to give them a soul."

That single line reframed how I viewed marketing forever. I began using AI not as a replacement, but as a creative partner — building adaptive, dynamic customer personas that evolved like living stories.

By early 2024, my focus had shifted from *learning AI* to *leading with it*. When Paul Roetzer challenged me at the *AI for B2B Marketers Summit* to “grab the bull by the horns” and create an AI enablement role if one didn’t exist, I accepted.

That challenge marked my leap from observer to builder.

The After State

In September 2024, I transitioned from Manager of Marketing Automation to become my organization’s first AI-Enablement Business Partner — a defining moment for both me and the American Arbitration Association (AAA).

As the AAA approaches its 100th anniversary, the organization is focused not just on honoring its legacy, but ensuring it remains a leader for the next century. My role was created to help make that possible — to embed AI into the culture responsibly, creatively, and collaboratively.

In my first year, I’ve led initiatives that brought AI from theory into daily practice: AI Champions Network — a cross-divisional team of early adopters mentoring peers and guiding responsible AI use.

Custom GPT Workshops — hands-on sessions helping staff design task-specific AI assistants that mirror AAA’s professionalism and neutrality.

Company-wide Promptathons — interactive training events that turned AI experimentation into collective innovation.

The results speak for themselves. Nearly four out of five employees completed at least one AI training, with thousands of course completions and sustained engagement across ChatGPT Enterprise and Microsoft Copilot Chat. Adoption grew more than 600% in the first year, positioning AAA above global industry benchmarks.

This foundation has shifted our culture from *AI awareness* to *AI fluency*. We've proven that when employees are empowered and trained, AI can strengthen — not compromise — an organization's human values of fairness, accuracy, and professionalism.

If our employees are no longer doing mundane tasks, what training do they need to think 10x, not 10%? That's the question that will define the next era of work.

The Human Impact

AI didn't just change my career; it rewired how I define value.

The tools took over the repetitive tasks — but in doing so, they exposed the deeper work I was meant to do: thinking, designing, and helping others grow.

My mindset shifted from *What will AI do to me?* to *What will I do because of AI?*

That pivot unleashed creativity and purpose. I began to see leadership not as having answers, but as cultivating better questions — questions about ethics, equity, and the evolving role of humans in an AI-driven world.

The Lessons

AI adoption isn't technical — it's cultural.

When organizations hand AI strategy solely to IT, they miss the point. IT builds systems. True transformation happens when humans learn to build *value*.

You can't automate empathy.

AI can mimic logic, but not integrity. Human oversight remains the bridge between capability and conscience.

Fear is just untapped data.

My fear of replacement became the signal that reinvention was overdue. Every disruption hides a map to your next level of growth.

The Future

In 2026, we're entering the next chapter of AAA's AI journey — one that blends applied innovation with ethical design.

We'll be launching the Applied AI Innovation Lab: Build Your Digital Teammate — Case Administrator Edition, an initiative that challenges teams to design their own AI-powered "digital teammate."

This lab invites employees to imagine a virtual Case Administrator — an assistant that reflects AAA's neutrality, professionalism, and procedural accuracy. Participants will collaborate in ChatGPT or Copilot Chat to design intelligent assistants capable of handling routine workflows while upholding human judgment and fairness.

The most promising blueprints will be reviewed by leadership and may evolve into divisional pilot projects later in the year.

More than a workshop, this Lab symbolizes where the future of work is heading: humans and AI co-designing systems together — responsibly, creatively, and aligned with organizational purpose.

As AAA celebrates 100 years of service, we're not just commemorating the past — we're prototyping the next century. Because longevity in the AI era won't come from speed alone, but from the courage to continuously reinvent.

BIO

AI-Enablement Business Partner

Empowering people to reimagine the AI-enabled future, Jason bridges AI literacy and business strategy to help organizations think smarter, work faster, and innovate responsibly. As an AI advocate, his mission is to make AI accessible and actionable for everyone — fostering understanding, creativity, and ethical integration that drives lasting impact in the digital age.

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Becoming an AI-Forward Leader

Devrin Carlson-Smith

“Every successful AI program I’ve seen rests on the same foundation: clear value, courageous leadership, and a workforce invited to help shape the change, rather than endure it.”

The Before State

Becoming an AI-Forward Leader Long before Generative AI became a headline topic, my work had already been centered on large-scale digital transformation. At Microsoft, I worked with media and entertainment leaders such as Viacom, News Corp, Disney, and Time Warner as they shifted from tape-based operations to digital content businesses. Their digital transformation was not a matter of swapping tools; it required reimagining core business models, protecting rights in a digital world, and inventing entirely new offerings—from early HBO streaming concepts and MTV’s Overdrive to CNN’s first-generation streaming platforms.

The same pattern of transformation change extended onto Madison Avenue, where I worked with major agency holding companies to move beyond television, print, and outdoor as their primary mediums and incorporate digital as a core part of their creative and strategic offerings. The goal was not to bolt on digital channels, but to embed digital-thinking into how brands reached and engaged audiences.

In 2018, I helped re-imagine the retail, service and hospitality job market for REITs and global shopping complexes using early ML intelligence. Driven by market need, we created a video-based job marketplace where candidates created short video profiles which were matched to available positions they knew about, and those they didn’t, all using early ML/AI—turning an old, paper-based, door-to-door process into a scalable, multi-tenant hiring platform.

This transformation continued when I became COO of a global e-commerce company, and the potential AI could bring. We were investing over \$150 million a year in paid media and receiving dense, fragmented data from platforms such as Meta, Google, Amazon and The Trade Desk. Traditional reporting could not keep pace with the complexity. We began exploring how ML/AI could integrate and normalize these data streams, compare performance, and support more intelligent allocation of spend.

The Turning Points

Early versions of ChatGPT were limited—especially with numerical accuracy—but the trajectory was unmistakable. Natural language interfaces were beginning to make it possible to interrogate large, unstructured datasets in ways that would previously have required teams of analysts. This marked the start of an AI-forward approach to reimagining traditional businesses and ultimately led to the founding of Extraordinary AI. Extraordinary AI was established as a strategic advisory to demystify AI for diverse organizations, help them get from 0-1 with AI and to apply decades of transformation experience to building AI-driven leaders and AI-forward organizations.

The After State

Scramble, Skepticism, and a New Operating Model

The first major test of that conviction came with a global commercial property group. I was invited to an executive off-site and given not a keynote slot, but an entire day with more than a hundred leaders, most of whom had little practical understanding of AI.

I was required to assemble a full-day experience: demos, live prompting, videos, and structured workshops. When I walked into the room, the energy was classic “arms folded, prove it.” My reputation—and the viability of Extraordinary AI—was on the line. By the end of the day, skepticism had softened into enthusiastic curiosity. The executives could see AI not as a gimmick, but as a lens for efficiency, productivity, innovation, and competitive advantage. I had my green light.

That, however, was only the beginning. A green light doesn’t build capability. The real task was to help a large, complex organization move from zero practical experience to an AI-forward operating model while the frontier models, tools and governance norms were in their infancy across the industry.

Our first major project was a voice agent for hotel bookings. The AI could handle conversations, but the back-office systems were not yet prepared to integrate and act on that data. We encountered friction, frustration, and a strong preference in some teams to “keep doing it the old way.” It was a confronting moment, and it forced us to rethink our approach.

The breakthrough was realizing that AI couldn't simply be 'installed.' It was a mindset-shift and had to be grown from within. That insight led to the AI Ambassador Program, which remains one of our flagship programs and has trained hundreds of executives and employees.

We selected 25 people from 15 departments and equipped them with a shared understanding of AI, practical tools, and a clear mandate: map your workflows, identify repetitive, predictive, data-heavy, and generative tasks, and surface opportunities. Each ambassador produced a concise business case/problem, opportunity, challenge, solution, and path forward—that fed into the AI Council. AI stopped being abstract and became a portfolio of concrete use cases. This process aimed to repeat itself until everyone participated. In 90 days identified 60 AI use cases across 15 departments with >\$4M year-one impact.

From there, in the first year, we built three flagship solutions:

- A Knowledge Hub that turned thousands of documents into a natural-language searchable system, reducing search time by 70% and improving accuracy by over 35%
- A Finance application that cut tax apportionment work of 20 accountants from 1,440 hours to about 400, cut tax close & reconciliation from 90 days to 16 days (72% reduction).
- An HR multi-agent flow that has screened over 4,500 applications unbiasedly, identified hidden talent and reduced manual review time by more than 80%.

These were not prototypes; they were working enterprise systems returning real hours and real value, implemented with appropriate governance and risk management and bringing payback periods in months not years.

The Human Impact

Professionally, AI has amplified my ability to design, test, and communicate complex strategies. It has become my thought-partner in pattern recognition, scenario exploration, and solution design—allowing me to bring more rigor, speed, and clarity to transformation programs. The deeper impact, however, has been human.

I've helped executives move from fear and skepticism to agency and curiosity. I've helped volunteer organizations imagine how AI can augment stretched-thin staff. I've built custom AI tools for my parents so they can ask better questions about their health and finances. I've

shown my children how to treat AI as a thought partner (not an answer engine) so they strengthen their critical thinking at school rather than outsource it.

A central belief at Extraordinary AI is that becoming an AI-Forward Leader is as much about people as it is about platforms. Our work is deliberately both top-down and bottom-up: marquee projects that demonstrate tangible value, and human-focused programs that build understanding, reduce anxiety, and invite employees to help shape the AI vision. We ask people not to “train their replacement,” but to co-design better workflows where AI acts as a thought partner and amplifier.

To support this, we created Extraordinary Human—a dedicated offering focused on building resilience, comprehension, and competency on the path toward mastery of AI tools. It is designed to help individuals understand how AI can support their careers and their organizations, and it has become a core differentiator in how we work with clients. AI has also allowed me to integrate decades of digital transformation work into a new chapter.

These same instincts that guided media companies from tape to digital, and agencies from analog to multi-channel, now guide organizations toward AI-forward operating models. The cumulative experience matters: it provides a stable foundation in a rapidly evolving landscape.

I don’t view the absence of a traditional engineering background as a limitation. In a world where coding is increasingly democratized and natural language itself is becoming a powerful interface for building systems, my role is to architect, orchestrate, and translate—to help organizations navigate platforms, tools, and vendors, and bring the right solutions together in service of clear business outcomes, while piquing their curiosity as human creators. Something we all have in us.

The Lessons

Three non-obvious lessons stand out from this journey so far:

- 1. AI transformation is more anthropology than technology.** The real work is understanding fears, incentives, and identity inside organizations. AI models are straightforward compared to navigating trust, uncertainty and fear of the unknown.
- 2. Ambassadors beat announcements.** Top-down memos about AI don’t move the needle. Distributed, empowered believers inside the organization do. The AI Ambassador model, and

the associated EAI adoption methodology have been far more powerful than any single presentation, demo or prototype we've ever built.

3. Imperfect tools can still create powerful momentum. Even when early solutions are rough around the edges, they can generate enthusiasm and unlock insight. By identifying the right use cases and building V1 working prototypes that solve a business challenge that people recognize from their day-to-day work, we've seen skeptics become advocates and teams lean in to co-create the next iteration collaboratively.

The Future

By late 2026, I expect Extraordinary AI to continue to expand our footprint of a wide range portfolio of mid-size and enterprise organizations, applying a refined, repeatable methodology for becoming AI-forward. That framework will continue to evolve in step with advances from leading model providers such as Microsoft, OpenAI, and Anthropic, as well as emerging frontier architectures and agentic frameworks. It will also be shaped by AI literacy initiatives led by thought-leaders, evangelists, researchers, frontier labs and strategic partners such as SmarterX, whose comprehensive education programs are lifting organizational comprehension, competency, and mastery to new levels, across a wide group of executives.

Our focus is to ensure that clients do not feel left behind, but instead understand the practical steps to become AI-driven: building literacy, establishing responsible governance, identifying high-value use cases, deploying solutions that deliver measurable impact and fostering the human spirit. We are already working to fold new capabilities—like more powerful multimodal models and agentic workflows—into our methodology so that organizations can benefit from innovation without shouldering the burden of constant technical catch-up.

In the nearer term, the next 6–12 months are about deepening our role as an indispensable partner to organizations across sectors such as private equity, travel, hotel and tourism, sports federations, consumer packaged goods, and biotech. We aim to be the team, like smokerjumpers, that can step in and add immediate value through quick wins and addressing prioritized “bright-flare” projects, while also designing and delivering “long-fuse” repeatable initiatives that reshape operating models over time. Together, they form a coherent AI roadmap, rather than a collection of isolated experiments.

Organizations that ignore or only partially adopt AI will face increasing pressure—from more agile, AI-native competitors; from talent who seek environments that embrace modern tools; and from the unmanaged spread of “shadow AI” inside their walls. Our work is to help leadership address these challenges proactively, give their teams safe and supported ways to experiment, and turn that experimentation into durable capability as AI-driven leaders.

BIO

Devrin Carlson-Smith is the Founder and Chief AI Officer of Extraordinary AI, a strategic advisory firm dedicated to building AI-driven leaders and AI-forward organizations—advancing AI literacy, education, strategy, and implementation through a fractional AI department model. With nearly 30 years of experience in digital transformation and change management at firms like Microsoft, Omnicom, Publicis and Droga5, he brings a pragmatic, human-centered approach to helping organizations adopt AI responsibly while building confidence and capability at every level.

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Progress, Not Perfection: Leading Through AI Uncertainty

Heather DelCarpini

"AI is not a replacement for human talent. It is an amplifier, and the people who experiment early gain confidence that carries them through every future change."

The Before State

In late 2022, I was leading marketing at a software company where pressure felt constant and progress felt out of reach. The company was struggling, the board was demanding, and my small team was stretched thin. I knew go-to-market strategy inside and out, yet so much of my day was spent managing expectations rather than building momentum. It was a season marked by responsibility without the sense of forward motion I craved, and the atmosphere around me hinted that bigger change was coming.

The Turning Points

When generative AI burst into public view, I kept my distance. It felt suspicious, like cutting corners. I had built my career on strategic thinking, creativity, and hard-won experience. Letting a machine shortcut any of that felt wrong. But then the layoff came, followed by a job market that looked nothing like the one I had been prepared for. Interviews suddenly centered on AI strategy. Marketing roles vanished or shifted under my feet. Dozens of opportunities fell out of reach, and it became clear that something fundamental had changed in the industry I knew so well.

The After State

Instead of resisting, I got curious. I tapped into my network, attended meetups, asked questions, and paid attention to what was actually happening rather than what I wished was happening. Once I began trying the tools for myself, everything sped up. What I found was not cheating. It was expansion. It sparked a sense of possibility I hadn't felt in years. I learned rapidly, experimented constantly, and rebuilt my understanding of the job market and of modern marketing itself. That learning carried me into a new chapter where I now lead

marketing and AI enablement for a half-billion-dollar organization. My work feels alive again. My days feel fueled, not drained.

The deepest transformation, though, has been internal. At the 2024 MAICON, I heard Jessica Hreha ask a simple question: "If not you, then who?" Something in that challenge broke open my hesitation. I began seeing myself not just as someone who could adapt, but as someone who could guide others through change. AI became the spark, but the real shift was belief. I found a level of courage and influence I had not previously claimed, and I stepped into leadership across departments with a confidence that surprised even me.

Today, I move through uncertainty with a steady sense of purpose. I see myself clearly as a lifelong learner, someone who can move through hard seasons and still find a path forward. I am willing to take risks inside an organization that is still forming its AI maturity. I try things, test things, and talk openly about what I am discovering. That spirit has strengthened my identity as a leader and a builder. It has also earned trust across the company because people can feel my commitment to progress, not perfection.

The Human Impact

The personal impact has been just as profound. The stress of the layoff and the tough job market could have narrowed my confidence, but instead it cracked open new ambition. AI helped me reconnect with curiosity, and that curiosity has reshaped how I approach my career and how I see the next decade. I have more clarity, more energy, and more vision for what I can contribute. I have discovered that I can thrive in environments where not everything is mapped out, and that realization has shifted my sense of identity in meaningful ways.

The Lessons

Across this journey, three insights stand out as the most influential:

Learning fast is a superpower when the landscape keeps shifting. What matters most is not mastery, but momentum.

Leadership today requires courage more than certainty. The willingness to move without a full blueprint opens doors others hesitate to touch.

AI is not a replacement for human talent. It is an amplifier, and the people who experiment early gain confidence that carries them through every future change.

The Future

As I look ahead to 2026, I see both promise and pressure on the horizon. I expect that tools will advance quickly, that some roles will compress, and that the organizations willing to rethink structures and workflows will adapt more smoothly. I also anticipate that cross functional leadership will matter far more than title or hierarchy. For me, personally, I see a future where I continue guiding teams through AI adoption, shaping strategy, and supporting people as they navigate change. I know that whatever the tools look like by then, those who stay curious and collaborative will chart the strongest path forward.

If I had to capture my story in one line, it would be this:

I discovered that my willingness to learn, try, and move forward in uncertainty became the foundation of the leader I am becoming.

BIO

Heather DelCarpini is the Head of Marketing and AI Enablement at Catania Oils. She is a lifelong learner, a creative strategist, and a leader who thrives at the intersection of innovation and human connection.

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From Funnels to Foundations: How AI Rewrote My Role as a Leader

Amanda Long

"Three years later, I'm not just a marketer anymore. I'm a translator between human potential and machine capability."

The Before State

Before AI, my workdays were dense and unrelenting. As the owner of a small, three-person marketing agency, I wore every hat — strategist, project manager, copywriter, problem-solver, therapist-for-humans-and-technology alike. My clients were mostly small teams too: a two-person healthcare marketing department, a five-person recruiting firm, and others who relied on us to fill the gaps their lean teams couldn't.

We were constantly context-switching between tools, platforms, and deadlines. The weight of the work wasn't just the hours, it was the *mental fragmentation*. I spent much of my time chasing down documents, troubleshooting broken automations, or rewriting content to make it "sound right." I thought my value was in being the person who could juggle everything, the one who could just "figure it out." But underneath that pride was exhaustion.

Then came late 2022 and ChatGPT.

The Turning Points

I tried it out the week it launched. Instantly, I felt it: that quiet shock of *possibility*. I started small, rephrasing ideas, brainstorming with it like a partner who never ran out of patience. The clarity it gave me in minutes was something I'd been paying for in hours.

That moment shifted everything. I dove in, learning, experimenting, testing every feature and new model as they came out: Gemini, Claude, custom GPTs, workflow builders. The marketer in me, who had spent years designing sales funnels, now saw a new kind of funnel, one that could channel *knowledge* through automation.

Soon I was building internal systems, helping clients document their institutional knowledge, and setting up automations that replaced hours of repetitive work. One CEO client, who had been trapped doing everything herself because “no one else could do it right” finally got ten hours of her week back. Seeing her reclaim that time wasn’t just operationally satisfying; it was *deeply human*. That became the moment I realized this wasn’t just about efficiency.

The After State

Three years later, I’m not just a marketer anymore. I’m a translator between human potential and machine capability.

My agency now helps small teams use AI to amplify their capacity, not replace them, but *unburden* them. We help them think differently about what they can delegate to systems so they can focus on what only humans can do: lead, connect, create.

Personally, I’ve evolved from being a “doer” to being a *designer of systems*. I have more bandwidth, not just in time, but in thought. I can see patterns faster, make better decisions, and support my clients with a depth of clarity I never had before.

The Human Impact

AI didn’t just change my business. It changed *me* as a leader.

I used to run on urgency; now I lead with intention. My days are less frantic, my thinking more strategic. The same technology that once scared people into fearing replacement has, for me, become a mirror, showing me how much of my worth isn’t tied to the grind, but to my ability to adapt, guide, and stay curious.

It’s also made me more compassionate toward my clients. Most of them are small teams who are scrappy, under-resourced, brilliant people just trying to keep up. And I see how overwhelming this wave of change is. AI is evolving faster than even those of us immersed in it can track. But that’s exactly why *AI literacy* matters. Without it, people don’t even know what they don’t know.

Helping clients gain that literacy, helping them think about AI not as a tool but as a *thought partner*, feels like meaningful work. We now prepare people for the future that’s already here instead of focusing on marketing deliverables.

The Lessons

AI isn't just a productivity tool — it's a mirror. It reflects your workflows, your habits, your bottlenecks, and even your fears. The moment you start using it honestly, you see what's truly holding you back.

Small teams can lead big transformations. You don't need a 20-person innovation department. With curiosity and good design, three people can be as powerful as what once took entire departments.

AI literacy is the new leadership literacy. Knowing how to prompt, test, evaluate, and ethically deploy AI will separate those who thrive from those who struggle to keep up.

The Future

By 2026, I believe AI will be woven invisibly into the workflows of nearly every small business, but the gap between those who understand it and those who don't will widen.

I see my role as helping bridge that gap, building not just automations, but *confidence*. Helping small teams understand enough to stay empowered. AI will get faster, more conversational, and more embedded in our daily tools. But the differentiator won't be who has the best tech, it'll be who has the *best habits* around it: curiosity, experimentation, discernment, and a willingness to evolve.

As for me, I plan to keep leading from that place, where marketing meets mindset, where automation meets empathy, and where the human story still drives the technological one. AI didn't just make me faster. It made me a better leader, because it gave me the space to finally think."

BIO

Amanda Long is the founder of a small marketing and operations agency helping small teams integrate AI into their daily workflows. She specializes in helping businesses build AI literacy, automate intelligently, and use technology as a thought partner, freeing teams to focus on creativity, leadership, and meaningful work.

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From Three Months to Three Weeks

Bob Mitton

“Once on the council, I didn’t tinker at the edges. I drove transformation. I became responsible for enabling more than 350 people in the partner marketing organization to adopt AI — specifically Jasper at the time.”

The Before State

Before generative AI arrived, my work at VMware was a mental symphony I conducted entirely in my head. I was the architect and guardian of executive messaging: crafting speeches, writing white papers, shaping partner narratives, guiding thought leadership, orchestrating podcasts, and weaving a single red thread through every asset, every summit, every executive retreat.

My work demanded vast cognitive range — absorbing information across the organization, synthesizing competing viewpoints, interviewing internal and external leaders, producing immaculate deliverables, and ensuring brand alignment across every channel. I held the messaging architecture not just as a framework but almost as an internal operating system. It lived inside of me.

It was demanding, sometimes overwhelming, and entirely dependent on my ability to mentally track everything at once.

The Turning Points

When ChatGPT launched in late 2022, I recognized the magnitude immediately. I didn’t wait to be invited into the AI conversation. I pushed my way in. I fought for a seat on VMware’s AI marketing council because I could already see the opportunity others were only beginning to imagine.

The turning point came when experimentation made the value undeniable. The things I used to labor over — reorganizing content across formats, repurposing thought leadership at scale, maintaining brand voice across dozens of deliverables — suddenly became dramatically easier.

Production cycles collapsed from three months to three weeks. Budgets shrank to a third or a fifth of what they had been. And the consistency of the messaging stack improved, not diminished.

This wasn't just efficiency. It was expansion — of capability, speed, ambition, and what was possible.

The After State

Over two years, my relationship to my work — and my sense of what I could accomplish — fundamentally changed. I have become deeply confident in my ability to use AI effectively, and even more aware that its potential is still unfolding. I no longer feel bound by the constraints that defined the “before” version of my role.

Instead of carrying the entire messaging architecture in my head, I now operate with an augmented mind — one that can hold more ideas, explore more formats, adapt faster, and produce at a level that would have been unthinkable in 2021.

My identity has shifted from strategist and creator to strategist, creator, educator, and advocate. I am no longer just doing the work — I am shaping the conversation around what AI *should* be used for.

The Human Impact

The emotional landscape is complex.

I feel energized by possibility — the sense that I can do more, learn more, and expand further with AI as a partner. I am continually surprised by how much I still don't know, and how much more AI can do every month.

But I also feel the weight of concern. I see how organizations are using AI to replace people rather than elevate them, and I experience real discomfort about unintentionally enabling that mindset.

I worry that the narrative around AI has become too reductionist — too focused on cost-cutting rather than value creation, too obsessed with efficiency instead of excellence. I am trying to steer people toward a more humane and constructive vision.

Perhaps the most surprising emotional effect: my astonishment at how many people, even after three years, still don't understand what AI is capable of. That gap — between potential and awareness — shapes where I feel called to go next.

The Lessons

Here are the three most powerful, non-obvious insights I have gained:

AI doesn't reduce the importance of human judgment — it magnifies it. The more you can delegate mechanical tasks to AI, the more essential your role becomes as the interpreter, the message-carrier, the cultural filter.

Speed isn't the real gift — adaptability is. AI lets you reshape entire messaging ecosystems overnight in response to shifts in leadership priorities, market dynamics, or partner needs. This is a strategic capability, not a production shortcut.

AI adoption is more emotional than technical. The resistance you see isn't about skill gaps — it's about identity, fear, and uncertainty. Tools can be taught; the mindset shift takes real leadership.

The Future

Looking to 2026, I anticipate a widening gap: the people who learn to partner with AI will accelerate dramatically, and the people who avoid it will struggle even more than they do today.

I expect AI to continue enabling high-quality message creation, content orchestration, and cross-format storytelling — but the biggest change will be in how people conceptualize value. I believe the next two years will push the conversation away from headcount reduction and toward quality, differentiation, and brand strength.

My role is shifting into that gap — advocating, educating, demonstrating what “better, not cheaper” actually looks like. I’m exploring what form that message should take as I refine my voice and my platform.

For me, 2026 is not about surviving the AI wave. It’s about shaping it.

Bio

Bob is Co-Founder and Managing Partner at Expera Consulting. His focus is on spearheading the intentional and ethical adoption and scaling of Generative AI within the enterprise.

Expera has consulted with a wide range of organizations from F100's such as The Home

Depot and Elevance Health, institutions such as The American Marketing Association, and venture studios like CAFE and Mucker Capital.

A founding member of VMware's award-winning marketing AI council, Bob now helps companies adopt and deploy AI throughout their marketing organizations. With a proven track record in strategic marketing and a specialization in Generative AI, Bob's expertise lies in guiding organizations through transformative AI integration.

Bob combines his proven thought leadership with practical experience and insights into a range of AI-enabled marketing tools, datasets, and frameworks to help enterprise executives and marketing teams quickly leverage the power of AI for optimized success.

Bob brings more than 20 years of experience in enterprise marketing strategy, product management, and partner marketing engagement, and has driven successful business initiatives on a global scale. He has extensive expertise across the marketing spectrum, including market analysis, product strategy, go-to-market, demand generation, and executive communication.

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SECTION 5

**Human-Led,
Future-Focused**

AI Is Our Newest Colleague: Teaching With Empathy in the Age of AI

John Bustard

"AI is our newest colleague, not our replacement; it challenges us to be more human, not less."

The Before State

Before generative AI became a staple in my toolkit, I was an academic who relied on focused application of traditional instructional design principles in my teaching prep. I curated resources manually and shaped learning experiences through a hands-on, step-by-step process. Each module I built was a careful assembly of learning outcomes, scholarly articles and active learning techniques, all aligned with my institution's standards. In those days, efficiency was a matter of methodical planning and human expertise and the process was particularly time-intensive.

The Turning Points

A pivotal moment arrived when I took a course with Dr. Philippa Hardman, who introduced me to a range of generative AI tools tailored for different phases of learning design. This was the "aha" moment: suddenly, drafting a course outline or surfacing high-quality, up-to-date resources became dramatically faster. AI became not just a convenience but a strategic partner, enabling me to focus more on refining and personalising the learning experience rather than just assembling its parts.

The After State

Now, through Gen AI's application, I find myself at the forefront of educational innovation within my institution. My role has evolved from a careful curator of learning resources to a champion of AI-augmented teaching and active learning. I am not only more efficient but also more influential, guiding colleagues and industry partners through the same transformations via our ELEVATE project (Empowering Learning & Efficacy Via AI Through Education). Yet I remain conscious of the human element, always using my own distinct educator's touch to blend AI capabilities with empathy and insight.

The Human Impact

Of course, the rise of AI has stirred mixed emotions. I see both the promise and the pitfalls: while AI can democratise high-quality education and boost everyone's capacity, it also raises concerns about job security and the shifting sense of purpose among educators. I anticipate a need for cultural support as much as technical training, ensuring that educators and students alike feel valued and purposeful in a landscape where AI is omnipresent.

AI is our newest colleague, not our replacement; it challenges us to be more human, not less.

The Lessons

Three non-obvious lessons emerge from my journey:

First, that integrating AI isn't just about increased efficiency and quality but about thoughtfully augmenting human creativity (I can build bespoke simulations and deploy them in hours - making learning much more relatable and integratable when designed right).

Second, through transparency and open dialogue about AI's role we can enable colleagues to experiment in low stakes ways and reduce fear to build a more collaborative culture.

Third, that the true value of AI in education lies in enhancing, not replacing, the uniquely human aspects of teaching. I can bring my creativity to life in ways I could not have previously imagined. Indeed, partnering with AI has increased my creativity in the class.

The Future

Looking ahead to 2026, I envision a landscape of even greater innovation tempered by the need for empathy and adaptation. I believe that while AI will transform the mechanics of education, the core mission of teaching will remain deeply human. And as someone committed to a better future, I am ready to guide others and celebrate our unique humanity through both the opportunities and the uncertainties that Gen AI, Agentic AI and indeed, AGI will likely bring.

BIO

John is currently Course Director for Business Studies (Part-time students) and Senior Lecturer in Digital Transformation within Ulster University Business School, specifically within the school's largest department: the Management, Leadership and Marketing. Previously, as a researcher, lecturer and doctoral candidate, he focused on digital events and delivers classes to Execs, MSc & BSc level. His duties have included coordinating and guest lecturing on Marketing Communications, Enterprise & New Venture Creation, e-Business Strategy, Research Methods and others. His particular passion is through active learning experiences to enhance student awareness and appreciation of technology through a strategy first approach, enabling the development of competencies to leverage innate human capacities in this digital age.

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AI-Powered, Human-Led

Maria Elena Duron

"The real win comes when AI accelerates our work while we stay firmly in control of our privacy, identity, and humanity."

The Before State

Before AI took center stage, I was already an explorer by nature. My marketing career began long before digital tools became the norm. I cut my teeth in an era when ICQ was new and eBay had not yet gone public. That experience shaped my mindset to equal parts experimentation, patient observation, and hands-on adaptation.

I lived through the rise of the internet, the shift to search, and the acceleration that came when Google became a dominant force. I learned what it meant to work at the edges of change. My focus has always been on strategy, visibility, customer experience, and the systems that make a brand both discoverable and trusted. Curiosity has always been my driver, balanced with a healthy respect for the risks that come with rapid technological shifts.

The Turning Points

My first real contact with generative AI came earlier than most. In late 2021, while serving on the Grow with Google training team, my role began shifting from in-person events to webinars. That change created an opening. I was invited to beta test ChatGPT and that moment became the spark.

It felt like the first brainstorming partner that could truly keep up with my pace and imagination. The speed with which it could iterate surprised me. The ease with which it shifted direction intrigued me. And the sense that it marked the beginning of a new wave excited me. I had been present at other turning points in technology, but this one was different. It moved faster. It was more accessible. It reshaped work in real time. My instinct wasn't to pull back. It was to lean in and see what was possible.

The After State

Over time, AI became part of nearly every dimension of my work. My role as an AI and Visibility Strategist expanded. My expertise in marketing operations, communications, brand

management, and product development evolved with new speed and creative depth. I became a Certified Chief AI Officer. My identity shifted from early adopter to trusted guide.

AI multiplied my capabilities. Brainstorming became faster. Content and research cycles compressed. I began teaching clients how to collaborate with AI without losing strategy, creativity, or humanity. My decades across digital evolution helped me bring both wisdom and clarity to a landscape moving at breakneck speed.

The Human Impact

Growth never comes without tension. My excitement for AI has always been matched by caution. The same instincts that make me an innovator also make me a guardian of privacy. I know many tools turn users into the product, and that speed often hides trade-offs.

I've set firm boundaries to protect my data and my focus. Two phones on different service providers. Separate apps. Cleared cookies. Frequent restarts. Intentional logouts. I watch AI browsers with both curiosity and concern. That balance has become part of who I am... open to possibility, but unwilling to surrender safety.

AI expanded my creativity and productivity. It also deepened my commitment to teaching others how to use these tools responsibly. The emotional arc for me has been one of excitement, vigilance, empowerment, and purpose.

The Lessons

Speed requires structure. The faster AI becomes, the more essential strong boundaries and clear decision frameworks are both personally and within companies.

Curiosity is a competitive advantage. Those who explore early gain insights that others only recognize years later.

Protection fuels trust. Sustainable visibility depends on systems that respect privacy and keep the human in control

The Future

By 2026, I expect AI to be even more embedded in daily life than most people imagine. Some tools will advance quickly. Others will collapse under their own complexity. I see a shift coming toward AI that is more private, more controllable, and more customizable.

Visibility will be shaped by a blend of human intention and machine intelligence. For me, the next step is deeper AI integration in my strategic work, paired with a stronger commitment to

teaching others how to use it without sacrificing identity or security. My focus is to guide clients through a world where AI is everywhere, but where human-led strategy and the human spark remain the foundation of influence.

BIO

Maria Elena Duron is an AI and Visibility Strategist and the founder of Smart Brand System™, helping founders and creators get seen, trusted, and chosen across Google, AI-powered search, and human-driven platforms.

A Certified Chief AI Officer and Business Growth with Google Coach, Maria has spent her career at the intersection of marketing, trust, and technology. She teaches business owners how to work with AI instead of against it and build systems that protect privacy, strengthen trust, and drive visibility.

Maria believes the best growth is AI-powered but human-led. Her work centers on keeping the human spark at the heart of every system, showing that when strategy meets humanity, visibility becomes influence.

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Preparing for Agent-to-Agent Commerce

Michael J. Goldrich

"Late 2022 changed the slope. Not because generative AI could generate text or images, but because it unlocked workflows I had been anticipating for years."

The Before State

Before generative AI matured, my work lived at the intersection of machine learning and hospitality. I had already spent years inside a tech company focused on predictive personalization, seeing both the promise and the limits of traditional ML. In 2019, I stood on an O'Reilly stage and told the world generative AI wasn't ready. I was right at the time. My days were full of potential but also friction. Progress required specialists, long timelines, and layers of translation between strategy and execution. The technology didn't yet match my instincts about where the world was heading.

That early-internet spark I felt back in 1995 — the Mosaic moment — sat in the background, waiting.

The Turning Points

Late 2022 changed the slope. Not because generative AI could generate text or images, but because it unlocked workflows I had been anticipating for years.

The real shift wasn't creativity. It was *agency*.

Tools began acting with intention: reasoning, taking steps, pursuing outcomes. This moved AI from "assistive" to "agentic." That shift made the old way of working feel instantly outdated.

A few moments stand out:

Seeing early agentic prototypes execute multi-step tasks without micromanagement. Realizing operational bottlenecks weren't technical — they were human, cultural, and organizational.

Watching hospitality leaders underestimate the speed of change.

These points formed a new conviction: the future wouldn't be "AI plus humans." It would be agent-to-agent commerce, with humans directing the higher-level moves.

The After State

My work pivoted toward preparing organizations for this new architecture. My consulting practice focuses on literacy, discovery, and scaling — not as buzzwords, but as the foundations of change management.

My writing expanded alongside my work:

Too Many Hats, Too Little Time explored the idea of 24/7 subject-matter expert agents.

The AI Literacy Playbook for Hoteliers translated mindset and capability into practical steps.

My upcoming book, *Invisible: What To Do When AI Erases Your Business*, dives into the uncomfortable but necessary truth: companies that ignore agentic systems won't get a warning shot.

My identity shifted as well. I now operate as a strategist preparing industries for a different economic model — one where agent systems negotiate, transact, and optimize faster than traditional organizations can react.

The Human Impact

The transition brought clarity. Less noise. More direction.

Instead of wrestling with immature tools, I now focus on guiding people through the psychological and cultural adjustments required to work with autonomous systems.

AI didn't overwhelm me. It sharpened my sense of purpose.

The Lessons

- **Capability isn't the barrier — culture is.** Organizations fail not because the tech is complex, but because the habits are entrenched.
- **Agents change the definition of work.** When systems carry out tasks end-to-end, humans shift toward oversight, orchestration, and judgment.
- **Hospitality is on the edge of a breakthrough.** High-volume, high-variation environments will benefit the most from agentic automation.

- **Agent-to-agent commerce is coming fast**, and the real story is how people prepare for it.

The Future

By 2026, agentic systems will interact directly with one another. Bookings, pricing, revenue management, service requests, vendor relations — many of these will move from person-to-system to system-to-system.

Commerce will become:

- Faster
- Less visible
- More competitive
- More heavily shaped by automation literacy

My work will center on ensuring leaders don't fall behind. Teaching them to adapt their structures, incentives, and expectations before the shift becomes irreversible.

The gap between prepared organizations and unprepared ones will widen dramatically.

BIO

Michael J. Goldrich is a hospitality AI strategist and the founder of Vivander Advisors, where he helps hotel executives, ownership groups, and boards navigate the shift from legacy digital tactics to AI-driven discovery, agent-ready workflows, and scalable commercial performance. He brings more than 25 years of digital marketing leadership across global hotel brands (including Starwood, Wyndham, Dolce, Denihan, Club Quarters, and The Hotels Network) paired with early-career management consulting experience at Accenture, giving him both operational depth and strategic rigor.

A graduate of the University of Michigan and Northwestern University, Goldrich has been recognized as one of HSMAI's Top 25 Extraordinary Minds and is a multi-time Adrian Award winner. He is the author of *Too Many Hats, Too Little Time* and *The AI Literacy Playbook for Hoteliers*. His upcoming book, *Invisible: What To Do When AI Erases Your Business*, examines the new competitive reality shaped by AI agents, structured data, and machine-to-machine commerce.

Today he works with hotel companies, associations, and enterprise teams to build AI literacy, automate workflows, strengthen direct channel performance, and design visibility strategies for an era where guests increasingly discover, evaluate, and book hotels through AI systems.

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Reader Action Plan

A practical way to move from insight to integration

Use this short action plan to turn what you've read into a repeatable practice. The goal isn't to "use more AI." The goal is to use AI in ways that create clarity, improve decisions, and protect the most human parts of your work.

Step 1 — Define your clarity target (15 minutes)

- Write down the top 3 jobs you do that require judgment (not busywork).
- Circle the one that feels the most chaotic or time-constrained right now.
- Define "better" in one sentence (e.g., faster decisions, clearer drafts, fewer meetings, fewer re-dos).

Step 2 — Choose a collaboration pattern (20 minutes)

Pick one pattern to test for a week:

- Pair-Think: Use AI to challenge your assumptions, generate counterarguments, and surface blind spots.
- Draft-Then-Direct: Let AI create a first draft, then you rewrite the structure and voice.
- Interview-Me: Have AI interview you to extract expertise, examples, and a cohesive narrative.
- Synthesize: Feed AI multiple inputs (notes, docs, emails) and ask for themes, risks, and next steps.
- Automate the Repeats: Use AI to standardize recurring outputs (templates, checklists, summaries).

Step 3 — Set guardrails (10 minutes)

- Decide what data is off-limits (client details, student data, internal numbers, etc.).
- Define your "human-in-the-loop" checkpoint (what must be reviewed by you before anything ships).
- Create a simple quality bar: accuracy, tone, privacy, and purpose.

Step 4 — Run one experiment (1 week)

Keep the experiment small. Track time saved, clarity gained, and how confident you feel about the output.

- What did I ask AI to do?
- What did AI do well?
- What did I have to fix?
- What will I keep, change, or stop next week?

A starter prompt kit

- Act as my thoughtful collaborator. Ask me 7 questions to clarify the real problem I'm trying to solve here.
- Summarize my notes into: key decisions, open questions, risks, and next actions. Keep it concise.
- Give me 3 options: conservative, balanced, and bold. For each, include tradeoffs and what I'd need to make it work.
- Rewrite this in my voice, but keep the meaning intact. Preserve specific details and avoid adding new facts.
- Generate a one-page plan: goals, stakeholders, steps, timeline, and how we'll measure progress.
- Play devil's advocate: what assumptions might be wrong, and what would disprove them?
- Create a checklist I can use every time I do this task so it's repeatable.

Closing Note

The contributors in this book didn't "arrive" at AI integration in one leap. They built it through small, intentional choices and realize this is the beginning of what will likely be a long journey of education, experimentation, strategy, and execution.

As you will see in these pages, if you start with clarity, experiment responsibly, and keep humans at the center of everything you do, you will be surprised how quickly the chaos turns into clarity.

Just as all of us did this past year, we invite you to join us inside the SmarterX AI Mastery Membership where we share a passion and a desire to learn as much as we can in order to help the organizations we serve.

SmarterX had nothing to do with the creation of this book and does not endorse any of the thoughts we have shared in these pages. The only connection this project has to SmarterX is that we are all passionate, dedicated members who have come to know, teach, and learn from one another in an independent virtual gathering once a month.

Because we believe in the cause that brought us together, we would be remiss if we didn't let you know that the AI Mastery Membership from SmarterX is a comprehensive annual subscription to their AI Academy, offering extensive education, insights, and guidance to help professionals and organizations master artificial intelligence for their careers and businesses.

You can find more information here: <https://academy.smarterx.ai/>

