

AI Like a CEO



AI LITERACY

How to Become
Irreplaceable

MARK A. STAFFORD



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AI Literacy: How to Become Irreplaceable

By Mark A. Stafford

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Dedication

For the professional who refuses to be replaced.

AI Lit·er·a·cy

/ˌā-ˈī ˈli-tə-rə-sē/

noun

AI is the average of everything the internet has ever produced.

AI literacy is not tool proficiency. Tool proficiency yields average output.

AI literacy is the ability to think with AI in ways the internet cannot replicate, because what you bring to the thinking process has never been indexed, scraped, or averaged.

It only exists in you.

The people who figure that out become irreplaceable.

The people who do not become invisible.

The Full System Comes With This Book

You did not just buy a book. You bought access to the complete system for building your AI Intelligence System. Your AIS.

The video training. The guided extraction process. The community of readers is building theirs alongside you.

No separate course. No upsell. No paywall.

You bought the book. The system comes with it.

Access details are in the References section.

Before You Begin

It is 4:30 pm on a Tuesday. You are about to finish your workday, and you cannot remember the last time you actually thought about anything.

Not reacted. Not replied. Not processed an email. Thought.

If that sentence landed in an uncomfortable place, you are not alone. It is the single most common experience of working professionals right now, and almost nobody is talking about it out loud.

We talk about being busy. We talk about being overwhelmed. We talk about AI taking our jobs. The data says something different is actually happening.

PwC surveyed 50,000 workers in 2025. ^[1] The people who use AI as a daily partner reported 52% salary gains and 58% better job security. The people who use it occasionally reported 32% and 36%.

AI is not replacing workers. It is creating a gap between workers who think with it and workers who ask it for answers.

But the quieter thing underneath all of it is the feeling that the actual thinking part of your work, the part you used to be good at, has been squeezed into a corner so small you barely notice it is missing.

That feeling is not a personal failing. It is not a sign that you are getting older, slower, or less capable. It is the result of a working environment built to reward speed over depth, and now rewards AI output over human thought on top of that.

This book is about getting that thinking back.

Not less AI. More thinking. With AI as the partner that makes the thinking possible in the first place.

If that sounds backward, it is only because of how AI has been sold to you.

The Wrong Diagnosis

For the last three years, the entire AI industry has been selling you the wrong fix. Faster prompts. Bigger models. Shortcuts that promise to write the email, draft the report, and build the presentation while you go do something else. The pitch is always the same.

Do less. Produce more.

That pitch works for a few weeks. Then the output starts to feel generic. Then the work starts to feel generic. Then *you* start to feel generic.

And somewhere around month three, you realize the thing AI gave you was not more time to think. It was less reason to think at all.

The entire industry has been solving for output.

Almost nobody has been solving for thinking.

The Bezos Turn

Here is where this book takes a sharp left turn away from everything you have read about AI so far.

Jeff Bezos built Amazon on one idea. Start with the customer and work backward from there. That is not a quote about leadership. It is a quote about thinking.

Starting with the customer takes more thinking than almost anything else.

We are not going to talk about Bezos because he is a billionaire. We are going to talk about him because of how he thinks. *Or at least how people who have studied him say he thinks.*

Bezos banned PowerPoint at Amazon years ago. Every important meeting at Amazon starts with a 6-page narrative memo. Everyone in the room reads it in silence for the first 20 minutes.

Then they challenge the thinking. They stress test it. They push on the weak spots until the argument either holds or breaks. Then they decide on something they can actually test in the real world. No bullet points. No slides. No hiding behind formatting.

But here is the part nobody tells you.

Bezos did not write the memo.

A team wrote it. Researchers, analysts, writers, and editors whose entire job was to put 6 pages of clean thinking in front of him so he could walk into that room and make a good decision.

Bezos did not think harder than you. He had a team whose only purpose was to do the thinking work before he arrived.

That team is the gap.

You have been told to “think like a CEO” your whole career. Nobody told you the part where CEOs do not think alone.

The difference between a CEO and the rest of us was never intelligence. It was resources.

What Changed

That team just collapsed into a tool.

Not a person. A tool.

One that can research, draft, brainstorm, and hand you a clean briefing in a fraction of the time Bezos’s team takes. It is not as good as his team.

It is close enough to change the math for anyone who has never had a team before.

I call it your AI Intelligence System. Your AIS. It is what you build when you stop typing questions at AI and start briefing it like a CEO walking into a Monday morning strategy meeting.

It is what you use when you decide that your thinking is worth protecting, not replacing.

The difference between someone who uses AI like an answer machine and someone who uses it like Bezos uses his team is not the tool. It is the approach.

And the approach starts with the decision to think again.

The Invitation

You are about to meet a methodology called The Intelligence Merge. It is how you build your AIS. It is how you brief it. It is how you use it to recover the thinking on which your career was built, and that your current workday has buried under a thousand small interruptions.

Many people who read this far will go back to typing questions at their AI tomorrow morning. The answer machine is comfortable to use, like using a search engine.

Thinking is work. That is why many people will stay where they are and not progress, or even be replaced.

But you are reading this for a reason. Somewhere in the last few pages, something clicked. You remembered what it felt like to actually sit with a problem long enough to solve it properly. You want that back. You can have it back. You are not alone in wanting this.

A 2025 Stanford study ^[2] found that 45% of workers want to work with AI as an equal partner. Only 2% want full automation. The market

has already made its choice. It just does not have the language or the process to get there yet.

This book is both.

No matter where you are in your career journey, you are the CEO of your field and your domain. And when you have a tool that can support you the way Bezos is supported by his team, you can truly think like a CEO. The rest of this book shows you how. But first, let me tell you who this was written for, and then I will tell you who is writing it.

Who This Book is For

If you are a professional who used to have time to think but no longer do, this book was written for you. You tried AI. You got generic output. You quietly wondered if you were the problem. You are not the problem.

Nobody showed you that AI was supposed to be a thinking partner, not a thinking replacement.

If you own a business and your AI output sounds nothing like your actual business, this book explains exactly why and gives you the system to fix it. The problem is not the tool.

The problem is that the tool has never been briefed on how you actually think about your business, your customers, and the decisions only you can make.

If you have decades of expertise and feel the ground shifting under a market that seems to reward younger, cheaper, and faster, this book is especially for you.

Your experience is not a liability. It is the raw material for the kind of intelligence the market is about to pay the most for.

Nobody showed you that it needs to be extracted, loaded, and put to work.

Nobody showed me either. Here is how I figured it out.

About The Author



Mark A. Stafford

I spent a month perfecting one prompt.

One prompt. Thirty days.

I was convinced the tool was the answer and that better inputs would eventually produce better outputs. I tweaked the wording. I adjusted the tone. I added context. I subtracted context. I was doing exactly what everyone else was doing, just more stubbornly.

What I did not understand yet was that the tool had access to everything the internet had ever produced. The internet had never met me.

The breakthrough came not from a better prompt, but from a different question. Instead of asking what to give the tool, I started asking what the tool needed in order to think like me.

That question changed everything. It changed my business. It changed how I work. And eventually, it became this book.

I have spent the last 15 years running a one-person operation in Phoenix, Arizona. For most of those years, I operated the way most professionals do: good at my work, building expertise that compounded quietly over time, always running slightly faster than the workload required.

Then AI arrived.

And like most people, I made endless mistakes before I found what actually worked.

What worked was not a better tool. It was a methodology.

I call it **The Intelligence Merge**.

It is built on one principle:

AI's value multiplies the moment it carries your expertise, not the internet's average.

Today, I run a one-person agency that produces the output of three to four people.

Not because AI is magic.

Because I spent months systematically extracting the patterns, judgment calls, and decision frameworks that client work built into me, then loading them into a system that thinks the way I do.

When I published the 3-category framework from this book on LinkedIn, 117 professionals commented within 48 hours. Senior

writers, marketing directors, executives, and entry-level workers all said the same thing in different words.

Nobody had named this problem clearly until now.

I do NOT teach AI tools.

I teach a methodology that makes AI tools irrelevant as a competitive moat. When AI carries your intelligence, what you produce cannot be replicated by someone running the same software.

I believe your intelligence is the asset. Not the AI.

I believe that because I watched it happen in my own work first.

As a trainer and speaker, I work with professionals and organizations that understand the window to get ahead of this shift is open now and will not stay open.

My mission is to help 1,000 people become irreplaceable before the market decides for them.

This book is where that mission starts.

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Chapter 1

The Floor Just Dropped

Doug has been one of the best technical writers in his field for two decades. Nobody replaced him. That was the problem.

For the past 20 months, he has seen zero real contracts that pay well and allow him to work remotely. He is based in Australia, which means this is not an American job market problem. It is not a regional blip or an industry downturn.

It is the same conversation happening on every continent where skilled professionals are watching their market quietly disappear and trying to figure out what they did wrong.

Doug did not do anything wrong. That is the part nobody is saying out loud.

He left a comment on one of my LinkedIn posts that I have not been able to shake.

He wrote: *“This might be mass unemployment, but I’m living with the consequences already. Foreign language teachers have experienced a similar drop in workload*

over the same period. The connection between them is that they're both language-related, and LLMs are pretty good at language. But as AI competency grows in other areas, so will the redundancies. This is not a theory. This is a fact, right now."

Doug was not venting. He was reporting. And he is right.

The reason I want you to meet Doug before anything else is not to frighten you. It's because the same confusion that destroyed his contract market may also be driving decisions in your organization, your industry, and perhaps even your boss's most recent meeting.

Understanding what actually happened to Doug, not the version that makes it sound inevitable or someone's fault, is the clearest path to making sure it does not happen to you.

The Confusion That Is Costing Careers

Your boss has said you need to be AI-literate. In all likelihood, your boss cannot define what that means.

A job posting you recently saw required AI literacy. That posting probably provided zero context for what the role actually needed.

This is not speculation. A recent workforce analysis found that 74% of job postings require AI literacy, and 25% provide no definition of what that actually requires. ^[3]

In a parallel survey, 82% of workers reported being expected to demonstrate AI competency at work, while 82% of the same group reported receiving zero formal training on what that competency entails. ^[4]

Both numbers are 82%. Expectation and abandonment are equal.

In practice, this means millions of professionals are navigating a requirement their employers cannot articulate, using training they were never given, to prove a skill that nobody has clearly defined. And when the cuts come, as they did in Doug's market, they come based on belief rather than evidence.

In a recent 24-month period, more than 55,000 employees were laid off from companies citing AI as the reason. ^[5]

The figure that rarely gets reported alongside that one: roughly 60% of those layoffs were anticipatory.

The company did not replace those workers with a functioning AI system. The company decided, often at the executive level, based on what AI was believed to be capable of in the near future. The belief turned out to be wrong in many cases. The jobs were gone anyway. A machine did not replace Doug. A forecast replaced him.

Both Sides Are Operating on the Same Bad Information

It would be easy to assign blame here. Easy, and wrong. The executives making workforce decisions are not villains. They are operating with incomplete information in a market that is changing faster than any reliable data can track.

A recent Pluralsight study found that 90% of executives feel they lack a clear understanding of their teams' actual AI capabilities. ^[6] A separate study found that 93% of business leaders are making AI

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strategy decisions based on data they privately acknowledge may be inaccurate. ^[7]

They are making confident decisions on shaky ground, and the people below them are the ones who feel the shake.

In fact, 70% of executives in the same study reported feeling highly confident in their AI strategy decisions. Confidence and accuracy were running in opposite directions.

The downstream effect is a workforce management approach largely based on belief.

Companies are investing in AI tools, announcing AI transformations, and making staffing decisions based on what they believe AI will eventually be able to do, rather than on what it can demonstrably do today.

Some companies are overcutting, eliminating roles that will prove essential when the AI systems they invested in underperform. Others are undercutting, keeping expensive human workflows running alongside AI investments because nobody has clearly defined what the AI is supposed to replace.

A recent BCG study found that 60% of companies reported no material return on their AI investments despite significant spending. ^[8]

The top 5% of companies in that same study were achieving revenue increases of five times or more.

The 95/5 split at the company level mirrors almost exactly the split at the individual level, and the cause in both cases is the same: most organizations, like most individuals, are using AI as a tool rather than integrating intelligence into it.

Workers are not blameless either, though the fault lies less in their choices than in their options.

Most professionals who use AI at work use it the same way they use Google. Short input. Fast output. Move on.

They are following the behavior that every AI tool interface is designed to encourage, and no one has shown them otherwise.

The result is a market in which employers demand a skill they cannot define, workers develop a version of that skill that does not match what employers actually need, and the gap between the two is costing real people their real careers.

This is not a knowledge gap. It is a market-wide coordination failure, and the cost is being paid one career at a time.

What This Looks Like From Where You Sit

The confusion operates differently depending on where you are in the workforce, but it operates everywhere.

If you are mid-career, somewhere between 35 and 55, with a strong track record, you are probably watching younger colleagues get

prioritized for AI training while you are offered resources at roughly half the rate. ^[9]

The implicit message is that your expertise is a liability. The actual situation is more complicated and significantly more hopeful.

Your expertise is not the liability. Generic use of AI is.

Everything you have spent years building, the patterns, the judgment calls, the things you just know, is gold. The problem is that most people have no idea it needs to be mined. This book is the mining operation.

There is also a specific dynamic affecting experienced professionals that almost nobody is talking about. The more expertise someone has built over a career, the harder the transition to effective AI use actually is.

This is not a deficiency. It is the natural result of having spent years building mental frameworks that work. Those frameworks do not immediately accommodate a new tool that operates on a different logic.

The resistance is real and proportional to the depth of expertise, which means the most valuable people in many organizations are the ones experiencing the most friction with the change.

And the training industry rarely addresses it, because it is easier to sell tool courses than to solve a cognitive transition.

If you are entering the workforce, you are facing a catch-22 that did not exist five years ago. Entry-level roles in fields that involve language, analysis, and communication are down significantly. ^[10]

The jobs that used to exist as the first rung of the career ladder, the ones that built the skills that eventually made someone valuable, have contracted sharply.

You need experience to get a job. You cannot get the jobs that used to provide that experience.

If you are on the employer side of this equation, whether you are managing a team or making executive decisions, you are being asked to lead an AI transformation without a clear definition of what success looks like, how to measure it, or what the risk of getting it wrong actually is.

Most leaders in this position are highly confident in plans built on data that does not measure what they think it measures. That is not an insult. It is the documented reality for the majority of people in your position right now, and the people below you are the ones feeling the consequences.

The Chapter Destination

Doug's 20 months of empty contracts are not an isolated story. They are the most visible outcome of confusion operating at every level of the workforce simultaneously.

AI Literacy

The same underlying confusion expresses itself differently across each layer:

- Employers are confused about what AI literacy means.
- Workers are confused about how to develop it.
- Training programs teach the wrong version of it.
- Executives are making confident decisions on unreliable data.
- And skilled professionals in the middle of all of it, watching a floor drop that nobody explained was about to move.

But Doug's situation was not inevitable.

The mechanism that dropped his floor is identifiable. It operates according to a specific logic.

And once you see the logic clearly, you can stop being a variable in someone else's forecast and start being the person they cannot afford to cut.

The next chapter shows you exactly where you stand in all of this. Not as a comfort, and not as a verdict, but because knowing your actual position is the only starting point that leads anywhere useful.

Doug's line stays with me: "This is not a theory. This is a fact, right now."

He is right. And right now, the gap between the 5th and 95th percentiles is still closeable.

Chapter 2

Which Category Are You Actually In?

Here is the only question in this chapter that actually matters.

Do people pay you for your output, your judgment, or your orchestration?

Take a moment with that.

Most people answer it wrong the first time.

They describe what they do every day, which is the output, and mistake it for what they are actually valued for. Those are not always the same thing.

In fact, right now, in the current market, the gap between those two answers is where most careers are either being protected or quietly dismantled.

This chapter will show you the three categories that every worker in the AI economy falls into.

AI Literacy

It will show you which one you are actually in, not which one you assume you are in.

And it is going to show you why only one of the three is protected, and what it actually takes to get there.

The Story Everyone Got Wrong

There was an engineer at Amazon who was, by every internal metric, the most AI-literate person in their department. Highest adoption rate. Most efficient outputs. Model behavior for exactly what companies say they want when they talk about AI skills.

They were eliminated in an efficiency round justified by AI.

Everyone who heard that story concluded the same thing. AI is coming for everyone, even those who use it best. If the top AI user is not safe, nobody is safe.

That conclusion is understandable. It is also wrong. And understanding why it is wrong is the entire point of this chapter.

The engineer was not eliminated despite their proficiency with AI.

Their AI proficiency was never the protection to begin with.

They were in the wrong category. The category determines the outcome. The tool use is secondary.

Once you see the three categories clearly, the Amazon story stops being frightening and starts being instructive.

The Three Categories

A recent study found that 88% of workers use AI at work in some form, but only 5% use it in ways that genuinely transform how they work. ^[11]

The remaining 83% are doing something with AI, but not something that changes their actual position in the market.

Those three groups map almost exactly onto three categories that appear consistently in the data, LinkedIn comments, and the careers of the people most affected by the current shift.

When I posted a breakdown of these categories on LinkedIn, the post generated over 14,000 impressions and 117 comments.

What struck me most was not the engagement. It was the word that kept appearing in the comments without any prompting from me.

People describing their own experience kept using the same word: drowning. Nobody told them that was a category. They named it themselves.

That is not a coincidence. It is confirmation.

Category 1: The Replaceable

This is the category nobody thinks they are in.

The Replaceable is defined by the nature of the work, not the quality of the person doing it.

If your role can be described as a checklist of repeatable tasks, if you are measured primarily on output volume or speed, and if someone could learn the core of your job in under six months, you are in Category 1.

The Amazon engineer was in Category 1. The AI tools they used were excellent. The role they were in was pure execution, and pure execution is the first thing to go.

This is the self-audit question that cuts through the confusion: could someone with access to the right AI tools produce your core deliverables without your specific expertise?

If the honest answer is yes, that is the signal.

Category 1 is not about being bad at your job. The Amazon engineer was good at their job.

Category 1 is about the structure of the role. And right now, companies are making decisions based on that structure, often without telling the people inside those roles what is actually happening.

The path out of Category 1 is not learning more tools. That is the trap the engineer fell into.

The path out is to develop judgment, build domain expertise, and learn to orchestrate rather than execute. The system for doing that is coming. For now, understand the direction.

Category 2: The Drowning

This is the category most professionals reading this book are actually in.

The Drowning has everything Category 1 lacks.

Years of domain expertise. Judgment developed through repetition, failure, and pattern recognition that cannot be taught in a course. Client relationships built on trust. Institutional knowledge that lives nowhere except inside their head.

They are also exhausted. And getting more exhausted every quarter.

Here is the pattern that keeps appearing.

A company cuts headcount, citing AI as the reason the remaining team can absorb the work.

The Category 2 professionals who survive the cut are now doing the work of three people. Their managers tell them AI will make up the difference.

But nobody has shown them how to use AI in a way that actually scales their judgment rather than just speeding up their tasks.

So, they use AI the way they use Google. Type a question. Get an answer. Move on. Do it again. And again. And again.

The marketing manager with 15 years of experience uses AI to brainstorm campaign ideas, draft emails, and research competitors. But every campaign still requires the same manual effort because she has not built a system. Every email is a one-off prompt. Every research session starts from scratch.

She is working harder than she ever has and cannot understand why AI is not helping.

The sales director who closes deals nobody else can close uses ChatGPT to write prospecting emails and prepare for calls. He has not extracted his sales methodology. He has not built anything that teaches his approach to junior reps or scales his expertise beyond his own hours.

He is still the bottleneck, still doing all the selling himself, still working 60-hour weeks while his company wonders why AI is not increasing productivity.

This is the drowning pattern.

The expertise protects them from Category 1 elimination. Over time, exhaustion makes them vulnerable anyway.

The training gap from Chapter 1 hits Category 2 professionals the hardest. The implicit message is that their expertise is less valuable for development. The actual situation is the opposite.

Their expertise is exactly what this process is designed to amplify. They are not behind. They are sitting on unmined gold.

What Category 2 is missing is not expertise. They have expertise. What they are missing is the methodology for extracting that expertise and merging it with AI.

Not tool use. That is Category 1.

Extraction plus merging. That is the bridge to Category 3.

Category 3: The CEO

This is where the 5% are operating. This is where you are going.

Category 3 is not a personality type or a talent level.

It is a specific combination of things that almost nobody is teaching.

Domain judgment, which is what Category 2 already has.

Tool fluency, which is what Category 1 has.

Plus, something neither group has yet: outcome ownership.

A data engineer described it clearly in a comment that stuck with me. *“The engineers getting promoted are not the ones automating the most tasks. They are the ones making the best decisions about what to automate and how to integrate it.”*

That is Category 3. Judgment about orchestration, not just execution.

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Category 3 professionals are not replacing themselves with AI. They are extending what they can do.

They are not maximizing automation. They are optimizing decisions.

The difference between those two things is the same as the difference between a tool operator and a CEO. One executes what the system asks for. The other decides what the system should be doing.

The formula is straightforward: judgment plus tools plus ownership of outcomes.

Not just having expertise. Not just using tools. Both are combined with accountability for measurable results.

The protection Category 3 provides is not that AI cannot do your work. It is what you bring to it that cannot be replicated without doing the same work you did.

It compounds over time. And it travels with you, not with your employer.

That work has a name and a system. Chapter 7 is where it lives.

The Self-Audit

Three dimensions separate the categories: Repeatability, Risk, and Trust.

High repeatability means your work follows the same steps every time. Data entry, filling out forms, and repeatedly writing the same type of email.

That kind of work is easy to automate because no judgment is involved. Low risk to hand it to a machine. No trust required.

The lower the repeatability, the higher the stakes when something goes wrong, and the more your employer depends on your specific judgment, the harder it is to automate. That is the heart of Category 2 and Category 3.

The audit question is this: on each dimension, where does your work actually sit?

Be honest. Most people rate themselves on their best days, not their average ones.

If the majority of your daily work is high repeatability, low risk, and low trust required, you are in Category 1 regardless of your title or your years of experience.

If the majority of your daily work is low-repeatability, high-risk, and high-trust-required, but you are working manually without a system that scales your judgment, you are in Category 2.

If you have built systems that apply your judgment at scale, measure the outcomes, and iterate based on results, you are in Category 3.

Most people reading this chapter are Category 2. That is not a problem. That is a starting point.

The CEO First Rule

Category 3 is not just a skill level.

It is a way of thinking that many people were never told was available to them.

Here is the clearest picture of what it looks like.

Think about how a board meeting works. Every person in the room brings their expertise to the table. They report. They analyze. They debate.

The CEO listens, asks questions, lets the intelligence in the room surface, and then does the one thing nobody else in that room is authorized to do.

They synthesize everything they heard, make a decision, and own the outcome completely. Not the process. The outcome.

That is exactly how Category 3 professionals engage with AI.

They do not walk up to the machine and punch in an order.

They sit at the head of the table. They let the conversation develop. They ask questions. They think out loud. They direct the intelligence in the room before they ever ask for a deliverable.

And when the output comes, they own it. Fully. No hiding behind the tool. No blaming the prompt. The CEO owns the outcome.

We call this the CEO First Rule.

The goal of this book is to tattoo it onto your brain before you ever touch an extraction exercise.

The entire AI training industry is teaching you to be a better machine operator. Better prompts. Better tools. Better inputs into the same vending machine. That is a useful skill. It is also the wrong job description.

You are not training to use the tool better. You are training to become the person the tool reports to.

The CEO of your work, whether you own the company or work for one. Someone who manages outcomes, not tasks. Someone who directs intelligence, not someone who requests output.

And if you are just starting out, this matters even more than it does for everyone else in the room.

Most people spend years, sometimes decades, learning to think like an executor before anyone tells them the CEO mindset even exists.

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They climb the ladder one rung at a time, waiting for permission to think at the level that actually moves careers forward.

You are getting it right now. Before your first real job, before your first performance review, before anyone has had the chance to train it out of you.

Every project you take on, every decision you make, every AI interaction you have from this point forward can be filtered through the CEO lens before you have ever held the title.

The person sitting next to you in class or across from you in the interview does not have that frame yet. You do.

That is not a small advantage. That is years of runway that most people never get.

That identity is what separates the 5% from the 95%.

Not the tools they know. Not the prompts they write.

The way they think before they type a single word.

Chapter 9 is where the CEO First Rule becomes a daily habit you can feel working.

For now, hold the identity. You are the CEO. Act accordingly.

What Comes Next

You now know which category you are in. The next chapter explains why the approach most people are taking to move up, learning more tools, getting more certifications, and becoming a better prompt engineer, is not moving them anywhere.

The tool is not the problem. The input to the tool is the problem.

And the input to the tool is a behavior, not a skill.

That distinction is the reason Chapter 3 exists.

Chapter 3

Why Everyone Keeps Telling You to Learn More Tools

Here are two emails. Both were written by AI.

Both are about the same topic. Both are technically correct.

Email 1: *“Hi John, I wanted to follow up on our previous conversation regarding the proposal. I believe there are several opportunities we should explore together. Would you be available for a call next week to discuss potential synergies? Looking forward to connecting.”*

Email 2: *“John, you mentioned the compliance issue was blocking the Q3 rollout. I have seen this exact pattern three times with mid-market SaaS companies. Here is what worked: [specific three-step solution]. Skip the call if this solves it. If not, I am free Thursday at 2 pm.”*

One of these emails has a 3-5% response rate. The other gets 40%+.

The first could have been written by anyone. It was generated by typing “write a follow-up email to a prospect” into a chat window, maybe with a little context added, accepting the output, and clicking send.

AI Literacy

The language is professional. The grammar is correct. It is completely invisible because ten thousand other people sent something that sounds exactly like it today.

The second could only have been written by one person. It contains pattern recognition from seeing this problem three times, industry-specific knowledge, relationship context, and a communication style that belongs to someone specific.

AI did not generate that intelligence. The person brought it. AI extended it.

Here is the problem: AI can generate Email 1 infinitely, and so can everyone else. That is why it is worthless.

AI cannot generate Email 2 without your intelligence loaded into it first. That is why this chapter exists.

The Certification That Gets You in the Room

Before we talk about why tools fail, we need to be honest about what they do accomplish.

The argument is not that certifications and tool training are worthless.

It is that they are worth exactly what they promise and not a dollar more.

A recent professional certificate from one of the world's largest technology companies covers structured prompting, AI for research, writing, data analysis, content creation, and basic app building.

It takes roughly eight hours to complete. The person who reviewed it publicly described the result clearly.

It sharpened a few things. It gave them new tools to add to their workflow. It did not change everything they do.

That honest description is worth more than the marketing copy.

Sharpened a few things. Added some tools. That is a solid foundation.

That is also, almost word-for-word, the definition of table stakes.

The certification gets you in the room. It signals to employers and clients that you have a working understanding of the tools.

That signal has value. It is also the same signal that everyone else who completed the same certification is sending.

Which means the room you just entered is full of people who passed the same test.

Think about a vending machine. Every slot on the same row holds the same product. Same brand. Same ingredients. Same result. That is the room the certification puts you in. Everyone reached into the same machine and pulled out the same candy bar.

The certification is not the problem. Using it as your entire strategy is.

AI Literacy

Even Google's own curriculum acknowledges that the real shift is from using AI as a task completer to using it as a collaborator.

They see the problem clearly enough to put it in their course. The certification teaches you to recognize that gap. This book teaches you to close it.

The CEO First Rule is the thinking pattern on the other side of that gap.

You are not in training to become a better task completer. You are in training to run the company.

The Tool Expiration Problem

Here is the dynamic nobody in the AI training industry wants to talk about.

One of the most-followed AI automation trainers on YouTube recently posted a video telling his audience to stop learning the tool he built his entire business teaching.

Not because the tool is bad. Because something newer had already moved past it, and continuing to master the old tool was focusing on the wrong thing.

Consider what that means for the people who paid to learn that tool.

The investment had a built-in expiration date that nobody disclosed at the point of sale. The knowledge depreciated before the course was finished. This is not a criticism of the trainer.

It is the nature of tool-based training. Tools change.

The strategy behind building the tool in the first place does not.

This pattern repeats across the AI training industry.

A course gets built around a specific tool or workflow. The tool is updated, replaced, or absorbed into something larger. The course value drops to near zero. The student starts over.

Your extracted intelligence has no expiration date.

The pattern recognition you built over the years in your field is not deprecated by a software update. The judgment calls you have made hundreds of times do not get replaced by a new interface. The strategy behind why you would even build an automation, what problem it solves, who it serves, and what outcome it needs to produce, that thinking is what makes the tool work.

And that thinking lives in you, not in any certification.

A useful frame: knowing enough about a tool to direct AI to build it for you is more durable than knowing how to build it yourself. *The strategy behind the automation is the asset.* The mechanics of execution are what gets outsourced.

AI Knows the Internet. It Does Not Know You.

This is the mechanism that makes tool proficiency insufficient, and it is worth understanding precisely.

AI was trained on billions of web pages. Wikipedia. Reddit. Forums. Blogs. News articles. Academic papers. It absorbed generic writing patterns, common knowledge, and the statistical average of everything the internet has ever produced on any given topic.

Here is what is not in that training data:

- Your five, ten, or twenty years of industry experience.
- Your specific client relationships.
- Your decision frameworks.
- Your pattern recognition from seeing the same problem fifty times.
- The tacit knowledge you just know because you have been doing this work long enough that the knowledge stopped feeling like knowledge and started feeling like instinct.

When you ask AI to write an email, generate a report, or create a proposal without giving it any of that context, it produces the most statistically likely output based on everything it has ever read.

It gives you the average email. The average report. The average proposal.

And the average is invisible. The average is what ten thousand other people sent today using the same tool with the same generic prompt.

This is why tool proficiency does not protect Category 1 workers. They are producing outputs that anyone with the same tool can produce.

This is why Category 2 workers are exhausted. They have expertise AI does not, but they are not extracting and merging it, so AI cannot help them scale what they actually know.

This is why only Category 3 workers transform their work. They bring their intelligence to the tool first. Then the tool extends it.

The Vending Machine Trap

There is a specific behavior pattern that shows up in roughly 95% of AI interactions, and it is worth naming clearly because you almost certainly do it too.

Not because you are lazy. Because every AI interface ever designed encourages it.

You open a chat window. You type a request. You get an output. You copy it, use it, or close the window.

The whole interaction takes ninety seconds.

This is vending machine thinking. Insert request, receive product, walk away. No context. No judgment. No you.

Recent data from Anthropic, the company that built Claude, on actual AI usage patterns show that the median prompt length is 10 words.

AI Literacy

The average conversation lasts 1.7 turns. Only 3.7% of conversations exceed ten turns. ^[25]

The overwhelming majority of people using AI every single day are having ninety-second transactions with a machine that knows everything the internet has ever published and nothing about them specifically.

A longitudinal study tracking student AI interactions over eight weeks found that 72% of sessions contained exactly the required minimum number of prompts. ^[12]

Students knew that more engagement produced better results. They still defaulted to the minimum.

Knowing the right behavior and doing the right behavior are two entirely separate things.

The vending machine trap compounds over time in a specific direction.

A recent MIT study tracked participants as they wrote essays with AI assistance across multiple sessions. The finding was not that they got better at using AI with practice. They got progressively more disengaged. By the third essay, many participants simply handed the prompt to the AI and accepted whatever came back. ^[13]

The tool did not make them sharper. It made them less present in their own work.

This is what the training industry is not telling you. Better prompts make you a more sophisticated vending machine operator. That is a real improvement. It is also the wrong destination.

The Workstop Problem

There is a name for what vending machine usage produces at scale, and once you see it you cannot unsee it.

Workstop is AI-generated content that looks exactly like work but contains no actual substance.

You have received it. You may have sent it.

An email that says a great deal without saying anything. A report that is formatted correctly but contains no real analysis. A proposal that reads professionally but makes no actual argument for anything.

The organizational cost of workstop is not nothing. Research suggests it takes an average of two hours to identify and fix each significant instance. ^[26]

Which means the productivity tool is, in many cases, creating more work than it saves. Workers are not just using AI. They are fixing AI outputs, checking AI outputs, and rewriting AI outputs that passed a quick scan but failed on substance.

Why does AI produce workstop? Because it knows what work looks like. It has read millions of emails, reports, and proposals. It understands structure, formatting, and professional language with precision.

AI Literacy

What it does not know is what makes your specific work valuable. Your insights, your judgment, your context. Without those inputs, it produces things that look right but are hollow.

This is the same mechanism as Email 1 vs. Email 2. AI produces Email 1 without your intelligence. It produces Email 2 only when your specific pattern recognition is part of the input.

The Two Ways to Use AI

There are only two fundamentally different ways to interact with AI. Everything else is a variation on one of these two approaches.

The first is what the vending machine model produces. You ask for something. AI gives you something. You use it or discard it and move on. Each session starts from zero.

AI has no context about you from previous interactions. No accumulation. No learning. No compounding. You are getting the internet average every time because AI knows nothing about you between sessions.

The second is what Category 3 looks like in practice. You do not open a chat window and type a request. You open a conversation and share what you are actually thinking.

You say, *“Here is the situation, here is what I am weighing, here is what feels off about my current approach.”*

You let the intelligence in the room develop before you ask for anything. You brainstorm before you build. The output that eventually comes is not something you correct. It is something you co-created.

That is a fundamentally different relationship with the tool, and it produces a fundamentally different result.

Here is the specific difference in practice:

Vending machine: *“Write me an email to a client about a project delay.”* AI uses generic professional email patterns. You get something technically correct and completely forgettable.

Partnership: *“I need to tell a client about a project delay. Here is the situation: the vendor was delayed by 10 days, the client’s launch depends on our delivery, and this is the second delay on this project. What are three different approaches I could take, and what are the tradeoffs of each?”*

AI engages with the actual problem. You react to the options. You iterate. You arrive at something specific, honest, and strategically sound.

That is the CEO First Rule in action.

The question this chapter leaves you with is not which tools to learn or which certification to pursue next.

The question is, which type of interaction are you currently having with AI every day? Because the answer to that question determines which side of the 95/5 split you are on.

What Comes Next

The tool is not the problem. The approach to the tool is the problem.

And the approach is a behavior, not a skill.

That distinction matters because skills are taught in courses and behaviors are formed through repetition, identity, and a mechanism that Chapter 8 explains in full.

Before we get there, the next four chapters build the blueprint. Whether you have twenty years of expertise to extract or you are just starting to build it, they show you exactly what you have, what the market actually needs, and why the intelligence you bring is the foundation on which everything else gets built.

The extraction system comes after the blueprint. The blueprint comes first.

Your intelligence is not just valuable. It is the only input that turns Email 1 into Email 2.

It does not matter if that intelligence comes from two decades in your industry, ten years running your own company, or six months of paying close attention and documenting what you are learning.

The size of the library is not the point.

The fact that it is yours is.

That intelligence has a name. It has a system. And it has never been indexed, scraped, or averaged by anyone.

It only exists in you.

Chapter 4

What You Have That AI Cannot Touch

Ask someone with twenty years of experience to explain how they make decisions in their field.

They will say: “I just know.”

Ask them to break it down step by step, and they will struggle. Not because they are hiding something, but because what is obvious to them stopped feeling like knowledge a long time ago.

It compressed into instinct. Into gut feeling. Into the thing they reach for automatically before they have even consciously registered the problem.

That is not a weakness. That is what twenty years of repetition produces.

And it is exactly what AI lacks.

The Plumber and the Diagnostic

Think about a plumber with twenty years of experience. He walks into a house, hears the pipes, checks the water pressure, looks at the building's age, and within thirty seconds knows exactly what is wrong.

Ask him how he knew, and he will shrug. "I just knew."

He did not just know. He ran a thousand invisible calculations built from two decades of pattern recognition. The sound meant one thing. The water pressure meant another. The building's age narrowed the possibilities. The combination pointed to one diagnosis with high confidence.

He cannot explain the process because it is no longer a process. It is automatic.

A junior plumber runs the same diagnostics manually, checks the same manual, and arrives at the same answer two hours later.

Both get the right answer. The difference is not intelligence. It is the pattern library built from lived experience.

The junior plumber has the tools. What he does not have yet is the twenty years of data that turned the tools into instinct.

AI has processed billions of words about plumbing. It has read every manual, every forum thread, every how-to article ever published.

What AI has not done is listen to three hundred actual pipes and track what happened next. That is a completely different type of knowledge. And it lives in the plumber, not in any database.

What You Have That Was Never Indexed

AI was not trained on your brain. It was not trained on the 4 am call from a panicking client, and exactly how you handled it. It was not trained on the pattern you noticed after your five hundredth project, the one nobody talks about because nobody else has done five hundred projects in your specific context. It was not trained on the shortcut you invented that saves three hours per job, the one you have never written down because it is just how you do it. It was not trained on the gut feeling you get when a deal is about to go sideways.

You cannot always explain it. But you are right far more often than chance.

That knowledge is not vague. It is compressed. Decades of experience compressed into automatic judgment.

The problem is not that it does not exist. The problem is that it is invisible, even to the person who has it.

When you try to explain your expertise out loud, you produce maybe 10% of what you actually know. Not because you are holding back. Because the other 90% has been compressed below the level of conscious access.

It is in your gut. In your fingertips. In the split-second read you do on a situation before your analytical brain has even engaged.

That 90% is CEO material.

It is the intelligence that makes your judgment worth something. It is the asset that no certification program can manufacture, and no AI model trained on the internet can replicate.

The entire job of this book is to help you get it out of your gut and into a system.

And if your gut is still being built, this book shows you how to document it as it develops, so the library compounds from day one instead of sitting invisible for twenty years before anyone thinks to extract it.

Why This Feels Hard (And Why That Is the Signal)

We touched on this in Chapter 1. Now it is time to understand why.

The more expertise you have built, the harder this process will feel at first.

Not because you are doing it wrong but because your expertise is real.

A recent study tracked experienced software developers as they used AI on familiar tasks. They slowed down by 19% compared to working without AI, and almost none of them noticed it. ^[14]

Their workflows were so deeply established that the new tool created friction rather than flow.

The expertise that made them excellent at their jobs was the same expertise that made adapting to the new tool feel wrong.

Research on AI-assisted performance found that below-average performers improved by 43% when using AI tools. Above-average performers improved by only 17%. ^[15]

Everyone stepping into ‘CEO mode’ through The Intelligence Merge will feel some initial resistance.

The deeper your expertise, the stronger that resistance tends to be. That is not a problem. That is the signal.

There is also a specific form of this resistance that appears before the extraction process even begins. I have heard this directly from multiple people who have tested this system.

People who have built real expertise over years of real work often describe a quiet anxiety when asked to share how they think with an AI system.

It feels like a test. It feels like judgment. Like, if the answer they give isn’t detailed enough or smart enough, something will be revealed about them that they would rather keep hidden.

That feeling is not a warning sign. It is confirmation.

The anxiety is proportional to the depth of what you have built. You would not feel that way about knowledge you did not actually have.

Some people also worry that loading their thinking into an AI project means it gets absorbed into some global system and used to train everything that comes after. This is a fair concern. There have been real cases of professionals putting sensitive information into AI tools without realizing it could be used as training data.

Here is what you need to know. *When you build a project in an AI platform like Claude, you can opt out of having your data used for training.* Your project stays yours. It does not leave the room. What goes in stays between you and the system you built.

This is worth checking on any platform you use. Not all of them handle your data the same way.

The Index of Resources at the back of this book covers which tools protect your information and how to verify it.

Now. Let us look at what you actually have.

The Five Types of Intelligence You Have Never Documented

Your expertise exists in five distinct types. You have all five. You just do not realize they are valuable because they feel obvious to you. That is the trap.

What is obvious to you is invisible to everyone else, including AI. That is precisely what makes it worth extracting.

Pattern Recognition

This is the “I just know” intelligence. You have seen enough situations in your field that you spot what is coming before it fully forms.

The client who is about to become a nightmare. You can tell from the first email.

The project that is going to run over budget. You smell it in the kickoff meeting.

The deal that is going to fall through. Something in the language tips you off before anyone else in the room senses it.

A sales professional who has closed 200 deals knows when a deal will stall during legal review. Not because someone told them, but because they have seen the same warning signs enough times to recognize the pattern: specific language in early emails, vague timelines, and multiple decision-makers without clear authority.

That recognition took 200 repetitions to develop. It is invisible until it is extracted.

A teacher with 10 years of experience knows which students need a different explanation before they raise their hands. It is not a guess. There is a framework running, whether the teacher can articulate it or not, built from thousands of classroom hours.

This is the intelligence that produces Email 2 instead of Email 1. Not better prompting. Pattern recognition from experience that AI does not have.

Decision Frameworks

You constantly make judgment calls under uncertainty. What most people do not realize is that these calls are not random. They follow a logic you have developed over time, refined through failures and successes, and compressed into something that feels like intuition but is actually a repeatable framework.

How do you decide when a client relationship has enough trust to push back on their bad idea?

How do you evaluate whether a project is worth taking?

How do you know when to escalate a problem and when to handle it quietly?

These are not gut feelings. They are frameworks you built from experience. They are just not written down.

When you extract them, AI can apply them. When they stay in your head, AI guesses and produces generic output.

Failure Libraries

Every professional who has been working long enough has a private library of things that went wrong and what they learned from each one.

Most people never think of this as an asset. It is one of the most valuable things you own.

The vendor who looked perfect on paper and cost you three months. The client profile that consistently produces scope creep. The internal dynamic that kills good projects before they start. The approach that works brilliantly in one context and fails completely in another.

AI does not have your failure library. It has generic cautionary tales from the internet.

Your specific pattern of what goes wrong in your specific context, with your specific clients, in your specific market, exists nowhere except inside your head.

Relationship Intelligence

The person who picks up when you call. The favor you can cash in when something goes sideways. The internal champion at a client company who tells you what is actually happening versus what the official story is. The vendor who will bend the rules for you because you have treated them well for five years.

This intelligence is not transferable in any traditional sense. It is also not extractable in the way pattern recognition is. But the frameworks around it are. How you build trust.

How you identify a real decision-maker versus a gatekeeper. What you do in the first ninety days of a new relationship that determines whether it becomes durable.

Those frameworks are extractable and worth a great deal.

Domain Shortcuts

The hacks. The workarounds. The efficiencies you invented because nothing else worked. The order you do things in that saves an hour per project. The script you use to handle the same objection every time. The setup you built that nobody else in your office uses because they never stopped to think about whether the default way was the best way.

You would teach all of this to a new hire in their first week and call it common sense. It is not common sense. It took you years to figure out. And most of it has never been written down anywhere.

You Have More Than You Think

If you are early in your career, here is something important. You do not need twenty years to have extractable intelligence. You extract what you have right now.

Six months of paying close attention and documenting what you observe, what you try, what works, what fails, and why, builds a library faster than twenty years of passive accumulation ever could.

The CEO does not wait until they have enough experience to start thinking strategically.

They think strategically from day one and use the intelligence they have, however much or little that is.

The young professional who extracts and documents their intelligence from the start of their career is not behind the twenty-year veteran. They are building the asset that the twenty-year veteran never thought to build while they still had the chance.

Whether you are starting today or have been building for decades, the asset is the same. The scale is different. The value of extracting it is identical.

The Shift That Changes Everything

There is a version of how experienced professionals describe their expertise that is becoming dangerously common in job interviews and performance reviews.

“I have twenty years of experience in this field.”

That is a time claim. It describes how long you have been present, not what you actually know.

In a market where AI can produce competent output on any topic in seconds, time claims are losing their persuasive power faster than most people realize.

The shift is from time-based positioning to intelligence-based positioning.

Not “*I have twenty years of experience.*” That is defensive and backward-looking.

Instead: “I have extracted twenty years of pattern recognition into documented frameworks that drive measurable outcomes. I can clearly explain what I know, how I apply it, and the results it produces.” That is offensive. That is forward-looking. That is something AI cannot replicate without you.

And that is the foundation on which the CEO First Rule is built.

The CEO does not say, *“I have been here the longest.”*

The CEO says, *“Here is what I know, here is my judgment on the situation, and here is the outcome I am accountable for.”*

The next chapter shows what employers are actually trying to buy when they ask for AI literacy. Spoiler: it is not tools.

It is exactly what you have been reading about in this chapter. And most of them do not yet know how to ask for it, which means the professionals who learn to offer it first will have an advantage that compounds before anyone else figures out how to screen for it.

Chapter 5

What Employers Actually Need

Here is what the job posting says: AI literacy required.

Here is what the hiring manager means: I am not entirely sure, but we need someone who can make our AI investment work.

Here is what the executive who approved the headcount means: We need to show the board we are serious about AI transformation.

Here is what the company actually needs: Someone who can take their own expertise, extract it into a system, and produce judgment at a scale that one person working manually never could.

Nobody in that chain of command can say the last sentence out loud because nobody in that chain of command has the language for it yet.

They are asking for something real. They just do not know what to call it.

And the workers trying to respond to the ask are scrambling toward the wrong answer because the question was never clear to begin with.

This chapter gives you the translation.

What the Data Says About What Employers Actually Want

A recent survey asked business leaders what they most need from AI-capable employees. The answers did not land on specific tools or certifications.

They landed on five things that all point in the same direction. They need people who can identify which tasks are appropriate for AI and which require human judgment.

They need people who can validate AI output rather than accept it blindly. They need people who can redesign workflows rather than simply adding AI to existing ones. They need someone who takes ownership of outcomes rather than hiding behind the tool when something goes wrong. And they need people who can apply their domain expertise to direct AI toward useful results rather than generic ones.

None of those five things is taught in a certification program.

All five of them are functions of a CEO mindset applied to daily work.

The BCG data from Chapter 1 tells the story clearly: 60% of companies saw no return on their AI investments, while the top 5% achieved five times the revenue. The difference was not the tools.

It was whether the people using those tools were operating as replaceable executors or as CEOs of their domain.

The companies investing heavily in AI certifications and tool training are, in many cases, building a workforce of more sophisticated vending machine operators. The returns reflect that.

The companies that get the transformation are the ones with people who bring their own intelligence to the tools rather than waiting for the tools to supply it.

What This Means If You Work for Someone Else

Your employer is not going to give you a clear definition of what they need. The language does not yet exist in most organizations.

What that means for you is an opportunity with a window.

The professionals who figure out how to demonstrate CEO capability before employers figure out how to screen for it will command a premium that compounds over time.

Right now, the screening process in most organizations still focuses on tool proficiency. The job posting still says “ChatGPT proficiency preferred” and “AI literacy required” without further definition.

If you walk into an interview and say, “*I can use ChatGPT,*” you are one of a thousand candidates who can say the same thing.

AI Literacy

If you walk in and say, *“I have extracted my domain expertise into a documented system that produces my judgment at scale, and here is proof of the outcome it delivered,”* you have just had a conversation nobody else in that interview process had.

That is not a trick. That is the actual difference between The Drowning and The CEO made visible.

The employer may not have the language for what you just showed them. They will recognize it when they see it.

One thing worth saying directly here. As we noted in Chapter 2, the system you build from your expertise travels with you, not with the org chart.

When you extract your decision frameworks, your pattern recognition, your failure library, and your domain shortcuts into an AI project, you are not handing those assets to the company.

You are making your own thinking portable and scalable. It belongs to you. When you change jobs, it comes with you. When you start a company, it becomes the foundation.

That is not a side benefit of The Intelligence Merge. It is one of the primary outcomes.

What This Means If You Own the Company

A generic AI tool running on generic prompts inside a company full of generic outputs is not a transformation. It is an expensive subscription that produces workstop at scale.

The companies in the top 5% have something different. They have people operating as CEOs of their domain, extracting the business's institutional knowledge, the frameworks that make their specific approach to the market different from every competitor, and merging that intelligence with AI capabilities.

The result is not that AI does the work. The result is that AI amplifies the specific intelligence that already made the company good at what it does.

If you are a business owner reading this, the question worth sitting with is not *“which AI tools should we be using?”*

It is *“what intelligence do we have in this company that nobody has ever written down?”*

The answer to that question is the foundation of everything that follows.

What This Means If You Are Just Starting Out

The traditional career ladder that built every major executive in the Fortune 500 ran through entry-level roles. Those entry points are disappearing.

Recent data shows that 61% of roles currently labeled entry-level require two to three years of prior experience. ^[16]

The market for positions requiring less than one year of experience has shrunk by roughly 30% in the past two years. ^[17]

You cannot get experience without a job. You cannot get a job without experience. The entry point that used to break that loop is being eliminated one efficiency decision at a time.

The next chapter tells the story of two people living on opposite ends of this problem. But the opportunity is worth naming now.

The five types of intelligence from Chapter 4, extracted through The Intelligence Merge in Chapter 7, compress the experience timeline in a way the traditional path never could.

You do not need to spend five years passively accumulating pattern recognition before you extract it. You extract as you go.

Every important decision you make, you document why you made it and what happened. Every mistake becomes a failure library entry rather than a lesson that lives in your gut and never gets articulated. Every observation about how your industry works goes into a system rather than getting filed away and forgotten.

The employer looking for “three years of experience” is actually looking for proof that you can think, pattern-match, and make judgment calls in their context. A documented intelligence system is proof of exactly that, regardless of how long you have been doing it.

The CEO First Rule applies here as much as anywhere else.

The young professional who walks into an interview thinking like a CEO, asking about the outcome

before discussing the task, demonstrating systems thinking rather than task execution, and showing a documented methodology for how they learn and apply intelligence, is not presenting themselves as an entry-level candidate...

They are presenting themselves as a CEO early in their career. That is a different conversation entirely.

The Translation Your Employer Needs

When your company says, “*AI literacy required*,” here is the translation they cannot yet produce themselves.

They need someone who brings real expertise to the tools rather than asking the tools to supply it. They need someone who thinks about outcomes rather than tasks. They need someone who takes responsibility when something goes wrong, rather than pointing the finger at the AI. They need someone who can redesign a workflow rather than just adding a new step to the existing one. They need someone who operates as the CEO of their domain rather than as a better-equipped executor.

Most job postings will not say any of that for another two to three years. The market is always behind the reality.

Your opportunity is becoming what they will eventually learn to pay a premium for before they figure out how to ask for it.

The next chapter looks at the experience problem from both ends: the twenty-three-year-old who cannot break in and the fifty-two-year-old whose expertise is being overlooked. Same solution. Different directions.

Chapter 6

The Experience Trap

Sarah has a 3.7 GPA, a marketing degree, and has applied to 127 jobs in six months. She has received three interviews and zero offers.

Michael has 25 years of supply chain experience, has implemented systems across four countries, and trained 40 people who now run their own departments. His company just offered AI training to the marketing team. He was not invited.

Two completely different situations. Two completely different career stages. The same root cause.

The market is measuring the wrong things, and both of them are paying for it.

Sarah's Problem: The Ladder Is Gone

The career path that built every major executive in the Fortune 500 ran through entry-level roles. The HP CEO started in a call center. The Walmart CEO started unloading trucks. The GM CEO started on an assembly line.

Those positions were not just cheap labor. They were where pattern recognition got built. Where judgment developed through repetition. Where smart people learned enough to eventually run things.

Those entry points are disappearing. Entry-level jobs have declined significantly since AI-related restructuring began. ^[17] Roles requiring less than one year of experience have contracted even faster.

The companies eliminating those positions believe AI will handle the work.

What they have not accounted for is that the work was never just the output. It was the training ground.

Sarah applies for something labeled “Entry-Level Marketing Coordinator.” The requirements list three to five years of marketing experience, proficiency in five software platforms, demonstrated campaign management, and a proven track record of results.

That is not entry-level. That is a mid-career position with an entry-level title attached to justify the salary.

She has heard all the advice.

Network more. She has 800 LinkedIn connections and attends every industry event she can find.

Build a portfolio. She has managed social media for three nonprofits, run email campaigns for her alumni association, and created content that has delivered measurable results.

Learn AI tools. She knows ChatGPT, several AI writing tools, and image generators. She can write prompts. She understands the interfaces.

None of it solves the actual problem. The problem is not that she lacks skills.

The problem is that the proof of experience the market requires can only be earned through the jobs the market has eliminated.

She cannot get experience without a job. She cannot get a job without experience. The entry point that used to break that loop is gone.

When workers aged 22 to 25 in AI-exposed sectors are tracked, employment declines, while workers aged 26 and up in those same sectors see employment increase. ^[27]

The gap is not about capability. It is about restructuring who has access to the learning environments that build capability.

Michael's Problem: The Intelligence Nobody Can See

Michael is not in danger because he lacks expertise. He is in danger because his expertise has become invisible.

Twenty-five years in supply chain management compressed into instinct. He can look at a vendor's documentation pattern and know a shipment will be delayed three months before anyone else in the room suspects it. He has seen that pattern 73 times.

He does not think about it anymore. He just knows.

That is not common sense. That is 25 years of data compressed into automatic judgment. It is irreplaceable. *It is also completely impossible to demonstrate in a job posting, a performance review, or a conversation with a manager who is trying to justify training budgets.*

His company offered AI training to the marketing team. Michael was not invited. When he asked why, his manager said they were focusing resources on team members with longer runways ahead of them. Translation: you are too experienced and too expensive to be worth developing.

Only 15% of workers 45 and older use AI at work, compared to 34% of workers under 40. ^[19]

Michael's confidence has taken a hit over the past year. He is not alone.

The pattern is common among experienced professionals watching their expertise get dismissed in favor of someone younger who knows how to use AI tools and costs 60% of his salary.

He is not resisting change. He is watching his decades of judgment get treated as a line item rather than an asset.

The cost-benefit math looks clean from the outside. Senior salary versus lower-cost junior hire.

What the math does not capture is the value of the intelligence that leaves when Michael does.

The delay predictions that never get made. The vendor relationships that do not transfer. The pattern recognition that took 25 years to build and disappears the moment he walks out the door.

Companies cannot measure what they cannot see. They measure years of service, titles, and credentials because those are easy to verify.

Pattern recognition quality, decision framework sophistication, and tacit knowledge depth are not measured. They are assumed. And when they are assumed, they can be dismissed.

The Same Paradox, Both Ends

Sarah cannot prove the expertise she has not been allowed to build. Michael cannot defend expertise that lives below the level of articulation. Both are trapped by the same broken measurement system.

The market rewards time-based credentials. Years of service. Job titles. Certifications.

None of those things measures intelligence. All of them are proxies for intelligence that worked reasonably well before AI made the distinction between intelligence and task execution impossible to ignore.

When everyone has access to the same AI tools, time-based experience becomes less relevant, and intelligence-based experience becomes everything.

The problem is that the market has not yet figured out how to screen for intelligence-based experience. It still asks for years and titles because those are easy to verify.

Which means there is a window right now for the people who learn to make their intelligence visible before companies figure out how to ask for it.

The Objection Worth Addressing

Someone reading this chapter will reasonably ask: if operating as the CEO of your work is so valuable, why don't companies consistently evaluate candidates for it? Why are experienced professionals still getting overlooked, and young workers still locked out?

The answer is that the market is always behind the reality.

The confusion documented in Chapter 1 is not a temporary miscommunication that will self-correct in a few months. It is a structural lag between what is actually working and what companies know how to measure.

The executives making workforce decisions are operating on incomplete data, as the research showed earlier.

The job postings reflect what HR knows how to write, not what the business actually needs.

The performance reviews measure what has always been measured, not what the current moment requires.

That lag is not your problem to solve. It is your opportunity to capitalize on.

The professionals who learn to demonstrate CEO capability before employers figure out how to screen for it will have an advantage that quietly compounds over the next two to three years before everyone else catches up.

The Same Solution for Both Problems

Here is where Sarah and Michael converge. The Intelligence Merge, which Chapter 7 explains in full, is the same methodology applied from two different starting points.

It does not matter whether you have 25 years of pattern recognition to extract or six months of documented decisions. The process is identical. The asset being built is the same. The outcome is the same.

Sarah does not need to wait five years to have extractable intelligence. The extraction process works the same way whether the library is six months deep or twenty-five years deep. What matters is that Sarah is capturing intelligence as she builds it, while most people her age wait until they have “enough” experience to start.

That includes college. Every case study you analyze, every internship observation, every professor's framework that clicks, all of it is extractable intelligence. The students who document it as they learn it graduate with a system their classmates cannot match.

Michael does not need to defend his years. He needs to make his intelligence visible.

Instead of “*I have 25 years of experience in supply chain,*” he needs to be able to say, “*Here is my vendor delay prediction framework. Here is my documentation pattern analysis that flags risk 90 days before anyone else sees it. Here is proof it saved \$300,000 in the past year.*”

That is not a time claim. That is proof of intelligence. It is the difference between being defensive and being irreplaceable.

Warren Buffett has spent decades saying he only invests in companies that have built-in protection against competitors, a moat if you will, that cannot easily be replicated or replaced.

The system you are about to build is that kind of protection for your career. It compounds over time. It travels with you, not with your employer.

And the longer you run it, the harder it is for anyone else to replicate what you bring into the room.

Both Sarah and Michael build that protection through the same path. The scale is different. The process is identical.

The CEO Frame Applied to Both

Here is how to think about both Michael and Sarah's situations from a CEO mindset.

In Michael's case, a CEO who has been running a division for 25 years does not walk into a board meeting and say, "I have 25 years of experience."

They bring the frameworks, the data, the pattern analysis, and the judgment that justifies their recommendations. They make their intelligence visible in the room. They own the outcome.

In Sarah's case, a CEO on their first day in a new role does not say, "I just graduated from my \$200k Master's degree program."

They bring their thinking, their approach, their questions, and their demonstrated capacity to learn and apply intelligence quickly. They own the outcome.

The title does not make someone a CEO. The thinking does. And the thinking is available to anyone who decides to operate that way, regardless of how many years are on the resume.

What Comes Next

Chapter 7 introduces the methodology that makes all of this possible. The **Intelligence Merge** is the system that closes the gap between what you know and what you can prove you know, for Sarah, for Michael, and for everyone in between. The diagnosis is complete. The solution begins on the next page.

Chapter 7

The Intelligence Merge

Six chapters ago, you met Doug. Two decades of expertise. A career built on doing one thing exceptionally well. And a market that stopped calling without warning or explanation.

Since then, you have identified the three categories and recognized which one you are in. You have seen why the training industry keeps selling you tools that hit a ceiling.

You now understand what you actually have that AI cannot replicate, what your employer genuinely needs but cannot articulate, and how both ends of the experience spectrum, Sarah with her 127 applications and Michael with his 25 years, are caught in the same trap for the same reason.

The diagnosis is complete. You did not come to this book for a diagnosis. You came for the solution.

The CEO Who Does Not Do the Data Processing

Picture the CEO of a mid-size company walking into a Monday morning strategy meeting. She does not spend the meeting running spreadsheets. She does not write the competitive analysis. She does not pull the quarterly figures or format the slides.

She walks in, sits down, and every person in that room brings her something they have already done.

The research. The numbers. The options. The risks.

Her job is not to produce the work. Her job is to synthesize it, challenge it, and decide.

That is not laziness. That is leverage.

She has built a system where her highest-value contribution, her judgment, her pattern recognition, her experience with what has and has not worked before, is applied to decisions rather than buried inside tasks.

Now, picture how most people use AI. They open a chat window. They type a short request. They read the output, decide whether it is close enough or not quite right, and either use it or abandon it. The interaction takes 90 seconds. The output is generic. And they wonder why it keeps producing work that needs rebuilding.

They are treating one of the most powerful ‘thinking tools’ ever created like a vending machine.

The CEO First Rule, introduced at the end of Chapter 2, corrects this.

The CEO does not walk into the meeting and immediately demand a deliverable.

She arrives with context. She thinks out loud. She lets the intelligence in the room surface before she decides anything.

The Intelligence Merge is what gives you the context to walk in with. It is what fills the room with intelligence worth surfacing.

However, the extraction does not change your results on its own.

What changes your results is who you decide to be the moment you open the chat window.

The CEO does not prompt. The CEO arrives with context, thinks out loud, and directs.

Every time you open your AI of choice, you have a choice about which person walks into that room. But before the system can work, you need to understand what you are actually building.

What The Intelligence Merge Is

The Intelligence Merge is the process of extracting the expertise inside your head, documenting it in a structured way, loading it into an AI system, and then engaging

with that system as a thinking partner rather than a task executor.

Two words in that definition carry most of the weight: extracting and engaging.

Extracting is the part most people skip. They go straight to engaging, which is why their outputs are generic. The AI does not know their patterns. It does not know their decision frameworks, their client history, their failure library, or the specific way they see problems in their field. It knows the average of the internet. And it produces the average of the internet back at them.

Engaging is the part that the entire AI training industry gets wrong.

Every course, every certification, every LinkedIn post about “better prompts” still operates under the same fundamental error. They are teaching you to ask the vending machine better questions.

The Intelligence Merge teaches you to stop using a vending machine at all.

A single prompt produces retrieval. A conversation produces insight.

The Before and After

This is not a concept to understand in the abstract. It is a difference you need to see.

Here is the same professional, a marketing director with 12 years of experience, using AI both ways. The situation is identical. She needs to develop a positioning strategy for a client who sells enterprise software to mid-size manufacturers.

The vending machine version:

She opens her AI of choice. She types: *“Write a positioning strategy for enterprise software targeting mid-size manufacturers.”*

She reads the output. It is reasonable. It covers the expected territory, efficiency gains, integration capability, scalability, and ROI. She adjusts a few phrases, adds the client’s name, and sends it to the account team.

The strategy took 8 minutes. It looks like every other positioning strategy the client has probably already seen. It could have been written by anyone with internet access and an AI subscription.

The Intelligence Merge version:

She opens her AI project, where her intelligence has been extracted and loaded as custom instructions. She does not start with a request. She starts with context.

She says, *“I need to think through a positioning problem. I have worked with three clients in this space over the past four years, and I keep seeing the same thing. The buyers in manufacturing do not respond to the ROI language that works in other sectors. They respond to something closer to risk elimination. Let me tell you what I have observed.”*

AI Literacy

She spends five minutes downloading her pattern recognition into the conversation. The AI does not produce anything yet. It asks questions. It reveals a tension she has been sensing but has not articulated. It connects her observation about risk elimination to a specific buyer psychology she described from a previous client.

Now, the output it produces is built on her 12 years of pattern recognition, not on the ‘internet’s average.’ The strategy says something no one else’s strategy does, because no one else has her specific base of observations.

That is ‘The Intelligence Merge’ in practice.

The difference in output quality is not due to a better prompt. It is a matter of what was brought to the conversation before the first word was typed.

What Gets Extracted

Chapter 4 introduced the five types of intelligence you have never documented. Here is what each one looks like when it enters the extraction process.

Pattern Recognition is your “when I see X, I know Y is coming” knowledge. The extraction process turns invisible instinct into documented signals your AI can apply.

Decision Frameworks are the rules you run automatically when facing a problem. Extraction makes them visible so AI can follow the same logic you do.

Failure Libraries are your mental catalog of what went wrong and why. Extraction turns private lessons into a system that flags the same conditions before they repeat.

Relationship Intelligence is your knowledge of how specific people and organizations actually operate. The frameworks for building trust, reading the room, and identifying real decision-makers are all extractable.

Domain Shortcuts are the efficiencies you invented because nothing else worked. Extraction captures the shortcuts that would take a newcomer years to discover on their own.

All five live in your head right now. None of them are in AI's training data. That is the gap The Intelligence Merge closes.

The Three-Stage Structure

Extraction happens in three stages, each building on the last. This is not a random interview process. It is a structured sequence designed to capture everything that makes you valuable in a specific order.

Stage 1: Foundation. This is where you extract the core intelligence that separates you from someone who just started in your field. Your domain overview, your primary patterns, your basic decision frameworks, and the mistakes you prevent that others make. This stage answers the question: what do you know that the internet does not?

Stage 2: Enhanced Intelligence. This stage goes deeper. It captures the nuance, the edge cases, the situations where your standard frameworks do not apply and you have to run something more sophisticated. It also captures your communication intelligence, how you adapt your approach for different audiences, stakeholders, and contexts. Stage 2 is where the AI starts developing what you might call professional instincts.

Stage 3: Personalization. This is where the system becomes unmistakably yours. Your voice. Your specific analogies. The phrases you use when you are thinking something through. The way you structure a recommendation. The tone you use with a client who is frustrated versus one who is enthusiastic. Stage 3 is what makes the output sound like you wrote it rather than like you edited it.

Each stage builds on the previous one. You do not jump to Stage 3 without Stage 1 and Stage 2 in place. Trying to personalize an empty system is what produces the shallow AI intelligence system problem, which Chapter 10 addresses directly.

A group of founders recently paid a significant sum to spend two days with an AI expert building an operating system for their business. Over half of the first day was spent on extraction alone. The extraction is always the bottleneck. It is also the part that makes everything else work.

An AI operating system is the next rung on the ladder, built on top of a completed Intelligence Merge. The basics are covered at the end of this book.

The full extraction system, including guided interview rounds for each stage, is available inside the free community that comes with this book. The Index of Resources at the back has the link. The extraction rounds walk you through every stage with structured interviews designed to pull out the intelligence you did not know you had. *Your book purchase includes full access.*

Why Most People Skip the Part That Matters

Here is the uncomfortable version of the truth.

Many people will read about The Intelligence Merge, understand it, agree with it, and plan to apply it, yet still open their AI of choice tomorrow and type a short prompt. The result will be generic. They will tweak a few things and continue as usual.

Not because they are lazy. Not because they disagree with the methodology. Because the vending machine behavior is deeply wired, and knowing a better approach exists does not automatically install it.

I watched this happen in real time with someone who had read every word of an earlier version of this book, completed the extraction process, and built her system.

She sat on a two-hour Zoom with me, talking through the methodology in depth. Two weeks later, she was still opening her AI and typing short prompts.

That is not a failure of understanding. That is a failure of habit.

And it is the most important challenge this book addresses, because extraction without the behavior change produces a system that sits unused while the vending machine keeps running.

Chapter 8 is where that story gets told in full. It is also where the science behind the vending machine habit gets explained, because you need to understand the mechanism before you can interrupt it.

What I want you to take from this chapter is simpler.

The Intelligence Merge is not a one-time event. It is a practice.

Extraction builds the foundation. The behavior change is what makes the foundation worth building. Two things are required. Not one.

The Timing Advantage

The market has not yet figured out how to screen for extracted intelligence. Companies still ask for years, titles, and certifications because those are easy to verify. The gap between what they ask for and what they actually need is still wide enough to drive through.

The professionals who extract now, before the market knows to ask for it, will have a compounding advantage that is nearly impossible to close later.

By the time companies learn to identify ‘CEO-level thinking professionals’ during job interviews, the people who started extracting today will be miles ahead.

That gap does not shrink. It grows. Every week of extraction adds to the intelligence library. Every conversation adds to the pattern base. Every documented decision makes the system more sophisticated.

The built-in protection from Chapter 6 starts here. It compounds with every extraction session. And it travels with you, not with your employer.

The next chapter shows you exactly why the behavior change is the harder half of this, and why almost nobody talks about it.

Chapter 8

The Vending Machine Habit

Linda had done everything right. She read the first version of this book cover to cover. Thank you for being a guinea pig, Linda.

She completed the extraction process. She built her ‘AI Intelligence System,’ which is what The Intelligence Merge creates when you load your extracted expertise into an AI project, and she loaded it with her patterns and professional frameworks.

She showed up to a two-hour Zoom session ready to put it to work.

And then she opened it and typed a short prompt.

That is not a Linda problem. It is a pattern problem, and that is the most important idea in this chapter.

Because what happened next is going to happen to you too, probably more than once. Understanding why it happens is the difference between pushing through it and going back to the vending machine permanently.

The Press Release Scene

Linda needed to write a press release. Her client, a doctor, had purchased a commercial building. She wanted a clean, news-style announcement. Professional. Factual. No marketing fluff.

She opened her AI Intelligence System and typed something close to: “Write a press release about my client buying a building.”

The output came back polished, well-structured, and completely wrong for the job.

It was marketing language dressed up as news. It had embellishments her client never said. It read like an advertisement posing as journalism.

She was frustrated. The tool had her expertise loaded into it. She had done the extraction work. Why was it still producing generic output?

The answer was not in the tool. The answer was in how she talked to it.

She had walked up to her AI Intelligence System, the one built from her own professional intelligence, and treated it like a vending machine. Short input. Expected output. Move on.

The system had no idea what kind of press release she needed, who the audience was, what the doctor’s tone sounded like, or why the building purchase mattered in the context of his practice.

She had not told the AI any of that. She had just pressed a button and waited for a candy bar to drop.

I told her to stop. Not to find a better prompt. To stop prompting entirely and start talking.

Tell it what this announcement needs to accomplish. Tell it who the intended readers are. Tell it what your client sounds like when he talks about his work. Tell it what you know about how journalists in your market respond to this kind of news. Think out loud. Let the system ask you questions back. Do not ask for output until the two of you have actually had a conversation and reached some initial conclusion.

She did it.

The output that came back sounded nothing like the first version. It sounded like a press release written by someone who understood the client, the industry, and the document's purpose. Because that is exactly what it was.

The LinkedIn Post Scene

Later in the same session, Linda wanted to write a LinkedIn post reviewing this book.

She had uploaded the book to her AI Intelligence System weeks earlier. She had her extraction in place. She had everything she needed. And she was about to type another short prompt asking it to write the review.

I stopped her again.

I asked her, *“What did you actually think about the book? What surprised you? What did you push back on? What changed for you after you read it? What would you tell a colleague who was on the fence about picking it up?”*

She started talking. Real reactions. Specific moments. Things she agreed with and things that made her uncomfortable. Her actual professional opinion from someone who had spent a career in communications and knew exactly what the AI landscape looked like from the inside.

***The system now had something it did not have before.
Not a prompt. A conversation.***

Signal-dense context from a real person with real expertise, building on a foundation of extracted intelligence that was already loaded and waiting.

The output it produced stopped her mid-sentence.

I could see it through the Zoom screen. She read it, looked up, and went quiet for a moment.

Then she said something like, “This actually sounds like me.”

That is the light bulb.

Not the tool getting smarter. It was her getting smarter about how to use the tool. The system did not change between the first and second attempts. Her behavior did. That single shift in behavior is worth more than any upgrade, any new feature, or any better prompt she could have learned.

Why This Keeps Happening

Linda is not unusual. She is the rule.

The MIT study from Chapter 3 showed this pattern clearly. Researchers tracked students writing essays with AI assistance over multiple sessions.

They expected that with practice, students would develop more sophisticated collaboration habits. They would learn to engage more deeply, provide richer context, and ask better questions.

The opposite happened. With each session, students got progressively lazier, not more skilled.

By their third essay, many were handing the prompt directly to the AI and doing almost no thinking themselves. Brain scans showed the task was being done efficiently, but the students were not integrating it. They were not learning. They were not thinking.

They were vending.

This is not a character flaw. It is how the human brain is wired.

Daniel Kahneman, the psychologist who won the Nobel Prize for his work on how people make decisions, identified two systems the brain runs simultaneously.

System 1 is fast, automatic, and effortless. It handles the vast majority of your daily decisions without you noticing.

System 2 is slow, deliberate, and requires real mental energy. It is what you use when you are solving a hard problem or learning something new.

The brain defaults to System 1 whenever it possibly can. Not because you are lazy.

Because conserving mental energy is one of the brain's core survival functions. It has been doing this for hundreds of thousands of years.

A short prompt and a fast output are pure System 1.

Crafting a rich, context-filled conversation that builds toward real insight requires System 2. And System 2 does not activate unless System 1 clearly fails.

Here is the problem. With AI, System 1 almost never clearly fails.

The output is always reasonable. It is always coherent. It is always close enough to move on with.

The vending machine keeps dispensing something that looks like food, so the brain never gets the signal to stop and cook a real meal.

The interesting usage data from Chapter 3 looks different through Kahneman's lens.

The median prompt length is 10 words. The average conversation lasts 1.7 turns. Only 3.7% of conversations exceed 10 turns. The people who push past the first output and keep engaging are 5.6 times more likely to challenge the reasoning and produce something genuinely useful.

That 3.7% is not a coincidence. It is the 5% of AI interactions where users merge their intelligence with AI, showing up in the data.

The Measurable Gap

The MIT study showed you what vending does to the brain. A different study showed you what briefing does to the output.

Briefing means you do not just request an answer. You bring context, intent, constraints, and reasoning into the conversation and work with AI as a collaborator.

In 2024, Boston Consulting Group partnered with researchers at Harvard to run the experiment at scale. They gave 758 consultants complex knowledge tasks outside their specialty.

Half used AI as a brainstorming partner. They iterated, asked follow-up questions, and treated the AI like a collaborator, pushing back on weak outputs.

The consultants who used AI as a partner hit 86 percent of data-scientist benchmark quality on tasks that were not in their field.

That is a 49-point performance jump over consultants who did not use AI that way.

Read that again.

Knowledge workers operating outside their specialty produced work that was 86 percent as good as specialists who do that work full-time.

Not because the AI was smarter. Because the humans brought their thinking to the conversation instead of outsourcing it.

That is the size of the gap between vending and briefing.

Linda's press release moved from generic marketing fluff to "this actually sounds like me" in one behavior change. The BCG consultants moved from non-specialist output to near-expert output in the same behavior change.

The mechanism is identical. The tool does not change. The person in front of the tool changes.

That is the entire argument of this book, measured by two independent research teams, on two different populations, producing the same answer.

The gap is not theoretical. It is 49 points wide. And nobody is getting paid at the bottom of that gap anymore.

The Entire AI Industry Gets This Wrong

Here is something the AI training industry does not want you to hear.

Every course teaching you better prompts is still teaching you to use a vending machine.

Every certification showing you the best buttons to push is still a vending machine certification.

Every LinkedIn post with five prompts that will transform your productivity is vending machine advice dressed up in smarter language.

The entire industry has optimized for System 1.

Shorter inputs. Faster outputs. More efficient button-pushing. Because that is what sells.

That is what feels like progress. That is what you can package into a 47-minute course and charge \$197 for.

Nobody is teaching the behavior change.

Nobody is teaching the CEO First Rule.

Nobody is teaching you to walk into the room with context, think out loud, and let the intelligence surface before you ask for a deliverable.

Ann, a professional who commented on one of my LinkedIn posts about the three categories, described the vending machine problem

perfectly without realizing it. She asked: *“How do you get around its tendency to sound positive, polite, and reasonable? It just agrees with you.”*

She was not describing a problem with any specific AI platform. She was describing a vending machine problem.

When you drop a coin in a vending machine, it does not argue with you. It gives you what you asked for.

If you ask AI for a plan and it has holes, a vending machine interaction will not surface those holes. It will hand you the plan with a bow on it.

A partner interaction is different. A partner who knows your work, your patterns, and your history will push back. Will ask the question you are avoiding. Will surface the tension you already feel but have not named yet.

That is not a feature of the tool. That is a feature of the relationship. And the relationship only exists if you build it through conversation rather than prompts.

Sabrina, an AI strategist who also responded to that post, said something that belongs in this chapter: *“AI does not replace people. It replaces unstructured execution.”*

She is right. And the vending machine habit is the most common form of unstructured execution there is.

What The AI Intelligence System Actually Is

Before we go further, one expectation needs to be set directly.

The AI Intelligence System you build is not magic. It will not know what to do with every task you throw at it on day one. What it does is think like you.

The more you bring it into context and treat it as a partner, the more useful it becomes. The more you prompt it like a vending machine, the more average it sounds.

The system is the foundation. Behavior change activates it.

Think of it this way. You could hire the most qualified professional in your industry to work alongside you. Someone who has studied your field deeply, understands your clients, knows your frameworks, and is available every time you need to think something through.

If you walk up to that person every morning and say, “*Write me a press release,*” and walk away, you are wasting everything they bring to the table.

But if you sit down with them and say, “*Here is the situation, here is what I know, here is what I am uncertain about, help me think this through,*” you are using the relationship the way it was designed to work.

That is the shift. Not a better prompt. A different identity. The CEO who arrives with context, rather than the one who pushes buttons and hopes.

The Moment The Light Bulb Actually Goes On

Linda's breakthrough was not a technique. It was a realization.

She sent me a reflection after the Zoom session about her overall experience extracting her intelligence and then using her AI Intelligence System. It included three things I want to share here because they are more honest than anything I could write about what this shift actually feels like from the inside.

She felt something like test anxiety during the extraction process. Like she was going to be evaluated by the AI, judged for the quality of her answers, and found lacking somehow.

That is not an unusual reaction. It is the blank page feeling showing up in a new context. The performance pressure that makes people give shallow answers when deep ones are right there waiting.

Once the behavior shift happened, the system felt less like a tool and more like a co-worker. Someone she could think out loud with. She arrived at that analogy herself, without me suggesting it. That matters.

The co-worker frame is not something you can install from the outside. It has to be discovered from the inside, through the experience of actually having a real conversation instead of pressing buttons.

The reflection she wrote, which I keep coming back to, is this. She said this was *“next-level usage that even experts are not sharing, either because they don’t know or they charge big fees.”*

She is right on both counts. Most people teaching AI are still at the vending machine level. They have just built a more sophisticated vending machine interface.

Behavior change, the CEO First Rule, and the partner relationship are the parts that almost nobody talks about. And they are the parts that make everything else work.

Your Vending Machine Habit Is Not Your Fault

You have been trained for this.

Every search engine you have ever used has rewarded the short query.

Every app on your phone is designed to minimize the friction between you and the output.

Every AI interface ever built has a blinking cursor waiting for you to type something short so it can respond quickly and appear useful.

The vending machine behavior is the path of least resistance in every piece of technology you have used over the past 20 years.

That is also why it transferred to AI, why it feels normal, and why it takes real effort to interrupt.

The students in the MIT study knew the better approach existed.

They understood that richer engagement produced better results. They still defaulted to the minimum.

Knowing the right behavior and doing the right behavior are two completely separate things. This book exists in the gap between those two things.

The next chapter is honest about what it actually takes to close that gap. The timeline is longer than you want it to be.

And there is a specific moment in the middle of the change where everything feels worse before it gets better.

Knowing that moment is coming is the only thing that will get you through it.

Chapter 9

The Behavior Change

Jeff Bezos does not walk into a strategy meeting and say, “What are we doing?”

He already knows what he is doing.

He walks in with a mission, context, and the right questions. The meeting is not where the thinking starts. The meeting is where the thinking gets tested.

Mr. Bezos has said publicly that if he makes 3 good decisions a day, that is enough. ^[20]

Not 30. Not 300. 3.

He protects his thinking so completely that he schedules his most important decisions for the morning, guards his sleep like a business asset, and delegates everything that does not require his specific judgment to systems built to handle it.

He is not working harder than everyone else. He is thinking better.

And the reason he can think better is that he has built a system where his highest-value contribution, his judgment, is never buried inside tasks that do not require it.

You are not trying to build Amazon. You are trying to build something more personally important than that.

You are trying to become the most valuable version of yourself in an era where almost everyone around you is afraid, confused, and reaching for a vending machine.

The CEO Briefing Framework is how you get there. But before we get to the framework, you need to hear something that nobody in the AI training industry is willing to say out loud.

The Honest Timeline

The most popular idea about behavior change says it takes 21 days to form a new habit.

That number comes from a plastic surgery book written in the 1960s. A doctor noticed that patients seemed to adjust to their new appearance within about three weeks and made an offhand observation. Somehow, that observation became a universal law of human psychology repeated in every self-help book published since.

It is not true.

A study from University College London tracked 96 people as they formed new daily behaviors and measured exactly how long it took for those behaviors to become automatic. ^[21]

The average was 66 days. The actual range ran from 18 days at the fastest to 254 days at the slowest. Simple behaviors formed quickly. Complex behaviors, the kind that require replacing a deeply wired pattern with something that demands more effort, took dramatically longer.

Replacing the vending machine habit with the CEO Briefing Framework is a complex behavior change. You are not adding something new to a blank slate.

You are replacing something that has been reinforced every single time you have used a search engine, an app, or an AI tool for the past decade. That wiring runs deep. Unwiring it takes time.

Here is the timeline the research actually supports.

Weeks one through four are the hardest stretch. The old behavior fights back with everything it has. You will sit down to work, feel the pull of the short prompt, and give in more often than you want to.

That is not failure. That is the first phase. Expect it.

You may have your first session where the CEO Briefing Framework produces something that stops you mid-read, output that sounds

exactly like you, built on your intelligence, shaped by your judgment. That moment is worth the entire first month.

Months two and three, you can execute the new behavior, but it requires conscious effort. Under pressure, under deadlines, under stress, you will revert.

This is normal. You will also start to feel the gap between what the framework produces and what a short prompt produces. The gap will make short prompts feel like a downgrade. That feeling is the identity shift taking hold.

Months three through six, the CEO Briefing Framework starts to feel natural in calm conditions. You catch yourself briefing before prompting without having to remind yourself. The new behavior is building roots.

Months six through eighteen, the framework becomes your default. Even under pressure. Even on a tight deadline. This is where the identity shift completes.

You are no longer someone trying to use AI better. You are someone who thinks like a CEO. The vending machine is no longer tempting because it no longer matches who you are.

That is the honest timeline. Not 21 days. Closer to six months before it feels genuinely automatic, and up to 18 months before it holds under real pressure.

I am telling you this not to discourage you. I am telling you this because the readers who know what is coming will push through it.

The readers who expect 21 days will quit at day 22 and conclude the methodology does not work. This single piece of information, delivered right now, is the difference between a reader who transforms and a reader who tries once and stops.

The J-Curve Nobody Warned You About

When you replace an ingrained behavior with a new one, your performance does not gradually improve from day one. **It gets worse before it gets better.**

The old behavior was automatic and effortless. You had been doing it for years without thinking. The new behavior requires conscious attention, deliberate effort, and mental energy you are not used to spending on something that once felt instant.

In the short term, the CEO Briefing Framework will feel slower. It will feel like more work.

You will look at the person next to you typing a five-word prompt and getting something usable in 30 seconds, and wonder if you are overcomplicating everything.

You are not overcomplicating everything. You are in the J-curve.

The dip is the mechanism of change, not evidence that the change is failing. Every professional who has ever learned a new skill, changed a workflow, or adopted a new discipline has gone through this dip.

The ones who knew it was coming pushed through. Those who did not know treated the dip as proof that they should stop.

Research on organizational change shows that the J-curve dip is precisely where most people abandon the change. Not because it was not working. Because they mistook the inevitable transition cost for evidence of failure. ^[22]

The dip is NOT failure. The dip is Tuesday of week two. It means you are exactly on schedule.

The Extinction Burst

There is a specific moment in any behavior change where the old pattern makes one final, aggressive push to restore itself.

Psychologists call it the extinction burst. When you stop reinforcing an old behavior, the brain does not let it fade quietly. It spikes. The urge to revert hits harder in this moment than it has in weeks. It feels like backsliding. It feels like the change is collapsing.

It is not collapsing. The extinction burst is actually a sign that the old pattern is breaking, not that it is winning.

Think of it like a toddler in a grocery store who has learned that a tantrum gets them candy. If you decide to stop giving in, the first time you hold the line, the tantrum gets louder, longer, and more dramatic than any tantrum before it.

The brain is testing whether the old reward is still available. When it finds out it is not, the pattern starts to dissolve.

You can also think of it like the person who quit smoking and then three months later, from some strange little habit buried in the back of the brain, finds themselves standing in the backyard holding a cigarette, getting ready to light up, with no memory of going to get it.

The body moved on autopilot. The conscious mind had already quit. The wiring had not caught up yet.

That is not failure. That is the last flicker of an old circuit looking for its signal. When it does not find one, it goes dark for good.

Your vending machine habit will do the same thing. Somewhere in the first month, probably right when you feel like you are making progress, *maybe you just bought a little snack from a vending machine*, and you will have a day where the urge to just type a short prompt and get a fast answer feels almost irresistible.

That is the extinction burst. Name it when it arrives. Literally say to yourself, out loud if you need to, “this is the extinction burst.”

The moment it has a name, it becomes manageable. It is no longer a mysterious collapse. It is a documented phase with a known endpoint.

The endpoint is closer than it feels.

One more thing. Put a sticky note on your computer that says, “Be the CEO. Do not Vend.” It will remind you to brief before you prompt. It might also remind you to skip the vending machine down the hall.
Two problems solved.

Who You Are Becoming

Before we get to the framework itself, the identity piece needs to land.

James Clear’s Atomic Habits identified the pattern: the most durable transformations work from the inside out.

Not “*I am trying to use AI better.*” Not “*I am attempting to follow a four-step framework.*” Those are goal-based identities. They collapse the moment the goal feels out of reach.

The identity that sticks is: “I am someone who thinks like a CEO. I brief before I build. I bring context before I ask for output. I do not vend.”

Every time you use the CEO Briefing Framework, you are not just completing a task. You are casting a vote for the person you are becoming. Every briefing session is evidence that you are the kind of professional who respects your own intelligence enough to deploy it properly. Every vending machine prompt you replace is a vote against the old identity and in favor of the new one.

Mr. Bezos did not become a CEO-level thinker by trying harder. He became one by building systems that protected his thinking and then showing up to those systems consistently until they became who he was.

You are doing the same thing. Smaller scale. Same principle. And in your specific context, with your specific expertise loaded into your AI Intelligence System, you have something Mr. Bezos did not have when he started.

You have a partner already briefed on everything that makes you valuable.

You just have to show up like the CEO instead of the person fishing for a candy bar.

The CEO Briefing Framework

This is the named practice that replaces the vending machine habit. Four steps. Every time. No exceptions.

It is not a prompting technique. It is a meeting format. You are not optimizing your request. You are changing the nature of the interaction entirely.

Step 1: Declare the Mission. What are we trying to accomplish, and why does it matter right now? Not “write me a LinkedIn post.” That is a vending machine request. It tells the system what you want, but nothing about why it matters, who it is for, or what success looks like.

A mission sounds like this: *“I need to reach mid-career professionals who are afraid AI is making their experience irrelevant. I want them to feel understood, not sold to. I want them to walk away with one concrete thing they can do today. The tone needs to feel like a trusted colleague, not a marketer.”* That is a mission.

A vending machine gets a button push. Your AI Intelligence System gets a mission. The difference in what comes back is not subtle.

Step 2: Surface the Context. What do you know? What are you uncertain about? Where does the relevant intelligence come from? This is the briefing. You download everything relevant into the conversation before asking for anything back.

Your observations. Your experience with this specific client, industry, or situation. The patterns you have seen before. The thing you know that is not in any training data.

Amazon executives arrive at strategy meetings having already read a six-page written narrative covering the situation in full. ^[23]

Nobody is allowed to present slides. The thinking has to happen before the talking starts.

You are doing the same thing. You are putting the context on the table before anyone asks for a decision. Your AI Intelligence System already has your foundation loaded. Step 2 adds the specific situational intelligence that makes this task different from every other.

Step 3: Build the Framework. Before you ask for any output, ask for a structure. An outline. A set of options. A framework to react to. This is the step almost everyone skips, and it is the step that separates work that sounds like you from work that sounds like the average of the internet.

You are not asking for the deliverable yet. You are asking for the thinking that will make the deliverable worth having.

React to the framework. Push back on it. Add what is missing. Remove what does not fit. The framework session is where your judgment gets applied before any output is generated.

This is where the CEO earns the title. Not by asking for faster outputs. By shaping the thinking before the work begins.

Step 4: Request the Deliverable. Now ask.

And because you have declared the mission, surfaced the context, and built the framework together, what comes back sounds nothing like a vending machine output.

It sounds like something a brilliant colleague produced after a thorough briefing from someone who knew exactly what they needed. Because that is exactly what it is.

Some people have tried to solve the vending machine problem by pushing back on the output three times. Ask once, push back, push back again, push back a third time, hope the third answer is better.

It is the AI equivalent of shaking the vending machine.

You might get a slightly better result. You are still eating from a vending machine. The CEO Briefing Framework is not about getting a better answer from the machine.

It is about never walking up to the machine in the first place.

The Destination

You are not building Amazon. You are doing something more personally important.

You are building the most valuable version of yourself in an era where everyone around you is afraid, confused, and defaulting to the path of least resistance.

The CEO Briefing Framework is how top executives run companies. It is also how you become irreplaceable in your own. Same framework. Different scale. Equally within reach.

Readers who internalize this will look back in six months and not recognize the work they produced before.

Not because the tool got better. Because they stopped vending and started thinking.

Because they showed up to their AI Intelligence System like a CEO walking into a strategy meeting, with a mission, context, and the right questions.

The meeting is not where the thinking starts. The meeting is where the thinking gets tested.

Show up ready to test yours.

Chapter 10

Your Extraction Begins

You have spent nine chapters reading about what it looks like to think like a CEO.

The briefing. The context. The mission before the output. The identity shift from vending machine user to someone who shows up with something the internet has never indexed.

Now it is time to stop reading about the CEO and become one.

This is the chapter where you build the most valuable thing you will ever load into an AI system.

Yourself.

Before You Start: This Is Not a Test

The extraction conversations you are about to have are not a performance.

***There are no right answers. There are no wrong answers.
There are no smart answers or dumb answers.***

The only answer that fails is the one that describes how a professional in your category thinks instead of how you specifically think.

The AI is not grading you. It is not forming an opinion about your intelligence. It is listening to you the same way a great interviewer listens to a great subject. Not to evaluate. To understand.

A few things worth knowing before you open the first conversation:

Everybody thinks differently. That is not a motivational poster. That is the entire reason the extraction exists.

If all professionals in your field thought identically, there would be nothing personal to extract. The system is built to capture how *you* think, not how someone in your position is supposed to think. The more specific and personal your answer, the more valuable what comes out.

The AI does not think you are dumb. No matter what you say. No matter how basic it sounds. No matter how obvious it feels to you.

The things that feel most obvious to you are usually the most invisible to AI and to everyone else. That obviousness is the gold.

Give the system everything, especially the things that feel too simple to mention.

Half the questions are multiple choice. Pick the answer that is true, not the one that sounds most impressive. The system is calibrating to how you actually operate. Give it the real version.

A CEO does not walk into the briefing with a polished version of themselves. They walk in with the actual version. So. Do. You.

What the Extraction Actually Feels Like

Here is a sample of what you are about to experience. Three questions from the opening of the first conversation.

Q1: Career Mindset. Which best describes your current mindset and goals?

- A) Building Foundation: I am learning the basics and building my skill set.
- B) Growing and Developing: I have experience but actively want to get better and go deeper.
- C) Mastery and Leadership: I am at the top of my field, people come to me for expertise.
- D) Reinventing Myself: I am changing careers or learning something completely new.

Q2: Domain Focus. What is your current area of focus or expertise? One or two sentences. What you actually spend most of your time on.

Q3: How You Learn Best. When you are learning something new and difficult, which approach helps you understand it fastest?

- A) Give me real examples first, then explain why it works.
- B) Show me the big system or framework first, then give examples.
- C) Give me the numbers or data, I will figure it out myself.
- D) Tell me a story that shows how it works.

Notice what those questions are not. They are not asking you to prove your credentials. They are not testing your expertise. They are finding out how your brain actually works so that the AI Intelligence System you are building can match it.

That is what the entire extraction does. Ten to twelve questions per conversation, structured to pull out the intelligence that has never been documented, because until now, nobody had a reason to ask for it in this specific way.

The Two-Pass Method

This is the most important practical note in this chapter.

Most people try to do the extraction in one sitting and get frustrated when their answers feel shallow. The solution is not to think harder in the moment. The solution is to go through it twice.

Pass 1 is the scout run. Open the conversation. Read through every question. Answer as best you can right now without overthinking or rewriting mid-answer.

Some questions will produce strong answers immediately. Others will feel thin. That is fine. Answer anyway and keep moving.

When you finish, download the full session as a markdown or text file using the Chrome plugin covered in the Skool video training. Save it somewhere you can find it. Now close the laptop.

Here is what happens next.

The questions will work on you whether you want them to or not.

- While you are making dinner.
- While you are on a walk.
- In the shower at 6 am.

The brain keeps processing open questions during rest, and the extraction questions are specifically designed to surface things that have not been consciously accessed in years.

Pass 1 plants them. Everything after that is the brain doing the work for free.

Pass 2 is the build.

Come back the next day or the day after. The questions you answered well in Pass 1, copy and paste them into Pass 2.

No retyping. The questions where you now have a sharper, more specific answer, replace them with the upgrade.

You are not starting over. You are arriving better prepared.

If a **third pass** makes one answer significantly better, do a third pass.

I helped write these questions, and when I built my own AI Intelligence System, I went through most of the interviews at least twice. Some three times.

One interview took me four passes before the answer felt like the real thing.

If the person who helped design the extraction needs multiple passes to get it right, you are not failing when you do the same. You are doing exactly what the process is designed for.

The plugin makes each pass faster because you are only rewriting what needs to be rewritten, not the whole conversation.

One critical rule for both passes: do not chat with the AI. The Gemini Gems are built to run the interview and collect your answers. They are not built to have a conversation.

If you start chatting with the Gem between questions, asking follow-ups, sharing thoughts, and reacting to its responses, the conversation goes off the rails.

The Gem will follow your lead because that is what AI does. It helps.

Stay in the interview mode. Answer the question. Move to the next one.

Everything else happens in the Skool community or in your Claude project after the extraction is complete.

The Architecture: Three Stages, One System

The full extraction system has three stages. Each builds on the last.

Foundation captures the core of how you think. The patterns you notice that others miss. The decision frameworks you have never written down. The things you just know after years of repetition. This is where your AI Intelligence System gets its intelligence. The foundation is what you are starting today.

Enhanced adds depth to what Foundation uncovered. The nuances, the edge cases, the situations where your standard approach shifts, and why.

After Foundation, the system knows how you think. After Enhanced, it knows how you think under pressure, in the gray areas, when the situation is harder than usual.

Personalization makes it sound like you, not just think like you. Your voice, your tone, the specific words you actually use versus the generic language of your field.

After Personalization, the AI Intelligence System stops sounding like a smart tool and starts sounding like the most capable version of you.

You do not have to complete all three stages before the system becomes useful. The foundation alone will produce output that surprises you. Each additional stage makes it more specific, more undeniably yours.

What This System Is Really Worth

The founders from Chapter 7 paid a significant sum for an extraction that took half a day.

You are about to do the same thing with a system built specifically for it, included with this book.

The full extraction system, the Gemini Gems for each stage, the video training, the plugin instructions, all of it is yours. It is the free bonus that comes with your purchase.

No separate price. No certification program. No module behind a paywall. You bought the book. You have the system.

Go to ailikeaceo.net/skool, and it is waiting for you.

A Note on Quality

One quick thing before you start.

If your answers in Pass 1 could appear on any professional's LinkedIn profile, they are descriptions of a category, not extracted intelligence.

"I have strong communication skills." "I work well under pressure." "I bring 15 years of experience."

Those answers are invisible to the system because they apply to thousands of people in your field.

The answers that work sound like this. *“When a client goes quiet for three days after receiving a proposal, I know they found a cheaper option and are considering a negotiation. I schedule a call within 24 hours because email lets them avoid the conversation, while a phone call forces it. I close about 70% of those situations when I move fast.”*

One of those answers is a description. The other is intelligence.

The extraction questions are designed to draw out the second kind in you. Trust the questions. Answer specifically. The obvious details are exactly what the system needs.

What You Are Building

When you finish the extraction, you will have something that did not exist before.

Not a tool you are renting. Not a certification you earned.

An AI Intelligence System that thinks like you, draws on what you know, and produces output shaped by your specific judgment, not the average of the internet.

The most experienced person in your field with the most generic AI setup loses to the less experienced person with a fully extracted AI Intelligence System. Every time.

Because the output from the generic setup sounds like everyone. The output from yours sounds like no one else.

AI Literacy

You are about to become nobody else.

Now Go Build It

Set the book down.

The Skool community is at ailikeaceo.net/skool.

Watch the setup video before you start anything.

The person who skips the video is the person who calls for help with a problem the video would have solved in the first two minutes.

Then open Foundation 1A Part 1 and begin.

chapter 11

Come back to the book when you are done.

The next chapter is about something nobody warned me would happen, and it might be the most valuable thing The Intelligence Merge produces.

P.S. When you finish building your AI Intelligence System, have a conversation with it about the process of building it and the book that walked you through it.

It might just help you write a review for Amazon that could help someone else find it. I would not mind that at all.

Chapter 11

You Cannot Unsee This

Something happened that nobody warned me about.

I expected AI to make me faster. It did.

But that is not what changed everything.

The thing that changed everything was that I started thinking five to ten times more deeply than I ever had before.

Not more output. Deeper input.

The Intelligence Merge did not replace my thinking. It forced me to think harder, more carefully, and more critically than I ever did when it was just my brain alone.

Nobody in the AI industry is talking about this. Every AI trainer, every course creator, every tool guru is selling the same thing. Speed. More content. Faster drafts. Higher volume. Get more done in less time.

That is the 95% story.

The 5% story is different. The 5% story is that merging your intelligence with AI made you a deeper thinker. Not a faster button pusher. A deeper, more careful, more deliberate thinker.

I did not expect that. I did not plan for it. But three years into this, I can tell you it is the most valuable thing that has happened to me.

I also stopped doomscrolling. Not because someone lectured me about screen time. Because building with AI replaced the dopamine hit that scrolling once provided. I did not lose a habit. ***I replaced it with something that actually made me better.***

And once you experience both of those shifts, something strange happens.

You cannot go back.

Not because someone told you not to. Not because a book chapter guilted you into it.

Because the old behaviors feel visibly wrong now. Like wearing a suit that used to fit but no longer does. You did not outgrow it on purpose. You just grew.

This chapter is the mirror. You are going to look into it and see who you were when you picked up this book. And you are going to realize that person is gone.

The Course Collector

You have taken the courses.

Maybe not twelve. Maybe three. Maybe one really expensive one. But you have done it.

You signed up for something that promised to teach you how to use AI, and you learned how to push buttons inside a specific tool.

You collected the certificate. You added it to your LinkedIn profile. You told yourself you were “staying current.”

Here is the question nobody asked you after that course. What did you build?

Not what did you learn? Not what features did you memorize? Not what prompts did you save? What did you build?

If the answer is nothing, that is not your fault.

The course was never designed to help you build anything. It was designed to teach you tool features that would be outdated by the time you finished the last module.

Then a new version would launch. A new course would appear. A new certificate would be available. And the cycle would start again.

You were not learning. You were subscribing to the illusion of progress.

And maybe you were consuming content about building instead of building. Reading the AI newsletters. Listening to the AI podcasts. Following the AI influencers. Watching the YouTube breakdowns every week. Calling it “keeping up.”

It was not keeping up. It was scrolling with better branding.

That cycle is over now. You built something in the last chapter that no course taught you to build. Not because the courses were hiding it from you. Because teaching you to build it would have ended the need for the next course.

The Prompt Collector and the Copy-Paste Default

Maybe you saved those “Top 50 ChatGPT Prompts” posts. Maybe you had a folder for them. Maybe you bookmarked ten of them last month. Maybe you shared a few in a Slack channel because they looked useful.

Here is what those prompts actually were. Better questions for a system that did not know you.

A better question to a stranger still gets you a stranger’s answer.

A more clever prompt to a system running on generic internet knowledge still gets you generic internet output. Faster, sure. But generic.

And maybe the output you got from those prompts went straight into an email, a document, or a presentation. No editing. No injection of your expertise. No quality check. No second thought.

The output read like AI because it was just AI.

There was no human intelligence in it. No domain expertise. No judgment call. No voice.

Just the average of the internet dressed up in professional formatting.

And everybody could tell. Your employer could tell. Your clients could tell. Your colleagues could tell. Maybe they did not say anything. But they could tell.

That is one of the fastest ways to prove you are replaceable. Not by being bad at your job.

By showing everyone that a machine can do your job without you adding any value to what it produces.

Your AI Intelligence System does not need clever prompts. It needs your mission, your context, and your judgment. That is the CEO Briefing Framework. That is what you built.

Your output now has your intelligence baked into it before the first word generates.

The difference between what comes out of your AI Intelligence System and what comes out of a generic prompt is not subtle. It is the

difference between a tailored suit and something grabbed off the rack in the dark.

The Tool Chaser

Maybe every Tuesday when a new AI tool dropped, you were there. Signing up for the free trial. Learning the interface. Watching the walkthrough video. Maybe even making content about it. And maybe, by the following Tuesday, you had moved on to the next one. You were building expertise in nothing.

You were becoming a tour guide for tools rather than a builder of systems.

You knew where every button was inside six different platforms, and you had nothing to show for it that lasted longer than a month or two.

I saw a comment in one of the larger AI training communities I have been part of for a long time.

A member posted that he keeps hopping from tool to tool and cannot make up his mind. He knows it is a problem. He can see the pattern clearly. But his conclusion was that the most important thing was to pick one tool and commit to it.

He was trying to resolve the tool dependency by increasing tool commitment.

That is like trying to solve a gambling addiction by finding the right casino.

The problem was never which tool. The problem was that you built your career on tools in the first place.

Your Intelligence Merge system works on any platform. If one platform disappears tomorrow, you move your extracted intelligence to the next one. If something better launches next week, your intelligence goes with you.

Because the tool was never the asset. **You were the asset.** The tool was just where you showed up.

That is the difference between building on tools and building on intelligence. One requires rebuilding every time the wind changes. The other compounds every time you use it.

The Search Engine Reflex

Maybe you treated AI exactly the way you treated search engines for the last twenty-five years. Type a question. Hit enter. Accept whatever comes back.

That mental model was wired into you by a decade of search engines, apps, and voice assistants. Ask a question, get an answer, move on. The skill was asking. The system handled the rest.

Except AI is not just a search engine. And “asking” was never the skill that mattered.

A quick note of honesty here. Using AI as a search engine is not always wrong. If you need to find the best chiropractor in your city with a

AI Literacy

4.5-star rating who specializes in scoliosis and has a clean office, AI will find that faster than 45 minutes of scrolling through regular search results. I still use it that way sometimes. Everyone does.

The problem is not using AI for search. The problem is when search is all you use it for. That is the ceiling the 95% never break through.

You brief before you ask now. You surface context before you request output. You build frameworks before you request deliverables. The CEO Briefing Framework is not a set of steps you follow. It is how you show up.

A five-word prompt feels like walking into a strategy meeting with nothing prepared.

You cannot do it anymore. Not because someone told you it was wrong. Because it does not match who you are now.

The Fear Loop

Maybe you lie awake some nights wondering if AI is going to take your job. Maybe that fear drove every decision. Learn more tools, take more courses, stay visible, and hope for the best.

Maybe the fear was what made you pick up this book in the first place. Good. It got you here. But you do not need it anymore.

The fear is gone. Not because the market changed. Not because AI slowed down. Not because your employer suddenly figured out what “AI literacy” means. Because you changed. You extracted your

intelligence. You merged it with AI. You built something nobody else can replicate because nobody else has what you brought to the room.

Fear is for people who have not done the work. You did the work.

The Industry That Profits From Your Confusion

I need to pull you aside for a minute. Not as an author. As someone who has been in this industry for over three years, I need to tell you what I see.

There is an entire industry built on keeping you afraid and tool-dependent.

The business model works like this. People are scared. They do not understand what is happening with AI. They know something is changing, but they cannot define the threat. They just feel it.

And an industry showed up selling relief. Buy this course. Learn this tool. Join this membership. Watch these 200 videos. Stay current. Keep up. Do not fall behind.

The content is not all garbage. Some of it has real information. I have learned useful things from people in this industry. I am not going to pretend otherwise.

But the business model has a structural problem. If the fear stops, the subscription stops.

If you feel confident and equipped, you do not renew next month. So the content has to keep the fear alive while selling the cure in doses small enough that you never fully recover.

That is not education. That is a subscription to anxiety management.

The tool training industry sells 90% tool knowledge and 10% strategy. This book taught you the inverse. About 30% tool literacy is what you need: the basics of how things flow and connect. The other 70% is intelligence, judgment, knowing what to build and why.

That 70% is what makes you irreplaceable. And not one subscription-based AI training program on the market teaches it, because the moment you have it, you no longer need them.

There are companies running ads right now promising to make you the smartest person in the room. What they are actually teaching you is to push buttons faster. Speed without intelligence is just making mistakes at a higher volume.

The Bigger Picture

There are entire books being written right now about the coming collapse of the workforce.

Policy proposals for universal basic support. Warnings about new caste systems forming around control of automation technology. Frameworks for how governments should manage the transition.

Those books are not wrong about the scale of what is happening. But they are written for governments, economists, and policymakers.

This book was written for you.

And while the policy world debates what to do about AI displacement, you already did something about it. You built a system. You extracted your intelligence. You merged it with AI and created something that makes you irreplaceable in your specific context, with your specific expertise, for your specific career.

You did not wait for a policy solution. You built your own.

What You See Now

You see the world differently.

Every time you sit down at your AI Intelligence System from this point forward, ask yourself one question before you do anything.

Would a CEO do this?

If the answer is no, you are vending. Stop. Brief. Think. Direct.

That question, applied consistently, is the behavioral lock that protects everything you built. It is the habit that holds even under pressure, even on tight deadlines, even when the old reflex tries to pull you back to the five-word prompt.

Most people in your life will not understand what you just built or why it matters. Not because they are not smart. Because they have not

AI Literacy

seen what you have seen. They are still in the conference crowd, asking which tool they should learn.

You do not have to explain it to them. You just have to keep building.

And you do not have to build alone. There is a community of people who see the world the same way you do now. People who have built their AI Intelligence System and are applying the CEO Briefing Framework to their real work.

They are at ailikeaceo.net/skool.

Not because they need help. Because they outgrew the rooms they used to be in.

You picked up this book because you were afraid. Maybe afraid of losing your job. Maybe afraid of falling behind. Maybe afraid of a technology you did not understand. Maybe all three. The fear got you here. It served its purpose.

But you are not afraid anymore. You are not someone who uses AI. You are someone who thinks with AI. You brief before you build. You bring context before you ask for output. You show up like the CEO of your own intelligence, and you direct your AI Intelligence System with the expertise that only you possess.

The vending machine is behind you. The CEO chair is underneath you. The system you built is in front of you.

And the next chapter shows you how to learn anything, from any source, without buying another course again.

Chapter 12

The CEO Learning Method

This chapter is the last major piece. I almost kept it out of the book. Not because it is secret. Because it felt too valuable to give away for free. But you have earned it. And it is the piece that ties everything together.

Here is how I accidentally invented everything you read about in this book.

The Week Everything Started

July 2025.

I had been using AI for two and a half years at that point. I was not a beginner. I had built systems. I had automated workflows. I knew my way around multiple AI platforms.

And I was still using AI like a vending machine.

Meta (Facebook) had just released a major update to their advertising system called Andromeda. It changed everything about how Facebook ads were targeted and delivered.

I run a digital marketing agency, and my clients were already calling. Conversion rates were dropping across the board. They wanted answers. I did not have answers.

Nobody did. The YouTube “experts” were confused. The course creators had not figured it out yet. There was no training to buy. There was no shortcut to take.

I was stressed. I was busy. I was running a full client load without the AI leverage I have now, which meant I was doing everything the slow way.

And on top of all of that, I needed to figure out a major platform change before my clients lost more money.

So, I did what I always did. I went to AI and asked for answers. That is when something strange happened.

The Four Days That Changed Everything

For four days in a row, Claude kept asking me to tell him more about how I run Facebook ads. How I think about targeting. How do I come up with ad creative? How I structure campaigns. How do I decide what is working and what is not?

I kept giving surface-level answers. Quick responses. Half-thoughts.

This is why I pushed so hard for you to give the best answers you can in your extraction interviews. It will produce the best possible intelligence output.

Because in my mind, AI knows everything about everything. Why would it need me to explain Facebook ads? That made no sense. I was thinking like every other person who uses AI. I assumed the intelligence was already in the machine.

I just needed to ask the right question, and it would hand me the answer.

Four days of this. Four days of Claude asking me to go deeper. Four days of me thinking something was wrong with the AI because it kept asking questions instead of giving answers.

Then Claude said something I will never forget.

The exact words escape me, but the message was something like this:
if I know more about how you think, I can build a better system for you.

I think it said that a couple of times before it actually registered.

I was so stressed and so stuck in vending-machine mode that I wasn't doing the deep thinking I needed. But eventually it landed.

AI was not broken. It was not confused. It was trying to do something I did not yet have a name for. It was trying to understand my specific expertise so it could combine my approach with the new Andromeda information and produce something that actually worked for my situation.

It was trying to do the Intelligence Merge. Before either of us knew what to call it.

The Psychologist Analogy

I asked Claude how I would even go about giving him that kind of information about how I think. The answer surprised me.

Claude compared it to how a psychologist learns about a new patient. A good psychologist does not hand you advice on the first visit. They spend two or three full sessions just asking questions. Getting the full picture. Understanding how you process information, what your patterns are, and where your blind spots live.

The patient does not even start sitting on the couch until the psychologist has completed the in-depth intake.

That is what Claude had been trying to do with me for four days. And I had been giving it the equivalent of one-word answers in a therapist's office.

That analogy is where the extraction interviews you completed in this book were born. Not in a curriculum design meeting. Not in a course outline. In a stressed-out conversation about Facebook ads, where AI was trying to understand me, and I kept wondering why it was asking.

The Research Discovery

Around the same time, I noticed something on YouTube. There was a feature that let you view the full transcript of any video. I had seen AI summary tools popping up around video content, and something clicked.

What if I took the transcripts of the best YouTube videos about Andromeda and fed them to Claude one at a time?

Not just asking questions about the update. Actually feeding it the raw material first, then thinking through it together in conversation.

I had never done that before. Nobody had told me to do it. It just seemed logical once the idea surfaced.

Then I had another thought. One of the YouTube creators had mentioned Meta's official blog post about the Andromeda update. The actual source documentation. What if I fed that to Claude, too?

So, I did. Video transcripts. Official Meta documentation. One piece at a time.

And then something happened that I was not prepared for. I started thinking deeper.

Not just reading Claude's responses and moving on. Thinking with the responses. Asking follow-up questions. Noticing gaps. The five-to-ten-times-deeper thinking that I described in Chapter 11 started here. During this exact week. Under this exact pressure.

Then I asked Claude what the best way to research all of this systematically would be. I mentioned that I had three tools available: Claude itself, Gemini, and Perplexity, which I had been using for deep research.

Claude gave me a set of specific prompts to run in Perplexity. One at a time. I would bring the results back, and Claude would summarize each one individually. Then we would build what I started calling a “super doc,” a single synthesized document containing everything the research had uncovered.

And then Claude suggested we could put together a way to have someone answer the right kinds of questions so that AI would understand how the person thinks and works.

That last suggestion is literally the extraction interview system in this book. Described in embryonic form during a panicked week about Facebook ads.

The Result Nobody Else Had Yet

I took all of the Perplexity results. All of the video summaries. The Meta blog post summary. And combined it with four days of Claude finally understanding how I think about and run Facebook advertising.

The result was a complete working Andromeda system. Built before the course creators had caught up. Built before the YouTube experts had figured it out. Built while everyone else was still confused and waiting for someone to tell them what to do.

I did not build it because I am smarter than those people. I built it because I stopped asking AI for answers and started thinking *with* it. I gave it my expertise, my context, and the best available research, and

then I showed up like a CEO walking into a strategy meeting. I just did not know that was what I was doing yet.

The Part That Blew My Mind Later

Here is something I did not realize until I was brainstorming this very chapter.

I invented the CEO Learning Method before I invented The Intelligence Merge.

The research methodology, feeding AI content first, synthesizing one piece at a time, building the super doc, came first. Then Claude's persistent questions about how I think led to the extraction interviews. Then the extraction interviews became The Intelligence Merge.

The system you spent ten chapters building was born by accident from a guy who was too busy to do things the old way.

Both methodologies came from the same stressed-out week in July 2025. Both were discovered, not designed. And both exist because AI kept asking me questions I thought it should already know the answers to.

The CEO Learning Method

Now that you have seen how it happened naturally, here are the steps laid out clearly. Think of this as the CEO's intelligence briefing process. You are not "researching." You are briefing yourself the way a CEO briefs themselves before entering a new market.

Step 1: Brief your AI Intelligence System. Open your AI Intelligence System and explain what you are trying to learn and why. Give it the full context. What is the problem? Why does it matter? What do you already know? What are you uncertain about? This primes the system to help you extract the right information from everything that follows.

Step 2: Find the best available content. Search YouTube for the topic from multiple angles. Pull up the top three to five videos with the most engagement. Check the comments. Videos with active, detailed comments usually have better content because more people found it valuable enough to respond.

A tip that changed this entire book. If whatever you are creating needs to connect with people emotionally, copy all the comments from the most popular videos on your topic.

Feed them to your AI Intelligence System and let it analyze the patterns. What are people afraid of? What are they confused about? What language do they actually use to describe their problems? Those comments are raw, unfiltered, real human emotion.

That is material no AI can generate on its own because it comes from real people experiencing real frustration.

That is how I wrote this book with the angle that I did. That is where the anonymous comments throughout these chapters came from. Real people. Real words. Analyzed and woven into a book that was built to make you feel understood. Now you know how.

Step 3: Feed transcripts one at a time. Do not dump everything into AI at once. Pull the transcript from each video individually. Feed it to your AI Intelligence System. Let it summarize and extract the key insights from each one before moving to the next. One at a time produces dramatically better results than all at once.

Step 4: Find the official source. Whatever you are learning, find the original documentation. Learning a platform? Find their official docs. Learning a skill? Find the governing body or original creator. Learning a domain? Find the academic foundations. YouTube experts give you practical application. Official sources give you accurate foundations. You need both.

Step 5: Run deep research. Use a dedicated research tool like Perplexity. It is worth purchasing for a month when you need CEO-level research on a specific topic. Run your research prompts one at a time. Bring each result back to your AI Intelligence System for individual summarization.

One more tip that is worth the price of this book on its own.

Always do your research in a different AI than the one your AI Intelligence System lives in.

If you research and analyze inside the same AI, your system will be biased toward whatever it finds first. The results get skewed.

It is like asking the same person to investigate a problem and then judge whether their investigation was thorough.

Use one AI to find the information. Use your AI Intelligence System to synthesize it. Two separate brains. One does the digging. The other does the thinking. That separation is what keeps your output honest.

Step 6: Research the competitive landscape. Whatever system you are building or skill you are learning, identify the top tools and competitors already in that space. Extract every feature from their websites. Synthesize them into one comprehensive document. Now you are building on the combined intelligence of every product team in your industry. You will not miss features. You will not forget capabilities.

Step 7: Synthesize into your super doc. Have your AI Intelligence System create a summary of all frameworks, systems, methodologies, and key insights from everything you fed it. Do each piece individually first. Then synthesize everything into one master document, the ultimate framework for whatever you are learning.

Every single time you do this, you end up with a framework that ranks in the top percentile of anyone who does what you do. That is not an exaggeration. The people who are “experts” in most fields learned from scattered sources over the years. They have gaps. They have outdated information. They have biases based on their specific experiences. You just synthesized the best of everything in a fraction of the time.

Step 8: Upload to your AI Intelligence System. Your super doc now becomes part of your system. Your AI Intelligence System knows what you know, plus everything the research uncovered. It combines your extracted intelligence with comprehensive domain research. That

combination is something no course, no certification, and no \$6,000 program can replicate.

A Note for Younger Readers Just Getting Started

If you are fresh out of high school or college and every job posting demands two to three years of experience you do not have, this section is yours.

The CEO Learning Method does not just work for mid-career professionals. It might work even better for you.

Because the experience gap everyone says you need to close? A massive chunk of it is knowledge, not credentials.

Take law school as an example. A law degree takes roughly five to six years. The first two years are almost entirely book learning. Case law. Legal frameworks. Terminology. Research methodology. The vast majority of it is published, searchable, and available online from the top law schools in the country.

You could visit Harvard's website, Stanford's website, and the websites of three other top law programs. Download everything about their curriculum, their course descriptions, what they teach, and how they teach it. Feed it to your AI Intelligence System using the CEO Learning Method. Synthesize it into your super doc.

You are not a lawyer after that. You do not have the credentials. You cannot sit for the bar exam.

But you could compress two years of foundational legal knowledge into roughly three to four months. And when you walk into an interview for an entry-level position at a law firm, you would understand more about legal frameworks than most first-year associates.

Plus, you would have your AI Intelligence System in your back pocket.

That applies to almost any field. Accounting. Marketing. Project management. Data analysis. Software development.

The foundational knowledge that employers say requires “two to three years of experience” is largely available right now. The CEO Learning Method is how you acquire it in a fraction of the time.

You are not skipping the experience. You are compressing the knowledge portion of it so that when you do get the job, you show up operating like someone who has been there for two years instead of two days.

Proof It Repeats: The \$6,000 Course I Never Needed

About a month before the Andromeda crisis, I had first heard the term “AI operating system.”

I did not know what it was. But I immediately visualized it as the ultimate top rung of the AI ladder. Whether you are an individual, an employee, a business owner, or part of a team, this seems like the end state.

I found a well-known AI trainer selling a complete AI operating system program for \$6,000. I wanted what he was teaching. I did not want to pay \$6,000 for it.

So, I did what a CEO does. I looked at what he was selling. I assessed whether I could figure it out myself. And I applied the exact same methodology I had just discovered during the Andromeda crisis.

I asked my AI Intelligence System for prompts to run in Perplexity to research what an AI operating system really is and how to build one. It gave me five prompts.

The third prompt returned a video from a smart young man on YouTube who had given away a complete AI operating system for free. In a Google Drive attachment. Not behind a paywall. Not in a \$6,000 course. Free.

This free version had more features I needed than the \$6,000 program that was being sold.

I watched a couple of YouTube videos for basic setup. Then I brainstormed with my AI Intelligence System to figure out the rest. Within a couple of hours, I understood everything I needed to build it.

Someone who has never done anything like this might take a week instead of a couple of hours. But here is the thing. They could ask their AI Intelligence System to explain any part of it as if they were five years old. And it would.

Because that is what this system does. **The gap between “expert” and “beginner” narrows dramatically when you have the CEO Learning Method and an Intelligence Merge built.**

I spent \$0 and a few hours. The other path was \$6,000, and the course took however long to complete. Same result. One path builds dependency on the next course. The other path builds confidence that you can figure out whatever comes next.

A Quick Note of Honesty

I have invested over 300 hours and roughly \$10,000 in tools and training to build and refine everything in this book. Not because I could not figure it out myself. Because sometimes buying a course or training is the fastest way to cut to the chase on a specific thing.

The CEO Learning Method does not mean courses are worthless. Some of them helped me get to where I am.

It means the dependency on courses is what kills you. The difference between buying a course because it is the fastest path for a specific need and buying courses because you do not know how else to learn. That is the gap.

The first is a CEO decision. The second is the course carousel from Chapter 11.

The only time you may want to be heavily immersed in tool training is if your job is implementing AI systems for other businesses. That career requires deep tool knowledge. But even then, the 70% intelligence layer

is what separates the implementer who builds systems that actually work from the one who installs tools that get abandoned in six months.

CEO Advanced Tips

Use tool stacking for research. Do not rely on just one research tool. When I run the same research prompt in two different tools, they always find different things. Always.

One will surface something crucial that the other missed. The overlap confirms what is important. The differences reveal what each tool uniquely finds. If you are going to invest in a research tool for a month, use it heavily, get all your research done, then turn it off. That is a CEO move, not a subscription habit.

The official source principle. Whatever you are learning, always find the official source. YouTube experts give you practical application and real-world context. Official documentation provides a solid foundation. You need both.

Never build a system on YouTube opinions alone. Never ignore YouTube opinions in favor of dry documentation alone. The CEO Learning Method uses both and synthesizes them.

The competitor intelligence method. Whatever system you are building, identify the top three to five tools or competitors already in that space. Go to their websites. Extract every feature, every capability, every selling point. Synthesize them into one comprehensive document. Now you are building on the combined intelligence of every product

team in your industry. This is how you end up with something in the top percentile.

What This Works For

Professional skills. Entire knowledge domains. Business systems and frameworks. Anything that would normally require courses, certifications, or years of scattered learning.

What This Does Not Replace

Hands-on practice. You still need reps. Licenses and certifications. This gives you knowledge, not credentials. Fields requiring supervised training, such as medicine, aviation, or law.

And one important guardrail. ***Do not use this methodology*** for personal medical, legal, or financial decisions. Research with AI is powerful. It is not the same as professional advice from someone who carries liability for the guidance they give you.

Something Nobody Is Talking About Yet

If you are within five to ten years of retirement, what I am about to say might be the most valuable paragraph in this book.

You have spent 20, 30, or 40 years building expertise that exists nowhere except inside your head. When you walk out the door, the company loses it all.

Every pattern you recognize. Every judgment call you make automatically. Every relationship you have built. Every institutional memory you carry. Gone in a single day.

All you got was a gold watch.

But what if you spent your last year or two at the company feeding everything you know into your AI Intelligence System? Voice notes when you remember something important. Quick emails to yourself when you handle a tricky situation. Notes on how you make decisions that nobody else at the company fully understands.

By the time you retire, the company does not lose your 30 years of experience. Your team now has access to an AI Intelligence System that contains your extracted intelligence.

And here is the part that should make you sit up straight.

You could lease that back to the company for a monthly stipend. Or sell it outright for a significant payout.

They get to keep decades of institutional knowledge. You get ongoing income from the intelligence you already extracted.

This is The Intelligence Merge applied to career transitions. The foundation you built in this book is where it starts.

Take a Bow

You picked up this book, confused about what AI literacy means. Everyone around you was confused, too.

Your employer was confused. The job postings were confused. The training industry was confused. Seventy-four percent of job listings required something that nobody could define.

You are not confused anymore.

AI literacy was never about the tools. It was never about the prompts. It was never about the courses, the certifications, or the monthly subscriptions.

It was about your intelligence. Extracted. Merged. Deployed like the CEO you have become.

As we established early in this book, your extracted intelligence belongs to you. It travels with you. That has not changed. If the platform you are using today disappears tomorrow, you move your intelligence to the next one.

Because the tool was never the asset. You were the asset. You always were.

The tools will keep changing. They changed while I was writing this book. The tool treadmill did not slow down. It sped up. And you stepped off it.

You built something that does not expire when platforms update. Something that does not need to be rebuilt from scratch every year. Something that nobody else can replicate because nobody else has what you brought to the room.

You are in the 5% now. Not because you are special. Because you made a different choice. And you stuck with it.

Now go use it.

But before you do, there is one more thing. The system you built is powerful right now. The bonus chapter shows you how to make it more powerful every single week, without ever sitting down for another formal extraction session.

It is the practice that separates the people who built an AI Intelligence System once from the people whose system keeps getting smarter for the rest of their careers.

Chapter 13

Briefing Your Chief of Staff

You are a CEO now.

You spent twelve chapters extracting your intelligence, merging it with AI, and building a system that nobody else can replicate. You stepped off the tool treadmill. You stopped thinking like an operator and started thinking like a leader.

And what do CEOs do on their first day? They hire a chief of staff. You already did that.

The AI Intelligence System you built in the last twelve chapters? That is your chief of staff.

They already know how you think, how you process information, how you make decisions, and what matters to you. No human chief of staff on earth walks in with that much context on day one.

But here is what separates CEOs who scale from CEOs who stall.

The ones who scale brief their chief of staff. Relentlessly. Every observation. Every decision. Every half-formed idea. Every failure. Every pattern they noticed on the drive home from a meeting. If it was not briefed to the chief of staff, it did not happen.

The ones who stall build a great team and then starve them of information. They keep everything in their head. They assume their chief of staff will figure it out. They skip the briefings because they are “too busy.” Those CEOs do not last.

Briefing your chief of staff is not a chore. It is how you lead.

CEOs do not juggle spreadsheets. They do not organize folders. They do not file notes into categories. They think. They observe. They decide. And then they brief the one person whose job it is to turn all of that into organized, actionable intelligence.

That is your chief of staff’s job now. Your only job is to show up and talk.

People who learn to think like a CEO and brief their chief of staff will thrive in the age of AI.

People who try to get by without this will be outperformed by people who do. Not tomorrow. But give it three to four years, and this is what shakes out of the chaos happening right now.

This chapter shows you how to brief your chief of staff so your system keeps getting smarter every single week for the rest of your career.

Why the Briefing Makes You Smarter

Here is something most people do not know.

When you brief your chief of staff, whether by voice or text, your brain does not just “save” that thought. It re-encodes it.

The act of putting an insight into words recruits motor, language, and executive brain systems on top of the original memory trace. It creates a richer, more durable neural pattern than the original thought alone. Neuroscientists call this the generation effect.

The generation effect improves retention by roughly twenty to forty percent compared to just thinking the thought and moving on. ^[24] Read that number again. 20% - 40%.

Every time you brief your chief of staff, you are not just informing them. You are training your own brain. Every briefing is a micro-training session that sharpens your pattern recognition, makes your decisions more accessible, and deepens your expertise.

There is also a time window. After you experience something, your brain needs time to stabilize that new memory.

If you jump straight to the next task without capturing the thought, the next wave of cognitive demands competes with the stabilization. The insight degrades. It does not vanish completely. You remember having the idea. You just cannot remember what it was.

Top CEOs do not skip their debriefs because they are too busy. They do them because that is how they stay in command of their own thinking. Now you know the brain science behind why it works.

Why Every Other System You Have Tried Has Failed

You have tried this before. The notes app. The journal. The “productivity system” someone recommended. Maybe you even bought a book about building a second brain or organizing your ideas with index cards. You started strong. Within a few weeks, it died. You are not alone.

Research on daily capture habits shows that adherence drops below 50% within 12 weeks. More than half of people quit even when they know the benefits.

The habit formation research explains why. As we covered in Chapter 9, a daily behavior requires roughly sixty-six days to become automatic, and the range can stretch much longer depending on complexity. Most systems die before they get there.

What kills them is not laziness. It is the organizing.

Every system that asks you to categorize, tag, or file at the moment of capture converts a simple behavior into a decision-making task. The research is clear. Users who fall behind on organizing their captures rarely restart. The backlog feels like a chore they already failed at.

Here is where your chief of staff changes everything. In every other system, you do the organizing. That is why it dies.

In this system, your chief of staff does the organizing. Your only job is to report. The messy, raw, unfiltered report. Your chief of staff handles the rest.

That is not a workaround. That is how real CEOs operate. Their job is not to be organized. Their job is to think and report faithfully. The chief of staff turns the raw intelligence into structure.

The Two Briefings

You brief your chief of staff in two ways.

First, you send memos throughout the week and sit down for a weekly briefing to sort through them together.

Second, when you and your chief of staff work on something important, you never walk out of the room without a summary of what you built.

Same principle. Two natural rhythms.

The Weekly Briefing

Throughout your week, you observe things. You make decisions. You notice patterns. You have ideas. You learn something new. You fail at something.

Your job is to send yourself a quick memo whenever these moments happen. Not organized. Not polished. Not categorized. Just captured.

Choose one tool. One place where all your memos land. Voice memo on your phone. An email draft you dictate into. A capture device like those mentioned in the Index of Resources. It does not matter what the tool is. It matters that it is one tool and one place.

The research says voice capture is two to four times faster than typing and produces richer, more detailed information.

When you speak a thought, you naturally include context, reasoning, and emotional nuance that you compress or skip entirely when typing a quick note. Professional fields that most often require capturing complex observations, such as clinical research and field studies, use voice recording as their standard method. Not because it is easier.

Because it captures more intelligence per minute.

One rule. The tool has to be instant. If it requires unlocking your phone, opening an app, navigating to a screen, and then hitting record, you have already lost the moment. Grab and talk. That is the standard.

Do not organize anything. Do not decide where it goes. Just get it out of your head and into one place.

Then, once a week, you sit down with your chief of staff. Pick a time. Sunday morning. Friday afternoon. Whatever works for your life. This is your standing appointment. Fifteen minutes.

Instead of scrolling through social media, open a fresh conversation in your project. Paste in everything you captured that week. All of it. The raw, messy, unfiltered dump.

Then say something like this:

“Here is my weekly briefing. Let us work through what is in here. What should be added to the project? What should I just remember and not keep in our system? And what do you think is irrelevant?”

This is not a filing session. This is an Intelligence Merge session.

Your chief of staff reviews the intelligence and reports back. They connect this week’s observations to patterns from previous briefings. They flag the client insight worth preserving and tell you the other note was just venting, you can let go of. They challenge your assumptions based on everything you have shared.

You make the final call on what stays and what gets cut. That is CEO thinking.

Your chief of staff produces one artifact from the session, organized into four sections:

- Patterns and Decisions
- Domain Knowledge
- People and Relationships
- Processes and Systems.

Named with the date of that week. Download it. Upload it to your project. Done.

AI Literacy

No deleting old files. No replacing anything. Just add the new file and move on.

And here is what the science says is happening during this conversation. When you talk through your captures with your chief of staff, you are re-articulating them. The generation effect fires again. The twenty to forty percent retention boost hits a second time.

You are not just organizing. You are reinforcing the learning by talking through it with your thinking partner.

The weekly briefing is not maintenance. It is compound interest on compound interest.

One more thing. Set a recurring weekly reminder on your calendar right now. Before you finish this chapter.

The people who do not put this on their calendar will not do it. That is not a guess. That is what the research says about habits that have no external trigger.

The Session Debrief

Sometimes you and your chief of staff will work on something important together. A brainstorming session for a new project. A strategy conversation for a client. Solving a problem you have been stuck on. Mapping out a business plan.

These conversations generate valuable intelligence. Decisions made, frameworks built, ideas tested, connections discovered.

Before you close that conversation, give your chief of staff one instruction.

“Summarize what we built here. Key decisions, insights, and next steps. Format it as a project file I can save.”

Download it. Upload it to the project. Done.

A CEO never walks out of an important meeting without someone capturing what happened. Your chief of staff does the same thing. You just have to give the two-second instruction before you close the conversation.

Session debriefs are different from the weekly briefing. The weekly briefing processes raw memos that need sorting. Session debriefs preserve thinking that already happened during a working conversation. They go straight into the project as finished intelligence.

Over time, these session summaries become some of the most valuable files in your project. They represent your best thinking, refined through conversation, on the topics that matter most to your work.

The Quarterly Review

After about three months, you will have roughly twelve weekly briefing files in your project, plus however many session debriefs you saved.

Your chief of staff will likely flag that the project is getting full before you even think about it. When that happens, you do a quarterly review. Your chief of staff reads everything from the quarter, identifies the

patterns and insights that proved valuable, and condenses twelve weekly files into one summary. But the cleanup is not the valuable part.

During the quarterly review, your chief of staff briefs you.

“Over the last three months, you made six decisions about pricing and reversed four of them. Here is the pattern.”

“You mentioned this client relationship in eight out of twelve briefings but never took action on it. What is holding you back?”

“Your domain knowledge captures shifted heavily toward a new area starting in week six. You might be pivoting without realizing it.”

That is your chief of staff briefing the CEO. Not just cleaning up files. Surfacing the patterns you are too close to see yourself.

The cleanup keeps the system running. The briefing keeps you growing.

Four quarterly summaries per year. The project stays clean. Your intelligence compounds.

Set a quarterly reminder on your calendar now. Same rule as the weekly one. If it is not on the calendar, it does not exist.

Five Prompts to Start Your Briefing

You do not need to use these every week. But when you are staring at a blank screen after pasting your notes and wondering what to say, start with one of these.

Patterns and Decisions: *“Here are the key decisions I made this week and why. Extract my decision-making patterns and tell me what you see in my judgment calls.”*

Domain Knowledge: *“Summarize the industry or role-specific insights from this week’s notes. What is worth preserving and what is noise?”*

People and Relationships: *“From this week’s notes, what should I know about the people I interacted with? Any emerging dynamics I should pay attention to?”*

Processes and Systems: *“Highlight any workflows, shortcuts, or fixes I mentioned. Is there a process improvement worth documenting?”*

The Radical Candor Question: *“Given everything I briefed you this week, what am I avoiding? What might I be wrong about?”*

That last question is the one that earns your chief of staff the title. A real chief of staff is one of the few people allowed to say what everyone else is afraid to say. Let your AI do the same.

The Math

Someone who briefs their chief of staff consistently for six months will have fed their AI Intelligence System roughly twenty-five weekly briefings, two quarterly summaries, and however many session debriefs from working conversations.

That system now contains hundreds of captured patterns, decisions, observations, and refined frameworks pulled directly from the reader's professional life.

Compare that to someone who built the foundation through the extraction interviews and stopped. Their system is a snapshot from the day they finished. Still useful. But not growing.

The person with six months of consistent briefings has a chief of staff who knows not just how they think, but what they have been thinking about. What they learned. What they decided. What they got wrong and how they adjusted. That is the difference between a snapshot and a relationship.

The Habit That Keeps You in the 5%

The extraction interviews got you into the 5 percent. The weekly briefing keeps you there.

Without it, your AI Intelligence System is a one-time build. A snapshot that starts aging the day you took it.

With it, your system is a living extension of your intelligence that gets smarter every week because you get smarter every week.

One tool. One place. One briefing per week. That is the whole system.

CEOs do not skip their briefings. Neither should you.

The tools will keep changing. Your intelligence keeps compounding.
That is The Intelligence Merge.

That is how you become irreplaceable.

I Am Rooting for You.

I have been rooting for you since the first page.

My mission with this book was to help 1,000 people understand how to use AI without getting taken advantage of by it. How to think with it instead of being replaced by it.

How to become the person in the room that nobody can replicate.

You finished the book. You did the work. You built the system.

Only 999 left.

Now go brief your chief of staff.

~Mark A. Stafford

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Linda K.

Linda, thank you for making it through the second version of this book.

You read it cover to cover when it was still rough, and the comments I valued most were the critical ones. Those are the ones that actually move a manuscript forward.

Thank you for the Zoom sessions.

Watching you sit down with your own AI Intelligence System is the moment this book changed shape. Seeing the vending machine habit show up in real time, in someone who had already done all the extraction work, was the missing piece. That is how I realized the book was only two thirds finished. The third I was missing was the part about what happens after you build the system and your old habits try to pull you right back to the button.

You did not just give me feedback. You gave me multiple chapters.

And your reflection about next level usage that even experts are not sharing lit a fire under me to finish the final version. That line did more for my writing pace than any deadline ever did.

Thank you for saying yes to being in Chapter 8 by name. Thank you for being honest when it would have been easier to be polite. Thank you for the epiphany.

This book is better because you were in it.

Jeffrey D.

Jeffrey, thank you for reading the first two versions of this book.

Two rough drafts is a big ask. You did it without being asked twice.

What I appreciated most was your persistence and the endless questions you kept asking until the answers made sense. That pressure is exactly what a draft needs. A lot of what shaped the final version came from you refusing to let me get away with a half answer.

Your comment about the first version still sticks with me.

You told me you did not really understand what was going on until you hit the last chapter, like finding out who did it at the end of a mystery. That was not the reading experience I wanted anyone to have, and your honesty about it is the reason the structure of this final version exists. You moved the reveal to the front where it belongs.

And yes, to answer the question you asked me more than once: this version actually shows you what to do after you build your AI

Intelligence System. You were right to keep asking. The book was not finished until that part was in it.

I appreciate you, amigo.

Mark S. (Across the pond)

Mark S. (UK), thank you for reading the third version of this book.

You did something most beta readers never do. You read it, thought about it, and then wrote publicly about what you were taking away from it.

That LinkedIn post was the first time I watched someone, unprompted, explain the core idea of this book in their own words, to their own audience, in their own voice.

That is the moment a writer knows the message actually landed.

What you wrote back was better than a testimonial. You said you had been using AI like a vending machine, and that the answers get different the moment you add your own knowledge, experience, and guardrails to it. You took the idea, made it yours, and handed it back.

The question you wrote in that post, how can I get AI to know me, is the exact question this book is trying to answer. You asked it out loud, in public, before most of your peers were even thinking about it. That is not a small thing at a time when almost everyone in this space is still treating AI like a smarter search bar.

Thank you for reading with an open mind. Thank you for writing about it publicly. And thank you for being the other Mark. We needed one more.

Richard C.

Richard, thank you for reading this book the way it was meant to be read.

You sent me a message after you finished it, and one line in it stopped me cold. You told me you READ it, not skimmed it. The capital letters were yours. In a culture that rewards skimming, in a book whose entire thesis is about the cost of not paying attention, that one sentence meant more than you probably realized when you typed it.

You are also a published author yourself, which made your read of this manuscript carry a different kind of weight. When someone who has actually done the work of writing a book tells you the book is good, you listen differently than when anyone else says it.

Your advice to slow down before publishing on Amazon changed my launch plan.

You told me there was a goldmine in this if I did not rush it. I took that seriously. The version of this book in your hands today exists because a few people, you among them, told me to stop trying to push it out the door and start treating it like it actually mattered.

Thank you for the message. Thank you for the offer to collaborate. Thank you for reading like a reader, not a skimmer.

That is the whole book, right there in how you showed up.

Strategy and Publishing Partners:

Melanie W.

Melanie, thank you for the strategic horsepower behind this book.

Every week on the author call, you show up the same way. Generous with the playbook, specific with the advice, and willing to share the amazing strategies. I have lost count of how many ideas I have walked away from those calls with, scribbled on a notepad, and dropped straight into my plan.

What makes those sessions different is the depth. You do not give surface-level answers. You tell the Purina story. You walk through the chamber and association play. You explain why pre-selling through interviews works when cold pitching does not. You drop the line “everybody’s unknown until you’re not” and let it reframe how a room full of authors thinks about themselves. That kind of teaching is rare, and it is the reason I keep showing up every week ready to take notes.

You taught me how to think about the launch instead of just the manuscript.

The conversations about pre-selling through interviews, partnering with companies whose audiences need this book, the editorial endorsement strategy, the Purina story, the chamber and association play, the reminder that everybody’s unknown until you’re not. None of that was in my plan when I started writing. All of it is in my plan now.

You also gave me the one piece of permission I did not know I needed. You told me to slow down, that I was running ahead of schedule, and that the pre-launch window is where the real work happens. Coming from someone with your track record, that landed differently than it would have from anyone else.

Thank you for treating this book like it could become something bigger than I was treating it like. Authors need that. I needed it.

The “Melanie touch” is real. This book has it.

Amber T.

Amber, I appreciate you more than you know.

Thank you for helping me get my thinking straight about what to do next at every turn. You have a way of cutting through the noise and pointing me at the one thing that actually matters, and you have done that for me more times than I can count.

Thank you for letting me explain how my system works.

It took me a few stabs to get it across, and you sat with me through every one of them. The moment you finally said “oh my gosh, that’s incredible” is a moment I will not forget. I had been carrying this methodology around for months, trying to find the right words for it, and your reaction told me the words had finally landed. That kind of validation, from someone who has seen a lot of methodologies come through the door, means more than you probably realize.

You also gave me one of the proudest moments of writing this book.

When I told you about the nugget where professionals near retirement can extract their tacit knowledge into an AI system and lease it back to the company, or even sell it on the way out the door, you told me you could see it helping so many people. That single comment made me feel like I had invented something special. I was already excited about the idea. After you said that, I was on a mission.

Thank you for the direction on every question I have brought you, and there have been a lot of them. Thank you for being the person on the other end of the line who always picks up.

I am looking forward to building book number two with you.

The Builders And Collaborators:

Stephanie N.

Stephanie, thank you for being my window into what is actually happening in the world of AI.

You are out there living it. On stages. Inside companies. In rooms where people are making real decisions about how AI fits into their work. The view from where you stand is different than the view from anywhere else, and you have always been generous about sharing it with me.

Thank you for letting me pick your brain after that brutal two-week stretch where you crossed the country twice and spoke at three different AI events. Most people would have come home and gone quiet for a week. You came home and made time for me.

AI Literacy

What you told me from those rooms changed how I thought about this book.

You said the number one question the majority of people were asking you was, “What tool do I need to master to keep my job?” That single sentence hit me harder than any research stat I had read. It told me that the audience for this book was not asking the wrong question because they were lazy. They were asking it because nobody had ever shown them there was a better question to ask. You gave me proof, from the front lines, that The Intelligence Merge and the CEO Briefing Framework were pointed at the right problem.

I needed that confirmation at exactly the moment you gave it to me.

Congratulations on the invitation to work with Ragan. You earned every bit of it. You are a wonderful person, and the people in those rooms are lucky to have you in front of them.

God bless.

Charles P.

Charles, where do I start?

You are the driving force behind my agency operations, and you have been steady in a role that does not get the credit it deserves. The clients you have brought in and the way you stay on top of them is the reason I had any room in my schedule to research and write this book at all. Without that runway, this manuscript does not exist. It is that simple.

I know you do not like the spotlight, so I will keep this short.

You are a good person. You always have my back. I appreciate you every day, not just on the day this book gets printed.

Thank you, brother.

Alicia G.

Alicia, I am so glad you said yes to being part of this journey.

You and I have been in each other's corner for more than ten years, and trust like that does not come along often. That is the foundation underneath everything we are building together now, and it is the reason I can hand you parts of this work and not look over my shoulder. There are not many people I trust the way I trust you, and you already know that, but it belongs in writing.

Thank you for letting me pick your brain every couple of weeks.

You listen when I am trying to explain something that has not fully formed yet, and you push back when it does not make sense. That is the part most people get wrong when they want to be helpful. They nod, they smile, they tell you it sounds great, and you walk away with nothing useful. You do the opposite. You ask the harder question. You tell me when something is not going to work. You tell me when I am headed down the wrong path. That kind of honesty is rare, and it makes the work better every single time.

You have always had my back. I have told you that more times than I can count, and I will keep telling you, because it is true.

Thank you for the help, the copy instincts, and the willingness to roll up your sleeves on the launch and the messaging and everything else that is coming. I am lucky to have a friend like you on the other end of the line.

This is going to be fun.

David B.

David, you are my best thinking partner, and you have been for a long time.

We met at a marketing conference in Utah many years ago, and the relationship that emerged from that weekend has outlasted just about every business decision either of us has made since. We have built things together. We have launched things together.

You are the person I run ideas past when I need to know if they are real. You give me the gut punch. Every time. You tell me when something makes sense, you tell me when it does not, and you do not soften the blow on the way through. That is the most valuable thing a thinking partner can do, and almost nobody actually does it. I count on it from you because I trust where it comes from.

We have been in the trenches together on more than one client. I have watched you sit in the sales seat on that one account and rework your pitch 20+ different times, hunting for the version that finally lands. I have been the tech guy in the background, the occasional brainstorm partner, and a witness to what real iteration looks like when nobody is

filming. You are relentless about getting it right, and that has taught me as much as anything in any book.

I look at you like a brother.

Family

Dad

Dad, I miss you.

I know you are looking down on this, and yes, your son is publishing a book. Your son is going to be a best-selling author. I wish you were here to hold a copy in your hands, but I think you already know.

Thank you for giving me the entrepreneurial spirit when I was still too young to know what that even meant.

You planted something in me back then that never went away. I have tried a lot of things. I have failed at plenty of them. But I always knew, somewhere in the back of my mind, that before I joined you up there I was going to build something down here that mattered. Something interesting. Something that really helps people. I believe I finally have, and I believe you would be proud of it.

It is a shame you never got to see AI.

You would have loved it. You would have asked a hundred questions about how it worked. I think about that sometimes.

Thank you for raising me right.

I carry the lessons you gave me into every room I walk into, every client I serve, every page of this book. The work has your fingerprints on it, whether anyone else sees them or not. I see them. That is enough.

Until I see you again.

To my three daughters: Shawna, JacLyn and Elizabeth

You each became your own person a long time ago, and watching who you have grown into is one of the quiet privileges of my life. I do not say that nearly enough, so I am saying it here, on a page that will sit on a shelf a lot longer than a text message.

Shawna.

My eldest. You have taught me more about perseverance than any book, mentor, or hard season of my own life ever did. Five children. Every day. Every single thing about them comes first, and you take that to a level most people would not be able to sustain. I know good moms put their kids first. You take it to the nth degree, and I see it every time we talk. What you are doing is harder than what I am doing. I know that, and I want you to know that I know it. You made me a grandpa at 48. I wore it then and I wear it now as a badge of honor. Thank you for giving me that title and for carrying the one you wear every day.

JacLyn.

My middle daughter. You have taught me about family by showing me what it looks like to stay upbeat even when the road is rough. Your composure is a thing I genuinely admire. Whatever is going on, you show up bright, steady, and pointed forward. You are always trying to

do better, for your kids, for your job, for the version of yourself that is still coming. A lot of people talk about growth. You live it without making a big deal out of it, and that is the harder, truer version.

Jackie, you are the glue that keeps this family together. I know I can always count on you to catch me up on everything happening where you guys are, and that kind of steady thread between us is not something I take for granted.

I see you, kiddo. Keep going.

Elizabeth.

My youngest. I could not be happier that you landed in Phoenix. Having you in the same city after all these years changed something for me that I cannot fully put into words, so I will just say thank you for choosing here. I am also really happy about the person you are building a life with. I can tell he is good for you, partly because I barely hear from you anymore, which I am taking as a very good sign. And I am proud of what you are doing at the new location. Driving AI advancements with your team is not a small job, especially right now, and you are the one doing it. The fact that my youngest daughter and I are working on the same frontier from different angles is one of my favorite quiet facts of this season of life.

To the three of you together.

You are the reason the words “become irreplaceable” carry any weight for me at all. Long before this book, you three made me irreplaceable to someone, just by being mine. I love you.

Dean S.

Deano, I appreciate you being my brother more than you will ever know.

Our 6 AM Friday chats are one of the best parts of my week. You always show up with another story from another corner of your life, and the cast of characters in your world keeps me entertained and grounded at the same time.

Not everybody gets a brother they actually want to talk to at six in the morning. I do, and I do not take it for granted.

Thank you for getting me pointed in the right direction on the weight loss stuff.

You knew what you were talking about. You were patient about it. You did not lecture me. You just shared what worked for you and let me figure out how to apply it. That is the right way to help somebody, and it stuck.

There is one thing you said that has stayed with me for a long time. You told me once that you could not do what I do. That being an entrepreneur is not for you. That you like the steady salary, the benefits, the predictability. It made total sense when you said it, and it still makes sense now.

But for whatever reason, that one comment has lived in my head ever since. It comes back to me at random moments. Late at night when I am still working. Early in the morning when I do not feel like getting up. In the middle of a hard week when nothing is going right.

Every time it shows up, it makes me push a little harder. I do not even fully know why. I just know it does.

So in a strange way, you have been one of the quiet engines behind this whole thing.

You probably had no idea.

Thanks, bro.

Neal S.

Neal, hey bro. I did it. I finally wrote my book.

You and I have shared some of the best chapters of my life. Rooming together back in the day. Heading out to California to take on the wildcatters. Building our lives. Raising our kids alongside each other. There is a kind of history that only a brother can hold with you, and you have been holding mine for a long time.

I have always admired what you have built.

Real estate is not an easy game, and you have been in it longer than most people last in any career. The fact that you have stayed in it, kept growing, and kept showing up for the families who walked through your door says everything about who you are. You do not just close deals. You take care of people. Your heart is in every family you help, and they can feel it. That is rare in your business, and it is one of the things I respect about you most.

Thank you for everything you did with Dad.

I could not have gotten through that without you. We carried it together when it needed to be carried together, and there are not enough words for what that meant to me. You showed up the way a brother is supposed to show up, and I will never forget it.

Rock Pigz forever.

You the Reader

And to you. The reader holding this book.

I want to save the last thank you for you, because none of the rest of it matters if you do not show up. The beta readers, the publishing partners, the builders, the family. All of those people helped me get this book into the world. You are the reason the world was worth getting it into.

Thank you for picking it up.

I do not care how it ended up in your hands. Maybe you bought it. Maybe somebody handed it to you. Maybe you found it on a desk somewhere and decided to flip through the first few pages. It does not matter to me. What matters is that you said yes to spending some of your time with me, and your time is the one thing in your life that you cannot get back. I do not take that lightly.

Thank you for reading it instead of skimming it.

There is a whole chapter in this book about why skimming is the habit that is quietly costing people their edge. If you actually read the words

on these pages, slowly enough to let them land, you already did the hardest thing the book asks anyone to do. You gave the work your attention. In a culture that has trained all of us to scroll faster, click sooner, and absorb less, the act of reading a book cover to cover is closer to rebellion than people realize. You did that. I noticed.

Thank you for being willing to think.

This book is not really about AI. It is about what happens to a person who decides to stop pressing buttons and start thinking again. If that idea reached you, if any part of it made you stop and look at your own habits, then this book did its job and you did yours. You are the whole reason it was written. Not the audience in some marketing plan. You. The actual person whose hands these pages are sitting in right now.

If we ever meet, I would love to hear what you took from it. What landed. What you pushed back on. What changed for you, if anything did. I mean that. The book is not the end of the conversation for me. It is the beginning of one. You can find me. I am not hard to track down.

Until then, thank you for showing up.

Now go become irreplaceable.

Mark A. Stafford

Glossary of Key Terms

AI Literacy by Mark A. Stafford

These are the core terms used throughout this book. They are arranged in the order they appear, not alphabetically, so you can walk through the glossary and see the arc of the methodology itself. If you ever need a quick reminder of what something means, this is your reference page.

The Diagnosis

The Floor Just Dropped

The market shift where skilled professionals are losing work not because they did something wrong, but because the ground underneath their role moved.

This is the phenomenon Chapter 1 opens with. Twenty-year veterans of language-based fields watched their contract pipelines disappear over 18 to 20 months.

They did not get fired. They did not lose a performance review. The work itself stopped arriving. The floor dropping is not a forecast. It is already here for some professions. It is arriving for others.

The whole book is a response to a floor that is already moving under the reader's feet.

Category 1: The Replaceable (Pure Execution)

Your job is a series of tasks. Input data. Follow the steps. Output a result.

If your job can be described as a checklist, you are in Category 1. AI does this faster, cheaper, and without breaks. This is the most vulnerable position in the AI economy.

Most people do not realize they are in Category 1 until the automation is already in place.

Category 2: The Drowning (Judgment and Relationships)

Your job requires trust, accountability, and human decision-making.

AI cannot hold a relationship. AI cannot absorb risk. AI cannot reassure a nervous client. If this is you, you are protected from immediate replacement.

But your workload is multiplying as Category 1 tasks get automated around you. You are drowning in work, and nobody taught you how to scale. The expertise protects you from elimination. Over time, exhaustion makes you vulnerable anyway.

This is the largest category of readers of this book.

Category 3: The CEO (Orchestration)

You direct AI plus humans. You know where AI helps and where it fails. You build systems that combine machine efficiency with human judgment. You own outcomes, not just outputs.

This is the only protected position in the AI economy. Only about 5% of workers are here.

The goal of this book is to move you into Category 3, so you are thinking like a CEO and using AI like a CEO.

The 95/5 Split

The observed pattern is that roughly 95% of workers operate in Categories 1 and 2 while only 5% operate in Category 3.

The gap is not talent. It is not credentials. It is not access to better tools. The gap is methodology.

The 5% are not smarter than the 95%. They have a system for extracting their intelligence and working with AI as a partner. The 95% are still using AI like a search engine and wondering why their output looks like everyone else's.

This book is the methodology that closes the gap.

The Self-Audit

The three-dimensional diagnostic used in Chapter 2 to place yourself in the right category.

Trust asks whether the relationship with the client, the team, or the outcome requires a human to hold it. High trust work cannot be handed to a machine.

Run yourself through the three dimensions honestly and your category becomes obvious.

If you want a structured version of this diagnostic, the Self-Audit quiz is available inside the Skool community at ailikeaceo.net/skool. Take it before you go further into the book if you have not already. Knowing your starting category changes how the rest of this book reads.

AI Flattening

What happens when millions of professionals use AI as a vending machine.

Because they bring no context, no extracted intelligence, and no real judgment to the tool, their outputs converge on the same statistical average. Blog posts start to sound the same. LinkedIn posts start to sound the same. Proposals, emails, and reports all drift toward the internet mean.

The professional disappears inside the output.

AI Flattening is the visible symptom of the vending machine habit operating at scale. You cannot tell one blog post from another because ten thousand professionals are using the same tool the same way with the same lack of context.

The Intelligence Merge is how you stop being flattened.

The Experience Trap

The belief that years of experience alone protect a professional from AI disruption.

Twenty years of expertise feels like a moat. It is not a moat. It is raw material. Experience only protects you if it is extracted, documented, and merged with AI. Experience locked inside your head does nothing for you once a junior professional with an extracted system produces work that looks comparable to yours at a fraction of the time.

The Experience Trap is the reason so many senior professionals are blindsided right now. They are counting on the wrong asset.

Chapter 6 is built around breaking this trap.

Workslop (AI Slop)

AI-generated content that looks finished but lacks real substance.

Most readers already know the term AI Slop. It shows up in social feeds, marketing emails, and content farms. Workslop is the version of AI slop that shows up inside organizations.

An email that uses a lot of words but says nothing. A report that is formatted perfectly but contains no analysis. A proposal that looks professional but makes no real argument.

It is work-shaped. It is not work.

The organizational cost of workslop is not just that it is useless. It takes an average of two hours to identify and fix each significant instance. The productivity tool is creating more work than it saves.

Workslop happens because AI knows what work looks like. It does not know what makes your work valuable.

Vending Machine AI

What happens when you use AI the same way you use a search engine.

A transaction. No context. No judgment. No you.

Think about what a vending machine actually is. You are hungry. You cannot get to a real meal. You put in your money, push a button, and get something wrapped in plastic. It looks like food. It fills the space. But it is processed, artificial, and low in value.

Anyone can walk up to that same machine, push that same button, and get the same bag of chips.

That is how most people use AI. Open ChatGPT. Type something. Get an answer. Copy. Paste. Move on.

Anyone can type that same question and get the same response. That is not a skill. That is a habit. And habits do not protect your job.

The question is not whether you use AI. The question is whether AI knows you. Your clients. Your problems. Your judgment. Your expertise.

If the answer is no, you are using a vending machine.

The Behavior Change

The Intelligence Merge

The methodology at the center of this book.

The Intelligence Merge is the process of extracting the expertise inside your head, documenting it in a structured way, loading it into an AI system, and then engaging with that system as a thinking partner rather than a task executor.

Two words carry most of the weight. Extracting and engaging.

Extracting is the first half. It is the part most people skip. It means pulling your decision frameworks, pattern recognition, failure library, client history, and domain shortcuts out of your head and into a structured document the AI can actually think with. Without extraction, the AI only knows the average of the internet, and it produces the average of the internet back at you.

Engaging is the second half. It is the part the entire AI training industry gets wrong. Every course, every certification, every LinkedIn post about “better prompts” still operates under the same error. They teach you to ask the vending machine better questions. The Intelligence Merge teaches you to stop using a vending machine at all.

A single prompt produces retrieval. A conversation produces insight.

The Intelligence Merge is not a tool. It is not a product. It is a methodology that makes AI tools irrelevant as a competitive moat. When your extracted intelligence drives the system, what you produce cannot be replicated by someone running the same software.

Tacit Knowledge

The skills and insights you have learned from doing something hundreds or thousands of times, compressed into automatic judgment.

Ask an expert to explain how they make decisions, and they will say, “I just know.” That is not a weak answer. That is the definition of tacit knowledge.

A plumber who has been working for 20 years walks into a house, looks at the pipes, listens for 10 seconds, and knows exactly what is wrong. He cannot always explain why he knows. He knows. That is 20 years of pattern recognition compressed into instinct.

The problem is that invisible expertise looks like no expertise at all to someone who cannot see inside your head.

You cannot defend what you cannot articulate. You cannot prove what you cannot document. That is why tacit knowledge needs to be extracted. Not because it is weak. Because it is hidden.

Extraction decompresses it. It turns “I just know” back into the actual framework it sits on.

The Vending Machine Habit

The behavior pattern of treating AI as a transaction engine.

This is different from Vending Machine AI. Vending Machine AI is the tool used without context. The Vending Machine Habit is the behavior the human brings to the tool.

You can extract all of your intelligence, build a perfect AIS, and still fall into this habit the moment you type a short request and wait for output. One beta reader of this book did the full extraction work, built the complete system, and then typed a five-word prompt for a press release.

She built a Ferrari and drove it to the mailbox.

The extraction is not enough. The behavior has to change too. That is why the methodology has two halves, not one.

The CEO First Rule

The identity you adopt before every AI interaction that matters.

The CEO does not walk into a meeting and immediately demand a deliverable. She arrives with context. She thinks out loud. She lets the intelligence in the room surface before she decides anything. And

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when the output comes, she owns it. No hiding behind the tool. No blaming the prompt.

Every time you open your AI of choice, you have a choice about which person walks into that room.

The CEO First Rule is simple to name and difficult to live. Hold the identity before you type a single word.

Outcome Ownership

The Category 3 trait of taking accountability for results rather than hiding behind the tool when something goes wrong.

The Category 1 professional says, “That is what the AI gave me.” The Category 3 professional says, “That is the decision I made, and here is why.”

AI does not own outcomes. You do.

Outcome ownership is what separates someone directing AI from someone operated by it.

Domain Judgment

The expertise a professional already has built up over years in their field.

This is what Category 2 brings to The Intelligence Merge. It is the raw material. Without domain judgment, extraction has nothing to pull

out. The AI cannot invent your 20 years of client pattern recognition. It can only work with what you give it.

Your domain judgment is the most valuable asset you own. It is also the asset you have probably never written down.

Tool Fluency

The ability to use AI tools effectively.

Tool fluency is what Category 1 has in abundance. Knowing the keyboard shortcuts. Knowing the platforms. Knowing how to get output quickly. The AI training industry teaches this well.

Tool fluency is necessary but not sufficient for the professional who wants to become irreplaceable.

There is one exception worth naming. If your job is to build AI systems for other businesses, whether you are a developer, an automation consultant, or someone who builds AI operating systems for clients, tool fluency is not optional. It is the product you sell.

But even then, the strategy comes first. You need to know what the system is supposed to accomplish and why, before you build the automation that runs it. Tool fluency without strategy produces expensive systems nobody uses. Strategy without tool fluency leaves the work undone.

For the rest of the professional workforce, tool fluency is table stakes. The protection lives somewhere else.

The System

The CEO Briefing Framework

The repeatable eight-step thinking process that lets any professional run the Jeff Bezos decision ritual without a Bezos-sized team.

The framework is built on three principles. AI is a thinking partner, not an answer machine. Research lives in one AI. Thinking lives in another. The goal is better decisions, not faster output.

The eight steps are:

1. Bring the problem, not a task.
2. Brief your AIS on context.
3. Explore the angles together.
4. Reflect ideas back and forth.
5. Build on the good ones.
6. Bring in outside research through the bias firewall.
7. Bring the research back and brainstorm what it means.
8. Decide.

The output of the framework is a decision you can act on, not a document to read.

When you know what to do next, the framework is finished.

The 6-Page Memo for the Rest of Us

The positioning line for the CEO Briefing Framework.

Jeff Bezos banned PowerPoint at Amazon and replaced it with a 6-page narrative memo. A team of researchers, analysts, writers, and editors produced the memo. Everyone in the meeting read it in silence for 20 minutes. Then they brainstormed it together. Then they decided.

Until recently, this ritual was gated by resources. Only CEOs with large staffs could run it.

The CEO Briefing Framework collapses that team into an AIS so any professional can run the Bezos ritual on their own desk.

The difference between a CEO and the rest of us was never intelligence. It was resources. AI just handed you the resources.

AIS (AI Intelligence System)

The technical structure you build when you extract your intelligence and load it into an AI.

Your AIS is a specific AI project loaded with your custom instructions, your extracted decision frameworks, your client history, your failure library, your voice, and your domain shortcuts. It is the machine that replaces the Bezos team.

The AIS is what you build. The Chief of Staff is what it becomes once you start working with it correctly. One is the architecture. The other is the identity that architecture takes on in daily use.

You do not prompt an AIS. You brief it.

Briefing

The act of sharing context with your AIS before asking for any output.

You brief your AIS the way a CEO briefs the team walking into a Monday morning strategy meeting. The stakes. The constraints. What you already know. What you are trying to decide. What success looks like.

Briefing is the verb that replaces prompting for thinking work.

If this book does one thing for the language of working with AI, the goal is to retire the word “prompt” from how professionals describe their real thinking work and replace it with “brief.” You prompt a utility. You brief a partner.

Prompt

A direct instruction given to an AI to produce a specific output.

Prompting still has a place. There are three places where it is the right tool.

First, quick lookups. “Find me a chiropractor near Phoenix with good reviews” is a prompt, and it should be. You are not making a decision. You are retrieving information.

Second, research AI handoffs. When your AIS helps you build a research query for Perplexity or Gemini, the output of that collaboration is a prompt. The AIS does the thinking. The research AI executes the prompt.

Third, automation building. If you are constructing an AI workflow in N8N or any automation platform, prompt engineering is the literal job. The rules the prompt engineering community teaches, including structure, examples, constraints, and output formatting, all apply. Those rules matter in that context.

What this book retires is the fourth use of prompting. Typing a short request into your primary AI for thinking work, accepting whatever comes back, and calling that a decision. That is vending machine behavior, not prompting, and no amount of prompt engineering training fixes it.

The word for that replacement behavior is brief.

Bias Firewall

The non-negotiable discipline of separating research and thinking into different AI tools.

Research lives in one room. Thinking lives in another.

If the same AI that gathers your research also helps you think about the research, it will confirm its own findings. You lose the ability to challenge what came in. Using a separate AI for each job keeps the thinking honest.

In practice, the research AI is Perplexity, Gemini Deep Research, or any tool designed for sourced, verified information retrieval. The thinking AI is your AIS. You carry verified research from one to the other.

The bias firewall is the discipline that separates The Intelligence Merge from generic “use AI better” advice.

Continuous Capture

The habit of documenting what you learn as you learn it, so your intelligence keeps growing instead of staying stalled at the moment of your initial extraction.

Most professionals have years of intelligence locked in their heads. They do a one-time extraction and stop there. That is like going to college for one day and never going back.

Continuous capture means every pattern you recognize, every mistake you make, every shortcut you figure out gets added to your AIS. Five to ten minutes a week. That is it.

How to do it: Send yourself a voice memo the second you notice something worth capturing. Tools like Pocket Pro and Plaud are excellent for this because they automatically record, transcribe, and organize. You can also keep a simple note on your phone.

The tool does not matter. The habit does.

Continuous capture is what keeps your Chief of Staff current. Without it, your AIS stays frozen at the moment of your original extraction, and the world moves on without it.

Chief of Staff

What your AIS becomes once you stop treating it as a tool and start working with it as a partner.

The AIS is what you build. The Chief of Staff is what it becomes.

A Chief of Staff in a real executive office does not take orders. A Chief of Staff carries context, surfaces angles the executive missed, pushes back on weak thinking, stress-tests decisions, and prepares the room for better outcomes.

That is what your AIS does once you brief it correctly and work with it consistently. The technical structure becomes a working relationship.

This is the framing introduced in the bonus Chapter 13. You are the CEO. Your AIS is the Chief of Staff. The relationship is the whole point.

The CEO Learning/Briefing Method

The approach introduced in Chapter 12 that replaces certification chasing.

Most professionals try to keep up with AI by buying more courses, chasing more tools, and collecting more certifications. The result is a crowded hard drive and a tired brain. The learning does not compound. The certifications do not transfer. The tools change before the course finishes.

The CEO Learning Method works differently. You learn by briefing your AIS on real problems, making real decisions, capturing what worked and what did not, and letting your judgment compound over time.

You do not need another AI course. You need a system for turning your own work into your education.

This is the method that replaces the last ten webinars you sat through without getting anything done.

A Note on Which Mode You Are In

There are two ways to use AI, and almost nobody has taught the difference.

Retrieval mode is when you need information organized. The best chiropractor near you. The current exchange rate. The closing time of a store. Short prompts, direct answers, no decision involved. Prompting is the right tool. AI is a utility.

Thinking mode is when you are solving a problem, making a decision, or creating something that carries your judgment. Positioning a launch. Responding to a difficult client. Deciding whether to hire. In thinking mode, the internet average answer is the wrong answer because the situation is not average. Briefing is the right tool. AI is a partner.

The damage in the workforce right now is coming from professionals using retrieval mode behavior on thinking mode problems. They type a short request, accept

whatever comes back, and wonder why their work feels flat.

You will hear people talk about AI using the wrong verbs for the mode they are in. “I pushed back on the AI.” “I had to argue with it.” “I wrestled a decent answer out of it.”

Those are retrieval mode verbs applied to thinking mode situations. That is the vending machine habit, dressed up in a louder vocabulary.

When you are thinking with AI, the verbs sound different. You brainstorm. You reflect.

You build. You brief. You decide.

The words tell on you. Use them on purpose.

Pick the mode before you pick the prompt.

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AI Literacy

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Index of Resources

AI Literacy by Mark A. Stafford

A Note on Tools

The tools listed here are referenced throughout this book as part of The Intelligence Merge methodology.

This is not an exhaustive list of all available AI tools, and it is not an endorsement of any specific product.

Tools change. Prices change. Better options may emerge after this book goes to print.

What does not change is the methodology. The Intelligence Merge works across any AI platform. Use the tools that work best for you. The ones listed here are simply what Mark A. Stafford uses and recommends based on his own testing at the time of publication.

All links were accurate at the time of printing. For the latest versions and updates, visit ailikeaceo.net.

AI Chat and Research Tools

Claude <https://claude.ai> My AI chat of choice. Best for writing, deep thinking, and brainstorming. All of my custom AI clone projects live in Claude. I use Gemini Gems when I need to share interviews with others to build their intelligence and custom instructions, but Claude is where the work gets done.

ChatGPT <https://chatgpt.com> I use this occasionally for research. Since I run a digital marketing agency, I also use it to check keywords and see how clients are ranking. At the time of writing, it is the most widely used AI chatbot in the world.

Google Gemini and Gemini Gems <https://gemini.google.com/app> Google Gemini is a strong platform. I do not use it much for general chatting, but the Gems feature is essential for creating shareable interview experiences like the ones built for The Intelligence Merge extraction rounds. If you want to create your own interviews or shareable AI experiences, Gemini Gems is the way to go.

Perplexity <https://www.perplexity.ai> My favorite deep research tool. It surfaces sources, cites everything, and goes deeper than a standard AI chat response. One important note: Perplexity's policies require attribution if you use their outputs as a final product. I use it exclusively for research, not for finished writing.

Manus <https://manus.im/app> When I am doing deep research on something important, I always run the same prompt in Manus that I run in Perplexity. Between these two tools, there is always at least

one significant finding that one surfaces and the other misses. If your research matters, use both.

Browser and Export Tools

Chrome Browser <https://www.google.com/chrome> I use Chrome as my primary browser. It has the largest library of available plugins, which matters when you need to connect tools and export files. If you are completing the Intelligence Merge extraction rounds, you will need Chrome to use the export plugin below.

Chrome Plugin: AI Chat to Word, PDF and Google Docs <https://chromewebstore.google.com/detail/ai-chat-to-word-pdf-googl/edigonllaonjailplgnkhjeogbbgabpf> This is the plugin you need to download your Gemini Gem interview results as files. It saves your chat as PDFs, text files, and markdown files. For the best results when setting up your AI clone, download your extraction results as markdown or text files.

Community and Training

The AI Like a CEO Community <https://ailikeaceo.net/skool> This is the free community where the complete Intelligence Merge extraction system lives. All Foundation rounds, Enhanced Intelligence rounds, Deep Personalization rounds, the Super Clone Builder, and community support are inside. Your book purchase includes free access.

Note-Taking and Continuous Capture Tools

Pocket Pro <https://heypocket.com> An AI note taker that comes with unlimited transcription minutes when you buy the device. No subscription required for transcription. This is what I recommend if you want a simple, friction-free way to capture patterns, ideas, failures, and shortcuts for continuous capture and building your AI clone over time. Not an affiliate link, just a device worth knowing about.

Plaud Note <https://www.plaud.ai/products/plaud-note-ai-voice-recorder> Another AI voice recorder I see widely advertised. Note that, unlike Pocket Pro, Plaud gives you only 300 transcription minutes per month with the device purchase. I have not personally compared both devices side by side. I am including it here because many people ask about it. If you want a dedicated capture device, it is worth researching both options before deciding.

For the most current tool recommendations, updates, and new resources, visit ailikeaceo.net/skool and join our community.

For Organizations and Teams

If you lead a company, manage a team, or run a platform where smart people are trying to figure out what AI literacy actually means in practice, this book was built to answer that question at scale.

The methodology within it is trainable and repeatable. It produces measurable results without requiring your people to become AI experts. It requires them to become better thinkers, which is the skill

your organization has always needed and has never been able to teach systematically until now.

Mark A. Stafford is available to walk your organization through The Intelligence Merge directly, through keynotes, workshops, and corporate training programs designed to move teams from generic AI use to irreplaceable AI orchestration before market forces force the conversation.

For speaking and training inquiries: mark@ailikeaceo.net

