

THE PROFESSIONAL HANDBOOK FOR WORKING WITH AI

How to Save Time,
Think Better, and
Get More Done
with AI at Work



THOMAS REYNOLDS

The Professional Handbook for Working with AI

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Get More Done with AI at Work

Thomas Reynolds and The Agile Mindset Ltd

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For Amanda

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Preface

I found myself living in two different conversations about artificial intelligence.

In one conversation, colleagues, trainers, consultants, software professionals, and LinkedIn contacts were discussing AI daily. People were experimenting with custom GPTs, coding assistants, automation, AI-generated content, and increasingly sophisticated ways of integrating AI into their work.

I was part of those conversations myself.

I used AI to analyse data, draft emails and reports, create training materials, summarise information, structure presentations, and support research. I built custom GPTs and used AI-assisted coding tools to create software applications.

In many professional circles, AI had become a major topic of discussion.

At the same time, I was hearing a very different perspective.

When talking to friends, family members, neighbours, and people in the local pub, the reactions were often more uncertain.

Some had heard of AI but were not particularly interested. Some had experimented with it briefly. Some used it occasionally to help write an email. Others associated it mainly with image generation or news headlines.

Many people seemed unsure what AI meant for them, their work, or their future.

The contrast was striking. Both groups were talking about the same technology but from entirely different perspectives.

In one world, AI was being discussed as a transformative technology that would reshape industries and professions.

In the other, many people were still trying to answer a much simpler question:

“What does this actually do for me?”

The more I thought about it, the more I realised that this question was entirely reasonable. Most people want to understand AI enough to use it effectively, make informed decisions, and avoid being left behind by changes that may affect their work and everyday lives.

Around the same time, I came across research published by the UK Government as part of its AI Skills for Life and Work programme. The findings reinforced what I was already observing. Awareness of AI was high, yet many people remained unsure how to use it confidently and effectively in their daily work. The report reflected what I had been hearing first-hand.

That observation became one of the main reasons for writing this book.

This book is written for professionals who want practical guidance. It is for people who work with information, communication, planning, decisions, analysis, coordination, and problem-solving. It is for people who have heard the headlines, experimented a little, or perhaps not at all, and want to understand how AI can be applied in realistic and useful ways.

Throughout my career, I have spent much of my time helping people learn, adapt, and navigate change.

Whether the subject was software development, Agile ways of working, leadership, facilitation, coaching, or organisational improvement, the challenge was often similar.

People rarely struggle because they lack intelligence; they struggle because they lack clarity.

They need practical explanations, realistic examples, opportunities to experiment, and enough understanding to build confidence. I believe the same is true for AI.

My own view is that AI is becoming a workplace skill and an essential productivity tool. Over time, AI literacy may become as important as digital literacy. Professionals who learn to use AI are likely to gain advantages in effectiveness, efficiency, quality, communication, learning, and problem-solving.

At the same time, I do not believe AI removes the need for human judgement. In many ways, it makes human judgement even more important.

AI can help draft, summarise, analyse, explain, brainstorm, and organise information.

It cannot take responsibility for decisions. It cannot navigate organisational politics, personal relationships, ethics, accountability, or professional context in the same way that people can.

The goal, therefore, is not to replace human thinking. It is to support and strengthen human thinking. That philosophy runs throughout this book.

You will not find exaggerated claims about AI replacing every profession nor promises that AI can solve every problem. You will not find technical explanations that require a background in computer science.

What you will find is a book designed to help you understand what AI is, what it is not, where it can help, where caution is required, and how to apply it effectively in real-world situations.

AI will continue to evolve. The tools discussed today will improve. New tools will emerge. Some tools will disappear. The underlying principles, however, are likely to remain valuable.

My hope is that this book helps bridge the gap between awareness and capability.

If it helps you feel more confident, more informed, and better equipped to work alongside AI in your professional and personal life, then it will have achieved its purpose.

Thomas Reynolds

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The Professional Mindset Shift

The biggest adjustment to working with AI is not learning how to use the technology. It is changing how you think about your own work.

People have spent years developing ways of working that feel familiar. We know how we prepare for meetings, organise information, write reports, research unfamiliar subjects, solve problems, and get ourselves ready for important conversations. Some of those habits are highly effective. Others exist because that is how we have always done them.

AI introduces another option.

Instead of asking, “How do I do this?”, we can ask, “How could AI help me do this better?”

That is a slight change in question, but a significant change in mindset.

It does not require you to hand your work over to AI or automate everything, and it does not require technical knowledge. It requires something more familiar to experienced professionals. You need to be willing to reconsider how work gets done when better tools become available.

A team leader preparing for a difficult meeting might use AI to explore the questions they could be challenged on. A trainer might use it to generate alternative ways of explaining a difficult concept. An analyst might use it to help structure an initial report before applying their own expertise to the findings.

In each case, the professional is still doing the work. What changes

is the support available to them.

The opportunity presented by AI is not simply to complete existing tasks faster. It is to rethink where we spend our time, where we apply our attention, and where our experience adds the most value.

The professionals who gain the most benefit from AI are not those who know the most about the technology. They are the ones who become good at recognising where it can strengthen the way they already work.

Augmentation, Not Replacement

Much discussion about AI at work focuses on what it might replace. Jobs, roles and individual tasks are often viewed through the question of whether AI could do them instead of a person.

For most professionals, there is a better question:

What could AI help me do?

This shifts the focus from replacement to augmentation.

Augmentation means using AI to support or extend what you can already do. You remain responsible for the work but use AI to help with parts of it.

This changes how we think about the work itself. Instead of looking at a task as something you do or AI does, you can look at the different parts involved and decide where AI could contribute.

Some parts may benefit from AI support while others depend more heavily on your experience, knowledge of the situation, relationships, judgement, or understanding of what needs to happen next. The work becomes a combination of what you bring and where AI can help.

When AI is used as augmentation, you are still directing the work. You decide what you are trying to achieve, provide the relevant

context, assess the response, and decide what happens next.

Sometimes AI may contribute significantly. At other times, its role may be much smaller. The important question is not how much of the work AI can do. It is whether its contribution improves the way you do the work.

This also means a task does not need to be fully automated for AI to be useful. There can be value in improving one part of a process while you remain involved in everything else.

The aim is not to remove yourself from the work. It is to become better at deciding where your involvement matters most and where AI can provide useful support.

Where the Leverage Comes From

The value of AI is not always in doing an entire task. Often, it comes from reducing the time and effort needed for parts of it.

Professional work contains many activities that take time without requiring all of our attention or expertise. Getting a first draft started, organising information, comparing different approaches, preparing questions, or turning rough ideas into something more structured can all take longer than we would like.

AI can reduce that effort.

Saving ten minutes on one activity may not seem significant. But professional work is made up of many repeated small activities. When AI helps with them, the time saved can begin to add up.

The benefit is not just about working faster. Reducing effort in one part of the work can give you more time and attention for another.

If AI helps you organise information before a meeting, you can spend more time thinking about the decisions that need to be made. If it helps you get a first draft underway, you can spend more time

improving the argument. If it helps you explore several approaches to a problem, you can spend more time deciding which one makes sense in your situation.

This is where productivity leverage starts to become significant. You are not simply trying to fit more work into the day. You are using AI to reduce effort where it can help so that more of your time can go towards the work where you add the most value.

The amount of leverage will vary. Some uses may save considerable time, while others may simply make a difficult task easier to start. What matters is whether the overall way of working improves.

As you become more familiar with AI, you begin to notice these opportunities more easily. Instead of looking only for large tasks that AI could perform, you start to recognise smaller points in your work where a little support can make the whole process easier.

Your Professional Skills Still Matter

AI does not make the skills and experience you have developed less important. In many situations, they determine how useful AI can be.

Two people can use the same AI tool for the same task and get very different results. The difference is usually not their knowledge of AI. It is what they bring to the work themselves.

An experienced project manager knows which questions need to be asked when a project starts to drift. A recruiter understands what matters when assessing whether someone is right for a role. A manager knows the history behind a difficult relationship within their team. AI can support each of them, but their professional knowledge shapes how that support is used.

This matters throughout the interaction.

Your experience helps you know what information to provide, what questions to ask, which suggestions are worth exploring, and when something does not look right. It also helps you recognise what is missing from an AI response.

The better you understand your own work, the better placed you are to use AI within it.

This is one reason technical expertise is not the main requirement for working effectively with AI. Knowing more about the technology can help, but it does not replace knowledge of your profession, organisation, customers, colleagues, or the situation you are dealing with.

AI gives you another capability to work with. Your existing skills help you decide how to use it.

As AI becomes more capable, some parts of professional work will become easier or quicker to complete. That does not make professional capability irrelevant. It can change where that capability is most valuable.

The opportunity is to combine the two. Use AI where it can reduce effort or provide useful support, while continuing to develop the skills that allow you to understand the situation, make good decisions, and produce work you are confident in.

Adaptability is More Important Than Technical Expertise

Working effectively with AI does not require you to become an AI expert.

You do not need to understand every new model, follow every development, or know exactly how the technology works. A basic understanding is useful, but for most, the more important skill is learning how to adapt the way you work.

That starts with being willing to experiment.

You might try AI with a task you normally do yourself, compare the result with your usual approach, and decide whether it helped. Sometimes the benefit will be clear. Sometimes you will decide that your existing approach works better. Both outcomes teach you something.

But experimentation does more than help you learn how to use AI. It also helps you discover what else might be possible.

When you find that AI helps with one part of your work, it can give you ideas about where else it might help. Those experiments lead to new ones. As you discover more about what AI can do, you become better at recognising opportunities to use it.

This creates a useful cycle. The more you experiment, the more you discover. The more you discover, the more ideas you have about what to try next.

Over time, your understanding of AI becomes less about what you have been told it can do and more about what you have discovered through your own work.

The challenge is that established ways of working can be difficult to change. When you know how to complete a task, using AI can initially feel like an extra step. You have to explain what you need, assess the response, and work out whether it has actually helped.

That can make it tempting to return to your usual approach.

Adaptability does not mean changing everything at once. It means being willing to question whether the way you work today is still the best way to work tomorrow.

As AI develops, the opportunities to use it will change. Tasks that are difficult for AI today may become easier. New capabilities will appear, and the tools themselves will become easier to use. Learning every feature is unlikely to be as valuable as developing the habit of exploring what is possible and deciding what is useful to you.

You do not need to keep up with everything. You need enough curiosity to experiment, enough professional knowledge to judge the results, and enough adaptability to change your approach when you find a better way of working.

Finding the Right Balance

Experimenting with AI can help you discover more ways to use it, but that does not mean every task needs it.

As you become more comfortable using AI, there can be a temptation to involve it because you can. Something that once required thought or effort can become as easy as opening a conversation and asking for help.

The question is whether that help is useful.

Some tasks are quicker to do yourself. Others benefit from the thinking involved in working through them. There will also be situations where your knowledge of the people, circumstances, or organisation matters more than anything AI can contribute.

Knowing when not to use AI is part of learning to use it well.

There is also a difference between using AI to support your capability and becoming dependent on it. If you automatically turn to AI whenever you need to write, think through a problem, develop an idea, or make sense of information, you risk using it out of habit rather than because it improves the work.

This is particularly important for skills you need to maintain yourself. AI can help you think through a problem, but you still need to be able to think through problems. It can help you communicate, but you still need to understand how to communicate well. It can help you develop ideas, but you still need to bring ideas and judgement of your own.

The aim is not to use AI as much as possible. It is to use it where it makes sense.

Sometimes that will mean asking AI to do a significant part of the work. Sometimes it will mean using it briefly. Sometimes the better choice will be not to use it at all.

Finding that balance comes with experience. The same experimentation that helps you discover where AI is useful also helps you recognise where it adds little value.

The goal is to reach a point where using AI becomes a considered part of how you work, rather than something you either avoid or automatically rely on.

Build the Habit of Experimenting

Developing an AI working mindset does not require a major change in how you work. It can start with a small habit.

Choose one thing each week to experiment with.

It could be a task you already use AI for but want to approach differently, or something you have not tried before. The experiment does not need to save a significant amount of time or produce an immediate improvement. The purpose is to learn something about what AI can and cannot do for you.

Afterwards, ask yourself three questions:

- Did it help?
- What did I learn?
- What else does this make me want to try?

Over time, these small experiments build practical experience. You become better at recognising when AI could be useful, how to

approach it, and when your usual way of working is the better choice.

You also begin to develop your own ways of working with AI. These will reflect your role, responsibilities, experience, and the type of work you do. What works well for someone else may not be what works well for you.

There is no need to explore everything at once. One experiment can lead to the next.

The important thing is to keep learning from what you try.

Explore with the AI Learning Companion

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Moving Forward

Working effectively with AI is not about using it for everything or becoming an expert in the technology. It is about becoming better at recognising where it can help and making good decisions about how to use it.

That starts with a change in mindset.

Instead of seeing work as something you either do yourself or hand over to AI, you can begin to think about where your own skills and experience matter most and where AI can provide useful support.

Some of the greatest benefits may come from small changes. A task that becomes easier to start. Preparation that takes less time.

Another way of looking at a problem. A first draft that gives you something to work with.

The more you experiment, the more you learn about what is useful. That experience makes it easier to recognise new opportunities while also knowing when AI is not the right choice.

You do not need to work out the perfect way to use AI before you begin. Your approach will develop as you use it.

The next step is learning how to make those interactions more effective.

Key Takeaways

- AI is most useful when you think about it as a way to augment your professional capability rather than replace it.
- The value does not always come from automating an entire task. Small improvements across your work can create meaningful leverage.
- Your professional knowledge, experience, and judgement remain important because they shape how you use AI and assess what it produces.
- Adaptability matters more than technical expertise. Experimentation helps you discover what AI can do and where else it might help.
- Using AI well also means knowing when not to use it and avoiding dependence on it.
- Regular small experiments can help you develop your own effective ways of working with AI.

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Further Reading and Exploration

Explore your approach to AI adoption

Skills England. (2026). *Employer guide: What works for AI upskilling in the UK*. UK Government.

This guide provides a practical approach to developing AI capability in the workplace. Its AI adoption pathway moves through exploration, experimentation, reflection, and continued development.

Use it to consider where you are in your own use of AI and what you could experiment with next.

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