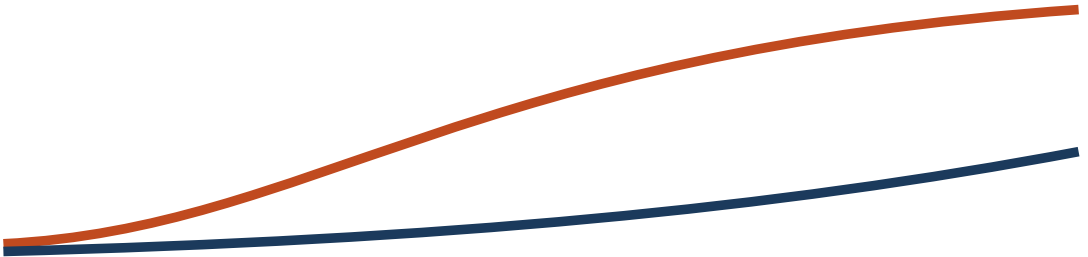


HOW TO BECOME A

CAIO

CHIEF · AI · OFFICER

The fastest-growing seat in business is empty in most companies on earth. This is the complete playbook for taking it: **land the role, deploy AI into real businesses, and get paid like it matters.**



**BENJAMIN
SIMKIN**

\$3.1B IN CLIENT REVENUE · 30 YEARS
BUILDING SYSTEMS

HOW TO BECOME A

CAIO

CHIEF · AI · OFFICER

Benjamin Simkin

AI FIRST FOUNDATIONS

How to Become a CAIO · First edition, 2026
Copyright © Benjamin Simkin. All rights reserved.
Published by AI First Foundations.

Market data throughout is current to 2026 and dated where it appears. Salary tables, rates and regulation move; the current edition and updates live at aifirstfoundations.com.

This book is general information, not legal, financial or employment advice.

Contents

PART I · The Window

1. The Window
2. What the Machine Can Actually Do
3. The Ninety-Five Percent

PART II · The Seat

4. The Seat
5. What It Pays
6. The Sceptics Are Right About the Wrong People
7. The Safety Seat

PART III · Your Path

8. No Code Required
9. The Assessment
10. Climb Inside
11. The Moonlight Ladder
12. Fractional
13. The Agency Model
14. Second Act

PART IV · The Proof

15. The Proof Ladder
16. The Shadow Audit
17. Your First Win
18. Speak Money, Not Model

PART V · The Craft: Deploying AI Into a Business

19. The Deployment Loop
20. Reading a Business
21. The Tool Landscape
22. Ten Deployments Anyone Can Ship
23. Piloting and Proving
24. Data, Privacy and Safety

- 25. Working With Builders
- 26. Installing Governance

PART VI · Getting Clients and Getting Paid

- 27. The Empty Seat Map
- 28. Shadow-Audit Outreach
- 29. The Assessment-First Close
- 30. Borrowed Audiences
- 31. Do It, or Hire the Doing
- 32. Pricing the Seat
- 33. Paper and Protection
- 34. The Honest P&L
- 35. Keeping the Seat
- 36. Hunting Bigger Water

PART VII · The Door

- 37. The Door
- 38. The CEO's Chapter

PART VIII · The Worked Engagement

- 39. A Complete Engagement, One: The Question Set and the Tally
- 40. A Complete Engagement, Two: The Findings Report and the Recommendation
- 41. A Complete Engagement, Three: Proposal, Paper, Memos and the Ninety-Day Readout

The Resource Layer

- Appendix A: The 30-Day AI Literacy Sprint
- Appendix B: Salary and Rate Tables
- Appendix C: The Job-Ad Decoder
- Appendix D: The CAIO Interview Bank
- Appendix E: The Regulation Cheat Sheet
- Appendix F: The Templates
- Appendix G: Glossary
- Appendix H: The Tools and Platforms Reference
- Appendix I: The Diagnostic Question Bank
- Appendix J: The Career Transition Kit

Appendix K: Your First Thirty Days

Appendix L: The Risk and Governance Primer

PART I

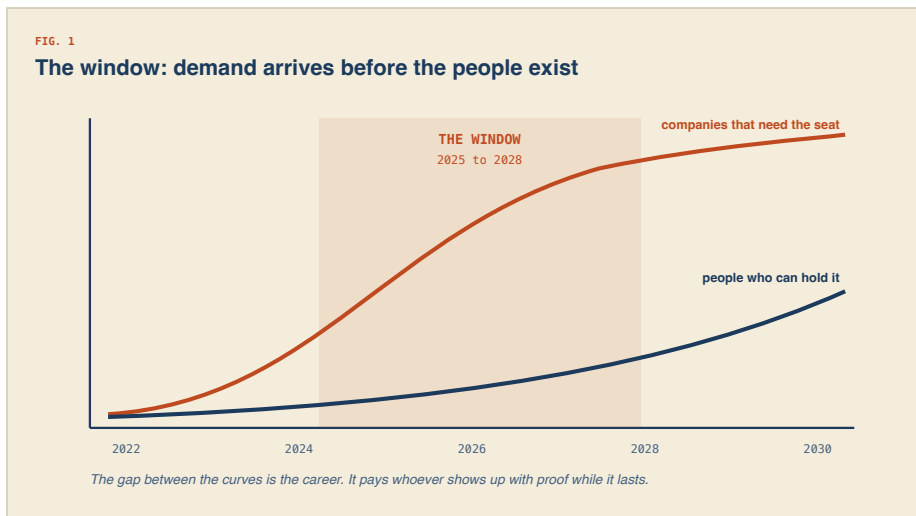
The Window

The ground moved. Most people have not noticed yet, and the ones who notice first get the best seats. Three chapters on what actually happened, what the machine really does, and why almost every company is failing at it.

Chapter 1: The Window

The price of intelligence collapsed, and most people watched it happen and decided it was a toy.

I want to show you what actually happened, because once you see it clearly, the rest of this book is obvious. And once you act on it, the next decade of your working life looks completely different from the decade you were otherwise going to have.



The window: demand arrives before the people exist.

FIG. 2

The same window has opened three times before

1996	The webmaster	Mocked as a fad job	Became the CIOs
2009	The social media manager	"Someone's nephew"	Became the CMOs
2013	The security officer	Untrained volunteers	Became the CISOs
2025	The Chief AI Officer	"Vanity title"	Being decided right now

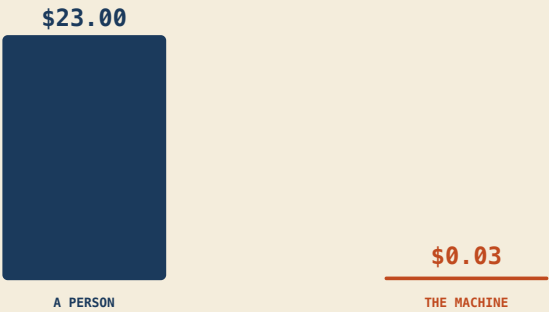
A technology arrives. A silly-sounding title appears. The title gets mocked. The early holders become the establishment, and the door shuts behind them.

The same window has opened three times before.

FIG. 3

What one ordinary task costs

A product description. Forty minutes of a \$70,000 employee, versus the machine.



Multiply by every task, every day, every business on earth. Prices do not fall this far quietly.

What one ordinary task costs, before and after.

What a task used to cost

Think about a small piece of knowledge work. Not a grand project. Something ordinary.

A product description for an online store. A summary of a forty-page contract. A first draft of a job ad. A spreadsheet of last quarter's sales

turned into three paragraphs a manager can read. A polite reply to an angry customer.

Each of those tasks has always had a price. The price was a person's time. A \$70,000-a-year employee costs their employer roughly \$35 an hour once you add the extras. If the product description takes forty minutes, that description cost about \$23. The contract summary, at two hours of a paralegal's day, cost maybe \$90. Multiply by every task, every day, every business on earth. That is the real economy: millions of people being paid by the hour to produce words, numbers, decisions and documents.

In late 2022, machines started doing those tasks for a few cents each.

Not all tasks. Not perfectly. We will spend a whole chapter on what these systems genuinely cannot do, because knowing the limits is half the skill. But for an enormous class of everyday work, work made of words, numbers and patterns, the price fell from tens of dollars to fractions of a cent. Somewhere between a hundred and a thousand times cheaper, depending on the task.

Prices do not fall a hundredfold quietly. When the price of something businesses buy every single day collapses, the businesses reorganise around the new price. Always. It happened when electricity replaced steam, when the spreadsheet replaced the bookkeeping pool, when the internet replaced the fax and the filing cabinet. The reorganisation is not optional. The only question is who runs it, and who gets paid for running it.

That question is this book.

The seat that gets created

Here is the pattern, and it has repeated three times in the last thirty years. Learn it once and you will see exactly where you are standing.

1996: the webmaster. The internet arrived and companies knew they needed “a website” without knowing what that meant. So someone put their hand up. Often it was an office administrator who had taught themselves HTML, or an IT helpdesk person who stayed late. The title “webmaster” was openly mocked in the business press as a fad job. Within ten years, the people who put their hands up were IT directors and CIOs, and “we don’t need a web presence” had become a sentence nobody said out loud. The mocked title disappeared because the function it named had swallowed the company.

2009: the social media manager. Same shape. Facebook and Twitter arrived, executives knew “we should be on there,” and the person who volunteered was usually a junior marketer or, famously, “someone’s nephew.” The role was ridiculed. A decade later those volunteers were heads of digital and CMOs, and social spend was a board-level line item. The window for walking into that career with no qualifications lasted maybe four years. After that, the jobs demanded five years of experience that only the early movers had.

2013: the security officer. After the Target breach put a CEO out of a job, boards suddenly needed someone accountable for security. The people who became Chief Information Security Officers were rarely trained for it, because almost nobody was trained for it. They were network admins and IT managers who took ownership of a terrifying new problem. Today the CISO is a fixture of every serious company, the average one out-earns most of the executives who once ignored them, and you cannot get the job without a resume that only the class of 2013 to 2017 had time to build.

Three times: a technology arrives, a gap opens between what companies need and who exists to provide it, a slightly silly-sounding title appears, the title gets mocked, the early holders become the establishment, and the door shuts behind them.

The fourth window is open right now, and it has a name: Chief AI Officer.

The numbers on the window

I do not ask you to take the window on faith. Here is the arithmetic of it.

IBM surveys thousands of CEOs every year. In 2023, 11% of organisations reported having a Chief AI Officer or equivalent. In 2025 it was 26%. In 2026 it is 76% of CEOs saying they have or are hiring one. That is not a trend. That is a stampede.

Job postings tell the same story from the other side. “Chief AI” postings grew 478% in a single year. In 2024 the United States government mandated, by executive order, that every federal agency appoint a Chief AI Officer. Around a hundred agencies had to fill the seat at once. Nearly half of FTSE 100 companies now have one.

Now the supply side. Where is the pipeline of experienced AI executives to fill those seats? There isn’t one. The role barely existed five years ago. Universities do not produce it. There is no twenty-year veteran class, because the field is not twenty years old. Recruiters describe the same thing over and over: hundreds of open mandates, and the same short list of names being passed around.

When demand grows like that and supply cannot, two things happen. The price of the people goes up, and the entry requirements come down. Both are happening now. Full-time Chief AI Officers at mid-market companies earn \$300,000 to \$450,000. At large companies, total packages clear a million. Fractional operators, people who hold the seat part-time for several smaller companies at once, charge \$5,000 to \$30,000 a month per client. And underneath the headline title, every rung of the ladder is repricing: workers with AI skills now earn a premium of more than 50% over identical workers without them, a number that was 25% two years ago and is still climbing.

And one more number, the one this whole book turns on. In S&P Global Market Intelligence’s 2025 survey of more than a thousand companies across North America and Europe, the share abandoning most of their AI

initiatives rose to 42%, up from 17% in the previous wave, and the average organisation scrapped 46% of its proofs of concept before they ever reached production. A separate and far more famous study put the failure rate of custom-built enterprise AI at 95%; Chapter 3 takes that figure apart properly, because it needs taking apart, and the conclusion survives the surgery.

Read those two paragraphs together and you get the strangest labour market of your lifetime. Companies are desperate to hire for a role. They are paying executive money for it. And simultaneously, almost everything they attempt in the area fails, because the people who can actually make it work barely exist.

That is not a problem. That is the single largest career opening since the internet, sitting there with almost nobody walking through it.

Why the window closes

Windows close. That is what makes them windows.

The webmaster window closed when the first generation accumulated experience nobody else could match, and hiring managers could finally demand it. The social media window closed the same way. The security window closed when certifications, degrees and a decade of incident scars became the entry ticket.

This window will close the same way, and you can already see the mechanism. Every month, more people get eighteen months of real AI leadership experience under their belt. Every month, the job ads get a little more specific about what they want. Every month, another university launches an AI leadership program that will graduate its first class in a few years. Somewhere between 2028 and 2030, the seats will mostly be filled, the requirements will harden, and this will become a career you prepare for over years, like the others did.

Between now and then, the seat goes to whoever shows up with proof. Not credentials from a field too young to have them. Not twenty years of experience nobody on earth possesses. Proof: evidence you can make this technology produce results in a real business. This book is largely about how you manufacture that proof from wherever you are currently standing, and how you convert it into the seat, the salary, or the client retainers.

Who I am, and what this book will do

I have spent over thirty years building production systems, and those same thirty years in the business world, where the work I have been part of has driven billions in client revenue. I have built and sold companies of my own. These days I spend my time doing exactly what this book describes: re-engineering real businesses around AI, and training the people who run that work. I am not an academic writing about a trend, and I am not a marketer who discovered ChatGPT last year. I build these systems, I deploy them into real companies, and I watch what actually happens afterwards.

Here is what I have watched: the technology works, the tools are cheap, and the bottleneck is not the machine. The bottleneck is people who can stand between the machine and the business and make one serve the other. Companies cannot find them. When they find them, they pay whatever it takes to keep them.

So this book has one job: to take you, whoever you currently are, a manager, a bookkeeper, a consultant, a tradie's office manager, a fifty-five-year-old operations veteran, a twenty-six-year-old who is good with the tools, and make you one of those people. In these pages you will get the literacy, the proof, the path that fits your situation, the method for winning clients or the internal seat, the craft of actually deploying AI into a business, and the way you get paid for all of it.

I will not pretend it happens by Friday. It happens in months, not days. But it does not require a technical background, it does not require quitting your job before you are ready, and it does not require permission from anyone.

The window is open. Let's get you through it.

Do this now

Three exercises, ten minutes each, before you read another chapter. Do them with any of the major AI chat tools. The free versions are fine.

1. **Price a task.** Pick one written task you did this week: an email, a summary, a report section. Ask the AI to do it. Time how long it takes you to get a usable result, including your corrections. Then work out what the task cost the old way: your hourly cost times the time it used to take. Write both numbers down. That gap is the entire economy of this book.
2. **Test its knowledge of your world.** Ask it something specific about your industry that a competent junior colleague should know. Then ask something only a ten-year veteran would know. Notice where it is brilliant and where it confidently makes things up. You have just learned the most important single fact about the technology.
3. **Find one stampede signal.** Search your industry plus "Chief AI Officer" or "Head of AI" on any job board. Count the postings. Save the three most interesting ones. You will use them in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2: What the Machine Can Actually Do

You are being lied to from two directions at once.

From one side, an industry with trillions of dollars at stake tells you AI can do everything: run your company, replace your team, think, feel, plan your strategy. From the other side, a chorus of dismissers tells you it is autocomplete, a plagiarism machine, a bubble, a toy that makes pictures of astronauts riding horses.

Both camps are selling something. The hype-sellers want your subscription money and your investment dollars. The dismissers are mostly selling you comfort, because “it’s a toy” means nobody has to change anything.

You cannot afford either lie. The whole career this book describes is built on knowing, precisely and calmly, what this technology does well, what it does badly, and what it cannot do at all. That knowledge is rarer than you would believe. It is rarer than coding skill. Most executives do not have it. Most vendors are counting on nobody in the room having it. The person who has it becomes, very quickly, the most useful person in any meeting where AI is discussed.

This chapter gives you the first layer of it.

FIG. 5

The line the job market is redrawing

MOVES TO THE MACHINE

- First drafts of everything
- Reading and summarising
- Extracting and organising
- Classifying and routing
- Answering from documents
- Analysing the numbers

STAYS HUMAN, PAYS MORE

- Accountability for outcomes
- Knowing the business deeply
- Judgment calls
- Relationships and trust
- Briefing the machine
- Checking the machine

Which side of the line you stand on is a decision. You are currently making it.

The line the job market is redrawing.

What the thing actually is

Strip away every brand name and every piece of marketing, and here is what sits underneath all of it.

A modern AI model is a mathematical machine trained on a colossal amount of human writing. From all that text, it learned patterns: how words follow words, how ideas follow ideas, how an answer tends to follow a question. When you give it some text, it produces what most plausibly comes next.

That single fact explains both everything it does well and everything it does badly.

It has read more contracts than any lawyer alive, so it can summarise yours in seconds. It has read a million job ads, so it can write a decent one instantly. It has seen every way anyone has ever explained anything, so it can explain almost anything at any level, in any tone, in any language.

But notice what is missing from the description. Nowhere in that machine is there a concept of true. There is only likely. It produces the most plausible next words, and plausible is usually right, which is exactly what makes the failures dangerous: when it is wrong, it is wrong in fluent, confident, professional-sounding sentences. Ask it for a legal precedent that does not exist and it may cheerfully invent one, complete with a case number. The industry calls this hallucination. I want you to think of it more plainly: the machine always answers, whether or not it knows.

Hold both truths at once. It is a pattern machine, not a mind. And it is genuinely, enormously useful. A calculator does not understand arithmetic either, and it changed the world.

What it does today, in real businesses

Forget the demos. Here is the kind of work these systems are doing right now, today, in ordinary companies, reliably enough to be left alone doing it.

Writing. First drafts of almost anything: emails, proposals, ads, product descriptions, reports, policies, job ads, tender responses. Not the final word, the first draft. The blank page is dead, and the blank page was where half of office labour actually went.

Reading. Give it forty pages and get back the two paragraphs that matter. Contracts, tenders, medical literature, meeting transcripts, a year of customer complaints. It reads at a speed no human team can match, and it never skims because it is tired.

Extracting and organising. Pull every date, dollar figure and obligation out of a stack of documents into a clean table. Turn a rambling voice memo into structured notes. Turn six hundred survey responses into themes with counts.

Classifying and routing. Read each incoming email and decide: complaint, enquiry, invoice query, spam. Score each new sales lead against what your good customers look like. Flag the three support tickets out of two hundred that are about to become disasters.

Answering questions from your documents. Load your product manuals, policies and past projects, and staff stop interrupting each other to ask where things are. Done properly, the machine answers from your material, with references, instead of making things up.

Analysing numbers. Hand it a messy spreadsheet and ask what changed, what stands out, what is trending against you. It will not replace an accountant. It will do in ninety seconds what a junior analyst does in a morning.

Now put prices on this. The follow-up email that never got sent because everyone was busy: it now gets sent, every time, for less than a cent. The forty candidate resumes screened against the role: minutes, not an afternoon. The monthly report that consumed a day: a draft in the time it takes to make coffee. Any business owner reading that list can feel the money moving. Your job, for the rest of this book, is to be the person who makes it move on purpose.

What it cannot do, which is where you come in

Now the other list. This one matters more, because it is the honest answer to “will AI take my job,” and because every item on it is precisely where your career lives.

It cannot be accountable. When the numbers are wrong, when the customer is furious, when the regulator asks who approved this, a machine cannot stand in that spot. Someone with a name has to own outcomes. Accountability is not a task, so it cannot be automated. Every deployment you will ever run ends at a human who signs off.

It cannot know your business. The model has read the internet, not your company. It does not know your customers, your pricing logic, your history with that difficult supplier, or the reason the delivery process works the way it does. Out of the box it produces competent generic work. Making it produce work that sounds like your company and serves your situation requires someone who knows the business deeply and can brief the machine properly. Remember that sentence. Most of the practical craft in this book descends from it.

It cannot decide what should be done. It answers questions superbly and asks none of its own. It will write the discount email without ever wondering whether discounting is the right move. Judgment, the weighing of things that are not written down anywhere, stays human.

It cannot maintain relationships. People buy from people, forgive people, refer people, and stay loyal to people. Nobody's client relationship has ever survived being handed entirely to a machine, and the businesses that tried are case studies in churn.

It cannot do the physical world. The plumber, the surgeon, the warehouse, the site inspection. The paperwork around that work is another story, and that paperwork is often 30% of the working week, which is exactly the opportunity.

And it cannot check itself. The machine that always answers cannot be the same machine that decides whether the answer is safe to use. Quality control of AI output is a human function, then a system function, and building it is one of the most billable skills you will learn in this book.

Look at the two lists together and the shape of the future job market is just sitting there. The tasks are moving to the machine. The judgment, the accountability, the briefing, the checking and the relationships are concentrating in fewer, better-paid human seats. Which side of that line

you stand on is a decision, and you are currently making it, whether you realise it or not.

The wage data says the repricing has already started: workers with AI skills earn more than 50% above matched peers without them, and the premium widens every year it is measured.

The lies, catalogued

A short field guide, because you will meet these weekly for the rest of your career.

“AI will replace everyone.” No. It replaces tasks, not whole people, and it replaces them unevenly. The jobs that are pure repeatable words-and-numbers will shrink hard. Everything else gets rearranged around the machine, and someone has to do the rearranging.

“AI is conscious,” or about to be. The machine predicts text. It performs empathy the way an actor does, without the inner experience. This matters practically: it will tell your vulnerable customer whatever sounds right, which is why unsupervised AI in sensitive conversations is malpractice, and why governance, Chapter 7’s subject, is a paid profession now.

“It’s just hype, like crypto.” Crypto asked you to believe in a future use case. This technology did a billion hours of real work last month. The pilot failure rate sceptics love to quote, which the next chapter examines carefully and which is narrower than they think, is not evidence the technology fails. Walk into those companies, as I have, and you find the same three causes every time: wrong task chosen, no proper briefing, nobody accountable. The 5% that succeed bank millions. The difference is never the model. It is the operator. Hold onto that, because the entire next chapter is about it.

“You need to be technical.” The most useful lie of all, because it keeps your competition small. The work this book teaches is done in

plain English: choosing tasks, briefing machines, checking output, measuring results, managing the humans around the change. The scarce skill is not code. It is knowing how businesses actually run, which, if you have spent twenty years inside them, you already own.

“Our product uses AI, so it’s magic.” The vendor version of the lie. Most “AI products” are a thin wrapper around the same models you can use directly for cents. You will learn to ask vendors three questions that collapse the act inside ten minutes. Companies pay serious retainers to have someone in the room who can do that.

The literacy bar is a kerf

Here is the good news hiding in all of this. The bar for “AI literate” in business right now is embarrassingly low. Most managers have poked at a chatbot twice. Most executives are bluffing. The person who has spent thirty focused days using these tools on real work is, in most rooms, the most experienced person present.

Thirty days. That is the actual distance between where you may be standing now and the front of the pack. The complete day-by-day sprint is in the appendix of this book, and it costs nothing but the month.

You do not need a degree in this. You need reps, a checklist, and the honesty to notice what works. Then you need proof you can do it inside a real business, which is Part IV of this book, and someone to do it for, which is Parts III and VI.

The machine is not your competition. The other people who read this chapter are, and there are not many of them yet.

Do this now

1. **Split your own job.** List the ten tasks that eat most of your week. Mark each one: is it made of words, numbers and patterns, or judgment, relationships and hands? Be honest. The first group is what you will learn to hand to the machine. The second group is your raise.
2. **Catch one hallucination.** Ask an AI chatbot a question in your area of expertise where you already know the answer is obscure. Watch it answer anyway. Screenshot the confident wrongness. That screenshot is your permanent vaccination against trusting unchecked output, and the best show-and-tell you will ever have.
3. **Run one real task end to end.** Take an actual piece of this week's work, brief the AI properly, tell it who the audience is, what the situation is, what good looks like, and iterate until the output is genuinely usable. Note how much better the properly-briefed result was than the lazy one. You just learned the highest-value lesson in applied AI for free.

Chapter 3: The Ninety-Five Percent

In August 2025 a number escaped into the business press that should have ended a thousand careers and started a million others.

A research group at MIT published preliminary findings on enterprise generative AI, and one line travelled everywhere: 95% of pilots produced no measurable impact on profit and loss.

Because this book runs on checkable numbers, here is that figure with its clothes on, before we use it for anything.

What the work actually consisted of: a review of more than three hundred publicly disclosed AI initiatives, structured interviews with representatives of fifty-two organisations, and survey responses from a hundred and fifty-three senior leaders recruited across four industry conferences, over a research period running January to June 2025.

What the 95% actually measures: custom-built and vendor-built tools, and only those. The same report found general-purpose tools converting from pilot to implementation about 83% of the time, which is close to the opposite finding and travelled almost nowhere. The bar for success was marked and sustained profit or productivity impact within six months, and the report's own limitations section concedes that window may understate success.

And the status of the thing: self-published preliminary findings, never peer reviewed, never institutionally backed by MIT, and the originally hosted version is no longer served.

So do not carry the bare number into a client meeting. Somebody will eventually check it, and you will lose a room you could have kept.

Carry this instead, from a sturdier source. In S&P Global Market Intelligence's 2025 survey of more than a thousand companies across

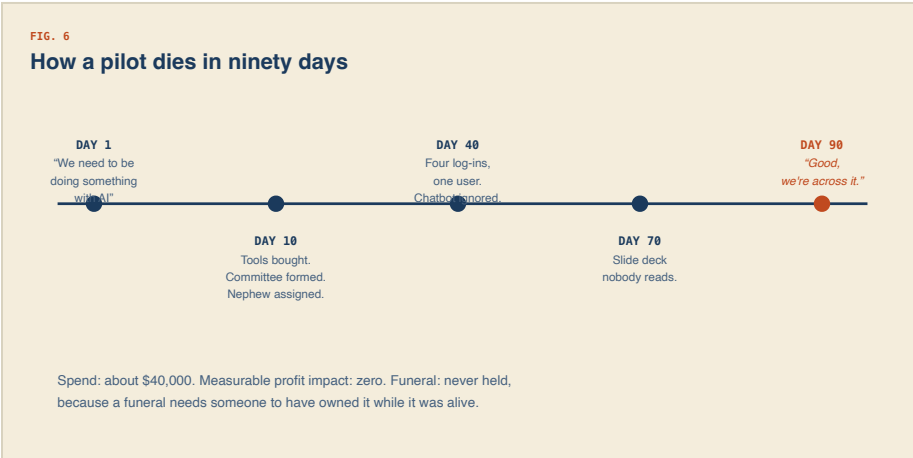
North America and Europe, the share of organisations abandoning most of their AI initiatives rose to 42%, up from 17% in the previous wave, and the average organisation scrapped 46% of its proofs of concept before they reached production. Meanwhile 77% of small and mid-sized businesses said they were “using AI,” most of them, by their own admission, winging it.

That is the shape, and the shape is what matters. Whatever the exact percentage, most corporate AI initiatives are not producing results anybody can point to.

One note on vocabulary, because it recurs for the rest of this book. When I write “the 95%” from here on, I am naming a pattern rather than quoting a statistic: the failed pilot, the orphaned subscription, the tool with four log-ins and one occasional user. Use the phrase in your own head. Do not use the number in front of a client.

The popular reading of all this is that AI does not work.

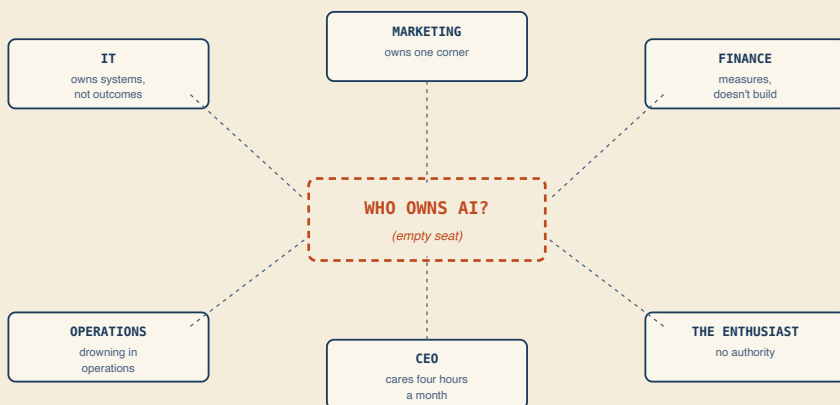
I want to teach you the correct reading, because the correct reading is worth a career: the technology works fine. Almost nobody owns making it work. The failure rate is not a verdict on the machine. It is a photograph of an empty seat.



How a pilot dies in ninety days.

FIG. 7

A function that touches every department is owned by none



A function that touches every department is owned by none.

How a pilot actually dies

Picture a mid-sized company. Distribution, maybe, or professional services. Sixty staff, decent profits, a managing director who reads the news and knows AI matters.

The MD comes back from a conference excited. In the Monday meeting: “We need to be doing something with AI.” Everyone nods, because everyone always nods.

Marketing signs up for an AI writing tool. IT, asked to “look into it,” raises sensible concerns about data and security, which is IT’s job, and proposes a committee. Someone’s nephew-equivalent, the young analyst who is “good with this stuff,” gets told to explore use cases on top of his actual job. A chatbot gets added to the website because the web agency suggested it.

Ninety days later, here is the state of the nation. The writing tool has four log-ins and one occasional user. The chatbot answers a tenth of questions correctly and the front desk quietly tells callers to ignore it. The analyst produced a slide deck of use cases that nobody has read, because

reviewing it is nobody's job. The committee has met twice and agreed to keep monitoring developments. Total spend: maybe forty thousand in subscriptions, agency fees and salary hours. Measurable profit impact: zero.

And here is the detail that matters. At the next executive meeting, when the MD asks how the AI stuff is going, the answer is "good, we're across it," because that is the answer that ends the agenda item. The pilot is dead, and nobody will ever hold a funeral, because a funeral would require someone to have owned it while it was alive.

Multiply that company by a hundred thousand and you have the pattern every one of those surveys was picking up.

The autopsy, and the three causes

I have stood inside a lot of these failures. The surface details vary. Underneath, it is the same three causes, in every industry, at every size, and not one of them is technical.

Cause one: the wrong task. The company automated something visible instead of something valuable. A flashy chatbot for a website that gets thirty visits a day, while three staff spend every afternoon retyping supplier invoices. Nobody did the boring arithmetic of where the hours and dollars actually leak, because arithmetic was nobody's job. Choosing the right task is a diagnosis skill, and diagnosis is what this book's craft chapters teach.

Cause two: no briefing. The machine got the task with none of the context that makes work usable: who the customer is, what the company sounds like, what the last person who did this task knew. Chapter 2 taught you the machine has read the internet but not your business. Feed it nothing of your business and it produces plausible, generic, slightly wrong work. Staff try it twice, conclude it is a toy, and go back to the old way, and they are not wrong to. Briefing the machine, properly,

systematically, in writing, is a craft. Almost nobody in a normal company has it.

Cause three: no owner. The fatal one. The tool works, the task is right, and still, six weeks later, the thing is dead, because a system with no owner dies the first time it hiccups. A supplier changes an email format, an output looks odd, a password expires, and there is no named human whose job is to notice, fix and improve. Software gets maintained. Processes get managed. AI systems, in the 95%, get launched and orphaned.

Wrong task, no briefing, no owner. Say it back to yourself, because when you can walk into any business and find those three within a day, you have become the person Chapter 1 said the market cannot find.

Why nobody owns it

The obvious question: why is the seat empty? These are functioning companies with organisational charts. How does something the CEO publicly cares about end up owned by no one?

Because every existing seat has a reason to not quite own it.

IT owns systems, not outcomes. Ask IT to own AI and you get what IT is paid to produce: security reviews, vendor assessments, caution. All legitimate, none of it revenue. The 95% is full of companies where AI went to IT and became a risk-management exercise.

Marketing owns one corner. They will use the writing tools, and stop at the border of their department. The invoice-retyping problem is not marketing's problem.

Finance measures, it does not build. Operations is drowning in operations. HR is worried about the policy implications, which is real, and is a fence, not an engine.

The CEO has no hours. The MD in our story genuinely cared. Caring in the Monday meeting is four hours a month of attention on something that needs four hours a day during a deployment.

And the young enthusiast has no authority. The analyst who is “good with this stuff” can make a tool sing, and cannot change a process, reassign an hour of anyone’s time, or make a department adopt anything. Enthusiasm without authority produces slide decks. You have seen the slide decks.

The result: a function that touches every department is owned by none of them. In companies, work that belongs to everyone belongs to no one. The AI transformation is, in most businesses, an orphan.

Boards have started to understand this, which is exactly why the title from Chapter 1 is stampeding into existence. The Chief AI Officer is not a technology job. It is the adoption of an orphan. One named human who owns the question “does AI make this company money or not,” with the authority and the budget to make the answer yes.

The companies that have made the adoption are already measurably different: organisations with a CAIO report roughly 10% higher return on their AI spend, and are meaningfully more likely to outperform their peers on innovation. The seat works. There are just barely any qualified people to put in it.

Reading a company in one meeting

Here is a skill you can start practising this week: diagnosing the 95% pattern from the outside, fast. Five questions. Ask them of your own employer, or a client, or a company you might want to work for. Each can be asked innocently in any meeting.

1. **“What AI tools are we paying for right now, and who uses them weekly?”** The gap between the subscription list and the weekly-use list is the graveyard, and nobody has ever measured it.

2. **“Who owns AI here? One name.”** Watch what happens. A pause, or three names, or a committee, means the seat is empty. An actual name means ask question three.
3. **“What changed in the last ninety days because of it?”** Not sentiment. A number: hours saved, response time, error rate, revenue. “It’s going well” with no number is the sound of the 95%.
4. **“Where does the most repetitive words-and-numbers work happen in this company?”** Whoever answers will name a department instantly, everyone always can, and the follow-up, “what’s AI doing about that?”, is usually met with silence. You have just located the value the pilots missed.
5. **“What happens when it breaks?”** For any AI thing they claim runs: who notices, who fixes it, how long was it broken last time. If the answer is a shrug, nothing they have will survive the year.

Ten minutes of questions, and you know more about that company’s AI reality than its own executive team, because you are the first person who asked. Write it down while it is fresh. In Part IV of this book, that write-up becomes a document with your name on it, and that document is how doors open.

The reframe that changes your career

One more turn of the lens, and it is the one that matters most.

Every failed pilot you find is not a company that tried AI and proved it does not work. It is a company that has already done three things for you: they have admitted, with real dollars, that they believe AI matters. They have felt the pain of failing at it. And they have an executive somewhere who would rather not explain the same failure twice.

You could not design a better customer, or a better employer.

The unqualified enthusiasm phase spent the budget and burned the goodwill. What is left, in hundreds of thousands of companies, is a

quieter, better question: “we know this matters and we know we cannot do it ourselves, who actually owns making it work?” That question has executive money attached, in salaries for those hired into the seat and retainers for those who carry it across several companies at once.

The rest of this book is one long answer to a single question: how do you become the person that question is looking for, wherever you are starting from, without permission, without a technical background, and before the window closes?

It starts, in the next chapter, with getting precise about the seat itself: what a Chief AI Officer actually does all day, what the different versions of the role look like, and what each of them pays.

Do this now

1. **Run the five questions** on the company you know best, probably your employer. Write one page: tools paid for vs used, the owner or lack of one, the last ninety days' measurable change, where the repetitive work lives, what happens when it breaks. Date it and keep it. This is the first artifact of your portfolio, and you will be surprised how much it already reads like a consultant's document.
2. **Find your local 95%.** Think of three businesses you know personally, through work, family or friends, that you suspect bought AI something in the last two years. Over coffee or a call, ask the second question: "who owns AI stuff there?" Note the answers. You are not selling anything yet. You are learning to see empty seats, and building the list you will use in Part VI.
3. **Write the one-sentence reframe** somewhere you will see it: "Every failed AI pilot is a funded, motivated, future employer or client." Read it whenever the 95% number is quoted at you as a reason this is all hype.

PART II

The Seat

The seat itself: what a Chief AI Officer actually does all day, what the market pays for it, why the sceptics are right about the wrong people, and the regulatory fear that makes this role easiest to enter from the least technical direction.

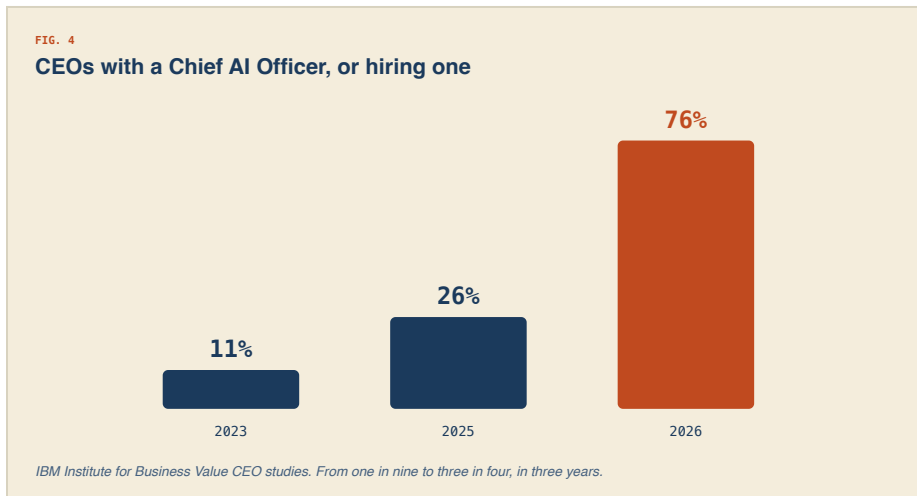
Chapter 4: The Seat

In 2025, ninety-four Fortune 500 companies appointed a Chief AI Officer. The year before, thirty had. The year before that, fewer than ten.

Zoom out from the giants and the curve is the same everywhere. IBM's surveys track the role at 11% of organisations in 2023, 26% in 2025, and 76% of CEOs in 2026 saying they have one or are hiring one. Forty-three percent of the Fortune 500 now has the seat or its equivalent, and in financial services it is 62%. No C-suite title has ever spread this fast. Not the CIO, not the CMO, not the CISO.

So the seat is real, it is multiplying, and the next chapter will show you it pays executive money. Which makes the following fact strange: almost nobody chasing the job can describe what it actually is. Ask ten people what a Chief AI Officer does all day and you will get ten versions of "something technical, in IT, with the engineers."

Wrong on all three counts. This chapter fixes it, using the employers' own words. Not my opinion of the role. The actual job ads, quoted and decoded.



CEOs with a Chief AI Officer, or hiring one.

The job, plainly

Chapter 3 ended with a definition, and everything else hangs off it. The Chief AI Officer is the one named human who owns the question “does AI make this company money or not,” with the authority and budget to make the answer yes.

Notice what that is not. It is not running servers. It is not the helpdesk, the laptops or the software licences. AI touches technology the way the CFO touches software: constantly, and beside the point. The CIO owns systems. The CAIO owns an outcome, and the outcome is measured in dollars, hours and risk, not uptime.

Day to day, the seat rotates through a handful of activities you have already met in this book. Choosing which tasks the machines take on, and, harder, which they do not. Killing the flashy pilot to fund the boring one. Sitting with department heads who are somewhere between curious and terrified, and moving them. Interrogating vendors until the act collapses. Writing the policy that lets staff use the tools without leaking customer data. And standing in front of the board with a number, because “it’s going well” without a number is the sound of the 95%.

Philippe Rambach has held the seat at Schneider Electric, a company of well over one hundred thousand people, since 2021. His summary of the work: 80 to 90% of it is change management, training and supporting the people who have to live with the new systems. He also reports spending a remarkable amount of his time downsizing expectations, talking his own executives out of the hype. The recruiting firm Kore1 tells its clients the whole role is change management dressed as a technical hire.

Hold that sentence. It is the single most useful correction to whatever you assumed this job was.

Seat Note: Lan Guan, Accenture. Career data and analytics consultant, not a research scientist. She spent years as Accenture’s global data and AI

lead before the CAIO title existed, and at sixteen built a robot to teach English to kids in rural China. As Chief AI Officer she led Accenture to \$3 billion in generative AI bookings in 2024, the fastest emerging-technology growth in the firm's history. Her position on the seat itself: "I believe every organization needs to have a Chief AI Officer or someone in that capacity to define the overall AI strategy within the organization."

A week in the seat

To make it concrete, picture a week in a mid-sized company's version of the role, assembled entirely from the duties the job ads themselves list.

Monday is the executive meeting, where you report progress as numbers: hours saved in accounts, response times in service, the two pilots running and the one you killed. Killing it was the week's most valuable decision, and you say so.

Tuesday is vendors. Three of them this week, each claiming their product "uses AI." Your job is the ten minutes of questions from Chapter 2 that establish what is under the bonnet, what the data does, and whether the same result costs a tenth as much done directly.

Wednesday belongs to a department. You sit with the operations manager whose team retypes supplier invoices every afternoon, map the task, and design the pilot with a baseline, because a pilot without a before-number is a story, not a result.

Thursday is governance and people. The AI policy needs updating because staff found a new tool, which is good news wearing a compliance problem. Then an hour of training for the sales team, because literacy is in the job description at every company that writes one honestly.

Friday you write. A one-page memo to the board: what changed this month, what it cost, what it returned, what is next. Chapter 18 teaches the memo. It runs the company's patience, so it is not admin. It is the job.

Nothing in that week required writing code. Every hour of it required knowing the business, the tools' real capabilities, and how to move people. That is the skill stack, and Part III builds it.

The two versions of the seat

Read enough postings and every “Chief AI Officer” and “Head of AI” ad resolves into one of two shapes. Telling them apart is the first professional skill of your new career, because one of them is open to you and the other mostly is not.

The platform seat. This version builds. It owns engineers and applied scientists, ships AI into the product the customers buy, and usually answers to the CTO. It demands a long technical career because it genuinely is a technical job: model choices, infrastructure, production systems. If you have spent fifteen years in machine learning, this is your seat, and you did not need this book to find it.

The strategy seat. This version transforms. It owns adoption, use-case selection, governance, vendor decisions and the money question, across every department, and it answers to the CEO or the board. Its raw material is the business, not the model. When the United States government mandated a Chief AI Officer in every federal agency in 2024, roughly a hundred seats at once, it was this seat: strategy, inventories, governance, literacy. Nearly every fractional engagement you will ever sell is this seat too.

The recruiters map the reporting lines the same way. CAIO to CEO or board. Head of AI to CTO or chief product officer. Hybrids exist, and you will meet one below. But when a mid-market company with no AI team creates its first AI leadership role, it is nearly always the strategy seat, because their problem was never that they could not build models. Their problem is Chapter 3: nobody owns the outcome.

At the giant end of the market you can watch the two seats pull apart in real time. UnitedHealth Group now employs a Chief AI Officer, a separate chief AI scientist recruited from a university health system, and a third executive titled Chief AI Transformation and Strategy Officer. One company, three seats, because the strategy work and the science are different jobs and everyone senior enough to hire for them knows it.

This book gets you the strategy seat.

Seat Note: Andrew Chin, AllianceBernstein. Twenty-seven years inside the same investment firm: head of quantitative research, chief risk officer for over a decade, then chief data scientist. In July 2024 the firm made him its first Chief AI Officer. No unicorn search, no external star. Just the insider who had quietly accumulated the AI portfolio for years. His view of where the edge lives: “Everybody has access to ChatGPT, so where’s our edge?” What separates firms, he argues, is judgment. Which data you focus on, which questions you ask, which viewpoints you build into the technology.

Four real job ads, decoded

In Chapter 1 I asked you to save three postings from your own industry. Here are four from mine, quoted from the live ads, with the reading an insider gives them.

SimpliSafe, Boston. Head of AI, Engineering & Product.
\$300,000-400,000 base. Reports to the CTO.

The ad opens like a strategy seat: “Partner with the executive team to develop and execute the company-wide AI strategy,” and “own the AI product roadmap.” Then comes the tell: “15+ years of experience in AI/ML, computer vision, or a related field, with a track record of shipping AI-powered products,” and “strong knowledge of computer vision techniques including object detection, segmentation, tracking, and recognition.”

This is a platform seat at a camera company. The strategy language is real, but it sits on top of a build mandate, and the reporting line to the CTO confirms it. Unless you can discuss segmentation models from experience, read this ad to learn the market, not to apply.

**AssetWatch, remote US. Head of AI. \$244,000-282,000.
Reports to the CEO.**

Watch the language change. “Partner with executive leadership to define AssetWatch’s AI-native vision, operating model.” “Identify where AI can create competitive advantage, drive efficiency, and unlock new customer value.” Then the qualification that should stop you mid-page: “Hands-on fluency with modern AI and data science, enough to scope work, evaluate quality.”

Enough to scope and evaluate. Not enough to build. That is the stated technical bar for a job paying over a quarter of a million dollars and reporting to a CEO, in the employer’s own words. And one more line worth framing: the hire must “clarify incoming requests by outcome, owner, data dependency, business impact, and build-vs-buy path.” That is not engineering. That is the Chapter 3 diagnosis, installed as a weekly discipline. This is the hybrid seat: a real team to lead, but the spine of the job is business judgment.

**Tebra, remote US. Head of AI Engineering & Enablement.
\$224,000-325,000.**

A healthcare software company, so regulation hangs over every line: the hire will “own how agents are deployed and monitored once live, ensuring full HIPAA compliance.” The role exists to “partner with each function to find high-value use cases and help them build and ship.” And then the decisive demand: “a proven track record of driving adoption and behavior change within non-technical teams.”

Read that twice. A quarter-million-dollar AI role whose make-or-break qualification is getting non-technical humans to change how they work.

This seat is more technical than most in this book, and even here, adoption outranks algorithms.

State of Arkansas. Chief AI Officer. \$118,000-192,000. Office of State Technology.

The purest strategy seat in the corpus. The role exists to “guide statewide AI strategy, lead enterprise governance, support secure adoption across departments, and coordinate AI training and literacy for state employees.” The person spec asks for “proven AI governance expertise, and the ability to provide clear strategic direction to policymakers, executives, and program leaders.”

There is no model-building anywhere in this job. It is strategy, governance, literacy and coordination, which is to say meetings, documents and judgment. Also notice the pay against the SimpliSafe ad: the actual C-title earns half what the Head of AI does. Sit with that discomfort. It becomes the most useful finding in the next chapter.

The ten things the market keeps asking for

Put the whole corpus together, from individual postings to a dataset of 8,901 US AI-strategy job ads, and the same ten responsibilities surface again and again. This is the job description underneath every job description.

1. Develop and execute an enterprise AI strategy tied to business goals. It appears in essentially every ad.
2. Identify and prioritise the high-value use cases. The diagnosis skill from Chapter 3.
3. Establish governance: frameworks, policies, guardrails. So central it gets Chapter 7 to itself.
4. Build, lead and mentor the AI-related team, whatever its size.
5. Own build-versus-buy decisions and stand between the company and its vendors.

6. Drive adoption and change management across non-technical departments.
7. Own the AI budget and connect every dollar of spend to a measurable return.
8. Partner with the rest of the C-suite as a peer, not a service desk.
9. Deploy and monitor production AI safely and compliantly.
10. Raise the AI literacy of the entire workforce.

Now count the technical items. Being generous, two or three. The other seven are diagnosis, persuasion, money and judgment: business skills wearing new vocabulary. If you have ever run a department, a budget or a change program, you have already done most of this list under other names.

What is conspicuously missing

Now the list the ads do not contain, which is where most readers' fears live.

A PhD. Across the entire corpus, exactly one posting demanded an advanced degree, a research-heavy gaming company in Malta. The 8,901-posting analysis says it flat: PhDs and hands-on coding ability "are not emphasized as necessary qualifications." AssetWatch, the CEO-reporting role above, requires a bachelor's degree, full stop.

Coding. The market has converged on the AssetWatch phrasing: fluency enough to scope work and evaluate quality. You must be able to judge an output and call a vendor's bluff. Nobody asks the executive to write the software, for the same reason nobody asks a CFO to program the accounting system.

Prior C-suite experience. Recruiters list this one as explicitly not required. The experienced supply does not exist, which is the entire argument of Chapter 1.

A big-tech pedigree. Also explicitly not required. The corpus is full of hires from consulting, risk, operations and domain careers.

Certifications. Not one posting in the corpus required any AI certification. Remember that when the ads for \$40,000 certificate programs find you, and they will find you.

Seat Note: Saif Khairat, University of North Carolina. In June 2026, UNC-Chapel Hill appointed its first Chief AI Officer and Vice Provost for AI. It did not choose a computer scientist. Khairat is a nursing-school professor of digital health, appointed to “help develop the strategy for AI across the University and bolster and connect existing AI work.” A major research university, with an entire computer science faculty in the building, put a domain expert in the seat. The market is telling you, in public, what it actually values.

Reporting lines, and why you should already care

One more decoding skill before we talk money. When you read a posting, find who the role reports to. That single line predicts more about the job than the title does.

Among Fortune 500 CAIOs, 54% report to the CEO, 31% to the CTO, and 15% to a COO or chief data officer. IBM finds more than half of all CAIOs now report straight to the CEO or the board. The split tracks the two seats exactly: platform seats report into technology, strategy seats report to the top.

While you are reading the fine print, one more market signal worth knowing. Indeed’s posting data shows “chief AI” job ads grew 478% in 2024, and then in 2025 the single chief-title postings cooled while distributed senior AI leadership roles jumped another 265%, the biggest rise since 2020. Some commentators read that as the CAIO fad fading. Read it properly and it is the opposite: the function is spreading into more seats at more levels, exactly what happened when “webmaster”

dissolved into a hundred web-era job titles on its way to the CIO's office. You are not applying for a fad. You are boarding a function while its org chart is still wet.

And the seats are being filled slowly, which is your opening. A well-run CAIO search takes nineteen to twenty-two weeks from kickoff to a start date. In the corpus behind this chapter, two director-level AI postings I went back to fetch had already been stamped "position filled." Both facts are true at once: companies agonise over these hires for five months, and the good candidates vanish in weeks. Scarce supply, slow process, desperate demand. You have seen this market before, in Chapter 1.

Here is why it matters to you now, and not just on the day you negotiate. A strategy seat buried under the CIO turns into what Chapter 3 told you IT always produces: reviews, caution, committees. The function that is supposed to reach into every department cannot reach past its own. A seat that reports to the CEO can move people, budgets and processes, which is the entire point of owning a question that touches the whole company.

In Chapter 6 you will meet a man who took one of the most prestigious CAIO titles in the world without securing what sat underneath it. He was out in eight months, and the company dissolved the seat behind him. The title, it turns out, is the least important word in the ad.

First, though, the money.

Do this now

1. **Classify your three postings.** Take the ads you saved in Chapter 1 and label each one platform or strategy. Two clues do most of the work: the reporting line, and whether the qualifications ask you to build things or to change things. Ten minutes, and you are reading the market the way an insider does.
2. **Score yourself against the ten.** Copy the ten responsibilities into a document. Next to each, write one line describing a time you did it under another name: a budget you owned, a rollout you drove, a vendor you saw through. Most readers with management experience honestly tick six or seven. The gaps are your curriculum for Part III, not your disqualification.
3. **Highlight the fluency bar.** In each of your saved ads, find the technical requirement and put it next to the AssetWatch line: “enough to scope work, evaluate quality.” Notice how many ads, read carefully, ask for judgment about technology rather than production of it.

Chapter 5: What It Pays

Ask the internet what a Chief AI Officer earns and you get three answers that cannot all be true. Glassdoor says the US average is \$354,111. Comparably says \$259,523. ZipRecruiter says about \$151,000. Same title, same country, same year, and a spread of two hundred thousand dollars.

All three numbers are honest summaries of different puddles. Glassdoor leans on self-reports from larger companies. ZipRecruiter hoovers up every posting that uses the words, including the five-person startup that gave its second employee a C-title instead of a raise. The title is being inflated from below and guarded from above at the same time, so averaging across it tells you almost nothing.

Here is what does tell you something: pay for this work tracks scope, company size and sector, almost never the letters in the title. This chapter gives you the real numbers, with receipts, so you can price yourself instead of guessing. Every figure is dated 2025 or 2026, and because this market reprices fast, treat them as this edition’s snapshot, not scripture.

The full-time ladder in the US

The cleanest picture comes from executive-search benchmarks that sort by company revenue rather than title. Here is the 2026 ladder.

Company revenue	Base salary	Total direct comp
Under \$25M	\$225,000-275,000	equity-heavy
\$25M-100M	\$250,000-350,000	\$375,000-675,000
\$100M-500M	\$325,000-450,000	\$575,000-1.1M
\$500M-1B	\$400,000-525,000	\$850,000-1.9M

Company revenue	Base salary	Total direct comp
\$1B-5B (public)	\$475,000-675,000	\$1.7M-4.3M
Over \$5B	\$625,000-850,000	\$3.8M-9.5M

Bonuses typically run 30 to 60% of base. Public-company equity grants run three to five times base. Geography moves the number by 30 to 40 points between the coasts and everywhere else.

Read the table as a career map, not just a rate card. The same job, done well, is worth four times as much a few company sizes up. That is the argument for treating your first seat as proof, not destination.

At the very top, the numbers stop looking like salaries. Equilar surveyed AI executives at the 50 largest companies in 2025 and found median total direct compensation of \$1.6 million, with the 75th percentile at \$2.5 million and the 90th at \$3.5 million. The median mix: \$439,375 base, with the rest in stock, bonus and incentives. Among the Fortune 500 CAIO appointments tracked through 2025, total cash ran \$420,000 to \$680,000.

And in the thick middle of the market, where most of the seats and most of this book’s readers are, the recruiter benchmarks agree with each other: growth-stage companies pay \$250,000-400,000 base, mid-market pays \$300,000-500,000 base with total packages of \$500,000-900,000.

The UK, Europe and Australia

The UK. Executive-search benchmarks put CAIO base pay at £180,000-320,000, with London financial institutions at the top of the band. Glassdoor’s UK average, by contrast, is £58,274. That gap is not a mystery, it is the title-inflation lesson again: the posting-scraper average includes every tiny firm handing out big words. Use it as a warning about data, not a number you would ever accept.

Europe. The continent runs roughly 25 to 35% below the US for the same seat. Germany €170,000-300,000 base. France €160,000-280,000. The Nordics €150,000-270,000.

Australia. Our market has real numbers now. An enterprise CAIO at a large Sydney company earns a median package of A\$426,000, in a band of A\$362,000-489,000, with advertised enterprise packages running A\$350,000 to A\$500,000 and beyond. The typical permanent structure is A\$400,000 base plus 12% super, plus around A\$100,000 in short-term incentives, plus long-term incentives of roughly A\$300,000 face value vesting over three years. One rung down, a Head of AI or Director of AI at a large Sydney company carries a median package of A\$291,000, band A\$248,000-335,000, with the broader advertised market at A\$230,000-290,000. Glassdoor's Australian Head of AI average sits at A\$327,736, consistent with the search-firm data for once.

The eight-thousand-dollar secret

Now the finding that should change how you plan the next three years.

Axial Search analysed 8,901 US AI-strategy job postings from January 2026 onward, about 330 new ones a week. The median salary across them is \$208,000. Director, VP and C-suite roles cluster from the high \$200,000s into the \$300,000s. And the C-suite median is exactly \$8,000 above the VP median.

Eight thousand dollars. That is the entire market price of the word “Chief.”

The same dataset: 49% of these roles are Director-level. Only 2% are junior. Companies are not hiring assistants to help with AI, and they are not mostly minting C-titles either. They are hiring owners, at whatever title their org chart tolerates.

You saw the same lesson in the ads last chapter. The State of Arkansas pays its Chief AI Officer \$118,000-192,000. SimpliSafe pays its Head of

AI \$300,000-400,000. The C-title earns half, because sector and scope set the price and the title does not.

Healthcare says it a third way. At the top 50 US health systems, HCA, Kaiser Permanente, Providence, Mount Sinai among them, the seat is now a standalone C-role. Below the top 50, the identical work sits at VP level inside a medical officer's portfolio, at \$180,000-230,000 base plus a 10 to 15% bonus. Same artifacts, same meetings, same accountabilities, different letterhead, hundred-thousand-dollar difference. The letterhead follows the size of the institution, not the quality of the officer.

Government runs the trade in the other direction. The federal mandate created more than a hundred CAIO seats at public-service pay, and Arkansas advertises its statewide seat below what a startup pays a Head of AI. What government seats pay in money they pay back in resume: there is no faster way to acquire the words "established an enterprise AI governance framework" than a seat where that is the entire job. More than one path in Part III runs through exactly that trade.

So here is the strategy this book will keep returning to: chase scope, not letters. Take the seat that owns the question, whatever it is called, in the richest sector and largest company that will have you. The Director-level tilt is good news twice over. It means the door is open to people without executive history, and it means the letters you are missing are worth about \$8,000, not the \$200,000 you feared.

The fractional rates

Now the version of the seat you can hold for several companies at once, which Part III of this book builds you towards.

Across four independent market guides, the consensus fractional CAIO retainer is \$5,000 to \$30,000 per month per client, against \$300,000 to \$550,000 and up for the full-time equivalent. One buyer's guide tiers it by involvement: advisory at about two days a month for \$4,000-8,000,

embedded at a day a week for \$8,000-15,000, intensive at two to three days a week for \$15,000-30,000.

Understand why the buyer says yes, because it sets your ceiling. The same guide prices the true first-year cost of a full-time hire, salary, equity, recruiter, ramp-up, at \$400,000 to \$1.2 million and up, or \$1.5 to 2 million once the new executive hires a team. Against that, \$8,000 a month for the strategic layer is not expensive. It is the cheapest line on the AI budget. The pitch writes itself: most of the strategic value at a fraction of the fully-loaded cost.

Run the day-rate arithmetic too. The embedded tier, one day a week for \$8,000-15,000 a month, works out to roughly \$1,800-3,500 per day. In Singapore, published part-time AI officer rates run SGD \$15,000-35,000 a month for two days a week. These are senior-professional day rates, for work this book teaches, in a market short of people who can do it.

Those are analyst numbers. Here are named operators with their actual public pricing.

Erin Moore, AutomateNexus. A US Army veteran with an executive MBA, not a developer. Entry point is a \$750 Strategy Intensive, a ninety-minute call plus a written assessment, credited to the first month. The retainer is \$7,500 a month with a three-month minimum, capped at eight active clients, targeting companies with \$1 million to \$30 million in revenue. Deliverables include a 90-day AI roadmap inside the first thirty days and one board-ready deliverable a quarter. Her positioning line: “Most fractional AI executives are either strategists who can’t build or engineers who can’t lead. I do both.”

John Cheney. Built a fractional CAIO practice to \$2 million in revenue and over \$1 million in profit in its first year, serving mid-market construction, law, dental and staffing firms. His pricing rule is roughly 1% of the client’s annual revenue, paid monthly, which lands at \$10,000-15,000 a month for a \$10-20 million company. His characteristic client, in the client’s own words: “I don’t want to learn this, just do it for me.”

Paul Okhrem. Top of the market. Fractional CAIO at \$30,000 a month with a six-month minimum, consulting at \$1,000 an hour with an eighty-hour minimum, aimed at companies from \$50 million up.

Study the minimums for a moment, because they are pricing lessons in themselves. Moore requires three months, Okhrem six, and both are telling you the same thing: the first month of any engagement is spent learning the business, and an operator who lets clients buy one month at a time is selling their diagnosis phase at a loss. The engagement floors, eighty hours, ninety days, exist because the sellers who survived learned to price the ramp, not just the hours.

And notice who is writing these cheques. Moore targets companies with \$1 million to \$30 million in revenue. Cheney's clients are construction firms, law practices, dental groups and staffing agencies. Okhrem starts at \$50 million. This is not Silicon Valley buying from itself. It is the ordinary mid-market, the exact companies Chapter 3 described: funded, motivated, and burned once already.

Around the named operators, the wider pricing ladder from published consulting guides: hourly rates from \$100-150 starting out, through \$300-500 established, to \$500-1,000 and up at the top. Retainers from \$2,000-5,000 a month for five to ten hours, up to \$15,000-50,000 for heavy involvement. Standalone AI assessments at \$7,000-35,000, which matters later, because the assessment is how fractional engagements begin. One operator, Sabrina Ramonov, simply charged \$1,600 a day minimum to enterprises for two years while bootstrapping her company, with her whole pipeline coming from networking and social media. In the UK, the practical SME range is £2,000-6,000 a month for one to two days a week, with day rates of £1,200-2,500.

Notice, too, how the published operators structure the front door, because you will copy it in Part VI. Moore's \$750 intensive is a paid diagnostic that credits against the retainer: the client risks a few hundred dollars, receives a written assessment, and converts. Cheney built his

early pipeline on free education, workshops for the exact mid-market owners he wanted as clients. Nobody on this list cold-calls offering “AI consulting.” They sell a small, priced first step that proves the value of the large one.

Two honest notes before you get excited. First, the bottom of this ladder is genuinely low: documented first clients start at \$150, and the operators above climbed from small, unglamorous first engagements. Part III is that climb, rung by rung. Second, do the arithmetic on the middle of the ladder anyway. Three clients at Erin Moore’s published \$7,500 is \$22,500 a month, \$270,000 a year, mid-market CAIO money without a single employer holding all of it. Her practice, capped at eight, tops out at \$60,000 a month. The maths is the point.

The premium underneath the title

You do not have to reach the seat for the repricing to reach you.

PwC’s Global AI Jobs Barometer reads advertised wages across roughly a billion job ads in 24 countries, comparing the same occupation with and without AI skills. The premium was 25% two years ago, 56% in the 2025 barometer, and 62% in 2026. Same job, AI-capable version, 62% more.

The premium is not evenly spread. The 2026 spread by industry runs from 118% in consumer markets down to 16% in government. And the jobs themselves are moving: AI-exposed roles are growing three and a half times faster than others.

Two practical uses for that number while you are still employed. First, it is a negotiation document: when you have run the Part IV playbook inside your current role, the premium data is the third-party evidence that the market, not your ego, has repriced your job. Second, it is a floor under the whole plan. Even if you never take a seat, never sign a client, and simply become the demonstrably AI-capable version of what you

already are, the measured market outcome of that alone is a raise in the tens of percent. Everything beyond it is upside.

The governance ladder, which Chapter 7 opens for you, has its own pay data. Across 1,600 professionals in 60 countries, average total compensation in privacy and AI-governance roles is \$200,000, and the median for people holding combined privacy-plus-AI-governance responsibility is \$169,700, against \$123,000 for privacy alone. Adding AI governance to an existing compliance career is worth about \$46,700 a year at the median. In the tech sector the medians climb further: \$205,000 for legal and compliance roles, \$221,000 for technical AI governance. A single named data point to anchor it all: Guardian Life advertises its Head of AI Governance at \$152,000-250,000.

What moves the number

Five levers, in rough order of force.

Company size. The table at the top of this chapter is the map. Same work, four times the pay, several sizes up.

Sector. Tech, financial services and healthcare pay the strongest premiums. Industrial and consumer businesses run 20 to 35% below tech market for the same seat. Regulated sectors pay more because the seat carries sign-off risk, which is Chapter 7's whole argument.

Scope and reporting line. The \$8,000 title premium means the negotiation that matters is not about the word Chief. It is about budget, headcount, mandate and who you report to. Trade the letters for scope every time.

Governance load. Wherever a regulator can fine the company, the person who owns AI risk gets paid more, and the pure governance seats now advertise into the \$250,000s.

Geography, softened by remote. A fifth of the US postings are in California and 15% in New York, but a third of all roles are remote and half are hybrid, which drags regional pay towards national rates. The 30-to-40-point geographic spread is real and shrinking.

One last discipline before you use any of this. These numbers are dated on purpose. This market reprices faster than any labour market I have watched in thirty years: the wage premium moved from 25% to 62% in two years, and the adoption figures tripled in one. Whatever edition of this book you hold, check the two or three numbers you plan to negotiate with against a current source before you say them out loud. A person quoting last year's market is announcing they are not in it. The receipts for every figure in this chapter are in the sources file, so the checking takes minutes.

The honest summary, then: the seat pays executive money at every level it exists, the premium now reaches every rung underneath it, and the published fractional rates are high enough that three small clients replace a salary. If that sounds too good, you are in the right frame of mind for the next chapter, because a serious group of people think this entire job is a fraud, and they have a body of evidence. We are going to look straight at it.

Do this now

1. **Build your two numbers.** From this chapter, write down the employed number for your situation: your country, your sector, the revenue band of a realistic employer. Then write the fractional number: three clients at \$7,500. Put both somewhere you will see them. Goals you have priced behave differently from goals you have not.
2. **Reprice your current role.** Take your present salary and multiply by 1.62. Then search your job title plus “AI” on any job board and compare the advertised ranges against what you earn. The premium is not theoretical, it is sitting in the ads.
3. **Save two pricing pages.** Erin Moore and Paul Okhrem publish their rates in public. Bookmark both. When you build your own rate card in Part VI, you will start from real market anchors instead of your own nerves.
4. **Sketch a \$7,500 assessment.** For one business you know, list what a paid AI assessment would actually contain: the tools audit, the five questions from Chapter 3, the top three opportunities, the risk list. You are not selling it yet. You are noticing that you could already describe most of it, which is the point of everything that follows.

Chapter 6: The Sceptics Are Right About the Wrong People

In March 2025, General Motors created its first C-suite Chief AI Officer role and filled it with one of the most credentialed AI executives on the market.

Barak Turovsky had led AI for Google Translate. He had run AI at PayPal, at Cisco, at Microsoft. If you were building the perfect CAIO resume from parts, it would look like his. GM built the seat specifically for him, and the business press covered it as exactly what it appeared to be: a hundred-year-old manufacturer buying the future.

Eight months later he announced his exit on LinkedIn, saying he would be “taking a little sabbatical to work on some exciting new ideas.” His departure followed the exit, weeks earlier, of the software chief he worked alongside. And then GM did the thing that turns a resignation into a verdict: it chose not to replace him. The role was dissolved, and the AI team was folded into manufacturing engineering.

The most qualified man in the room could not hold the seat, and the seat did not survive him. For scale: a well-run CAIO search takes nineteen to twenty-two weeks. GM’s experiment lasted barely twice as long as the process that staffs one.

The sceptics have a story about why, and this chapter takes it seriously, because it is the best-evidenced objection to everything this book has told you so far. Then it shows you what the wreckage actually teaches, which is not what the sceptics think.

The washout roll call

Turovsky is not an isolated case. He is the cleanest example of a documented pattern.

At the US Department of Justice, the first Chief AI Officer, a Princeton professor named Jonathan Mayer, lasted about a year before an administration change ended the appointment. The head of the US government's AI safety institute, Chris Fall, resigned three months after taking the job. At Apple, the long-serving AI chief John Giannandrea stepped down in December 2025 with coverage tying the move to Apple Intelligence trailing its competitors. And IBM's first Global Chief AI Officer, Seth Dobrin, spent roughly a year in the seat before leaving to found his own advisory firm, describing IBM on his way out as "a layover on my journey."

Four exits, four different surface stories: an org-chart dissolution, an administration change, a product falling behind, a springboard to something better. Underneath, one common fact. In every case, the seat's survival depended on things its occupant did not control.

The aggregate numbers say the same thing as the anecdotes. Bernard Marr, writing in *Forbes*, reports that most CAIOs leave their positions within eighteen months, and describes one Fortune 500 company that replaced its CAIO after exactly eighteen months. The broadest tracking of Fortune 500 CAIOs puts average tenure at 2.1 years. For calibration, that is about the same as the Chief Data Officer, a seat that has been famously short-tenured for a decade.

One honesty note on the data itself. There is no rigorous tenure dataset for this role yet, the seat is too young. The 18-month figure is directional, the 2.1-year average is the best tracked number, and both point the same way.

So let us say it plainly, because pretending otherwise would make this book worthless: the fastest-growing job in the C-suite is also one of the fastest-ending.

The critique, taken seriously

The sceptics' case goes further than tenure, and it deserves its full weight.

CNBC ran a piece asking whether the most powerful AI job on the market was anything more than a figurehead. When a panel at the American Medical Association was asked whether health organisations even need a Chief AI Officer, the panellists unanimously answered no. And Marr's autopsy of the failures identifies structural rot, not bad luck. It is worth walking through his five failure modes, because you will be negotiating against every one of them someday.

The unicorn hunt. Companies write job specs demanding an impossible hybrid, deep technical mastery plus decades of executive experience in a field too young to have produced it, then hire someone who matches half the spec and resent the missing half.

The silo. The CAIO arrives to fanfare and discovers the CIO owns the systems, the CDO owns the data, and neither intends to share. The new seat has a title and a lanyard and no territory. It becomes a strategy function that produces decks, and you know from Chapter 3 what decks produce.

The expectation mismatch. Marr describes a manufacturing firm that expected fifty million dollars in AI savings within twelve months. When reality arrived, the CAIO wore it.

The governance gap. The CAIO is made responsible for AI ethics and risk without enforcement authority over the departments creating the risk. Responsibility severed from authority, in Marr's phrase, makes CAIOs "convenient scapegoats."

The talent tension. The new seat is expected to build a team while competing for engineers against companies that pay double.

And the weather has turned against easy money. By mid-2026, business press coverage had CIOs and CTOs, the same executives who spent years lauding AI, imposing limits on its use as the bills came in. Industry analysts covering the GM exit warned that more departures may follow

as companies struggle to define the role. The era when an AI title came with an uncontested budget is over, which sharpens every failure mode above.

Notice what every one of these has in common. None of them is about the technology, and none of them is about the officer's competence. They are all descriptions of a seat built wrong: no mandate, no budget, no authority, wired to expectations nobody wrote down. The sceptics look at this and conclude the job is a vanity title, corporate theatre for the AI age.

They are right more often than the boosters want to admit. GM built exactly that seat. It just built it around a world-class occupant, which is what makes the case so instructive.

Right about the wrong people

Here is the turn, and it is the most important paragraph in this chapter.

The washouts were not underqualified. Turovsky's resume is close to the best on earth for this role. Mayer is a Princeton professor. Giannandrea helped build modern Google. The failures the sceptics point at are overwhelmingly failures of credentialed people in structurally broken seats. Marr's own core conclusion says it: structural organisational flaws, not individual shortcomings, cause CAIO failures.

Now look at who is still standing, because the survivors share a shape too.

Andrew Chin, twenty-seven years inside AllianceBernstein before taking the title. Philipp Herzig at SAP, an internal engineering executive handed the AI portfolio with a direct line to the CEO, who delivered so visibly he was made global CTO within a year. Philippe Rambach, years into the Schneider Electric seat, who defines success as adoption and spends his days on change management. Sameer Sethi at Hackensack Meridian Health, who spent three years building the data foundation before letting

anyone say AI. Lan Guan, whose seat at Accenture is attached to three billion dollars of booked work.

The survivors are not better credentialed than the washouts. Several are less credentialed. What they had instead was a mandate that was real, a method that was repeatable, and results that were measured. The sceptics are right that the title is often a vanity item. They are wrong about which people that indicts. The title does not fail because the wrong humans hold it. It fails because it is handed out without the three things that make any seat real.

And when the seat is built properly, the evidence says it earns its keep. You met the numbers in Chapter 3: organisations with a CAIO report roughly 10% higher return on AI spend and are markedly more likely to outperform peers on innovation. Boards have seen both datasets, the washouts and the returns, and they keep creating the seat anyway, ninety-four times in the Fortune 500 last year alone. They are not confused. They are searching, expensively and often clumsily, for people who come with the three things attached.

So learn the three things. They are your protection, whether the seat you eventually take is employed, internal or fractional.

The three things that make the seat stick

A written mandate. Before you accept any version of this role, the scope, budget, authority and reporting line go on paper. Four questions, asked before you sign, answered in writing. What exactly do I own? What can I spend without asking? Whose processes can I change, and what happens when a department head refuses? Who do I answer to, and how often does the board hear the results directly from me?

A real answer sounds like Herzig's seat at SAP: an end-to-end growth area, a named budget, a direct line to the CEO, and it worked well enough to make him global CTO within a year. A hollow answer sounds

like enthusiasm without nouns. Turovsky's seat sat inside a company that, when tested, decided AI belonged to manufacturing engineering after all, and no resume on earth negotiates with an org chart that has already made up its mind. If the honest answer to "why does this role exist" is "to signal we take AI seriously," the seat is theatre, and eighteen months from now it will be your name in the post-mortem. Asking for the mandate in writing is not aggressive. It is the first display of competence, and the companies worth joining read it as exactly that.

A method. The washouts arrived with expertise. The survivors arrived with a loop: assess the business, pick the valuable tasks, pilot with a baseline, measure, kill or scale, hand off, govern. Part V of this book is that loop in full. The market has already learned to interview for it. One executive-search firm's advice to boards screening candidates is blunt: make them tell you what broke. A widely used board interview rubric asks candidates to describe a use case they refused to pursue despite executive sponsorship, and flags as disqualifying anyone who cannot recall killing a project. U.S. Bank's CAIO attributes much of the famous 95% failure rate to a missing method, pilots launched with no baseline, so success could never be demonstrated even where it happened. Method is also what Rambach means when he says he spends his time downsizing expectations: a method includes saying no out loud, early, to the people who hired you. That fifty-million-dollar expectation at Marr's manufacturing firm should have died in the CAIO's first week, in writing.

Herzig gives the method its sharpest test. Asked what success means for his AI portfolio at SAP, he does not talk about model quality: "The ultimate success metric for us is clearly adoption... You can build the most amazing thing in the world. Nobody actually adopts it. Probably built the wrong thing." A method that does not end in adoption is a hobby with a budget.

A measured ninety-day win. The seats that stick produce a real, countable result fast. Cost down, hours recovered, revenue influenced, or risk retired, with a before and an after. Not a roadmap, not a committee,

not a literacy program, all of which have their place behind the win. Boards now ask candidates to present a hundred-day plan in the interview itself, and the plan they want ends in a number. The win does not need to be large. It needs to be undeniable, because in month four, when the silo owners push back and the expectation mismatch surfaces, the only armour you have is a result nobody can argue with. Chapter 17 builds your first one step by step.

There is a tension inside this, and the honest practitioners name it. eBay's Chief AI Officer, one of the longest-serving in the corporate world, puts it simply: "It's tricky to balance the short-term wins with the long-term transformation." The ninety-day win is not the transformation. It is the political oxygen the transformation breathes. Sethi at Hackensack spent three years on data foundations, and he could only afford those years because visible results kept arriving while the foundations went in.

Mandate, method, measured win. Squint and you will notice these are the same three causes from Chapter 3 with the polarity reversed. Pilots die of wrong task, no briefing, no owner. Officers die of no mandate, no method, no measured result. The 95% and the washouts are the same photograph at two altitudes: proof that this only works when somebody owns it properly, and that owning it properly is a learnable discipline rather than a personality.

Choosing your seat like a survivor

Turn the three things around and they become your due-diligence checklist for any seat you are ever offered, employed or fractional.

Prefer the company that has already failed. Chapter 3's reframe applies doubly here: an executive who has personally worn a dead pilot will give the next owner a real mandate, because the alternative is explaining the same failure twice. The most dangerous employer is the one hiring its first AI leader for the press release.

Prefer scope over letters. Chapter 5 priced the difference at \$8,000. The washout data prices the letters lower still, because the grandest title in this chapter belonged to the seat that dissolved. A Director role with budget and a CEO's ear beats a Chief title with neither, every time it is offered.

And interview them harder than they interview you. The five questions from Chapter 3 work on employers: what tools are they paying for, who owns AI today, what changed in ninety days, where does the repetitive work live, what happens when it breaks. Their answers tell you whether you are being offered a mandate or a scapegoat's chair, months before the org chart would have told you.

What the market actually checks

One more thread runs through everything above, and it becomes a major theme of this book, so I want to plant it here.

Not one job ad in the corpus behind Chapter 4 required a certification. GM did not fail to check Turovsky's credentials, there was nothing wrong with them. The board rubrics do not test for degrees. They ask what you killed, what broke, what you measured, and what you told the CEO that the CEO did not want to hear.

Look at how the serious interviews are now built. Candidates present an AI strategy to the actual stakeholders and defend it for an hour. They bring a hundred-day plan. Some are asked to deliver a ten-minute briefing to a fictional board covering roadmap, investment required, risk mitigation and expected return. Every element of that process is a simulation of doing the job, and none of it can be passed by anything except having done the job, somewhere, at some scale, with numbers you can defend.

In other words, the market has quietly stopped pricing titles and credentials, and started pricing qualification: demonstrated, evidenced

capability to make this technology produce results inside a real business. The eight-thousand-dollar title premium from Chapter 5 is the same discovery expressed in salary data.

That is very good news for you, and slightly humbling. Good, because qualification can be manufactured from wherever you stand, without permission, and Part IV of this book is the manufacturing process. Humbling, because it means there is no shortcut to buy. The people who washed out held the best titles this field has issued. The people who stuck held proof.

Before we start building yours, there is one more version of the seat to show you. It is the easiest door in the whole building for a non-technical operator, it exists because boards are frightened, and the fear has legislation attached.

Do this now

1. **Run the mandate test.** Whatever AI responsibility you currently hold, or are angling for, write the mandate it would need to be real: scope, budget, authority, reporting line, in four sentences. If you cannot get a version of it agreed in writing, you have learned what the role actually is before it cost you eighteen months.
2. **Write your “what broke” story.** One page on a project you have seen fail, AI or otherwise: what broke, what you did, what you would do differently. Interviewers and clients trust scar tissue over frameworks. This page becomes raw material for Part IV.
3. **Draft a ninety-day win on paper.** For the company you know best, name one result you believe AI could produce in ninety days, with the number you would measure before and after. You are not committing to build it yet. You are practising thinking in wins instead of initiatives, which is the entire mental difference between the survivors and the washouts.

Chapter 7: The Safety Seat

Picture a board meeting at any mid-sized company this year. Somewhere between the finance report and general business, a director leans forward and asks: “This AI the teams are using. Are we actually allowed to be doing that? Who checked?”

Silence. Somebody says they think IT looked at it. Somebody else says there is probably a policy. The chair moves on, and every person at the table quietly notes that nobody in the company can answer the question.

That silence is a job. It is currently the most accessible door into everything this book describes, especially if you have never written a line of code in your life, and this chapter walks you through it: why boards are frightened, what the rules actually say, what the work concretely is, and why it belongs to judgment rather than technology.

Why the boards are scared

For the first two years of the AI boom, governance was a virtue. Companies adopted “responsible AI principles” the way they adopt mission statements. Then the rules got dates and dollar figures, and virtue turned into exposure.

Europe wrote the hammer. The EU AI Act entered into force in August 2024, and its penalties top out at €35 million or 7% of global annual turnover, whichever is higher. That ceiling is higher than the GDPR’s. It reaches outside Europe: it applies to any company placing AI on the EU market or whose AI outputs are used inside the EU, which catches exporters everywhere, including Australian ones.

The Act arrives in stages, and knowing the stages is already billable knowledge. Since February 2025, the banned uses are banned, things like social scoring and emotion inference on workers, and there is a live duty that staff using AI must be adequately trained, the AI literacy obligation.

Since August 2025, the makers of general-purpose models carry transparency duties. From December 2026, chatbots must disclose they are AI and deepfakes must be labelled. The heavy regime for high-risk systems, which includes AI used in recruitment, credit scoring, education and essential services, now bites on 2 December 2027, deferred a year by an amending package the European Parliament passed 423 votes to 57. AI embedded in regulated products like medical devices follows in August 2028.

Note what the deferral means. Companies read “deferred” as “postponed, relax.” It is actually a compliance runway: the obligations for high-risk systems fill a book, risk management systems, data governance, technical documentation, logging, human oversight, conformity assessment, registration, and the companies that start in 2027 will not be ready. Someone gets paid to start them earlier.

The standards world built the checklist. ISO/IEC 42001, published December 2023, is the first certifiable international standard for an AI management system, the AI sibling of ISO 27001 in security. It specifies 39 controls across nine categories: policy, roles, impact assessment, lifecycle, data management, third parties and so on. Certification, including implementation work, runs about \$15,000-40,000 for a small scope, \$40,000-90,000 mid-size, \$90,000-200,000 and up for enterprises, over four to nine months. It matters because it is becoming the procurement checkbox: enterprises are starting to ask their AI-touching suppliers for it, the way they ask for security certifications. When a standard becomes a condition of selling, budget appears.

The US regulates by sector and by state. There is no single federal AI act for companies, but the pressure arrives from every other direction. The federal government ordered its own agencies to appoint Chief AI Officers, publish AI use-case inventories and run governance boards. Colorado passed the first comprehensive state AI law, aimed at algorithmic discrimination in consequential decisions like jobs, credit and housing, requiring impact assessments and risk programs, now

taking effect from 30 June 2026 after a postponement. California's employment regulations took effect in October 2025: AI tools used in hiring or promotion can violate discrimination law, and employers must keep automated-decision records for four years. Insurance regulators in more than twenty US jurisdictions have adopted a model bulletin requiring a written AI program with board-level accountability. New York's financial regulator says no AI in underwriting or pricing without a documented risk assessment. And banking has run formal model risk management since 2011, refreshed in April 2026 with revised joint guidance, which means banks already employ whole teams whose job is checking models, and AI just multiplied their scope.

The UK went principles-first. No AI Act. Five cross-sector principles, safety, transparency, fairness, accountability, contestability, enforced through the existing regulators: the financial regulator for finance, the information commissioner for data, and so on. Targeted legislation for the largest models is expected, but for an ordinary UK business the exposure today is its sector regulator reading old powers onto new tools.

Australia chose no hammer, and that changes the sale, not the need. The proposed mandatory guardrails for high-risk AI were not proceeded with. The National AI Plan of December 2025 chose existing technology-neutral laws, sector regulators, voluntary guidance and a new advisory AI Safety Institute. There is a Voluntary AI Safety Standard with ten guardrails and newer national guidance built on six essential practices. But do not read "voluntary" as "safe to ignore." The Privacy Act, Consumer Law and anti-discrimination law all apply to AI-made decisions today, directors' duties are increasingly read to include AI oversight, and any Australian business selling into Europe inherits the EU Act. The Australian governance conversation is about risk and capability rather than a statutory deadline, which honestly makes it a better consulting conversation: you are selling protection and competence, not panic.

And the professions have their own police. In law, the American Bar Association's Formal Opinion 512 sets out lawyers' duties when using generative AI, competence, confidentiality, verification of outputs, supervision, honest billing, and court sanctions for AI-hallucinated citations have been routine since a 2023 case where lawyers filed invented precedents, with fee awards in later cases exceeding \$1.5 million. In health, the FDA had authorised more than a thousand AI-enabled medical devices by March 2025, six were cleared in all of 2015 against 295 in 2025 alone, while, tellingly, no generative-AI-powered device had yet been authorised as of early 2026. Every law firm now needs a use policy, tool vetting and a verification workflow. Every health provider needs to know which of its tools are regulated devices and which are unmanaged risk. The most regulated industries are moving fastest and most nervously at the same time, which is exactly the condition that creates paid seats.

You do not need to memorise any of this. You need to be the person in the room who knows which three of these apply to the business in front of you, and what dates are attached. That person is currently missing from almost every mid-sized company on earth.

What AI governance actually is: eight documents

Strip the jargon off "AI governance" and it is not mysterious, and it is certainly not mathematics. It is eight artifacts, documents and routines, that together let a company answer the director's question from the top of this chapter. Every one of them maps to a demand in the rules above. Producing and maintaining them is the job.

One: the AI use policy. A few pages that say who may use which tools, on which data, for which purposes, and how new uses get approved. This is the document that stops a staff member pasting the customer database into a free chatbot. The EU's literacy duty, the professional conduct rules and the insurance bulletins all effectively require it.

Two: the AI register. A live inventory of every AI system in the business: what it is, what it does, who owns it, what data it touches, how risky it is. Regulators from Washington to Brussels demand inventories, and almost no company has one. Most cannot even produce the list, which is why Chapter 3's first question, what are we paying for and who uses it, lands so hard.

Three: risk and impact assessments. For each system that touches consequential decisions, a written answer to “what could this do to a person, and what did we do about it,” including bias testing where hiring or lending is involved. Colorado requires them, Europe requires them for high-risk uses, New York requires them for insurers.

Four: the audit trail. Records of model versions, decisions made, human overrides. When the regulator, court or angry customer asks “why was this decision made,” the company either has logs or has a problem. California's four-year retention rule is the plainest version.

Five: the sign-off workflow. A named accountable owner for each system, and an executive signature accepting residual risk before anything goes live. You met this in Chapter 2: accountability cannot be automated. Governance turns that sentence into a form with a name on it.

Six: the vendor file. Due-diligence records for every AI product the company buys: contracts, what data goes where, evaluation results. Most companies' AI exposure arrives through vendors, and most have never asked a vendor a hard question. You learned in Chapter 2 that the wrapper is thin. This file is where that scepticism becomes protection.

Seven: training records. Evidence that staff have been trained on the policy and the tools. Since February 2025 this is a legal duty for anyone in the EU's reach, and it is the cheapest artifact to produce, a register and a training session.

Eight: the incident plan. What happens when the AI is wrong in a way that matters: who is told, what gets switched off, who calls the customer or the regulator. Chapter 3 asked “what happens when it breaks” as a diagnostic. This is the document that answers it.

Read the list again and notice what it is made of. Interviews, spreadsheets, policies, checklists, meetings, sign-offs. If you have ever run compliance, quality, safety, HR policy, auditing, or simply a well-documented department, you have built artifacts exactly like these. The subject matter is new. The craft is not.

Here is what the work looks like being done well. One US health system leader, facing the CAIO question, ran a twelve-week entry instead of a hiring splash: interviewed around fifty people across the organisation, surveyed another fifty, and used what came back to build the governance structures and an AI enablement centre before deploying anything. Twelve weeks, a hundred conversations, a set of documents, a standing structure. No code. That is the profession in miniature, and it is teachable.

The five questions a director will pay to have answered

Here is the same material, compressed into the form that opens doors. Any board, any owner, any managing director, five questions.

- 1. What AI is running in this business right now, and who owns each piece?** Including the unofficial tools staff are quietly using, which is usually the majority of the answer. The MIT study behind the 95% found individual, unofficial use of chat tools was widespread and effective even where official pilots failed. That shadow economy is productive, unmanaged and completely invisible to the board.
- 2. Which of it touches decisions that a regulator, a court or a customer would care about?** Hiring, lending, pricing,

medical anything, customer-facing anything.

3. **Which rules apply to us today, and which have dates attached?** The map from the first half of this chapter, cut down to the three entries relevant to this company.
4. **If we were asked to prove who approved all this, could we?** Sign-offs, logs, vendor files, training records. Usually the answer is no in writing.
5. **What happens when it goes wrong?** Who notices, who acts, who calls whom.

No mid-sized company I have walked into could answer more than one of these. The eight artifacts are simply the five answers made permanent. And that is the engagement: an assessment that asks the questions, a report that scores the answers, a program that builds the missing artifacts. It is the same shape as every audit-led profession that came before it, accountancy, safety, security, and it produces the same economics, because the assessment naturally becomes a retainer: someone has to keep the register live, chair the reviews and train the new starters. Recall from Chapter 5 that combined privacy-and-AI-governance responsibility carries a median of \$169,700, that a single Head of AI Governance seat advertises at up to \$250,000, and that standalone assessments price at \$7,000-35,000.

Why this is judgment work, and why the door is open

Three facts, and then the point.

First, the demand is measured. Industry surveys find 77% of organisations already working on AI governance, rising towards ninety percent among AI users, and the top reported constraint is people: nearly a quarter name finding qualified AI-governance professionals as a leading challenge. LinkedIn's skills data has AI-governance demand growing at roughly 150% year on year.

Second, the market hires non-engineers into it, in public. The State of Arkansas wants its CAIO for governance, literacy and strategy, no code in the spec. Guardian Life's governance seat asks for someone to run an operating model of "intake, review, escalation, monitoring, and change management processes," which is process language, not engineering language. UNC gave its AI seat to a nursing professor. The board rubric you met in Chapter 6 makes any zero on governance an automatic disqualification, for every candidate, however technical. Governance is where the non-technical operator is not merely tolerated but structurally necessary.

Third, look at what the work is actually made of. Reading rules and mapping them to a business. Interviewing staff about what they really do. Writing policy people can follow. Chairing a review meeting. Deciding whether a risk is acceptable, and being willing to say no to an enthusiastic executive. Every one of those is judgment, the exact category Chapter 2 told you the machine cannot do. There is a pleasing symmetry here: the technology's own limits created this job. The machine cannot be accountable, cannot check itself, and cannot decide what should be done. Governance is the profession of doing those three things to the machine, on the record.

One warning before the exercises, because I want you to take the safety seat without getting trapped in it. Chapter 3 told you what happens when AI is owned by functions that only say no: it becomes a fence, not an engine. A governance-only operator who blocks everything becomes the compliance department with a new vocabulary, and eventually gets routed around. The seat sticks when protection is paired with production, the same mandate, method and measured win as Chapter 6, with the artifacts as your opening proof rather than your whole identity.

Schneider Electric shows what the pairing looks like. When staff started using public chatbots, Rambach's team did not ban them, the reflex of every pure compliance function on earth. It built an internal equivalent on a private deployment, so employees kept the capability and the

company's data stayed home. Same risk eliminated, zero capability lost, adoption up. That is governance as an engine. Govern so the company can go faster safely, not so it cannot go at all.

For many readers of this book, this chapter is the path: your first paid AI work will be an assessment against the five questions, and your first artifact set will be built from the eight. Part III will show you where it slots into your particular route, and Chapter 26 covers installing governance properly inside a deployment. For now, just register what you have seen: a legally mandated, measurably understaffed, judgment-based profession, reachable without a technical background, attached to the fears of every board on earth.

The window from Chapter 1 has a service entrance, and almost nobody is using it.

Do this now

1. **Build your jurisdiction map.** One page, three columns: the rules that plausibly apply to your employer or target clients, what each demands in one sentence, and the date attached. Use this chapter as the index and verify locally. You now possess a document most executives in your market have never seen.
2. **Draft artifact two for a real business.** Take your employer or a business you know and write the AI register: every tool in use, official and unofficial, its owner, its data, your rough risk rating. One spreadsheet, one hour. This is the single highest-leverage governance document, and doing it once teaches you more than any course.
3. **Ask a director the five questions.** Over coffee, with anyone you know who owns or directs a business, walk through the five. Watch how quickly confidence turns to concern around question two. You are not selling anything yet. You are learning what the fear sounds like firsthand, and letting one real decision-maker discover that you are the person who knows the questions.

PART III

Your Path

There is no single road in. There are four, and they suit different lives. Score yourself honestly, pick the one that fits your job, your mortgage and your appetite, and ignore the other three without guilt.

Chapter 8: No Code Required

Somewhere in the last few chapters, a voice in your head has been repeating the same sentence.

“This all sounds great, but I can’t code.”

I want to deal with that sentence now, before we choose your path, because it is doing more damage to more careers than any recruiter, any rejection letter, any economic downturn. It walks capable people out of the room before the interview starts. And it is false. Not encouraging-poster false. Checkably, documentably false.

This chapter is the check.

What the job ads actually ask for

Do not take my word on what the market wants. Read what the market wrote down.

A search firm called Axial analysed 8,901 AI-strategy job postings in the United States, roughly 330 new ones a week. Half were director level or above. And buried in their findings is a sentence that should be printed on the cover of this book: PhDs and hands-on coding ability are “not emphasized as necessary qualifications.”

Nearly nine thousand postings for AI leadership roles, and the two things everyone assumes are the entry ticket barely appear.

Go closer and it gets more specific. AssetWatch, an industrial monitoring company, advertised a Head of AI role at \$244,000 to \$282,000, reporting to the CEO. Read the technical requirement carefully. They asked for “hands-on fluency with modern AI and data science, enough to scope work, evaluate quality.” Enough to scope work. Enough to evaluate quality. Not enough to build it. That is the standard, written down by a

company willing to pay a quarter of a million dollars a year: you must be able to judge the work, not do the work.

Tebra, a healthcare software company paying up to \$325,000, listed something else as a hard requirement: “a proven track record of driving adoption and behavior change within non-technical teams.” Getting humans to change how they work. That is the qualification.

And in June 2026, the University of North Carolina appointed its first Chief AI Officer. They chose Saif Khairat, a professor of digital health. From the nursing school. Not the computer science department. The nursing school, because the job is about people adopting technology, and he understood the people.

One recruiting firm that places these roles summed up the whole corpus in a phrase I have not been able to improve on: the CAIO job is change management dressed as a technical hire.

Philippe Rambach, Schneider Electric’s Chief AI Officer, runs AI for a company with more than a hundred thousand employees. His estimate of his own job: 80 to 90% of AI transformation is change management, training the people, deploying the software into human routines. The man holding one of the biggest AI seats in Europe says the job is mostly not AI.

So where did your disqualification come from? It came from confusing two different jobs. Building AI models is a technical job, done by a few thousand researchers at a handful of labs, and you are right, you are not qualified for it, and neither am I. Deploying AI into businesses is a different job, and it is the one every chapter of this book is about, and the people currently failing at it are failing for reasons that have nothing to do with code.

The actual skill stack

If the job is not coding, what is it? Five skills. I want to name them precisely, because vague reassurance helps nobody, and because you are about to discover you already hold two or three of them.

Skill one: literacy. Knowing what the machine does well, what it does badly, and what it cannot do at all. Chapter 2 gave you the map. Turning the map into reflexes takes about thirty focused days, and later in this chapter I will show you the shape of those days. Literacy is the only skill on this list you can acquire quickly, which is convenient, because it is the only one you are likely to be missing.

Skill two: briefing. The machine has read the internet but not your business. The gap between useless AI output and excellent AI output is almost always the quality of the instructions and context it was given. Briefing is a writing skill and a thinking skill: who is the audience, what does good look like, what does the machine need to know that it cannot know. If you have ever written a decent brief for a designer, a contractor, a new employee or an agency, you have done this. The medium changed. The skill did not.

Skill three: judgment. Which task is worth automating. Which output is safe to send. Which vendor is lying. When to stop a project that is technically working but commercially pointless. Judgment is the skill the machine categorically lacks, the one Chapter 2 said cannot be automated, and it comes from one place only: years spent watching real businesses succeed and fail. Andrew Chin, who became AllianceBernstein's first Chief AI Officer after 27 years inside the firm, put the whole thing in one line: "Everybody has access to ChatGPT, so where's our edge?" The edge is judgment. What data matters, what questions to ask, what to build in. The tools are commodities. The judgment is not.

Skill four: translation. Speaking two languages that almost never live in the same head, the language of the technology and the language of the profit and loss statement. More on this in a moment, because this skill is where the money is, and it deserves its own section.

Skill five: change management. Getting a sales team, a warehouse, a front desk to actually use the thing. Handling the veteran who feels threatened and the manager who quietly sabotages. Making adoption someone's job, with numbers attached. This is the 80 to 90% Rambach was talking about, and it is pure people work. If you have ever rolled out a new process, a new system, a new roster, and lived through the grumbling to the other side, you have done change management under fire.

Read the list again. One skill takes thirty days. One is a writing skill you likely have in some form. Three of them, judgment, translation and change management, are only acquired through years inside real businesses.

Now ask yourself who is disqualified.

The Translator Premium

Here is the concept this book has been circling since page one, and it is time to give it a name: the Translator Premium.

Picture a meeting room. On one side sits an engineer. Genuinely brilliant, can build almost anything you describe. On the other side sits the managing director. Knows the business cold, twenty years of customers and margins and near-death experiences.

The engineer cannot tell you which of fifty possible builds is worth building, because that requires knowing where the business bleeds money, and no one taught engineering school that. The MD cannot brief the engineer, cannot judge whether the demo is impressive or a trick, cannot tell the difference between a \$500-a-month problem and a \$50,000-a-month problem dressed in the same interface. Each is expert in a language the other does not speak.

Every dollar of AI value in that company has to pass through the gap between those two chairs. And in most companies, the gap is empty.

The person who sits in the gap, who can hear “we keep losing quotes because follow-up is manual” and translate it into a build spec, then hear “we’d use retrieval over your document store” and translate it back into “it will answer from our own manuals, so it won’t make things up,” that person is not a nice-to-have. That person is the tollbooth on the only road the value travels.

Tollbooths set prices.

That is the Translator Premium. It is why the wage data shows workers with AI skills earning a 56% premium over matched colleagues without them, a number that has more than doubled in two years and is still climbing. The market is not paying that premium for typing to chatbots. It is paying for the translation, because businesses have discovered, thirty to forty billion dollars of failed pilots later, that engineers without business judgment build the wrong things, and executives without literacy buy the wrong things, and only the person in the middle stops the bleeding.

Watch the premium operate in an ordinary scene. A vendor is presenting to that same meeting room: their platform, their dashboard, their AI. The MD is impressed and cannot say why. The engineer, if one is present, is unimpressed and cannot explain it in words the MD values. The translator asks three plain questions: which model runs underneath this, what happens to our data when it goes in, and what does this do that we could not do directly for a fiftieth of the price? Ten minutes later the room has either found a genuinely useful tool or saved itself a \$60,000 contract, and everyone present has quietly updated their sense of who in the building understands this subject.

That ten minutes is billable, and businesses know it. It is a large part of what the retainers in Chapter 12 actually buy.

Notice what qualifies you for the middle seat. Not the deepest technical knowledge in the room. Not the most senior title. The middle seat goes to whoever holds working knowledge of both sides, and here is the

asymmetry your whole career now rests on: a business person can acquire working AI literacy in a month. An engineer cannot acquire twenty years of business scar tissue in any amount of months.

The translator seat is easier to reach from your side of the room. Act accordingly.

Thirty days to literate

So the one missing skill is literacy. Here is the shape of acquiring it. The complete day-by-day version is Appendix A; this is the map, so you can see how short the road actually is.

Week one: use it on everything. Every written task you touch, emails, summaries, plans, replies, goes through an AI tool first. Not to publish the output. To learn, on real work, where it is brilliant and where it stumbles. By day seven you will have opinions, and they will be earned opinions, which puts you ahead of most executives in the country.

Week two: find the edges. Deliberately push it until it fails. Feed it your industry's jargon. Ask it about your suppliers, your regulations, your niche. Catch it inventing facts and note the pattern of when. Give it a task with numbers and check every one. The goal of week two is calibrated distrust, knowing exactly how far to trust the machine, which is the single rarest form of AI knowledge in business.

Week three: build briefs. Stop typing casual requests and start writing proper briefings: role, audience, context, format, examples of good. Save the ones that work. By the end of the week you have reusable briefs for your five most common tasks, and you have crossed the line that separates users from operators. A saved brief that reliably produces usable work is a small machine, and you built it.

Week four: measure and document. Take three real tasks, run them the old way and the new way, and record the numbers: minutes, cost, quality. Write one page describing what you did and what it saved.

That page is your first artifact, and artifacts, as Part IV will show you, are the currency this whole career trades in.

That is the sprint. No course fees, no permission, no code. A month from now the literacy gap between you and the job is closed, and everything left on the skill list is something your career has already been teaching you.

The ops manager and the prompt kid

Now let me make this concrete with the comparison that settles it.

Picture two candidates for the same seat, the AI leadership role at a sixty-person distribution company.

Candidate one is 25. Lives in the tools. Knows every model by name, follows the launches, can make a chatbot do backflips. Genuinely skilled, and I mean that; the fluency is real.

Candidate two is 50. Ran operations at a similar company for nineteen years. Has hired, fired, rostered, budgeted, apologised to angry customers, survived two downturns and a warehouse flood. Started using AI tools seriously about two months ago.

The room they will both walk into: staff who fear for their jobs, a warehouse manager who has outlasted four IT initiatives and intends to outlast this one, a spreadsheet-run inventory system with fifteen years of workarounds baked in, and an MD who has already burned forty thousand dollars on a chatbot nobody uses.

Candidate one can make the tools sing and cannot read the room. Does not know that the workaround in the spreadsheet exists because of the refrigerated stock rules. Does not know that the warehouse manager's cooperation is the whole ballgame. Does not know which of the twenty possible automations touches money and which touches only

convenience. Every one of those things takes years to learn, and none of them are on the internet, so the machine cannot supply them either.

Candidate two knows all of it on sight, because she has lived inside this exact organism for two decades. Her gap was literacy, and she closed most of it in sixty days.

Chapter 3 taught you why pilots die: wrong task, no briefing, no owner. Look at those three causes and ask which candidate fixes them. Choosing the right task is business judgment. Briefing the machine is context only insiders hold. Being the owner is management, accountability, follow-through. The 95% failure rate is a catalogue of exactly the failures the operations veteran has spent a career preventing in other forms.

This is not a consolation prize for older readers. It is the honest reading of the evidence. The market agrees: the job ads ask for adoption, change leadership and judgment, and quietly drop the requirement everyone assumed was the barrier. The University of North Carolina looked for its AI chief and found a nursing professor. AllianceBernstein looked and found its 27-year risk veteran. The pattern is not hidden.

And notice what the comparison predicts about the next five years, because it runs against every instinct you have about technology careers. As the tools get better, the technical half of the job shrinks. The models need less coaxing every year; the interfaces get simpler; more of the building becomes configuration. What does not shrink, what grows as a share of the whole, is everything on the other side of the line: choosing, briefing, checking, governing, persuading. The trend line of this technology bends toward the business person, not away.

The prompt kid is not your competition. The prompt kid is, in a well-run deployment, your extremely useful junior hire.

The disqualification, revisited

One more pass at the voice in your head, because I know one chapter does not silence it.

“I can’t code” belongs to a family of sentences. “I’m not a numbers person.” “I’m too old for this.” “They’d never take me seriously.” Every one of them feels like humility and functions as a locked door, and every one of them survives on a single trick: comparing your beginner level in the new thing against your expert level in the old thing, and concluding you are behind.

You are not behind. The field is four years old. Nobody has twenty years of experience. The executives bluffing their way through AI agenda items are not ahead of you; they are behind you the moment you finish the thirty days. The bar, as I said in Chapter 2, is a kerb.

What you actually bring, the years of watching businesses work, the ability to write a clear brief, the standing to walk into a manager’s office and be heard, took decades to build and cannot be downloaded. The market is currently paying a 56% premium for people who can bolt one month of literacy onto that foundation.

You are one month away from the foundation being visible. The next chapter works out which door you should carry it through.

Do this now

1. **Kill the sentence with evidence.** Open three job ads for “Head of AI” or “Chief AI Officer” in your industry, the ones you saved in Chapter 1 or three fresh ones. Highlight every requirement you already meet from your business career, in one colour, and every genuinely technical requirement, in another. Count both. Keep the marked-up ads; they are the antidote you will need on bad days.
2. **Audit your stack.** Score yourself 1 to 5, honestly, on the five skills: literacy, briefing, judgment, translation, change management. For each score of 3 or higher, write down the single strongest piece of evidence from your career, the rollout you led, the briefs you wrote, the call you got right. You have just drafted the raw material for every pitch, memo and interview in the rest of this book.
3. **Start the sprint.** Open Appendix A and put day one in your calendar for tomorrow. Not Monday. Tomorrow. The thirty days only work if they start.

Chapter 9: The Assessment

Most career books hand every reader the same plan, which is why most career books fail most readers.

The plan was written for one imaginary person, usually a version of the author, and if your savings, your obligations, your employer or your appetite for risk do not match that person's, the plan quietly breaks, and you conclude the problem is you. The problem was never you. The problem is that "become a Chief AI Officer" is not one path. It is four, and they suit four different situations.

Climb Inside. Win the seat at an employer, yours or a better one. Salary, security, one company deep.

Moonlight. Keep your job, build a client practice on nights and weekends, and let the numbers tell you when to jump. The slowest path and the safest, and for most readers the right one.

Fractional. Hold the AI seat part-time for several smaller companies at once, at \$5,000 to \$30,000 a month each. The best economics in this book, for the people positioned to start there.

Agency. You win the clients and own the outcomes; other people build. A business, not a job.

The next four chapters cover them in order. But reading all four and nodding is not a decision, so before you turn the page, you are going to sit the assessment. Twenty minutes, six questions, honest answers. It routes you to the chapter you should read first, and, more usefully, it shows you exactly which weakness to fix if the path you want is not yet the path you scored.

Get a pen. Circle one answer per question. Nobody is watching, so answer with what is true, not what is flattering.

FIG. 8

Four ways through, one of them fits your situation



Paths compound: inside today, moonlighting in six months, fractional in two years, with your old employer as client number one.

Four ways through. One of them fits your situation.

The six questions

Question 1: your current role. How good a launchpad is the job you hold right now?

- Score 3: I'm employed at an organisation of roughly thirty people or more, nobody clearly owns AI there, and I can get a meeting with decision-makers.
- Score 2: I'm employed and could get AI work noticed, but the company is small, or someone half-owns AI already, or decision-makers are a layer away.
- Score 1: I'm employed, but the company is tiny, or hostile to change, or I'm a contractor with no standing.
- Score 0: I'm between jobs, or I'm leaving where I am regardless.

Question 2: your background. How many years have you spent running things: teams, processes, budgets, projects, clients?

- Score 3: ten or more years with real management or ownership responsibility.

- Score 2: three to ten years.
- Score 1: under three years, but I've owned projects or client relationships.
- Score 0: I haven't run anything yet.

Question 3: your industry depth. How deep are you in one industry?

- Score 3: ten or more years in one industry; people inside it already call me for advice.
- Score 2: five to ten years in one industry.
- Score 1: solid experience, but spread across several industries.
- Score 0: early days everywhere.

Question 4: your network. How many business owners or decision-makers would take your call this week? Count actual names, not theoretical reach.

- Score 3: ten or more.
- Score 2: three to nine.
- Score 1: one or two.
- Score 0: none, honestly.

Question 5: your runway. If income stopped, how long could your household run at current spending?

- Score 3: twelve months or more.
- Score 2: six to twelve months.
- Score 1: three to six months.
- Score 0: under three months.

Question 6: your risk appetite. Not the adventurous self-image. The truth, at 3am.

- Score 3: variable income doesn't scare me; I've been self-employed before, or I'd genuinely back myself.
- Score 2: I could handle a lean year if the arithmetic made sense.

- Score 1: I need predictability right now; people depend on my payslip.
- Score 0: an unpredictable month would keep me up at night.

Before you tally, one calibration check, because this instrument has a known fault: people score their hopes, not their facts. The two questions most commonly inflated are network, counting people who once said “we should catch up” as decision-makers who would take a call, and risk appetite, scored from the adventurous self-image rather than the actual jam. If you live with someone whose finances are tied to yours, read them your six answers and let them veto the generous ones. It is a slightly uncomfortable ten minutes, and it is cheaper than discovering your real risk appetite in month three of a path that assumed a different one.

Scoring the grid

Now build two numbers.

Your Anchor score: Question 1 plus Question 2. Range 0 to 6.

This measures how strong your position is inside employment: a launchpad employer plus the management track record to be taken seriously there.

Your Freedom score: Question 4 plus Question 5 plus Question

6. Range 0 to 9. This measures your capacity to earn independently: people who would buy from you, money that buys you time, and a nervous system that can handle the ride.

Question 3, industry depth, sits outside both totals. It is the multiplier for the fractional and agency paths, and you will see it appear in the routing rules as its own condition.

Here is the grid.

Freedom score	Anchor 0 to 3	Anchor 4 to 6
0 to 3	Climb Inside, at a better employer (Ch10)	Climb Inside (Ch10)
4 to 6	Moonlight Ladder (Ch11)	Climb Inside and Moonlight in parallel (Ch10 + Ch11)
7 to 9	Fractional or Agency if Rule One holds, otherwise Moonlight, fast (Ch11/Ch12/Ch13)	Fractional or Agency (Ch12/Ch13), if Rule One holds

Three routing rules sharpen the bottom row.

Rule one. Fractional requires Freedom 7 or higher, plus at least 2 on network and at least 2 on industry depth, and it does not care about your Anchor; the model runs on trust that already exists, not on an employer. Score below the network or depth line and the Moonlight Ladder is your on-ramp; it builds exactly the missing pieces.

Rule two. Agency requires everything fractional requires, plus a 3 on risk appetite, plus a yes to the tie-breaker question below. An agency is a business with payroll-like obligations and a sales quota that never sleeps. Do not back into it.

Rule three. If you scored 0 on Question 1 because you are between jobs, read Chapter 10 anyway, but read it as a shopping guide: it will teach you what an employer worth joining looks like, and the interview leverage of arriving as “the AI person” is larger than you think.

And the tie-breaker, for anyone who lands in the bottom-right cell. Which of these sounds like a good Tuesday?

A: embedded inside a client’s business, running their AI agenda, making the thing actually work.

B: winning a new client in the morning, then handing the delivery to someone else and checking their work.

A is fractional. B is agency. If you flinched at “handing the delivery to someone else,” that is your answer too.

Write your result in the margin, in pen. Then read the honest page on your path, and the honest pages on the other three, because circumstances change and the grid is reusable.

Climb Inside: the honest page

Who it suits. People with a decent Anchor score and a real need for salary continuity: mortgage, school fees, a partner between jobs. People at organisations big enough that an AI seat is plausible, thirty staff and up, where the 95% pattern from Chapter 3 is visible and unowned. People with the patience for politics, because there will be politics. If that is you, this path converts your existing tenure, reputation and inside knowledge, assets worth years, that the other paths would make you rebuild from zero.

Who it will hurt. Anyone at a company too small, too broke or too hostile to ever create the seat; you can do everything right and win a title that does not exist there. Anyone who mistakes proximity for progress: being “the AI person” without a mandate in writing is unpaid extra work, and Chapter 10 is blunt about the difference. And understand the structural risk you are accepting: one employer holds your entire position. General Motors created a Chief AI Officer seat in March 2025, hired a genuine heavyweight into it, and dissolved the position eight months later, folding the AI function into engineering. He was not fired; the seat evaporated underneath him. Companies are still working out whether this chair sits at their table. Inside one company, that decision is your whole downside, which is exactly why the parallel cell of the grid exists.

The quiet advantage. Even when the title never lands, the work makes you the person Chapter 14 calls uncuttable. The downside case on this path is still a promotion in everything but name.

Moonlight: the honest page

Who it suits. Most readers of this book, and I say that having watched the alternatives chew people up. It requires no resignation, no savings drawdown, no permission beyond what your employment contract already allows. It converts risk into time: five to eight hours a week, for roughly a year, is the price of finding out with real evidence whether clients will pay you, before you bet the mortgage on the answer. Every later path gets easier from here: moonlighting builds the proof for an internal seat, the client base for fractional, the delivery experience for agency.

Who it will hurt. People who cannot actually free the hours. Look at your last month honestly; if evenings are already spoken for by young kids, study or a second job, forcing rung two of the ladder will just make you fail slowly and expensively in front of witnesses. Better to run the internal path now and moonlight in a season when the hours exist. It also hurts people who skip the boring safeguards: if you are on a work visa tied to a single employer, moonlighting for money can be a visa breach, full stop, check before rung two. And if you never read your employment contract, Chapter 11's conflict rules are not optional reading; people get fired for the disclosure they didn't make, not the side work itself.

The quiet advantage. The ladder has exits at every rung. You can stop at "paid hobby that funds the holidays" and still have won.

Fractional: the honest page

Who it suits. People whose Question 3 and Question 4 scores are the envy of the room: a decade or more deep in one industry, with owners and executives who already trust them. If that is you, you are sitting on

the exact asset the fractional market pays for, and the practitioners profiled in Chapter 12 prove the model at real numbers: published retainers running \$7,500 a month at the accessible end, \$30,000 at the top, and one operator who built a fractional practice to \$2 million in revenue in its first year. Trust that took you twenty years to build converts into retainers in months.

Who it will hurt. Anyone who tries to start here without the network, because fractional is a referral business and cold-starting one is the hardest sales problem in this book. Anyone who cannot hold a boundary, because the failure mode of fractional is over-servicing: three clients each quietly expanding into a 50-hour week that pays for twenty. And anyone who secretly wants a boss. Fractional means three CEOs with opinions and no one to tell you which fire matters. Some people find that freeing. Some people find out otherwise in month two.

The quiet advantage. Diversification. The GM problem, one company dissolving your seat, cannot end your income when you hold four seats.

Agency: the honest page

Who it suits. Sellers. People whose energy comes from winning the client, who read Chapter 13's split, you own the client, diagnosis and outcome while contractors build, and feel relief rather than anxiety. People with a 3 on risk appetite and enough margin discipline to resist buying growth with underpricing. If the moonlight ladder taught you that you love the first meeting and merely tolerate the delivery, the agency model is how you scale the part you love.

Who it will hurt. Anyone who hates selling, with no exceptions, because in an agency the selling is your job and it never finishes; the delivery you enjoyed is precisely what you have given away. Perfectionists who cannot accept work they did not build will die of quality-control anxiety or, worse, redo everything and destroy the margin. And it punishes the undercapitalised: contractors invoice you

whether or not the client has paid, so thin runway plus one slow-paying client equals a cashflow crisis in a business that is otherwise working.

The quiet advantage. It is the only path in this book that builds something sellable. Jobs and retainers end when you stop. An agency, with clients and contractors and a method, can outlive your involvement.

Two readers, scored

To see the grid working, run two composite readers through it.

Picture the first: 47, operations manager at a 120-person logistics company, nineteen years in the industry. Question 1: the company is big enough, nobody owns AI, she reports to the COO. Score 3. Question 2: fifteen years managing teams and budgets. Score 3. Question 3: nineteen years, one industry, suppliers ring her for advice. Score 3. Question 4: she knows plenty of people, but decision-makers who would take a commercial call this week? Four, honestly. Score 2. Question 5: a mortgage and one income; four months of runway. Score 1. Question 6: predictability matters right now. Score 1.

Anchor: 6. Freedom: 4. The grid says Climb Inside and Moonlight in parallel, and look at how well the cells fit the person. Her employer is a nearly perfect launchpad, so Chapter 10 is her main game. Her Freedom score is soft in exactly the fixable places, runway and nerve, and one small moonlight client, built slowly, repairs both while her salary carries the household. In eighteen months she is either holding a mandate, or holding case studies, and probably both.

Now picture the second: 58, sold his share of an engineering consultancy two years ago, been consulting loosely since. Question 1: no employer. Score 0. Question 2: twenty-five years running the firm. Score 3. Question 3: three decades deep. Score 3. Question 4: forty owners would take his call by Friday. Score 3. Question 5: comfortable. Score 3.

Question 6: he has made payroll from an overdraft; variable income holds no terror. Score 3.

Anchor: 3. Freedom: 9, with network and depth maxed. The grid routes him to the bottom-right, and the tie-breaker decides the chapter: he reads option B, handing delivery to someone else, and feels his shoulders drop. Agency. His risk is not failure; it is under-pricing his own scarcity, which is why his chapter spends so much time on margin.

Same book, same window, two completely different first moves. That is what the grid is for.

Scores change

One last thing before you turn to your chapter.

This assessment is a photograph, not a diagnosis. Every input is movable. Runway grows with a year of saving. Network grows with the outreach method in Part VI. Industry depth is the only slow variable, and even that compounds faster once you are the AI person inside your sector rather than a spectator of it.

Which means the grid is not telling you who you are. It is telling you where to start, and what to build to earn the cell you actually want. Picture a reader who scores Anchor 5, Freedom 3 today: she starts inside, wins the visible win of Chapter 10, moonlights one small client next year, and sits this assessment again eighteen months from now scoring Freedom 8, with the fractional chapter suddenly describing her. Nothing about that path was luck. She just read her own grid honestly, twice.

Sit the assessment again every six months. The window from Chapter 1 is open for years, not weeks. You have time to move cells. You do not have time to skip the honest look.

Do this now

1. **Sit it properly.** If you read the six questions without a pen, go back and score them for real. Write the six numbers, the Anchor and Freedom totals, and your routed path, on one page, dated. This page joins the Chapter 3 write-up in your growing file.
2. **Name your weakest number.** One sentence: “My lowest useful score is [question], and the evidence is [honest reason].” Then one more: the single action that would raise it by one point in ninety days. Savings target, five coffee catch-ups, a conversation with your boss. Put the action in your calendar.
3. **Read your chapter first, but read all four.** Your routed chapter is your plan. The other three are your map of what everyone else in this market is doing, including the people you will compete with, partner with, and eventually hire.

Chapter 10: Climb Inside

The most common way people become Chief AI Officers is not the one the job boards show you.

The job boards show the external searches: the 19-week executive hunts, the shortlists, the poaching. What actually fills most of these seats is quieter. Somebody already inside the company starts doing the work before anyone asks, becomes the obvious answer to a question the board eventually gets around to asking, and is standing in the doorway when the title arrives.

Look at the record. SAP's first Chief AI Officer, Philipp Herzig, was promoted from inside engineering. AllianceBernstein's first, Andrew Chin, had been at the firm 27 years. Schneider Electric elevated an internal leader. The US Department of Labor promoted its deputy into the seat. Hackensack Meridian Health grew its data chief into the AI title. The pattern repeats at company after company in the dossier behind this book: when the seat gets created, it is very often created around a person who already occupied it in practice.

That is the whole strategy of this chapter. You are not going to apply for the job. You are going to become the person the job is created around. There are four stages, and they run in a strict order: the visible win, the positioning, the written mandate, the title. People who skip a stage, and most people skip straight to wanting the title, get the failure modes we will cover at the end.

Stage one: the visible win

Nothing else starts until something works and the right people watch it work.

Not a strategy deck. Not a committee. Chapter 3 showed you what decks and committees produce. You need one deployment, on real work, with a

number attached, inside ninety days. The full method is Part IV of this book; here is the shape of the decision.

Pick a task, not a transformation. The task must have three properties. It is repetitive and made of words or numbers, so the machine can do it. It is measurably costing hours or money right now, so the win converts to a figure. And it sits close enough to your own role that you need nobody's permission to touch it, or only one manager's.

Then hold yourself to the discipline the 95% never applies. Measure the before, honestly, in hours and dollars, before you automate anything. Run the new way alongside the old until the output is trustworthy. And when it works, write the one-page results memo: what the task was, what it cost before, what it costs now, what that is worth a year. Chapter 18 teaches the memo format; the point here is that the memo, not the automation, is the career artifact. Wins that nobody can read did not happen.

Picture the difference in the Monday meeting. Someone says AI is interesting. You slide one page across the table showing that quote follow-ups now go out in four minutes instead of two days, and what that did to the close rate. Every AI conversation in that company now routes through you. That is stage one complete, and it usually takes one win, not ten.

Seat Note: Pratik Thakar, The Coca-Cola Company. Thakar was a marketing man, not a technologist: a decade at the company, running global creative strategy for the Coke brand. When generative AI arrived he became its loudest and most practical internal champion, actually shipping AI-made campaign work while others debated. In June 2023 Coca-Cola created a role around him: Global Head of Generative AI, later widened to Global Vice President. The company did not run a search. The search would have found him anyway.

Stage two: becoming “the AI person”

The visible win makes you noticed. Stage two makes you the default.

“The AI person” is a real organisational position, and large companies now build it deliberately. The law firm Ropes & Gray ran an internal AI champions program that took the firm from 32 people sending a few hundred prompts a month to around 2,200 employees generating more than 282,000 prompts a month. Citigroup has scaled its champions program past 4,000 participants. Boards have noticed that adoption follows named humans, not licences. If your company has such a program, join it today; it is a farm system for exactly the seat you want. If it does not, you are about to become an informal one-person version.

The mechanics are unglamorous and they compound.

Repeat the win in someone else’s department. Take your method, not just your tool, to the manager whose team drowns in the most repetitive work, and make their number move. The second win matters more than the first, because it proves the first was a method, not a fluke.

Teach in public. A twenty-minute lunch session, monthly: here is what I automated, here is what it saved, here is the one thing to try this month. Teaching does two jobs at once. It builds the literacy of the people whose adoption you will later need, and it installs you, meeting by meeting, as the person who owns this subject.

Become the safety valve as well as the accelerator. When someone asks “can we put client data into these tools?”, have the considered answer, in writing. The person who prevents the disaster gets trusted with the budget. Enthusiasm alone reads as junior; enthusiasm plus caution reads as executive.

And keep the log. Every task automated, every hour saved, every person trained, in one running document with dates and numbers. This log is about to become the evidence section of the most important memo of your career.

Seat Note: Andrew Chin, AllianceBernstein. Twenty-seven years inside one investment firm: quantitative research, chief risk officer for over a decade, chief data scientist. Chin accumulated the firm's data and AI portfolio piece by piece, long before the title existed, so that when AllianceBernstein decided in 2024 it needed a first Chief AI Officer, the appointment read less like a hire than a recognition of fact. The seat was built where he was already standing.

Seat Note: Mangala Kuppa, US Department of Labor. More than a decade at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, then deputy Chief AI Officer, then the CAIO seat itself when it opened. No lab pedigree, no famous employer. Deep institutional knowledge plus proximity to the new function, converted into the title through the least dramatic promotion imaginable. Most of the seats in government filled exactly this way.

Stage three: the written mandate

Here is where the internal path most often quietly dies, so read this stage twice.

"The AI person" with no mandate is doing a second job for free. Worse, they are accountable in everyone's mind for a function they have no authority to run. The research on failed Chief AI Officers is blunt about where that ends: responsibility for outcomes without enforcement authority turns the AI leader into what one Forbes analysis called a convenient scapegoat. Most CAIOs, that same analysis found, leave within 18 months, and the causes are structural, unclear mandates, turf wars, impossible expectations, far more often than personal failure.

So you are going to ask for the mandate in writing, and you are going to make asking easy, by writing it yourself. One page. Here is the template. Adapt the numbers and names; keep the structure and the length.

To: [CEO / Managing Director] **From:** [You] **Re:** Proposal: making AI accountability official

What has happened so far. Over the past [nine] months, working inside my current role, I have deployed AI on [four] processes: [quote follow-up, supplier invoice entry, report drafting, candidate screening]. Measured results to date: [\$96,000] a year in recovered hours and [two days] cut from our quote turnaround. The full log of deployments and numbers is attached.

The problem. These results came from one corner of the business. Company-wide, we are paying for [seven] AI tools with no owner, and our competitors are moving. Industry-wide, the surveys are consistent: in one survey of over a thousand companies, [42%] abandoned most of their AI initiatives and the average organisation scrapped [46%] of its trials before production. They fail for three reasons: wrong task, no briefing, no owner. We currently have no owner.

The proposal. Make AI accountability official for a 12-month term. Specifically:

1. I own the question “does AI make this company money,” reporting quarterly to you with measured results.
2. Scope: authority to run pilots in any department with the department head’s agreement, a budget of [\$X] for tools and training, and [two days a week] protected for this work, with [named items] moving off my plate.
3. Governance: I bring you a one-page AI use policy within 30 days, and no customer-facing AI ships without sign-off from [me plus legal/IT].
4. Targets for the first two quarters: [\$X] in measured savings or revenue, [two] departments live, every manager through basic training.

What I am not asking for. A title, a team, or a restructure. If the results at twelve months justify it, we discuss the role formally then.

The decision I need: yes or no by [date], because the pilots queued behind this are worth [\$X] a year and every month unowned is a month

lost.

Notice the design. It leads with proof, not vision. It asks for authority and time, the two things “the AI person” never has, while explicitly not asking for the title, which makes yes easy. It volunteers governance, which recruits the cautious. And it sets its own review date, which turns the title conversation from a favour you ask into an appointment you booked.

If the answer is no, you have learned something that saves you years: this employer will consume your AI work without ever paying for it. Take your log and your memos to the assessment grid in Chapter 9, because your Anchor score just changed, and the moonlight and external options are still open. A written no is worth more than an unwritten maybe.

Seat Note: Travis Nixon, Dollar General. Nixon joined the retailer in November 2025 as an SVP with an awkward, invented title: artificial intelligence optimisation. Roughly seven months later he was Chief Data and AI Officer, with data engineering and delivery operations added to his mandate. Seven months from arrival to the chief title, because he took the vague version of the job and made its results impossible to ignore. The mandate expanded to match the proof, not the other way around.

Stage four: the title, and what it should pay

When the review date arrives with the targets hit, the title conversation is short. The pay conversation is where internal candidates get robbed, so bring data.

The problem is that this role has no salary history inside your company, and internal promotions default to “current salary plus a bit.” Refuse that framing politely, with the market numbers on the table. Nationally, the Glassdoor average for a Chief AI Officer runs around \$354,000, with the middle half of the market between roughly \$265,000 and \$496,000. Recruiter salary guides band it by company size: growth-stage companies

pay \$250,000 to \$400,000 base, mid-market \$300,000 to \$500,000 with total packages of \$500,000 to \$900,000, and enterprises \$400,000 and up with seven-figure totals. At Fortune 500 scale, total cash runs \$420,000 to \$680,000. Your company sits somewhere on that curve, and you should walk in knowing where.

Two negotiating notes the data supports. First, scope is worth more than the C. Across nearly nine thousand AI-strategy postings, the C-suite median salary sits only about \$8,000 above the VP median; what separates a \$200,000 role from a \$400,000 one is company size and breadth of mandate, not the letter C. If the company resists the CAIO title, take Head of AI reporting to the CEO with budget and enterprise scope over a decorative chief title reporting three layers down. Second, negotiate the review before you need it. A written six-month compensation review tied to the targets in your mandate converts your certain future results into money, and it costs the company nothing to grant on day one.

And take the reporting line seriously. More than half of CAIOs now report directly to the CEO or board, and the ones who report into IT inherit IT's remit: caution, infrastructure, cost centre. You are proposing a profit role. Sit where profit roles sit.

A note for the reader using this chapter as a shopping guide, because Chapter 9 sent some of you here between jobs. Everything above doubles as an employer checklist. You want an organisation of thirty-plus people, with obvious repetitive words-and-numbers work, no named AI owner, and a leadership team that has already felt the sting of a failed pilot; you can establish all four in one interview using the Chapter 3 questions, politely rephrased. And you can begin stage one in the interview itself: candidates who present a one-page observation of the company's AI reality, this is what I noticed, this is what I would do first, this is what it is worth, are effectively interviewing for the seat before the job they applied for. Arrive as the AI person and skip a year of becoming one.

Seat Note: Philipp Herzig, SAP. An internal engineering executive handed the AI portfolio, named Chief AI Officer in January 2024, reporting directly to the CEO. Within a year the role had widened to global CTO. The lesson internal climbers should steal is the reporting line: Herzig's seat was designed at the top of the house from day one, and the man used it as a platform, not a destination.

The politics, plainly

Every internal climb happens inside a building full of people with their own interests. Pretending otherwise is how smart people get ambushed. Here is the map.

The CIO or IT manager is your most important relationship, and your most dangerous. From their chair, you look like shadow IT with executive sponsorship: unvetted tools, data leaving the building, security risk with your name nowhere and theirs everywhere. The failed-CAIO research names territorial conflict with the CIO and chief data officer as a top killer of these roles. Do not fight that war; make it unnecessary. Go to the CIO early, before your first win if you can. Give them the whole infrastructure and security domain out loud: nothing goes live without their sign-off, vendor security reviews are theirs, and your memos name their team every time. You own which tasks and whether it made money; they own how it runs safely. A CIO offered that split usually takes it, because most CIOs privately dread being made to own AI outcomes. You are removing a risk from their plate, not food.

The department heads fear quota arithmetic. Every manager hears “automation” as “headcount.” Defuse it the same way every time: start with the work they already cannot staff, the backlog, the follow-ups nobody sends, and give the head the credit in your memo. Managers who get credit invite you back. Managers who get compared resist you forever, and their resistance is invisible and fatal.

The young enthusiast is your ally, not your rival. Somewhere in the building is the analyst who is good with the tools and has no authority, the one Chapter 3 described producing unread slide decks. Recruit them. You bring the standing and the method; they bring speed and tool fluency. The pairing is stage two on fast-forward, and being the person who develops them is itself executive evidence.

And manage the expectation, or it will manage you. One documented failure mode: a manufacturer expected its new AI chief to deliver \$50 million in savings inside a year, and the role was dead on arrival. Your defence is the mandate memo's own targets, modest, dated, written, and the quarterly cadence of results memos that replaces fantasy with a running score. Remember Schneider Electric's Rambach, who says much of the real job is downsizing expectations. Deflating hype on schedule is not failure. It is the job.

One honest caveat to end on. You can play every move in this chapter correctly and still lose the seat, because companies are still deciding whether the seat should exist. General Motors dissolved its Chief AI Officer role after eight months and pushed the function into engineering; average tenure in the title runs around two years. This is why the mandate is written, the results are memos, and the log is yours. Play it right and everything you built, the proof, the method, the reputation, walks out the door with you, straight up the value of every other path in this book. The title can be taken back. The evidence cannot.

Do this now

1. **Choose your stage-one task this week.** Repetitive, measurable, inside your reach. Write down the task, the current cost in hours per week, and the number you expect to move. Then measure the before, properly, for five working days. You cannot claim a win you did not baseline.
2. **Draft the mandate memo now, months early.** Fill in the template with today's numbers, even if the evidence section is thin. The gaps you cannot fill are your work plan for the next quarter, and the day the memo is strong enough to send, you will know it.
3. **Book the CIO coffee.** Before your first pilot touches company data, sit down with whoever owns IT and open with one sentence: "Anything I do in this area goes through your security review, and I want your rules in writing so I can follow them." Fifteen minutes now buys you an ally for the entire climb, or an early, honest look at your biggest obstacle.

Chapter 11: The Moonlight Ladder

Two failures bracket every attempt to leave employment for client work, and they are opposites.

The first is the jump. Someone resigns on enthusiasm, prints business cards, and discovers over six shrinking bank statements that having skills and having clients are different achievements. The second is the never. Someone keeps the job, keeps the idea, polishes the idea for years, and retires with the idea still in mint condition, never exposed to a single paying customer.

The Moonlight Ladder exists because both failures share one cause: they treat “go out on your own” as a single decision, one giant yes-or-no bet. It is not. It is five small decisions, each one cheap, each one reversible, each one producing evidence for the next. You keep your salary the entire way up. You quit, if you ever quit, only when the arithmetic says quitting is no longer a risk.

This is the path I would put most readers of this book on, and it runs on five to eight hours a week. Nights, early mornings, one weekend block. If this chapter has a price, that is it.

One rule governs the whole ladder: **you do not climb to the next rung until you have met the exit criteria of the current one.** The criteria are written below, and they are deliberately unforgiving, because the ladder only de-risks your life if you refuse to lie to yourself on it.

FIG. 9

The Moonlight Ladder: from salary to practice without jumping



The Moonlight Ladder.

Rung one: free, for a friend, documented ruthlessly

Your first client pays you nothing, and you choose them on purpose.

Somewhere in your circle is a business owner you already know: a friend with a trade business, your cousin's e-commerce store, the accountant you have used for years. They have what Chapter 3 taught you to see, repetitive words-and-numbers work leaking hours, and they trust you already, which removes the only barrier a beginner cannot yet clear: proof.

Entry criteria. You have finished the 30-day sprint from Appendix A, and you have at least one documented win from your own work, the Chapter 8 audit or the Chapter 10 visible win. You are not experimenting on this business. You are applying something you have already done once.

The engagement is small and shaped like a real one. Sit with the owner for an hour and run the five questions from Chapter 3. Pick one task,

one, using the same three properties as always: repetitive, measurable, reachable. Deploy it. Support it for a month, because Chapter 3 also taught you that unowned systems die at the first hiccup, and a dead system is worse than no case study.

And here is the part that makes this rung worth a chapter of its own: document like the fee is \$10,000. Baseline numbers before. Results after, in hours and dollars. Screenshots. A one-page case study in the Chapter 18 memo format. A written sentence or two from the owner about what changed. You are not working free; you are buying a case study at the cheapest price ever offered to you, and the difference between “helped a mate with some AI stuff” and a dated, numbered document is the difference between an anecdote and an asset.

There is a community of people attempting this path right now, and their public post-mortems agree on where it goes wrong. One consultant who launched with LinkedIn ads and a services website reported the results to a forum in plain numbers: high cost, low clicks, zero clients. The reply that mattered has stayed with me: “Where’s the proof?” Nothing on the page showed a business made measurably better. The market does not buy AI skills. It buys evidence that your AI skills moved someone’s numbers. Rung one exists to manufacture that evidence.

Exit criteria. One working deployment in someone else’s business, still alive a month after handover. One written case study with real numbers. One testimonial. And one referral conversation: “who do you know with the same problem?” Meet all four and you may touch money.

Rung two: the first paid pilot, priced small on purpose

Now someone pays. Not much, and the amount is a tool, not an income.

A practitioner writing about his first AI client tells the story with rare honesty. He found the client in a comment under a Facebook post, a

business owner complaining about drowning in admin. He built a small follow-up automation that messaged customers when the business forgot to. When the owner asked the price, he panicked and said the first number that felt safe: \$150. The owner said one word: “Deal.” His summary of what actually mattered has the whole rung in it: one niche, one painful problem, one small but useful workflow, one person willing to say yes, one result worth talking about.

\$150 is too low, and it does not matter. The first paid dollar changes your category. You are no longer a hobbyist with a theory; you are a person businesses pay for this, and the second conversation is easier than the first in a way no amount of preparation substitutes for.

Entry criteria. The rung-one case study exists. You have a defined offer, one specific problem for one specific kind of business, not “AI consulting.” The consensus of everyone who has failed at this in public is that generalists get ignored; the fix, as one respected practitioner puts it, is to stop saying “I’m an AI consultant” and pick a specific problem you solve.

Price it as a fixed-scope pilot: defined task, defined timeline, defined success number, somewhere in the \$1,500 to \$3,000 range. Small enough that a business owner can say yes without a committee, real enough that they treat you as a supplier, not a favour. Anchor the fee to the value in writing: “this saves roughly six hours a week; the pilot costs less than a month of that.” If the owner hesitates, offer the structure, not a discount: fee on results, or half now and half on the measured outcome.

Watch yourself for the three imposter reflexes documented across every pricing forum: apology pricing (“I know this might sound high, but”), pre-discounting before anyone objected, and quietly adding free extra work to feel worth the fee. All three train the client to undervalue you. State the number and stop talking.

The path from free to paid can be fast. One documented case: a manufacturing operations manager with no computer science

background used AI to cut procurement costs about 20% at his own employer, wrote up that single internal result as a case study, and landed his first external project, worth \$8,000, within two weeks. The asset was never the technology. It was the written, numbered proof.

Exit criteria. A paid invoice, settled. A second case study. A delivery that came in inside the hours you estimated, or an honest note on why not. And a decision, in writing, about what your standard pilot now costs, because you will never again price from panic.

Rung three: the weekend retainer

Projects end. Retainers compound. This rung converts your pilot client, or the next client, into recurring money.

The offer: ongoing ownership of what you built, plus steady expansion. You keep the systems alive, improve them monthly, add one new automation each cycle, train their staff as needed, and send a monthly one-page results memo, the same memo format, now doing sales work every thirty days. Priced, at this rung, around \$1,000 to \$2,500 a month for a defined scope. The published market for full fractional work runs far higher, \$5,000 to \$30,000 a month, but you are not there yet, and underpricing-with-a-plan beats overreaching-without-proof.

Entry criteria. Two case studies, a settled pilot price, and this sentence, which you must be able to say truthfully: “the systems I have built are still running without me touching them daily.” If your rung-two build needs constant rescuing, fix that first; a retainer on a fragile system is a second job with worse hours.

The real work of rung three is not the client. It is the systemisation of you. Written briefs for every recurring task. A checklist for deployments. A standard onboarding. Templated memos. The practitioners who make fractional work at scale run on exactly this, repeatable weekly syncs, standard monthly reports, automated status updates, and the ones who

burn out are the ones who reinvent every client from scratch. Build the machine now, while you have one client and the stakes are low.

A word on where the next client comes from, because rung four needs one and moonlighters have no time for marketing. You already hold the only channel that matters at this scale: the referral. Every case study ends with the same conversation, held out loud with the client whose numbers you just improved: “Who do you know with this same problem?” Business owners cluster, in industry groups, in golf clubs, in the accountant’s client list, and an owner describing your work to another owner converts better than any advertisement you could ever buy. One documented result worth talking about, actively talked about, is a pipeline. This is also why the ladder insists on the written case study at every rung: the referred prospect’s first question is “what did you do for them?”, and the answer is a page you already wrote.

Exit criteria. Three consecutive months of retainer held and paid. Monthly hours inside your budget, tracked honestly. The monthly memo sent every month without heroics. When the retainer runs on systems instead of adrenaline, you have room for a second client, and it is time for the most important compliance conversation in this book.

Rung four: two clients, and the conflict rules

Two clients is a practice. It is also the point where your side work becomes visible enough that getting the employment rules wrong can cost you the job that funds the whole ladder. So here are the rules, and I am giving them to you bluntly because every one of them is a place someone has actually been burned.

Read your employment contract before rung two, and act on it by rung four. Not skim. Read. The clauses that matter: outside employment or “moonlighting” clauses, conflict-of-interest provisions, intellectual property assignment (some contracts claim everything you create while employed, on any equipment), and non-solicitation. The

uniform advice from people inside big-company legal processes is unambiguous: read the exact wording, and where the work is in the same field as your day job, get explicit approval rather than your own hopeful interpretation.

You do not get to decide what counts as a conflict. This is the mistake that ends careers. The consistent testimony from corporate forums: employees who self-certified “it’s not a conflict” and stayed quiet were fireable not for the side work, but for failing to disclose it. Disclosure is the company’s mechanism for deciding; use it. If your employer has a conflict-of-interest form, file it. The general boundaries that make approval likely: different industry than your employer, no competing offering, no clients who are your employer’s clients or prospects.

Never compete with your employer. If your employer sells marketing services and you moonlight selling AI-assisted marketing services, you are building your case for dismissal, not a practice. Serve businesses your employer would never serve. When in doubt, pick a niche further away.

Never use employer time, tools, data or accounts. Your own laptop, your own software subscriptions, your own hours, no exceptions. Client work on the company laptop is how IP-assignment clauses eat your business; company data in your side project is how you convert a career risk into a legal one. Jurisdictions vary, some places strongly protect what you build on your own time with your own equipment, but every protection anywhere shares the same condition: complete separation. Treat separation as sacred and most of the law is on your side.

And if you are on an employer-sponsored work visa, stop. In many countries, including for most sponsored workers in the United States, you can only work for your sponsoring employer, and paid moonlighting is a visa breach with consequences no retainer justifies.

Rung one, free and documented, may be all this ladder can legally offer you until your status changes. Check with an immigration professional, not a forum.

Entry criteria for rung four. Rung three's exit met, contract read, disclosure made where required, and a written answer to "what niches are off-limits given my employer." **Exit criteria.** Two concurrent retainers held for three months, combined side income around a third to a half of your take-home pay, delivered inside roughly eight hours a week, with your day-job performance intact. That last one is not decoration. The ladder collapses if the job funding it notices you have left early.

Rung five: the resignation maths

People agonise over the decision to quit. The ladder's entire purpose is to make it not a decision. It is a sum, and you either have the numbers or you do not.

Here are the conditions. All of them, not most.

Revenue. Side income, after software and delivery costs, of at least 70% of your take-home pay, for three consecutive months. Not your best month, three in a row. Why 70% rather than 100%: because the hours you currently give the ladder are five to eight a week, and resignation hands you forty more. If eight constrained hours produce 70%, the forty you are about to free cover the rest, conservatively.

Spread. At least two paying clients, with no single client above half of the side revenue. One client is not a business; it is a fragile job with invoicing. Losing your biggest client the month after resigning must be a bad quarter, not a catastrophe.

Pipeline. Warm, qualified conversations, people who have a named problem and know your price range, worth at least twice the gap between

current side revenue and your target income. Pipeline, not followers, not “interest.” Conversations with dates on them.

Runway. Six months of household expenses banked, untouched by the business. This is the buffer that lets you decline bad clients in month two instead of panic-accepting them, and panic-accepting bad clients in the early months is how new practices acquire the anchor clients that sink them.

And the boring extras sorted while you still have a payslip: insurance, the engagement-letter basics from Chapter 33, and, if you are in a country where a salary makes borrowing easier, any refinancing done before the income becomes “self-employed” in a bank’s eyes.

One condition does not appear on the list because it is not mine to set, and it decides more resignations than any of the others: the household. If a partner’s sense of security is wired to your payslip, the rung-five conversation does not begin the month you want to quit. It begins at rung two, with the first invoice shown across the kitchen table, and it continues monthly, with the same results memos your clients get. A partner who has watched eighteen months of evidence accumulate is a co-investor in the jump. A partner ambushed with a resignation plan is, quite reasonably, an opponent of it. Build the case at home the same way you built it in the market: early, in writing, with numbers.

When every line is true, look at what you are actually deciding. You would be trading roughly 30% of your income, temporarily, for a five-fold increase in the hours you can sell, with proof of demand, spread risk, a funnel, and half a year of expenses in reserve. Written that way, staying put is the aggressive move. That is what I mean by arithmetic, not courage: courage is what you need when you have no evidence. You spent four rungs building evidence precisely so you would not need it.

And if the numbers never arrive, the ladder still paid you. A practice earning a third of your salary from six hours a week is a magnificent thing to simply keep: it funds the holidays, hedges a redundancy, and

holds your skills at market sharpness. Rungs are places to stand, not just places to pass through. There is no version of climbing this ladder honestly that leaves you worse off, which is a sentence you cannot say about either of the failures this chapter opened with.

Do this now

1. **Read your employment contract this week.** Tonight, ideally. Find and copy out every clause touching outside work, conflicts, IP and non-solicitation. Write a three-line summary: what is clearly fine, what needs disclosure, what is off-limits. This twenty minutes is the cheapest insurance in this entire book, and it must happen before rung two, so do it before rung one.
2. **List five rung-one candidates.** Business owners you already know, with a note beside each: what repetitive work do I suspect leaks their hours, and how would I find out? Pick the one with the clearest single problem and the warmest relationship, and open the conversation this week: “I’m building a practice deploying AI in businesses like yours. I’ll do the first project free in exchange for the numbers and a testimonial. Interested?”
3. **Write your exit criteria where you will see them.** All five rungs, one page, on the wall by your desk. The ladder fails through self-deception in both directions, promoting yourself early because you are excited, or refusing promotion forever because you are scared. Written criteria are how you catch yourself doing either.

Chapter 12: Fractional

Do the buyer's arithmetic first, because the whole model lives inside it.

Picture a \$10 million company. Sixty staff, healthy margins, an owner who has read enough to know AI matters and watched enough internal flailing to know nobody on the payroll can lead it. The market rate for a full-time Chief AI Officer, as Chapter 5 laid out, starts around \$300,000 and runs far higher. Against a \$10 million revenue line, that is an absurd purchase. It is also unnecessary: this company does not have forty hours a week of AI leadership work. It has about six.

Now price six hours a week of genuine AI leadership at, say, \$8,000 a month. That is \$96,000 a year, roughly 1% of revenue, for the function that Chapter 3 proved is the difference between the 95% that fails and the 5% that banks the money. The owner can say yes to that number without a board meeting.

There are hundreds of thousands of companies inside that arithmetic, and almost nobody serving them. That mismatch is the fractional Chief AI Officer market: the same seat this book has been describing, held part-time, for several companies at once. It is the best economic model in this book for one person, and this chapter is what it actually takes to run it.

What fractional is, and what it is not

The word matters, so let me define it against its neighbours, because the market is full of people using “fractional” to mean “consultant with a better business card.”

A project consultant is hired to produce a thing: an assessment, a strategy document, a build. The engagement ends, the consultant leaves, and, as Chapter 3 taught you, the thing usually dies of orphanhood

shortly afterwards. The consultant is accountable for delivery, never for outcomes.

A fractional CAIO is hired to own a function. You are, for your contracted slice of the week, this company's AI executive: you set the roadmap, run the pilots, manage the vendors, install the governance, train the humans, and report the results at management level. You sit in the leadership meeting, on the leadership side of the table. When the AI number is bad, it is your bad number. The engagement has no natural end, because functions do not end.

One practitioner in this market, Erin Moore of AutomateNexus, draws the line exactly where I would: the fractional CAIO role is an executive function, not consulting and not coaching. Her other line is just as useful, because it names the two impostors crowding this market: "Most fractional AI executives are either strategists who can't build or engineers who can't lead." The seat requires both halves, the judgment to choose and the capability to ship, which is precisely the translator stack from Chapter 8, and precisely why the seat is scarce enough to pay well.

Business media has settled on a fair summary of why buyers like the shape: a middle way, for boards that need an AI brain but cannot justify or attract a full-time one. My summary is blunter. The fractional CAIO exists because the empty seat from Chapter 3 exists at a hundred times more companies than can afford to fill it full-time. You are the seat, subscribed to.

The people actually doing it, at their actual prices

This is not a theoretical model, so meet the practitioners, with the numbers they publish in public.

John Cheney built a fractional CAIO practice to \$2 million in revenue, more than \$1 million of it profit, in its first year. Not a developer. His clients are mid-market companies, construction firms, law practices,

dental groups, staffing agencies, and his pricing rule is the cleanest anchor in this market: roughly 1% of the client's annual revenue, paid monthly. A \$10 to \$20 million company pays him \$10,000 to \$15,000 a month. His early pipeline came from free educational workshops, and his description of the buyer is worth memorising, because it is a direct quote from a client: "I don't want to learn this, just do it for me." That sentence is the entire demand side of this market.

Erin Moore publishes her model on her website: a \$750 "Strategy Intensive," ninety minutes plus a written assessment, credited in full against the first month if the client proceeds, then a retainer of \$7,500 a month with a three-month minimum. Deliverables are defined like an executive's, not a vendor's: a 90-day AI roadmap inside the first thirty days, vendor evaluation, one board-ready deliverable a quarter. She targets companies from \$1 million to \$30 million in revenue, and she caps her practice at eight active retainers. An Army veteran with an executive MBA who says she has led more than a hundred implementations, and every element of her offer, the paid entry point, the minimum term, the cap, is a lesson we will unpack below.

Paul Okhrem shows what the top of the market looks like: fractional CAIO at \$30,000 a month with a six-month minimum, advisory work at \$1,000 an hour with an 80-hour floor, aimed at companies from \$50 million up, where AI sits on the board agenda. You will not start here. It matters that you know the ceiling exists.

Around the named operators, the published market data agrees on the band: fractional CAIO engagements cluster between \$5,000 and \$30,000 a month, with most mid-market arrangements landing at \$60,000 to \$180,000 a year, and senior independents charging well above that. One consultant, Sabrina Ramonov, has described charging a \$1,600-a-day minimum for AI consulting for two years while building her company, with her entire pipeline coming from networking and social media, no ads, no agency.

Set those numbers against the day job they replace. Three clients at \$7,500 a month is \$270,000 a year. Four at Cheney's mid-band is over half a million. The full-time seats in Chapter 5 pay comparably, but with one boss, one point of failure, and, as the GM story showed, one decision between you and zero. The fractional version of this career holds the same seat with a diversified income. That is why I called it the best economics in the book.

The shape of a week

Abstract models hide the labour, so here is a fractional practice with three clients, drawn concretely. Picture the operator: three retainers, roughly \$22,000 a month, each client owed about six focused hours a week plus an executive's responsiveness.

Monday is client A's day-anchor: the weekly sync, forty-five minutes with the owner and the two managers whose departments have live pilots, run on a standing agenda. What shipped, what the numbers say, what is blocked, what ships next. Then two hours working the roadmap: this month that means finishing the acceptance tests on the quoting automation and a vendor call, with the client's IT contractor in the room, exactly the CIO-alliance move from Chapter 10, scaled down.

Tuesday morning, the same shape for client B. Tuesday afternoon is the practice's own machine: the status updates that go to every client like clockwork, the monthly results memos in their standard format, the shared library of briefs and checklists getting one improvement. Cheney's operation runs on this kind of systemisation, standard weekly syncs, standard monthly reporting, automated status emails, and so does every durable practice; the deliverables are bespoke to each client's numbers, but the machinery producing them is identical across all three.

Wednesday is client C, currently mid-deployment, so it is the heavy day: on-site, walking the warehouse floor with the operations lead, watching staff actually use the new intake system, catching the

workaround someone invented on day three that quietly breaks the data. No dashboard shows you that. Executive-level trust is built in person, which is why fractional operators serve regions or run scheduled travel, and why eight clients is a cap and not a floor.

Thursday splits: two hours of governance across the portfolio, reviewing anything customer-facing before it ships, updating one client's AI policy for a new tool, and two hours of pipeline, because a fractional practice that stops selling starts dying, however full it feels today. A workshop for an industry group next month, coffee with an accountant who refers, follow-up on the two Strategy Intensive-style paid assessments booked this quarter.

Friday morning is overflow and deep work; Friday afternoon is closed. The week held roughly thirty-five committed hours for \$22,000 of monthly revenue, and every hour of it was leadership, deciding, briefing, checking, reporting, with the building work done by tools, templates and, where needed, subcontractors, which is the bridge to the next chapter.

That is the job. If you read that week and felt the pull, this path is yours to earn. If you felt tired, be honest about it now rather than in month four; the agency model in Chapter 13, or the single seat of Chapter 10, may fit you better.

The first ninety days in a new seat

Because the engagement is a function and not a project, how you open it decides everything about how it runs. Here is the standard opening, and notice that the successful operators have converged on the same shape independently.

Days one to thirty: diagnose and promise. You run the full version of the Chapter 3 read: the tool graveyard, the subscription audit, the interviews with every department head, the map of where the repetitive words-and-numbers work actually lives, and the honest accounting of

what previous AI attempts cost and returned. Out of it comes the engagement's spine, a 90-day roadmap, in writing, with numbers attached to each item. Moore's published offer commits to exactly this, roadmap inside the first thirty days, and the reason is commercial as much as methodical: the roadmap is the moment the client stops wondering what they bought.

Days thirty to ninety: one win, measured. Not five initiatives. One, chosen by the same three properties as always, repetitive, measurable, reachable, delivered to a number, and reported in the first monthly results memo. The first memo with a real dollar figure in it is the moment the retainer stops being an expense in the client's mind and becomes a return. Everything else in the roadmap gets easier from that day.

And from day one: the cadence. Weekly sync booked as a standing meeting, monthly memo dated in advance, quarterly board-ready deliverable promised in the engagement letter. The cadence is not administration. It is the product's heartbeat, and clients renew heartbeats, not heroics.

Ninety days run this way produce a strange and valuable artifact: a client who has stopped shopping. The owner who has a roadmap, a number and a rhythm does not take the next vendor's call. That, more than any contract clause, is what retention is made of.

What kills fractional practices

The model fails often, and it fails in three predictable ways. I want them nailed to your wall before your first retainer, because each one is invisible from inside while it is happening.

Over-servicing. The client pays for six hours a week and, because you are conscientious and the Slack messages keep coming, receives fourteen. Multiply by three clients and you are working a sixty-hour week for a

thirty-hour income, resentful, exhausted, and unable to sell because there is no time left to sell in. The defences are structural, not motivational: defined scope in the engagement letter, tracked hours reviewed monthly, and a priced mechanism for “more,” so that when the client asks beyond scope, and good clients always do, the answer is never a free yes or a naked no, it is “yes, and here is what that costs.” Notice that every serious operator builds the boundary into the product itself: minimum terms, defined deliverables, client caps. Moore’s cap of eight retainers is not modesty. It is the practice protecting the practice.

No method. The operator who reinvents each engagement from a blank page has a job with three demanding bosses, not a practice. Every hour is bespoke, nothing compounds, and the honest critics of this market are right about where that ends: unrepeatable, resource-hungry engagements that cannot scale and barely profit. One widely shared piece of scepticism declares AI consulting a generally non-viable business for exactly this reason, and its own prescribed cure is the one the successful operators already practise: productise. A named engagement sequence, a standard assessment, standard cadences, standard memos, Cheney runs a three-part framework across every client; Moore sells the identical \$750 entry product to everyone. The strategy is bespoke. The delivery system is a product. Practices with products survive; practices made of artisanal heroics do not.

Scope sprawl. The subtlest killer. It starts with “while you’re here, could you look at the website,” and six months later you are the client’s outsourced IT department, marketing reviewer and occasional therapist, none of it in scope, all of it expected, and the AI results, the thing your renewal actually depends on, have quietly stalled. Sprawl feels like trust, which is why it works on good operators. The defence is the monthly results memo doing double duty: it reports the numbers, and by reporting the numbers it re-declares, every thirty days, what you are for. When the memo starts having nothing to say, you have sprawled. Cut back to the roadmap or reprice the role honestly.

Underneath all three failures is one root: the fractional operator's scarcest asset is not expertise, it is attention, and every force in the model conspires to fragment it. The operators who last are not the smartest in the market. They are the ones who defend their attention with structure, and who remember that at three to eight clients, you are running a portfolio, and a portfolio is managed, not heroically survived.

Earning the seat

Last thing. How you get here, honestly.

The entry conditions from Chapter 9 stand: this path wants your network and your industry depth, because fractional is a trust purchase and trust arrives by referral. The Moonlight Ladder is the standard on-ramp, by rung four you are already a fractional operator at small scale, and the step from two weekend retainers to three real ones is a price change and a resignation, both covered by the rung-five arithmetic. The direct entry, for readers whose Chapter 9 scores allow it, still runs through proof: one flagship client, documented in numbers, before you print the title on anything.

A niching note worth stealing from the practitioners: Cheney niches by revenue band, not by industry, and his client list, construction, law, dental, staffing, shows why it works. Companies of a similar size share the same diseases, the same drowning inbox, the same manual follow-up, the same unowned subscriptions, regardless of what they sell, and your method transfers across them almost unchanged. Industry niching still works, especially if your Chapter 9 depth score is your strongest card. But if your network spans sectors, the revenue band is the niche, and "I hold the AI seat for \$5 million to \$30 million companies" is a perfectly sharp answer to what do you do.

And when you do print it, price like an executive from the first conversation. The paid assessment, \$750 to a few thousand dollars, structured like Moore's, credited against the retainer, is your entry

product: it filters the curious from the committed, pays you to diagnose, and hands you the roadmap that becomes the retainer proposal. The 1% of revenue anchor gives you a defensible number for almost any client size. And the three-month minimum protects the only thing that makes this model work, enough time for your method to produce a number worth renewing for.

The seat is the same seat this whole book is about. Fractional is simply the version where you own it, plural, on your own paper. For the reader with the depth and the network, I know of no better trade for the second half of a career.

Do this now

1. **Do the buyer's arithmetic on ten real companies.** List ten businesses you know in the \$1 million to \$50 million band, estimate each one's revenue, and write 1% of it next to the name, divided by twelve. That column of monthly numbers is your addressable market, made personal. Note the three where you already know the owner.
2. **Draft your assessment product.** One page: what a paid AI assessment from you covers (the Chapter 3 five questions are its spine), what the client receives in writing, what it costs, and the sentence that credits the fee against a retainer. You now have an entry product, which means you now have an answer to "so how would we start?"
3. **Write your three boundaries before you have a client to test them.** Hours per client per week. The list of work that is out of scope. The sentence you will say when asked for more: "yes, and here is what that costs." Practices die of unwritten boundaries; write yours while it is free.

Chapter 13: The Agency Model

Every solo practice hits the same wall, and you can compute the exact height of yours right now.

Take the hours you can genuinely sell in a week, thirty-five on a heroic definition, and multiply by what the market pays for them. That is your ceiling, and no amount of skill raises it, because skill was never the constraint. Time was. Worse, the solo model punishes success: every client you win consumes delivery hours, delivery hours come out of selling hours, so the reward for a good quarter is an empty pipeline two quarters later. The feast-famine cycle that plagues every consultant who ever lived is not a discipline problem. It is arithmetic, built into the model.

The people studying this market have started saying out loud what the arithmetic implies: the solo AI consultant is a dying model, and the operators winning right now are not the ones with the deepest expertise but the ones building delivery partnerships. I would put it less dramatically, solo is a fine place to start and, as Chapter 12 showed, a fine place to stay at the right prices, but the direction of the observation is correct.

There is a version of this career where your hours stop being the product. You get the clients. Others build. This chapter is that model, and the two disciplines, margin and quality control, that decide whether it makes you a business or a mess.

The division of labour

Get the split exactly right, because everything else in the model hangs off it.

You own the client. The relationship is yours: you found them, you sit in their meetings, you take their late-night message when something

breaks. To the client there is one accountable human, and it is you.

You own the diagnosis. The shadow audit, the five questions, the choice of which task gets automated and which gets refused: that is the translator work from Chapter 8, the highest-value judgment in the entire chain, and it never gets delegated. An agency that outsources diagnosis is a broker, and brokers get squeezed from both ends.

You own the outcome. The number in the monthly results memo is your number. If the build works but the result does not appear, that is your problem to fix, not something to relay to a contractor while shrugging at the client.

Others do the building. The workflow construction, the integrations, the data plumbing, the chatbot configuration: bought, not made. Your delivery bench has three shelves, and mature agencies use all three. Contractors: independent builders, hired per project, found through referrals and the freelance platforms, vetted once and reused forever. White-label shops: small dev teams, often offshore, who deliver under your brand as a business model; they are used to being invisible. And platforms: an increasing share of “builds” are configurations of no-code automation tools that a process-literate person can assemble, meaning some delivery you can do yourself at contractor speed without being a developer at all.

Notice what stayed with you: everything a Chief AI Officer actually does. Diagnosis, judgment, accountability, translation, the client’s trust. The agency model does not dilute the CAIO role; it distills it. You are running the empty seat from Chapter 3 across a portfolio, with hired hands where the technical hands go. This is why the model belongs in this book and not in a generic agency manual: what you are selling is still the seat. The delivery bench is just how the seat scales.

The margin, in real numbers

Here is the engine, one deployment at a time.

A client engages you for a customer-enquiry automation: intake, classification, drafted responses, a monthly report. You price it as Part VI teaches, against the value: it recovers roughly a thousand staff hours a year, and you charge \$8,000 for the build plus a retainer beyond. Your contractor, properly briefed, builds it for \$3,000.

The \$5,000 between those numbers is not “profit for doing nothing,” and the day you believe it is, your agency starts dying. That margin buys four real things. The sale: finding this client cost outreach, meetings, a paid diagnostic, and every unclosed prospect before them. The diagnosis: knowing this task was the right task is precisely what the 95% in Chapter 3 lacked, and it is the scarcest input in the chain. The accountability: you carry the outcome, the revisions, the client’s trust, and the 2am problem. And the risk: if the contractor botches it, you pay to fix it; the client’s price does not change.

Now the rule that keeps the engine honest: **delivery cost stays under 40% of the client price.** At 40% you have margin to survive a rebuild, fund the sales time the model demands, and still bank a real profit. Price at \$8,000 against \$3,000 of delivery and you are at 37%, healthy. Let a contractor quote balloon to \$5,500 against the same \$8,000 and you are at 69%, which means one revision cycle erases the project and a slow-paying client turns it negative. When the numbers break the rule, you have exactly three levers, raise the price, change the scope, or change the builder, and “absorb it quietly” is not one of them.

Sequence matters too: price the delivery before you price the client. The amateur move is to quote the client first, then discover what contractors charge; the professional move is to have your bench quote the build, from your spec, while the deal is still open, so the client’s number is set with the margin already inside it. This is one more reason the diagnosis stays yours: the person who scopes the work controls both prices, and controlling both prices is the whole game.

Two cashflow rules travel with the margin rule, learned expensively by everyone who skipped them. Deposits are non-negotiable: half up front from the client, always, because your contractors invoice you whether or not the client has paid, and an agency is a business that can be profitable on paper and dead in the bank. And pay your bench fast, faster than you are paid if necessary. Reliable builders are the scarce resource on your side of the model; being the client who pays in five days is how you get first call on their calendar forever, and first call on a great contractor's calendar is a competitive weapon no marketing budget buys.

Quality control for work you didn't build

Here is the question that stops most people considering this model: how do I stand behind work I did not personally build, in a field this new? The answer is a system, three layers of it, and none of the layers is "trust the contractor."

Layer one: acceptance criteria, written at sale time. Before the contractor is even chosen, you write down, with the client, what "working" means in testable sentences. The system classifies incoming enquiries into these five categories with at least this accuracy against a sample we supply. Drafted responses use the client's templates and never promise delivery dates. Anything the system cannot classify lands in a named person's queue within five minutes. Every failure state sends an alert to this address. This document does double duty: it is the specification your contractor builds against, and it is the contract your client signs off against, which means both sides of your business are aligned on the same page, literally. The craft of writing these is Chapter 25's subject in full; what matters here is when they get written. Acceptance criteria written after the build measure what got built. Written before, they control it.

Layer two: test cases, run by you, on real material. Before anything touches the client's live operation, you personally run the

system against a bundle you assembled from the client's actual work: their twenty real enquiries, including the three weird ones you found during diagnosis, the angry customer, the supplier email that looks like a customer, the one in another language. Score the output against the acceptance criteria, in writing. You do not need to know how the thing was built to know whether it behaves, any more than a restaurant owner needs to cook to know the dish is wrong. Chapter 2 told you the machine cannot check itself; the agency corollary is that the contractor cannot accept their own work either. Checking is your function. It is also, not incidentally, where your judgment stays sharp: the operator who reviews every build against real material keeps learning what breaks, which feeds back into better diagnosis, better specs and better pricing. QC is not overhead in this model. It is the part of delivery you kept because it compounds.

Layer three: the client never meets the subcontractor. This rule reads as vanity and is actually load-bearing, so hold it firmly. Every piece of communication routes through you: briefs go from you to the builder, questions come back to you, and you carry answers to the client in your voice. Three reasons. First, translation is the value: the contractor asking the client "which fields should the webhook pass?" torches in one sentence the confidence your diagnosis built, because clients buy outcomes and technical questions hand them anxiety. Second, accountability must have one address: the moment the client can talk to the builder, blame has two doors to hide between, and scope has two people to creep past. Third, the relationship is the asset: an agency where clients hold contractor relationships is an agency the contractor can disintermediate with one polite email. Tell the client the truth if asked, plainly: "I run a delivery team; every specification and every quality check is mine, and I'm accountable for all of it." Serious buyers hear that as maturity, because it is exactly how every professional firm they already use, their accountants, their lawyers, their builders, actually works.

The brief is the business

Between the sale and the quality check sits the document that makes the whole model work, and it deserves its own few paragraphs: the build brief.

Everything the client told you, everything the diagnosis found, everything the acceptance criteria demand, has to reach the builder through this one document, because the builder never meets the client. A thin brief produces the agency version of Chapter 3's second cause of death: the contractor, briefed with nothing of the business, builds something plausible, generic and slightly wrong, and you pay for the rebuild out of your margin. A proper brief carries the context: what the business does, who the users are, the real sample material, the tone the outputs must take, the edge cases you found, the acceptance criteria verbatim, and, just as important, what is out of scope, in writing, so the contractor's quote means what you think it means.

Notice what this is. It is the briefing skill from Chapter 8, pointed at humans and machines at once, and it is the skill that compounds fastest in this model. Your tenth brief takes half the time of your first and produces a quarter of the revision cycles, because briefs, like everything else in a real agency, become templates. The operators who complain that contractors "never get it right" are, in my experience of reading their briefs, usually describing their own writing.

There is a clean test of whether your brief is done: a builder you have never worked with could quote it, build it and pass the acceptance tests without asking you a single question about the business. You will rarely hit that standard. Writing toward it is what keeps the margin.

What it costs you: sales becomes your job

Now the honest page, because this model's demands are as specific as its rewards.

Your calendar changes species. In the solo model, selling is the interruption between deliveries. In the agency model, selling is the job: the delivery hours you handed to contractors return to you as hours that must be spent filling the bench's pipeline, or the model starves. Budget the majority of your week for it, outreach, the borrowed-audience partnerships of Chapter 30, paid diagnostics, follow-up, and measure it the way you measure a client deployment, because Part VI's machinery is now your production line. Here is the self-test, the same one from Chapter 9's tie-breaker, now with money on it: if a week of pure business development sounds like a week of real work, this model will feel like freedom. If it sounds like the punishment between builds, stay solo or fractional, and do it without shame; a \$270,000 fractional practice beats a miserable agency every single year.

Management arrives whether you invited it or not. Contractors miss deadlines, misread briefs, disappear mid-project. The defences are boring and cumulative: two vetted builders before you depend on one, small paid test projects before real client work, briefs written to the acceptance criteria, and a bench deep enough that no single disappearance becomes a client-facing crisis. You are not managing employees, but you are absolutely managing, and readers who came to this model to escape managing should hear that clearly now.

And the perfectionists should self-select out. Chapter 9 said it and the field bears it out: if you cannot sign your name to competent work you would have done slightly differently, you will either redo everything, destroying the margin, or slowly poison your bench with revisions no one else thinks necessary. The standard is the acceptance criteria, not your fingerprints.

What do you get for all that? The only path in this book that decouples income from your hours: won clients stack onto a bench that scales, rather than onto a calendar that cannot. The only path that builds a sellable asset, a business with clients, contractors, method and margin, that a buyer could one day own without buying you. And a strange, real

resilience: the model that looked riskiest at the start of this chapter is, at three clients and two reliable builders, harder to kill than any job in this book, because every part of it, client, contractor, even you on a bad month, has a backup.

Run the scale arithmetic once, because it is the model's entire case. A strong solo month is three deployments, delivered by your own hands. An agency month with two reliable builders is six or eight, at the worked margin above, call it \$5,000 kept per deployment, with your hours spent on the selling and checking that made them possible. Same operator, same market, same craft: one version capped near \$300,000 a year and exhausted, the other clearing more with a calendar that can still take a new client. The difference is not talent. It is the model.

When does agency beat solo? Use the arithmetic, not the mood. Stay solo while your pipeline is thinner than your capacity, while you are still learning what good delivery looks like, because you cannot QC a standard you have never personally met, and while your income need is covered by hours you enjoy selling. Move to the agency model when demand reliably exceeds your delivery hours, when you catch yourself declining good clients or, worse, delivering badly because you are full, and when the Chapter 9 tie-breaker keeps whispering that you love the first meeting more than the build. Many readers will run the hybrid, and it is a legitimate destination, not a compromise: fractional seats you deliver personally, with an agency bench behind you for the builds. That hybrid, priced properly, is quietly the highest-income shape in this entire book.

Do this now

1. **Price your last project both ways.** Take the most recent deployment you delivered, at work, on the moonlight ladder, anywhere, and write the agency version: what a client would pay for it, what a contractor would charge to build it, and the margin percentage. If you have never delivered one, do this arithmetic on the Chapter 12 assessment product instead. You are checking one thing: does the 40% rule survive contact with your actual market?
2. **Interview two builders this month.** One contractor from a freelance platform, one white-label shop, no project attached, thirty minutes each: what they build, what they charge, how they handle revisions, how fast they start. You are not hiring; you are pricing your future bench and learning to hear the difference between a builder who wants a spec and one who wants to “explore your needs.” Keep notes. This list is agency infrastructure, and it costs nothing to start.
3. **Write acceptance criteria for something that already exists.** Pick any automation you have built or used and write its acceptance criteria after the fact: five to ten testable sentences, including the failure states. Now note what the exercise surfaced that the build missed. That gap is why criteria get written at sale time, and the page you just produced is your template for every spec you will ever hand a contractor.

Chapter 14: Second Act

This chapter is for the reader who did the arithmetic on their birth year before they did it on anything else.

You are somewhere between 45 and 60. You have twenty or thirty years of real work behind you, running operations, managing teams, holding customers, surviving restructures. And somewhere in the first chapter, a cold little thought arrived and has been sitting there since: this window is for younger people. I would be starting over. Starting over at my age is a young person's story with an old person's ending.

I am not going to talk you out of that thought with enthusiasm. I am going to take it apart with evidence, because it happens to be exactly backwards, and the market has already written the proof down.

The arbitrage

Here is the claim, stated plainly so you can hold me to it: for the specific career this book describes, twenty-five years of operational experience is not something to overcome. It is the qualification. And because almost nobody your age believes that yet, it is currently available at a discount. Buying an undervalued asset that you already own is the closest thing to free money a career will ever offer you. I call it experience arbitrage.

Walk back through the evidence you have already read, and notice whose CV it describes.

Chapter 8 established what the job is made of: literacy, briefing, judgment, translation, change management. One of those is learnable in thirty days. The other four are purchased only with years, and you have already paid. The job ads asked for adoption leadership across non-technical teams, the ability to scope work and evaluate quality, the standing to advise executives, and conspicuously did not ask for youth, code or a PhD. The role, in the phrase worth repeating from Chapter 8, is

change management dressed as a technical hire. Who has done more change management: the 28-year-old tools expert, or the person who has personally rolled out four systems, two restructures and a site move, and still remembers which ones failed and why?

Now look at who actually holds the seats. AllianceBernstein gave its first Chief AI Officer title to Andrew Chin, a man 27 years into his career at that firm, most of them running risk and quantitative research. Entergy, a utility with a century of infrastructure, made Andy Quick its AI chief on the strength of roughly thirty years of experience. The US Department of Labor promoted Mangala Kuppa, more than a decade deep in the Bureau of Labor Statistics, into its seat. Hackensack Meridian Health grew its AI leadership out of a veteran data executive. These are not exceptions sprinkled among wunderkinds. Across the dossier this book is built on, the modal new Chief AI Officer is a mid-career or late-career operator whose long institutional knowledge was the point.

And the reason is the one this book keeps arriving at from every direction. The technology is the abundant input; anyone can rent it for cents. The scarce input is knowing where a business bleeds, which of its habits are load-bearing, which manager can carry a change and which will bury it, what the regulator will actually ask, how money moves through a P&L, and how it feels in the room when a rollout is about to fail. That knowledge has exactly one supplier: time served inside real businesses. The 25-year-old cannot buy it at any price. You cannot avoid owning it.

The fourth window from Chapter 1 is, structurally, a mid-career window. The webmasters were young because HTML was the scarce skill. This time the scarce skill is business judgment, and business judgment has grey hair.

And like every arbitrage, this one closes as it gets noticed. Right now, the discount exists because your contemporaries believe the same false sentence you walked in with, so the supply of experienced operators who

have added the literacy layer is tiny. Every year, a few more of them work it out. The reader who moves in the next twelve months competes with almost nobody who shares their advantages; the reader who waits five years competes with everyone who read a book like this one and started. Windows reward the early twice: once with the opportunity, and once with the thin field.

The fears, handled honestly

Enthusiasm is cheap and you have heard plenty. Let me instead take the actual fears one at a time, and tell you the truth about each, including the uncomfortable parts.

“I’m too old to learn the technology.” This one dissolves fastest under contact. The literacy bar, as Chapter 2 said, is a kerb: thirty days of deliberate use puts you ahead of most executives in the country. These tools are operated in plain English, the language you have been briefing humans in for decades; briefing a machine is the same craft with a more patient recipient. The honest caveat: the thirty days are real days, and they require the humility of being briefly bad at something. If it has been twenty years since you were last a beginner, the first week will sting. Budget for the sting. It is the entire tuition.

“Ageism is real.” It is, and I will not insult you by pretending otherwise. Corporate hiring filters do discriminate; a 56-year-old and a 34-year-old with identical CVs do not get identical callbacks, and no amount of window will fully fix that. Now look at the structure of the four paths, because this is where honesty turns into strategy. The paths that expose you to hiring filters, applying cold for advertised seats, are exactly the paths this book de-emphasises for everyone. The paths it prescribes are the ones where age changes sign. Climbing inside converts tenure, the thing older workers have most of, into position; the promotion stories above were all long-tenure people. Moonlighting and fractional work face no hiring filter at all: they face business owners choosing an

advisor, and a business owner picking someone to re-engineer their company reliably prefers the person who has run things for twenty-five years over the impressive kid. In the advisory market your age reads as safety. You are not sneaking past the bias; you are playing the board where the bias sits on your side of the table.

“What if I look foolish?” Underneath most of the hesitation is this one: the veteran’s fear of being visibly a novice, of the younger colleague smirking at your prompt. Two things are true. First, the exposure is briefer than you think; the thirty days close most of the visible gap, and your questions after that will be better than the smirker’s answers, because yours come loaded with judgment. Second, and I say this as the encouragement of an operator, not a cheerleader: the willingness to be publicly a beginner at 52 is itself a leadership signal, and rooms notice it. The executive who says “I don’t know this yet, and I’m learning it” is more credible on every other subject too. The people who look foolish in this window are the ones bluffing.

“What if it all changes again and my new knowledge expires?”

It will change; the tools you learn this month will be superseded. But watch what actually expires. Tool knowledge, the cheap layer, churns constantly, which is precisely why it commands no premium. What you are actually building, the judgment about where machines create business value, the craft of briefing, measuring, governing and carrying humans through change, transfers across every tool generation, exactly as your management skills survived five generations of software. You are not betting your second act on a tool. You are adding one durable layer to a stack you already own.

That is the fear inventory. None of them empty, none of them disqualifying, and every one of them is being quietly used, right now, by your equally capable contemporaries as the reason to do nothing. Their inaction is your margin.

The hedge: uncuttable without the title

Now the part of this chapter I most need the 45-to-60 reader to hear, because it removes the last excuse for waiting: this plan pays off even if you never take a single title, win a single client, or earn a single consulting dollar.

Here is the uncomfortable actuarial truth of being 45 to 60 in this decade. You are, in most organisations, the expensive layer. When AI-driven restructuring arrives, and Chapter 1's numbers say it is arriving everywhere, the spreadsheet that proposes the cuts sorts by salary, and senior operational salaries sit at the top of it. The threat to your second act was never that AI takes your job. It is that a cost-cutting exercise dressed as an AI strategy takes your job, eighteen months before you were ready.

Now run the tape on everything this Part has told you to do, and watch what it does to that spreadsheet. You complete the sprint and become visibly literate. You deliver the Chapter 10 win and your name attaches to a number. You become the AI person: the one who teaches the lunch sessions, writes the sensible policy, gets consulted before tools are bought. You keep the log. Within a year, in any restructure discussion, you are no longer a line item in the automation plan. You are the automation plan. Companies do not cut the person running the transformation to fund the transformation; cutting you is the one move that visibly sets the project back a year, and every executive in the room knows it.

Picture the meeting where it pays out, because it is worth seeing concretely. A conference room, eighteen months from now. The consultants have presented the restructure options, and your division is on the slide with the red bracket around it. Someone asks the question that decides careers: "What do we lose if we lose these roles?" In the version of the meeting where you did nothing, the answer is a salary figure, and the bracket tightens. In the version where you ran this Part's

play, someone at the table says: “That’s the person running the quoting automation and the invoice system. That’s who trained the sales floor. Half the savings on the next slide are their projects.” The bracket moves. Nobody in that room is doing you a favour; they are protecting their own plan. You arranged, over eighteen unhurried months, to be inside it.

That is the hedge, and notice its unusual shape: the exact same moves that pursue the upside, seat, clients, retainers, simultaneously build the downside protection, and neither requires the other to succeed. If the title never comes, you are still the least cuttable person in the building. If the building itself fails, you walk out with a documented practice, a case study log and a live skill the market pays a 56% premium for, which is the strongest position a 55-year-old job-seeker can occupy in this economy. And if the redundancy cheque arrives anyway, it arrives to a person with rungs of a ladder already climbed and, per Chapter 9’s grid, a runway score that just improved. Every branch of the tree ends somewhere better than standing still.

Most insurance costs money. This insurance pays premiums to you.

Realistic timelines, by starting point

Cheerleading ends in disappointment; arithmetic doesn’t. Here is what the move actually takes, by starting position, assuming five to eight honest hours a week. These are planning figures, not promises, drawn from how long the stages in Chapters 10 and 11 genuinely run.

One thing before the timelines, about how the hours behave. The first month is the slowest and feels the worst; you are a beginner, and everything takes three tries. But the work compounds in a way most plans don’t, because every artifact is reusable: the case study sells the next client, the brief templates halve the next deployment, the memo format repeats forever, and your existing judgment means you skip the expensive detours that eat a younger operator’s second year. Readers your age consistently misjudge these timelines in both directions,

overestimating month one and underestimating month twelve. Budget for a bad first month. Then trust the compounding.

Employed, mid-sized organisation, seat plausible. The straightest road. Sprint in month one; visible win with a measured number by month three or four; the AI-person position, second win, teaching, the log, through months six to nine; mandate memo around month nine to twelve; the title-and-pay conversation, on the review date you set yourself, somewhere in months twelve to eighteen. Faster happens, Dollar General promoted its AI executive to the chief title in about seven months, but plan on the slower figure and let reality surprise you upward. The hedge, note, is fully in force from roughly month six.

Employed, but no plausible seat. Small company, hostile culture, or a role too far from the action. Same sprint, then straight onto the ladder: free client by month three, first paid pilot around month six, weekend retainer by month nine to twelve, second client by month fifteen to eighteen, and the resignation maths answerable at eighteen to twenty-four. Slower than the fantasy, faster than the alternative, which was zero. And the day job improves along the way, because moonlight-built skills leak backwards into your role whether you advertise them or not.

Between roles right now. The redundancy that felt like the disaster scenario is, coldly assessed, a timeline compression: you have the one asset every employed reader lacks, hours. Run the sprint in half the time. Build the Part IV proof artifacts in your first sixty days, they require no employer, only permissionless work you assign yourself. Then fork: re-enter employment as the AI person, interviewing with artifacts in hand rather than apologies for the gap, typically a three-to-six-month road; or, if your Chapter 9 network score allows, go straight at a flagship client and be reading Chapter 12 in earnest by month six. The gap on your CV is real; the counter is walking into the room with a documented capability the interviewer's current staff do not have.

Deep network, patient capital, 55 and up. The reader with three decades of industry relationships and some savings is closer than anyone in this book, and mostly doesn't believe it. One flagship client from the existing network, priced modestly and documented ruthlessly, in the first three or four months. Second and third retainers by month nine to twelve, referred, because in your network referrals are how everything has always moved. A fractional practice at the Chapter 12 numbers, \$15,000 to \$25,000 a month across three seats, is a realistic month-twelve-to-eighteen outcome, and it is a better retirement glide path than any part-time board role currently on offer to you: higher paid, more alive, and built on the asset you spent thirty years accumulating.

Look down that list once more. The longest timeline on it is about two years. You are 45 to 60; you have fifteen or twenty working years left, and the window from Chapter 1 stays open for several of them. The question was never whether there is time. The question is whether the first month starts.

Part III is done. You know the seat, you know the four roads to it, and you know which one is yours. What every road needs next is the same thing: proof, manufactured deliberately, starting from nothing, without anyone's permission. That is Part IV, and it begins with a ladder anyone can climb in thirty days.

Do this now

1. **Write the experience inventory.** One page, two columns. Left: every system rollout, restructure, process change, difficult adoption and failed initiative you have lived through in twenty-plus years, one line each. Right: what each one taught you that a 25-year-old cannot know. Read it once when finished. That page is the asset this chapter says the market is underpricing, and you will use it in every memo, pitch and interview from here.
2. **Price your hedge.** Write down what a redundancy at your current employer would actually cost you, months of search at your age, the salary haircut on re-entry, honestly estimated. Then beside it, write the cost of the hedge: five to eight hours a week for six months. Look at the two numbers together. File the page where the doubting voice can find it.
3. **Set the eighteen-month date.** Take your timeline from the section above, count forward on a calendar, and write the date down: the day the title conversation happens, or the resignation maths gets answered, or the third retainer lands. Then book the first hour of the first week, tomorrow. Second acts do not begin at some age. They begin on a date.

PART IV

The Proof

Nobody is going to appoint you on potential. The market runs on evidence, and evidence is something you can manufacture, from any job, in about thirty days, without asking anyone. This part is how.

Chapter 15: The Proof Ladder

Nobody is going to give you permission to start this career. That turns out to be the best news in this book.

Every career you have had so far ran on what I call the Title Ladder. You did the job in front of you, you waited, you applied for the next rung, and someone above you decided whether you got it. Promotion was something done to you. Your evidence was your title, and your title was granted by somebody else.

The Title Ladder is a perfectly good machine, but it only runs on one fuel: a mature field. It needs twenty years of incumbents above you, a settled definition of the job, and interviewers who can compare you against a hundred people who have already done it. Accountancy has that. Law has that. Engineering has that.

This field has none of it. A search firm analysed 8,901 AI-strategy job postings from a single year, roughly 330 new ones a week. Forty-nine percent were Director-level or above. Two percent were junior individual-contributor roles. Read that again: the market wants owners of the AI agenda, and it has almost no interest in assistants to the AI agenda. The ladder is missing its bottom rungs. There is no junior Chief AI Officer. There is no AI-leadership graduate scheme feeding the pipeline. You cannot climb what has not been built.

So how does anyone get in? The same way the webmasters and the first security officers got in. They replaced permission with evidence. They showed up holding things they had built, and the market, desperate and unable to wait for a credentialing system that did not exist, said fine, you'll do.

I call this the Proof Ladder, and this chapter hands it to you: five artifacts you can build in thirty days, from any job, on evenings and lunch breaks, without asking anyone for anything.

FIG. 10

Two ladders. Only one needs permission



Interviews, clients and mandates are all downstream of the right-hand ladder.

Two ladders. Only one needs permission.

What the market actually checks

Before the five, be clear about why artifacts work, because the evidence here is unusually one-sided.

Start with what the market does not check. Across every Chief AI Officer and Head of AI posting I have pulled apart, not one required an AI certification. The same 8,901-posting analysis found PhDs and hands-on coding ability “not emphasized as necessary qualifications.” The recruiting firms that fill these seats say it outright: no PhD required, no advanced coding, no prior C-suite time. On the anonymous forums where tech workers speak freely, the verdict on AI certificates is brutal, and the advice that follows the brutality is always the same: build real projects instead.

Now what the market does check. One healthcare software company’s Head of AI posting asked for “a track record on operationally focused technology projects that demonstrably changed how a business runs.” Sit with that sentence, because it is the entire hiring bar in plain sight. Not

credentials. Not vocabulary. A track record. Things that happened, that you caused, that can be shown.

And the interview process is built to inspect exactly that. Structured CAIO interviews open with a sixty-minute AI strategy presentation. Executive search firms ask candidates to bring a hundred-day plan, or a ten-minute AI briefing for a fictional board. A well-run search takes nineteen to twenty-two weeks, and most of those weeks are spent trying to answer one question: has this person actually done anything, or do they just talk well?

One more piece of evidence, from the other direction. A consultant posted on a tech forum asking why his new AI consulting business was failing. He had done everything the Title Ladder mindset suggests: built a website, listed his skills, bought LinkedIn ads. High cost, low clicks, zero enquiries. A stranger looked at his site and handed him the diagnosis in one line: “Nothing on the page indicates you can AI my business good. Where’s the proof?”

Where’s the proof. That question is waiting for you at every door you will knock on for the rest of this career: every interview, every client conversation, every internal pitch. The Proof Ladder is how you make sure you never hear it without an answer in your hand.

The five artifacts

An artifact is a document or a result that exists whether or not anyone asked you to make it. That is the defining property. Nobody assigns it, nobody approves it, and nobody can take it away, because it is yours, dated, with your name on it.

Here are the five, in the order you should build them. For each: what it is, how to build it, how long it takes, what it proves, and where it gets used later.

Artifact one: the before-and-after

This is one task, automated, with honest numbers on both

sides. Not a company transformation. One recurring task from your own working week, done the old way and the new way, measured.

How to build it. Pick a task you personally do at least weekly that is made of words, numbers or patterns: a report section, a batch of replies, data moved between two systems, a summary written from something longer. For one week, do it the old way and time it, every instance, honestly. That is your baseline, and you must capture it before you change anything, for reasons Chapter 17 makes painful. Then build the AI-assisted version: a properly briefed prompt, a saved workflow, whatever the task needs. Run it for two weeks. Record the new time, including every minute you spent correcting the output, because the corrections are part of the truth.

Then write both numbers down with the date. “Weekly sales summary: 70 minutes before, 12 minutes after, of which 5 are my review. Output quality equal or better nine weeks out of ten. Tool cost: under a dollar a month.”

Time required: about three weeks of elapsed time, perhaps four hours of actual work.

What it proves: that you are an operator, not a commentator. Thousands of people can talk about AI. You automated something real and measured it like an adult, including the part where the machine needed correcting. The honesty is not decoration. The honest limitation in your write-up is what makes the rest of it believable.

Where it gets used: it is your answer to “what have you actually done with AI,” which is the first real question in every interview. It becomes a LinkedIn post that outperforms any opinion piece you could write. And it is the raw material for artifact five.

Artifact two: the public teardown

This is a short written analysis of where AI would move money in a company you do not work for, built entirely from public information.

How to build it. Pick a public company or a well-known business in an industry you understand. Spend two evenings with what anyone can see: their website, their annual report if listed, their job ads, their customer reviews, their published complaints. Then apply the lens from Chapter 3. Where does the repetitive words-and-numbers work live? What are they hiring humans to do that reads like a machine's job description? What do their reviews complain about that a response-time system would fix? Write 600 to 800 words: three specific places AI would change their economics, what each is roughly worth, and what you would do first. Real observations, careful arithmetic, no jargon.

Time required: two evenings.

What it proves: diagnostic thinking. Anyone can say “companies should use AI.” You looked at one specific business from the outside and found where the money leaks. That is the skill the seat is paid for, demonstrated in miniature.

Where it gets used: this artifact is a rehearsal in disguise. Remember what interviews for these roles actually demand: a strategy presentation, a board briefing, a hundred-day plan. Those are teardowns of the employer. If you have written three teardowns of other companies, you walk into that room having already rehearsed the exam. It also posts well, and it is the direct ancestor of the Shadow Audit in the next chapter, which is the same move aimed at a specific target with intent.

Artifact three: the one-page AI policy

This is a draft AI use policy for a real business, in plain English, on one page.

How to build it. Write it for your current employer, whether or not they asked, or for a business you know well. One page, five sections, no legal cosplay. Which AI tools are approved for use. What information must never be put into them, named specifically: customer personal details, health information, unreleased financials, anything under NDA. Who approves a new tool or use case, by name or role. What gets human review before it leaves the building, which for now should be everything customer-facing. And what happens when something goes wrong: who gets told, and how fast.

Time required: one evening. Three hours, maybe less, because the machine itself will draft it and your job is to make it true and make it short.

What it proves: governance instincts, and this is worth more than it looks. Recall from Chapter 7 that governance is the disqualifier axis of this profession. One published board-level interview rubric scores candidates across twelve questions and states that any zero on governance and risk is an automatic disqualification. Entire seats at insurers and state governments exist purely to own this. A one-page policy shows you take the risk seriously and, rarer, that you can make safety legible to normal humans instead of burying it in forty pages nobody reads.

Where it gets used: it is your evidence when an interviewer asks how you have handled data risk. It is almost always the first thing a nervous small-business client asks for, and you will have it in the drawer. And later, as a fractional operator, a version of this document is something clients pay real retainer money to receive.

Artifact four: the vendor evaluation

This is a one-page assessment of one AI product sold into your industry, built from a demo you sat through on purpose.

How to build it. Find a tool being marketed to your industry with AI on the label. Book the demo; vendors will happily give an hour to anyone with a work email. Then ask the three show-me questions, which you will use for the rest of your career.

First: **show me which model does the work.** Most AI products are a thin layer over the same models you already use for cents. You are asking what the wrapper adds and what the markup is, and whether the product survives its underlying model changing.

Second: **show me a customer like us, and the number that moved for them.** Not a logo wall. A named or nameable business of similar size, and the metric that changed. Watch how fast the conversation gets vague.

Third: **show me what happens when it gets something wrong.** Every AI system is sometimes wrong. The serious vendors can show you the checking, the flagging, the human handoff. The act-collapse happens right here, because the unserious ones have never been asked.

Write one page on what you found, including what the vendor answered well.

Time required: two hours plus the demo.

What it proves: that you can protect a buyer. Boards specifically probe candidates about vendor AI that aced the proof-of-concept and then degraded in production; one rubric flags any candidate who claims that has never happened to them. Having run even one sceptical evaluation puts you ahead of executives who have signed six-figure contracts on a demo and a feeling.

Where it gets used: interviews, again. Client conversations, constantly, because “should we buy this tool” is among the first questions every business asks its AI person. And it makes a quietly authoritative LinkedIn post, provided you write it fair rather than savage.

Artifact five: the results memo

This is one page reporting the result of artifact one, written the way an executive needs to read it.

How to build it. Take your before-and-after and write it in four moves: baseline, change, number, next. What the task used to cost and how you measured it. What you changed, in one plain sentence. What the numbers say now, including what the fix costs to run and where it still needs a human. What you recommend next: the same treatment applied to the two adjacent tasks you have already spotted.

Time required: one hour, because artifacts are compounding and the hard work is already done.

What it proves: that you can report like an executive, which is its own scarce skill and the entire subject of Chapter 18. Plenty of technically capable people can produce results. The ones who can make results legible to money are the ones who end up owning the function.

Where it gets used: everywhere, forever. The results memo is the atom of this career. Fractional CAIOs anchor five-figure monthly retainers on a steady rhythm of exactly this document. The one you write this month is the first rep of the habit that will one day justify your invoice.

The thirty days

Here is the whole ladder on a calendar, assuming a job, a family, and no permission from anyone.

Week one. Choose your task and start the baseline clock on it. Book the vendor demo for week four. Pick your teardown company and start collecting what you notice.

Week two. Build the automated version of your task and start running it. Write the teardown across two evenings.

Week three. Keep measuring. Draft the one-page policy in one evening.

Week four. Sit the vendor demo, ask the three questions, write the page. Close out your task numbers and write the results memo.

Total cost: perhaps twelve to fifteen hours of work you control, spread across a month. At the end you hold five dated documents with your name on them. Most people applying for AI roles right now hold zero. That is not a rhetorical flourish; it is what hiring managers report seeing, and it is why the stranger's question, where's the proof, eliminates almost everyone it is asked of.

Where the ladder leads

The five artifacts are not five separate tricks. They are one portfolio, and it goes to work in three places.

Interviews. Every stage of the CAIO interview process maps to something you now hold. Asked for a strategy view, you have teardowns. Asked about governance, you have the policy. Asked about vendors, you have the evaluation and its three questions. Asked what you have actually done, you have the before-and-after and the memo that reports it. You are no longer answering hypotheticals; you are handing over evidence.

Outreach. The next chapter weaponises artifact two into the Shadow Audit, the single move most likely to land you a client or a seat. It only works because it arrives as proof rather than promise. One consultant in my research files wrote a technical comparison post, published it, and weeks later a CEO cold-messed him and became his first direct client. Proof travels. Claims do not.

Public record. Five artifacts are five weeks of LinkedIn posts that demonstrate instead of assert. You never need to write "I am passionate about AI" ever again, which is fortunate, because that sentence has never once been read by anyone who believed it.

A note on how artifacts age, because it is the opposite of how resumes age. A resume line goes stale the day you write it. A dated artifact appreciates: the before-and-after from this month becomes “I have been measuring AI deployments since 2026” in two years’ time, which is exactly the experience claim the closing window will make unbuyable. Keep every artifact, keep the dates on them, and add one a month. The portfolio you start this week is the one the 2028 job ads will demand and almost nobody will have.

And notice what was never required at any rung: permission. You did not ask your boss, your IT department, a university or a certifying body. The Title Ladder hands you a rung when someone else decides you are ready. The Proof Ladder is climbed at will, and the market at this moment in history, short of supply and burned by the 95%, has agreed to accept it. That agreement is the window. It will not stay open forever, but it is open now, and it costs thirty days to walk through.

Do this now

1. **Put the thirty days in your diary tonight.** Four weekly blocks, named: baseline, build, policy, memo. Treat them like client appointments, because that is what they are: the client is the version of you that holds the portfolio.
2. **Start the baseline clock tomorrow.** Pick the one recurring task from your week that most obviously belongs to the machine, and begin timing the old way. Do not build anything yet. The baseline is the artifact everyone skips and everyone regrets skipping.
3. **Book one vendor demo this week.** Any AI product aimed at your industry. Write the three show-me questions in your notes before the call. You are about to conduct your first vendor evaluation, and the vendor will never suspect the demo was for your benefit, not theirs.

Chapter 16: The Shadow Audit

This chapter teaches you one move. It is the signature move of this book, the highest-leverage hour you will spend on this career, and almost nobody will ever do it, which is precisely why it works.

Here is the move in one paragraph. You pick a business you can observe from the outside. You study it the way a diagnostician studies a patient: their website, their job ads, their reviews, their chatbot, their response times. You write a two-page memo on what AI would change in their business, specifically theirs, with their evidence in it. And you send it to the owner or CEO, by name, asking for nothing.

That is a Shadow Audit. It costs you three or four evenings. And it solves, in one document, the problem that kills almost everyone who tries to enter this field: how do you get a stranger with money to take you seriously before you have a track record they recognise?

Why proof outranks promotion

Recall the consultant from Chapter 15 who bought LinkedIn ads for his AI consultancy and got zero enquiries, and the stranger who diagnosed the corpse in one line: “Where’s the proof?”

Advertising yourself as an AI person is a claim. Claims arrive in a stream of identical claims; every business owner’s inbox now contains a daily sludge of people who “help companies leverage AI.” The owner cannot tell you from the sludge, so the sludge wins and everyone loses.

A Shadow Audit is not a claim. It is a work sample, addressed to an audience of one, about the thing that audience cares about most in the world: their own business. The owner has never received one before. It demonstrates, rather than asserts, every capability the market is trying to buy: diagnosis, business sense, communication, and the nerve to do work before being asked.

There is a commercial logic under it too. Paid AI assessments, the entry product of nearly every fractional CAIO practice, sell for anywhere from \$750 for a strategy intensive to \$35,000 for a full enterprise diagnostic. The Shadow Audit is a free sample of exactly that product, small enough to give away, real enough to prove the shop is worth entering. In Chapter 29 you will see the paid version; this chapter is how the paid version gets its first buyers.

And the same document works on employers, which we will come to. First, the craft.

Choosing the target

Not every business can be shadow-audited well. You want three properties.

You can see them from outside. They interact with the public: a website that sells or quotes, published reviews, visible response channels, active hiring. A business that is a logo and a phone number gives you nothing to observe. Service businesses are ideal: legal, accounting, conveyancing, trades, medical and allied health, real estate, recruitment, logistics, anyone who quotes for work.

The decision-maker is reachable. Owner-led businesses between roughly ten and a hundred staff are the sweet spot. Big enough that the leaks are worth real money, small enough that the owner reads their own email. The owner's name is on the website or one search away.

You know the industry, or can learn its shape in an evening. Your twenty years in whatever you have done is an unfair advantage here. Audit the industry you came from. You already know where its bodies are buried; the audit just puts dates and dollars on the graves.

Boring businesses are the best businesses for this. Chapter 27 builds you a list of fifty; for now, pick three you personally know exist and would not be embarrassed to email.

The outside study

You are gathering evidence, and evidence means things you observed, timed, counted or quoted, not things you assume. Work through this list. Two evenings covers it.

Test their response time. Send a genuine-shaped enquiry through their website form or email. Start a stopwatch. The reply time, and the quality of the reply, is usually the single most valuable observation in the audit, because speed-to-first-response is where service businesses bleed and almost none of them measure it.

Use their chatbot, if they have one. Ask it three questions a real customer would ask. Record what it gets wrong. A bad chatbot is doubly useful to you: it proves they have spent money on AI, and it proves nobody owns the result.

Mine their reviews. Read the last thirty on Google and anywhere else they accumulate. Ignore the star average; read for operational patterns. “Slow to respond.” “Had to chase them for updates.” “Invoice was wrong.” Count the mentions. Customer reviews are a free operations audit conducted continuously by people with no reason to lie, and almost no owner reads them as data.

Read their job ads. This is the X-ray. A job ad is a company’s confession of its manual labour. When they hire an “administration assistant” to do data entry, prepare standard letters and chase documents, they have published a machine’s job description with a salary attached. Save the exact wording; you will quote it.

Walk their public process. Request a quote and note every step and every day it takes. Check whether their pricing requires a phone call. Ring after hours and listen to what happens. Look at how long their published content, prices or case studies have sat untouched.

Estimate the arithmetic. From staff count, industry averages and what you observed, sketch what the leaks cost. You will present these as

frames, not facts, because you are outside the walls; honesty about that is part of the memo's power.

Writing the memo

Two pages, maximum. Five sections. Plain English throughout, no AI vocabulary at all, and every claim anchored to something you observed.

What I noticed. Four to six observations, each concrete, each with its evidence: the timestamp, the review count, the job-ad quote. No interpretation yet. This section does most of the persuading, because the owner is reading facts about their own business that they half-know and have never seen written down by an outsider.

What it likely costs. The arithmetic frames. "If X is true, this is worth roughly Y a year" sentences, using their numbers where visible and industry numbers where not, with the assumptions shown. You are handing them a calculation they can correct, which is a conversation, which is the goal.

What AI would change. Three specific changes, ranked, each in the shape: the task, what the machine does, what the human still does, what it is worth. No products named, no jargon. This is Chapter 2's capability list pointed at their evidence.

What I would do first. One of the three, chosen for speed and low risk, with a rough timeline measured in weeks. Owners trust people who sequence. Enthusiasts recommend everything at once; operators say "this one first, and here is why."

Who I am and what I want. Three sentences. Your one-line background, the honest disclosure that this was built from the outside, and a single low-pressure offer of twenty minutes on the phone. No pricing, no services list, no attachment titled Capabilities Deck.

A complete example

The company below is invented, and I want that clearly on the record: Coastline Conveyancing does not exist, and the numbers are illustrative. But every observation technique in the memo is real, everything in it is the kind of thing you genuinely can see from outside a firm like this, and the arithmetic is the kind you will do. This is the standard you are aiming at. It fits on two pages.

To: Maria [surname], Principal, Coastline Conveyancing From: [Your name] Re: Five things I noticed about Coastline from the outside, and what they might be worth

Maria,

You don't know me, and this isn't a sales letter. I'm a [your one-liner: e.g. operations manager of fifteen years] who now works on applying AI inside ordinary businesses. I spent a few evenings studying Coastline from the outside, the way a prospective client would experience it. Here's what I found. Some of it will be wrong, because I'm outside the walls. Where I'm wrong, you'll know within a minute of reading.

What I noticed

- 1. I sent an enquiry through your website form on Tuesday at 9:40am, asking for a quote on a standard residential purchase. The reply arrived Thursday at 4:15pm: 55 hours later. It was a friendly, well-written email. It also arrived after I would already have chosen a conveyancer, if I'd been a real buyer collecting the usual three quotes.*
- 2. Your Google reviews average 4.3 stars across 61 reviews, which is strong. But of your last 30 reviews, 8 mention some version of "had to chase for updates" or "slow to hear back", including two 5-star reviews that praise the outcome and complain about the silence. Your happiest clients are telling you the same thing as your unhappiest ones.*
- 3. You're currently advertising for a Conveyancing Assistant. The ad lists "data entry of contract details into our practice management*

system, preparation of standard letters, and following up outstanding documents from clients and agents.” Those three duties are, almost word for word, the three tasks AI systems now do reliably under human review.

4. Your website’s quote process requires a phone call for anything beyond a basic price range. Two of the three competitors that appear beside you in search results show instant online estimates.

5. I rang at 5:20pm on a weekday and got voicemail. Buyers mostly research conveyancers after work.

What this likely costs

You’ll have the real numbers; here’s the frame. If Coastline receives around 15 quote enquiries a week and a 55-hour first response loses even 2 of them to same-day competitors, at your published fixed fee of \$1,320 that’s roughly \$137,000 a year in matters lost to response speed alone. Separately, the assistant role you’re advertising is presumably \$60,000 to \$70,000 plus on-costs, and on the ad’s own wording, most of that role is machine-shaped work.

What AI would change

First, enquiry-to-quote in under 15 minutes. Incoming enquiries get a drafted, personalised quote and reply within minutes; a staff member reviews and sends. Nothing goes out unchecked. This directly attacks the \$137,000 frame above.

Second, proactive matter updates. A weekly plain-English status update drafted automatically from each file’s activity, reviewed and sent by your team. This is aimed squarely at the 8-in-30 reviews, and at the inbound “just checking in” calls that interrupt your staff all day.

Third, contract data entry. Contract details extracted automatically into your practice system for a human to verify rather than retype. This

changes the assistant role you're hiring for from data entry to client care, which your reviews suggest is where the hours should go.

What I would do first

The enquiry response. It's two to three weeks of work, it touches nothing inside your existing files, every outgoing message still gets human eyes, and you'd measure the result in one number you already care about: quotes won.

Who I am

[Two sentences of background.] I built this from public information only, so treat the numbers as conversation-starters, not findings. If any of it lands, I'd genuinely enjoy 20 minutes on the phone to hear where I'm right and wrong. If not, keep the memo with my compliments; point 3 is worth acting on with or without me.

Read that memo again and notice what it never does. It never says "AI is transforming everything." It never lists services. It never pressures. It makes one small ask and gives the value away regardless. The confidence is in the observations, not the adjectives.

Sending it, and what actually happens next

Send it to the owner by name, as a short email with the memo in the body or as a clean one-attachment PDF. Subject lines that work are specific and unsalesy: "Five things I noticed about Coastline from the outside." If you can find no email, use LinkedIn, or post it. Physical letters to owners get opened at rates marketers would kill for.

Now the honest part, because this book does not sell fantasies. Most of these memos will get no reply. The owner is busy, your email arrived during a fire, or it was read, appreciated and never answered, which happens constantly and stings the most. If you send one audit and wait by the phone, you will conclude the method fails. The method is a

numbers game played with high-quality pieces. Over twenty well-chosen, well-built audits, expect a handful of replies and one or two real conversations. That expectation is not a consolation prize; a single real conversation is the entire objective, because of what one conversation converts into in a market this short of credible people.

The record backs the low-and-worth-it maths. In my research files: a first AI client acquired for \$150 from a Facebook comment thread, a procurement manager whose single internal result became the case study that landed an \$8,000 external project within two weeks, a consultant whose one published analysis produced a CEO's cold message and his first direct client. First doors in this field open on one artifact reaching one right person. The audit is you choosing the person instead of waiting for the collision.

Follow up on a cadence, then stop. Day three or four: a two-line reply to your own email, adding nothing, asking if it arrived. Day ten to twelve: one new observation, because their business kept generating evidence while they ignored you, and a fresh data point re-opens the memo without nagging. Day twenty-one: a graceful close, in writing, that leaves the door open and your dignity intact: you're glad they have the memo, point 3 stands, no reply needed. Then leave them alone, and re-approach in a quarter if something changes. Three touches and a close. Never more.

Jobs and clients, same key

Everything above reads like client acquisition, and it is. But run the identical move at an employer and it becomes the strangest job application they have ever received, in the best way.

Picture a company advertising a Head of AI role, or one you simply want to work inside. The standard path is a resume into a stack of two hundred. The Shadow Audit path is the same two-page memo, built on their public evidence, sent to the hiring manager or CEO with one

sentence changed at the end: instead of offering twenty minutes, you note you have applied for the role, or that you'd want a conversation about whether the role should exist.

Remember what the interview process for these seats actually is: a strategy presentation, a plan for the first hundred days, a briefing for the board. The Shadow Audit is that exam, sat early, voluntarily, before anyone asked. Recruiters running these searches spend nineteen to twenty-two weeks trying to distinguish people who talk from people who look at a business and see. You just showed them, in the first paragraph, which kind you are. It will not always work. It only has to work once, and it filters you into a conversation the resume stack never reaches.

What the audit filters for

One last thing, and it is really about you.

The Shadow Audit has no gatekeeper. It needs no employer's sign-off, no certification, no budget beyond your evenings. Which means the only thing that stops it happening is the person holding this book. In my experience most readers of any business book do nothing; the audit is cheerfully indifferent to them. It selects for exactly the traits the seat itself demands: the nerve to do work before being invited, the diligence to observe instead of assume, and the resilience to send twenty and hear back from two.

It filters the other side too. An owner who reads an unrequested, useful, honest memo and picks up the phone is curious, decisive and open to outside thinking. That is the best client profile in this book and a better-than-average boss. The audit finds them for you. The sludge never will.

Three evenings. Two pages. One right reader. That is the move.

Do this now

1. **Shortlist three businesses tonight.** Observable from outside, reachable owner, an industry you know. Write one sentence each on why they made the list. Chapter 27's fifty-business method will widen this later; three is enough to start.
2. **Run the outside study on the first one this week.** Send the test enquiry and start the stopwatch, read the last thirty reviews with a tally sheet, and save their current job ads verbatim. You will have your "what I noticed" section before the weekend.
3. **Write and send one complete Shadow Audit within fourteen days.** Two pages, five sections, the example memo as your quality bar, follow-up dates in your diary before you hit send. The first one is the hardest and the worst you will ever write. Send it anyway; the second one is better, and the fifth one is the version somebody answers.

Chapter 17: Your First Win

The most important AI deployment of your career will be the smallest one. It will save one business a few hours a week, most people will never hear about it, and everything you build for the next decade will grow out of it.

This chapter is about choosing and shipping that first visible win: one task, in one business, automated, measured, and reported inside thirty days. Get this right and you have the seed of every chapter that follows: the case study for your Shadow Audits, the story for your interviews, the first line of the track record that Chapter 15 showed you the market actually checks. Get it wrong, and you join the 95% you read about in Chapter 3, with the added sting of having done it to yourself.

The good news is that getting it right is mostly a matter of selection, and selection follows rules. Here they are.

Why the first one is different

Your first win has a different job from every win after it.

Later deployments earn their keep in dollars. The first one earns its keep in proof. It exists to demonstrate, with a number attached, that you can take this technology into a real working environment and make something measurably better. The dollar value of the win itself almost does not matter. A documented saving of six hours a week beats an undocumented transformation, every single time, because the documented win can be shown, and the market runs on what can be shown.

There is a real case in my research files that makes the point better than I can. A procurement manager at a manufacturing company, no computer science background, used AI on his own patch and cut procurement costs by 20%. One internal result. That single result became a case study, and

the case study landed him his first external consulting project, worth \$8,000, within two weeks. Notice the sequence: not credentials, then clients. Result, then story, then clients. The first win is the result. Everything else is downstream.

Another first-client story from the files ends with the lesson stated outright: one niche, one painful problem, one small but useful workflow, one person willing to say yes, one result worth talking about. Read that list again. Nothing on it is large. Everything on it is specific.

So the question is not “what is the most valuable thing I could automate?” The question is “what is the surest thing I can automate, measure and report inside a month?” Different question, different answer, and the difference is the 95%.

The four criteria

Score every candidate task against four criteria. A task must pass all four. Three out of four is a trap, and I will show you where each trap leads.

Recurring. The task happens at least weekly, ideally daily. Recurrence is what makes measurement possible and what makes savings compound. Automating the annual report saves you once a year and proves almost nothing, because a sample of one is an anecdote. Automating the Monday quote backlog saves you fifty-two times a year and gives you a dataset by week three. If it does not recur, it cannot be your first win.

Measurable. A number must exist on both sides of the change. Minutes per instance, instances per week, days of turnaround, error rate, backlog size. If you cannot state the task’s current cost in a sentence with a number in it, you cannot claim the improvement in a sentence with a number in it, and an unquantified win is not a win, it is a vibe. Some genuinely valuable tasks are hard to measure. Fine. They can be your fourth win. Not your first.

Hated. The task should be one the people doing it actively resent: the retyping, the chasing, the formatting, the report nobody thanks them for. This is not sentiment, it is adoption physics. People defend work they like and surrender work they hate. Automate something a person enjoys or takes pride in, and you have made an enemy who will quietly starve your system; automate the thing they groan about, and you have made an ally who will fight to keep your system alive. Since Chapter 3 taught you that unowned systems die, allies are infrastructure. A useful test: if the task were taken away tomorrow, would anyone feel diminished? If yes, pick another task.

Low blast radius. If it fails, and early versions will sometimes fail, nothing public and nothing irreversible breaks. Internal drafts, not customer-facing sends. Suggestions into a human's hands, not actions into the world. A wrong internal summary costs a correction; a wrong quote emailed to a customer costs trust you cannot refund. Your first win runs where mistakes are cheap, which is also, not coincidentally, where a human review step fits naturally. Every system in this chapter keeps a person between the machine and the outside world.

Where do such tasks live? You already know, because Chapter 3's fourth question finds them in any business in one sentence: where does the most repetitive words-and-numbers work happen here? The answers cluster in the same places in every company I have ever walked through. The inbox that gets triaged by hand. The data moved between two systems that do not talk. The weekly report assembled from the same four sources. The follow-up that everyone agrees should happen and nobody reliably does. The quote, the summary, the status update, the chasing. Boring, all of it. Chapter 27 calls this the Boring Goldmine for a reason.

Baseline first, always first

Now the rule that separates professionals from enthusiasts, and it is a rule about sequence.

Before you change anything, capture the number you will later compare against. Not after. Not alongside. Before.

The baseline is boring and it takes a week and every instinct will tell you to skip it and start building, because building is fun and counting is not. Do not skip it. Here is the uncomfortable truth about retrofitted baselines: they are guesses, everyone can smell that they are guesses, and they convert your result from a fact into a claim. “We used to spend about a day on this, I think” is the sound of a win evaporating in a meeting. “We logged it for a week: 11.5 hours across 23 instances” is the sound of a career starting.

Baselining is not complicated. For one week, the task gets logged every time it happens: who did it, how long it took, and any quality marker that matters, like errors caught or turnaround from request to delivery. A shared note or a simple spreadsheet is plenty. Then the arithmetic: instances per week, times minutes per instance, times the loaded hourly cost of the people doing it. Chapter 1 gave you the \$35-an-hour frame for a \$70,000 employee. Write the weekly figure down, with the date and the method. That number is now the most valuable sentence in your future results memo.

Capture the quality baseline too, not just the time. How many got done late? How many contained errors? How often did the follow-up simply not happen? Some of your best wins will show up in those numbers rather than the hours, because a follow-up that now goes out every time, as Chapter 2 put it, was never costing hours. It was costing revenue.

The thirty-day shape

Here is the deployment on a calendar. It deliberately rhymes with the Proof Ladder month from Chapter 15, and if you are doing this inside

your own job, they can be the same month.

Week one: baseline and design. Log the task all week. While the log fills, design the new version: what the machine drafts, what the human checks, where the output lands. Brief the machine properly, with everything Chapter 2 taught you: audience, context, what good looks like, real examples of past output. The lazy prompt produces the generic work that made half the 95% give up.

Weeks two and three: build and shadow-run. Build the workflow, then run it alongside the old way, not instead of it. The machine drafts; the human who owns the task compares, corrects and sends. Shadow-running costs a little extra effort for a fortnight and buys you two priceless things: proof of quality before anything depends on it, and the task-owner's trust, earned by letting them judge the machine's work rather than be replaced by it. Log everything the machine gets wrong and fix the briefing as you go; week two's corrections are usually the best training material the system will ever get.

Week four: measure, decide, hand over. Rerun the baseline week's measurements on the new way of working. Compare honestly, including the review time and the tool cost, because inflated claims are a loan against your credibility that always comes due. If the numbers are good, retire the old way, name the owner who runs it from here, and write the one-page results memo: baseline, change, number, next. Chapter 18 will polish that memo; for now, write it while the numbers are a day old.

And to be clear about the finish line: **shipped means someone other than you uses it in the normal course of their work.** A workflow only you touch is a demo. A demo is not a win.

What the month looks like from the inside

Picture an operations coordinator at a sixty-staff wholesale distributor. No technical background, no mandate, just this book and a candidate

list.

The task that scores four out of four is the one she already dreads: “where’s my order” emails. Twenty-odd a day, each one meaning open the order system, find the shipment, translate the status codes into a sentence a customer can read, write the reply. She logs them for a week without changing anything: 118 emails, a little over six minutes each, twelve hours across the team, plus four replies that went out with the wrong delivery date because someone misread a code.

Week two, she builds the boring version of the fix. The order status gets pasted in, the machine drafts the customer reply in the company’s tone, and the person answering reads, corrects and sends. Nothing touches the order system itself. Nothing goes out without human eyes. Blast radius: a bad draft that gets fixed before sending.

Weeks two and three, the shadow run. The team keeps working normally but starts from the machine’s draft instead of a blank reply. She logs the corrections. The first days are rough: the drafts are too formal, they apologise too much, they do not know that “held at depot” usually means call the courier. Each correction goes back into the briefing. By the end of week three the drafts are going out barely touched.

Week four, she reruns the count: under two minutes per email, review included, and zero wrong dates in the fortnight, because the machine does not misread codes when the codes are in front of it. Ten hours a week back, error rate to zero, cost a few dollars a month. She names the owner, writes the one-page memo, and sends it to her manager on Friday.

Nothing in that month required permission, code, or budget. And that coordinator is now the only person in a sixty-staff company holding a dated, measured AI result. Chapter 10 is about what she does with that position, and it is a strong one.

The three ways people blow it

I have watched each of these mistakes kill a first deployment, and the punchline is that all three feel like good decisions at the time.

Mistake one: picking the impressive thing. The gravitational pull is always towards the demo-friendly project: the chatbot on the website, the flashy assistant, the thing that will look good when the MD walks past. Chapter 3 already did the autopsy on this: visible beats valuable, and then the visible thing answers a tenth of its questions correctly and the front desk tells callers to ignore it. Impressive projects have high blast radius, hard measurement and public failure modes, which is to say they violate three of the four criteria at once. There is a place for ambition; it is your sixth deployment, not your first. First wins are boring on purpose. The impressiveness lives in the number.

Mistake two: automating something that should die. Before you automate any task, ask the question almost nobody asks: should this task exist at all? Picture a weekly report that takes four hours to assemble, and the discovery, one honest conversation later, that nobody has acted on it in a year. The enthusiast automates it and proudly produces the unread report ninety percent faster. The operator kills it, saves all four hours, and spends nothing. A killed task is a better result than an automated one: bigger saving, zero build cost, zero maintenance. Here is the professional's endorsement of that instinct: one board-level CAIO interview rubric specifically asks candidates to describe a use case they refused to pursue, and flags as a red light anyone who cannot recall killing a project. The willingness to not automate is scored, at the top of this profession, as a qualification. Practise it on your first candidate list.

Mistake three: no baseline. The mistake this chapter has already lectured you about, listed again because it is the most common of the three and the only one that is unfixable afterwards. Build first and measure later, and there is no later; the old way is gone and its cost left no record. You will be left saying “it feels much faster,” which is an

anecdote wearing a suit. No baseline, no number. No number, no memo. No memo, no proof, and Chapter 15 showed you what the market says to people without proof.

A fourth, smaller trap for the employed reader: doing all this in secret. There is a whole chapter, Chapter 10, on converting internal wins into an internal seat, and its machinery works far better when your manager watched the win happen. Your own tasks need nobody's permission to improve. But improve them in daylight.

The seed

Zoom out to see what you are actually holding at the end of the thirty days, because it is more than a saved half-day a week.

You hold a dated baseline, a working system with a named owner, an honest measured result, and a one-page memo. That small stack of paper is the seed of everything in the back half of this book.

Carry it forward with me. The results memo becomes the case study inside your next Shadow Audit, and an audit with a real, personally-achieved number in it hits harder than any hypothetical: this is not what AI could do, it is what I did. The win becomes your answer to the interview question every CAIO process opens with, what have you actually done, and yours comes with a method, a number and a scar or two, which Chapter 18 will show you is exactly what the interviewers are screening for. Inside your company, the win is the moment you stop being someone interested in AI and start being the person who did the thing with the invoices, which is the first rung of the internal ladder in Chapter 10. And when Part V hands you the full deployment loop, you will recognise it, because the thirty-day shape you just ran is that loop in miniature: assess, pick, baseline, build, pilot, measure, hand off. You will run it dozens of times for clients at \$5,000 a month and up. This month was the free rehearsal.

One task. One number. Thirty days. The procurement manager's 20% started exactly this size, and two weeks after he wrote it down, it was paying him.

Do this now

1. **List five candidate tasks tonight, then score them.** Four columns: recurring, measurable, hated, low blast radius. Only tasks scoring four out of four survive. If nothing survives, your candidates are too grand; halve their size and score again. Then, for each survivor, ask the killer question: should this task exist at all? Anything that deserves death, mark for killing instead of automating. Cheapest win in the book.
2. **Start the baseline Monday.** One week, every instance logged: minutes, person, errors, turnaround. Put the log somewhere the task's owner can see, and tell them what you are doing and why. Daylight, remember. By Friday you will own a number almost nobody in your company has ever bothered to capture.
3. **Book the thirty days in your diary before the baseline week ends.** Week one baseline and design, weeks two and three build and shadow-run, week four measure and memo. Set the final entry now, titled "write results memo," because the next chapter is going to show you exactly what to put in it, and why that one page is worth more than the automation itself.

Chapter 18: Speak Money, Not Model

“We deployed a RAG pipeline with vector embeddings across our document corpus.”

That sentence, spoken proudly in a leadership meeting, has ended more AI careers than any failed project ever has. Not because it is false. Because it is inaudible. The executives in the room heard a foreign language, concluded the speaker lives in a world that does not touch theirs, and filed them under technical resource: useful, replaceable, and never, ever promoted into the seat this book is about.

Now the same work, reported by someone who understands what this chapter teaches: “Quote turnaround fell from nine days to 24 hours.”

Same project. Same technology. One sentence builds a career and one quietly buries it, and the difference is not spin. It is translation. Executives run companies on two units, money and time, and they trust information exactly in proportion to how directly it arrives in those units. The person who can take what the machine did and render it in money and time is speaking the only language in which the seat is offered.

This chapter installs that discipline permanently. It has three parts: the results memo, which is the discipline in document form; the translation table, which is the discipline sentence by sentence; and the failure story, which is the discipline applied to the moment you fear most and need most.

The translator premium is the whole premium

First, be convinced this matters as much as I am claiming, because the evidence is blunt.

Go back to the job ads from Chapter 4. One Head of AI posting asks for “strong judgment connecting technical work to customer value, revenue impact, cost control.” Another wants projects that “demonstrably changed how a business runs.” The analysis of 8,901 postings found hands-on coding conspicuously not emphasised. The interview guides used to score CAIO candidates say the winning trait out loud: the ability to explain technical strategies and decisions in business terms, outcomes rather than technical details.

Read the market’s two hands together. One hand: we do not particularly need you to build it. Other hand: we absolutely need you to connect it to money. The premium in “translator premium” is not a bonus on top of the job. It is the job. The recruiting firms that fill these seats describe the role as change management dressed as a technical hire, and change management is conducted entirely in sentences that decision-makers can hear.

There is also a defensive reason to care. Chapter 3 showed you companies burned by the 95%: money spent, nothing measurable, an executive somewhere who does not want to explain the same failure twice. When you speak model, you sound like the people who burned them. When you speak money, you sound like the cure. Fairly or not, vocabulary is the first credibility test you sit in every room, and it is pass-fail.

The results memo

The core artifact of the money language is one page long, and you already met it at the top of the Proof Ladder. The results memo has four moves, in order: **baseline**, **change**, **number**, **next**. Learn the four moves and you can report anything, to anyone, for the rest of your career.

Baseline. What the work cost before, and how you know. One or two sentences, method included. “Quoting was measured across three weeks in March: median nine days from enquiry to quote sent, 31 staff hours a

week across two estimators.” The method matters because the method is what makes the number a fact rather than a feeling, which is why Chapter 17 made you capture it before you built anything.

Change. What you did, in one plain sentence a fifteen-year-old could repeat. “Incoming enquiries now get a drafted quote automatically; an estimator checks and sends each one.” Notice what is absent: every tool name, every technique, every acronym. If the reader wants the technical detail, it lives in a footnote or an appendix, where curiosity can find it and where it cannot obscure the point.

Number. What moved, stated honestly, with the costs and the caveats in the same paragraph. “Median turnaround is now 24 hours. Estimator review takes 20 minutes per quote. Tool costs are \$140 a month. Two quotes in the first fortnight needed full rework; both were non-standard jobs, which still go to a human first.” The caveats are not humility theatre. They are what makes the headline number believable, and they quietly demonstrate that you measure like someone who can be trusted with a bigger budget.

Next. The decision you are asking for, or the target you are taking next. A memo without a next is a scrapbook entry. “Recommend applying the same treatment to the follow-up sequence; baseline measurement starts Monday, results memo in five weeks.” One sentence, concrete, dated.

Four moves, one page, no exceptions on the length. Send it monthly whether or not anyone asked for it. The monthly rhythm does compounding work that the individual memos cannot: it builds a paper trail of you, dated and numbered, which becomes your portfolio, your renewal case, and eventually your negotiating position. When Chapter 35 shows you fractional operators holding \$5,000-and-up monthly retainers year after year, the retention mechanism will look familiar. It is this memo, arriving every month, making the value impossible to forget. One published fractional CAIO practice promises its clients a board-

ready deliverable every quarter and charges \$7,500 a month. The deliverable is the discipline you are learning on this page.

The translation table

The memo is the set-piece. The rest of your career happens in conversation, one sentence at a time, and the discipline there is a single rule: **never hand a decision-maker a mechanism when they asked about an outcome.** They ask what you built; the answer is what changed. Here is the table. The left column is true. The right column is audible.

What you built	What you say
We deployed a RAG pipeline over the document base	Staff now get answers from our own manuals in seconds, with the source shown. Time spent hunting for information fell by half.
We fine-tuned the model and engineered the prompts	The drafts now sound like us instead of like a robot. Editing time per document dropped from twenty minutes to five.
An agent orchestrates the workflow end to end	The follow-up goes out every time, on time, without anyone having to remember. We stopped losing the leads we used to forget.
We built an OCR and extraction layer	Nobody retypes invoices anymore. Entry errors are down and the team got their afternoons back.
We built an eval suite before release	We test it the way finance checks the accounts, before customers ever see it.
We reduced the hallucination rate	It is confidently wrong less often, and when it is, a human catches it before it leaves the building.
Inference costs are down 40%	Each processed enquiry now costs about a cent.
The vendor deprecated the model version	Our supplier changed the engine. Here is the switching plan and what it protects us from.

Study the right-hand column and notice its habits. Every sentence has a subject a business person recognises: staff, leads, invoices, customers, costs. Every sentence contains a number or points directly at one. And every sentence would survive being repeated by the CEO to the board, which is the real test, because that is exactly what happens to your best sentences. You are not simplifying down to executives. You are writing lines for the most expensive messengers you will ever have.

One boundary, so the discipline does not curdle into an act: when a technical person asks you a technical question, answer in full technical depth. The rule is not “never say RAG.” The rule is match the language to the listener’s decisions. Engineers decide about mechanisms; speak mechanism. Executives decide about money and risk; speak money and risk. The failure mode this chapter kills is using the left column on the right audience, and it kills the reverse error too: hand-waving at an engineer reads as fraud just as fast.

The two questions under every question

One more conversational habit, because it separates the fluent from the merely translated.

Whenever a decision-maker asks you anything about AI, two silent questions sit underneath it: what does this cost me, and what happens when it breaks? They rarely say either out loud. Answer both before being asked and you sound like an owner; wait to be asked and you sound like a vendor. “The follow-up now sends itself, it costs about forty dollars a month, and if it ever misfires, Sarah sees every message before it goes and can switch it off in one click.” Three clauses: the outcome, the cost, the failure plan. That sentence shape, used habitually, is worth more than any credential in this book.

And keep your numbers hygienic, because the money language only works while your numbers deserve trust. Report medians, not your best day. Give ranges when you are unsure, with the assumption attached,

exactly as the Shadow Audit memo did. Never annualise a fortnight; “on track for \$130,000 a year” from ten days of data is the kind of sentence that feels great once and costs you the room forever. The first inflated number you are caught holding converts every future memo from evidence into marketing. Underclaim slightly, every time. In a field this full of hype, modest numbers that survive checking are a superpower.

Your scars are qualifications

Now the part of the language almost nobody practises, and the part the market checks hardest.

When boards interview for AI leadership, they screen for failure stories. On purpose, explicitly, as method. The recruiting guidance for hiring a Head of AI says it in four words: make them tell you what broke. And the most rigorous board-level interview rubric in my research files, twelve questions with scoring, dedicates three of the twelve to scar tissue. Describe a use case you chose not to pursue even though it was feasible and had executive sponsorship, and the red flag is a candidate who cannot recall killing anything. Tell us about vendor AI that aced the proof-of-concept and degraded in production, and what specifically caused the gap; the red flag is claiming it never happened. Describe telling a CEO or board that an initiative they loved was not ready; the red flag is the candidate who never pushed back.

Understand what this means, because it inverts the instinct you walked in with. The interviewers assume everyone working honestly in this field has failures, because Chapter 3 showed you the base rate and they have read the same studies. So a candidate with no failure stories is not impressive. They are either inexperienced or lying, and the rubric treats both the same. Your killed projects, your degraded pilots, the deployment that quietly died: properly told, these are not the things you survive in an interview. They are the things you are being interviewed for. The 95% is

the industry's tuition bill, and scars are the receipts that prove you attended.

The same logic runs with clients. A prospective client who hears only your successes is listening to an advertisement. The one who hears what broke, and what you now do differently because of it, is listening to experience. Guess which one signs.

How to tell the story of what broke

A failure story is still a results memo. Same discipline, same money language, run backwards. Five moves.

The goal and the number you were chasing. “We set out to cut invoice processing from four days to one.” Starting here proves the project had a measurable point, which already separates you from most of the 95%.

What broke, as mechanism, not mood. Not “it didn’t really work out.” The specific thing: “Accuracy held at 96% in the pilot on clean PDFs. In production, a third of invoices arrived as phone photos, accuracy fell off a cliff, and the team went back to typing.” Specificity is the entire currency here. The board question literally asks what specifically caused the gap, and vague answers score zero.

What it cost, in money and time, honestly. Picture yourself saying it plainly: “Six weeks and about four thousand dollars, all told.”

Executives do not flinch at the number. They flinch at people who will not say the number, because those people will not say it next time either, when it is bigger.

What you changed so it cannot happen again silently. “Every pilot now runs on a sample of real production inputs, worst ones included, before anything is promised. And every deployed system has a named owner and a weekly accuracy check, so degradation gets caught in days, not quarters.” This is the move that converts a loss into an asset:

the failure purchased a process, and the process is transferable to the interviewer's company. That is precisely what they are trying to buy.

What you now check first. One sentence of distilled judgment. "Now I always ask to see the ugliest inputs before I believe a demo." Portable, memorable, earned. Interviewers write this sentence down.

What the structure never does: blame. Not the vendor, not the staff, not the model, and do not reach for "the data was bad," which is this industry's "the dog ate it." Somewhere in every failure is a decision you would now make differently. Own that decision by name.

Counterintuitively, ownership reads as strength, because the interviewer is not really asking what broke. They are asking what you are like when things break, since things will break on their watch too, and they know it better than you do.

Picture the two candidates side by side, both asked what has gone wrong in their AI work. One says, "Honestly, nothing major; my projects have gone pretty smoothly." The other gives the invoice story: the goal, the phone photos, the four thousand dollars, the worst-inputs rule. The first candidate sounded safer and is unhirable. The second sounded bruised and is the only one in the room the board can imagine handling next year's incident. You are not choosing whether to have scars; the work will see to that. You are choosing whether to waste them.

The discipline, installed

Everything in this chapter compresses to habits small enough to start today.

Every claim gets a number or a next-step to one. Every mechanism stays in the footnote until a mechanism-decider asks. Every month, a one-page memo: baseline, change, number, next. Every failure, written up with the same care as a win, because it will one day earn you more than the wins do. And every sentence you say about AI to a decision-maker sits an

imaginary test: could the CEO repeat this to the board without you in the room? If not, translate until they can.

None of this is spin, and that is worth ending on. Spin is what people reach for when they have no numbers. You have baselines, honest caveats, dated memos and owned failures. This language does not decorate the truth; it delivers it in the units the business actually runs on. The window from Chapter 1 belongs to people the market can hear. As of this chapter, that is you.

Part V is next: the full craft of deploying AI into a business, deployment by deployment. You now speak the language the results will be reported in. Time to go get the results.

Do this now

1. **Write the results memo tonight.** Take your Chapter 17 win, or your Proof Ladder before-and-after if the win is still in flight, and put it through the four moves: baseline, change, number, next. One page. Read it aloud and strike every word your least technical relative would stumble on. This document is the first entry in a monthly habit; diarise the second one now.
2. **Write your what-broke story this week.** One page, five moves: the goal, the mechanism of the break, the honest cost, the process it purchased, the thing you now check first. If you genuinely have no AI failure yet, write up a killed project instead, even the small one where you decided a task should die rather than be automated. You will be asked for this story in every serious interview and by every serious client. Never improvise it again.
3. **Build your own translation table.** Explain your current project out loud to a non-technical friend and note every word that makes their eyes flicker. Each of those words gets a row: the mechanism on the left, the money-and-time sentence on the right. Keep it open on your desk for a month. After that you will not need it, because the discipline will have moved into your mouth, which is where careers are actually built.

PART V

The Craft: Deploying AI Into a Business

The craft. What you actually do inside a business: find the work worth touching, choose the tools, ship the deployment, prove it worked, and leave it safer than you found it. Read this part twice.

Chapter 19: The Deployment Loop

Everything before this page was about the seat. This part of the book is about the work you do once you are sitting in it.

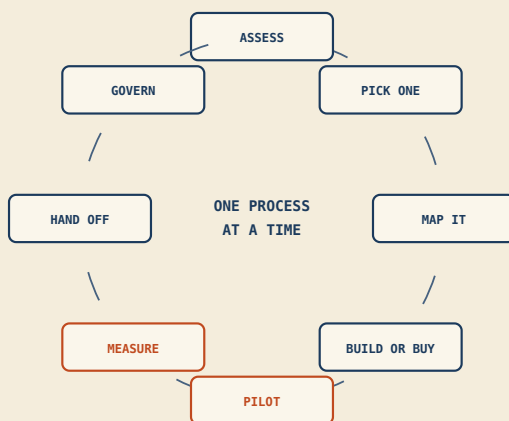
Because here is an uncomfortable truth about the window we have spent eighteen chapters walking towards: you can talk your way into the seat exactly once. After that, something has to actually run. A process has to get faster, an error rate has to fall, a number on a report has to move, and everyone has to be able to see that you did it. The title survives on delivery, and delivery is a craft.

The good news is that the craft is smaller than it looks. It is not fifty techniques. It is one loop, eight steps, run completely, on one process at a time. The people in the 5% run the loop. The people in the 95% run fragments of it, in the wrong order, on six things at once, and then hold a meeting about why nothing shipped.

This chapter gives you the whole loop from altitude. The rest of Part V descends into each piece: reading the business, choosing the tools, ten complete builds, proving results, staying safe, working with builders, and installing governance. By the end of Part V you will have watched every deployment skill this work requires, at the level a working practitioner actually uses it.

FIG. 11

The deployment loop, run one process at a time



The deployment loop, one process at a time.

One honest note before we start

What follows is the generic playbook. It is the industry-standard craft that any competent implementer converges on, assembled here in one place, in order, with nothing important left out. I want to be straight with you about two things at once.

First: there is a deeper, more prescriptive version of this work. I run a certified method with my own frameworks, diagnostics and trained practitioners, and this book deliberately does not teach that method. Second, and just as true: you can genuinely build a working practice on what is in this book alone. Thousands of independent operators deliver exactly this playbook for real money every month. The certified path makes you faster and more consistent. It is not the price of entry. Nothing in the next eight chapters is held back to make you buy something.

Right. The loop.

Why a loop, and why one process

Recall the autopsy from Chapter 3. The 95% of failed pilots die of three causes: wrong task, no briefing, no owner. Look at those three causes again and notice what they have in common. None of them is a technology failure. All three are sequence failures. The company skipped the step where you choose the task carefully, skipped the step where you feed the machine its context, and skipped the step where a named human takes ownership.

A loop is just a sequence you refuse to skip.

And the loop runs on one process at a time. This is the single most counterintuitive rule in the craft, and the one that separates working deployments from slideware, so let me defend it properly.

The everywhere-at-once approach feels ambitious. The MD announces AI across the company, five departments each start something, and there is energy in the building. Ninety days later, five things are 40% done, nothing is measured, nobody can say what worked, and the whole program has the smell of failure without a single completed experiment to learn from. That is the S&P Global statistic from Chapter 3 wearing its work clothes: 42% of companies abandoning most of their initiatives, because most of their initiatives were started in parallel and none was finished.

One process at a time feels slow. It is not. One process taken all the way through the loop gives you, in four to six weeks, a running system, a measured result, a trained owner, and a story the whole company believes. That story is the fuel for process two, which now takes three weeks because the objections died with process one. Sequential deployments compound. Parallel pilots divide. Every experienced operator I know learned this the expensive way, and I am giving it to you for the price of a paragraph.

The eight steps

Here is the loop entire. Read it once now, and again after you finish Part V, and notice how much more the second reading holds.

Step one: assess. Before you touch a single tool, you sit with the business and find out where the hours and dollars actually leak. Not where the owner thinks AI would be cool. Where the repetitive words-and-numbers work lives, how much of it there is, what it costs, and what it breaks when it goes wrong. This is the owner interview, and it is such a load-bearing skill that it gets all of Chapter 20. The output is a shortlist: three candidate processes, with rough volumes and rough costs attached.

Step two: pick one. From the three, you choose a single process using three lenses: volume, pain, and measurability. High volume, because automating a task that happens twice a month saves nothing. Real pain, because you need the staff cheering for the fix rather than defending the old way. And measurability, because Part IV taught you that an unmeasured win is a rumour. You are also quietly applying a fourth lens: blast radius. For a first deployment you want a process where the worst possible failure is embarrassing, not catastrophic. Chapter 24 covers that thinking in full.

Step three: map it. You cannot automate what you cannot describe. So you sit with the person who actually does the work, not their manager, and you write the process down: what triggers it, every step, every decision point, every exception, where the information comes from, where the result goes, and what “done properly” looks like. This usually takes an hour and it is always revelatory. Half the time you discover steps that exist for reasons nobody remembers. The map becomes the specification for everything that follows, and Chapter 25 will show you that the same map is most of what a software builder needs too.

Step four: build or buy. Now, and only now, tools. You decide at the task level whether an off-the-shelf product does this, whether a workflow platform can be assembled to do it, or whether it genuinely needs custom

work. Chapter 21 gives you the tool landscape by category and the vendor questions that stop you paying twenty times the fair price. Chapter 22 then builds ten real systems in front of you so the decision becomes pattern recognition instead of guesswork. The rule of thumb to carry in the meantime: buy for commodity problems, assemble for your workflows, build only when the first two demonstrably fail.

Step five: pilot. The new system runs alongside the old way, not instead of it, for a defined period with a defined baseline. The human keeps doing the job; the machine shadows them; you compare outputs. Nobody's customer is exposed to an unproven system and nobody's job depends on it working on day one, which means nobody needs to sabotage it to feel safe. Chapter 23 gives you the full pilot design, including the part almost everyone skips: deciding before you start what result would make you kill it.

Step six: measure. Against the baseline you captured, with real numbers: hours, dollars, error rates, response times. Not sentiment, not anecdotes, not "the team loves it." You learned the reporting format in Part IV. Here it earns its keep, because the measurement is what converts a working system into a renewed retainer, a promotion case, or budget for the next process.

Step seven: hand off. The step the 95% never reaches. The system gets a named owner inside the business, and that owner is not you. They get trained to run it, a one-page runbook telling them what to check and when, a list of what can go wrong with fixes attached, and an escalation path for the failures beyond them. A system only you can operate is not an asset you delivered. It is a hostage you are holding, and hostages make terrible references.

Step eight: govern. The system goes on the company's register of what runs where. Its checkpoint gets documented: who reviews what, before or after it acts. The policy gets updated if the system touches new data or new customers. This takes half a day, it is the difference between a

business that runs AI and a business that AI happens to, and Chapter 26 will show you how to package it as a product companies pay for on its own.

Then the loop closes: back to the assessment, pick process two, go again. A fractional operator running this loop well completes a process roughly every month per client. Inside a company, an internal operator does the same. Twelve months, ten to twelve deployed processes, each one measured. That is what a first year in the seat looks like when it is done properly, and it is a first year almost nobody in the market can currently show.

Where each step kills a failure

The loop is not ceremony. Every step exists because its absence has a body count, and you have already met the bodies.

The wrong-task failure from Chapter 3 dies at steps one and two. You cannot automate the flashy-but-worthless thing if a volume-pain-measurability screen chose the task, because the screen will hand you invoice processing and lead follow-up long before it hands you a website chatbot.

The no-briefing failure dies at step three. The process map is the briefing. When you hand a machine the trigger, the steps, the exceptions, the tone, and what done looks like, you have given it precisely what Chapter 2 said it can never know on its own: your business. Generic output is not a model problem. It is a mapping problem, upstream, every time.

The no-owner failure dies at steps seven and eight. A named owner, a runbook, and a register entry mean the system survives its first hiccup, and every system has a first hiccup. A supplier changes an email format, a password expires, an output drifts. Owned systems get fixed in an hour. Orphaned systems die quietly and take your reputation with them.

And the failure nobody talks about, deploying something that works but should never have been trusted, dies at steps five and six. Shadow-running with kill criteria means the system earns autonomy instead of being granted it on launch-day optimism.

What running the loop feels like

I want to set your expectations honestly, because the loop on paper is tidy and the loop in a real business is not.

The assessment will surface a process the owner is embarrassed by. The mapping session will reveal that two staff members do the same task two different ways and each thinks the other is wrong. The build will take twice as long as the demo suggested, usually because of one exception case that turns out to be a fifth of the volume. The pilot will produce a week of mediocre output before the briefing gets tightened. Someone will ask, in week three, whether this whole thing is really worth it.

All of that is normal. None of it is failure. The loop is designed for exactly that weather, which is why it has a shadow period instead of a launch day and a measurement step instead of a vibe check. The operators who wash out are not the ones who hit these bumps. They are the ones who expected not to, and had no sequence to fall back on when reality arrived.

Picture instead the end state, because this is what you are building towards and it is worth keeping in view. A business where four processes run partly on machine labour. Each has a named owner who is not you. Each is on a register. Each produces a line on a monthly report showing hours saved and errors avoided against a dated baseline. The owner of the business can explain all four systems to their accountant in plain English. Nothing depends on your daily presence.

That business pays you a retainer with a smile, or promotes you, or refers you to three other owners. And it took nothing but the loop, run completely, one process at a time.

The same loop in every seat

A question worth settling before we descend into the detail: does the loop change depending on where you sit?

It does not, and that is worth appreciating, because Part III gave you several possible paths and you may still be deciding between them. Run the loop as an employee and the assessment is a series of internal conversations, the pilot report goes to your boss, and the payoff is standing, then mandate, then title. Run it as a fractional operator and the assessment is a paid diagnostic, the report goes to the owner, and the payoff is the retainer. Run it as an agency and you do steps one, two, five, six and eight yourself while contractors carry the build, which is Chapter 25's territory. Same eight steps, same order, same artifacts. The loop is the constant; only the letterhead changes.

The loop also survives the thing everything else in this field does not: tool churn. Models will leapfrog each other, platforms will merge and die, and the specific products named in Chapter 21 will look quaint in five years. None of that touches the loop, because the loop is not a technology. It is the management discipline that any technology gets deployed through. People who built their practice on a favourite tool have to rebuild every time the market moves. People who built it on the loop just swap a component and keep going.

And one more thing the loop is: your sales script, without modification. When an owner asks what working with you looks like, you describe these eight steps in plain English, and something useful happens in the room. Every other person who pitched them led with technology and enthusiasm. You are describing baselines, kill criteria, named owners and a register, and the owner realises, usually somewhere around step five, that they are talking to the adult in this market. The loop does not just deliver the work. Described honestly, it wins the work.

The shape of Part V

Seven chapters follow, and they are the loop unpacked in working order.

Chapter 20 is steps one and two: how to sit with an owner for ninety minutes and leave with the three processes worth touching, the exact questions to ask, and the red flags that tell you to walk away. Chapter 21 is the tool landscape for step four: six categories, what each is for, what things cost, and the markup reality that makes vendor meetings enjoyable. Chapter 22 is the spine of the whole part: ten deployments worked end to end, at build level, with honest timings and honest prices.

Chapter 23 is steps five and six in full: baselines, shadow runs, sample sizes in plain language, kill criteria, and the graduation decision. Chapter 24 is the safety layer that wraps every step: what you may feed a model, what you must never, and the habit of capping the worst case before you switch anything on. Chapter 25 covers the deployments that genuinely need code: hiring builders, writing specs they cannot misinterpret, and accepting work you cannot code-review. Chapter 26 closes with governance as a deliverable: the policy, the register, the audit trail, and the one-hour training, packaged so a client will pay for it as a product.

Read them in order the first time. They are sequenced the way the work is.

Do this now

1. **Write the loop out by hand.** Assess, pick one, map, build or buy, pilot, measure, hand off, govern. Once, on paper, from memory after you close the book. It takes ninety seconds and it is the table of contents for your next several years. If you can say the eight steps cold, you will never again sit in an AI meeting without knowing what should happen next.
2. **Autopsy one dead pilot with the loop.** Take a failed AI attempt you know about, from your employer, a client, or the Chapter 3 exercises, and mark which steps it actually ran. Most died at step two, having skipped step one, and never met steps five through eight at all. Write the autopsy in three sentences. You have just produced the diagnostic one-pager that Part VI will teach you to open doors with.
3. **Pick your practice business.** Choose the business you will run this part of the book against as you read: your employer, a friend's company, or your own. Every chapter from here has exercises that assume a real business on the table. Decide now which one, and write down the three processes you currently suspect are its biggest leaks. By Chapter 23 you will know whether you were right.

Chapter 20: Reading a Business

The most valuable ninety minutes in this entire craft happen before you touch a single tool.

They happen in a meeting room, or on a video call, or across a cafe table, with the person who owns or runs the business. You ask questions in a particular order, you write down particular things, and you leave with the three processes worth touching first. Do this well and everything downstream gets easier: the build is obvious, the pilot measures itself, the client believes the result because it addresses the pain they themselves named. Do it badly, or skip it, and you join the 95% with better tools.

Most people who fail at this work fail right here, and they fail in a specific way: they arrive with an answer. They have a favourite tool, or a demo that impressed them, and they spend the meeting looking for somewhere to put it. The business becomes a mounting bracket for their solution. That is backwards, and the owner can smell it, because every software salesperson who ever wasted their time did exactly the same thing.

You are going to arrive with questions instead. This chapter gives you the questions, verbatim, the order to ask them in, what to write down, and the red flags that should send you politely towards the door.

Why the owner interview beats every other method

There are fancier ways to assess a business. Process-mining software, staff surveys, week-long observation studies. Consultancies charge six figures for them and they have their place in companies with ten thousand employees.

In the small and mid-sized businesses where you will do most of this work, the ninety-minute interview beats them all, for one reason: in a

business under a couple of hundred people, the owner or general manager already knows where the pain is. They have known for years. Nobody has ever asked them the right questions in the right order and written the answers down, that is all. The knowledge is in the building. Your job is extraction, not discovery.

There is a second reason the interview matters, and it is commercial. The interview is where trust gets built. An owner who has spent ninety minutes being asked intelligent questions about their business, by someone who clearly understood the answers, has already half-decided to work with you. The assessment is the sale. Part VI will make heavy use of that fact. For now, just understand that this meeting is doing two jobs at once, and both of them reward the same behaviour: genuine curiosity, careful notes, no pitching.

One rule before the questions. Interview the owner first, but do not interview only the owner. The owner knows where the pain is. The staff know why. Book the owner for ninety minutes, then ask for thirty minutes each with the two or three people who actually run the processes you shortlist. The gap between what the owner described and what the staff describe is itself diagnostic information, and sometimes it is the most important thing you learn all day.

The selection lens: volume, pain, measurability

Everything you are listening for in the interview reduces to three tests. Hold them in your head the whole meeting, because they are the difference between a process worth touching and a process that merely sounds interesting.

Volume. How often does this happen? Daily beats weekly beats monthly, almost without exception. Automating a task that occurs twice a month saves a rounding error and teaches the business nothing. Automating a task that occurs forty times a day changes someone's working life within a fortnight, and the maths of every deployment is

volume times minutes times hourly cost. No volume, no maths, no project.

Pain. Does anyone actually suffer when this goes wrong or piles up? You want processes with a victim: the owner chasing invoices at 9pm, the admin who dreads Monday because the inbox has 200 unsorted messages, the salesperson who knows leads are going cold in the queue. Pain buys you cooperation during the build and applause after it. A process that is high-volume but painless has no champion, and champion-less systems die in the pilot, quietly, of neglect.

Measurability. Will you be able to prove what changed? Some processes come with numbers attached: response time, days sales outstanding, quotes sent per week, error rates. Others are real work but resist counting. For your first process in any business, take the measurable one every time, even if a less measurable one seems bigger. Part IV taught you why: the measured win becomes the memo, the memo becomes the mandate, and the mandate is what lets you tackle the murkier stuff later.

Score every candidate process against all three. The winners are usually boring, and that is a feature. In Chapter 27 you will meet the Boring Goldmine argument in its full commercial form; here is its operational form: the money in this craft lives in invoices, follow-ups, scheduling, reports, and inboxes. It almost never lives wherever the demos were flashiest.

The interview, verbatim

Here is the sequence I use. The wording matters less than the order, but I will give you wording that works, because the difference between a good question and a clumsy one is often ten words. Budget ninety minutes. Ask permission to record and transcribe; an AI notetaker in this meeting is both practical and a quiet demonstration of your subject.

Open with the business, not the technology. First fifteen minutes, no AI at all:

- “Walk me through what this business actually sells, and who buys it.”
- “Roughly how many people, and what do the main few roles spend their week doing?”
- “What does growth look like right now? What would you double if you could?”

You need this context to judge everything that follows, and the owner needs to see you care about the business before the machinery. Skipping this section marks you as a tool salesperson within four minutes.

Then find the repetition. The heart of the interview:

- “Where does the most repetitive typing, copying and pasting happen in this company?”
- “What information gets moved by hand from one system to another? By whom?”
- “What does your admin person, or whoever is closest to one, actually do all day?”
- “What work piles up when someone goes on leave?”
- “What tasks do you personally do after hours that you know are beneath your pay grade?”

That last question is the most reliably productive sentence in this whole book. Owners answer it instantly, with feeling, and the answer is nearly always a high-volume, high-pain, measurable process.

Then find the leaks. Where money already falls on the floor:

- “How fast does a new enquiry get a response? Honestly. Nights and weekends included.”
- “How much is owed to you right now in unpaid invoices, and who chases them?”

- “How do quotes get produced, and how long does one take from request to sent?”
- “Where do things get retyped because two systems don’t talk to each other?”
- “What reports get built by hand every week or month, and who builds them?”

Then test the information. Because a machine can only work on what the business can feed it:

- “Where does the knowledge live for how things get done here? Written down, or in people’s heads?”
- “If your longest-serving employee left tomorrow, what walks out the door with them?”
- “What systems run this place? Which ones do you love, which do you tolerate, which do you fight?”

Close with the past and the future:

- “What have you already tried with AI or automation? What happened?”
- “If one piece of work simply stopped consuming this company, which would you pick, and what would that be worth to you a year?”

The answer to that final question, in the owner’s own words, is the sentence you will quote back in every proposal, report and renewal conversation for the life of the engagement. Get it verbatim.

What to write down

The notes from this meeting become the assessment document, so capture with the end in mind. For every candidate process that surfaces, you want six things:

The trigger, meaning what event starts the work. The frequency, in real numbers per day or week, and push politely past “heaps” until you get a number. Who does it, by name and role. How long it takes, per instance, honestly. Where the inputs come from and where the output goes, naming the actual systems. And the cost of it going wrong: what breaks, who notices, how bad.

Then, from those six, one derived number: instances per week, times minutes per instance, times the loaded hourly cost of the person doing it. That is the annual leak. When you write “quote follow-up: roughly 30 a week, 15 minutes each, at \$45 an hour loaded, call it \$17,000 a year, plus the deals lost to slow response,” you have turned an anecdote into a business case in one line. Three of those lines is an assessment worth paying for.

Also write down the exact phrases the owner uses for their pain. Not paraphrases. Their words. “I’m the bottleneck on every quote” is worth more in a proposal than any sentence you could compose, because the owner recognises themselves in it.

By the end of the interview you will typically have surfaced eight or ten candidate processes. Score them against volume, pain and measurability, shortlist three, and validate those three in the staff conversations before you commit to one. The staff will tell you which of the three is real, which has an exception rate the owner underestimates, and which the team would quietly strangle.

The staff conversations

Those thirty-minute conversations deserve their own craft, and a warning first: they fail if they feel like an inspection. The person across from you may be wondering whether you are here to automate them out of a job, so deal with that directly in your opening. “The owner asked me to find the most annoying, repetitive parts of the work and get machines doing them, so the humans can do the parts that need humans. You

know this job better than anyone, which is why I'm asking you and not a spreadsheet." Then ask, and mostly listen:

- "Walk me through yesterday. Just what actually happened, start to finish."
- "What's the most annoying part of this job that nobody upstairs really sees?"
- "If you had to train someone to do this next week, what would take longest to teach?"
- "What do you fix by hand, over and over, that keeps coming back?"
- "Where does stuff pile up, and what do you do when it does?"

"Walk me through yesterday" is the staff-side equivalent of the beneath-your-pay-grade question: concrete, unthreatening, and impossible to answer with the official version of the job. The official version is what the owner described. Yesterday is what actually happens, workarounds included.

Then compare the two accounts, because the gaps are the diagnosis. The owner says quoting takes an hour; the person doing it says three, because the owner never sees the chasing of missing details. The owner describes a tidy process; the staff member describes the unofficial spreadsheet that actually runs it. None of this means anyone lied. It means the business's picture of itself is out of date, which is true of nearly every business, and you are now the only person holding both pictures at once. Write the gaps down. Some of them will outrank everything on the original shortlist.

The red flags

Some things you hear in this meeting should stop you, and part of the craft is respecting them. Three matter most.

The process that should not exist. Sometimes you map a process and realise the correct amount of automation is none, because the correct

amount of the process is none. A report nobody reads. An approval step added after an incident in 2019 that nobody can remember. Data entered into two systems because someone doesn't trust the first one.

Automating these is malpractice with good production values; you would be paving a path that should be demolished. Say so, plainly: "I can automate this, but I think you should kill it instead, and that advice is free." Nothing builds trust faster, and trust is the actual product of this meeting.

The owner who will not let go. Watch for the owner who personally approves everything, has three "assistants" they bypass daily, and answers "who else could do this?" with a small laugh. You can build this person beautiful systems and they will route around every one of them, because the involvement is the point; it is how they feel in control. The deployment will fail and the failure will be filed under AI. You cannot fix this with technology. Either name it gently in the assessment as its own finding, which sometimes lands, or price the engagement knowing adoption will be a fight, or walk away. Walking away from an unwinnable engagement is not lost revenue. It is reputation insurance.

The data that lives in heads. If every answer to "how do you decide that?" is "well, it depends, you get a feel for it," and nothing is written down anywhere, understand what you are actually looking at: not an automation project, a documentation project with an automation project behind it. Chapter 2 told you the machine cannot know their business; if the business does not know its own business in writing, there is nothing to brief the machine with. This is not a reason to walk away. It is a reason to reframe: the first engagement becomes capturing how the work is done, which is billable, valuable, and precisely what makes the machine work afterwards. Just never quote the automation price for what is secretly a documentation-plus-automation job.

One more, smaller flag: the owner who spends the meeting asking you to validate a specific tool they have already bought. You are allowed to assess it honestly. You are not obliged to build your engagement around

their sunk cost, and the three vendor questions from Chapter 2 will usually settle the matter inside ten minutes.

From interview to shortlist

Here is what leaving well looks like. Within forty-eight hours, while it is fresh, you write up the assessment: one page of business context, the candidate-process table with the leak arithmetic, the three-process shortlist with your reasoning against volume, pain and measurability, any red flags stated honestly, and a recommendation of which single process to run through the loop first, with what you would measure.

Whether that document is an internal memo to your boss or a paid deliverable to a client, it is the same document, and notice something about it: there is not one technical sentence in it. No model names, no tools. That is deliberate. The assessment proves you understood the business, and the understanding is the scarce thing. Tools are Chapter 21.

The first few times, this interview will feel presumptuous, especially if the owner across the table has run their company for twenty years. Do it anyway, exactly as written. Around the third repetition something clicks: you realise the questions are doing the work, the patterns repeat across wildly different industries, and you can hear a leaking process before the owner finishes describing it. That sound, once you can hear it, is the assessment skill. Nobody can take it off you, and remarkably few people in any market currently have it.

Do this now

1. **Run the full interview on your practice business.** The one you chose at the end of Chapter 19. All five sections, in order, recorded and transcribed. If it is your own employer, interview your boss or interview yourself in writing, honestly. Produce the candidate-process table with the leak arithmetic for every process you surface. Aim for at least eight candidates before you shortlist.
2. **Score and shortlist.** Take your candidates and score each one to ten on volume, pain and measurability. Shortlist the top three, then write one paragraph on which single process you would run through the loop first and why. Keep the paragraph; in Chapter 22 you will check whether the deployment you chose matches one of the ten patterns, and it almost certainly will.
3. **Practise the one killer question.** This week, ask one business owner you know socially: “What do you personally do after hours that you know is beneath your pay grade?” Just that, in conversation, and listen. You are training your ear for the sound of a leaking process, and you are also, quietly, starting the prospect list that Part VI will formalise.

Chapter 21: The Tool Landscape

Every month, somebody publishes a map of the AI tool market with three thousand logos on it, and every month it terrifies another cohort of people out of this career before they start.

Ignore the logo maps. They are marketing for the map-makers. The truth underneath is almost embarrassingly simple: for the deployment work this book teaches, the entire tool universe collapses into six categories. Learn what each category is for, how to judge a tool within it, and roughly what things should cost, and you can navigate this market for the rest of your career, no matter which logos live or die.

That last clause matters, so I will make it a rule before we begin: **learn categories, not brands**. I will name real products in this chapter because vague advice is useless, but every specific tool named here will be renamed, acquired, repriced or obsoleted within a few years of printing. The categories will not. Tools churn; categories persist. When someone asks what you think of some product you have never heard of, the professional move is never to bluff the brand. It is to place it: “that’s a workflow automation platform, so here’s what matters when you judge one.” You will sound more expert than the person who memorised the logo map, because you will be.

And one price anchor to carry through everything: the raw intelligence underneath nearly all of these tools comes from the same handful of model providers, and it costs cents. Whatever a vendor charges above cents is for the packaging: the interface, the integrations, the support, the compliance. Sometimes that packaging is worth every dollar. Often it is not. Holding that single fact makes you the calmest person in any vendor meeting.



Six tool categories. Categories persist, brands churn.

Six tool categories. Categories persist, brands churn.

Category one: chat assistants and copilots

What it is. The general-purpose interfaces to frontier models: ChatGPT, Claude, Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and whatever has joined them by the time you read this. One human, one conversation window, any task made of words, numbers and reasoning.

What it is for. Individual productivity, drafting, analysis, and thinking. This is where the writing, reading, extracting and analysing work from Chapter 2 happens when a human is driving. It is also where every deployment you ever build gets prototyped: before you automate a task, you first make it work manually in a chat window, because a task you cannot get right interactively will never come right unattended.

What it is not for. Unattended processes. A chat assistant waits for a human; the moment nobody is typing, nothing is happening. Companies that “rolled out AI” by buying everyone a chat licence and nothing else have bought potential, not deployment, which is why so many of those rollouts show up in the 95%.

How to choose. For business use the decision is mostly not about which model writes prettier sentences; the frontier models leapfrog each other every few months. Choose on: business-tier data handling, meaning your prompts are not used for training and admin controls exist; whether it plugs into the company’s existing suite, which in practice often decides between Copilot for Microsoft shops and Gemini for Google shops, with ChatGPT and Claude as the strong standalone picks; and whether it can be fed company context in a managed way through projects, custom instructions or connected drives.

What it costs. Free tiers exist for kicking tyres. Business plans run roughly \$20 to \$30 per user per month, enterprise tiers more. This is the cheapest professional multiplier in the building, and it is still the most common line item on the subscription graveyard from Chapter 3, because a licence without training and use cases is just a monthly donation.

Category two: workflow automation platforms

What it is. The plumbing. Platforms that connect systems and run multi-step processes automatically: Zapier, Make, n8n, Power Automate and kin. A trigger fires, steps execute, systems get updated, and increasingly one of those steps is a call to an AI model.

What it is for. This is the workhorse category of your entire practice. Most of Chapter 22's ten deployments run on this plumbing. When an enquiry arrives and needs logging, drafting against, and following up; when a transcript needs summarising into a CRM; when an invoice needs chasing on a schedule: this is the machinery. The AI is one component in the pipeline; the platform is the pipeline.

How to choose. First question, always: does it already connect to the systems this business runs? A platform with a native, well-maintained connection to the client's CRM and accounting package beats a theoretically better one without. Then: can the client's own team eventually understand it, because handoff is step seven and a rat's nest nobody can read is a hostage situation; what does it cost at real volumes, since per-task pricing that is trivial at 100 runs a month can sting at 20,000; and how does it handle failure, because a platform that fails silently will eventually humiliate you, and the error-alerting features are the ones to test hardest.

What it costs. Entry tiers from free to roughly \$30 a month; realistic small-business production use typically lands at \$50 to a few hundred a month depending on volume. Self-hosted options like n8n trade subscription cost for the technical overhead of running them. Either way, this category is cheap against the labour it replaces, and it is where the most billable assembly work in this book happens.

Category three: document AI

What it is. Tools that ingest documents and produce structured output: reading invoices, receipts, contracts, forms and PDFs, then extracting the fields, obligations or answers into systems. Ranges from bookkeeping-flavoured tools like Dext, through contract-review products, to general document-parsing services, to simply feeding documents to a frontier model with a well-built extraction prompt.

What it is for. The single most common leak in small business: information arriving as documents and being retyped by humans into software. Supplier invoices into the accounting system, customer forms into the database, contract terms into a summary. Chapter 20's interview question about retyping is, most of the time, a document AI question.

How to choose. Accuracy on their documents, not the vendor's demo set, so insist on a trial with fifty real samples before anyone signs anything. Then: does it write into the system of record directly, because extraction that lands in another inbox has just moved the retyping; how it handles low confidence, since the good tools flag uncertain fields for human review rather than guessing confidently, and by Chapter 23 you will treat that review queue as a design feature, not an apology; and data residency, because documents are where the sensitive information lives, a matter Chapter 24 takes up properly.

What it costs. Per-document pricing from cents to a dollar or so, or subscriptions from roughly \$20 to a few hundred a month. Note that a general model plus a good prompt now handles much of what specialist tools charged serious money for three years ago; this category has the fastest-moving buy-versus-assemble line of the six, so re-run the comparison every time rather than relying on last year's answer.

Category four: voice AI

What it is. Systems that speak and listen. Two very different sub-families that get confused constantly: transcription and meeting intelligence, meaning notetakers like Fireflies, Otter and the recorders

built into the meeting platforms; and conversational voice agents that answer or make phone calls, from providers like Vapi, Retell and a fast-changing field of others.

What it is for. Transcription is mature, cheap and near-universal in usefulness; a meeting notetaker feeding your CRM deployment is one of Chapter 22's builds. Voice agents are the newer, spikier tool: after-hours call answering, reception overflow, booking and reminder calls, first-pass phone screening. They are genuinely deployed and genuinely valuable in businesses that live on the phone, trades and clinics especially.

How to choose. For notetakers: transcription quality on your accents and jargon, where recordings are stored, and whether summaries can flow into other systems rather than dying in an app. For voice agents, judge exactly three things: does it handle interruption and mess gracefully when a caller talks over it or wanders off script; does it hand off to a human fast and smoothly the moment it is out of depth; and does it log everything for review. A voice agent is the most public-facing thing you will ever deploy. It fails in front of customers, in real time, with no human checkpoint between it and the caller. Deploy this category later in an engagement, never first, and pilot it harder than anything else, a discipline Chapter 23 formalises.

What it costs. Notetakers roughly \$10 to \$30 per user per month. Voice agents typically price per minute, commonly in the ten-to-thirty-cents range, plus platform fees; a realistic small-business phone deployment lands in the low hundreds per month. Compare that with reception labour and the arithmetic is loud.

Category five: agent platforms

What it is. The newest category: systems where an AI is given a goal, tools and permissions, and works out the steps itself. Claude and ChatGPT operating with tool access and computer use, autonomous

browsing agents, and platforms for building multi-step assistants that decide their own path.

What it is for. Work too variable for fixed plumbing: research a company and compile a brief, reconcile mismatched records across systems, triage a messy inbox where every message needs judgment. Where a workflow platform executes the steps you defined, an agent invents steps, which is precisely its power and its risk in one sentence.

How to choose. Bluntly: first ask whether you need it. A fixed workflow that covers 95% of cases is easier to build, cheaper to run, and infinitely easier to debug than an agent, because it does the same thing every time and an agent by definition does not. When the variability is real and the value is high, judge the platform on the permissions model, since you must cap what the agent can touch, send, spend or delete before it runs, the blast-radius habit Chapter 24 drills; the audit trail, because every action must be logged and reviewable; and testability at volume before real customers or real data are exposed.

What it costs. Usage-based and swinging too fast to print reliably; tens to hundreds of dollars a month at small-business scale. The honest guidance is about posture, not price: this is the category to watch most closely and trust most slowly. It is improving fast enough that some of Chapter 22's builds will migrate here over the life of this book. Migrate with them after the reliability is proven, not before.

Category six: vertical SaaS with AI baked in

What it is. The software a business already runs, with AI arriving inside it as a feature. The CRM that now drafts follow-ups, the accounting package that chases debtors, the practice-management, job-management or property platform sprouting an assistant. Every serious vertical product is doing this.

What it is for. Often the fastest possible win. If the client’s existing job-management platform has just shipped an automated quote-follow-up feature, switching it on beats building the same thing externally: no new vendor, no integration, no new thing to govern. A working habit for the assessment: before you propose any build, spend thirty minutes in the settings of the systems the business already pays for, and check what shipped in the last year. Nobody in the business will have looked. Finding money in software they already own is the cheapest credibility you will ever buy.

How to choose. The feature is only worth adopting if it actually uses the business’s own data and workflow rather than being a chat window bolted on for the earnings call, if it can be configured to the business’s tone and rules, and if its output can be checked before it reaches customers, at least initially. Plenty of baked-in AI features fail all three; they exist so the vendor can say “AI-powered.” Which brings us to the conversation this chapter has been building towards.

The markup reality, and the three questions

Here is the sentence to hold onto in every vendor meeting for the rest of your career: **most AI products are a thin wrapper around the same models you can use directly for cents.**

That is not a sneer; wrapping is legitimate work when it adds interface, integration, evaluation and support. But the market is flooded with products whose entire substance is a model call plus a logo, priced at fifty times the underlying cost, sold to buyers who cannot tell the difference. In Chapter 2 I promised you three questions that collapse the act. Here they are, deployed:

“What model does this run on, and what happens to our data?” A serious vendor answers in one crisp sentence. Evasion, or “our proprietary AI,” from a product that plainly rides on a frontier model, tells you about the company’s honesty, which you are about to depend on.

“What does this do that the underlying model plus a workflow platform can’t?” The real answers are integrations, evaluation, edge-case handling, compliance, support. If the honest answer is “a nicer interface,” you now know the fair price, and it is not \$500 a seat.

“Show me it failing.” Ask what inputs break it and what happens then. Vendors who know their failure modes have done the engineering. Vendors who insist it always works have not tested it, or are lying, and either way you have learned what you came to learn.

Ask all three politely, in front of the client, and watch your stock rise in real time. Companies pay retainers substantially because someone in the room can do this.

Build versus buy, decided at the task level

The classic question arrives wearing the wrong clothes. Companies ask “should we build or buy AI?” as if it were one decision. It is never one decision. It is a per-task decision, made fresh for every process that comes through the loop, and the decision tree is short.

First: does software the business already pays for do this now? Check honestly, thirty minutes in the settings. If yes, switch it on, configure it, pilot it. Done.

If not: is this a commodity problem, one that thousands of businesses share in nearly identical form, like meeting transcription or receipt extraction? Buy the best-of-category tool, because the vendor has met more edge cases than you ever will and the price reflects competition.

If not: can it be assembled on a workflow platform from standard parts plus model calls? This is the answer for most processes specific to how one business runs, which is to say most of your deployments. Assembly is fast, cheap, inspectable and yours to hand off.

Only if all three fail: build custom, with code. That is genuinely the right answer sometimes, and Chapter 25 exists for exactly those times. But it is the last resort, not the first instinct. The most expensive failure pattern in this market is custom-building a commodity, and the second most expensive is buying a wrapped commodity at enterprise prices. Both are failures of category knowledge, which you now have.

Hold the map lightly. The six categories will still be recognisable years from now; the logos will not, and that asymmetry is your advantage. The operator who knows categories reads every new product announcement in ten seconds: which category, what is genuinely new, what would I pay. That speed is learnable, it compounds, and it started on this page.

Staying current, by the way, takes less than the anxious assume. One deliberate hour a month: skim what the major model providers shipped, check the changelogs of the two workflow platforms you actually use, and re-test one old assumption, something that was true of the tools a year ago and may not be now. That last habit matters most, because in this market the expensive mistakes are rarely ignorance of the new. They are confidence in the stale: paying specialist prices for what a general model now does, or custom-building what a platform shipped as a feature in March. An hour a month keeps your map honest, and an honest map is the whole product of this chapter.

Do this now

1. **Build the tool inventory for your practice business.** List every piece of software it pays for, in a table: what it is, category, monthly cost, who uses it weekly. Then spend thirty minutes in the settings of the two biggest systems looking for AI features shipped in the last year that nobody has switched on. You will almost certainly find at least one, and finding it is your cheapest first win.
2. **Price one process three ways.** Take the process you shortlisted in Chapter 20 and cost it as a buy, an assembly, and a custom build: a specialist tool's subscription price, a workflow platform plus model calls at realistic volume, and a rough contractor quote. Write the three numbers side by side. This is the exercise that turns the build-versus-buy instinct from theory into reflex.
3. **Run the three vendor questions once, live.** Book a demo with any AI product relevant to your practice business; vendors give demos freely. Ask the three questions, politely, and write down what happened to the conversation. You are rehearsing, in a meeting that costs you nothing, the exact performance clients will later pay to have you deliver.

Chapter 22: Ten Deployments Anyone Can Ship

This is the chapter the whole book has been promising, so let me tell you exactly what it is.

Ten deployments, worked end to end at build level. Each one is a real pattern that runs today in thousands of ordinary businesses. For each, you get the trigger, the steps, the tool category with example tools, the briefing the machine needs, where the human checkpoint sits, the gotchas that actually bite, what done looks like, how long the build honestly takes, and what to charge a client for it.

Between them, these ten cover the majority of what a working deployment practice ships in its first two years. They are not the flashiest builds available. They are the ones that survive contact with real businesses, which is a different and better thing.

Three notes before the first one. The tools named are examples within categories; Chapter 21's rule stands, categories persist and brands churn, so substitute freely as the market moves. The build times assume you have done each pattern once before; add half again for your first attempt, and that first attempt should be on your own work or a friendly business, not a paying client's deadline. And the prices are for the small and mid-sized market, quoted as a build fee plus a monthly amount for monitoring and improvement, because Chapter 32 will show you that the monthly is where the practice income actually lives. Charge in your market's currency and adjust for its weather, but do not halve these numbers out of nervousness. The value arithmetic from Chapter 20 is what justifies the price, and you will have written it down before you quote.

1. Lead follow-up automation

The pattern that pays for this book. Research on lead response has said the same thing for fifteen years: respond in minutes and you massively outconvert responding in hours, yet most small businesses take half a day or longer, because humans are busy.

The trigger is a new enquiry arriving: web form, marketplace lead, email, missed call. The steps: capture the enquiry into the CRM, have a model draft a reply that acknowledges the specific request in the company's voice, answer what can be answered, offer a booking link or next step, send it, then run a polite follow-up sequence over the following days that stops the moment the prospect replies. Built on a workflow automation platform such as Zapier, Make or n8n, calling a frontier model for the drafting, connected to whatever CRM exists. If no CRM exists, installing a simple one becomes part of the job.

The briefing is what separates this from spam: the services list with honest pricing guidance, tone rules with two or three example replies the owner loves, what never to promise, and the escalation rule for enquiries that smell big or angry. The checkpoint: for the pilot, every reply queues as a draft for a human to approve before sending. Graduation to auto-send happens per enquiry type, only after the approval rate has proven itself, which is Chapter 23's machinery.

Gotchas: enquiries arriving through channels nobody mentioned in the mapping session, the model over-promising ("yes we can definitely do that by Friday"), and duplicate follow-ups when a prospect replies to a different address. Done looks like: every enquiry answered inside five minutes, around the clock, in a voice the owner signs off on, with response time and conversion tracked against the Chapter 20 baseline. Build time: two to four days. Charge \$2,500 to \$6,000 to build, \$300 to \$750 a month to run and improve. This is the best first deployment in most businesses that sell anything, because the metric moves fast and the owner can feel it.

2. Meeting notes to CRM

Salespeople hate admin, so CRMs are full of blanks, so forecasts are fiction and handovers are folklore. This build ends that quietly.

Trigger: a sales or client meeting ends. Steps: an AI notetaker in the voice category, Fireflies, Otter or the meeting platform's own recorder, produces the transcript; a model extracts a structured summary against your template, covering who attended, what was discussed, objections, commitments made by each side, and next steps with dates; the workflow platform writes it to the right CRM record and creates the follow-up tasks; the salesperson gets a copy with one job, correct anything wrong within a day.

The briefing is the extraction template itself plus the company's deal-stage definitions, so "they want to think about it" lands as the stage the sales manager actually calls it. The checkpoint is that salesperson review, which in practice takes ninety seconds and catches the transcription mishearings. Gotchas: consent, since recording calls has legal and etiquette rules that vary by jurisdiction, so put recording notices in invites and check local requirements as part of Chapter 24's homework; matching meetings to the correct CRM record when names are misspelled; and mumbled commitments the model renders as firmer than they were.

Done looks like: every meeting in the CRM within an hour, in a consistent format, with tasks created, and the sales manager reading summaries instead of interrogating the team. Build: one to three days. Charge \$2,000 to \$4,500 plus \$250 to \$500 a month. A lovely second deployment, because it feeds the lead follow-up system richer context.

3. Invoice chasing

Every business hates asking for its own money, so the money arrives late. The fix is a machine that is never embarrassed.

Trigger: an invoice crosses its due date in the accounting system, Xero, QuickBooks or MYOB. Steps: the workflow platform watches for overdue

invoices daily; a model drafts a reminder whose tone is set by how overdue and how valuable the relationship is, friendly at three days, firm at thirty, formal with consequences at sixty; the sequence sends on schedule, stops instantly on payment, and escalates genuinely delinquent accounts to a human with a summary of the history.

The briefing: the escalation ladder with the owner's words at each rung, the client-exception list, and the rule for part-payments and disputes, which always route to a human. The checkpoint sits at the top rung: nothing threatening or final goes out unapproved, and for the pilot month, every message queues for approval. Gotchas: chasing an invoice the client already paid by a method the accounting system has not reconciled yet, which is mortifying, so reconciliation timing is the first thing you check; disputed invoices entering the sequence; and the owner's nephew's company being on the exception list nobody mentioned.

Done looks like: days-sales-outstanding measurably down, the owner out of the debt-collection business, and a monthly one-line report of what was chased and what came in. Build: one to two days; this is the simplest pattern in the ten. Charge \$1,500 to \$3,500 plus \$200 to \$400 a month. The result is visible in the bank account, which makes this the deployment that renews retainers.

4. Quote and proposal drafting from call notes

In service businesses the quote is the bottleneck: the owner is the only one who can write them, so they get written at 10pm or not at all, and slow quotes lose to fast competitors.

Trigger: a sales conversation finishes, with a transcript from build two or dictated notes from a site visit. Steps: a model drafts the quote from the transcript against the company's templates, pulling scope language from a library of past quotes the owner rates as good, applying the pricing rules that can be written down, and flagging anything non-standard for

human pricing; the draft lands in the owner's queue formatted and ready; the human reviews, adjusts, sends.

The briefing is the heaviest of the ten and is the real work of the build: ten to twenty past quotes, annotated by the owner for what made them good; the pricing logic, extracted in a painful but valuable session where "it depends" gets decomposed into actual rules; and the scope-trap list, the things this business always forgets to include and later eats the cost of. The checkpoint is absolute and permanent: no quote leaves without human approval, ever. Money documents do not graduate to auto-send, a line Chapter 23 will hold firm. Gotchas: the model inventing prices for unpriced items, and old quote language contradicting current pricing, so version the library.

Done looks like: quote turnaround from days to hours, the owner reviewing instead of composing, and quotes-sent-per-week up against baseline. Build: three to five days, mostly briefing work. Charge \$3,500 to \$8,000 plus \$400 to \$800 a month, priced against what a lost quote costs, which you learned in the interview.

5. Review collection

Reviews are the small-business currency of trust, everyone knows it, and almost nobody asks systematically, because asking feels awkward and gets forgotten.

Trigger: a job completes, an invoice is paid, or a project closes, whichever event in this business means "the customer is happy now." Steps: the workflow platform waits a tasteful day or two; a model drafts a short personal request naming the actual work done, with the direct review link; non-responders get one gentle nudge a week later and then are left alone; new reviews get detected, drafted replies queued for approval, and negative signals routed instantly to the owner as a service-recovery opportunity before they become public one-star reviews.

The briefing: what warm-but-not-grovelling sounds like in this company's voice, plus the rule set for who gets asked, since you skip the customer whose job had problems, and platform policies on review solicitation vary, so check them per platform as you build. The checkpoint for the pilot is approval of outgoing requests; this pattern graduates to fully automatic faster than any other because the stakes per message are low. The gotcha that matters: the trigger event lying, such as "invoice paid" firing on a customer who paid grudgingly after a dispute, which is why the skip rule exists.

Done looks like: a steady drip of fresh reviews month over month against the baseline count, and not one awkward ask by a human. Build: one to two days. Charge \$1,500 to \$3,000 plus \$150 to \$300 a month. Small build, outsized visible impact, and a favourite add-on to any first engagement.

6. Internal knowledge assistant

Every business has one person who knows where everything is, and everyone interrupts them all day. This build gives the interruptions somewhere else to go.

Trigger: a staff member has a question: the returns policy, the process for a warranty claim, what we quoted for jobs like this, where the induction checklist lives. Steps: the company's documents, policies, procedures, templates and selected past work get organised into a source library; an assistant is configured to answer questions from that library and only that library, citing which document it drew from; it lives where staff already work, Slack, Teams, or a simple chat page.

The tool category is chat assistants configured with retrieval: the project or workspace features of ChatGPT, Claude or Copilot at small scale, or purpose-built retrieval tools as the library grows. The briefing is the library itself, and here is the gotcha that defines the whole build: the machine answers from what the documents say, and if the documents are

wrong, stale or contradictory, it becomes a confident distributor of wrong answers. So the real work is curation, deciding which documents are canon, fixing the worst ones, and dating everything. Recall the Chapter 20 red flag about knowledge living in heads; this build is where that documentation debt gets paid down, billably.

The checkpoint is structural rather than per-answer: citations on every response so staff can check the source, a visible “answers come from our docs, verify anything critical” label, and a weekly review of unanswered and badly answered questions, which doubles as a to-do list for the library. Done looks like: the expert measurably interrupted less, new starters productive in days instead of weeks, and the question log quietly telling management what the business is confused about. Build: two to four days plus curation, which can be its own paid phase. Charge \$3,000 to \$7,000 plus \$300 to \$600 a month including library upkeep.

7. Monthly report automation

Somewhere in almost every business, a capable person spends one to three days a month copying numbers from four systems into a document that management skims. That is a mortgage payment of labour producing a formatting exercise.

Trigger: month end, or week end for operational reports. Steps: the workflow platform pulls the numbers from the source systems, accounting, CRM, ad platforms, operations software, on schedule; a model turns them into the report using a fixed template, stating what the numbers are, how they moved against last period and target, and what looks anomalous; the draft lands with the report’s owner for review; corrected versions teach next month’s prompt.

The briefing: last year’s reports as format exemplars, the definition of every metric in writing, because “revenue” means three different things in three systems and this build will force the business to pick one, which is a service in itself, and the commentary rules: describe, compare, flag,

and stop short of strategic advice unless the owner wants a clearly-labelled “questions this raises” section, which they usually love. The checkpoint is the owner’s review before distribution, permanently; numbers going to management or a board carry a human signature, full stop.

Gotchas: source data not being final when the automation runs, accounting periods that close late, and one system’s API returning quietly stale numbers, which is why the build includes a data-freshness check that refuses to draft from old inputs. Done looks like: the report producing itself to draft in minutes, the human spending twenty minutes on review instead of two days on assembly, and nobody missing the old way. Build: two to four days per report. Charge \$2,500 to \$6,000 plus \$250 to \$500 a month. Finance-adjacent, visible to the top of the company, and a superb credibility builder.

8. Email triage and routing

The shared inbox, info@ or accounts@ or support@, is where small-business customer experience goes to die: two hundred messages, three staff, no system, and the urgent one found on Thursday.

Trigger: any message arriving in the shared inbox. Steps: a model reads and classifies each message against the business’s real categories, enquiry, invoice query, complaint, supplier, spam; applies urgency rules; routes to the right person or queue with labels; drafts a reply for the routine majority, ready for one-click review; and flags the dangerous few, the furious customer, the legal threat, the huge opportunity, straight to a human with a summary on top.

The briefing: two hundred historical emails classified with the team in a working session, which sounds tedious and is actually where the taxonomy gets honest; the routing rules; and the danger list, the phrases and situations that must always escalate. The checkpoint: humans send everything at first; auto-send is earned per category, and complaint

responses never graduate. Gotchas: multi-topic emails that fit two categories, reply chains where the machine reads the whole thread as new, and the classic silent failure, a routing rule pointing at a staff member who left, so the build includes a weekly “did every message land somewhere” audit and an unclassifiable-goes-to-human default.

Done looks like: nothing unanswered past a defined threshold, each category’s response time measured against baseline, and the inbox no longer a source of dread. Build: two to four days. Charge \$2,500 to \$5,500 plus \$300 to \$600 a month. Pairs naturally with build one, since the same plumbing serves both.

9. Candidate screening

A decent job ad now attracts a hundred-plus applications, so nobody reads them properly, so hiring is first-impression roulette. This build makes the reading happen, with a large flashing caution attached.

The caution first, because it shapes the whole design: hiring is exactly where AI has produced discrimination lawsuits and exactly what regulators worldwide treat as high-risk, with the EU’s rules the strictest of them. So this pattern is assistance, never decision. The machine summarises and checks facts; humans rank and reject; and every rejection is a human’s documented call. Design it that way and say so in writing; Chapters 24 and 26 carry the full reasoning.

Trigger: applications arriving for an open role. Steps: a model reads each application against the written criteria for the role, produces a structured summary, claimed experience, evidenced skills, gaps against the criteria, questions worth asking at interview; verifies checkable basics like dates that add up; and presents the whole field in a consistent one-page-per-candidate format. Every candidate gets summarised. No candidate gets scored out or auto-rejected.

The briefing: the actual criteria, written down, which many businesses have never done and which improves their hiring before any machinery

runs; and strict instructions to summarise evidence rather than infer quality, because models absorb the biases of the text they learned from and inference is where bias lives. The checkpoint: a human reads every summary and makes every call, permanently. Gotchas: AI-written applications gaming AI reading, which is another reason the human interview stays load-bearing, and beautifully-formatted CVs summarising better than plain ones, which the fixed summary template mostly corrects.

Done looks like: every applicant genuinely reviewed within days, better shortlists with written reasoning, and a hiring manager who read a hundred summaries in the time forty CVs used to take. Build: one to three days per role family. Charge \$2,000 to \$5,000 plus support per hiring round. Sell it as review capacity and rigour, never as automated selection, because automated selection is both wrong and, increasingly, illegal.

10. The social and content production line

Most small businesses know they should publish and do not, because content takes hours they do not have. The fix is not a robot that invents content. It is a production line that multiplies content the business already generates.

Trigger: a weekly capture, and this is the design insight of the whole build: the raw material is real, a twenty-minute voice note from the owner answering customer questions, a walkthrough of a finished job, photos from the field, a customer win. Steps: transcribe the capture; a model drafts the derivatives, a short article, three or four social posts shaped per platform, an email newsletter segment, all in the company's voice from a style guide built out of their best past material; drafts land in a review queue; a human approves, edits or bins each one; approved pieces schedule out through a scheduling tool.

The briefing: the style guide, examples of what they would never say, the claims rules, especially in regulated trades where a casual “best in town” can breach advertising rules, and the topics list mined from real customer questions. The checkpoint: a human approves every piece before it publishes, permanently; brand damage compounds too fast for autopilot, and the fifteen minutes a week this costs is the entire human price of the system. Gotchas: the owner skipping the capture session, which starves the line and is a management problem rather than a technical one, so make it a recurring calendar slot with you in the first month; and generic-sounding output, which means the style guide needs more of their actual voice in it.

Done looks like: consistent publishing every week from one twenty-minute capture, measured by output volume and enquiry attribution, with the owner spending under an hour a month on the whole apparatus. Build: two to four days including the style guide. Charge \$2,500 to \$6,000 plus \$400 to \$900 a month, the higher band where you also manage the weekly run.

What the ten have in common

Read back across them and the same skeleton appears every time. A trigger from a real business event. Steps that mirror the mapped process. A briefing built from the business’s own material, which is Chapter 3’s no-briefing failure, solved. A human checkpoint scaled to the stakes, tight where money, reputation and people are involved, looser where the worst case is a clumsy sentence. A measurement against a baseline. An owner and a runbook at handoff.

That skeleton is the actual product you sell. The tools are interchangeable; the skeleton is the craft. Master it on these ten and you will find that deployment eleven, whatever it is, assembles itself from parts you already know.

Notice too what the ten add up to commercially. Build fees of \$1,500 to \$8,000 each, monthly amounts of \$150 to \$900 each. A single client running four of these patterns is paying a retainer that Part VI will teach you to structure, and every pattern's monthly fee is anchored to a measured saving that dwarfs it. That is why this chapter is the spine of the promise: these are not demos. They are the inventory of a practice.

Do this now

1. **Match your shortlist to the patterns.** Take the three processes you shortlisted in Chapter 20 and identify which of the ten patterns each maps to. At least two of the three will map cleanly; they almost always do. Write one paragraph per match: trigger, tools you would use, where the checkpoint sits, what you would measure.
2. **Build number three or number five for real.** Invoice chasing and review collection are the two simplest patterns in the ten. Pick whichever fits a business you can access, your own, your employer's, or a friend's, and build it this fortnight on a workflow platform's free tier, with every message set to queue for approval. You will learn more in those two days than in a month of reading, and you will own your first working deployment.
3. **Write your rate card.** Using this chapter's ranges, draft a one-page price list for the five patterns you would offer first, adjusted to your market. You will revise it after Part VI, but writing prices down does something useful to your nerve: it converts "could I charge for this?" into "this is what it costs," which is the sentence a professional uses.

Chapter 23: Piloting and Proving

There is a moment in every deployment where the build works on your screen and everything in you wants to switch it on for real.

The demo ran. The test email drafted beautifully. The owner is excited, you are excited, and flipping it live would feel like finishing. This chapter exists to stop you, because that moment is where the 95% and the 5% part ways, and the parting has nothing to do with the quality of the build.

The 95% launches. The 5% pilots. Launching means exposing customers and staff to an unproven system and finding out what it does wrong in public. Piloting means running the system in the shadow of the existing process, against a measured baseline, for a defined period, with the decision rules written before you start. Same build, entirely different careers, because launchers get one visible failure and lose the room, while pilots arrive at every hard conversation holding numbers.

This chapter is the pilot craft in full: baselines, shadow runs, the thirty-day design, sample sizes in plain language, kill criteria, the graduation decision, and how to report the result honestly, including when the result is bad.

Baselines, or why you measure before you build

Here is the mistake that quietly ruins more deployments than any technical fault: nobody wrote down what the old way cost before the new way started. Then the system works, things feel better, and when the owner asks what they got for their money, the honest answer is a shrug with adjectives.

A baseline is the antidote, and it is embarrassingly simple: before the pilot starts, measure the process as it currently runs, and write it down with a date on it.

What you measure depends on the pattern, but it is always the same short list of families. Time: how long between trigger and completion, enquiry to response, meeting to CRM entry, month end to report sent. Volume: how many instances per week, and how many fall on the floor entirely, since the follow-up that never happened is invisible until you count it. Quality: error rates, rework, complaints, things missed. Money: the labour arithmetic from Chapter 20, plus whatever the process leaks directly, late payments, lost quotes, missed leads.

Collect it from the systems where you can, since email timestamps, CRM records and accounting software already know most of it, and by honest sampling where you cannot: take last month's twenty enquiries and work out the median response time by hand. An hour of archaeology is usually enough, and precision is not the point. "Median response time last month: nine business hours" is a serviceable baseline even if the true figure is seven or eleven, because the system you are about to pilot answers in five minutes, and no measurement error survives that gap.

One baseline deserves special mention because it hides: the baseline of work that was not happening at all. The follow-ups nobody sent, the reviews nobody requested, the leads that arrived on Saturday and were stale by Monday. There is no timestamp for a task that never occurred, so you measure the absence instead: of last month's forty enquiries, how many ever received a second touch? Of the jobs completed last quarter, how many customers were asked for a review? Zero is a perfectly good baseline, and it is often the most persuasive number in the final report, because the system's entire output is new work the business was silently forgoing.

Two rules. Date the baseline, because an undated number cannot anchor a before-and-after story. And get the owner to agree to it in writing before the pilot: "we currently respond in about nine hours, we agree that is the number to beat." That sentence, agreed in advance, is what makes the final report unarguable, because the finish line was drawn before anyone ran.

Shadow-running: the new way alongside the old

The central mechanic of a good pilot is that during it, the machine does the work and the human still does the job.

Concretely: the lead follow-up system drafts every reply, and a human approves each one before it sends. The invoice chaser queues its reminders for sign-off. The report writes itself to draft and the person who used to build it reviews before anyone else sees it. The candidate summaries sit beside the CVs they summarise. The old process remains the process of record; the new system shadows it.

Shadow-running buys you four things at once, and it is worth seeing all four, because people who think the shadow period is mere caution cut it short and lose the other three.

It caps the risk. During the shadow, the worst the machine can do is waste a reviewer's minute, because a human stands between every output and the world. You will meet this idea again as Chapter 24's blast-radius habit; the shadow period is that habit applied to time.

It generates the evidence. Every approval, edit and rejection during the shadow is a data point. Out of a month of shadowing you get exactly the numbers the graduation decision needs: what fraction of outputs were usable untouched, what fraction needed edits, what fraction were wrong, and, critically, how the wrong ones were wrong.

It tunes the briefing. The edits reviewers make are the most valuable feedback in the entire deployment. When the owner keeps softening the machine's third follow-up email, that is the briefing telling you it needs a tone rule. Fold the edits back into the prompt weekly and watch the approval rate climb; the pilot's second fortnight is usually dramatically better than its first, and that climb itself belongs in your report.

And it disarms the people. Staff who fear replacement meet, instead, a drafting assistant they get to correct. They are the expert marking the machine's homework, visibly senior to the system. Adoption resistance

mostly evaporates in the shadow period, not because of any speech you give but because checking output feels safe in a way being replaced does not. The pilots that get sabotaged are almost always the ones that skipped this stage.

The cost of shadow-running is real: for a few weeks, the business runs the old process and reviews the new one, which is more work, not less. Say so upfront. Frame it as the four-week insurance premium on a permanent saving, which is exactly what it is.

The thirty-day pilot, by week

Thirty days is the default pilot length for the patterns in this book, and it is not arbitrary: it is long enough to catch weekly rhythms, month-end behaviour and a respectable sample, and short enough that nobody's patience dies. Here is the shape.

Before day one. The baseline is captured, dated and agreed. The kill criteria and graduation thresholds are written, and we will get to those in a moment. The reviewers are named and know what to do, including how to reject an output and why their edits matter. The measurement is plumbed: approvals, edits and rejections get logged as they happen, not reconstructed later. And the scope is fenced: which enquiry types, which invoice bands, which inbox categories are in the pilot, with everything else still running the old way.

Week one: expect mess. The first days surface everything the mapping session missed: the enquiry channel nobody mentioned, the supplier who emails PDFs of photographs of invoices, the reply chain that confuses the classifier. This is normal and useful. Fix the plumbing, note every surprise, and resist the urge to judge performance yet; week one is discovery, not evidence.

Weeks two and three: the real test. The system runs on tuned briefing and stable plumbing. This is the window where the numbers

start meaning something. Hold a fifteen-minute weekly review with the reviewers: what got rejected and why, what edits repeat, what the log says. Fold the lessons into the briefing. Touch nothing in the final few days of week three, because you want a stretch of untouched performance for the decision.

Week four: decide. Compare the log against the thresholds you wrote before day one, and make one of three calls. Graduate: the system met its thresholds, and autonomy starts expanding, per the ladder below. Extend: the trend is right but the sample is thin or a fix landed late, so run two more weeks; one extension is legitimate, repeated extension is a decision being dodged. Or kill: the criteria say stop, so stop, and we will cover why that is a win in a moment.

Sample sizes, in plain language

You do not need statistics training to run honest pilots. You need one idea: small samples lie, and they lie in whichever direction you were hoping.

Ten outputs tell you nearly nothing. Nine good drafts out of ten sounds like ninety percent, but with ten samples, plain luck can dress up an eighty percent system as a ninety-five percent one, and vice versa. Rules of thumb that serve at this scale: below twenty instances, treat everything you see as anecdote; around fifty, you can trust the broad shape, the difference between “mostly right” and “mostly wrong”; north of a hundred, you can start trusting differences of a few percentage points, and not before.

That is most of the statistics you need, and it has two practical consequences. First, pilot length must respect volume: a process running forty instances a day gives you a real sample in a week, while a process running three a week cannot be judged in thirty days, so extend the calendar or, better, pick higher-volume processes to pilot first, which Chapter 20’s volume lens already told you to do. Second, judge rare

events by severity, not rate. If the pilot saw two furious-customer emails and handled one badly, your sample of dangerous cases is two, and no percentage computed on two is worth writing down. For the rare-and-dangerous category, the pilot question is not “what rate?” but “when it happened, did the escalation rule catch it?” That is a yes-or-no about the safety net, and it needs to be yes.

Kill criteria, decided in advance

Before the pilot starts, you and the owner write down what result would make you kill it. Not vague unease. Numbers and events: if fewer than sixty percent of outputs are approved without edits by week three, we stop. If it invents a price, a policy or a fact in a customer-facing draft more than twice, we stop. If reviewing the output takes longer than doing the task, we stop. If any output breaches the data rules in Chapter 24 even once, we stop that day.

Do this while everyone is calm and hopeful, because after a month of invested effort, no human judges fairly. Sunk cost is a physical force; pre-committed criteria are the only known counter. This is not pessimism. It is the thing that makes the rest of the pilot honest: results only mean something when failure was genuinely possible and everyone knew what it would look like.

And here is the reframe to install permanently: a pilot that hits its kill criteria is a success of the method. It caught a system that does not work before customers met it, for the price of a few weeks’ shadowing, in a market where, remember, 42% of companies are abandoning initiatives after real money and real launches. Say exactly that to the client, then diagnose: was it the wrong process, a briefing that needs rebuilding, or a task genuinely past the current tools? The diagnosis usually points straight at the next, better attempt. Operators do not lose credibility by killing pilots. They lose it by defending systems that everyone in the room can see are not working.

Graduation: earning autonomy

The pilot ends well and now comes the question everyone actually cares about: when does the human stop checking every output?

Treat autonomy as a ladder the system climbs, one earned rung at a time. It starts with a human approving every output, where the pilot ran. It graduates to spot-checking, a sample reviewed daily, then weekly, when sustained approval rates justify it. It ends, for suitable categories only, at exception-only review, where humans see just what the system flags or what trips a rule.

Three principles govern the climb. Graduate by category, not wholesale: routine enquiry replies may earn auto-send while complaint responses stay human-approved forever, and the ten deployments in Chapter 22 marked which checkpoints are permanent; money documents, hiring calls, and published content do not graduate, at any approval rate. Set the bar by blast radius: a category can run unattended when its approval rate has held above your threshold, commonly ninety-five percent for low-stakes categories, on a real sample, and the worst plausible failure is one you can live with in public. And make graduation reversible: any incident drops the category back a rung while you fix the briefing, which is not drama, just the ladder working in both directions. This, in plain clothes, is the pair of questions that should precede any autonomy anywhere: can you trust it unattended, and what is the worst it can do. If the second answer is frightening, the first does not matter.

Spot-checking, by the way, never falls to zero. Even fully graduated systems keep a small weekly sample under human eyes, because processes drift, suppliers change formats, models get updated underneath you, and the sample is how you notice. Chapter 26 will fold that habit into the governance kit; it costs minutes and it is the difference between systems that stay good and systems that were good once. The review queue is not scaffolding you remove. It is part of the building.

Reporting the pilot honestly

The pilot's last artifact is the report, and Part IV already taught you its language: money and outcomes, not models and features. One page. What we tested, in one sentence a board member could repeat. The baseline, dated. What happened, in numbers: instances handled, approval rate and its trend, time from trigger to done versus baseline, hours of human time now required versus before. What went wrong, stated plainly, including the near-misses the escalation rules caught. The decision and its reasons: graduated, extended or killed, against the pre-agreed thresholds. And what happens next: the autonomy plan by category, the handoff owner, the next process in the queue.

Include the costs, unprompted. The subscriptions, the model usage, the review minutes the checkpoint still consumes, your fee. Then state the net. A report that says "this saves eleven hours a week and costs \$480 a month plus forty minutes of review, for a net of roughly \$1,700 a month" does the client's mental arithmetic for them and removes the question every owner is silently asking. Reports that mention only the savings train the reader to hunt for the catch. Reports that volunteer the catch get believed about everything else.

The temptation, every single time, is to shave the rough edges off, and you must not, for a commercial reason as much as an ethical one: the flaws are what make the report believable. "Ninety-one percent approved untouched, and here are the three failures and what we changed" reads like the truth and builds the kind of trust that renews retainers. "It went great" reads like every vendor the owner has ever regretted. You are the person who measures; it is the entire difference between you and the 95%, and it compounds with every honest page you put your name on.

One pilot, run like this, gives you the measured win that Part IV taught you to convert into standing. Ten of them give you a portfolio no credential can match. The craft is not glamorous: baselines, logs,

thresholds, one-page reports. But it is the exact craft the market cannot find, and now it is yours.

Do this now

1. **Baseline your chosen process this week.** The one process you matched to a pattern in Chapter 22. One hour of archaeology: pull last month's instances from the systems, work out volume, median time from trigger to done, and the honest labour cost. Write it up in five lines, date it, and if there is an owner or boss involved, get them to agree to it in writing. You now hold the before photo, which most operators in this market never think to take.
2. **Write the pilot one-pager before you build anything further.** For that same process: scope, reviewers by name, the thirty-day calendar, graduation thresholds per category, and at least three kill criteria with numbers in them. Half a page is plenty. This document, written before the pilot, is the discipline; every number in it is a decision you will not have to fight about later.
3. **Design the log.** Decide exactly where every approval, edit and rejection will be recorded during the shadow period, a spreadsheet is fine, and who records it. Set it up now, empty. Pilots fail to prove things for one boring reason more than any other: the evidence was never captured while it was happening, and no one can reconstruct it afterwards.

Chapter 24: Data, Privacy and Safety

One careless deployment can undo everything the previous five chapters built, and it will not fail the way you expect.

It will not fail because the model was not smart enough. It will fail because somebody pasted a client list into a free chatbot, or because an automation with delete permissions met an edge case at 2am, or because a system quietly emailed the wrong customer someone else's quote. Technical quality did not matter in any of those sentences. Judgment about data and permissions did.

Here is the reframe that makes this chapter a career asset rather than a compliance chore: safety is not the tax you pay on deployment. It is a thing the market pays for. The operator who can say “here is what we will never feed the model, here is the worst this system can possibly do, and here is how we capped it” wins engagements against cheaper competitors precisely because the owner can hear the difference. Recklessness is common in this market. Care is scarce, and scarce things price well.

This chapter gives you the working rules: what may and may not go into a model, how tool settings change that answer, who gets access to what, the habit of capping the worst case before switching anything on, what backup thinking looks like, and what to do in the hour after something goes wrong.

Where a prompt actually goes

Start with the question underneath every data decision: when you type something into an AI tool, where does it go?

It leaves the building. For every mainstream tool, the prompt travels to the provider's servers, gets processed, and a response comes back. So the

real questions are what the provider does with it afterwards, and the answer depends almost entirely on which door you walked in through.

Consumer tiers, the free and personal-subscription versions of the chat tools, commonly reserve the right to use your conversations to improve their models, unless you find the setting that opts out. Treat consumer tiers as fine for learning, drafting with public information, and anything you would be comfortable posting publicly, and as the wrong door for anything else.

Business and enterprise tiers of the same tools flip the defaults: your data is not used for training, admin controls exist, and the provider signs actual commitments about handling. The functional difference between the tiers is not the model. It is the contract.

API and platform access, which is what your workflow automations use, generally behaves like the business tier, with data-handling terms published per provider.

So the first concrete rule of this whole chapter: **any business deployment runs on business-tier or API access, never on someone's personal free account.** This costs a few extra dollars a month and removes an entire category of risk. When you find company work running through personal chatbot accounts, and you will, in most businesses you assess, that finding goes in the report, and moving it onto proper accounts is your first, easiest safety win.

Providers change their terms, so the durable skill is knowing the three questions to re-ask per tool, per year: is our data used for training, how long is it retained, and what did the provider contractually commit to. Ten minutes on a data-handling page answers all three, and the vendor conversation from Chapter 21 already taught you to ask.

What you may and may not feed a model

Now the material itself. Sort everything you might ever paste, upload or pipe into a model into three piles.

The green pile: fine for any properly configured tool. Public information, your own drafts, published material, product descriptions, anonymised examples, process documentation, and the general how-to of the business. Most of the daily work of Chapters 19 to 22 lives here. Notice that a document does not need to be secret to be useful; the briefing libraries behind Chapter 22's builds are almost entirely green-pile material.

The amber pile: business-confidential. Client lists, pricing and margins, sales pipelines, internal financials, unreleased plans, most of what sits in the CRM and the accounting system. This pile may go into business-tier and API tools, and that is precisely what your deployments do all day, but under three conditions: the tool tier is right, the client knows and has agreed in the engagement terms that these systems process their data, and you send the minimum needed for the task. The minimum matters more than people think: the invoice-chasing build needs the invoice amount, date and contact, not the customer's full history. Piping less is both safer and, usually, better engineering.

The red pile: personal and high-consequence data. Information about identifiable people: health details, financial records, identity documents, payroll, HR files, complaints about named staff. Plus anything under a specific confidentiality obligation: material covered by an NDA, legal matters, anything a professional privilege attaches to. The red pile is not a never; document AI legitimately processes personal data every day. The red pile means each use gets a deliberate decision, not a default: is this tier contractually fit for this data, does privacy law in your jurisdiction permit this use, does the person's reasonable expectation cover it, and did anyone actually make that call, by name. Privacy law varies by country and the details are beyond one chapter; the operator's obligation is not to be a privacy lawyer, it is to know which pile they are holding and to stop, at the red pile, and decide rather than drift.

The habit that enforces the piles is a written rule set per business: which data classes may enter which tools, on one page. That page becomes part of the policy in Chapter 26, and staff follow it far more readily than you might fear, because the alternative you are offering, “just don’t paste anything sensitive anywhere,” gives them nothing to follow at all.

Two special cases complete the sorting. First, other people’s IP: material a client received under NDA, a competitor’s proposal that arrived sideways, licensed content. The machine will happily process it; the obligation sits on the human who fed it in. Second, credentials: passwords, API keys and bank details never go into a prompt, full stop, not because the model will misuse them but because prompts get logged, shared and screenshotted, and secrets do not belong in transcripts.

Access control, in four sentences

The subject fills books; the working rules fit in four sentences.

Every automation gets its own account and its own credentials, never a person’s, so that when your workflow platform connects to the CRM it does so as “automation@company,” and its access can be measured, limited and revoked without touching a human’s login. Each system gets the least access that lets it do its job: read-only where it only reads, one mailbox rather than the whole domain, this folder rather than the drive. Credentials live in a password manager or the platform’s credential store, never in prompts, spreadsheets or chat threads. And someone keeps a list of every connection: what talks to what, with what access, revocable where, which is fifteen minutes of documentation per deployment and becomes, in Chapter 26, part of the register a client will pay you to maintain.

Least-privilege is boring right up until it is the only thing that mattered. The difference between “the automation had read access to one mailbox” and “the automation had full access to everything, because that was

easier on day one” is the difference between an incident and a catastrophe, decided weeks earlier, by you, in a settings screen.

The AI use that is already happening

Everything so far assumes you are designing the AI use. In every business you will ever walk into, AI use predates you, and nobody in charge knows its extent.

The staff are already using it. The salesperson pastes proposals into a free chatbot to punch them up. The admin runs customer complaints through one to draft replies. The junior accountant summarises contracts in whatever tool a friend recommended. All on personal accounts, all invisible to management, all sorted into no pile at all. The MIT research behind Chapter 3’s numbers found exactly this pattern at enterprise scale: official AI projects failing while unofficial personal-account use quietly flourished everywhere. It is not a fringe behaviour. It is the default state of every workplace now.

Your first instinct might be to stamp it out. Resist it, for two reasons. First, the staff using these tools are your allies: they are the ones who already believe, and their workarounds are a free map of where AI genuinely helps in this business, drawn by the people who know. Second, bans do not work; they just push the use deeper underground, where no policy can reach it and no tier protects it.

The professional response is an amnesty, run in three moves. Ask, without threat: a short anonymous survey or a round of the Chapter 20 staff conversations, asking what tools people use and for what, with an explicit promise that the answers carry no consequences. Sort what comes back into the three piles: most of it will be green-pile use that just needs blessing, some amber-pile use that needs moving onto business accounts, and occasionally a red-pile habit that needs to stop this week, kindly but immediately. Then replace, rather than remove: proper business-tier accounts, the one-page rule set, and approval for the use

cases that survive scrutiny, which is most of them. You will have converted a hidden liability into an adoption head start, and the staff will have watched you make their initiative legitimate instead of punishing it. That story travels through a business faster than any announcement.

The blast-radius habit

Here is the single most valuable safety habit in this book, and it costs one minute per deployment.

Before you switch anything on, ask: **what is the worst thing this system can send, delete, spend or commit to, exactly as configured, if everything goes as wrong as it can go?** Not “what will it probably do.” What can it do, with the permissions it holds, at the volume it runs, before a human would notice.

Run the lead follow-up build through it. As configured, could it send a hundred emails in an hour to the whole contact list? If it has send permission and no rate cap, yes, and a loop or a bad trigger will eventually find the gap. Could the invoice chaser demand money from your biggest client over a disputed bill? Could the inbox triage system delete mail rather than label it? Could an agent with a payment method attached spend real money on nonsense?

Then cap what you found, and the caps are almost embarrassingly mechanical: rate limits, so the sender that should send thirty messages a day is hard-capped at fifty and an alert fires at the cap; scope limits, the exception lists, the labelled-not-deleted rule, the no-payment-methods-attached rule; value limits, where anything above a threshold amount or outside a defined class queues for a human regardless of how graduated the system is; and the shadow default from Chapter 23, where any new or newly-changed system goes back to draft-and-approve until it re-earns trust.

The habit generalises into the two questions you met at graduation, and they are worth engraving: can you trust it unattended, and what is the worst it can do. Answer the second question first, cap it, and the first question gets dramatically easier to answer honestly. Systems built this way still fail; they fail small. The 2am edge case meets a rate cap and a queue instead of an open throttle, and Monday brings a log entry instead of an apology tour.

Voice agents and autonomous agents, note, are this habit's hardest tests: one talks to customers in real time with no queue between it and the damage, the other invents its own steps. That is why Chapter 21 told you to deploy voice late and trust agents slowly. The blast-radius question is how you decide when they are ready, and the honest answer, early in an engagement, is usually not yet.

Backup thinking

Automation adds a failure mode that manual work never had: speed. A human making a mistake makes one; a system making a mistake makes four hundred before morning. Backup thinking is the discipline of assuming that day arrives, and arranging things so it is annoying rather than fatal.

Three arrangements cover most of it. Reversibility first: wherever the platform offers a choice, prefer the action that can be undone, label rather than delete, draft rather than send, flag rather than change, archive rather than purge; the system that moves records to a holding state needs an apology when it errs, while the one that destroys them needs a miracle. Snapshots second: before any system gets write access to data that matters, confirm the underlying platform's backup and export story, and take your own export of anything precious before go-live, since the CRM that gets mangled by a bad sync restores in an hour if last week's export exists and becomes a reconstruction project if it does not. And a manual fallback third: every automated process keeps its old

manual procedure documented in the runbook, because the machine will be down sometimes, and “we can do it by hand for a day” is the difference between an outage and an incident. The handoff owner from step seven should know all three arrangements exist, and where.

And test the restore once, before you need it. An export nobody has ever re-imported is a hope, not a backup. Ten minutes of proving that last week’s CRM export actually loads is the cheapest insurance in this chapter, and the day it pays out, it pays out completely.

Incident honesty

Something will eventually go wrong. Run enough systems for enough months and one of them will send the wrong thing to the wrong person, or chase a paid invoice, or publish a draft. What you do in the following hours decides whether the incident costs you a bad week or a reputation.

The sequence is short. Stop the system, first, before diagnosis; pause the automation so it cannot compound. Size the damage honestly: what went out, to whom, what did it commit to or destroy, and the logs you built in Chapter 23 make this an hour instead of a guess. Tell the client before they find out, in plain language, with what happened, what you have done, and what happens next; delivering bad news fast and factually is the most trust-building act in this entire craft, and the operators who bury incidents are always, eventually, found out, in a market small enough to remember. Fix forward: remediate the damage, then fix the cause, then, and this is the part that separates professionals, fix the class of cause, because the wrong-attachment incident is an instance and the missing pre-send check is the class. Then write the half-page down: what happened, why, what changed. Chapter 26 gives that half-page a home in the governance file, and a client who reads an honest incident log with fixes attached trusts you more than a client shown a spotless record, because they know which one of those is real.

Notice what the whole chapter has been quietly arguing. Data rules, least privilege, blast-radius caps, backups, incident honesty: none of it requires a security qualification. It requires deciding, in advance, on paper, what you will and will not let a system do, and telling the truth when reality tests you. That is a professional standard, not a technical one, and holding it is what makes you safe to hand a business to. The market can hear the difference in one meeting.

Do this now

1. **Sort your practice business's data into the three piles.**

One page: what is green, amber, red for this specific business. Then check which door their current AI use walks through: list every AI tool in use and whether it is consumer-tier or business-tier. Any amber-or-red data flowing through consumer accounts goes on your findings list, and fixing it is a same-week win you can deliver before any build.

2. **Run the blast-radius question on your build.** Take the deployment you started in Chapter 22's exercises and write down, honestly: worst thing it can send, delete, spend or commit, exactly as configured. Then add the caps: a rate limit, a value or scope threshold that always queues for a human, and confirmation that its destructive actions are reversible. Date the page. You have just produced your first safety review, and it took twenty minutes.

3. **Rehearse the incident call.** Write the four sentences you would say to a client if your system emailed the wrong customer someone else's quote: what happened, what you have paused, what you are doing about it, when they will hear from you next. Nobody performs well in that moment unrehearsed. You now will, and with luck the rehearsal is the only performance you ever give.

Chapter 25: Working With Builders

Sooner or later, a deployment will genuinely need code, and you will need to buy it without being able to write it.

This frightens more people out of this career than any other single thing, and it should not, because you already know how this works from the rest of your life. You have hired an electrician without holding a trade certificate. Businesses commission buildings without laying bricks. The skill was never doing the work. The skill is specifying it, buying it, testing it and owning it, and that skill is entirely learnable in one chapter.

It matters commercially, too, well beyond the occasional custom build. Chapter 31 will show you a whole practice model where you win the clients and others do the building; this chapter is the craft that model runs on. Even if you never hire a single contractor, writing specs this precisely will improve every workflow you assemble yourself, because a spec is just a process map that has stopped being polite about ambiguity.

When it genuinely needs code

First, protect yourself from the most expensive sentence in this market: “we’ll build something custom.” Custom code is the last resort of Chapter 21’s decision tree, after configuring what the business owns, buying the commodity tool, and assembling on a workflow platform. Run those three honestly and most processes never reach this chapter.

But some do, and the signals are consistent. It needs code when a system the process depends on has no connector on any workflow platform, and someone must build the bridge, which is the most common trigger by far: the twenty-year-old industry package, the government portal, the in-house database. It needs code when volume outgrows per-task platform pricing, since ten thousand runs a month can make a small custom

service cheaper than the plumbing bills. It needs code when logic gets genuinely complex: not many steps, which platforms handle fine, but deep branching, calculations with consequences, or performance that visual tools cannot deliver. And it needs code when the client requires things platforms cannot promise, data that never leaves their infrastructure, or a certification the platform lacks.

Notice what is not on the list: “it would be more impressive.” A custom build is a liability with benefits, because everything custom must be documented, maintained and owned, forever, by someone. The professional instinct runs opposite to the amateur one: amateurs custom-build to seem serious; professionals assemble where possible and code only where the signals demand it, then keep the custom part as small as it can be. Half a build on the platform and one small coded bridge where the connector was missing beats a fully custom system every time it is available.

One honest complication of the current moment: AI itself now writes serviceable code, and the fashionable term is vibe coding, non-programmers producing working software by conversation. For your own internal glue, a small script the AI writes and explains, this is genuinely useful and worth doing to build your confidence. For anything that runs unattended inside a client’s business, be careful: code you cannot read is code you cannot maintain, and Chapter 24’s questions still apply to it with full force. The craft in this chapter, specifying, testing, owning, is exactly what makes AI-written code safe to use, which tells you something: the scarce skill was never the typing.

Finding and hiring builders

The market for freelance builders is deep, global and wildly uneven. You will find them in four places: the big freelance marketplaces such as Upwork and Fiverr, at every price and every quality; the certified-expert directories that workflow platforms like Zapier, Make and n8n maintain,

which pre-filter for the exact skills most of your builds need; developer communities and job boards where automation specialists advertise; and, best of all once you have any network at all, referral from other operators, because a builder someone like you has already survived is worth ten cold profiles.

What to pay swings by geography and skill, but working ranges keep you from being fleeced in either direction: platform-automation specialists commonly run \$40 to \$120 an hour; general software developers \$50 to \$150 an hour and up; and most of the coded bridges and small custom services this book's deployments ever need land between \$2,000 and \$15,000 as fixed-price projects. Cheaper exists, and is sometimes excellent, but unusually cheap plus unusually confident is its own warning sign.

Structure the money to protect both sides. Fixed price against a written spec for defined builds, hourly only for genuine exploration, and never a large upfront payment: a deposit, a milestone, and a final payment that lands after acceptance testing passes, which we will get to, because a builder paid in full before testing has your money and your leverage simultaneously.

Interview for communication before competence, because you cannot judge their code but you can absolutely judge their questions. Give a candidate your spec and watch what they do with it. The good ones ask questions that surprise you: what should happen when the invoice number is missing, what happens if the API is down at 6am, who gets told when it fails. Builders who ask about failure before you raised it think the way Chapter 24 taught you to think. Builders who read your spec and reply only "yes, easy, when do we start" have either not read it or not understood it, and both are disqualifying.

The red flags, collected: no questions about edge cases or failures. Estimates given instantly for work they have not examined. Reluctance to write anything down. Insistence on tools or platforms you cannot access

afterwards, or accounts in their name. A portfolio they cannot walk you through in plain language, since a builder who cannot explain their past work to you will not be able to explain your system to you either. And hostility to small first projects, because the correct first engagement with any new builder is deliberately small, one bridge, one script, one week, so both sides learn what working together costs before anything important depends on it.

The spec: a document a builder cannot misinterpret

Every horror story about outsourced software, the runaway budget, the thing that arrived wrong, the freelancer who vanished mid-project, traces back, more often than any other cause, to a spec that lived in somebody's head. The builder built what the words said, the buyer wanted what the words never captured, and both are angry at the other for the gap. The spec is where your Chapter 20 skills pay their biggest dividend, because you already know how to map a process; a spec is a process map sharpened until it cannot be misread. Five sections, one to three pages total.

Context. What the business is, what this process does, and why it is being built, in three or four sentences. Builders make dozens of small decisions you will never see; context is what lets them make those decisions in your favour. “This chases overdue invoices for a plumbing firm whose customers are builders; relationships matter more than speed” changes a hundred tiny choices.

Inputs. Exactly what the system receives, from where, in what format, with real examples attached. Not “the invoice data” but “these six fields, from this Xero report, and here are five real (redacted) samples, including an ugly one.” The samples are not decoration; they are the most information-dense part of the whole document, and the ugly one is worth more than the four clean ones.

Outputs. Exactly what the system produces, where it lands, and what it must look like, again with a worked example: the actual email as it should read, the actual row as it should appear. If you cannot produce a worked example of the output, you have discovered that you do not yet know what you are asking for, which is the cheapest possible moment to find out.

Exceptions. The section that separates a professional spec from a wish. What should happen when the input is missing a field, when the amount is zero or negative, when the same trigger fires twice, when the external system is down, when the volume spikes tenfold. And the catch-all rule, which must always exist: anything not covered above goes to a named human, with a notification, and does nothing else. You will not think of every exception; the catch-all is your admission of that, engineered.

Acceptance criteria. The tests that mean done, written as checkable sentences: given this sample input, exactly this output appears within this time; given the broken sample, the human gets notified and nothing sends; the runbook and credentials handover, which we are about to define, are delivered. Payment is against these criteria, so write them like they are the contract, because they are.

Send the spec, then insist on a conversation about it before work starts, and treat the quality of that conversation as your final interview. A builder's questions about your spec are the best free consulting you will ever receive.

Running the project

Between spec and delivery sits the stretch where outsourced projects actually die, and they die of silence. The builder goes quiet for three weeks, you assume progress, and what emerges at the end is three weeks wrong. The fix is a cadence, agreed before work starts, and it costs fifteen minutes a week.

The cadence is: show me, weekly. Not a status report, which is a sentence about feelings, but the thing itself, running, on whatever is built so far. Week one might be “the trigger fires and the data lands in the right place.” Week two, “the draft generates, here are ten examples.” You do not need to read code to watch a demo, and a builder who demonstrates weekly cannot be three weeks wrong, only one.

Insist, too, on staged delivery for anything beyond a few days’ work: the bridge first, then the drafting, then the exception handling, each stage runnable and reviewed before the next begins. Staging turns one large act of faith into several small verifiable ones, and it means that if the relationship fails mid-project, you own working pieces rather than half of nothing.

And put changes in writing, in both directions. You will discover mid-build that the spec missed something; that is normal, and the mapping was still worth it. The discipline is that every change gets a sentence in an email, with its price and schedule effect, before it is built. Scope that drifts conversationally is how a \$4,000 project becomes a \$9,000 argument, and the paper trail protects the builder as much as you, which good ones appreciate.

When a build goes well, do the thing almost nobody does: keep the builder. Put them on a small monthly arrangement for maintenance and improvements, or simply bring them the next project. A builder who knows the client’s systems, has proven they document and hand over properly, and answers your messages is an asset worth more than a marginally cheaper stranger, and assembling a small bench of two or three such people is quietly one of the highest-value moves in this whole practice. By your third client, the bench is what lets you say yes to work you cannot personally build, which is the hinge Part VI’s agency model swings on.

Acceptance testing work you cannot code-review

The build arrives. You cannot read the code. How do you know it works? You test behaviour, not code, and behaviour is exactly the thing you are qualified to judge, because you wrote the spec.

Prepare the test pack before the build even starts, which keeps everyone honest: twenty or thirty real sample inputs, drawn from the actual process, covering the clean majority, every exception named in the spec, and two or three genuinely nasty cases from the wild. Run the happy path first: the clean samples through the system, outputs checked against your worked examples, precisely, since “basically right” at acceptance becomes “constantly slightly wrong” in production. Then break it on purpose: feed it the missing-field sample, the duplicate, the zero, the nonsense; kill the connection to the external system mid-run if you can. What you are inspecting is not whether failure happens but what failure looks like: does the catch-all rule fire, does the named human get told, does anything send that should not. A system that fails loudly and safely passes; a system that fails silently fails acceptance, whatever else it does well.

Then two tests that outrank all the clever ones. The volume test: a realistic week’s load in one run, because plenty of builds work perfectly on five samples and fall over, or cost a fortune, on five hundred. And the handover test, the one almost everybody skips: with the builder unavailable, using only the runbook they delivered, can you or the client’s owner-of-the-system restart it, re-authenticate a credential that you deliberately expire, and interpret its failure alert? If the answer is no, the build is not done, no matter how well it runs, because every system spends its life mostly in the hands of the people who did not build it.

Run acceptance over a week, not an afternoon, in shadow mode per Chapter 23, and pay the final milestone when the criteria pass. None of this is adversarial; good builders love acceptance tests, because passing them is how they get paid without argument.

Keep the test pack afterwards, permanently. Every future change to the system gets the same thirty samples run through it before the change goes live, which is how you catch the fix that quietly broke something else. The pack cost you an afternoon to build and it will earn that back on the first modification, then keep earning for the life of the system.

Ownership: never let a client become a hostage

The last piece is the one nobody thinks about until it hurts. Eighteen months from now, the builder has moved on, and the system needs a change. What happens next was decided at contracting time, or it was decided by default, badly.

Four things must be true at the end of every build, and they go in the agreement before work starts. The client owns the work: the contract assigns IP in the delivered work to the client on final payment, in writing, since without that clause the default in many places leaves ownership with the author. The client owns the accounts: every platform account, API key and credential is created in the client's name, under the client's billing, with the builder given access rather than ownership, because a system running in a freelancer's personal accounts is a hostage with monthly fees, and migrating it later costs more than the original build. The system is documented: a plain-language runbook, what it does, where it runs, every connection, what its failures look like, how to restart and re-authenticate, at a level the handover test proved. And access is revocable: when the engagement ends, the builder's access gets removed, credentials rotated, and the client's register from Chapter 26 updated, as routine rather than drama.

Say all four to a prospective builder and watch the reaction one more time: professionals nod, because this is how professionals already work. Anyone who resists client-owned accounts or documentation is planning, consciously or not, to be irreplaceable, and irreplaceable suppliers are precisely what you exist to protect clients from. That protection, by the

way, is the quiet reason this chapter makes you more hireable rather than less: any freelancer can build a thing; you deliver built things that are specified, tested, documented and owned, and every business that has ever been burned by the other kind can hear the difference immediately.

Do this now

1. **Write one real spec.** Take the most complex process on your Chapter 20 shortlist and write the full five sections: context, inputs with real samples, outputs with a worked example, exceptions with the catch-all rule, acceptance criteria. Two pages maximum. Even if you build it yourself on a workflow platform, write the spec first; the exceptions section alone will change what you build.
2. **Collect three builder profiles.** Spend thirty minutes on a freelance marketplace and a workflow platform's expert directory. Shortlist three builders you would plausibly use, note their rates, and read their reviews looking specifically for mentions of communication, documentation and handover, which matter more than the star count. You are not hiring today; you are making the market real so it holds no fear when you are.
3. **Run the handover test on your own build.** Take the deployment you built in Chapter 22's exercise and write its runbook: what it does, where it runs, every credential, what failure looks like, how to restart it. Then hand it to someone else and have them talk you through what they would do if it broke. Whatever they cannot answer is what the runbook is missing, and you have just learned, from the inside, exactly what you will demand from every builder you ever hire.

Chapter 26: Installing Governance

The last step of the loop is the one that turns a collection of clever systems into something a business actually controls, and almost nobody is doing it.

Walk into a typical small or mid-sized business today and ask three questions. What AI runs here? Nobody has a complete list. What are staff allowed to put into it? Nobody has written it down. Who signed off on the systems that touch customers? Silence. This is not because the business is careless. It is because governance sounds like something for banks and multinationals, so nobody translated it to their scale.

That translation is your product. Not a hundred-page framework, which no sixty-person company will ever read, but a kit: a one-page policy, a register of what runs where, an audit trail, sign-off rules, and a one-hour staff training. A competent operator installs the whole kit in a business in about two days, and here is the commercial fact this chapter will justify: businesses will pay for it as a standalone product, separate from any build, because it answers questions their insurers, their lawyers, their big customers and increasingly their regulators are starting to ask.

You have already built most of the pieces without noticing. The data rules from Chapter 24, the runbooks from Chapter 25, the checkpoint decisions from Chapter 23: governance is those artifacts, standardised, filed and kept current. This chapter assembles the kit, gives you the policy template in full, and maps it lightly to the regulatory landscape so you can say, accurately, why each piece exists.

Why now: the short version of the regulation story

You do not need to be a lawyer to sell governance, but you do need to describe the weather honestly. Here it is, in plain English, current as of this edition and moving fast enough that checking annually is part of the job.

Europe has an actual AI law. The EU AI Act sorts AI uses into tiers by risk. A small set of uses is banned outright, things like social scoring and emotion-surveillance of employees, and those bans are already in force. A high-risk tier, which notably includes AI used in hiring, credit and access to essential services, carries heavy obligations, documentation, human oversight, logging, registration, that arrive on a timetable running through 2027. Most everyday business uses sit in lower tiers with light or no new duties. Two details matter even for readers nowhere near Europe: the law reaches companies outside the EU whose AI outputs are used inside it, and it already requires that staff using AI be adequately trained, which makes your one-hour training session literally an instrument of compliance for any EU-touching client. Penalties at the top end reach into the tens of millions of euros or a share of global turnover, which is why multinationals are suddenly interested, and why their suppliers are being asked questions.

There is now a certifiable standard. ISO 42001, published in late 2023, is the AI equivalent of the quality and security standards businesses already know: a certifiable management system for AI. You are not going to certify a sixty-person business, and you should say so. The reason it matters at your scale is procurement: bigger companies are starting to ask their suppliers AI-governance questions modelled on it, and a business holding your kit can answer those questionnaires instead of losing the tender.

Regulators of specific industries moved early. Lawyers in many jurisdictions now operate under explicit professional guidance on AI use, with courts sanctioning fabricated citations. Insurance regulators in the US require written AI programs with named accountability. Banking has treated model risk as a governed discipline for over a decade and is

extending it to AI. Employment law in several places now treats automated hiring decisions as a live discrimination risk, which is exactly why Chapter 22's candidate-screening build kept humans deciding. If your client is in a regulated industry, their regulator probably has an AI opinion already; part of your assessment is a thirty-minute check of what it says.

And some places have chosen a light touch. Australia, at this writing, has no AI act; it points businesses at voluntary guidance and existing law, consumer, privacy and discrimination law all still bite, and company directors are increasingly told AI oversight belongs in their duties. The UK runs a similar principles-through-existing-regulators approach. In these markets, the governance sale is not “the law requires this.” It is “your insurer, your board, your biggest customer and your next incident all require this,” which is just as true and, delivered honestly, just as persuasive.

The pattern across all of it: written policy, trained staff, an inventory of systems, human accountability and records. Every serious framework converges on those five things, which is convenient, because they are precisely the kit you are about to install.

The one-page policy

Here is the template in full. Give it to clients in their own letterhead and language; adjust the bracketed parts; resist the temptation to let it grow past a page, because a policy nobody reads governs nobody.

[Company] AI Use Policy

Effective [date]. Owner: [name]. Review: every six months.

1. Why this exists. We use AI tools to work faster and serve customers better. This page sets out how we do that without putting our customers, our people or our business at risk. It applies to everyone, including contractors, on any device used for company work.

2. Approved tools. We use the AI tools on the approved list kept by [name]. All company use of AI runs through business accounts we control, never personal accounts. Want a new tool on the list? Ask [name]; the answer is usually yes within a week if it passes our checks.

3. What may go into AI tools. Public information, our own drafts and general business documents: fine in any approved tool. Confidential business information (client lists, pricing, financials, pipeline): approved business-tier tools only. Personal information about identifiable people (health, financial, HR, identity documents), and anything under an NDA: only with prior approval from [name], recorded on the register. Passwords, keys and bank details: never, in any tool.

4. Checking output. AI output is a draft, not a fact. Anything sent to a customer, published, or used in a decision about money or people gets checked by a human first, and the sign-off rules on the register say who. You are responsible for work you send, whoever or whatever drafted it.

5. Automated systems. Every automated AI system we run is listed on our AI register with a named owner. Nobody switches on a new automated system, or materially changes one, without sign-off from [name] and a register entry.

6. Honesty. We do not present AI-generated work as human where it matters to the recipient, and our systems identify themselves where the law or good faith requires it.

7. When something goes wrong. If an AI tool or system does something unexpected, sends, deletes, invents or exposes anything it should not, stop using it and tell [name] immediately. Raising a problem fast will never get you in trouble. Hiding one will.

8. Training. Everyone gets one hour of AI training at induction and a refresher when this policy changes. Using these tools well is part of your job; using them carelessly is a performance issue like any other.

That is the whole policy, and every clause earns its place: clause 2 kills shadow accounts, clause 3 is Chapter 24's three piles in staff language, clause 4 preserves the human checkpoints, clause 5 feeds the register, clause 7 makes incident honesty a rule instead of a hope, and clause 8 satisfies the training expectation that European law now makes explicit and every other framework implies.

The register: what runs where

The register is a table, and the table is the single most valuable governance artifact at this scale, because it is the one that answers the question no unmanaged business can: what AI runs here?

One row per system, whether bought, assembled or built. The columns: the system's name in plain words ("invoice chasing"); what it does, one sentence; the named owner, a person, never a team; what data it touches, using the three-pile classes; its autonomy level, drafts-for-approval, spot-checked, or exception-only, straight from Chapter 23's ladder; the checkpoint, who reviews what, how often; the tools and accounts it runs on; the date it was signed off and by whom; and the date it was last reviewed.

Ten systems is ten rows. A spreadsheet is fine; grand tooling misses the point. What matters is the discipline wrapped around it: nothing switches on without a row, every row has an owner, and the register gets walked once a quarter, thirty minutes, checking each row's spot-check sample and asking whether anything changed. That quarterly walk is where you catch the drifted briefing, the departed owner, the tool that changed its terms, while each is still a row-edit rather than an incident.

Notice what the register also is: your recurring revenue, structurally. The operator who maintains the register, runs the quarterly walk and updates the policy is performing the governance function of the business, which is a retainer service by definition, and one that survives even quiet months when no new builds ship.

Audit trail and sign-off rules

Two more pieces complete the kit, and both are lighter than their names suggest.

The audit trail answers, after the fact, what did the system do and who approved what. You built it without meaning to: the workflow platform's run history, the approval queues from shadow-running, the pilot logs from Chapter 23, the incident half-pages from Chapter 24. Governance just insists these be kept, findable, and retained for a sensible period rather than deleted with the free tier's limits. For systems touching people-decisions, hiring above all, the standard is stricter: keep the inputs, outputs and the human's documented decision, for years, because several jurisdictions now require exactly that and every dispute will ask for it.

The sign-off rules put names against the checkpoints so that "a human reviews it" never decays into "someone, probably." Three rules cover a small business: every system's outputs have a named approver at the autonomy level the register records; the permanent checkpoints from Chapter 22, money documents, hiring decisions, published content, complaint responses, are listed as never-automated, in writing; and changes of autonomy level, the graduations and demotions of Chapter 23, are signed by the owner of the register, dated, on the row. An executive accepting, in writing, "this system now sends without review, and I approved that" is governance working exactly as intended: not preventing autonomy, but making a named human own it.

The vendor file

One thin folder completes the paperwork, and it exists because not all the AI in a business is AI you installed. Some of it arrives inside products the business buys, which means somebody else's model, somebody else's data handling, and somebody else's failure modes, running on your client's customers.

The vendor file holds, per AI-touching product: the answers to Chapter 21's three questions, in writing, from the vendor; a dated copy or link capturing the data-handling terms as they stood at sign-up, because terms change and "what did we agree to?" is unanswerable without a snapshot; and a note of what business data the product touches, in the three-pile language. Fifteen minutes per vendor, gathered when the contract is signed or at the next renewal, filed beside the register.

Its value shows up twice. Once when a vendor changes its terms or has an incident, and the business can establish its position in minutes instead of days. And once in every procurement questionnaire from a bigger customer, where "we maintain due-diligence records on all AI-enabled suppliers" is a sentence most businesses ten times the size cannot truthfully write.

Govern your own practice

Before you sell any of this, install it on yourself, and not only for the integrity of the thing.

You run AI systems for clients, which makes you an AI-enabled supplier, the exact category the vendor file exists to scrutinise. So run your own register: every client system you operate, one row each, with its owner, data classes, autonomy level and review date. Write your own one-page policy covering what client data enters which of your tools. Keep your own incident log, even while it is empty. It is an afternoon's work, and it compounds.

Because now, in any governance conversation, you can put your own kit on the table. "Here is my register, my policy, my sign-off rules; I hold myself to what I am proposing for you" is the single most disarming move available in this market, where every prospect has met a consultant who sells discipline and practises none. The kit governs your practice, and it is also, permanently, your best demo.

The one-hour training

The last piece is the hour that makes the paper live. One session, everyone, calendared, and its shape is simple: twenty minutes on what these tools are and what the company actually uses them for, told through the systems on the register, because staff engage with “here is what chases our invoices” far more than with abstractions; twenty minutes on the policy, walked clause by clause with the three piles made concrete using this company’s own examples, including catching one live hallucination on stage, which teaches clause 4 better than any slide; and twenty minutes of hands-on, each person running one real task from their own week through an approved tool, properly briefed, because the point of the policy is confident use, not fear.

Keep the attendance sheet, dated, filed with the policy. That sheet is evidence of the training duty discharged, and it is also, quietly, your renewal: every new hire needs the induction hour, every policy change needs the refresher, and you are the person who delivers them.

Expect the training hour to produce something else, too: use cases. Put staff in front of an approved tool with permission and a little competence, and within the week someone finds a leak the assessment missed. Tell them at the end of the hour where to send those ideas, because a workforce that surfaces its own automation candidates is the cheapest assessment engine a business can own, and you built it in sixty minutes.

Selling it straight

Priced as a standalone, the kit, assessment of current AI use, policy, register, sign-off rules, audit-trail setup and the training hour, is a \$3,000 to \$8,000 engagement at small-business scale, two days of your work once you have done it twice, with the quarterly walk and training refreshers folded into any retainer. It is also the single best door-opener

in regulated industries, where the client's own professional body has already made your argument for you.

Sell it without fear-mongering, because it does not need any. The honest pitch is three sentences long. Something in this business already uses AI, whether or not anyone decided it should. This kit means you know what runs, what staff may do, and who owns each system, on paper, when your insurer, your biggest customer or your regulator asks. It costs two days and it is the difference between a business that runs AI and a business that AI happens to.

That sentence has been following you since Chapter 19, so notice where it leaves you. Assess, pick, map, build or buy, pilot, measure, hand off, govern: you now hold the entire loop, at working depth, with nothing left mysterious. What remains, in the chapters ahead, is the part most craftspeople never learn: how to get paid for it, repeatedly, by businesses grateful to pay. The craft was the hard part. You have it.

Do this now

1. **Draft the policy for your practice business.** Take the template, fill in the real names, adjust the piles with examples from their actual work, and make it fit their letterhead and one page. An hour's work. Even if nobody asked for it yet, you now own a deliverable you can produce on demand, and Part VI will teach you to lead with it.
2. **Build their register, as far as you can see it.** List every AI tool and automated system you know about in the practice business, one row each, with owner, data classes and autonomy level. Include the shadow use you found in Chapter 24's exercise. The gaps you cannot fill are themselves findings: every empty owner cell is a Chapter 3 orphan, located.
3. **Outline your one-hour training.** One page: the three twenty-minute blocks, with this business's own systems as the examples and one live hallucination demo you have rehearsed. Then price the whole kit for your market using this chapter's range, and add it to the rate card you started in Chapter 22. You now have two products: deployments, and governance. Most of your future competitors will have neither.

PART VI

Getting Clients and Getting Paid

Skill without clients is a hobby. This part is the commercial engine: finding the businesses that need you, converting them without pitching, pricing the work, protecting yourself on paper, and the honest arithmetic of what a practice earns.

Chapter 27: The Empty Seat Map

Most people who fail at getting clients fail before the first conversation, because they are looking at the wrong companies.

They picture “AI clients” as tech startups, funded software firms, companies with innovation departments. So they pitch into the one corner of the economy that is already drowning in AI people, gets fifty pitches a week, and can smell a generalist from orbit. Then they conclude there is no market.

Meanwhile, twenty minutes from their house, a plumbing wholesaler with thirty staff is paying three people to retype supplier invoices, a physio clinic is losing patients because nobody answers the phone after four, and a freight company’s reviews all say the same thing: great service, impossible to reach. None of those businesses will ever be pitched by an AI consultant. All of them have money.

This chapter teaches you to see those companies. By the end of the weekend after you read it, you will have a list of fifty of them, built entirely from public information, ranked by how badly they need you.

The seat is visible from the street

Here is the thing nobody tells you about the empty seat from Chapter 3. You do not need to be inside a company to know it is empty. Companies leak the evidence constantly, in public, for free.

Think about what an empty AI seat actually produces. Nobody owns making the machine do the repetitive work, so the repetitive work gets done the expensive way: by hiring more humans, by making customers wait, by the owner doing it personally at nine at night. Every one of those coping mechanisms leaves a public mark.

The job ads are the loudest signal. Go to any job board and search a local company’s name. If they are advertising for an administration

assistant, a data entry officer, an accounts payable clerk, a customer service officer to “respond to enquiries,” they have just told you, in writing, that they have a volume of words-and-numbers work large enough to hire for. That is a company paying \$60,000 or \$70,000 a year, per seat, for work you learned in Part V to deliver for a fraction of that. Three ads like that at once is not a company growing. It is a company drowning, and announcing it.

Read the ad text itself, closely. “High volume of emails.” “Processing orders and invoices.” “Updating the CRM.” “Preparing quotes.” Each of those phrases is a deployment from Chapter 22 with a salary attached. The ad is practically a brief.

The broken chatbot. Visit the website and poke the chat widget. If it answers a tenth of questions and dead-ends on the rest, someone at that company bought AI, watched it embarrass them, and has nobody to fix it. That is a funded, failed pilot, which Chapter 3 taught you is the best prospect there is. They have already spent money admitting the problem matters.

The owner answering the phone. Ring the company at 11am on a Tuesday. If the person who answers turns out to be the owner or the general manager, you have learned something worth more than any database: the most expensive person in the building is doing the least expensive job. Owners answer phones when they do not trust what happens otherwise. That is an operations problem wearing a telephone.

The reviews. Read their last forty Google reviews, and ignore the star average. Read for patterns in the complaints. “Took three days to get a quote.” “Nobody called me back.” “Invoice was wrong twice.” Slowness complaints are almost never lazy-staff problems. They are process problems, and process problems made of words and numbers are your entire trade. A four-star business whose one-star reviews all mention response time is a better prospect than a three-star business with

random complaints, because the four-star one has a good service being strangled by admin.

The hiring spree for repetitive roles. A company that has grown fast and is now advertising its second bookkeeper, its fourth admin, its sixth customer service rep is scaling by throwing bodies at volume. Every body costs more than the machine, takes months to train, and quits. Somewhere in that company an owner is staring at a wage bill wondering if there is another way. There is, and you are it.

Two quieter signals, worth a minute each. The website's date. A company whose news page stopped in 2021 and whose team photo shows people who have since left is a company where nobody owns anything digital, which almost guarantees nobody owns AI. And the after-hours test: email their general enquiries address on a Saturday and see when the reply comes and who signs it. A Tuesday reply signed by the director tells you the enquiry pile is real, unowned, and being cleared by the most expensive person in the company on their weekend.

None of these signals requires a login, a subscription, or an inside contact. They require an hour and the eyes this book has been building since Chapter 3. The five questions taught you to read a company from inside one meeting. This is the same diagnosis, run from the footpath.

One caution before you get carried away with any single signal. No individual signal is proof; a job ad might be a maternity cover, a bad review might be one unreasonable customer. What you are looking for is convergence, two or three signals pointing the same direction.

Convergence is what turns a hunch into a memo you can defend, and Chapter 28 is going to ask you to put these observations in writing under your own name. Only write what you can point to.

The Boring Goldmine

Now, where to point those eyes. This is the argument I most need you to actually believe, because everything in Part VI gets ten times easier if you do.

The best clients for a fractional AI leader are boring businesses. Distribution, wholesale, trades, freight, clinics, allied health, accounting firms, law firms, manufacturers, labour hire, real estate agencies, aged care providers. Businesses that have existed for fifteen years, make real money, and have never once been described as innovative.

Everyone chasing AI work ignores these companies, and the reasons they ignore them are exactly the reasons you should not.

Boring businesses are made of repetition. A freight company processes the same booking, the same delivery confirmation, the same proof-of-delivery paperwork, hundreds of times a week. Repetition is precisely what the machine eats. A startup doing something novel has less repeatable work than a wholesaler doing something ancient. The older and duller the business model, the more of it is patterns.

Boring businesses have money and no AI people. A \$10 million wholesaler makes real profit and employs exactly zero people who could brief a language model. The 77% of small and mid-sized businesses who say they are “using AI” are, by their own admission, mostly winging it. Nobody is coming to help them. The competition you fear does not service this market. It does not even see this market.

And the demand is sitting there, out loud. When one person posted an ad offering custom AI help for small businesses on a single Reddit forum, over a hundred business owners responded within two weeks. These owners have heard of AI. They know it matters. They have no idea where to start, and no intention of learning. The fractional operator John Cheney built a \$2 million practice in his first year serving exactly this market: construction firms, law practices, dental groups, staffing agencies. His summary of what those clients say is the whole goldmine in one sentence: “I don’t want to learn this, just do it for me.”

Picture the alternative buyer for a moment, the one everybody else is pitching. A tech startup has AI-literate staff who think they can do it themselves, no money because it all goes to runway, and a founder who wants to debate model architecture with you. The plumbing wholesaler has profit, pain, and zero interest in doing it themselves. One of these is a client. The other is a hobby.

You do not need industry expertise to serve boring businesses, because Chapter 20 taught you to read any business through the owner interview, and because the work inside them is the same everywhere: quotes, invoices, enquiries, follow-ups, scheduling, reports. Cheney niches by company size, not by industry, for exactly this reason. The problems repeat even when the products do not.

Building the fifty

Now the weekend's work. The output is one spreadsheet with fifty companies in it. Not a vague intention, a file. Every client you sign for the next two years will probably come off this list or off a referral that started on it.

Set your catchment first. Two filters. Geography: businesses within an hour of you, because for boring businesses, being local and able to show up in person is a genuine advantage the remote AI crowd cannot match. And familiarity: any industry you have ever worked in, sold to, or bought from, wherever it is located, because you speak its language. Your list can mix both.

Set the size band. You want companies big enough to pay a monthly retainer and small enough to have no technology leadership. As a working rule, ten to a hundred staff. You will rarely find published revenue, so use proxies: staff count on LinkedIn, number of vehicles in the yard, number of locations, how long they have operated. A business that has run for ten years with thirty staff has money. It might not look like it. The ute in the car park is not the balance sheet.

Now fill the list, from six taps.

First, the job boards. Search your area on any major job board for the admin-shaped roles: administration, data entry, accounts, customer service, scheduling, office manager. Every company that appears is advertising its repetitive workload in public. This single source can fill half your list, and each entry arrives with the pain pre-documented in the ad text. Save the ad with the company name. You will quote it back to them in the next chapter.

Second, Google Maps. Pick five boring categories, wholesalers, freight, clinics, manufacturers, trades, and sweep your area. For each candidate, two minutes: staff scale, review patterns, website state, chatbot check. You are not researching deeply yet. You are collecting names with one observed signal each.

Third, industry directories and association member lists. Every boring industry has an association, and most publish member directories. These lists are pre-filtered for established businesses that care enough to pay membership fees.

Fourth, your own history. Former employers, their competitors, their suppliers, their customers. Companies you dealt with in old jobs. You already know where the bodies are buried in these businesses, and they already know your name. These entries go straight to the top of the list.

Fifth, local business awards and “fastest growing” lists. Award winners and growth-list companies are proud, ambitious, and usually growing faster than their back office can handle. Growth plus thin admin is exactly the hiring-spree signal, one year early.

Sixth, the people you already told. If you ran the Chapter 3 exercise and asked three business owners “who owns AI stuff there?”, those companies, and every company those owners mentioned, belong on the list.

Then score what you have. Three columns, one to three points each.

Money: can they plausibly pay \$3,000 to \$6,000 a month? Score on the size proxies.

Pain: how many public signals did you find? A company with three admin job ads, slow-response reviews and a dead chatbot scores three. A company where you found nothing scores one, and stays on the list anyway, because absence of public signals is absence of evidence, not absence of pain.

Access: do you know anyone there, have you worked in their industry, are they local enough to visit? Warm beats cold by an order of magnitude, so weight this honestly.

And know what to leave off. Three kinds of company look like prospects and are not. Franchisees, because the interesting decisions are made at head office and the local operator cannot buy what you sell; if a franchise system tempts you, the head office goes on the list, not the outlet. Businesses under about ten staff, because however real their pain, the retainer maths rarely works, and Chapter 32 will give you a project-priced way to serve them instead. And anything government or corporate-owned, where the buying process is a procurement department and a six-month cycle; that is bigger water, and Chapter 36 explains why you do not fish it yet.

Sort by total. The top ten are your first campaign, which is the next chapter's subject. The rest are your pipeline for the year.

Expect the whole build to take a weekend the first time: a Saturday for the sweep, a Sunday for the scoring and the top-ten deep scan. It will feel slow around row twenty, when the obvious candidates are used up and you are down to the third page of the directory. Keep going, because rows twenty through fifty are where the list earns its keep. The obvious companies are the ones a competitor might eventually also notice. The freight depot on the industrial estate with the fourteen-year-old website is on nobody's list but yours.

A note on discipline while you build. You will feel a pull toward the interesting companies, the ones doing something clever, the ones that would sound good at a dinner party. Resist it. Interesting companies attract competition and debate. Boring companies attract nobody, pay on time, and refer you to other boring companies, because boring industries all know each other. The goldmine is boring by definition. That is why it is still full.

And one more reframe before you start. This list is not a list of targets you are hoping will tolerate you. Every scored signal on it is a company already paying for the empty seat, in wages, in lost customers, in the owner's nights. You are not going to ask them for something. You are going to show them something, with their own numbers on it. Building the list is the last thing you do in this book as an outsider.

Do this now

This one is not an exercise. It is the weekend that starts your practice.

1. **Build the spreadsheet.** Columns: company, industry, location, size proxy, signals observed (with the evidence, quote the job ad, quote the review), money score, pain score, access score, total. Fifty rows. Use all six taps: job boards, Google Maps, directories, your history, awards lists, your Chapter 3 conversations.
2. **Deep-scan the top ten.** For each of your ten highest scores, spend twenty minutes: read every current job ad, read the last forty reviews, test the chatbot, ring the main line once and note who answers. Write three sentences per company on where the money is leaking. Those sentences are raw material for Chapter 28.
3. **Say the niche out loud.** Write one sentence: “I help [size band] businesses in [catchment] stop paying salaries for work a machine should do.” Pin it above your desk. When a shiny startup opportunity floats past, read it again.

Chapter 28: Shadow-Audit Outreach

You now have fifty companies and a document format that opens doors. This chapter is about the unglamorous machine that connects them: the campaign.

I want to be blunt about why this chapter exists. The shadow audit from Chapter 16 is the best cold outreach instrument I know of, and it will still mostly not work. Most of your memos will get no reply. If you do not know that going in, you will send eight, hear silence, decide the method is broken, and quit three weeks before it pays. The people who win this game are not the ones with the best memo. They are the ones still sending in week six.

So here is the whole campaign: the numbers to expect, what to personalise, how to follow up, which channel to use when, how to track it, and how to turn the meeting into money.

What you are actually sending

Quick recap so we are standing in the same place. A shadow audit is the Chapter 16 memo: one to two pages, addressed to a specific company, showing what you observed from the outside about where their money is leaking, what it is roughly costing them, and what the fix category looks like. Their numbers, their job ads, their reviews, their broken chatbot. Findings, not flattery.

Understand why this works when nothing else does. A business owner's inbox is a landfill of AI offers. Every one of those offers asks the owner to believe a claim. Your memo makes no claims. It demonstrates. The owner reads two pages about their own business, containing observations that are checkably true, and the only conclusion available is "this person already did work everyone else only promises to do."

There is a story from the consulting forums that makes the point in reverse. A consultant launched an AI consultancy and put money into LinkedIn ads. His own report: high cost, low clicks, zero enquiries. The pile-on from other consultants landed on one line: nothing on the page proved he could do anything, so, “Where’s the proof?” Ads assert. The memo is the proof, delivered before the first hello.

One memo, though, is a lottery ticket. A campaign is a system. Here is the system.

The honest arithmetic of a campaign

Send to your top ten first, then work down the list in batches of ten a week. Fifty companies over five weeks. Batching matters for two reasons: each memo takes real research time and you cannot do fifty well in one hit, and the first batch will teach you things that improve the next four.

Now the expectations, and I am going to give you ranges rather than promises, because anyone who promises response rates on cold outreach is selling something.

From fifty well-researched memos, expect somewhere between five and twelve replies of any kind. Expect three to six actual conversations. Expect one to three paid assessments. Expect the first retainer client to come from those assessments within a quarter, not within a fortnight.

Read that again and notice what it means. Roughly ninety percent silence is the result of a campaign that is working. The economics still land overwhelmingly in your favour: the whole campaign costs you evenings and postage, and one client at \$4,000 a month is \$48,000 a year. There are very few investments on earth that pay like fifty researched letters, and none of them feel like it while you are sending letter thirty into the quiet.

Two things move you toward the top of those ranges. Warmth: any entry on your list where you know someone, or where a mutual contact will

forward the memo, converts at several times the cold rate, which is why the access score existed in Chapter 27. And specificity, which is the next section.

The warmth lever deserves one practical paragraph, because most people leave it unpulled out of awkwardness. Before any memo goes to a company where your access score was above one, ask the connection to carry it. The ask is small and specific: “I’ve written a short piece on where I think [company] is losing money on admin. Would you forward it to [owner] with a line saying you know me?” You are not asking anyone to vouch for claims, only to vouch for your existence, and that alone moves a memo from the suspicious pile to the read pile. Most people are happy to forward something substantial; it makes them look connected. The same two pages, delivered through a mutual contact, can outperform ten cold sends.

One more piece of expectation-setting, about you rather than them. Somewhere around memo twenty, with two polite replies to show for it, a voice will suggest the whole thing is not working and perhaps the memo needs rebuilding from scratch, or the niche is wrong, or you are. This is the point where most people silently quit, and it is almost always a maths error, not a market verdict: twenty sends is not yet a sample. The campaign discipline is to change nothing until a full batch has run its complete cadence, follow-ups included, and then change one thing at a time, like the pilots you learned to run in Chapter 23. You are the deployment now. Give yourself a baseline before you declare failure.

Personalisation that matters, and personalisation that is wasted

Every outreach guide says “personalise.” Most personalisation is cosmetic and owners see straight through it. Congratulating them on a LinkedIn post, complimenting the website, mentioning you “love what they’re doing in the freight space.” That is not personalisation. That is a

mail merge wearing a name tag, and it costs you credibility rather than earning it.

Personalisation that works is evidence. Only three kinds matter.

Their numbers. “Your current ad for an accounts administrator is the third admin role you’ve listed this year. At market salaries that’s roughly \$200,000 a year of repetitive processing work.” You are quoting their own public record back to them with a dollar figure attached. Nobody deletes an email that contains their own payroll maths.

Their customers’ words. “Nine of your last forty Google reviews praise the work and complain about response time. Quote requests seem to take two to three days.” An owner may ignore you. They do not ignore their customers.

Their own tools failing. “I asked your website chat four questions a customer would ask. It answered one.” Specific, checkable, slightly painful. Perfect.

Everything else, cut. The memo needs no biography of you beyond a sentence, no philosophy of AI, no market statistics. Two pages of their business. The test before sending: could this memo be sent to any other company by changing the name? If yes, it is not done.

The cadence

A memo with no follow-up is a coin toss. The follow-up is where most of the replies actually come from, and almost nobody does it, because following up feels like pestering. It is not. You sent a business owner two pages of free analysis about their own money. Following up on that is a courtesy, not an intrusion.

Here is the cadence I recommend per company. Adjust the days, keep the shape.

Day one, the memo goes out by email, addressed to the owner or general manager by name. Finding the name takes five minutes on the website, LinkedIn, or the industry association list, and memos addressed to “the manager” are memos addressed to the bin. Subject line: plain and specific. “Three things I noticed about [company]’s admin costs.” Not clever, not salesy.

Day four, the phone call. This is the step that separates the professionals from the hopeful, and it is where boring businesses are won, because their owners live on the phone and barely live in their inbox. The call is short: “I sent you a short document on Monday about where I think [company] is losing money on admin. Did it reach you?” That is the whole script. Either it starts a conversation, or you learn the email went to the wrong address, or you get a no. All three are progress. If the receptionist blocks you, be straight with them: “It’s about a document I sent [owner] on Monday, two pages about your quoting turnaround. Happy to resend it, who should it go to?” Receptionists forward things for people who respect their gate.

Day ten, the second email. New information, not a nudge. One extra finding you held back, or a sharper costing of the first one. “One more thing I noticed since I wrote.” Never send “just bumping this to the top of your inbox.” That sentence has never earned anyone a dollar.

Day eighteen, LinkedIn. Connect, with a one-line note referencing the memo. For boring businesses LinkedIn is the weakest channel, many owners check it monthly if at all, but it costs nothing and occasionally an owner who ignored two emails answers a connection request the same day.

After that, the company moves to your quarterly list. Not dead, resting. In three months they will have new job ads, new reviews and the same problems, and a fresh memo with fresh evidence lands harder the second time because the first one is dimly remembered. Some of your best

clients will sign a year after the first memo, and they will say some version of “you wrote to us a while back and it stuck.”

The channel logic in one paragraph: email carries the document, phone carries the relationship, LinkedIn catches strays. If you only work one channel, work the phone, and if you cannot bring yourself to work the phone, accept that your numbers will sit at the bottom of every range in this chapter. In the boring goldmine, the phone is where the money is.

Track it like a deployment

You are running a system now, so instrument it like Chapter 23 taught you to instrument a pilot. A spreadsheet is plenty. One row per company, columns for memo sent, call made, second email, LinkedIn, reply, meeting, assessment, and a notes field for every scrap you learn.

Review it weekly, twenty minutes, same time every week. You are looking for two things. Stuck companies: anyone who replied and then went quiet gets a follow-up before the week ends. And pattern: which industries reply, which signals appeared in the memos that got meetings, what objection keeps recurring. After two batches you will know things about your local market that nobody else knows, because nobody else is measuring it.

This tracking habit has a second job. In Chapter 34 you will meet the always-be-two-conversations rule, the discipline that protects a fractional practice from churn. The spreadsheet you start this week is that discipline, already running.

What a no teaches

You will get replies that say no, and some that say it rudely. Treat every one as paid market research, because that is what it is.

“We already have someone looking at AI.” Ask who, genuinely. The answer is usually a nephew-equivalent or an IT contractor, which means

the seat is still empty and this company re-enters the pipeline in six months when the someone has produced nothing. Note the date.

“No budget.” Usually means no perceived value yet, sometimes means a genuinely skint quarter. Either way the answer is time, not argument. Quarterly list.

“Not interested in AI.” Rare, and gold, because it is honest. Note it, leave gracefully, and watch what happens to their job ads over the next year.

“How much do you charge?” This is not a no. This is a buying question arriving early, and your answer is the next chapter’s assessment, not a rate card.

“We got burned by an AI thing last year.” The best reply on this list, though it will not sound like it. This owner has already spent money proving they believe the problem matters, which Chapter 3 taught you is the profile of the ideal client. The response is not to defend the technology. It is to agree: “Most of those projects fail, and they fail for the same three reasons, none of them technical. That’s actually what I do: I’m the person who owns making it work. Want me to have a look at what happened with yours?” A post-mortem conversation on someone else’s failed pilot is the warmest possible entry to the assessment.

And from every no, one refinement. If three owners in the same industry give the same objection, your memo for that industry needs to answer it on page one. The campaign is a loop, not a broadcast: send, listen, adjust, send.

The meeting, and the only place it needs to go

Sooner than you expect, an owner will say “come in and see us.” Here is the entire strategy for that meeting: do not pitch anything.

You have one goal, and it is small. Convert the conversation into a paid assessment, the \$1,500 to \$3,000 diagnostic that Chapter 29 covers in

full. Not a retainer, not a deployment, not a grand transformation plan. Owners do not buy grand plans from people they met an hour ago. They buy small, priced, concrete next steps from people who have already shown them something true.

So the meeting is Chapter 20's owner interview, run gently. You ask, they talk. Where does the time go, what gets retyped, what do customers wait for, who does what when someone is sick. You take notes like it matters, because it does. And when they ask, and they will ask, "so what would you do about all this?", you say the sentence that this whole chapter has been building toward:

"I can see three or four places where there's real money here, but I'd be guessing about the size. What I'd normally do is a proper assessment. It takes about two weeks, it costs \$2,500, and you get a written report on exactly where AI saves you money, what it's worth, and what to do first, whether or not you ever use me to do it. Want me to send you the one-pager?"

Notice what that sentence does. It respects their money by refusing to guess. It prices the next step so small that it is a decision an owner can make alone, today. And it promises value independent of hiring you, which is precisely what makes them want to hire you.

The memo opened the door. The interview built the trust. The assessment is the handle you offer instead of a pitch. What happens when they take it is the next chapter.

Do this now

1. **Write the first three memos.** Top three companies from your Chapter 27 list. Two pages each, built from the evidence you already collected: their ads, their reviews, their chatbot, their phones. Run the test: if the company name could be swapped out, keep working.
2. **Set up the tracker.** One row per company, the columns from this chapter, and a repeating thirty-minute calendar block each week for sending the next batch and reviewing the last one. The calendar block is the campaign. Protect it like a client meeting.
3. **Rehearse the two scripts out loud.** The day-four phone call, and the assessment-offer sentence. Out loud, several times, until they sound like you talking rather than you reciting. The first real call will still be uncomfortable. Make it on a Tuesday morning anyway, starting with the company on your list you care least about losing.

Chapter 29: The Assessment-First Close

Here is the mistake that kills more new consulting practices than bad work ever has: trying to sell the marriage on the first date.

The new consultant gets a meeting, senses the opportunity, and proposes the whole relationship. A monthly retainer, a transformation roadmap, six months of engagement. The owner, who met this person ninety minutes ago, does what any sane owner does with a five-figure commitment to a stranger. They say “leave it with me,” and the deal dies of politeness over the following month.

The fix is structural, not motivational. You need a front door: a small, priced, fixed-scope first purchase that a business owner can say yes to without a committee, without references, and without much courage. In this practice, that front door is the paid AI-readiness assessment. This chapter is the whole play: what it costs, why it must not be free, what is in it, how the findings meeting runs, and the exact words that turn findings into a retainer.

FIG. 13

You never pitch. You show findings



You never pitch. You show findings.

The front door, priced

The assessment is a fixed-fee diagnostic. You spend roughly two weeks part-time inside their business, and they receive a written report on where AI saves or makes them money, what each opportunity is worth annually, and what to do first. Charge \$1,500 to \$3,000 for it, at the bottom of the range for your first few, at the top once you have case studies.

That price is not arbitrary. It sits below the level where an SMB owner needs anyone's agreement but their own, and above the level that signals hobbyist. It is also not where you make your money, and you need to be honest with yourself about that. The assessment roughly pays for your time. Its real function is to convert a stranger into a client through the only mechanism that reliably does: doing actual work for them and being visibly good at it.

This is not a novel trick, it is how the working end of this market operates. Fractional operators run paid entry offers exactly like this. Erin Moore, a fractional chief AI officer whose practice caps out at eight retainer clients, sells a \$750 strategy intensive as her front door and credits it against the first month's retainer, which is a mechanic you are free to steal. At the bigger end of the market, standalone AI assessments sell for \$7,000 to \$35,000. Your \$2,500 version is the SMB-sized instance of a proven product.

Why paid beats free

Every instinct you have will whisper “waive the fee, lower the barrier, do it free to get in the door.” The whisper is wrong, for three reasons that compound.

Paid buys respect. Free advice is worth what it costs, and owners treat it accordingly. A free assessment gets you rescheduled twice, given the office manager instead of the owner, and thanked warmly on the way to

being ignored. A paid assessment gets you the owner's actual attention, real answers to your questions, and staff who have been told to cooperate, because the boss is paying for the outcome and the boss does not waste money.

Paid qualifies. A company that will not spend \$2,500 to find out where it is losing hundreds of thousands was never going to pay a monthly retainer. The fee is a filter that costs cheap prospects out of your calendar before they can consume a fortnight of it. Free assessments fill your diary with the wrong companies and then break your heart at proposal time.

Paid commits. This is the subtle one. An owner who has paid for a diagnosis is psychologically invested in acting on it. They have already backed this project with money, in front of themselves. When the findings arrive, “do nothing” now has a price tag, because doing nothing means the \$2,500 bought a document for a drawer. Free findings are trivia. Paid findings demand a response.

There is exactly one situation where waiving the fee makes sense, and Chapter 32 covers it: a strategically valuable first client in a niche you want to own, where you trade the fee for a written agreement to be a case study and referee. Even then, put the price on the invoice and show the discount. The value must be seen even when it is not collected.

What the assessment actually contains

Nothing in this section is new to you. The assessment is Part V of this book, executed small and packaged. Two weeks, perhaps fifteen to twenty hours of your actual time. Here is the anatomy.

The interviews. The owner interview from Chapter 20, plus the two or three people who actually run the admin heart of the business: the office manager, the ops lead, the senior bookkeeper. The owner tells you what they believe happens. The staff tell you what happens. The gap between those two accounts is usually where the first deployment lives.

The tool audit. Chapter 3's first question, formalised. Every subscription with AI on the label, what it costs, who actually uses it weekly. You will almost always find paid-and-abandoned tools, and each one goes in the report, because each one is money already leaking and proof the company cannot do this alone.

The process walk. Sit with the actual work for a day. Watch a quote get built, an invoice get processed, an enquiry get answered. Count the retyping, the app-switching, the waiting. Time three or four of the highest-volume tasks from trigger to done. You are building the baseline numbers that Chapter 23 taught you no pilot can live without.

The opportunity table. The heart of the report. Five to eight opportunities, each with the current cost in hours and dollars per year, the deployment category from Chapter 22 that addresses it, a realistic capture estimate, and an effort rating. Conservative numbers, always. An owner who checks your maths and finds it cautious trusts every other number in the document. One inflated figure poisons the lot.

The risk snapshot. One page. Where their data lives, what would embarrass them if a chatbot said it, which staff are already pasting customer information into free tools without anyone deciding that was fine. Chapters 24 and 26, miniaturised. This page does real selling work, because it demonstrates a category of thinking the owner has never seen from a vendor: someone accounting for what could go wrong with their name on it.

The sequence. What to do first, second, third, and why in that order. First thing on the list is always a Chapter 17-style thirty-day win: visible, measurable, low-risk. You are designing the sequence you would run on retainer, which is not a coincidence.

Written in the language of Chapter 18 throughout. Money and hours on every page, model names on none of them.

The fortnight itself has a rhythm worth planning rather than improvising. Week one is inside their business: the interviews early, because everything else is sharper once you have heard the owner and the staff disagree; the process walk mid-week; the tool audit as you go. Week two is at your desk: baselines calculated, the opportunity table built, the report written, with one short follow-up call to the office manager to check the two numbers you are least sure of. Checking your numbers with their staff before the findings meeting does double duty, because it makes the report more accurate and it means the owner hears about your thoroughness from their own people before you present a word.

Expect one objection at the point of sale, and welcome it: “Can’t you just tell us roughly what you’d do, without the assessment?” The answer is friendly and absolute. “Roughly, yes, and roughly is how those three subscriptions you’re not using got bought. The value isn’t my guess, it’s the numbers. Guessing is free and worth it.” An owner who accepts that logic has just accepted the premise of everything you will ever charge them. An owner who keeps pushing for free detail after hearing it is telling you what kind of client they would be, and the assessment fee is doing its qualifying job while it is still just a sentence.

The findings meeting

Treat the assessment as a product, not a performance, and it gets better and cheaper to deliver every time you run it. Templates for the interview questions, the opportunity table, the risk page, the report itself; a standing checklist for the fortnight; the same structure every client. Your first assessment will take thirty hours. Your sixth will take fifteen and be twice as good, because every previous client’s business has sharpened your sense of where the money hides. This is also why the fixed fee works in your favour over time: the price stays constant while your cost falls, which is the quiet economics of every productised service, and a preview of the pattern-library effect Chapter 31 will apply to delivery.

The report is never emailed ahead. It is presented, in person or on a call, with the owner in the room. Email the report first and you will present into a silence that has already formed its opinions, or worse, the meeting evaporates because “we read it, all makes sense, we’ll digest and come back to you.”

The meeting runs forty-five minutes. Walk the opportunity table, spend time on the two biggest numbers, be plain about the risk page. Then, and this is the discipline the whole chapter turns on, stop talking. The worst thing you can do with a good report is bury it under a pitch. Let the owner sit with their own numbers. The report is doing the selling. Your job is to be the calm person who found the money, not the eager person who wants some of it.

The owner will get there first if you let them. Almost always some version of: “So how do we actually do all this?”

That question is the entire reason the assessment exists, and you answer it with a frame, not a pitch.

Proposing the retainer: who owns what we just found

Here is the frame. The report on the table describes work: deployments to run, tools to fix or kill, staff to train, risks to close, numbers to track. Work needs an owner. Chapter 3 taught you that systems without owners die, and the owner of this business already has a job. So the retainer conversation is not “would you like to buy my services.” It is “who owns what we just found.” Verbatim, it sounds like this:

“There’s about \$180,000 a year of recoverable cost in that table, and none of it recovers itself. Someone has to own this: run the deployments, manage the vendors, train your people, check the outputs, and report the numbers to you monthly. Realistically you’ve got three options. You can hire someone, and a full-time person who can genuinely do this costs

\$150,000-plus if you can find one, which right now you mostly can't. You can give it to someone internal on top of their day job, and I'd gently point at the three subscriptions in that report nobody uses, because that's what that approach produces. Or I own it. I take that seat part-time. For a business your size that's \$4,000 a month, I run everything in that report in priority order, and you get a one-page memo every month telling you what changed, in dollars. First project would be the quote turnaround, and you'd see the result inside thirty days. If it isn't producing, you can stop any month; I don't do lock-in contracts."

Every element of that paragraph is load-bearing. The three options make the retainer a comparison rather than an expense, and the comparisons are a hire they cannot find and a failure mode they have already personally funded. The monthly memo promises accountability in the owner's language. The thirty-day first result gives them a near horizon. The no-lock-in line removes the last excuse to defer, and costs you nothing, because Chapter 35 is about how you keep clients through results rather than contracts.

Then stop talking again.

Some owners sign there and then. More say they need a week, and mean it. Handle the week properly: before you leave the room, book the follow-up call for a named day, because "I'll get back to you" with no date is where deals go to be forgotten politely. On the call, do not resell the report. Ask one question: "What's the hesitation?" and deal with what actually comes back, which is usually cash timing, a partner to convince, or a fear of being locked in that your no-lock-in line already answered once and can answer again. Some take the report and do nothing, and that is fine: they paid for your time, you gained a case study's worth of practice, and companies that shelve a paid report have a way of ringing back in six months when the numbers in it have kept quietly compounding.

A word about the assessment that finds little, because eventually one will. You will spend the fortnight inside a business that turns out to be genuinely well-run, or too small in its admin volume for the retainer to make sense, and the honest opportunity table tops out at modest. Say so, plainly, in the report and in the meeting: “There’s maybe \$30,000 here, and at that size I’d do these two things as fixed projects and nothing more. You don’t need me monthly.” It will feel like failure. It is the opposite. You have just become the only person in that owner’s experience who was paid to find work for themselves and declined to invent it, and boring industries talk. The practitioners who last in this trade are the ones whose findings can be trusted precisely because their findings are sometimes small.

But notice what you never did at any point in this chain, from memo to meeting to assessment to retainer. You never pitched. You showed findings, priced small next steps, and let evidence do the persuading. That is not a sales technique. It is what actually being the empty seat’s answer looks like from the outside, and owners can tell the difference between a person performing expertise and a person exercising it.

The retainer is signed. Now you need more than one, without cold-starting every time, which is what borrowed audiences are for. Next chapter.

Do this now

1. **Build the assessment one-pager.** One page: what it is, the six components in plain English, the two-week timeline, the fixed price, and what the owner walks away with whether or not they engage you further. This is the document your Chapter 28 meeting sentence promises to send. Make it exist before the meeting does.
2. **Write your findings-meeting close.** Take the “who owns what we just found” script and rewrite it in your own words, with your own price from Chapter 32’s rate card. Read it aloud until the three-options frame is something you can deliver conversationally over a table, without notes.
3. **Run a practice assessment.** Pick any business you can get real access to: a friend’s company, a family business, your own employer’s worst department. Run the full anatomy in miniature and produce the actual report. You will find the opportunity table takes three times longer than you think, which is exactly why you are learning that now and not inside your first paid fortnight.

Chapter 30: Borrowed Audiences

Cold outreach works, and it is the slowest way you will ever win a client.

Every memo you send starts the trust meter at zero and has to earn its way up alone. There is a faster route, and it runs through a fact hiding in plain sight: the trust you need already exists, fully formed, in someone else's hands. Your future clients already have advisers they believe. Those advisers are being asked about AI every week. And almost none of them have anything to say.

This chapter is about borrowing those audiences. Done properly, one relationship with one accountant can feed your practice for years, which is why I would rather you spent a month landing one good partner than a month sending a hundred memos.

The people who already own the trust

Think about who a business owner actually listens to. Not vendors. Not LinkedIn. A short list of people who have earned it over years.

The accountant sees the numbers naked. They know the wage bill is bloating, they know which clients are drowning in admin, and they are the single most trusted external adviser most SMBs have. A suburban accounting practice serves a couple of hundred business clients. Read that number again. Two hundred companies, pre-filtered for being real businesses with real books, all of whom take this one firm's calls.

The bookkeeper is even deeper inside, weekly instead of quarterly. Bookkeepers personally perform the exact work Part V automates, they know precisely where the repetitive hours live, and the good ones are already nervous about what AI means for their own trade, which makes them motivated partners rather than reluctant ones.

A word on the bookkeeper relationship specifically, because it has a second layer the others lack. The work you automate is often work

bookkeepers currently bill for, so a careless approach reads as a threat, and a thoughtful one reads as a lifeline. The thoughtful version is explicit: you are not there to shrink their hours, you are there to move their hours up the value chain, from data entry they win on price to advisory work they win on trust, with the AI handling the typing underneath. Bookkeepers who make that shift with you become your fiercest advocates, because you are the answer to the question keeping them up at night. Some will even become your Chapter 31 bench for the finance-flavoured deployments, which is a partnership within a partnership.

The business broker meets owners at the two moments they are most motivated: buying and selling. Every seller wants the business to look less owner-dependent and more systemised, because that is what buyers pay multiples for. An AI-cleaned back office is a valuation story. Brokers understand valuation stories instantly.

The agencies. Marketing agencies, web shops, IT managed-service providers. They hold monthly retainers with dozens of SMBs, their clients ask them about AI constantly, and their honest internal answer is that they do websites, or ads, or servers, not AI transformation. Some will see you as competition. The smart ones will see the obvious: they can either keep saying “not really our thing” to their own clients, or they can have an answer with a revenue share attached.

Now the asymmetry that makes all this work. These advisers hold exactly what you lack: distribution and trust. You hold exactly what they lack: an answer to the AI question their clients keep asking. In the consulting world this is becoming the recognised playbook; as one industry analysis put it, the consultants winning right now are not the ones with the deepest expertise but the ones building partnerships. The lone-wolf AI consultant grinding cold channels is competing with people who get handed warm clients by the folder.

And the referral from an adviser does not just skip the trust queue, it transforms the conversation. A memo from a stranger gets read sceptically. The same finding, introduced by the accountant with “you should talk to this person, they found something in your numbers,” arrives pre-believed. You start at the findings meeting instead of the letterbox.

The three structures

Before you approach anyone, decide what shape the partnership takes, because “send me referrals and I’ll look after you” is not a structure, it is a hope. Three models cover the territory.

Revenue share. The adviser introduces, you deliver, they receive a percentage of what the client pays you. Market practice runs ten to twenty percent of collected fees, either for the first year or for the life of the client. Pay on collected money, never on invoiced money, and pay promptly and visibly, because the first commission cheque is what converts a polite arrangement into an active pipeline. Some professions have rules about referral commissions and how they are disclosed, and Chapter 33’s advice applies here too: get the arrangement in writing and have your accountant and theirs bless the mechanics. Where a fee cannot be paid, the next model exists.

Reciprocal referral. No money moves. They send you AI work; you send them everything you find in their lane, and your assessments genuinely do surface it: businesses with shambolic books, businesses about to sell, businesses whose bank reconciliation is one person’s memory. This model runs on kept score, so keep score. A partner who has sent you two clients and received nothing back is a pipeline you are actively closing. Send work, mention names, make introductions, and tell them when you do.

White label. The strongest and most demanding form. The accounting firm sells “our AI advisory service” under its own brand. You deliver it.

The client may barely know you exist; the firm bills the client and pays you a wholesale rate, typically sixty to seventy percent of the retail fee. You surrender margin and the client relationship, and in exchange the firm's entire brand pushes your service for you, at a scale your own name cannot yet reach. The traps are covered by Chapter 31's rules, because white-labelling yourself to a firm is exactly the agency model with the roles reversed: agree in writing who owns delivery quality, who talks to the client when something breaks, and what happens to the relationship if the partnership ends. For a new practice, one white-label deal with a mid-sized accounting firm can be a full pipeline on its own.

Start with revenue share or reciprocal. They are simple, low-stakes, and easy to unwind. Graduate to white label once you have delivery capacity you trust, which, not coincidentally, is the next chapter's subject.

Whichever structure you run, be clean about disclosure. If a commission moves when an accountant refers a client, the client should be able to find that out without feeling deceived, and in some professions the adviser is obliged to disclose it anyway. The simplest policy is the strongest: nothing about the arrangement would embarrass anyone if it were read aloud in front of the client, because sooner or later, in a small industry, everything is. Trust is the entire asset being borrowed in this chapter. Handle it like borrowed money.

The partner pitch

Approaching an accountant is not like approaching a client, and the biggest mistake is pitching them as if they were one. The accountant does not have the problem your clients have. They have a different problem: their clients keep asking about AI, and "we're keeping an eye on it" is getting older every quarter.

So the pitch leads with their exposure, not your service. Picture the meeting, fifteen minutes over coffee:

“Your business clients are asking you about AI. Right now the honest answer is that it’s not your field, so the question bounces, and eventually one of your clients gets picked up by whoever answers it, and that person probably also has opinions about who should do the bookkeeping. I do this for a living: I take an AI seat in small businesses, find where the admin cost is leaking, fix it, and report the results in dollars. What I’m proposing is that when the question comes up, you have an answer that’s yours. Introduce me, I do a paid assessment, and the client hears your name in every report. I’ll pay you fifteen percent of anything they spend with me, or we keep it commission-free and I send you every bookkeeping and advisory need I find inside my clients, and I find plenty. Either way, the AI question stops being a hole in your service and starts being a reason clients stay with you.”

Every line is doing partner-shaped work. The quiet warning that someone else will eventually answer the question is real, not a tactic; advisory firms lose clients to whoever solves the problem they deflected. The your-name-in-the-reports line matters more than the commission to most accountants, because their business runs on being indispensable. And offering both structures in one breath lets them pick their comfort level instead of negotiating against you.

Then, exactly as in the findings meeting, stop talking.

Expect two objections, and have both answered before they finish the sentence. The first is territorial: “What stops you poaching my client, or bringing in your own bookkeeper mate?” The answer is structural, not a promise. Put a non-solicitation clause in the partnership agreement both ways, and make the point that your entire business model depends on referral partners trusting you, so poaching one client would cost you the pipeline that feeds everything: you would be burning an oil well to cook a sausage. The second objection is reputational: “What if the AI stuff goes wrong? It’s my name on the introduction.” This one deserves a real answer, and you have one. Walk them through the Chapter 33 kit, the professional indemnity cover, the engagement letter, the data-handling

clause, and the Chapter 31 QC gate. Advisers refer confidently in exact proportion to how professionally boring your paperwork is. This is the audience your insurance certificate was always really for.

One more thing that converts advisers faster than any pitch: do the assessment on them. An accounting practice is itself a boring goldmine business, drowning in document processing, client queries and compliance admin. Offer your partner the assessment at mates' rates, or run your first one free as the exception Chapter 32 allows. An accountant who has personally watched you find \$90,000 in their own practice does not refer you politely. They refer you the way they refer their own tax advice: as settled fact.

One partner is a pipeline

Run the arithmetic that makes this chapter worth a month of your effort. One accounting firm, two hundred business clients. If AI comes up for even one client in ten this year, that is twenty warm conversations, from one relationship, each starting with borrowed trust. Convert a quarter of those through the Chapter 29 front door and this single partnership has produced five paid assessments and, plausibly, two or three retainers. That is most of a full practice, from one coffee meeting and a follow-through.

Which is why the strategy is depth, not breadth. Do not carpet the city's accountants with partnership offers; that is just cold outreach wearing a nicer shirt. Pick three candidate advisers you can reach warm, ideally ones who already know your work. Land one. Then service that partnership like it is a client, because it is worth more than one. Send a monthly note about what you are seeing in their client segment. Hand them a co-branded one-pager they can give clients who ask the AI question. Offer to run a free lunchtime session for their staff, or a client webinar under their banner; the fractional operators who scaled fastest, John Cheney among them, built their early pipelines on exactly this kind

of education-first hosting, where the partner supplies the room and the trust and you supply the answers. Report back on every referral within a week, even when the news is “not a fit,” because nothing kills a referral pipeline faster than referrals vanishing into silence.

The single best activation move, once a partner has said yes, is the joint session. A lunchtime talk for the firm’s staff first, so the people who actually field client questions know what you do and like you; then a client event under the partner’s banner. Forty-five minutes, badged as theirs, pitched as education rather than sales: the three signs a business is bleeding admin money, one worked example with real numbers, and the five questions from Chapter 3 handed out as a take-home self-test. No selling from the front of the room, ever. The self-test does the selling, because a business owner who scores their own company badly on those five questions walks up afterwards and starts the conversation themselves, in front of the partner whose event just produced it. One session like that can generate more assessment bookings than a month of memos, and the partner watches it happen under their own brand, which locks the partnership harder than any commission.

And be honest with yourself about partnerships that are not working, because some will not. An adviser who takes the meeting, likes the idea and sends nothing in six months is not a pipeline, they are a pleasant coffee, and the polite fiction of the arrangement costs you attention that a live partner deserves. Give every partnership two quarters and an honest scoreboard: referrals made, referrals received, revenue moved in either direction. If the board is blank at the six-month mark, have the direct conversation once, and if nothing changes, stop investing and move to the next name on your list of three. Reciprocity is the whole engine here. A partnership without it is just marketing you are doing for someone else.

And when a partner’s referrals start arriving faster than your evenings can absorb, that is not a problem to manage down. That is the signal to

read the next chapter, because it means it is time to decide what you deliver with your own hands and what you hire the doing of.

Do this now

1. **List your three advisers.** Your own accountant and bookkeeper go on the list automatically, plus every accountant, broker or agency principal you know personally or can reach through one introduction. For each, note how many business clients they plausibly serve. Rank by warmth times reach.
2. **Book the first coffee.** Message the warmest name this week. The ask is fifteen minutes, and the framing is the chapter's: their clients are asking about AI, and you want to give them an answer that is theirs. Bring the partner pitch rehearsed and one page describing the assessment, nothing else.
3. **Draft the referral one-pager.** A single page an adviser can hand to a client: the three signals a business is bleeding admin money, what an assessment is, what it costs, and where your partner's name sits on it. Write it so the adviser looks good giving it away. This page is your partner's tool, not your brochure, and writing it before the coffee means you can put it on the table when they say yes.

Chapter 31: Do It, or Hire the Doing

Somewhere around your third client, the maths of your own hands stops working.

You will feel it before you can name it. A build that should have started Monday starts Thursday. A client's monthly memo goes out four days late because you were elbow-deep in another client's invoice pipeline. Your calendar becomes a lie you tell yourself every Sunday night. The practice that was supposed to buy your freedom is quietly becoming the most demanding boss you have ever had.

Chapter 13 introduced the agency model as a path: you get the clients, others do the building. This chapter is that model at practice level, the working machinery of it. The economics, where the builders come from, the quality gate that protects your name from work you did not personally touch, the communication rules that keep the client yours, and the judgment call of what to keep in your own hands.

The economics, plainly

Start with the numbers, because they are the reason this chapter exists.

Picture a client on an \$8,000 monthly retainer, a solid mid-sized engagement. The work that retainer covers in a given month: one deployment being built, two systems being maintained and improved, staff support, vendor wrangling, and the monthly results memo. Done entirely with your own hands, that is maybe fifty or sixty hours. Effective rate, somewhere around \$140 an hour. Respectable, and utterly capped, because there are only so many sixty-hour clients in a human.

Now split the work by what it actually requires. The parts that need you: the diagnosis, the deployment choices, the owner relationship, the quality sign-off, the memo. Call it fifteen hours. The parts that need

competence but not you: building the automation to an agreed spec, testing it, documenting it, routine maintenance. That work, delivered by a contract builder or a small delivery shop, costs \$2,500 to \$3,500 a month at market rates.

So the retainer becomes: \$8,000 in, roughly \$3,000 out to delivery, \$5,000 kept, for fifteen hours of your time. Your effective rate has more than doubled, and, far more importantly, your capacity has tripled. Three clients at sixty hours each is impossible. Eight clients at fifteen hours each is a business.

This margin is not a rort, and you should never feel sheepish about it. The client is not paying \$8,000 for hours of labour. They are paying for the outcome and for someone accountable for it, and the accountability is the expensive part. Chapter 2 taught you the machine cannot be accountable. Neither can a contractor the client has never met. You can, and that is what the \$5,000 buys.

Finding the doing

The bench does not need to exist before the work does. The wrong move is hiring ahead of revenue; the right move is landing work you know the shape of, then buying the delivery. Here is where delivery comes from, in the order I would look.

Freelance builders on the automation platforms. The tools you learned in Part V all have contractor ecosystems around them, and the going rates for competent builders are a fraction of what your retainer pays. This is the natural first bench: project-priced, no commitment, scalable from one task upward.

Small automation agencies. Two-to-ten person shops that build integrations and AI workflows for a living. Dearer than freelancers, but they bring their own project management and do not disappear when one person gets sick. The better ones will happily be your invisible

engine, because you are solving their hardest problem: they can build anything and win clients badly. You are the opposite. It is a trade as old as trades.

Other readers of books like this one. Not a joke. The market is filling with people who have the technical craft and hate the selling. Your Chapter 30 network, local meetups and online communities are full of them. Someone an hour away has the skills and no clients. You have clients and no hours. Find each other.

Price the bench on fixed scopes, not hours, wherever you can. You sell outcomes upstream, so buy outcomes downstream: a specced build for a fixed fee, with the acceptance criteria attached to the payment. Hourly arrangements with builders put the overrun risk on you, and overruns on a fixed retainer come straight out of your margin. A builder who will not quote a fixed price against a written spec is telling you either that your spec is not finished, which is worth knowing, or that they intend to bill the ambiguity, which is worth knowing more.

Whoever they are, never let a first engagement be on a live client. Audition on your own money first: a paid test task, something real but internal, a tool for your own practice or a rebuild of something you have already done yourself so you can mark their work against a known answer. You are testing three things, and only one of them is technical skill. The other two are whether they communicate before problems become surprises, and whether their documentation would let a stranger maintain what they built. A brilliant builder who goes quiet for nine days is not a bench. They are a liability with talent.

Then contract properly, and this paragraph connects to two others in this book. Chapter 25 taught you to spec and accept work from builders; every rule there applies double when the client is paying you for the result. And Chapter 33's paperwork applies down the chain as well as up it: your builder signs confidentiality that mirrors what you signed with the client, IP in what they build for your client assigns through you, and

client data is handled under the same rules you promised the client. Your subcontract can never be looser than your engagement letter, because when something leaks, the client's lawyer will not be writing to your contractor.

The QC gate

Now the part that makes the whole model safe, and the part most people running agencies skip until it burns them. Every piece of work that reaches a client passes through a gate, and you are the gate.

Here is the rule in one sentence: you may delegate the building, and you may never delegate the checking.

The reason is Chapter 2's oldest lesson. The machine cannot check itself, and now there is a second remove: a contractor's judgment between you and the output. The client is not buying the contractor's standards. They are buying yours. The day something wrong reaches a client with your invoice attached, "my builder did that bit" is not a sentence you can say. It converts you, in the client's eyes, from the accountable seat into a middleman, and middlemen get shopped on price.

So the gate is a ritual, run every time, no exceptions for trusted builders on easy jobs, because trusted builders on easy jobs is exactly where rot starts.

Acceptance against the spec, line by line. The spec you wrote under Chapter 25's rules lists what done means. Check every line, not a sample of them.

The real-cases test. Before anything goes live, run it against a set of genuine historical cases from the client's business: last month's actual enquiries, actual invoices, actual quotes, including the ugly ones you collected because Chapter 23 taught you to. Twenty real cases tell you more than two hundred hypothetical ones. You are looking for the failures the builder could not have known to look for, because they do not

know the client. That knowledge gap is precisely what you are paid to close.

A shadow run before the client sees it. New systems run alongside the old process, outputs checked against reality, for days or a fortnight depending on stakes. Same discipline as Chapter 23, unchanged by who built the thing.

The maintainability check. Could a different builder pick this up from the documentation alone? If not, it is not done, however well it works, because benches change and the client's system must survive your contractor's next career move.

Your name, literally. The last step is that you sign off, recorded in writing, even if only in your own project log. Not a formality. A forcing function. People check differently when the record says they checked.

Budget the gate honestly: reviewing work takes something like a fifth of the time building it would have. That fifth is not overhead eating your margin. It is the margin, the entire difference between selling accountability and selling arbitrage.

Plan for the day the bench fails, because benches do. A builder goes quiet mid-project, takes a full-time job, or delivers something the gate rightly rejects with a client deadline a week out. Three habits keep that day survivable. Keep two builders warm, not one, even if the second only gets occasional small jobs; a bench of one is a single point of failure with an invoice. Insist on documentation as work progresses, not at the end, so a half-finished build is a thing another builder can pick up rather than a mystery. And hold a buffer in every client timeline, because Chapter 25 taught you builds slip even when nobody fails. The client never hears about any of this machinery. They just notice that your practice, unlike most of their suppliers, does not have emergencies.

Over time, the bench work compounds into something better than capacity: a pattern library. Every build that passes the gate becomes a

documented, reusable shape, the enquiry-triage pattern, the invoice-extraction pattern, the quote-follow-up pattern, each with its spec template, its test cases and its known traps. The third instance of a pattern costs a fraction of the first and carries less risk than anything built fresh. This library is the real asset of the agency model. Clients churn, builders move on, but the patterns stay, and they are what let a one-person practice deliver like a firm.

The client hears one voice

The delivery model is invisible to the client, and keeping it invisible is a set of communication rules, not an accident.

You are the only voice. All client communication routes through you: status, questions, bad news, the lot. The builder never emails the client unsupervised, not because builders are untrustworthy but because every direct channel between client and builder erodes the thing the client is paying the margin for, which is one accountable human. Where a build genuinely needs the builder in the room, say for technical discovery on the client's systems, you are in the room too, and you run it.

Never hide that a team exists; never itemise it either. If a client asks whether you personally write every line, the answer is the truth: "I use specialist builders under my direction for parts of the build, and everything that reaches you is checked and signed off by me." Owners are comfortable with that, it is how their own accountant and lawyer work. What you never do is present a cast list or a breakdown of who did which hours, because you are not selling hours, and you do not want the client pricing them.

Bad news is yours, at your speed. When a build slips or breaks, the client hears it from you, early, with the fix attached, exactly as Chapter 17's reporting discipline taught. What you never do is pass through a contractor's excuse. "The developer had another project overrun" is a

sentence that demotes you to broker. “It’s a week behind; here’s why and here’s the revised date” is the accountable seat, occupied.

And translate in both directions. Client language to spec on the way down, results to money on the way up. The client speaks Chapter 18. Your builder speaks fields and endpoints. The practice is the interpreter between them, which is, you may notice, the same Translator Premium this book has been describing since the beginning, now earning a margin instead of a salary.

What stays in your hands

The bench is not an ideology, and the goal is not to delegate everything. Some work you keep, permanently or for now, and the judgment splits on two lines.

First, novelty. The first build of any new type stays in your hands. First time deploying into a medical practice, first document pipeline in a new accounting suite, first anything where you could not write the acceptance test from experience. You cannot QC what you have never done; the gate only works when the gatekeeper knows what right looks like. Once you have built a category yourself and turned it into a documented pattern, it benches cleanly, and every future instance is spec, build, gate.

Second, proximity to trust. Anything touching the owner relationship stays yours forever: the assessments, the findings meetings, the monthly memo, the quarterly conversation, anything involving the client’s most sensitive data or a decision that could hurt them. This is the fifteen hours that can never be outsourced, because it is not labour. It is the seat itself.

Everything else is a candidate for the bench, and the practical trigger is repetition: the second or third time you build the same shape of thing, the pattern is proven and your hands are no longer where its value lives.

There is also a stay-hands-on case that has nothing to do with capability, and I want to name it so you make it consciously. Some months, keeping

a build in your own hands is simply better business: the margin on a small client does not cover a contractor, or a build is so close to the owner relationship that handing it over risks more than it saves, or frankly, you want the reps in a new tool. Fine. The failure mode is not doing work yourself. The failure mode is defaulting to your own hands out of habit or cost-fear while your pipeline starves for the hours, and calling it quality.

Chapter 34 will show you what the fractional practice honestly nets, and where its ceiling sits. When you hit that ceiling, this chapter is the door through it. Better to have built the bench, tested the gate and learned the rules on your second client than to attempt all of it, for the first time, on your eighth.

Do this now

1. **Split your current workload.** List everything you are delivering this month, or would deliver for your first client. Mark each item: needs-me, or needs-competence. Price the needs-competence pile at contractor rates and compare it with the hours it is taking you. That number is what your own habit is charging you.
2. **Recruit and audition one builder.** Source three candidates through the platforms or your network. Give the best-looking one a paid test task this month, something internal or already solved, with a written spec and an acceptance list. Judge the communication and the documentation as hard as the build.
3. **Write your QC gate as a checklist.** One page: spec check, real-cases test, shadow run, maintainability check, signed-off-by line with a date. Put it in your project template so it runs on everything, including, from now on, the work you build yourself. The gate protects your name. Your name is the practice.

Chapter 32: Pricing the Seat

There is a story that does the rounds in the AI agency communities, told by a consultant about his very first client. He had found the client through a comment under a Facebook post, a business owner complaining about drowning in admin. He built the fix, a follow-up automation that messaged customers when the business forgot to. Then came the moment every new consultant meets: the owner asked what it would cost. In his own words: “I panicked. Then said the first number that felt safe: \$150.” The owner said “Deal,” instantly, and the consultant had learned, at the cheapest possible tuition, the first law of this chapter.

The instant yes is not a win. The instant yes means the number was so far below the value that the buyer could not believe his luck. That automation was worth thousands a year to that business. It sold for the price of a dinner because the seller priced his own nervousness instead of the client’s problem.

You are going to feel that same panic. This chapter exists so that when the moment comes, you have a structure to say instead of a feeling.

The anchor: what the alternative costs

All pricing is comparison. A number lands as expensive or cheap depending entirely on what it sits next to, so decide what your number sits next to, or the client’s imagination will decide for you, and the client’s imagination will pick “free ChatGPT.”

Here is the true comparison, and it is the sentence your entire price list leans on. A full-time Chief AI Officer averages around \$350,000 a year, when a company can find one at all, and mid-market packages run \$300,000 to \$500,000. The market’s answer for companies that cannot pay that is exactly the seat you are selling: fractional AI leadership runs \$5,000 to \$30,000 a month across the published market, and the accessible end of real practices clusters right where you are pitching. Erin

Moore's practice charges \$7,500 a month with a three-month minimum. John Cheney's prices at roughly one percent of client revenue, \$10,000 to \$15,000 a month for a \$10 to \$20 million company, and that practice cleared \$2 million in its first year. At the top end, senior independents charge \$20,000 to \$80,000 a month and one operator publishes \$1,000 an hour with an \$80,000 floor.

So when you quote \$5,000 a month, you are not asking for a lot of money. You are offering the \$350,000 seat at a sixth of the price, part-time, cancellable, with results reported monthly. Say it exactly that way: "A full-time hire for this seat is \$350,000 a year, if you can find one. I'm \$5,000 a month, and you can stop whenever it stops paying for itself." The owner's mental comparison shifts from "what does a chatbot cost" to "what does an executive cost," and your number becomes the bargain in the room.

That is the anchor. Now the machinery.

The three models

Every engagement you will ever price is one of three shapes.

Project pricing. A fixed fee for a defined build with a defined outcome. The quote-turnaround system, installed and handed over, \$12,000. Projects are how you should price almost everything for smaller clients, and any client whose commitment you doubt, because both sides know exactly what was bought. Price the project on the value recovered and the accountability carried, never on your hours; Chapter 22 gave you the worked ranges deployment by deployment. The weakness of projects is the treadmill: every month starts at zero, and the moment the build ships, the relationship has no reason to continue. Which is why projects are the entry, not the business.

The retainer. A monthly fee to hold the seat: run the roadmap, own the systems, train the people, report the results. This is the practice's spine,

the shape Chapters 29 and 34 assume, and the shape that makes revenue survivable, because five retainers is an income and five recent projects is a memory. The retainer's weakness is drift: eighteen months in, a client can forget what the fee buys. Chapter 35 exists to prevent exactly that.

Value share. A percentage of measured savings or gains, sometimes atop a reduced base. Picture the clean case: a distributor's quote pipeline, baselined in the assessment at \$220,000 a year of lost jobs from slow turnaround, and a deal at \$2,500 a month plus fifteen percent of measured recovery against that baseline, reviewed quarterly from their own job numbers. Owners love proposing arrangements like this, because it sounds like alignment and feels like zero risk. Be extremely careful. Value share only works where the value is cleanly measurable, attributable to your work alone, and auditable from numbers you can see, three conditions that are almost never all true in an SMB. Revenue has many parents and savings have many accountants. Where the conditions do hold, a rescued failed pilot with a brutal baseline, a measurable cost line you own end to end, value share can outearn any retainer. Everywhere else, it is a discount wearing a growth story. If an owner pushes hard for it, offer a hybrid: reduced retainer plus a defined bonus on one specific measured number, reviewed after two quarters.

When each, in one line apiece: projects for entry and for small clients, retainers for the seat itself, value share rarely and only where the measurement is bulletproof.

You will notice what is missing from the three models: hourly billing. That is deliberate, and it is a rule, not a preference. Sell an hour and you have priced yourself as labour, invited the client to audit your timesheet instead of your results, and built a business where efficiency punishes you, because every system you improve shrinks your own invoice. Everything Part V taught you makes you faster every month; hourly billing hands that entire gain to the client. Quote the outcome, quote the seat, quote the project. The only people in this trade selling hours are the ones who have not noticed they are competing with their own tools.

The rate card

Write your prices down before anyone asks. A written rate card is not for showing clients; it is for you, because the panic in the opening story feeds on blank space, and a number you set calmly on a Tuesday will hold in a meeting where a number invented under pressure will not.

Here is a defensible card by client size. Adjust for your market, keep the logic.

Under \$2 million revenue. Projects only, \$3,000 to \$15,000. These businesses can rarely sustain a real retainer, and a retainer they cannot sustain becomes churn with paperwork, which Chapter 34 will teach you is dearer than no client at all. Serve them well in fixed scopes, and let them grow into retainers later.

\$2 to \$10 million. Retainers of \$3,000 to \$6,000 a month. This is the heart of your Chapter 27 list: real money, no technology leadership, drowning in exactly the work Part V automates. The \$5,000 anchor conversation was built for this room.

\$10 to \$30 million. Retainers of \$8,000 to \$15,000 a month. Cheney's one-percent-of-revenue rule is a clean sanity check in this band. Note that the work does not scale with the fee anywhere near linearly; a \$20 million company's quote pipeline is not four times harder than a \$5 million company's. This band is where the practice's economics get properly good, and where Chapter 31's bench earns its keep.

Above \$30 million. Different water, priced differently, and worth a sentence of its own: the same seat that rents for \$5,000 a month in a \$3 million business prices at a multiple of that in a \$50 million one, and hunting those clients is a different discipline entirely, which is where Chapter 36 is taking you.

Two rules that ride on top of the card. First, the assessment from Chapter 29 stays at \$1,500 to \$3,000 regardless of client size; it is a front door, not a profit centre, though for the larger bands you should scope it bigger

and price it at the top. Second, when you present a retainer, present the annual arithmetic of the problem next to the monthly fee. “\$180,000 a year leaking, \$5,000 a month to own fixing it” is a sentence. A bare “\$5,000 a month” is a target.

While we are near the subject: minimum terms. Chapter 29’s script offered no lock-in, and I stand by it as a closing tool for the seat itself, because confidence sells and results retain. But pair it with one honest caveat in the engagement letter, a three-month minimum on new retainers, the same structure Erin Moore’s practice uses. The reason is not revenue protection, it is physics: the first month is discovery and build, the second is pilot, and the results that justify the fee arrive in month three. A client who can quit in week five is a client who can quit before the evidence exists. Explain it exactly that way and nobody blinks: “First results land inside thirty days, the full picture takes a quarter, so the retainer runs three months minimum and month to month after that.”

Charging versus waiving

Chapter 29 made the argument that paid beats free, and it stands. Here is the complete decision rule for the exceptions, because there are exactly two.

Waive, or rather discount to visibly-near-free, when the client is a strategic beachhead: your first entry into a niche you intend to own, or a name whose logo reshapes your credibility, and only in exchange for a written commitment to a case study, a testimonial and referrals. You are not giving away the fee. You are buying marketing with it, at a price you chose.

And waive when a Chapter 30 partner is the client, for the same investment logic. An accountant who has had the assessment run on their own practice sells you with the conviction of a customer, not the caution of a contact.

Everyone else pays. The moment you notice yourself inventing a third exception in a meeting, you are not strategising. You are panicking, and the first number that feels safe is on its way. Close your mouth, quote the card.

Two price moments deserve scripts of their own, because they arrive under pressure.

The early “how much do you charge?”, asked in a first meeting before any assessment, is a trap only if you answer it with a number. A number quoted before the value is measured is a number the owner will compare with their phone bill. Deflect it honestly: “Depends entirely on what we find. The assessment is \$2,500 and it tells both of us what anything else would be worth. Beyond that, engagements run from a few thousand a month, and I’ll only propose one if the numbers justify it.” You have given them a floor, a next step, and a reason to trust the eventual figure, in three sentences.

And the comparison objection, usually some cousin of “that’s more than we pay our bookkeeper.” Do not argue with it; agree with it and fix the comparison. “It is. Your bookkeeper records what happened. This seat changes what happens. The right comparison is the \$350,000 hire, or the \$180,000 a year you’re currently paying, in wages and lost customers, for nobody to own this.” The objection is never really about the money. It is about which mental category your fee sits in, and your job is to move it from the suppliers column to the executives column and leave it there.

While we are on discounts: never discount the monthly fee to win a retainer. If the number is genuinely beyond them, shrink the scope, one function instead of two, and keep the rate intact. A discounted rate is permanent; everyone anchors on it, including you, and raising it later is a renegotiation. A smaller scope grows back naturally, and Chapter 35 is largely about how.

Raising your prices

Your first prices will be too low. This is nearly universal, it is the panic story in slow motion, and the correction is a scheduled discipline rather than a hope.

New clients first. The rate card is not a public document, so each new client simply meets the new number. Raise the card when either signal fires: you are at capacity with a pipeline still producing, or your last three proposals all closed without a flinch. Three easy yeses in a row means the market just told you the number is low. Move it twenty percent and watch what happens, because the strange truth of this trade is that higher prices frequently close better. Price signals seriousness, and the imposter-syndrome pricing patterns the consulting world catalogues, apologising for the number, pre-discounting before anyone objected, piling free scope on top to feel worthy of it, signal the opposite.

Existing clients, once a year at most, moved at the natural moment, which is the Chapter 35 re-proposal, where the increase arrives on the same page as the year's measured results. "The retainer moves from \$5,000 to \$5,750 from March; here's what this year returned" is a routine paragraph in a document about money you made them. A surprise line on an invoice is a provocation. Same increase, entirely different meeting.

And accept, calmly, that a real price rise will occasionally cost you a client at the margin. That is the mechanism working. Three clients at \$6,000 is a better practice than four at \$4,200, by the arithmetic and by every hour of your week, and the next chapter's paperwork plus the honest P&L two chapters on will show you exactly why the difference compounds.

The seat is priced. Now we make sure you actually get paid, keep what you build, and stay protected while you do it.

Do this now

1. **Write the rate card, tonight.** All three models, all four size bands, your assessment price, in a document you can open on your phone. Then say the anchor sentence aloud with your own numbers in it: “A full-time hire for this seat is \$350,000 a year. I’m [your fee] a month, and you can stop when it stops paying.” Rehearse until it sounds like fact, because it is.
2. **Reprice your last panic.** Take one piece of AI work you have already done, for an employer, a friend, a first client, and price it three ways: what you charged (or \$0), what your card says now, and what the value table from Chapter 29’s method says it was worth annually. Look at the three numbers side by side. That gap is what this chapter is for.
3. **Set the review trigger.** A calendar entry three months out: “Last three proposals: any flinches?” If the answer is no flinches, the card goes up twenty percent that day. Decide it now, while nobody is asking, so the future you in the meeting is executing a policy instead of negotiating with the panic.

Chapter 33: Paper and Protection

Nobody starts a practice because they love paperwork, and paperwork is what keeps the practice alive when something goes wrong.

Something will go wrong. Not catastrophically, probably, but ordinarily: a client who pays sixty days late, a scope that swells until the retainer is underwater, a dispute about who owns the system you built, an automation that sends something embarrassing. Every one of those is survivable with the right paper in place and expensive without it, and the difference is a few unglamorous documents you set up once.

One thing before we start, and it matters. I am not a lawyer, and this chapter is not legal advice. It is a practitioner's map of what the paper needs to cover, so that when you sit down with a local solicitor and accountant, and you should, early, the meeting takes one hour instead of five and you know which questions to ask. Laws on contracts, privacy, insurance and business structures differ by country and state and change constantly. Get local professional advice. Consider that sentence stapled to every section below.

The engagement letter

Every client signs an engagement letter before work starts. Every client, every time, including the friend, including the tiny project, especially the client who says “we don't need the formalities, mate.” The letter is not a sign of distrust. It is the two of you agreeing what was bought while you still agree, which is the cheapest moment to do it.

It does not need to be long. Five to eight pages of plain English beats thirty pages of borrowed legalese nobody reads. Here is what it must cover.

Scope, specifically. What you are doing, and the boundary of it. For a retainer: which functions of the business, which systems, what the monthly rhythm includes, roughly how much capacity it buys. For a project: the deliverables, by name. The scope clause is the fence that scope creep will test, so build it before you need it, and include the sentence that work outside scope is quoted separately in writing before it starts.

Deliverables and what “done” means. For builds, tie completion to the acceptance criteria you learned to write in Chapter 25: the system passes the agreed test cases, full stop. Vague deliverables produce the client who withholds the final invoice because the thing is never quite finished in their head.

IP ownership. The clause most AI consultants get wrong in one direction or the other. The clean structure has three layers. What the client ends up owning: the systems, automations, prompts and documentation you build for them, on their processes, assigned on payment. Payment is the hinge; ownership transfers when the invoice clears, not before, which is quiet leverage you will be glad of exactly once. What you keep: your methods, templates, checklists, know-how and everything you brought in the door, plus the right to reuse general patterns and skills across clients. Without that clause, your third client technically owns the approach you need for your fourth. And what nobody owns alone: be explicit that the client’s data stays theirs, and your reusable toolkit stays yours, even where the two met in the middle.

Liability caps. The clause your solicitor will care about most. Standard consulting practice caps your total liability at the fees paid, often the fees of the last twelve months, and excludes indirect and consequential loss. You are deploying systems into live businesses; if an automation misfires and a client imagines a six-figure consequence, the cap is what stands between that imagination and your house. Have a professional draft this one for your jurisdiction. It is the single clause least suited to copying off the internet.

Data handling. New territory for most engagement letters, and your Chapter 24 knowledge goes here. What client data you will access, where it may be processed, which AI services it may pass through and under what settings, what happens to it when the engagement ends, and who the client's privacy obligations remain with (them, with you assisting). Written plainly, this clause is a selling point as much as a shield: most owners have never seen a supplier take their data seriously on paper.

The AI-specific clause the templates will not have. Say, in plain words, what the client's obligations are around the systems you build: that AI outputs above an agreed risk line require human sign-off by their nominated person before use, that you are not liable for outputs the client's staff use outside the agreed process, and that the governance rules from Chapter 26 form part of the engagement. This is Chapter 2's oldest lesson, the machine cannot be accountable, translated into contract language, and it protects both of you: the client from unsupervised output, and you from being blamed for what someone did with a draft you never saw. Your solicitor will not have seen this clause before. Bring your own plain-English version to the drafting meeting.

The boring but load-bearing rest. Payment terms, notice periods on both sides for a retainer (thirty days each way is standard and fair), what happens on termination (handover, final invoice, IP assignment), confidentiality both directions, and a line that you may use subcontractors while remaining fully responsible for the work, which Chapter 31 already showed you the operational side of. Mirror the confidentiality and data terms into every subcontract you issue; your paper downstream can never be weaker than your promises upstream.

Get a template drafted once by a local professional, then reuse it for years. A few hundred dollars, amortised over every client you ever sign.

Paper flows the other way too, and you should be ready for it. Larger clients will hand you their documents to sign: confidentiality deeds before the assessment, supplier onboarding forms, sometimes their own

services agreement instead of yours. Read every word before signing, however routine it looks, because standard corporate templates routinely contain clauses that quietly break your business model: IP terms that claim everything you create including your reusable methods, non-competes that would bar you from serving their industry, insurance requirements above your cover, unlimited liability. None of this is malice; it is a template written for cleaning contractors being applied to you. Push back politely and specifically, “clause 8 would stop me using my own methods with other clients, can we carve out pre-existing materials and general know-how,” and you will find most of it moves, because the person administering the form has moved it before. What you cannot do is sign now and hope later. The version with your signature on it is the version that counts.

Insurance and the entity

Professional indemnity insurance, before your first paid engagement. PI cover is what responds when a client alleges your advice or your system cost them money. You are in the business of advice and systems, so this is not optional dressing; it is table stakes, and sophisticated clients and every larger company will ask for your certificate before you start. Cover in the low millions is the usual ask, and for a solo advisory practice it costs on the order of a modest monthly software subscription. When buying, describe your work accurately, AI consulting and implementation, not just “IT consulting,” because cover only responds to the activities you declared. Add public liability if you are physically on client sites, and cyber cover is worth pricing given you will hold client data. Insurance brokers are free to talk to. Talk to one.

Then keep the cover honest as the practice grows. Insurance is priced and scoped on what you told the broker at a point in time, and this practice changes shape fast: the year you add subcontractors, start holding more client data, or sign your first client several times your old size, the declared risk has moved. A ten-minute annual call with the

broker, ideally at the same time as the Chapter 32 rate-card review, keeps the certificate matching the reality. Cover that has drifted from the facts is the most expensive kind there is: paid for and useless.

The entity. Do not trade as yourself. A company or your jurisdiction's equivalent limited-liability structure puts a wall between the practice's risks and your personal assets, looks more substantial on an engagement letter, and gives the accountant something sensible to work with on tax. Costs a little to set up, and it is the first thing your accountant will tell you anyway. Which is the actual point of this paragraph: get an accountant who serves small businesses, before the first invoice, and let them set the structure, the tax registrations and the bookkeeping rhythm for your country. You advise businesses on their operations; be a business with advisers.

Getting paid

Cash flow, not revenue, is what kills small practices, so the payment machinery deserves the same design attention as the deployments.

Deposits on all project work. Half up front, half on acceptance, or thirds on start, midpoint and completion for larger builds. No build starts before the deposit clears. A client who resists any deposit is telling you, in advance and for free, how the final invoice will go. Believe them, and walk.

Retainers in advance, by direct debit. The retainer for March is paid on the first of March, not invoiced into April, and it goes out automatically by direct debit or stored card, set up as part of onboarding, not raised as a question each month. The payment platforms make this a ten-minute setup, and their small fee is the cheapest employee you will ever hire: it removes the monthly moment where a human at the client has to decide, again, to pay you. Frame it at signing as routine, because it is: "Retainers run on direct debit on the first, that's just how the practice

works.” Said plainly at the start, nobody ever objects. Introduced later, it is a negotiation.

The first late invoice is a fire alarm, not a fluke. Act the day it goes overdue, not at some diplomatic distance. A friendly same-week call, “the March payment didn’t come through, can you check it from your end?”, solves most cases, because most cases are genuinely administrative. But the pattern you are protecting against is the client who discovers, once, that paying you late has no consequence, because that client will pay you late forever, and other creditors first. For retainers, the rule goes in the engagement letter and gets enforced: work pauses when payment is more than fourteen days behind. Pausing feels brutal the first time. It is the opposite. It is the mechanism that keeps the relationship honest, and clients respect suppliers who run their own business properly; you are, after all, selling operational competence.

Defending the scope

Scope creep will arrive dressed as reasonable. “While you’re in there, could you also look at the rostering?” Each request is small, each is genuinely useful, and six of them silently convert your \$5,000 retainer into a \$9,000 workload, which is a pay cut you approved one nicety at a time.

The defence is a habit, not a confrontation, and it is two sentences long: “Happy to. That’s outside the current scope, so let me send you a note on what it would cost.” Warm yes, clear boundary, money conversation in writing. Most requests either become paid work, which is Chapter 35’s expansion path arriving early, or quietly evaporate, which tells you what they were worth to the asker. What must never happen is the third path, absorbing it silently, because silent absorption teaches the client that scope is decorative, and resets what the retainer means without either of you agreeing to it.

The retainer's monthly memo helps here too: when every month documents what was delivered against the roadmap, the shape of the engagement stays visible, and "extra" stays recognisable as extra, to both of you.

Which points at the quiet habit underneath this whole chapter: keep the record as you go. Decisions confirmed by email the same day ("as discussed, we're pausing the chatbot work and prioritising invoices; shout if I've got that wrong"), scope changes in writing, sign-offs dated, the Chapter 31 gate checklist filed per build, the monthly memos archived. This takes minutes a week and it is the difference between every future disagreement being a memory contest and being a lookup. Almost no dispute in a well-papered practice ever reaches a lawyer, and the sequence when one threatens to is deliberately boring: a direct conversation first, then a short written summary of the issue and your proposed fix, then, rarely, the formal steps your engagement letter's dispute clause sets out. The paper trail is what keeps you at step one, because people argue less with a record than with a recollection.

Firing a client

Some clients need to be fired, and the ones that do are rarely the rude ones. They are the chronically late payers, the scope-creepers who ignore the boundary twice, the owner who overrides every recommendation then blames the results, the company whose staff are ordered to cooperate and quietly briefed not to. Chapter 34 will show you the arithmetic: a bad client does not just underpay, they consume the hours and attention that your best client and your pipeline were owed. The most profitable decision available to a full practice is often a subtraction, because every seat a bad client occupies is a seat a Chapter 27 list company cannot.

Do it cleanly and boringly. Invoke the notice period in the letter, deliver handover documentation that would make a new provider's life easy,

finish the month professionally, and say little: “I don’t think the engagement is working the way it needs to for either of us, so I’m giving notice under the agreement, and here’s the handover.” No essay of grievances, no revenge pricing on the final invoice, nothing you would not want read back in your town, because boring industries all know each other, which was Chapter 27’s gift and is also its warning. The engagement letter you signed at the start is what makes this a procedure instead of a fight. That is what the paper was always for: not winning disputes, but making almost all of them too clearly settled to have.

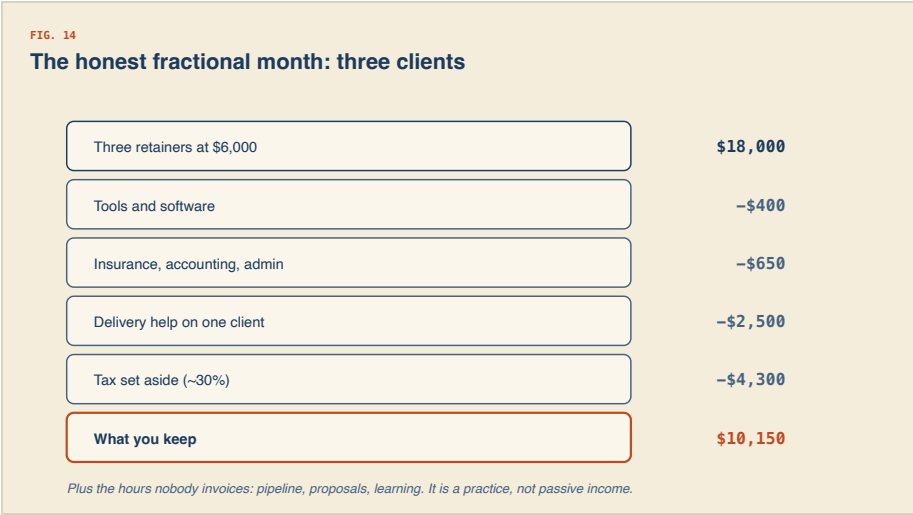
Do this now

1. **Book the two professionals.** One hour with a solicitor who serves small consultancies to draft your engagement letter template around this chapter's headings, and one hour with a small-business accountant on entity, tax and bookkeeping. Total cost is real and modest; it is the practice's foundation slab. Before the meetings, write your own plain-English draft of scope, IP and data clauses so the hour is spent refining, not explaining.
2. **Get the PI quote this week.** Contact a broker, describe the work accurately, and price professional indemnity plus cyber. Even if you are a month from your first client, knowing the number ends the vague dread, and the certificate becomes part of the credibility kit you hand larger clients.
3. **Build the money machinery once.** Set up your invoicing tool with direct debit capability, write the deposit terms into your project template, and write the two-sentence scope response and the late-payment rule where you will see them. Then, calendar reminder: the day any invoice goes overdue, the friendly call happens that day. Decide it now, so the future you does not have to be brave, just consistent.

Chapter 34: The Honest P&L

The internet is full of people selling the fractional dream with a screenshot of a Stripe dashboard, and this chapter is the antidote.

I want to show you the real profit and loss of a running fractional AI practice: what comes in, what actually goes out, what the hours honestly are, where the income breaks, and where the ceiling sits. Not to talk you out of it. The numbers are genuinely good, better than almost any job the same effort could buy you. But you deserve the version with the costs left in, because the people who quit this path mostly quit from surprise, not from failure, and every surprise in this chapter is removable in advance.



The honest fractional month.

The topline, and what is really underneath it

Picture the practice this book has been building, eighteen months in. Three retainer clients at \$6,000 a month each. Topline: \$18,000 a month, \$216,000 a year. Say it at a barbecue and it sounds like a fortune.

Now subtract, honestly.

One reinvestment note before the subtractions, because the tools line is not just a cost. Your own practice should be the best-automated business you serve: your memos drafted by the systems you sell, your tracker feeding itself, your invoicing untouched by your hands. Partly that is hours back. Mostly it is proof. “Want to see how I run my own shop?” is the shortest sales demonstration that exists, and a practitioner whose own admin is a shambles is selling something they visibly do not believe.

Tools, roughly \$400 a month. AI subscriptions at the professional tiers for two or three model providers, automation platform plans, and the working stack: accounting software, a CRM or the spreadsheet discipline of Chapter 28, document tools, a scheduling tool, your website and email. Any client-specific platform costs should sit on client accounts they own, which Chapter 25 taught you for handover reasons and which also happens to protect this line.

Insurance, call it \$150 to \$300 a month once professional indemnity and cyber are in place. Chapter 33’s slab, amortised.

The accountant and the paperwork, \$300 to \$500 a month averaged across the year. Bookkeeping, tax work for the entity, the occasional hour of legal review when an engagement letter meets an unusual client.

Delivery costs, if you have read Chapter 31 and built the bench: whatever portion of the workload you have priced out to builders. For our three-client picture, say one client’s build work is benched at \$2,000 a month on average, and the other two you deliver yourself.

So far, the subtractions are visible and small: roughly \$3,000 to \$3,300 a month against \$18,000, leaving something near \$15,000 before tax. Still excellent. But the biggest cost in a fractional practice never appears on a bank statement, and it is the one that catches everyone.

The unpaid hours. The three retainers might consume sixty paid-for hours a month between them, more in heavy build months. But the practice consumes more than the clients do: the Chapter 28 campaign that never stops, the memos, the follow-up calls, the partner coffees from Chapter 30, the proposals, the assessment for a prospect who might not convert, the bookkeeping evening, the tool-keeping-up that this field demands weekly, the invoice chasing that Chapter 33 hopefully minimised. Fifteen to twenty-five hours a month, forever, that no client pays for. Divide your real monthly profit by your real total hours, paid and unpaid, and that is your true rate. It will still be a very good number. It will not be the number the Stripe screenshot implied.

Run it fully: \$15,000 profit over, say, eighty-five total hours in a month is about \$175 an hour, real. Against the \$70,000 employee from Chapter 1 at \$35 an hour, you are earning five times the rate with no boss and a practice that compounds. Against the fantasy of \$18,000 for “a few hours a week,” it is a business with a wage bill of one, and the employee is tired some weeks. Both things are true. Hold both.

And before you compare that figure with your old salary, compare it properly, because a salary hides its own accounting. Employment came with paid leave, sick days, public holidays, retirement contributions, and someone else carrying the quiet weeks; self-employment prices all of those into your rate or not at all. The working rule when you compare practice income to a salary is to discount the practice number by something like a quarter for everything employment used to include, and even after that haircut, the three-client picture comfortably beats the payroll job it replaced. Do the comparison once, honestly, and then stop doing it, because the point of this path was never just the rate. It was who sets it.

Tax deserves its own paragraph, because it is the first-year trap. Nobody withholds anything from a retainer. The money arrives whole, sits in your account looking like yours, and a chunk of it is not; it belongs to the tax office, plus whatever your jurisdiction’s GST-style

obligations add once you cross the registration threshold, which this practice does quickly. The discipline is mechanical: a separate account, a fixed percentage of every single payment swept into it the day the payment lands, sized with your Chapter 33 accountant's advice, untouched. Practitioners who skip this spend their second year working for their first year's tax bill. It is the single most common self-inflicted wound in solo practice, and it is entirely a plumbing problem, solved in one afternoon of setup.

Churn is not an if

Now the number nobody puts in the screenshot: clients leave.

They leave for good reasons and bad ones. The company gets sold. A new general manager arrives with their own people. The owner hits a cash crunch and cuts every external line, including the profitable ones, because panic does not read results memos. And the pattern in who leaves is worth knowing before it teaches you the hard way: the smallest retainers churn hardest, because a \$3,000 fee is a bigger share of a small company's nerves, while clients running two or three functions with you barely churn at all. Depth is retention, which is half of why Chapter 35 pushes expansion as hard as it does. Sometimes they leave because you did the job so well they can run what you built without you, which Chapter 35 will argue is a graduation to be engineered rather than a loss to be feared. Across the fractional world, an engagement that runs eighteen months to two years is a good engagement. Some run five years. Plan on the shorter number and let the long ones be upside.

Do the arithmetic of what that means at three clients. One departure is a third of your income, gone inside a notice period. If your pipeline is cold when it happens, you are three to four months from replacing them: list, memos, meetings, assessment, close. Three to four months at \$12,000 instead of \$18,000 is the difference between a wobble and a crisis, and

which one it is was decided months earlier, by whether you kept prospecting while full.

Sometimes, of course, the notice is yours; Chapter 33 gave you the firing procedure, and this page gives you the arithmetic that makes it affordable. The point either way is the same: a departure you have modelled is a line item, and a departure you have not is a crisis, and the modelling costs one page.

Hence the rule that keeps fractional practices alive, and I want it stated as bluntly as the panic story in Chapter 32. **Always be two conversations deep.** At any moment, regardless of how full you are, two live conversations with potential clients: a memo answered, an assessment scheduled, a partner referral in motion. Not because you intend to take them all on, but because the pipeline's job is not growth. It is insurance. The always-two rule converts churn from an emergency into a scheduling event, and it has a pricing side-effect Chapter 32 predicted: a practitioner with a live pipeline quotes calmly, holds the rate card, and walks away from bad fits, because no single client is load-bearing. The desperate version of you negotiates differently, and clients can smell which version walked in.

The weekly half-hour you set aside in Chapter 28 is where this rule lives. It survives success only if you treat it as untouchable. The most common failure sequence in this trade is exactly this: get full, stop prospecting because you are full, lose a client, panic, discount, and rebuild from a worse position. Every step of it is optional.

The hours, honestly

Let me kill the phrase “passive income” before someone sells it to you.

A fractional practice is active income with excellent margins. The retainer arrives monthly, but you re-earn it monthly: the deployments need running, the outputs need the Chapter 31 gate, the staff need

supporting, the memo needs writing, the owner needs the relationship maintained. Automation helps enormously, and you will automate your own practice harder than any client's, but Chapter 2's list of what the machine cannot do is precisely the list of what your clients are renting from you. Accountability, judgment, relationships. None of those switch off in December.

The honest weekly picture at three clients: fifteen to twenty hours of client delivery in a normal week, spiking toward thirty in a heavy build or pilot week, plus the standing five or six practice hours. Call it a solid twenty-five-hour core that flexes. Most weeks, that is a genuinely freer life than employment, and the freedom is real: where you work, when you work, who you work for, and the fact that no single person can fire you. What it is not is optional. A retainer week skipped is discovered by the client within the month, because the memo that proves your value, or fails to arrive, was the subject of the whole retention system.

There is also a lumpiness employment never taught you. Client work clusters: two pilots land in the same fortnight, an assessment overlaps a crisis, and some weeks are heavy in a way you cannot fully schedule. The bench absorbs some of it. Your calendar absorbs the rest. Budget energy like you budget money, with a reserve.

The year has a shape too, and it pays to know it in advance. SMB decision-making goes quiet over the summer holiday stretch and again around end of financial year, when owners are buried in their accountants' paperwork rather than yours. Proposals sent into those windows do not die, they hibernate, so plan the campaign rhythm around it: prospect hard into the months when owners are planning, use the quiet weeks for the practice's own machinery, the pattern library, the rate-card review, your own deployment backlog, and never judge your pipeline by its slowest month. Retainers, mercifully, keep paying through the lulls, which is one more argument for the retainer spine that Chapter 32 made on other grounds.

While we are being honest about money, be honest about the runway too. If you are reading this part while still employed, the Moonlight Ladder in Chapter 11 already told you the safe sequence, and the P&L on this page is the reason it exists: the practice's income is lumpy precisely when it is young. The comfortable version of this transition starts with two moonlight clients proving the model and several months of expenses banked, so that the always-two rule can be run from calm rather than need. The uncomfortable version starts with a resignation letter and a hope. Both eventually work or fail on the same skills. Only one of them prices every proposal with rent in its voice.

The ceiling, and the two doors out of it

Now follow the model to its natural limit, because the limit is where the rest of this book is pointing.

Run the practice well and the growth path is obvious for a while. Three clients become four, \$6,000 creeps toward \$8,000 as Chapter 32's review trigger fires, Chapter 35 expands existing clients from one function to three. Somewhere around four to six hands-on retainers, depending on their size and your stamina, you hit it: every hour is sold or promised, the always-two conversations have nowhere to put a yes, and the only way to earn more is to work more, which is the exact treadmill this career was meant to replace. Call it what it is, a ceiling at hands-on capacity, somewhere in the \$250,000 to \$350,000 a year range for a well-run solo practice. A wonderful ceiling by almost any standard. Still a ceiling.

Two doors lead out, and they are not exclusive.

The first door is leverage: stop being the delivery. That is Chapter 31, taken seriously, the bench carrying the building while your hours concentrate on the fifteen-per-client that cannot be delegated: the seat itself. Practices that walk through this door properly, the way John Cheney's did, run eight-plus clients on systems, repeatable playbooks

and hired doing, and clear seven figures with a team where a soloist clears three hundred thousand alone.

The second door is price: stop selling the seat to \$5 million companies and start selling the same seat to \$50 million ones, where it rents for five to ten times as much for not five to ten times the work. That door has different locks on it, a different buyer psychology behind it, and its own chapter, which is two chapters away.

Either door, though, opens off the same landing: a healthy practice with honest books, a live pipeline, and clients who stay. The staying is the part we have not covered yet, and it is worth more than any new-client tactic in this book, because the cheapest revenue you will ever earn is the retainer you already have. Keeping it is the next chapter.

Do this now

1. **Build your own honest P&L, forward-dated.** One page, three columns: at one client, three clients, five clients. Real subscription prices, the insurance quote from Chapter 33, accountant costs, a delivery-cost line, and an unpaid-hours line priced at your target rate. Look at the true hourly figure at each stage. This page is your business plan, and it is more useful than any pitch deck you could write.
2. **Install the always-two rule today.** Write down your two current live conversations. If you do not have two, your Chapter 28 tracker is telling you what this week's half-hour block is for. Put the rule where you will see it: "Full is not safe. Two conversations, always."
3. **Set the churn drill.** Write the one-page plan now, while it is hypothetical: if my biggest client gave notice tomorrow, which three companies from the list get memos that week, which partner gets the call, and which costs pause. Ten minutes of planning that converts your worst future Tuesday from a panic into a checklist.

Chapter 35: Keeping the Seat

Every retainer client you will ever have asks themselves the same question, roughly monthly: “What am I actually getting for this?”

They rarely ask it out loud. They ask it silently, while approving invoices, and the danger is not that they reach a negative answer. It is that they reach no answer, because nothing in front of them says what the money bought. Retainers almost never die from bad work. They die from invisible work: value delivered, forgotten, and eventually cancelled in a cost review by someone scanning a list of suppliers for anything that cannot explain itself.

Getting a client, Part VI so far, costs you fifty memos, weeks of pursuit, an assessment and a close. Keeping one costs a disciplined hour a month. This chapter is that hour, plus the machinery that turns kept clients into bigger ones, and the judgment call of when to let one go well.

The monthly results memo

The single highest-leverage hour in your practice is the one where you write each client’s monthly results memo. Chapter 18 taught you the formula for reporting results in money; the memo is that formula, applied as a standing client ritual, twelve times a year, without fail.

One page. Not a report, not a deck, one page the owner reads in three minutes. Four parts.

What changed, in dollars and hours. The numbers from the systems you run: quotes going out in four hours instead of two days, 340 enquiries answered automatically, nine hours a week back in the office manager’s calendar, the month’s tally against the baseline you built in the assessment. Always against the baseline. The owner has forgotten how bad it was; the memo’s quiet job is to keep the before-picture alive, because the before-picture is what the retainer is measured against.

What I did. Three or four lines of the invisible work made visible: the vendor renegotiated, the prompt library updated after the product change, the new hire trained on the quoting system, the fix shipped before anyone noticed the breakage. This is the section that answers “what am I getting,” and it is the section you will be most tempted to skip out of modesty. Do not. Nobody else will say it for you.

What’s next. The next deployment from the roadmap, the pilot starting Tuesday. This section keeps the engagement pointed forward; a retainer that only maintains is a retainer that has started to end.

One number I’m watching. A single honest flag: adoption dipping in one team, error rate creeping on one workflow, a risk worth a conversation. This line does more for your credibility than the whole rest of the page, because a memo that only ever carries good news gets discounted as marketing within a quarter. The one-flag memo gets read as what it is: an executive reporting to an owner.

The month you most want to skip the memo is the month it matters most. Every practice has flat months, a pilot mid-stream, nothing shipped, numbers unchanged, and the temptation is to let the memo slide rather than send a thin one. Send it anyway, honestly: here is where the pilot is up to, here is what I did, here is why the number moves next month. A flat month reported builds trust. A missing month builds a question, and Chapter 34 told you which question.

Send it the same day every month, invoice attached to the same email. That pairing is deliberate and you should never be shy about it: the question “what am I paying for” and its answer should arrive in the same envelope. Practices that run this discipline, and the good fractional operators run exactly this cadence of weekly touches and monthly written results, keep clients for years. Practices that skip it become a line item, and line items get cut.

The quarterly re-proposal

The memo defends the month. The quarter needs something bigger: every three months, a sit-down with the owner that re-sells the engagement from scratch. Call it a review if you like, but understand what it is. You are proposing the next quarter as if the client could walk, because they can.

The agenda is three questions. What did the quarter return, totalled from the memos and stated against the year's baseline: "The systems are now returning about \$210,000 a year against a \$60,000 retainer." Where is the roadmap up to, honestly, including what stalled. And what should the next quarter buy: the next deployment, the next function, the next risk retired, priced and scheduled.

The quarterly meeting is also harvest time, and most practitioners forget to harvest. The moment an owner says "honestly, I don't know how we ran quotes before this" is the moment to ask, right then, for the sentence in writing: a two-line testimonial, a named quote for your one-pager, a yes to being a case study with the numbers included. Asking at the peak costs nothing and lands as a compliment. Asking cold, months later by email, gets a week of silence and a watered-down paragraph. Your Chapter 28 memos and Chapter 30 partners run on borrowed proof, and this meeting is where proof is minted; leave with it. The memo archive itself compounds the same way: eighteen months of dated one-pagers is a documented before-and-after that no competitor pitching your client can match, and, when the time comes for bigger water, it is the evidence file that chapter is going to ask you for.

This meeting is where three chapters of machinery come home to roost. It is where Chapter 32's price rises land, attached to a results total instead of an invoice surprise. It is where scope formally grows, which is the next section. And it is your early-warning system, because an owner's energy in this meeting tells you the truth about the account three months before a cancellation email would. A distracted owner, a delegated meeting, a "let's skip this quarter", those are not scheduling facts. They are data, and the section after next tells you what to do with them.

From \$5,000 to \$12,000 without a new logo

Here is the growth arithmetic most new practitioners never run. Winning a new \$5,000 client costs months of campaign. Growing an existing client from \$5,000 to \$8,000 costs one good quarter and one conversation, because every barrier that makes selling hard, trust, proof, access, risk, is already down. The cheapest revenue in your practice is sitting inside the clients you already have, and the assessment you ran on day one is the map to it.

The expansion path is nearly always the same shape. You were hired to fix one function, say the quoting and enquiry pipeline, because Chapter 29's close deliberately started with one visible, winnable thing. Two quarters later that function is transformed, the memos have proved it in dollars, and the owner now trusts you with what they would never have handed a stranger: the accounts back-office, the scheduling chaos, the reporting nobody reads, the second location. Each function is a new deployment cycle, a new baseline, a new line in the memo, and a step up in the retainer. One function at \$5,000 becomes two at \$8,500 becomes three at \$12,000, and the client is still paying a fraction of what the recovered value and the \$350,000 alternative hire would cost. Same logo, doubled practice.

And once a year, at the strongest quarterly meeting, make the referral ask that happy clients are quietly waiting for permission to answer: "Who else do you know running a business like this one who should see what you've seen?" Owners in boring industries sit on boards, in associations, at supplier barbecues with a dozen peers, and a direct ask converts their satisfaction into introductions in a way that passive hoping never does. One warm introduction from a client whose numbers you can show is worth a month of the Chapter 28 campaign, and it costs one sentence, asked at the right meeting.

Two rules keep expansion healthy. Propose the next function only on the back of a measured win in the current one, at the quarterly meeting, off

the memo trail; expansion pitched from behind schedule reads as upselling, and is. And re-scope in writing each time, Chapter 33's letter amended, so the retainer's shape stays agreed rather than assumed. Scope that grows formally is growth. Scope that grows quietly is Chapter 33's creep, just wearing your optimism instead of the client's.

Expansion is also your churn hedge arriving early. A client paying for three functions has three sets of running systems, three baselines of proof, and three reasons to answer their own monthly question well. Depth retains.

The client who goes quiet

You will learn to hear it. Memos stop getting replies. The quarterly meeting gets moved twice. The office manager, once chatty, goes formal. Nothing is wrong, exactly. It is just quiet.

Silence is data, and it is never neutral. Sometimes it is benign: the owner is buried in an acquisition, a bad season, a family thing, and your systems are humming along unwatched, which is, after all, what they were built to do. But often quiet means drift: a new influence in the building, a cash conversation you are not in, a competitor's cousin at a barbecue, or simply the slow fade of a relationship nobody is feeding. Retainers do not usually end with a complaint. They end with a quiet quarter, then a "we're reviewing our costs" email that was written, in truth, weeks earlier.

The response is never to match the silence, and never to send the needy "just checking in" note either. The response is to show up with something. Book a visit with a reason attached: a finding from their own numbers, a new opportunity you have scoped, something you spotted in their reviews or their industry, the same evidence-first move that opened the account in Chapter 28, redeployed to keep it. Sit with the owner and ask the direct question, calmly, because you are a practitioner with a full pipeline, not a supplicant: "The engagement feels quieter this quarter.

What's changed at your end?" Nine times out of ten you will learn something the memos could not tell you, and the account either re-engages around a fresh win or tells you the truth early, and both beat the alternative, which is being surprised by the email.

One version of quiet deserves its own playbook: the new decision-maker. A general manager arrives, or the owner's son takes over, or a CFO gets hired, and suddenly the person approving your invoice has no memory of the before-picture and no relationship with you. New brooms cut inherited suppliers on principle, and you are, on their spreadsheet, an inherited supplier. Move within the fortnight, before their opinion of you forms without you: request a meeting, bring the memo archive, and re-run the original findings presentation in miniature, baseline, systems, results to date, roadmap. You are not defending your fee; you are giving the new person what they actually need, which is a fast, numerate briefing on a function they just inherited, delivered by the one person who has it documented. Handled that way, the new decision-maker usually converts from your biggest churn risk into your renewal sponsor, because you have just made them look informed in their second week.

And if the truth is that the drift is real and the energy is gone, you have one more move, and it is the one almost nobody in this trade has the nerve for.

Letting the seat go well

Some clients should graduate off you, and when the moment comes, the strongest thing you can do is say so first.

The moment looks like this. Two years in, the systems run, the staff you trained now train other staff, an internal person, maybe one your work created the room to hire, has quietly become the day-to-day owner of the machinery. Your fifteen monthly hours have drifted from executive work toward supervision that flatters your invoice more than it serves the client. Chapter 3 taught you that the seat's whole point is a named owner

inside the business; sometimes your success builds exactly that, and the honest reading is that the fractional seat has done its job.

You can cling to the retainer anyway, thinning the work to fit the fee, and the client will let you for a while. It is the worst trade in this book. You are spending the finite asset, your reputation in a boring industry where everyone talks, to defend a wasting one, a retainer whose real value you already delivered.

Do the opposite. At a quarterly meeting, on the back of the results total, propose your own step-down: “The machinery’s running and your team owns it, which is what we were building toward. I’d move us to a light quarterly arrangement, a review, the roadmap refresh, and I’m on call when something new comes up.” The step-down might be a small quarterly fee or a paid review twice a year; the shape matters less than who proposed it.

What that conversation buys defies its price tag. The owner, braced for a supplier defending territory, instead watches you put their interest ahead of your invoice, which converts a satisfied client into an evangelist. A graduated client is the best referral engine that exists: they have results with dates on them, no ongoing bill colouring their story, and owner friends at barbecues in the same boring industries your Chapter 27 list was built from. One graceful graduation feeds the pipeline for a year, keeps a warm quarterly relationship that regularly re-fires into project work when something new lands, and marks you, in a market thick with clingers, as the practitioner who leaves when the job is done. Which is, if you think about it, the most credible possible proof that you were worth having in the seat at all.

A practice run this way, memos, quarterly re-proposals, deliberate expansion, honest exits, compounds. Clients stay longer, grow bigger, and replace themselves when they leave. Which brings us, at last, to the ceiling this practice cannot solve from inside, and the bigger water beyond it.

Do this now

1. **Write this month's memo, today.** For your current client, your employer, or your Chapter 29 practice assessment target. One page, four sections: what changed in dollars, what I did, what's next, one number I'm watching. If you cannot fill the first section, that is not a writing problem, it is a measurement problem, and Chapter 23 is where you go to fix it.
2. **Calendar the ritual before you need it.** A repeating monthly block, memo day, invoice attached, and a repeating quarterly block for the re-proposal meeting, for every client you have or sign. The discipline installed on day one is easy. Retrofitted in month eight, it reads as a sales push.
3. **Map your expansion, one page per client.** From the original assessment, list the functions you have not touched, the annual leak you estimated for each, and which measured win would earn the right to propose it. That page is next year's revenue, already scoped, waiting for a quarterly meeting.

Chapter 36: Hunting Bigger Water

At some point, if you run the practice this book teaches, you will hit the day I have been quietly warning you about since Chapter 34.

The calendar is full. Three, four, five retainers, all healthy, all fed by memos and quarterly meetings. The always-two conversations are live and you have nowhere to put a yes. You raised the rate card twice and the proposals still closed without a flinch. You built the bench, and even with the building delegated, the seats themselves, the fifteen hours per client that cannot be outsourced, have consumed you. You are earning more than most executives, working for nobody, and you are, once again, standing at a ceiling.

Chapter 34 showed you the two doors out. More leverage is one, and Chapter 31 gave you that door in full. This short chapter is about the other one, and it starts with a piece of arithmetic that should annoy you.

The same seat, priced by the water

Think about what you actually do for a \$3 million client at \$5,000 a month. You find where money leaks through repetitive work, deploy systems that capture it, install governance so nothing embarrassing happens, train the humans, and report the results in dollars. The value recovered might be \$150,000 a year. A great trade for the client, a fine retainer for you.

Now run the identical playbook inside a \$50 million company. Same diagnosis, same deployment loop, same governance, same memos. But every number has a zero added. The quoting team is not one office manager, it is a department of eleven. The invoice pile is not four hundred a month, it is nine thousand. The leak you find is not \$150,000, it is \$2 million, and the risk you retire is the kind that has a board

subcommittee nervous about it. The seat that rents for \$5,000 a month in the small business is worth, and gets paid, \$25,000 to \$50,000 a month in that one. Those are not aspirational numbers; that is the going market for senior independents, where published rates run \$20,000 to \$80,000 a month and practitioners like Paul Okhrem list fractional AI leadership at \$30,000 a month with six-month minimums, for companies in exactly that \$50 million to \$500 million band.

One whale client at \$30,000 a month out-earns your entire five-retainer practice, for one client's worth of relationship, one memo, one quarterly meeting. The skills are the ones you already own. The craft of Part V does not change. The economics change completely.

And unlike your first ceiling, this one is not solved by working harder. There is no number of \$5,000 clients that adds up to the whale economics, because every one of them arrives with its own memo, its own owner relationship, its own quarterly meeting. The maths only moves when the price per seat moves, and the price per seat only moves when the water does.

So why doesn't everyone just go do that? Because landing whales is a different discipline, and the honest thing I can do in this chapter is show you exactly where the differences are, and then point you to where the full method lives, because it does not fit in these pages.

What changes at whale scale

The buyer changes. In the boring goldmine, you sold to an owner who could say yes over a coffee, alone, from their own bank account. At \$50 million, nobody decides alone. There is a CEO, a CFO who owns the money, an IT director who can quietly kill you, maybe a board. The sale is not one conversation, it is a sequence of them, each with a different person who cares about a different thing, and the skill is orchestrating that sequence rather than winning any single meeting. You need a sponsor inside the building who wants you to win, and sponsors are

cultivated, not found. Your Chapter 29 close was designed for a room with one decision-maker in it. Whale rooms have five, and two of them are looking for reasons to say no.

The positioning changes. The generalist “AI person for local businesses” who thrives on the Chapter 27 list gets filtered out instantly at whale scale, because companies that size buy specialists, and their gatekeepers are paid to know the difference. Whales are landed by practitioners positioned as the answer to one expensive problem for one kind of company, with proof at a scale the buyer recognises as their own. Getting that positioning right, narrow enough to be obvious, broad enough to feed a pipeline, is a craft in itself, and it is the first thing that has to change before any outreach makes sense.

The pricing changes. Chapter 32’s rate card priced your time against a salary anchor. Whale pricing is value-based: priced against the size of the problem, defended with a business case, and negotiated with a CFO who does this for a living and enjoys it. The \$2 million leak justifies the \$360,000 engagement, but only if you can build and hold that case under adult scrutiny. Price like a small supplier in a whale negotiation and you will not look affordable, you will look wrong, and the deal will die of your own modesty.

The qualification changes. At SMB scale, a dud prospect costs you a memo and a coffee. At whale scale, a dud prospect can consume a quarter: months of meetings, a procurement process, a legal review, and then a restructure swallows your sponsor and the whole thing evaporates. Whale hunters qualify ruthlessly, walk away early and often, and treat their pipeline time as the scarcest asset in the practice, because at this scale it is.

The timeline changes. Your Chapter 29 close could run memo to retainer inside a month. A whale engagement moves through sponsors, evaluations, procurement, legal and security review, and the cycle runs a quarter to half a year even when everyone wants it to happen. That

changes the practice's plumbing: you cannot live off whale deals while hunting your first one, which is why the sequence in this chapter matters, and it changes the paperwork stakes, because the Chapter 33 kit that impressed a \$5 million owner is the entry ticket that a \$50 million company's vendor process simply requires before you exist.

And the sale gets a structure. The instinct-and-evidence approach that wins owners over coffee does not survive a five-person buying committee and a nine-week evaluation. Landing whales runs on a deliberate sales process: staged, sequenced, with the proof built for each stakeholder and the close engineered from the first meeting. It is learnable, it is repeatable, and it is genuinely a different discipline from everything Part VI has taught you so far.

Notice, too, what one whale does to the shape of everything you built in this part. At \$30,000 a month, the always-two rule buys insurance against a client that is half your income rather than a fifth of it. The bench from Chapter 31 stops being a convenience and becomes the delivery model, because whale-scale work does not fit in one person's hands. And the honest P&L from Chapter 34 turns from a good living into a firm. The practice does not change kind. It changes magnitude, and magnitude is a choice.

None of this is beyond you. Every one of those changes is a skill, not a gift, and you will come to them holding the two assets that matter most: a craft that works at any scale, and a book of measured, dated, dollar-denominated results from real companies. What you need is the method for the hunt itself.

Where the method lives

Teaching that method properly takes a book, so I wrote one. It is called **Land Whale Clients**, and it is the complete discipline this chapter has been sketching: how to position yourself so big companies see you as the obvious answer, how to price on value and defend it in the CFO's

language, how to qualify hard so your quarters never die in procurement, and how to run the structured sales process that turns a five-person committee into a signed six-figure engagement. It is the system behind the largest client wins of my own career, and it picks up precisely where this chapter stops.

It costs \$7, which is not a typo; I would rather have it in your hands than make money on it, for reasons that will be obvious by its final chapter. You can get it at **in.themastermind.com/whales**.

My advice on timing is the same advice this whole part has followed: sequence beats ambition. If you are still building your list of fifty, stay here; the boring goldmine is where your proof gets built, and whales do not buy promises. But the day your calendar is full and your memos carry numbers you are proud of, that is the day you have outgrown this book's water. Read Land Whale Clients that week. The ceiling you will be standing under is not a limit on the seat you have built. It is just the depth mark of the pool you learned to swim in, and the same strokes work in the open ocean, where the fish are forty times the size.

The rest of this book returns to the seat itself: the credential question, and the chapter your future clients' CEOs will read. But between us, the practice is built. What size you build it to is, from here, only a question of where you choose to fish.

Do this now

1. **Find your ceiling's date.** From your Chapter 34 P&L page, work out when you hit hands-on capacity at your current close rate: how many months until every hour is sold. Write the date down. That is the deadline for having the whale discipline learned, and it is closer than it feels.
2. **Spot your first whale, but do not touch it.** Scan your region and your industry history for three companies in the \$30 million-plus band showing the same Chapter 27 signals: admin hiring sprees, slow-response complaints, visible failed pilots. Add them to a separate list marked “not yet.” Feel the difference in what proof and positioning they would demand. That gap is your curriculum.
3. **Get the book.** Land Whale Clients, \$7, at in.themastermind.com/whales. Read it when the calendar fills, or now if the ceiling is already in sight. Bring your results memos with you when you do; they are worth more in bigger water than you currently believe.

PART VII

The Door

Two doors to close the book: the one you walk through to become credentialed, and the one for the owner reading over your shoulder who wants to hire the seat instead of holding it.

Chapter 37: The Door

By 2028, two kinds of people will be holding AI leadership seats: the ones who can prove they know what they are doing, and the ones who declared themselves.

The market is already learning to tell them apart. This chapter is about which one you will be, and about the strange, overpriced, mostly useless industry that has sprung up promising to make you the first kind.

The washout problem, one more time

Cast your mind back to Chapter 6, because the ending of this book starts where the sceptics did.

General Motors created a C-suite Chief AI Officer role, hired a genuine technologist with PayPal, Microsoft and Google on his resume, and dissolved the whole position eight months later. The AI team was folded into manufacturing engineering and the seat was never refilled. Bernard Marr, surveying the wreckage across the Fortune 500, put a number on the pattern: most CAIOs leave their positions within 18 months. The best available data puts average tenure at 2.1 years, which is roughly what Chief Data Officers manage, and CDOs have had a decade to figure their role out.

Every one of those washouts makes the next hire harder to get and easier to lose. The first wave of AI leadership hiring ran on enthusiasm. Companies bought titles, credentials-sounding LinkedIn profiles, and confidence. A lot of what they bought did not work, for the reasons this book has spent thirty-six chapters on: no mandate, no method, no measurement, no ninety-day win.

And while the washouts were washing out, the supply side filled with self-declaration. Search “fractional Chief AI Officer” on any professional network and watch the results multiply month on month. Some of those

people are the real thing; you have met several of them in this book, with published prices and client results. Many are last year's social media consultants with a new headline. The buyers cannot tell at a glance, which means for a while nobody could tell, which is exactly the environment in which a market invents filters.

So the buyers are getting sharper. Boards that have been burned once now ask second-question questions. What broke on your last deployment? Show me a result with a number on it. Walk me through your first ninety days. Who else have you done this for, and can I call them? The self-declared operator, the one whose entire qualification is a title they typed into their own profile, survives the first meeting and dies in the second.

In 2025 you could self-declare and get away with it. Every year from here, that gets harder. The window from Chapter 1 does not just close on latecomers. It closes on the unproven.

The industry that grew in the gap

Wherever there is a gap between what people want to be and what they can prove, an industry appears to sell them paper. The AI leadership version of that industry is now in full bloom, and it is worth a clear-eyed tour, because you are going to be pitched by it for the rest of your career.

At the top of the price list sits a private outfit selling a trademarked “Certified Chief Artificial Intelligence Officer” designation for \$39,999. Read that number again. Forty thousand dollars. The program is five days long, delivered online, roughly 9:30 to 3:30 with breaks. The website describes admission as “very selective.” The website also has a checkout page.

Just below it, a corporate vendor sells a Chief AI Officer course at \$40,000 for an in-person cohort. Then come the universities. Chicago Booth runs a Chief AI Officer program at \$28,000. Duke offers a seven-

month version at \$25,000, which includes, and I am quoting the sales page, a “Duke Basketball leadership signature experience with Coach K insights.” Michigan Ross sits around \$16,000. Cornell, Georgia Tech and MIT all have entries in the category.

And at the bottom, Udemy will sell you a “Certified Chief AI Officer Program” for whatever this week’s discount makes it, usually somewhere between the price of a pizza and the price of a nice dinner. Self-paced videos, certificate of completion, no assessment anyone would recognise as one.

Between fifty dollars and forty thousand dollars, then, and here is what should bother you: at every price point, the product being sold is the same thing. A certificate.

The finding that reframes everything

Now put the sales pages down and look at the demand side, because this is the number that matters.

An executive search firm analysed 8,901 US AI-strategy job postings from January 2026 onward, about 330 new postings a week. In my own research for this book we pulled the actual text of live Chief AI Officer and Head of AI postings: a \$300,000 to \$400,000 Head of AI role at a consumer security company, a Head of AI reporting to the CEO of an industrial IoT firm, a HIPAA-regulated healthcare SaaS role at \$224,000 to \$325,000, a state government CAIO, a Head of AI Governance at a major insurer.

Not one of them requires an AI certification. Not one. Across the whole corpus, the closest anything comes is a template listing cloud vendor certificates as a nice-to-have. The same analysis found PhDs and hands-on coding “not emphasized as necessary qualifications.” On the professional forums where tech workers speak anonymously, the verdict

on AI certificates is brutal and consistent: not worth the paper they are printed on, build real projects instead.

The most generous version of the case for certificates, and it appears in those same forums, is that a certificate might help you get shortlisted when a recruiter is drowning in applicants. Note how modest that claim is. Not hired. Not paid more. Shortlisted, maybe, by a tired screener. That is the ceiling for the paper on its own.

There is exactly one credential in the whole landscape with real salary data behind it, and it is telling that it is not a CAIO certificate at all. The IAPP's AI Governance Professional, an examined credential in a regulated specialty, correlates with roughly 13% higher pay, rising to 27% for holders of multiple credentials. An exam that costs a few hundred dollars, that you can genuinely fail, in a field where the law itself is the syllabus and the examining body maintains the profession around it. That is the exception that explains the rule.

So the \$39,999 five-day designation and the \$50 Udemy certificate share a defect: as paper, neither is worth anything, because nobody hiring for this role checks for paper. The market checks for proof. It has been the argument of this entire book, and the job ads confirm it line by line.

At which point you might reasonably ask why this chapter exists at all. Burn the certificates, build the Proof Ladder, done?

Not quite. Because the question "is the certificate worth it" is the wrong question. Nobody serious ever bought a qualification for the paper. The right question is what the qualification contains.

What a qualification is actually for

Think about the qualifications that do work, in fields older than this one. A trade apprenticeship. A pilot's licence. A chartered accountancy. None of them are valuable because of the certificate on the wall. They are

valuable because of what you must do to hold one, and what holding one connects you to.

Nobody hires an electrician because of the laminated card. They hire because the card means someone watched this person wire a hundred boards under supervision, tested them on the ways wiring kills people, and stands ready to strike them off if they get sloppy. The card is a pointer to a process. When the process is real, the pointer is priceless. When there is no process, the pointer points at nothing, and forty thousand dollars buys you a laminated nothing.

Strip the real ones down and you get six things. Use them as your buying checklist for anything in this market, at any price.

One: a working method. Does the program teach an actual operating method for doing the job, one that its own people use on real businesses, with real clients, this year? Or does it teach “frameworks”: slideware about strategy alignment that has never been run against a live payroll? You have spent Parts IV, V and VI of this book learning fragments of a method. A qualification worth money hands you a complete one and makes you run it.

Two: a real assessment. Can you fail? This is the fastest filter in the whole market. If everyone who pays passes, the certificate certifies nothing except the payment. Ask the vendor directly: what percentage of paying candidates do not get certified? A weekend mill cannot answer that question honestly and survive.

Three: standards. Can you lose it? A credential that cannot be revoked is a souvenir. Real professional designations come with conduct standards, and the existence of those standards is precisely what makes the designation worth showing a client. It means someone other than you is vouching, and staking their name on the vouch.

Four: a community. The certificate expires the day you frame it. The network does not. Practitioners who are in the same work, hitting the

same vendor problems, sharing what broke last month and what they charged for fixing it. In a field moving this fast, a live community of working operators is worth more than any curriculum, because the curriculum is six months old by definition and the community is six days old.

Five: ongoing updates. This field rewrites itself roughly twice a year. Models change, tools change, regulation lands, prices collapse. A qualification issued as a one-time event is a photograph of a river. What you want is a subscription to the river: updated material, current tooling, a body that keeps the method alive as the ground moves.

Six: something to show for it. The best programs are indistinguishable from work. You leave with artifacts: a real audit of a real business, a deployed system, a results memo with numbers in it. In other words, you leave with rungs of the Proof Ladder already climbed, and the qualification is simply the witnessed record of the climb. If a program's final deliverable is a certificate rather than a portfolio, it has told you what it thinks the product is.

Run the market you just toured through that checklist. The \$50 course fails all six. The \$39,999 five-day designation fails at least five, and its "very selective" admissions page with a buy button fails the sixth on its own. The university programs are the interesting middle case: real institutions, real faculty, some genuine content, but built for executives who already hold senior roles and mostly assessed by attendance and a capstone that nobody outside the classroom will ever see. You are paying \$25,000 for the brand on the paper, and we have just established what the paper is worth in this market.

Notice, too, what five days cannot contain, at any price. You have now read a whole book describing this work: the diagnosis, the deployment loop, the piloting discipline, the governance artifacts, the client craft. Sit with your own honest estimate of how much of that transfers in a week of webinars, however good the slides. The problem with the five-day

designation is not only the price. It is that the job cannot be installed in five days, and everyone selling a five-day installation knows it.

The red flags, so you never get taken

Keep this list. You will meet every item on it within a year, because the washout problem is minting new credential mills faster than anyone can review them.

Run from a countdown timer on the checkout page. Urgency is a sales tool, and education sold like a Black Friday television is a television, not education.

Run from “selective admission” that terminates in a payment form. Selection means someone can say no to your money. If nobody can, the word is decoration.

Run from lifetime certification with no assessment and no renewal. In a field that rewrites itself twice a year, “lifetime” is a confession.

Run from faculty who have never held the seat. Check who is teaching. If the instructors’ AI deployment experience consists of teaching AI deployment, you are in a hall of mirrors.

Run from trademark symbols doing the work that evidence should do. A TM after a job title is not a moat. It is a tell.

Run from any program that cannot show you what its graduates went on to do. Not testimonials. Outcomes. Seats held, clients won, results memos written.

And run, always, from anyone who promises the title without the work. You have read thirty-six chapters describing the work. You know precisely how much of it there is. Anyone selling a shortcut past it is selling to the version of you that existed before page one.

Who actually needs a program

Honesty compels a paragraph the sales pages of this industry would never print: some of you do not need to buy anything.

If you have worked through this book, run the Shadow Audit on real businesses, climbed the Proof Ladder, landed a client or won the internal seat, then you are already the credentialed kind, in the only sense the market checks. Proof outranks paper. It always has in this field, and every job ad in the corpus says so. Keep working, keep the results memos going out monthly, and let the washouts advertise your scarcity.

But some readers know themselves well enough to name what is missing, and it is usually not information. It is structure, assessment, and company. The discipline of a method someone makes you actually run. An examiner who can fail you, which is the only thing that makes passing mean anything. A room of people doing the same work, so you are not the only person you know who does this. And speed, because the window from Chapter 1 is not waiting while you assemble all of this alone from free content.

If that is you, use the six-point checklist and buy carefully. There is almost nothing in the market built for you. The analysis of the certification landscape found the same gap I did: a market split between \$16,000-to-\$40,000 executive programs for people who already hold senior titles, and sub-\$200 video courses for people who never will. Almost nothing serious in the middle, for the employed professional becoming the AI person, moonlighting toward a practice, stepping up to the seat. Which is to say: for the person this book was written for.

The door

That gap is why I built what I built, and since you have let me be your guide for thirty-seven chapters, I will tell you about it plainly and briefly, and you can weigh it against the same checklist as everything else.

My organisation, AI First Foundations, runs a certified practitioner program, the AICP, built on the operating method behind our own client work: the same assess, deploy, measure and govern discipline this book has described in generic form, taught in full, run against real businesses, and assessed by people who do this for a living. It carries the six things this chapter says a qualification must carry, including the two that cannot be faked: an assessment you can fail and a community of working practitioners you keep.

Entry is by application and a conversation, not a checkout page, because we say no more often than we say yes, and because a designation is only worth holding if the people who hold it were selected for something. If you want to have that conversation, apply through AI First Foundations and we will talk. If you never do, everything in this book still works exactly as written. The door is there. Walking through it is optional. The work is not.

Do this now

1. **Audit yourself against the six.** Method, assessment, standards, community, updates, artifacts. Write one line under each: what you currently hold. The blanks are your honest gap list, and whether you fill them alone or inside a program, they need filling before a sharp buyer finds them in a second meeting.
2. **Run the checklist on one program.** Pick any AI certification you have seen advertised. Twenty minutes on its website, six questions, score it. You are not shopping. You are practising the vendor-nonsense detector on the industry that sells to you, which is the final exam for the detector.
3. **Write your proof sentence.** One sentence, numbers included, that answers “why should anyone trust you with this,” using only things you have already done. If the sentence is strong, you are further along than most title-holders. If it is weak, you know exactly which chapter to reread, and it is not this one.

Chapter 38: The CEO's Chapter

This chapter is not for the reader who has been here since page one. It is for the person who picked the book up off their desk.

If you own or run a company, and someone handed you this, or you flipped to the back to see what your ambitious operations manager has been reading, this chapter is yours. Everything before it taught someone how to become your Chief AI Officer. This is the other side of that trade: how to create the seat, fill it well, pay it fairly, and not waste a year and several hundred thousand dollars doing it badly, the way a remarkable number of companies already have.

I will be brief, because you are busy, and because brevity is the correct format for the one decision this chapter covers.

Do you need the seat at all

Start with the honest question, because the answer is not automatically yes.

You need someone to own AI in your company. That part is not optional anymore, and Chapter 3's evidence is the reason: in one survey of more than a thousand companies, 42% abandoned most of their AI initiatives and the average organisation scrapped 46% of its trials before they reached production. When you autopsy the failures you find the same three causes every time. Wrong task, no briefing, no owner. The third one is structural, and structure is your job. A function that touches every department and is owned by none of them dies quietly, forty thousand dollars at a time, while everyone tells you it is going well.

Whether that owner is a full-time executive is a size question. Here is the decision tree I use, by revenue, and you can argue at the edges but not the middle.

Under roughly \$10 million: do not hire a full-time CAIO. You cannot feed one and you do not have the surface area. Either grow your own internal AI person, someone who already knows your business and gets a real mandate and real hours, or engage a fractional operator. The going fractional market is \$5,000 to \$30,000 a month depending on days per week and seniority, and the most sensible pricing heuristic I have seen in the wild is roughly 1% of annual revenue, paid monthly. A \$10 million company paying \$8,000 to \$10,000 a month for a day or two a week of genuine ownership is buying the function at a fifth of the cost of the executive.

\$10 million to \$50 million: fractional, moving toward embedded. Start at one or two days a week. If after two quarters the results memos show real money, expand the days before you expand the title. Many companies in this band never need more than three days a week of this function, well run.

\$50 million and up: now the full-time conversation is real, and the arithmetic works. At this size, a 2% improvement in operating efficiency pays the salary several times over, and the coordination load across departments genuinely fills a week. Below this line, a full-time hire spends half their time inventing work to justify the seat.

There is also a sequencing option the tree allows at every size: rent before you buy. A fractional operator for two or three quarters produces the inventory, the baselines, the first wins and the governance floor, and in doing so writes the job description for the permanent seat better than any search firm can, because by then you know exactly what the work is in your company. Several of the best full-time appointments I have seen started as retainers.

One more gate, and it matters more than revenue: do not create the seat until you are willing to give it a mandate. Authority to change processes, a budget, your ear, and public backing when a department head pushes back. The research on failed CAIOs is unambiguous. The role fails for

structural reasons, not personal ones: isolated silos, responsibility without enforcement authority, impossible expectations. General Motors created the seat, hired a world-class technologist, gave it eight months, and dissolved it. A seat without a mandate is an expensive way to announce you are not serious.

What to pay

Compressed from Chapter 5, in 2026 dollars. Check current numbers before you negotiate; this market reprices annually.

Full-time, United States, by company size: under \$25 million revenue, base of \$225,000 to \$275,000, usually equity-heavy. \$25 million to \$100 million, base \$250,000 to \$350,000 with total packages of \$375,000 to \$675,000. \$100 million to \$500 million, base \$325,000 to \$450,000, totals to \$1.1 million. Above that, packages climb steeply; the median total comp for AI executives in Equilar's top-50 survey is \$1.6 million. In Australia, an enterprise CAIO package medians around A\$426,000; a Head of AI at a large company runs A\$250,000 to A\$335,000. Bonuses typically run 30% to 60% of base.

Fractional: \$5,000 to \$30,000 a month, with the accessible middle of the market clustering at \$7,500 to \$15,000 for one to two days a week. Top-of-market independents charge more; the value case is that you get most of the strategic function at a fraction of the fully loaded executive cost, which for a real full-time Year 1, all-in, can run past \$500,000 before they have shipped anything.

If those numbers feel high, note the one that offsets them: IBM's survey of 600-plus CAIOs found organisations with one report roughly 10% higher return on AI spend. On a serious AI budget, the seat pays for itself before it does anything clever.

The job description that works

I have read the live posting corpus so you do not have to. The postings that attract operators, rather than academics or tourists, share a shape. Steal it.

Lead with outcomes, not technology. The best ad in the corpus asks for someone to “identify where AI can create competitive advantage, drive efficiency, and unlock new customer value” and to connect “AI investments to customer outcomes.” That is the job. Strategy, use-case selection, build-versus-buy, governance, adoption, and a number at the end.

Demand adoption experience explicitly. The single most predictive line in any posting: “a proven track record of driving adoption and behavior change within non-technical teams.” This role is change management wearing a technical costume. Hire for the costume and you get a lab. Hire for the change management and you get results.

Ask for hands-on fluency, not hands-on coding. The canonical phrasing: technical depth “enough to scope work, evaluate quality.” Across 8,901 analysed postings, PhDs and coding ability are conspicuously not required, and the companies still demanding them are advertising that they have confused this role with a research position.

Set the reporting line before you post. More than half of CAIOs now report to the CEO or board, and the role works best there, because its whole point is crossing departmental borders. Bury it under the CTO and you have told the company it is an IT project, and you know from Chapter 3 how IT projects that touch every department fare.

Finally, do not write the unicorn ad. Twenty years of AI experience does not exist. A person who is simultaneously a frontier researcher, an enterprise change agent and a board communicator barely exists, and mostly works at companies that can outbid you. Hire the operator who knows business deeply and the machine well enough, over the researcher who knows the machine deeply and your business not at all. The washout data is largely a graveyard of the second kind.

The interview that actually screens

Titles and confidence do not screen. Two things do.

Make them tell you what broke. The best filter question in the field. Ask for the deployment that failed, the vendor tool that aced the proof of concept and degraded in production, the project they killed despite executive sponsorship. Operators answer with specifics: what broke, what it cost, what they changed. Tourists answer with frameworks, or claim it never happened. A candidate who has never killed a project has never run a portfolio. A candidate whose failures are all someone else's fault will bring that skill to your company too.

Score the failure stories, and make governance a hard gate.

Borrow the board rubric in Appendix D: twelve questions, scored, with one absolute rule worth adopting verbatim: any zero on governance and risk is automatic disqualification. Ask them to classify your actual use cases under the EU AI Act's risk tiers, or to walk through what happens the day your chatbot tells a customer something false. Fluency here is not optional in 2026, and it is the axis where bluffing is easiest to catch, because the regulations are written down and the bluffer has not read them.

Add one practical exercise: a ten-minute AI briefing for your board, covering roadmap, investment, risk and expected return, based on a one-page description of your company. You will learn more from those ten minutes than from every reference call. You are not testing polish. You are testing whether they speak money or model.

And on reference calls, change the question. Do not ask former colleagues whether the candidate is good. Ask what the candidate deployed, whether it is still running, and who runs it now. A system that survived its builder's departure is the strongest reference in this field. A trail of impressive projects that all quietly died the month after the candidate moved on is the washout pattern with a fresh haircut, and it is remarkably common.

Fair expectations for the first ninety days

Here is what a good operator will actually deliver by day ninety, and holding them to more is how you manufacture a washout.

An inventory of every AI tool and experiment currently in the building, including the ones you do not know about, with what each costs and who actually uses it. Baselines for the two or three processes that matter most, measured before anything is deployed, because a result without a baseline is a story. One deployed improvement with a number attached: hours recovered, cost down, response time, revenue influenced. A governance floor: a one-page policy, a use-case register, a named owner per system. And a twelve-month roadmap ranked by return, not by excitement.

What you should not expect: transformation of the company by Easter, or a seven-figure saving in year one promised in the interview. One manufacturing firm in the research expected \$50 million of savings in twelve months and destroyed the role within eighteen. The pattern across every failed seat is the same: impossible expectations, then the scapegoat, then the quiet dissolution, then eighteen months of lost time before anyone tries again. Set the ninety-day bar at one real, measured, visible win, then compound it monthly. That is how the 5% who succeed actually operate.

The two mistakes that cost the most

Hiring the vendor's guy. The consultant who deployed your new platform offers to stay on and run AI. It feels efficient. It is a conflict of interest wearing a lanyard. Their incentive is more of their platform; your incentive is the right tool per task at the lowest cost, which is frequently not their platform, and occasionally no tool at all. Your AI owner must sit on your side of every vendor table. The whole point of the seat is to be the person in the room the vendors cannot fool. Do not hand it to a vendor.

The vanity appointment. Announcing a Chief AI Officer for the press release and the board pack, without mandate, budget or reporting line, is worse than doing nothing, because it inoculates the company against the real thing. Staff watch the appointment change nothing, conclude AI was a fad, and the next serious attempt starts from behind. If you are not ready to give the seat authority, run a smaller honest version instead: one owned pilot, one department, one number. Small and real beats broad and fake in every case I have ever seen.

The trade in front of you is simple enough to state in a sentence. On one side: a salary or a retainer, a real mandate, and your backing for two quarters. On the other: an owner for the highest-leverage cost and capability shift of your business lifetime, and an exit from the 95% who are paying for AI and getting nothing. Companies with the seat filled properly are already measurably ahead, and the gap compounds.

The person who handed you this book may be the cheapest version of that trade you will ever be offered. They come pre-loaded with knowledge of your business, they have just finished a several-hundred-page operating manual, and they are motivated for reasons salary alone cannot buy. Have the conversation.

And if this chapter has done its job and you want the owner's-side version of everything this book gave your candidate, the full playbook for re-engineering a company around AI from the top, that book is *The AI First Company*. It was written for the seat you are sitting in.

Do this now

1. **Run the five questions from Chapter 3 on your own company.** What AI tools are we paying for and who uses them weekly. Who owns AI here, one name. What changed in the last ninety days, with a number. Where does our most repetitive words-and-numbers work happen. What happens when it breaks. Twenty minutes with your leadership team. The silences will tell you whether you need this chapter.
2. **Pick your lane on the decision tree.** Revenue band, mandate you are genuinely willing to grant, budget you are genuinely willing to commit. Write it down in three lines. If you cannot write the mandate line, you are not ready to hire, and knowing that now is worth six figures.
3. **If you were handed this book, ask the person who handed it one question:** “What would you do here in your first ninety days?” Then measure their answer against the ninety-day list above. If they name an inventory, baselines, one measured win and a governance floor, you may be holding your shortlist.

PART VIII

The Worked Engagement

One engagement, start to finish, with every document on the page and the arithmetic shown. The questions asked, the tally they produced, the findings report, the recommendation, the proposal, the paperwork, the weekly memos, and the ninety-day readout, including the build that missed its target. The company is invented. The method is not.

Chapter 39: A Complete Engagement, One: The Question Set and the Tally

Everything up to here has taught you pieces. This part of the book runs one engagement start to finish, with every document on the page, so you can see how the pieces sit together in real time.

Three chapters, one job. This one covers the business, the questions asked, and the arithmetic those questions produced. Chapter 40 covers the findings report and the recommendation that came out of it. Chapter 41 covers the proposal, the paperwork, the weekly memos and the ninety-day readout, including the part that underperformed.

A word about the company before we start. It is invented. Fenwick Group does not exist, and if a real business somewhere shares the name it has nothing to do with this book. The shape of the business is a composite of the kind of company that buys this work most often: large enough to have real process pain, small enough that nobody has ever owned the problem. The numbers are constructed to be arithmetically consistent and realistically sized, and they are labelled as constructed every time they matter. No client's data appears anywhere in these three chapters. What is real is the method, the sequence, the format of every document, and the discipline about what you are allowed to claim.

Read this part with a pen. When you run your own first engagement you will reach for these three chapters more than any others in the book.

FIG. 15

The tally: every row traceable to a count

PROCESS	VOLUME	TIME EACH	RATE	A YEAR
Quote assembly	46 a week	55 min	\$52	\$114,036
Debtor follow-up	11 hrs a week	n/a	\$52	\$29,744
Inbox reading and routing	210 a day	40 sec	\$52	\$31,616
Management pack	monthly	26.6 hrs	\$85/\$52	\$22,132
Internal questions	19 a day	4 min	\$103	\$29,767
Addressable after the honest haircut, all seven rows				\$141,212

A cost is not a saving. Never claim the whole row: subtract what review and exceptions still cost.

Volume, time, rate. Every row traceable to a count.

The business

Fenwick Group is a commercial maintenance contractor. Cleaning, grounds, minor repairs and reactive callouts, sold to property managers and facilities teams on annual contracts with additional work billed as it arises.

Revenue	\$14,200,000
Staff	118 total: 92 field, 26 office
Office split	4 estimating, 6 scheduling and dispatch, 5 accounts, 4 customer service, 3 people and recruitment, 4 leadership
Gross margin	34%
Net margin	6%, roughly \$850,000
Customers	214 contracted sites, 61 client organisations

Core systems	job management platform, accounting package, a CRM used by two of four estimators, three shared inboxes, a phone system, fourteen other subscriptions
Leadership	founder and chief executive, operations director, finance manager
Trigger for the call	the chief executive read that competitors were “using AI” and had no idea whether that mattered

That last row is the honest version of why most of these engagements start, and it tells you something useful. The buyer is not arriving with a specification. The buyer is arriving with anxiety and a budget, which means the first thing you sell is clarity about where the money actually is, well before anything gets built.

The engagement was bought the way Chapter 29 describes. A shadow audit memo went out, the chief executive replied, a forty-minute call happened in which nothing was pitched, and the call ended with a paid assessment: two weeks, fixed fee, a written findings report and a recommendation the company owns whether or not it ever hires anyone to build anything. The fee was \$2,500.

That figure surprises people, so hold on it for a moment. Chapter 32’s rate card holds the assessment at \$1,500 to \$3,000 flat, and flat means flat, including for a \$14 million business with 26 office staff and six functions to walk. The assessment is deliberately not priced as a profit centre. It is the front door, it qualifies the buyer, it commits them, and it is the only document in this engagement that has to be bought before anyone knows whether the rest is worth buying. Chapter 29 is blunt about the arithmetic: your first assessment takes thirty hours and your sixth takes fifteen. At \$2,500 the sixth one is properly paid and the first one is tuition. Price it any higher on a first engagement and you will lose buyers who would have signed a \$100,000 year.

What the assessment actually bought

Two weeks. Inside them: eleven interviews, six process walkthroughs where the operator drove and the consultant watched, a systems and subscription inventory, a read of twelve months of numbers the finance manager exported, and one afternoon sitting in the dispatch office saying nothing.

That last item is not padding. Interviews tell you what people believe about their work. Watching tells you what the work is. When the two disagree, the watching is right, and the gap between them is usually where the money is.

The deliverable was a findings report, a recommendation, and a two-hour meeting to walk both. Nothing else was promised. No build was included, no tool was bought, no software was configured. The company could have taken the report to any implementer in the market, and was told so in writing before it paid.

The question set

Here is the set that was actually used, in the order it was used. Eighteen questions. They are deliberately fewer than the bank in Appendix I, which runs to more than a hundred and twenty across every business function; that bank is a library to select from, and eighteen is roughly what one engagement selects.

The questions are grouped by who answers them.

To the chief executive, ninety minutes, first

1. Walk me through what this business does from the moment a customer first contacts you to the moment the money is in the account.
2. What are you personally the bottleneck on right now?
3. Which part of this business would break first if you doubled revenue next year?

4. What did you try to fix in the last two years that did not stick, and what happened?
5. What would have to be true in ninety days for you to say this was worth the money?
6. Who here will resist this, and what are they right about?

Question six earns its place every time. It surfaces the political map before you walk into it, it flatters nobody, and the answer is almost always specific and correct. At Fenwick the answer was the operations director, and the reason given was that she had been sold a scheduling optimiser two years earlier that was never configured and is still being paid for. She was right, and that fact turned into a finding.

To each function lead, sixty to ninety minutes each

1. Take me through your week. What happens on which day, and who does it?
2. What does your team do that is the same every single time?
3. What arrives here in one format and gets typed into something else?
4. What do you wait for, and who do you wait on?
5. What goes wrong often enough that you have a workaround for it?
6. If I gave you one more person tomorrow, what would you put them on?
7. What do you measure, where does that number come from, and who checks it?

Question twelve is the highest-yield question in the set. Nobody hesitates over it, everybody answers honestly, and the answer is a direct nomination of the most painful capacity gap in that function, ranked by the person closest to it. Question thirteen is the one that most often produces silence, and silence there is a finding of its own.

To the operators doing the work, thirty minutes each plus a walkthrough

- 1. Show me. Do the task now, at normal speed, while I watch and time it.
- 2. How many of these do you do in a day, in a week, in a month?
- 3. What is the longest part, and what makes it long?
- 4. What do you do when it goes wrong, and how often is that?
- 5. If this part vanished tomorrow, what would you do with the time?

Question fourteen is the whole assessment in one instruction. Every number in the tally that follows came from a stopwatch and a count, not from an estimate. When you ask somebody how long a task takes they will tell you what it takes on a good day, from memory, with the interruptions edited out. When you watch, you get the real figure, and the real figure is nearly always worse, which is good news for the value case and bad news for anyone quoting from memory.

Two rules on the question set. Ask them in this order, because the chief executive’s answers tell you which functions to walk and the function leads’ answers tell you which tasks to watch. And never ask a question whose answer you intend to ignore. If you are not going to price the scheduling function, do not spend ninety minutes interviewing the scheduling function; walk it, note it, and say so in the report.

The loaded hour

Before any tally can mean anything, you need one number: what an hour of this company’s time actually costs. Get this wrong and every figure downstream is wrong, which is how consultants end up presenting savings a finance manager can dismantle in thirty seconds.

The arithmetic at Fenwick, built with the finance manager in the room so the number was hers as much as anyone’s:

Step	Office average	Finance manager	Operations director
Base salary	\$68,000	\$112,000	\$135,000

Step	Office average	Finance manager	Operations director
Employment on-costs at 30%	\$20,400	\$33,600	\$40,500
Fully loaded annual cost	\$88,400	\$145,600	\$175,500
Paid days a year	260	260	260
Less leave and public holidays	32	32	32
Working days	228	228	228
Productive hours a day	7.5	7.5	7.5
Productive hours a year	1,710	1,710	1,710
Cost per productive hour	\$51.70	\$85.15	\$102.60

Rounded to \$52, \$85 and \$103 for everything that follows.

The on-cost multiplier covers employer contributions, insurance, payroll overhead and the desk. Ask the finance manager for the company's own figure rather than importing a rule of thumb; she will have one, and using hers removes the only line of the tally anyone would otherwise argue with. Be precise about what this number measures: what one hour of that seat costs the company, which is the only figure that belongs in a savings calculation, and neither a billing rate nor a statement of what the person is worth.

The tally

The tally is one page. It is the entire commercial spine of the assessment, and it is built from three columns per process: how often, how long, and what the hour costs. Nothing else goes in it.

Here is Fenwick's, as delivered.

Process	Volume	Time each	Hours a year	Rate	Annual cost
Quote and proposal assembly	46 a week	55 min	2,193	\$52	\$114,036
Debtor follow-up	11 hrs a week	n/a	572	\$52	\$29,744
Shared inbox reading and routing	210 a day	40 sec	608	\$52	\$31,616
Management pack assembly	monthly	14 hrs + 12.6 hrs	168 + 151	\$85 / \$52	\$22,132
Internal questions to the ops director	19 a day	4 min	289	\$103	\$29,767
Applicant screening	340 a year	6 min	34	\$52	\$1,768
Dispatch and scheduling	6 people, full time	n/a	10,260	\$52	\$533,520

Two things to notice, because they are the difference between a tally and a fantasy.

First, every row traces to a count and a stopwatch. Forty-six quotes a week came from the job management platform's export, not from an estimator's guess. Fifty-five minutes came from timing four estimators building four real quotes, and the range across those four was 38 to 71 minutes, which is in the report as a range with 55 as the mean. Two hundred and ten messages a day came from the mail server. Nineteen internal questions came from the operations director agreeing to tally marks on a sheet for five working days, which is a crude instrument and produced a number nobody disputed.

Second, the biggest row is the one you will not touch. Dispatch and scheduling costs half a million dollars a year in labour, and that is exactly why an inexperienced operator would go straight at it. Do not. A row's size tells you how much money is in the room; it tells you nothing about

whether you can move it. Chapter 20’s three tests decide that, and dispatch fails one of them badly, for reasons Chapter 40 will put in writing.

From cost to opportunity

A cost is not a saving. The step that separates a professional findings report from a vendor’s slide deck is the one where you take each row and estimate honestly what fraction of it is actually addressable, then say out loud why.

The rule used at Fenwick, and the rule to carry: **never claim the whole row**. The task does not disappear. It gets shorter, and the remainder is review, exception handling and the part a human still has to do. Estimate the remainder, subtract it, and show your working.

Process	Annual cost	What remains after	Addressable	Basis
Quote assembly	\$114,036	21 min review per quote	\$70,510	timed on 8 draft-then-review runs
Debtor follow-up	\$29,744	3.5 hrs a week on disputes and part-payments	\$20,272	32% of chases were exceptions in the sample month
Inbox reading and routing	\$31,616	approvals plus unclassifiable messages	\$18,970	60% claimed, held back deliberately
Management pack	\$22,132	4 hrs review by the finance manager	\$13,600	assembly is automatable, judgment is not
Internal questions	\$29,767	questions the documents cannot answer	\$17,860	60% of the logged questions had a documented answer

Process	Annual cost	What remains after	Addressable	Basis
Applicant screening	\$1,768	all of it	\$0	too small to bother, see Chapter 40
Dispatch and scheduling	\$533,520	all of it, for now	\$0	wrong tool, wrong year, see Chapter 40
Total addressable labour			\$141,212	

Then the items that are not labour at all, which is where the fastest money in most assessments hides:

Item	Annual	Basis
Duplicate and unused subscriptions	\$9,360	14 tools inventoried, 3 overlapping, 2 unused for over 6 months
Scheduling optimiser module paid for, never configured	\$7,680	on the invoice, off in the settings
Interest on cash tied up in receivables	\$28,300	see below
Total non-labour	\$45,340	

The receivables line needs its arithmetic on the page, because it is the line most likely to be challenged and the easiest to get wrong.

Revenue of \$14,200,000 divided by 365 is \$38,904 a day. Debtor days stood at 51, so receivables were running at roughly \$1,984,000. The target after a working debtor follow-up system was 43 days, a reduction of 8 days, which frees \$311,232 of cash once. That freed cash is a one-time release and must never be presented as profit. Fenwick runs a \$1,200,000 working capital facility at 9.1%, so if the release is used to pay down the facility, the recurring benefit is the interest no longer paid

on that portion: \$311,232 at 9.1% is \$28,322 a year, rounded to \$28,300 and labelled in the report as conditional on the company actually using the cash that way.

That paragraph is worth more to your credibility than any build in the engagement. Anyone can multiply hours by a rate. The operator who separates a one-time cash release from a recurring saving, and says which is which without being asked, is the one the finance manager stops arguing with.

The number at the bottom, and the honest split

Addressable labour of \$141,212 plus non-labour of \$45,340 gives \$186,552.

Resist what happens next. The temptation is to write “\$186,552 a year” at the top of the report in large type and let it do the selling. Do not, because the number is two different kinds of money and a competent finance manager will separate them for you in front of the room if you do not do it first.

Category	Annual	What it actually is
Cash out of the business, stopped	\$45,340	subscriptions, licence, interest. Real money, leaves the bank account today, stops leaving.
Capacity recovered	\$141,212	hours returned to people who stay on the payroll. Worth money only if the hours get used or the headcount changes.

Then the sentence that goes in the report, verbatim:

Recovered hours become money in one of two ways. Either the company grows into them, taking on more work without adding office headcount, or the company reduces headcount. Which of those happens is the chief executive’s decision and not ours. We report the capacity. We do not book it as profit, and no proposal in this document assumes it.

Read that again and notice what it costs you. It gives away the biggest number in the report. It also does something no discount and no case study can do: it tells the buyer you will not inflate a figure in your own favour, at the exact moment when inflating it would be easy and expected. At Fenwick the chief executive read that paragraph twice and then asked what the fee for the build phase was. That sequence is not a coincidence, and Chapter 18's whole argument is standing behind it.

One more discipline before the report gets written. Every number in the tally carries a source note in a column the client sees: which export, which timing session, which sample, which date. When the operations director challenged the 55 minute figure in the findings meeting, and she did, the answer was four names, four dates and a range of 38 to 71 minutes. The challenge ended in one sentence and her posture changed for the rest of the meeting. Build your tally so that every row can survive being pointed at, because in a room with money in it, at least one row will be.

The arithmetic is done. Turning it into a document a chief executive can decide from is the next chapter.

Do this now

1. **Build the loaded hour for a business you can access.**

Your employer, a friend's company, or the practice business you have been using since Chapter 20. Get the base salary, ask what the on-cost multiplier is rather than assuming, subtract leave properly, and produce the cost per productive hour. It takes twenty minutes and it is the number every engagement you ever run will stand on.

2. **Time one task with a stopwatch.** Choose any repeated office task, sit beside the person doing it, and time four real runs. Write down the mean and the range. Then ask the person how long they thought it took. The gap between those two figures is the reason question fourteen exists, and seeing it once will change how you run every assessment after.

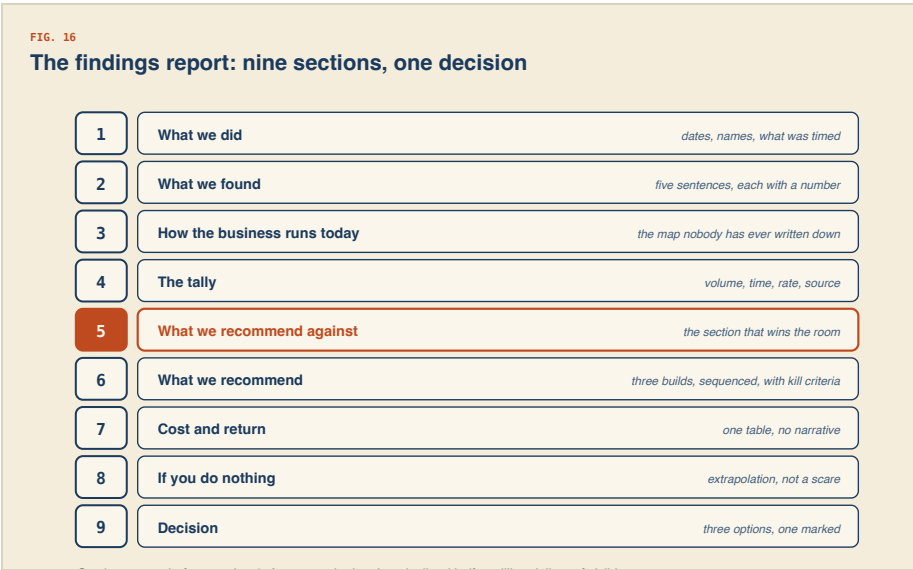
3. **Draft a tally with one row in it.** Volume, time each, hours a year, loaded rate, annual cost, and a source note for every cell. One row, fully sourced, is worth more than a page of rows you would have to defend from memory.

Chapter 40: A Complete Engagement, Two: The Findings Report and the Recommendation

The tally is arithmetic. The findings report is the document that turns arithmetic into a decision, and it is the single most valuable artifact you will ever produce, because it is the thing clients keep, forward, quote back to you a year later, and hire you on.

This chapter reproduces Fenwick Group’s findings report structurally and in substance, then the recommendation that closed it. The report ran to fourteen pages in delivery. What follows is the whole architecture with the substance of each section, compressed only where the original repeated the tally from Chapter 39.

The company is invented, as Chapter 39 set out. The format is the part to copy.



Nine sections. The one that sells is the one you decline.

What a findings report is for

It exists to make one person able to make one decision, in one sitting, without you in the room.

That sentence rules out most of what people put in these documents. It rules out the tool comparison, the maturity model, the eleven-slide explanation of what a large language model is, and the roadmap with four horizons on it. None of those help a chief executive decide anything by Thursday. What helps is: here is what is happening, here is what it costs, here is what we would change, here is what that costs and returns, here is what we recommend against, here is the decision in front of you.

Write it so it survives being read alone on a phone at 9pm. That is when it will actually be read.

The report, section by section

Section 1. What we did

Half a page. Dates, names of everybody interviewed, what was walked, what was exported, what was timed. No findings.

This section earns its half page because in four weeks somebody in the business will say “they never spoke to anyone in accounts,” and this page is the answer. At Fenwick: eleven interviews across six functions, six walkthroughs, twenty-two timed task runs, one systems inventory, twelve months of financial exports, and one afternoon in dispatch. Two weeks elapsed, listed by date.

Section 2. What we found, in one page

The executive summary, written last, read first. Five findings at Fenwick, each one sentence with its number attached, and nothing else on the page.

1. Quote assembly consumes 2,193 hours a year, of which roughly 62% is document construction rather than judgment, worth \$70,510 at your loaded office rate.
2. Debtor days stand at 51 against an achievable 43, tying up roughly \$311,000 in cash, and the chasing itself costs 572 hours a year.
3. Three shared inboxes receive 210 messages a day with no routing rules; median first response is 6 hours 30 minutes, and 608 hours a year go into reading and forwarding before any work is done.
4. The management pack costs 319 hours of assembly a year across two senior people, of which the judgment portion is roughly four hours a month.
5. You are paying \$17,040 a year for software that is duplicated, unused, or switched off, including a scheduling optimiser module purchased in 2024 and never configured.

Notice finding five. It is the smallest number on the page and it is deliberately there, because it is the only finding the company can act on this afternoon for free, and it is proof that the fortnight paid for itself before anybody built anything. Put a finding like that in every report you write. There is always one. Businesses of this size are all quietly paying for something they turned off.

Section 3. How the business runs today

Two to three pages. The process map, in prose and one diagram, written so an outsider could follow it: enquiry to quote to schedule to work to invoice to payment. Where each system holds the truth. Where information is retyped. Where the waiting happens.

This section wins you the room. It is the section where the chief executive says some version of “nobody has ever written this down.” Fenwick had four separate places where a piece of information was retyped from one system into another by a human, and the map showed all four as a single

visual line, which is more persuasive than four paragraphs describing the same thing.

The rule for writing it: describe, do not diagnose. The diagnosis comes in section four and lands harder for having waited.

Section 4. The tally

Chapter 39's tables, unchanged, with the source note column visible. Volume, time, rate, cost. Then the addressable column with the basis for every haircut. Then the split between cash stopped and capacity recovered, and the paragraph that refuses to book capacity as profit.

Nothing is softened here and nothing is dramatised. The tone is a surveyor's.

Section 5. What we recommend against

This is the section that separates you from every vendor who has ever walked through that door, and it goes before the recommendation, not after.

Fenwick's, in full:

Dispatch and scheduling. We recommend no AI work here in the next twelve months.

This function costs \$533,520 a year in labour and is by far the largest line in the tally, which is why it is the obvious target and why we are declining it. Three reasons.

The schedule changes 30 to 60 times a day in response to weather, sickness, site access and client escalation, and the judgment applied to those changes sits with people who know which client tolerates a late arrival and which does not. That judgment is not written down anywhere, which means there is nothing to give a machine.

You already own an optimiser. The scheduling module in your job management platform includes route and load optimisation, purchased in 2024, currently switched off. Configuring what you own must happen before anything new is considered, and it is a configuration project, not an AI project. Your platform vendor's professional services team quotes this at \$4,000 to \$6,000 and two to three weeks. We recommend you engage them directly. We would be a middleman adding cost.

Your operations director was sold this module and watched it fail to land. Any new system in this function starts from a deficit of trust that no technical argument will fix. It will land far better in eighteen months, after two other systems in this business have worked and she has watched them work.

Then the second recommendation against:

Applicant screening. Not now.

At 340 applications a year and six minutes each, the entire process costs 34 hours and \$1,768 a year. A build here would cost more than a decade of the problem. Revisit if hiring volume triples.

Separately, note that automated screening of job applicants is treated as high-risk under the EU AI Act and is the subject of specific rules in several other jurisdictions, so if this ever does become worth doing, it comes with obligations that a \$1,768 problem does not justify inheriting. Appendix L covers the questions that follow.

Two things happen when a client reads a section like this. The obvious one is trust. The one people miss is that it makes the recommendation section credible, because a person who has just declined half a million dollars of visible labour has demonstrably not selected the recommendations to maximise their own invoice.

Write this section first, before the recommendation, on every engagement. If you cannot find anything to recommend against, you

have not looked hard enough at the business or hard enough at yourself.

Section 6. What we recommend

Three builds. Sequenced, with a reason for the sequence.

First: quote and proposal drafting. Largest addressable number, fastest visible effect, and the function most able to feel the difference. Estimators keep the pricing judgment and the client relationship; the machine assembles the document from the call notes, the scope library and the pricing rules, and the estimator reviews and sends. Target: assembly time from 55 minutes to under 25, turnaround from 4.2 days to under 1.

Second: debtor follow-up. Simplest build in the three, and the only one whose result shows up in the bank account, which matters for the internal politics of everything that follows. Target: debtor days from 51 to 43, chasing labour from 11 hours a week to under 4.

Third: shared inbox triage and routing. Largest change to how people work day to day, so it goes last, after two systems have already earned their trust. Target: median first response from 6 hours 30 minutes to under 30 minutes, reading and routing labour down 60%.

Under each, the report carried the same six lines: what triggers it, what the machine does, what the human still does, what the human checkpoint is, what gets measured against what baseline, and what would make us stop. The build detail is Chapter 22’s ten patterns, applied; the report does not re-teach them, it names them and states the local specifics.

The kill criteria were on the page from day one, before any money changed hands:

Build	We stop if, by week 8
Quotes	estimator edits exceed 40% of draft content, or turnaround has not halved

Build	We stop if, by week 8
Debtors	debtor days have not moved at all, or any client complains about tone twice
Inbox	routing accuracy is below 90%, or first response time is worse than baseline

Chapter 23 argues for kill criteria at length. Here is the commercial reason to put them in the findings report rather than the contract: a buyer reading numbers that could end the engagement early, written by the person being paid, stops wondering whether they are being managed.

Section 7. What this costs and what it returns

One table. No narrative.

Item	Amount
Assessment (complete, paid)	\$2,500
Build: quote drafting	\$6,500
Build: debtor follow-up	\$3,000
Build: inbox triage and routing	\$4,500
Ongoing: monitoring, improvement, governance, monthly reporting	\$8,500 a month
Year one total	\$101,500

The monthly figure comes off Chapter 32's rate card, low end of the \$8,000 to \$15,000 band for a business between \$10 and \$30 million, because Fenwick sits near the bottom of that band with only 26 office staff. It is presented next to the alternative, as Chapter 32 insists: a capable full-time hire for this seat runs past \$150,000 and the market average sits far higher, and the retainer can be stopped any month it stops paying for itself.

Against:

Return category	Annual
Cash out of the business, stopped (subscriptions, licence, interest)	\$45,340
Capacity recovered across the three builds	\$109,752
Targeted by this plan	\$155,092
Identified across the business but deferred	\$31,460
Total identified	\$186,552

Then, immediately underneath, the sentence that keeps you honest:

Of the \$155,092 this plan targets, \$45,340 is money that stops leaving the bank account and can be verified from your own statements within sixty days. The remaining \$109,752 is hours returned to five people. Those hours become money only if you grow into them or change the shape of the team. We will report the hours accurately every month. What you do with them is your decision.

That table returns 1.5 times year one fees, and you should say the number out loud rather than let the client work it out. Say the reason with it: build fees are one-time and the first year carries all of them, so year one is always the worst ratio a deployment engagement will ever show. Do not dress it up. A finance manager who sees a claimed twelve times return stops reading. A finance manager who sees 1.5 with the working shown starts negotiating scope, which is the conversation you want to be in.

Section 8. What happens if you do nothing

Half a page. Not a scare, an extrapolation. At Fenwick: quote turnaround stays at 4.2 days into a market where two named competitor categories quote same day; debtor days stay at 51 and the working capital facility keeps being drawn; the operations director remains the single point of knowledge failure for 19 questions a day, which is a business continuity

issue rather than a productivity one and belongs in the risk register regardless of any AI decision.

The last clause of that paragraph is a gift to the reader that costs you nothing. Some of what you find is not an AI problem at all, and saying so is what makes you an adviser instead of a supplier.

Section 9. Decision

Three options, on one page, with the recommended one marked.

Option A. Do nothing. Cost: nil. You keep this report; act on finding five yourself and recover \$17,040.

Option B. Take the report to another implementer. Cost: nil to us. Everything in this document is yours. We will answer questions from whoever you appoint at no charge for thirty days.

Option C. Proceed with the three builds and the ongoing seat, as costed in section seven. Recommended. Start date, first payment, first measurable result at week four.

Option B is the clause that makes the report worth what was paid for it, and it is the reason a paid assessment can be sold to a stranger in the first place. Chapter 29's whole close depends on it being true, so make it true, and honour it when somebody takes it. Some will. They come back more often than you would expect, and they talk.

The findings meeting

Two hours, both leaders plus the finance manager, the report circulated forty-eight hours in advance with one instruction: read it before we meet, and bring your objections written down.

The structure that works:

Ten minutes on section one, so everybody knows what was actually done. Thirty minutes walking the process map, which is the section that generates the most talking and should be allowed to. Twenty minutes on the tally, where you present the source column as deliberately as the numbers. Then, and this is the sequencing that matters, section five before section six. Deliver the two recommendations against, in full, before anything you are proposing to be paid for.

The room changes at that point. It changed at Fenwick when the operations director, who had arrived to defend her function, heard her function declined for the reasons she would have given herself. She spent the rest of the meeting arguing about quote turnaround targets, which is to say she started participating in the build.

Then twenty minutes on the recommendation, ten on the money, and the last twenty on the decision, in silence if necessary. Do not fill the silence. The document has done the work; talking over it can only subtract.

The two mistakes that kill findings reports

Recommending everything you found. A report with nine recommendations gets none of them done. The company does not have nine slots. It has one, maybe two if the first goes well, and a report that pretends otherwise tells the reader you have never watched a business try to change while also doing its actual work. Fenwick's report found seven addressable things and recommended three. The other four are listed in an appendix headed "later, in this order," which is a genuine service and also the sales pipeline for the next two years, held without a single follow-up email.

Writing it in your vocabulary instead of theirs. Every noun in a findings report should be a noun the business already uses. Fenwick calls them jobs, not work orders, and sites, not accounts, and the report used their words throughout. Where a technical term was unavoidable it appeared once, in a footnote, in one sentence. If a reader has to translate

your document, they will read it once and never forward it, and forwarding is how this document does its job.

The client said yes. Next chapter is everything that happens after the yes, including the build that missed.

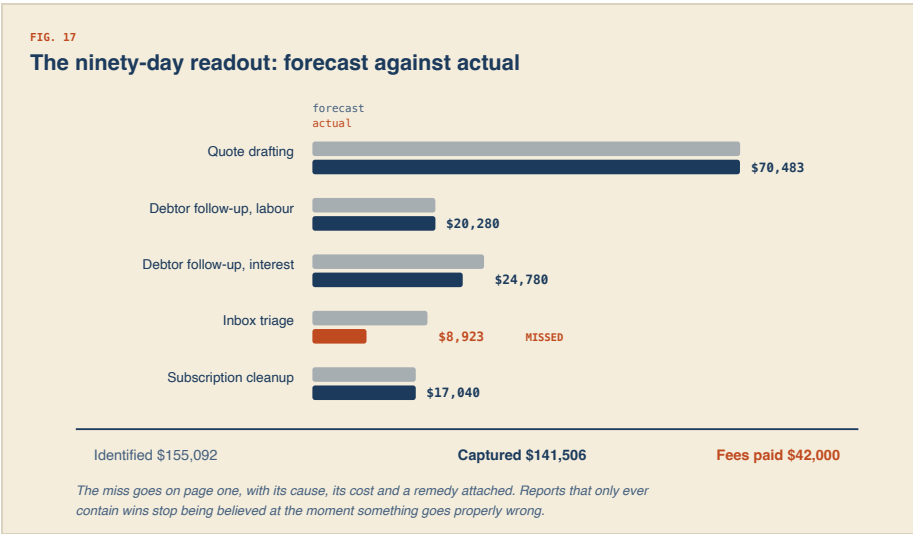
Do this now

1. **Write section five for a business you know.** Take the practice business you have been carrying since Chapter 20 and write the “what we recommend against” section, in full, with reasons. Two items, a paragraph each. It is the hardest page in the report to write and the fastest way to find out whether you actually understand the business or only its tools.
2. **Compress your findings into five sentences.** One page, five findings, each with a number attached, nothing else. If a finding will not fit in a sentence with a number in it, you have not finished the arithmetic on it.
3. **Build the decision page.** Three options, cost against each, one marked as recommended, and option B written honestly enough that you would genuinely honour it. Read it back and ask whether a person could act on it alone, at 9pm, without you. That is the only test of a findings report that matters.

Chapter 41: A Complete Engagement, Three: Proposal, Paper, Memos and the Ninety-Day Readout

The findings report made the case. This chapter is everything after the client says yes: the proposal, the paperwork, the weekly memo that keeps the engagement alive, and the ninety-day readout, including the build that missed its target and what was written about it.

That last part is the reason this chapter exists. Every worked example in every business book succeeds at everything, which is why none of them prepare anyone for the second month. One of Fenwick’s three builds fell well short. The readout says so on page one, and the retainer renewed anyway. Understanding why is worth more than the other three chapters of this part combined.



Report the miss on page one.

The proposal

The proposal is short because the findings report did the persuading. It exists to fix scope, price, sequence and responsibility so that nobody argues about any of them in week six.

Two pages. Here is the whole of it.

Proposal: AI deployment programme Prepared for Fenwick Group.
Valid 30 days.

What we are doing. Three deployments, in sequence, as recommended in the findings report of [date], plus the ongoing AI leadership seat.

Phase 1, weeks 1 to 4. Quote and proposal drafting. Scope: a system that drafts quotes from call notes and site visit notes, using your scope library, your pricing rules and your templates. Estimators review and send. Includes: extraction of pricing rules into written form with your estimating team, construction of the scope library from 20 past quotes you nominate, the build, four weeks of supervised running, and a written runbook. Not included: changes to your pricing, changes to your job management platform, any customer-facing automation. Fee: \$6,500.

Phase 2, weeks 3 to 6. Debtor follow-up. Scope: automated reminder sequences off your accounting system, tone escalating by age and relationship, stopping instantly on payment, exceptions and disputes routed to a human. Includes the exception list, the escalation ladder in your words, the build, four weeks supervised, runbook. Not included: collections, legal action, changes to payment terms. Fee: \$3,000.

Phase 3, weeks 6 to 12. Shared inbox triage and routing. Scope: classification, routing and drafted replies across the three shared inboxes, with a human approving every outgoing message for the first six weeks. Includes a classification session on 200 historical messages with

your team, the build, six weeks supervised, runbook. Not included: replacing your phone system, customer-facing chat, changes to your service level commitments. Fee: \$4,500.

Ongoing, from week 1. The seat. Monitoring of everything built, weekly written memo, monthly results memo, tool and vendor decisions, the AI policy and use-case register, staff training sessions as needed, and availability for anything AI-related that arises. Fee: \$8,500 a month, first three months payable monthly in advance, reviewed at 90 days.

What we need from you. A named internal owner for each build, four hours of that person's time a week during their build phase, administrative access to the three systems named above, and a decision-maker reachable within one working day. Delays caused by access or availability move dates without changing fees.

Baselines. Measured and agreed before each build starts. No result is claimed against a baseline set after the fact.

Kill criteria. As stated in section six of the findings report. If any build hits its stop condition at week 8 we halt that build, refund nothing already delivered, and remove its share from the ongoing fee.

Payment. Assessment paid. Phase fees invoiced on phase start, 14 days. Monthly fee invoiced on the first.

Term. The ongoing engagement runs month to month after the initial three months, 30 days notice either side.

That is the entire proposal. It contains no benefits language, no company background, no team biographies and no restatement of the value case, because all of that is in a document the client has already read and agreed with. A proposal that re-sells is a proposal written by somebody who does not believe the findings report worked.

Three details worth stealing. The "not included" line under every phase, which prevents more disputes than any other sentence in the document.

The paragraph on what the client owes you, which converts the most common cause of a failed engagement, client unavailability, into a stated condition rather than a grievance. And the kill criteria appearing in a commercial document, which is unusual enough that clients mention it.

The engagement letter

The proposal sets scope. The engagement letter is the legal container. Chapter 33 covers the substance; what follows is the outline, so you know what a complete one contains before you take it to somebody qualified in your jurisdiction to draft or review.

Do not copy a letter out of a book, including this one. Take this outline to a lawyer once, pay for two hours, and use what comes back for the next five years.

1. Parties and commencement. Legal entity names, addresses, start date, and who signs.

2. Services. Reference the proposal by date and attach it as a schedule rather than restating scope in legal prose. Restating it creates two versions that will eventually disagree.

3. Fees, expenses and payment terms. Amounts, timing, what triggers an invoice, late payment consequences, whether expenses are chargeable and which ones.

4. Term and termination. Notice period both ways, what happens to work in progress, what happens to fees already paid, and immediate termination triggers.

5. Client responsibilities. Access, data, the named owner, availability, and the consequence of not providing them. This is the proposal's paragraph, given teeth.

6. Intellectual property. The one that matters most and that people skip. Distinguish three things: what the client owns, being their data,

their configurations, their content and the specific systems built for them; what you own, being your methods, templates, frameworks and anything pre-existing; and what you licence to them rather than assign. Get this wrong and you rebuild your own toolkit from scratch for every client.

7. Confidentiality. Both directions, with a survival period, and an explicit carve-out for anonymised, aggregated learning if you intend to write or speak about your work.

8. Data protection and AI-specific terms. What data you will access, where it goes, which third party services will process it, and on what basis. Whether any client data may be used to train anything, which for almost every engagement should read “no.” Retention and deletion on termination. This clause did not exist in consulting agreements five years ago and now sits near the top of the list of things a client’s own lawyer will ask about.

9. Limitation of liability. A cap, usually tied to fees paid, and the exclusions your insurer requires. Read your policy before agreeing to any cap, because a contractual liability wider than your cover is a personal exposure.

10. Insurance. What you carry, at what level. Many clients above a certain size will specify minimums, and the specifications increasingly name AI-related exposure. Appendix L covers what they ask and why.

11. Warranties and disclaimers. What you do warrant, being professional care and skill, and what you explicitly do not, being any warranty that an AI system will be accurate in every instance. State plainly that outputs require human review at the checkpoints defined in the runbooks, and that the client is responsible for those checkpoints being staffed.

12. Non-solicitation, subcontracting, assignment, notices, governing law, dispute resolution. The standard back half. Have

your lawyer set them once.

Two additions that experience argues for. A schedule listing every third party service the engagement will use, updated when it changes, because it becomes the client's vendor register and your defence when someone asks what you plugged into their business. And a short clause requiring both parties to agree baselines in writing before each phase, which is the contractual version of the discipline that makes your results defensible.

The weekly memo

Every week, in writing, from week one, whether or not anything happened. Under 250 words. Same five headings every time, permanently.

The weekly memo is the cheapest thing in the engagement and the reason engagements renew. Clients do not cancel because a build underperformed. They cancel because six weeks went quiet and the invoice arrived into a vacuum. A memo every Friday makes the retainer visible, and it makes the monthly results memo of Chapter 18 nothing but the sum of four weeks nobody had to reconstruct.

Here is week six at Fenwick, in full.

Fenwick Group, week 6. AI programme.

Shipped this week. Debtor follow-up went live Tuesday across all overdue invoices. First run touched 61 invoices totalling \$184,320. Every message queued for Aisha's approval before sending; approval rate was 58 of 61, with 3 pulled for disputes already in progress.

Numbers. Quote assembly, week 4 of measurement: mean 26 minutes against a 55 minute baseline, 44 quotes drafted, estimator edits at 31% of draft content against a 40% stop condition. Turnaround now 1.1 days against 4.2. Debtor days unchanged at 51, as expected in week one of a system that works on a 7 to 60 day cycle.

Decisions needed from you. Two. First, whether accounts can auto-send the 3-day reminder without approval from week 8; recommend yes, approval rate on that tier is 100% over 40 messages. Second, a name for the inbox triage owner by Friday, or phase 3 starts a week late.

Risks and watch items. The scope library is drawing on two 2023 quotes with superseded pricing; being removed Monday. One estimator has not used the draft system since Tuesday; I am sitting with him Wednesday.

Next week. Phase 3 classification session, Thursday, 2 hours, needs 3 people from customer service. Debtor tone review with Aisha after 2 full weeks of sends.

Five headings: shipped, numbers, decisions needed, risks, next. Nothing else. Note that the numbers section reports against baselines and against the stop condition, that the risk section names a build's biggest problem without being asked, and that the decisions section is specific enough to be answered in a one-line reply.

Note also what the memo is doing politically. It names a person whose behaviour is a risk to the engagement, in writing, to that person's leadership, in a neutral sentence with a remedy attached. Six weeks of that and the leadership team knows exactly what you are worth, which is the conversation you want to be having when the ninety-day review arrives.

The ninety-day readout

Twelve weeks, four pages, one meeting. The format mirrors the findings report deliberately, so the two documents can be read side by side: same processes, same rows, baseline column, actual column, and the gap explained.

Here is the substance of Fenwick's.

What was built

Three systems, all live. Quote drafting live week 4, debtor follow-up live week 6, inbox triage and routing live week 11 with human approval on every message.

Results against baseline

Measure	Baseline	Target	At week 12	Verdict
Quote assembly time	55 min	under 25 min	21 min	beat
Quote turnaround	4.2 days	under 1 day	0.8 days	beat
Quotes drafted per week	46	46	51	up, unplanned
Estimator edit rate	n/a	under 40%	24%	good
Debtor days	51	43	44	close
Debtor chasing labour	11 hrs/wk	under 4	3.5 hrs/wk	met
Inbox median first response	6 hrs 30 min	under 30 min	34 min	close
Inbox reading and routing labour	11.7 hrs/wk	under 4.7	8.4 hrs/wk	missed
Routing accuracy	n/a	over 90%	94%	met

The money, annualised from measured week 12 rates

Build	Forecast	Actual, annualised	Gap
Quote drafting	\$70,510	\$70,483	as forecast

Build	Forecast	Actual, annualised	Gap
Debtor follow-up, labour	\$20,272	\$20,280	as forecast
Debtor follow-up, interest on released cash	\$28,300	\$24,780	\$(3,520)
Inbox triage	\$18,970	\$8,923	\$(10,047)
Subscription and licence cleanup	\$17,040	\$17,040	nil
Total	\$155,092	\$141,506	\$(13,586)

The interest line came in below forecast for an arithmetic reason worth following. Debtor days moved from 51 to 44 rather than the targeted 43, so the cash released was 7 days at \$38,904, being \$272,328 rather than the forecast \$311,232. At 9.1% that is \$24,782 of interest rather than \$28,322.

Fees paid across the ninety days: \$2,500 assessment, \$14,000 builds, \$25,500 in monthly fees, total \$42,000.

Where we missed, and why

This section is a page and a half, and it is the most important page in the document.

Inbox triage recovered 47% of the labour we forecast. The system classifies correctly 94% of the time and routes correctly, which is what we designed and measured for. It did not save the hours we projected, for one reason: every outgoing message still goes through a single approver, and that approver is one person who also has a full-time job. The queue, and not the classification, is the bottleneck. We built the right thing and sequenced the human side wrong.

This was visible in week 9 and reported in that week’s memo. It was not fixed inside the ninety days because the fix requires either a second

approver or a decision to let two message categories send without approval, and that decision belongs to you.

The remedy, recommended: from week 14, allow the two lowest-stakes categories, being delivery confirmations and standard information requests, to send without approval. Together they are 44% of outgoing volume and have a 100% approval rate over 610 messages. Retain approval permanently on complaints, anything about money, and anything the classifier flags as uncertain. Projected recovery of the remaining labour: 3.5 to 4 hours a week, worth \$9,500 to \$10,800 a year, which closes the \$10,047 gap within eight weeks if adoption holds.

Read what that section does. It leads with the miss, quantifies it exactly, assigns the cause to a design decision that was the consultant's, states when it became visible, states why it was not fixed, and arrives with a costed remedy and a decision request. There is no hedging, no blaming of the client, and no repositioning of the target.

The instinct in the second month of every engagement is to bury a miss under two paragraphs of context. Do the opposite. A consultant whose reports only ever contain wins is a consultant whose reports stop being believed at exactly the moment something goes properly wrong, and something eventually will. The one who reports a miss cleanly in month three is the one who gets believed in month eighteen when the stakes are higher.

What we recommend next

Three items, sequenced, with the reason for the sequence. At Fenwick: the approval change above, then the management pack automation from the original findings report, then a first pass at the internal knowledge problem. Plus one item that is not a build: the operations director remains the single point of failure for 19 questions a day, and that belongs on the risk register whatever else happens.

The ask

Continue the ongoing engagement at \$8,500 a month, reviewed again at six months. Approve the two auto-send categories. Approve phase 4, management pack automation, at \$4,000, starting week 15.

What happened at the review, and the general lesson

The retainer renewed and the phase 4 build was approved in the meeting. The chief executive's stated reason, which is the sentence to carry out of this entire part of the book, was that the readout matched the memos, and the memos had matched the tally, and the tally had had a source column.

That is the whole product. Not the builds. The builds are Chapter 22 patterns that a competent operator can assemble in a fortnight, and the client half knows it. What the client cannot get anywhere else is a person who counts honestly, says what they will not do, reports the miss on page one, and produces the same numbers in the same format for twelve weeks running until the arithmetic is simply not in dispute.

Chapter 35 is about keeping the seat and moving the retainer upward without a new logo. Everything it teaches rests on the discipline demonstrated in this chapter, which is available to you from your very first engagement, requires no experience, and cannot be bought by a competitor with a bigger tool budget.

Do this now

1. **Write your proposal template once, properly.** Two pages, phases with a “not included” line under each, what you need from the client, baselines, kill criteria, payment, term. Write it now, while no client is waiting, because a proposal written under deadline is a proposal that omits the paragraph you will later need.
2. **Book two hours with a lawyer.** Take the twelve-point outline in this chapter, ask for an engagement letter for your jurisdiction and your work, and pay for it. It is the cheapest insurance in this book, and clause six alone, on intellectual property, will pay for the whole conversation the first time a client’s counsel asks who owns the build.
3. **Send a weekly memo this Friday.** To your employer, your first client, or the friendly business you are practising on. Five headings: shipped, numbers, decisions needed, risks, next. Under 250 words. Do it for four weeks straight and you will understand why this document, and not any build, is what renews engagements.

THE RESOURCE LAYER

Appendices

Appendix A: The 30-Day AI Literacy Sprint

The complete day-by-day program promised in Chapter 8. One task per day, 20 to 40 minutes, every task on real work. Not tutorials, not toy examples. By day 30 you hold a dated proof artifact and more hands-on AI experience than most executives in your country.

Rules for the month: use the paid tier of at least one major AI chat tool if you can spare roughly \$30; the free tiers work but you will hit limits. Never paste confidential client or customer data into a consumer tool (day 26 covers the full rules; until then, use judgment and strip names). Keep a running log: date, task, time the AI took, time the old way took. That log becomes part of your day 30 artifact.

Week one: daily tool use on real work (days 1 to 7)

The goal this week is volume and honesty. Use the machine on real tasks every day and record what happened, including the failures.

Day 1: set up and price a task. 30 minutes. Create accounts on two major AI chat tools so you can compare them all month. Then take one written task from today's actual work, an email or a short document, and have the AI draft it. Time the whole thing including your corrections. Work out what the task costs the old way: your hourly cost times the usual time. Write both numbers in your log. This is Chapter 1's exercise; now it becomes a habit.

Day 2: three audiences, one document. 25 minutes. Take one real piece of writing you owe someone. Ask the AI for three versions: one for your boss or client, one for a customer, one for a colleague who needs it in two sentences. Send the best one, edited. Note which version needed the least fixing and why.

Day 3: the long-document summary. 30 minutes. Find the longest document currently relevant to your work: a contract, a report, a policy, a tender. Ask for a one-page summary, then ask three follow-up questions about specifics. Then verify two of its claims against the original document. Note what it got right and anything it smoothed over.

Day 4: catch it lying. 20 minutes. Ask questions in your own area of expertise, starting easy and getting obscure. Keep going until you catch a confident wrong answer. Screenshot it. This is your permanent vaccination, and your best show-and-tell for sceptical colleagues. If you cannot catch it in 20 minutes, ask it for sources on an obscure claim and check them.

Day 5: meeting notes to actions. 25 minutes. Take your messiest recent meeting notes, or a transcript if your meeting tool records one, and have the AI turn them into a clean summary with a table of actions, owners and dates. Send it to the attendees. Note the reaction. This one task, done consistently, has made more people “the AI person” than any other.

Day 6: the hard email. 20 minutes. Pick the email you have been avoiding: the awkward no, the price rise, the reply to the angry customer. Brief the AI on the situation and the relationship, ask for a draft, then ask for it warmer, firmer, or shorter until it sounds like you on a good day. Send it. Notice that the machine removed the dread, not the judgment. The judgment stayed with you.

Day 7: week one review. 30 minutes. Read your log. Total the time saved. Pick the three tasks with the best result and make them your daily defaults for the rest of the sprint. Then write four honest sentences: where the machine was brilliant, where it was mediocre, where it failed, what surprised you. Those four sentences are the start of real literacy.

Week two: the briefing skill (days 8 to 14)

Chapter 2 told you the machine has read the internet but not your business. This week you learn the craft that fixes that: briefing. It is the highest-leverage skill in applied AI, and almost nobody in a normal company has it.

Day 8: lazy brief versus full brief. 25 minutes. Take one task from last week and run it twice. First with a one-line instruction. Then with a full brief: who you are, who the audience is, what the situation is, what good output looks like, what to avoid. Put the two outputs side by side. The gap between them is the gap between the 95% and the 5%, in miniature.

Day 9: build your context block. 30 minutes. Write a half-page standing description of your world: your company or team, what it sells, who its customers are, how it speaks, what you do, your common constraints. Save it somewhere you can paste from. Start every substantial session with it. Watch generic output become specific output.

Day 10: teach by example. 25 minutes. Pick a task where output format matters: a report section, a proposal paragraph, a status update. Give the AI two or three past examples you consider good and ask it to match them for a new case. Compare against day 8's results. Examples beat descriptions almost every time; you have just learned why templates are so valuable in this work.

Day 11: role, audience, format. 20 minutes. Practise the three dials. Same underlying question, but assign the machine a role ("you are a sceptical CFO reviewing this"), name the audience precisely, and specify the format ("five bullet points, then one risk I have not considered"). Run a real task through two different settings of the dials and note how much control you actually have.

Day 12: make it interview you. 25 minutes. Flip the direction. Give it a real task and add: "Before you draft anything, ask me the five questions you need answered to do this well." Answer them, then let it draft. This is

the single best trick for tasks where you do not know how to brief, because the machine surfaces the brief for you.

Day 13: build your first template. 35 minutes. Take your most frequent task and turn the best brief you have discovered this week into a reusable template with blanks: context block, task, audience, format, examples, checks. Run three real items through it. You have just built your first piece of AI infrastructure. This is what “deploying AI” actually looks like at the smallest scale.

Day 14: write the briefing one-pager. 30 minutes. Write a one-page guide, in your own words, titled “How to brief an AI.” What to always include, what the dials are, your template, one before-and-after example. Date it. This is a portfolio artifact, and handing it to one colleague next month will do more for your reputation than a month of talking about AI.

Week three: breadth (days 15 to 21)

The chat window is a fraction of the territory. This week you touch documents, data, images and voice, so no vendor can ever show you a demo of something you have never done yourself.

Day 15: documents in, structure out. 30 minutes. Upload a real PDF: a contract, a supplier agreement, a lease. Ask for every date, dollar amount and obligation extracted into a table. Verify three entries against the document. Note any misses; misses are why humans stay in the loop, and why Chapter 24 exists.

Day 16: the messy spreadsheet. 35 minutes. Upload a real spreadsheet, sales, expenses, tickets, whatever you have, and ask what changed, what stands out, and what is trending in the wrong direction. Ask it to show its working. Check one calculation by hand. You are learning both the power and the verification habit at once.

Day 17: images, both directions. 25 minutes. Reading: photograph a whiteboard, a receipt, or a handwritten note, and have the AI turn it into

clean text or a table. Generating: create one useful image for real work, a diagram concept or a slide illustration. Note where image generation is genuinely useful and where it is a toy for your purposes.

Day 18: voice. 20 minutes. Use voice mode for a working conversation: talk through a real problem on your commute or a walk, ask it to challenge your thinking, then have it summarise the conversation into notes. Separately, dictate a memo instead of typing one. Many operators end up doing a third of their AI work by voice; find out if you are one of them.

Day 19: research with receipts. 35 minutes. Use a research or search-enabled mode to profile something you actually need: a competitor, a supplier, a market, a regulation touching your industry. Require sources for every claim. Then check two of the citations yourself. One will usually be solid and one thinner than it looked, and knowing that ratio firsthand is the literacy.

Day 20: your first assistant. 40 minutes. Most major tools let you create a custom assistant or project with standing instructions and uploaded files. Build one: load your context block, your briefing template, and two or three reference documents, and give it a job, such as answering questions from your team handbook or drafting in your format. This is day one of understanding what vendors charge thousands a month for.

Day 21: the end-to-end run. 40 minutes. Chain it: take one real piece of work through three modalities. Example: photograph or upload the source material, extract and structure it, analyse it, then draft the output document, all in one session, using your template. Log the total time against the old way. Week three review: update your log and your four honest sentences.

Week four: the vendor-nonsense detector (days 22 to 27)

Chapter 21 gave you the tool landscape; this week you internalise it, because the person who cannot be fooled by vendors is worth a retainer.

Day 22: map the categories. 30 minutes. From memory and Chapter 21, draw your own one-page map of the tool landscape: general assistants, writing tools, meeting tools, document processing, data and analytics, image and design, voice, automation platforms, customer-facing bots, and vertical tools for your industry. Under each, note whether you have now personally used one. Fill any gap with a ten-minute trial this week.

Day 23: the three questions teardown. 30 minutes. Pick one “AI-powered” product being marketed to your industry. Apply the three vendor questions from Chapter 21: what model is under the hood, what happens to my data, and what does this do that I cannot do directly with a general tool. Write a five-line verdict. Most products in this exercise reveal themselves as thin wrappers within ten minutes.

Day 24: price the wrapper. 25 minutes. Take the same product and estimate the do-it-directly cost: what would the same job cost using a general AI tool or its API at cents per task? Compare with the vendor’s monthly fee. Sometimes the wrapper earns its margin through workflow and support. Often it does not. Being able to run this arithmetic in front of a business owner is a billable skill.

Day 25: claims versus evidence. 30 minutes. Watch one vendor demo, live or recorded, from any AI product in your space. Two columns: claims made, evidence shown. Note the demo data. Vendor demos run on curated data; your business runs on messy data, and the gap between the two is where pilots go to die. You now know to ask for a trial on your own data, always.

Day 26: the data rules. 30 minutes. Read the data policy of your main AI tool: what is retained, what trains models, what business tiers promise. Then write your five personal rules for what never goes into a prompt: customer identifying details, credentials and financial account

data, health information, anything under NDA, anything you would not email outside the company. This half page is the seed of the one-page AI policy in Appendix F, and you will reuse it in every company you ever help.

Day 27: pick your stack. 25 minutes. Decide your default toolkit: primary assistant, meeting tool, document workhorse, automation platform, and one vertical tool for your industry, with monthly cost for the lot. Write one line each on what it is for. When someone asks “what should we use,” you now answer in specifics, calmly, from experience. That is the voice of the most useful person in the meeting.

Days 28 to 30: the first proof artifact

Three days that convert a month of literacy into the first rung of the Proof Ladder.

Day 28: choose the target and take the baseline. 40 minutes. Pick one recurring process, from your own job or a business you know well, using Chapter 20’s filter: high volume, real pain, measurable. Retyping data, drafting the same document type, summarising the same inputs, chasing the same follow-ups. Then measure the current state honestly: how many times a week, how long each time, whose hours, what it costs a month. Baseline first, always. A result without a baseline is a story.

Day 29: build and run the improvement. 40 minutes. Using your template, your assistant from day 20, or a simple automation, run the improved version of the process on real volume. Do not aim for perfect. Aim for measured: same task, new method, timed. Note the quality checks a human still performs, because that detail is what separates your write-up from hype.

Day 30: write the results memo. 40 minutes. One page, using the results memo template in Appendix F. What the process was, the baseline, what you changed, the measured result, what it is worth a

month, the three next opportunities you can now see. Date it and put your name on it. Then read your month's log once, end to end.

That memo is your first proof artifact. Chapter 15 tells you what to do with it. And take a moment on the arithmetic of what just happened: thirty days ago the entire AI conversation was other people's noise. Today you have used the machine on real work about forty times, caught it lying, briefed it properly, built an assistant, torn down a vendor, and produced a measured business result with your name and a date on it. That is more than most executives will do this year. The bar really was a kerb.

Appendix B: Salary and Rate Tables

All compensation data below was compiled in 2026 from the sources noted under each table. This market reprices every year, which is exactly why this book publishes in annual editions. Treat these numbers as the 2026 baseline, and check current figures before you negotiate anything. Full source URLs are in the SOURCES file.

Currencies are US dollars unless marked otherwise.

B1. Full-time Chief AI Officer, United States: the survey spread

Different data sources measure different slices of the market. Posting-scraped averages skew low because they catch small companies and inflated titles; executive-comp surveys skew high because they catch the top of the market. Read the spread, not any single number.

Source and method	Figure
Glassdoor, self-reported US average	\$354,111 (25th percentile \$265K, 75th percentile \$496K)
Comparably, self-reported US average	\$259,523
ZipRecruiter, posting-based US average	~\$151,203
Axial Search, 8,901 AI-strategy postings, median	\$208,000 (C-suite median only ~\$8K above VP median)
Equilar Top 50 survey, AI executives, median total direct comp	\$1.6M (25th pct \$700K, 75th pct \$2.5M, 90th pct \$3.5M)

Source notes: Glassdoor, Comparably and ZipRecruiter salary pages; Axial Search AI-strategy jobs analysis (2026); Equilar AI executive compensation survey (September 2025). The Equilar median mix: base

\$439,375, time-based stock \$242,997, cash bonus \$191,307, performance incentives \$90,186.

B2. Full-time CAIO by company size, United States

The most decision-useful table in this appendix. From JRG Partners 2026 benchmarks.

Company revenue	Base salary	Total direct comp
Under \$25M	\$225K to \$275K	equity-heavy packages
\$25M to \$100M	\$250K to \$350K	\$375K to \$675K
\$100M to \$500M	\$325K to \$450K	\$575K to \$1.1M
\$500M to \$1B	\$400K to \$525K	\$850K to \$1.9M
\$1B to \$5B (public)	\$475K to \$675K	\$1.7M to \$4.3M
Over \$5B	\$625K to \$850K	\$3.8M to \$9.5M

Rules of thumb from the same source: bonus typically 30% to 60% of base; public-company equity grants 3 to 5 times base; a 30 to 40 point spread between the most and least expensive US geographies. Industry differentials: technology, financial services and healthcare pay the strongest premiums; industrial and consumer sectors run 20% to 35% below the tech market.

Source note: JRG Partners CAIO salary guide, 2026 benchmarks; corroborated by Kore1 (US base range \$280K to \$650K; Fortune 500 and frontier-AI total comp past \$1.5M).

B3. United Kingdom and Europe

Market	Figure
UK base salary	£180K to £320K, London financial institutions at the top end
UK Glassdoor average	£58,274 (posting skew: includes small firms and title inflation; use with caution)
Germany base	€170K to €300K
France base	€160K to €280K
Nordics base	€150K to €270K

Europe as a whole runs roughly 25% to 35% below the US market. Source notes: Kore1 salary guide; GuruSup CAIO salary survey 2026; Glassdoor UK.

B4. Australia

Role	Figure
Enterprise CAIO, median total package (large company, Sydney)	A\$426K (band A\$362K to A\$489K)
Advertised enterprise CAIO packages	A\$350K to A\$500K+
Typical permanent structure	A\$400K base + 12% super + A\$100K short-term incentive + LTI (~A\$300K face value, 3-year vest)
Head of AI / Director of AI, large Sydney company, median package	A\$291K (band A\$248K to A\$335K)
Head of AI, broader advertised market	A\$230K to A\$290K
Glassdoor AU Head of AI average	A\$327,736

Source notes: Galileo Search AI Salary Guide Australia; AI Talent On Demand 2026; Glassdoor Australia.

B5. Head of AI and the rungs below the C-title

Data point	Figure
Head of AI, US growth-stage company, base	\$250K to \$400K
Head of AI, US mid-market, base / total	\$300K to \$500K / \$500K to \$900K
Enterprise, base / with equity	\$400K to \$700K+ / \$1M to \$3M
Healthcare below top-50 systems (VP level, in CMO/CMIO portfolio)	~\$180K to \$230K base + 10% to 15% bonus
Typical experience asked in postings	~8 years; ~10 for Director and above

Reporting lines observed in the corpus: CAIO reports to CEO or board; Head of AI to CTO or CPO; VP of AI/ML to VP Engineering or CTO. More than half of CAIOs now report straight to the CEO or board. Source notes: Kore1 2026 guides; Axial Search corpus; IBM Institute for Business Value.

B6. AI governance roles: the adjacent ladder

From the IAPP Salary and Jobs Report 2025 to 26 (1,600+ professionals, 60+ countries).

Data point	Figure
Global average total comp, privacy and AI-governance roles	\$200K
Median, combined privacy + AI governance	\$169,700
Median, privacy-only	\$123,000
Median, AI-governance-only	\$151,800
Tech-sector legal/compliance median	\$205K
Technical AI governance median	\$221K

Data point	Figure
Certification premium	~13% with one credential; ~27% with multiple

The takeaway sits in rows two to four: the combined skill set out-earns either specialty alone. Governance fluency is a comp multiplier, not a compliance chore.

B7. Fractional CAIO retainers

Data point	Figure
Consensus retainer range, US	\$5K to \$30K per month (\$60K to \$180K per year)
Advisory tier (~2 days per month)	\$4K to \$8K per month
Embedded tier (~1 day per week)	\$8K to \$15K per month
Intensive tier (2 to 3 days per week)	\$15K to \$30K per month
Top-of-market senior independents	\$20K to \$80K per month; hourly \$700 to \$1,500
UK, SME-practical range (1 to 2 days per week)	£2,000 to £6,000 per month; day rates £1,200 to £2,500
Singapore, 2 days per week / 3 days per week	SGD \$15K to \$35K / SGD \$30K to \$60K per month

Published, named examples from the practitioner research: one US operator charges \$7,500 a month on a three-month minimum with a \$750 paid entry assessment, capped at eight active clients; another prices at roughly 1% of client annual revenue paid monthly, \$10K to \$15K a month for a \$10M to \$20M company; a top-of-market operator publishes \$1,000 an hour with an 80-hour minimum and a \$30K-a-month fractional rate on a six-month minimum. First engagements at the bottom of the ladder have started as low as \$150; the ladder exists to climb.

Source notes: Iternal, AY Automate, Pertama Partners, The Professor-AI, Dan Cumberland Labs pricing guides; practitioner sites and interviews as cited in SOURCES.

B8. The wage premium underneath everything

Data point	Figure
AI-skills wage premium, 2024 measurement	25%
2025 (PwC Global AI Jobs Barometer, ~1 billion job ads, 24 countries)	56%
2026 barometer	62% (industry spread: 118% consumer markets down to 16% government)

Same occupation, same market, with and without AI skills. This is the fastest-moving number in the book, and the strongest argument that the sprint in Appendix A is the highest-paying month you will spend this year.

Source note: PwC Global AI Jobs Barometer 2025 and 2026 editions.

How to use these tables

If you are negotiating a full-time seat: anchor on the B2 band for the company’s revenue, adjust for industry and geography, and remember the bonus and equity conventions before you compare offers on base alone.

If you are pricing a fractional practice: the accessible middle of the market is \$7,500 to \$15,000 a month for one to two days a week, and Chapter 32’s \$5K anchor is the floor for a real engagement, not the ceiling.

If you are the CEO reading Chapter 38: the 1%-of-revenue heuristic for fractional, and the B2 table for full-time, will keep you out of both failure

modes: underpaying into the washout pool, and overpaying for a title without a mandate.

Data dated 2026. Check current numbers. The next edition of this book will restate every table.

Appendix C: The Job-Ad Decoder

Eight real postings from 2026, with the lines that matter quoted and translated. Every ad below was live during the research for this book; comp figures and quoted lines come straight from the posting text. The purpose of this appendix is a habit: never read a job ad literally again. Read what the company is afraid of, what it actually needs, and which “requirements” are negotiable, which is most of them.

One market fact before the ads, because it reframes all of them: across 8,901 US AI-strategy postings analysed in 2026, PhDs and hands-on coding ability were explicitly found “not emphasized as necessary qualifications,” 49% of roles were Director-level or above, and not one posting in our fetched corpus required an AI certification. The ads ask for confidence and proof. The decoder below shows you where each ad actually bends.

1. SimpliSafe, Head of AI, Engineering and Product

Consumer home security, Boston. \$300,000 to \$400,000 base. Reports to the CTO.

The ad says: “Partner with the executive team to develop and execute the company-wide AI strategy” and “Lead, manage, and mentor a talented, multi-disciplinary team of AI/ML/CV engineers and applied scientists.” Requires “15+ years of experience in AI/ML, computer vision, or a related field” and “strong knowledge of computer vision techniques including object detection, segmentation, tracking, and recognition.”

What it means: this is the deep-technical end of the market. Cameras are the product, so computer vision is not a buzzword here, it is the factory floor. The “15+ years” line tells you they want a veteran engineer-

leader, and the CTO reporting line confirms this is a technology seat, not a transformation seat.

How you get past it: mostly, you don't, and knowing that is the skill. This ad is the exception that proves the rest of the appendix: when a company's product is AI, they hire product-AI veterans. The reader of this book targets the seats where AI serves the business rather than being the business. Use ads like this one as a sorting signal, not a rejection.

2. AssetWatch, Head of AI

Industrial IoT condition monitoring, US remote. \$244,000 to \$282,000. Reports to the CEO.

The ad says: "Identify where AI can create competitive advantage, drive efficiency, and unlock new customer value." "Clarify incoming requests by outcome, owner, data dependency, business impact, and build-vs-buy path." Requires "hands-on fluency with modern AI and data science, enough to scope work, evaluate quality" and "a Bachelor's degree in computer science, data science, AI, engineering, or a related field."

What it means: read the responsibilities and you are reading Part V of this book. Outcome, owner, business impact, build-versus-buy: that is the deployment loop in a job ad. "Hands-on fluency... enough to scope work, evaluate quality" is the canonical phrasing of the real technical bar for this whole market: you must be able to judge work, not produce it. And the degree requirement ends in "or a related field," which is ad-speak for "we will not actually check if the rest of you is strong."

How you get past it: the "10 or more years leading AI, machine learning, data science, or adjacent... teams" line bends at the word "adjacent." A decade running operations teams that lived in data, plus a portfolio of real deployments and results memos, answers the spirit of the requirement. Lead your application with the outcome language the ad itself uses, and bring the artifact that proves you can run the loop.

3. Tebra, Head of AI Engineering and Enablement

Healthcare SaaS, HIPAA-regulated, US remote. \$224,000 to \$325,000.

The ad says: “Work with the CEO, CFO, and CPO to identify where AI can drive the greatest efficiency.” “Own how agents are deployed and monitored once live, ensuring full HIPAA compliance.” Requires “8+ years in software engineering, applied AI, or technical product roles” and, the line that matters, “a proven track record of driving adoption and behavior change within non-technical teams.”

What it means: the last line is the tell. This company has learned, probably expensively, that the technology is not the bottleneck. They are hiring a change agent who can also read a system diagram. The HIPAA line means governance fluency is a hard gate: they need someone who knows what patient data can never touch which tools.

How you get past it: “technical product roles” is the widest door in the requirements. If you have shipped anything that changed how a team works, and you can speak concretely about adoption (who resisted, what you measured, what stuck), you are answering the question the ad is really asking. Study the regulated-industry entries in Appendix E before any interview like this; one fluent paragraph about data handling separates you from the tourists.

4. Betsson Group, Head of Artificial Intelligence

iGaming, Malta. Comp not listed.

The ad says: “Develop and execute a comprehensive AI strategy that aligns with the company’s overall goals.” Requires “Master’s or Ph.D. in Computer Science, Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence, or a related field” and “at least 5 years of experience in AI Field.”

What it means: the advanced-degree demand makes this ad the outlier of the corpus, and worth decoding for exactly that reason. A research credential plus only five years of experience suggests a company buying academic authority, possibly to impress a regulator or a board. Notice the mismatch: comprehensive enterprise strategy is a seniority skill, and five years is not senior. Ads that mismatch degree inflation with experience deflation are usually written by committee.

How you get past it: if you lack the degree, you likely do not fight this one; there are hundreds of ads that do not ask. But note the pattern for salary negotiations elsewhere: when an ad demands credentials rather than outcomes, the company has not yet defined what success in the seat looks like, and Chapter 38's mandate questions become your interview questions to them.

5. State of Arkansas, Chief AI Officer

State government, Little Rock, on-site. \$118,000 to \$192,000.

The ad says: the officer will “guide statewide AI strategy, lead enterprise governance, support secure adoption across departments, and coordinate AI training and literacy for state employees,” including establishing a governance framework and “maintaining a statewide inventory of AI use cases.” Requires a “senior leader with experience managing complex technology environments, proven AI governance expertise, and the ability to provide clear strategic direction to policymakers, executives, and program leaders.”

What it means: a full C-title CAIO seat for less than half of what SimpliSafe pays a Head of AI. Title and pay have divorced; sector and scope set the price. But look at the deliverables: strategy, governance framework, use-case inventory, literacy program. That is the OMB federal template, and every artifact in it is in this book, mostly in Appendices E and F.

How you get past it: “proven AI governance expertise” sounds like a wall and is actually a door, because almost nobody has it and the artifacts that constitute it are documents you can produce. A portfolio containing a real AI policy, a use-case register and a risk write-up for an actual organisation is the proof this ad is begging for. Government seats are also the market’s best experience-launderers: two years here and the private sector calls you the credentialed kind.

6. Guardian Life, Head of AI Governance

Insurance, US remote. \$152,000 to \$250,000.

The ad says: “Lead the execution of Guardian’s AI governance program by operationalizing enterprise policies, standards, and guardrails across AI models, copilots, agents, and RAG-based workflows.” Own “the AI governance operating model, including intake, review, escalation, monitoring, and change management processes,” ensuring they are “repeatable, risk-based, and scalable,” and, in the ad’s own words, not “bespoke or ad hoc.”

What it means: a pure safety seat, exactly as Chapter 7 described. Insurance is regulated by state bulletins that require a written AI program with board accountability, so this job exists because a regulator effectively requires it to. “Repeatable... not bespoke” translates as: our current governance is a pile of one-off exceptions and it is frightening us.

How you get past it: no line here demands a technical build background; the demanded skill is operating a process across departments, which is management, not engineering. Learn the artifact list in Appendix E, get fluent in the NAIC bulletin and NIST framework by name, and bring evidence you have made any cross-departmental process repeatable. The vocabulary is learnable in weeks; the process discipline is the career you may already have.

7. UNC-Chapel Hill, Chief AI Officer and Vice Provost for AI

Higher education. An appointment rather than an open ad, and the most instructive entry in this appendix.

The record says: the seat was filled in June 2026 by Saif Khairat, a nursing-school professor of digital health, not a computer scientist, mandated to “help develop the strategy for AI across the University and bolster and connect existing AI work.”

What it means: a major university surveyed everyone available and gave its top AI seat to a domain expert who understood the institution, over technologists who understood the machine. “Bolster and connect existing AI work” is the whole job description of the modern CAIO in one phrase: the work already exists in pockets; the seat exists to join the pockets up.

How you get past it: nothing to get past. This one is here as evidence. When the translator premium from Chapter 4 gets tested against real hiring decisions, the translator wins seats. Cite this appointment, and the wider pattern it belongs to, whenever anyone tells you the seat requires a computer science degree.

8. Modern Health, Head of Artificial Intelligence

Mental health tech, US.

The ad says: a “visionary and execution-focused role to lead the integration of artificial intelligence across products and organization.”

What it means: “visionary and execution-focused” is the ad-writer admitting they want two different people. The phrase appears, in some variation, in half the ads in this market, and it decodes to: our board wants a story and our staff want the tools to work. The candidate who

wins shows one artifact for each: a crisp view of where the industry is going, and a results memo proving they have shipped.

How you get past it: answer both halves explicitly and separately, because most candidates answer only the half that matches their temperament. Vision without execution reads as a tourist; execution without vision reads as a contractor. The one-two of a Shadow Audit (here is what I see) plus a first-win memo (here is what I did) is precisely this ad's answer.

The decoder rules, compressed

Ten seconds per ad once you have the habit.

1. **Find the reporting line first.** CEO or board means a transformation seat, your market. CTO means a technology seat; check whether the product itself is AI before applying.
2. **Read responsibilities as the real ad and requirements as the wish list.** Responsibilities describe the job; requirements describe the committee's anxieties. Match yourself to the first list.
3. **"Or a related field" and "or adjacent" are doors.** They exist because the ad-writer knows the perfect resume does not exist. Walk through them with proof.
4. **Years-of-experience lines price the seat, they do not gate it.** "10+ years" in this field is demanding something scarcer than the ad admits; a strong portfolio regularly beats a weak decade.
5. **Governance language is a gift.** Every compliance phrase in an ad is a topic you can be fluent in by next month using Appendix E, while your competition is still hoping it does not come up.
6. **Adoption and change-management lines are the company confessing its last failure.** Speak to them with specifics and you are answering the question behind the ad.
7. **No ad in this corpus required an AI certification.** If you catch yourself wanting one to feel eligible, reread Chapter 37.

What the market checks is proof, and proof is manufactured, not purchased.

Appendix D: The CAIO Interview Bank

Every question a serious CAIO or Head of AI process will throw at you, with guidance on what a strong answer contains. Two audiences use this appendix: candidates preparing for the seat, and CEOs building an interview loop (Chapter 38 sent you here). The questions work in both directions.

Structure of a typical process, so you know where each question lands: a screening conversation, then a strategy presentation (often 60 minutes: your approach to building an AI strategy, presented to stakeholders), then a technical-and-leadership deep dive with the CTO or equivalent, often a governance case, and increasingly a request to present a 90-day or 100-day plan. Well-run searches take four to five months end to end, so the process itself is a test of stamina and follow-up discipline.

One rule above all the guidance below: specifics beat frameworks, every time, in every round. The market's sharpest hiring filter is five words long: make them tell you what broke. Walk in with your broken things catalogued and owned, and you are ahead of the field before the first question.

D1. The board rubric: twelve questions

Adapted from executive advisor Arjun Jaggi's published board hiring guide, which scores each answer 0 to 3, requires 24 of 36 to pass, and applies one hard rule worth memorising whichever chair you sit in: any zero on governance and risk is automatic disqualification.

1. "Walk me through how you would build the first 90-day AI investment thesis for this company." Strong answer: starts with the business, not the technology. Where the hours and dollars leak, what the baselines are, which two or three use cases clear the volume-pain-

measurability bar, what gets explicitly deferred. The red flag the rubric names: leading with technology choices. If your first sentence contains a model name, you have already lost the point.

2. “Describe a use case you chose not to pursue, even though it was technically feasible and had executive sponsorship.” Strong answer: a real story with a named reason: weak ROI, unmanageable risk, data that was not there, a cheaper non-AI fix. Killing a sponsored project is the costliest kind of no, which is why the question finds operators. Red flag: cannot recall killing anything. A portfolio where everything proceeded is a portfolio nobody was steering.

3. “How do you measure the success of an AI program at the 6-month mark, the 18-month mark, and the 3-year mark?” Strong answer: different metrics per horizon. Six months: deployed use cases with baselines and first measured deltas. Eighteen months: P&L-visible results, adoption rates, governance operating without drama. Three years: capability spread through the org, AI in how every department works, and a number the CFO signs. Red flag: the same vague metric at all three horizons, or activity metrics (pilots launched, staff trained) presented as outcomes.

4. “What does your AI infrastructure stack look like at 10,000 employees versus 500?” Strong answer: scale changes governance and platform choices, not principles. At 500: buy over build, consumer-grade tools with business data controls, one owner, light process. At 10,000: platform consolidation, identity and access integration, model gateways, audit logging, a federated operating model. Red flag: one stack answer for every company, or reciting vendor names without reasons.

5. “How do you decide whether to fine-tune a foundation model versus using retrieval-augmented generation, and when would you reject both in favour of a simpler approach?” Strong answer: RAG when the problem is knowledge (answers must come from your documents, with references); fine-tuning rarely, when the problem

is form or specialised behaviour at volume; and, the part that scores, plain prompting with good briefing solves most business problems, and some problems want a database query, not AI at all. The red flag the rubric names: defaulting to fine-tuning. It is the expensive-sounding answer, and it is usually wrong.

6. “Tell me about a vendor AI product that performed well in the proof of concept and degraded in production. What specifically caused the gap?” Strong answer: names the mechanism: curated demo data versus messy real data, edge cases, drift as the world changed, missing monitoring, integration debt. Then what you changed: acceptance criteria on your own data, shadow runs, kill criteria. Red flag: claims it never happened. Everyone who has deployed at any scale has this scar; its absence means absence of deployments.

7. “Walk me through how you would classify our AI use cases under the EU AI Act’s risk framework.” Strong answer: prohibited, high-risk, limited-risk, minimal, in plain English, then applied to their business: anything touching hiring, credit, or essential services is presumptively high-risk with real obligations; chatbots carry disclosure duties; most internal productivity use is minimal risk. Bonus points for knowing the high-risk obligations were deferred to late 2027 and calling the delay a runway, not a reprieve. Appendix E is your preparation. Remember the hard rule: a zero here ends the interview.

8. “How do you design a red-team process for a new AI system before it goes live?” Strong answer: adversarial testing by people incentivised to break it: prompt injection, data leakage, harmful and off-brand outputs, the angry-customer transcript, the weird edge cases from real logs; documented findings, fixes, and a sign-off gate. Red flag: equating red-teaming with ordinary QA, or having no pre-launch gate at all.

9. “Describe how you have built an AI governance committee. How did you prevent it from becoming a bureaucratic

bottleneck?” Strong answer: governance as an enabling function with service levels: a risk-tiered intake where low-risk uses get fast default approval and only consequential systems get full review; the committee owns policy and exceptions, not every decision. Red flag: either no governance story, or a governance story with no shipped systems behind it. Both fail, in opposite directions.

10. “What does a ‘literate’ non-technical employee look like 18 months into your tenure?” Strong answer: concrete and behavioural: uses AI tools weekly on real work, can brief properly, knows the data rules, can spot a hallucination, knows where to route an idea or an incident. Measured by usage and outcomes, not training-completion rates. Red flag: literacy defined as “everyone did the e-learning module.”

11. “Describe a situation where you had to tell a CEO or board that an AI initiative they were excited about was not ready.” Strong answer: a real story where you delivered the no with evidence and an alternative, and the relationship survived. The seat’s daily work includes deflating hype upward; one of the most experienced CAIOs in the research describes spending much of the job “downsizing expectations.” Red flag: never pushed back. That is not loyalty, it is uselessness at the precise moment the seat exists for.

12. “When do you move from centralised AI delivery to distributed capability with guardrails?” Strong answer: centralise early for standards, safety and quick wins; distribute as literacy and tooling mature, keeping the centre for platform, governance and hard problems. Name the signals: demand outstripping the central team, departments self-serving competently, incident rates stable. The red flag the rubric names: planning to run everything centrally forever. Empires are not operating models.

D2. The failure-story set

These recur across search-firm guides and real loops, because failure stories are the credential this market actually checks. Prepare each as a two-minute story with a number in it.

“Tell me about your most instructive AI failure.” Own it in the first sentence. Mechanism, cost, what you changed, and what you now do differently on every deployment. The failure you learned from publicly is worth more in this room than a success you cannot explain.

“What is the most money you have seen wasted on AI, and what would have prevented it?” Whether it was your budget or a client’s, the strong answer diagnoses cause (wrong task, no briefing, no owner) rather than blaming the tool, and prices the waste.

“Tell me about a deployment that succeeded technically and failed on adoption.” They are asking whether you understand that the technology working is the midpoint, not the finish line. Strong answer includes what you did about the humans: champions, training, incentive changes, and what adoption number you eventually reached.

“What have you shipped that is still running without you?” The hidden question is whether your systems have owners, documentation and monitoring, or whether they die when you leave the room. Chapter 19’s handoff discipline is the answer.

“What broke last month?” The trap is the polished answer. Anyone genuinely operating has a current, small, honest example: a format change that broke an extraction, a model update that shifted outputs, a monitoring gap. Fluency in fresh, minor failure is the sound of a real practitioner.

D3. Governance cases

Increasingly common as live exercises. The interviewer cares how you structure the response, who you involve, and how you communicate upward, more than the specific fix.

Case: the biased hiring tool. Your screening model appears to be filtering out older candidates. Strong shape: contain first (suspend the system's decisions, revert to human process), then diagnose (test outcomes across groups against a baseline), involve legal and HR early, check notification duties (in some jurisdictions discovered algorithmic discrimination triggers regulator notification), communicate to the executive in writing with a remediation plan, and fix the process that let an untested model touch consequential decisions. Naming the ambient rules (automated-decision regulations, record-keeping duties) earns the senior mark.

Case: the hallucinating customer-facing bot. Your support chatbot told a customer something false about a refund policy, and the customer acted on it. Strong shape: honour the commitment to the customer (the trust cost of arguing exceeds the refund), pull the transcript, determine whether it is systematic, constrain the bot to grounded answers with references or narrow its scope, add the failure to a regression test set, and report the incident honestly with the fix attached. Bonus: chatbots that pretend to be human are picking up legal disclosure duties; yours should disclose and log.

Case: shadow AI discovery. You discover a team has been pasting customer data into a free consumer AI tool for months. Strong shape: no witch hunt, because the behaviour is information: the team had a real need and no sanctioned path. Stop the data exposure, assess what left the building and whether notification duties apply, then give the team a compliant tool that does the same job, and use the incident to accelerate the policy and training rollout. Punishing your best adopters teaches the company to hide usage, which is the worst possible governance outcome.

Case: the vendor demo your CEO loved. The CEO returns from a conference sold on a platform and wants it signed this month. Strong shape: run the three vendor questions, demand a pilot on your data with acceptance criteria and a baseline, price the wrapper against doing it directly, and put a kill clause in the contract. Deliver the verdict in

money, not model names. This case is really question 11 in disguise: can you say no upward, with evidence, without losing the room.

D4. The standard set, rapid guidance

The questions every loop includes. One line each on what the strong answer contains.

- **“Walk me through your AI strategy process.”** Business diagnosis first, use-case triage by value and feasibility, baselines, build-buy-defer, pilot with kill criteria, measure, scale, govern. The deployment loop is the answer; say it in their industry’s vocabulary.
- **“How do you measure ROI of AI initiatives?”** Baseline before deployment, measure the delta in hours, dollars, speed or error rate, price the hours honestly, report monthly in writing. No baseline, no claim.
- **“How do you work with the rest of the C-suite?”** In their currencies: CFO gets payback periods, COO gets throughput, CMO gets pipeline, legal gets risk artifacts. Speak money, not model.
- **“How do you evaluate third-party AI vendors?”** The three questions, a pilot on your own data, security and data-handling review, reference calls on production performance, exit terms before entry.
- **“How do you balance innovation with reliability?”** Two-track answer: a sandbox where experiments are cheap and quarantined, and a production gate nothing crosses without testing, monitoring and an owner.
- **“How do you identify and mitigate bias?”** Test outcomes across groups before launch and on a cadence, keep humans on consequential decisions, document everything, and treat vendor claims of fairness as claims, not facts.
- **“How would you build an AI-driven culture?”** Champions over mandates, literacy over lectures, visible wins over vision

decks, and leadership using the tools themselves, because staff copy what executives do, not what they announce.

- **“Where is AI going in the next three years?”** Have a view, hold it lightly, and land it on their business: capability will keep compounding and cheapening, agents will take on multi-step work, regulation will keep arriving, and the constraint will remain adoption and ownership, which is why the seat exists.

D5. Your questions to them

An interview for this seat runs both ways, and your questions are also being scored. Four that identify whether the seat is real, drawn from the washout research:

1. “What does this role own that no other executive currently owns, and what budget comes with it?” (No crisp answer: the seat is decorative.)
2. “What happened to the last person or team who ran AI here?” (You are listening for the washout pattern and whether its causes were structural.)
3. “If my first-quarter audit shows the highest-value use case sits in a department whose leader disagrees, what happens?” (Tests the mandate against the org chart.)
4. “What result, twelve months from now, makes this hire a success in the CEO’s eyes?” (Uncalibrated expectations are the number-one structural killer of this role. Better to find the \$50-million-in-year-one fantasy now, in the interview, while you can still reset it or walk away.)

Appendix E: The Regulation Cheat Sheet

The AI regulation landscape in plain English, by jurisdiction and industry, as it stood in 2026. Dates and thresholds in this field move; the next edition restates this appendix, and you should verify anything load-bearing before you rely on it in writing. Sources are in the SOURCES file.

How to use it: each entry answers three questions. What it is. Who it touches. What a CAIO must actually do about it. Read your jurisdiction and your industry, skim the rest, and remember the meta-point from Chapter 7: every line of regulation on this list is a reason somebody must be hired or retained, and the plain-English translation of these rules is itself a billable service.

E1. The EU AI Act

What it is. The world's first comprehensive AI law, in force since August 2024, phasing in over several years. Risk-based: a short list of prohibited practices, a heavily regulated “high-risk” tier, transparency duties for a middle tier, and nothing new for minimal-risk uses. A separate track covers the providers of general-purpose models.

Who it touches. Not just European companies. Any business placing AI on the EU market, or whose AI outputs are used in the EU, is in scope. An Australian recruiter screening candidates for a Dublin office, or a US SaaS product with EU users, inherits it.

The timeline that matters. - Since February 2025: prohibited practices are banned (social scoring, manipulative techniques, emotion inference at work and school, untargeted face scraping), and the AI literacy duty applies: staff using AI must be adequately trained. - Since August 2025: obligations on general-purpose model providers, plus the penalties framework. - August 2026: the bulk of remaining provisions

formally apply; member-state regulatory sandboxes operational. - December 2026: chatbot and deepfake transparency duties (systems must disclose they are AI; synthetic media must be labelled), as re-sequenced by the 2026 Digital Omnibus. - December 2027: the heavy high-risk regime bites: recruitment and HR screening, credit scoring, education, essential services, law enforcement. Deferred from 2026 by the Omnibus. The delay is a compliance runway, not a reprieve. - August 2028: AI embedded in regulated products (medical devices, machinery, vehicles).

Penalties. Up to €35 million or 7% of global turnover for prohibited practices; up to €15 million or 3% for most other violations. Higher ceilings than GDPR.

What a CAIO does about it. Classify every use case against the risk tiers and keep the classification current. Get the training records in place now, because the literacy duty already applies. For anything touching hiring, credit or essential services: risk management system, data governance, technical documentation, logging, human oversight, and conformity assessment, budgeted and scheduled before the 2027 deadline, not after. Make chatbots disclose themselves and label synthetic media from December 2026.

E2. ISO/IEC 42001

What it is. Published December 2023, the first certifiable international standard for an AI Management System. The AI analogue of ISO 27001: 39 controls across 9 categories covering policy, roles, impact assessment, lifecycle, data management, third parties and responsible use. Certification takes a documentation audit plus an implementation audit, then a three-year certificate with annual surveillance.

Who it touches. Voluntary, but becoming the de facto procurement checkbox for selling AI-touching services to enterprises, and a recognised

way to evidence AI governance to boards and regulators. US state law has named it as a safe-harbour framework.

What it costs. All-in including implementation work: roughly \$15K to \$40K for a small scope, \$40K to \$90K mid-size, \$90K to \$200K+ enterprise, over four to nine months. Existing ISO 27001 holders save 30% to 50%.

What a CAIO does about it. Two moves. Defensive: when enterprise customers start asking for it in tenders, be ready with a gap assessment. Offensive: for a consulting practice, 42001-readiness is a productisable engagement, and for a client selling into enterprises, certification is a sales asset you can sponsor. Even without certifying, its control list is the best available checklist for what a grown-up AI management system contains.

E3. NIST AI Risk Management Framework (US, voluntary)

What it is. The US government's voluntary framework for AI risk, organised into four functions: Govern, Map, Measure, Manage. Not certifiable, but named in US state law (alongside ISO 42001) as a safe harbour, and the shared vocabulary of American AI governance.

Who it touches. Any US-market organisation wanting a defensible answer to "what framework do you follow." Insurers, banks and government suppliers especially.

What a CAIO does about it. Use it as the skeleton for the governance program: an inventory of systems (Map), testing and metrics (Measure), incident and lifecycle processes (Manage), and named accountability (Govern). In interviews and board papers, fluency in its four functions signals competence cheaply.

E4. United States, federal

What it is. No comprehensive federal AI statute. The load-bearing instrument is OMB memo M-24-10 (March 2024): every federal agency must designate a Chief AI Officer, maintain a public AI use-case inventory, convene governance boards, and apply minimum risk-management practices to safety- and rights-impacting AI. A companion memo, M-24-18, governs how agencies buy AI.

Who it touches. Federal agencies directly, and every company selling AI-touching products or services to them, who inherit the procurement requirements. It also created the world's largest cohort of CAIOs by mandate, 100-plus seats at once.

What a CAIO does about it. If you sell to government: align your documentation to the procurement guidance before the RFP asks. For everyone else: the federal template (inventory, governance board, risk practices, named officer) is the most copied governance blueprint in the market, and Appendix F's templates map to it.

E5. United States, states

Colorado. The first comprehensive state AI law, and a useful lesson in how fast this ground moves. The original act was signed in May 2024, its start date was pushed twice, and it was then repealed and replaced before it ever took effect. The replacement was signed in May 2026 and takes effect on 1 January 2027, with attorney-general rulemaking running in the meantime.

The reframing matters more than the dates. The law now attaches to automated decision-making technology used in consequential decisions across education, employment, housing, financial services, insurance, healthcare and essential government services, rather than to a defined class of "high-risk AI systems." Its centre of gravity moved too: the original leaned on prescriptive risk-management programs and impact

assessments, while the replacement leans on transparency, disclosure and consumer rights.

Two things follow for an operator. The trigger is now the decision rather than the technology, so a spreadsheet with a scoring formula in it can be in scope while a chatbot answering opening hours is not. And the practical obligations are the ones you were installing anyway: know where automated decisions get made about people, tell people when one is, keep the records, keep a human on the call. Watch this one wherever you work. It is the template other states copy, and the redraft is now the version they will copy from.

California. Two instruments matter to operators. First, employment regulations effective October 2025: for employers with five or more California employees, AI and automated-decision tools in hiring and promotion can violate anti-discrimination law directly or by disparate impact, and employment plus automated-decision records must be kept four years. Second, a frontier-model transparency law effective January 2026, aimed at the largest model developers.

What a CAIO does about it. If AI touches hiring anywhere in the company, act as if Colorado and California already apply to you: bias-test before deployment and on a cadence, keep the records, keep humans on consequential decisions, and write it all down. The cost of doing this voluntarily is a fraction of the cost of retrofitting it under enforcement.

E6. Australia

What it is. No AI Act, and deliberately so. The 2024 proposal for mandatory high-risk guardrails was not proceeded with; the National AI Plan (December 2025) chose existing technology-neutral law, sector regulators, voluntary guidance and an advisory AI Safety Institute. The Voluntary AI Safety Standard sets out ten guardrails (accountability, risk management, testing, human oversight, transparency and so on),

superseded as primary guidance by the National AI Centre's Guidance for AI Adoption with its six essential practices.

Who it touches. Everyone, through existing law: the Privacy Act (with major reforms in train), Australian Consumer Law on misleading conduct (an AI system that misleads a customer is your misleading conduct), anti-discrimination law, and directors' duties, with boards increasingly told that AI oversight is a directors'-duty issue. Exporters inherit the EU AI Act.

What a CAIO does about it. The sale in Australia is risk and capability, not a compliance deadline, so the pitch changes: no regulator will fine the client next quarter, but their board is already personally accountable under existing duties, and the voluntary guardrails are the standard a court or regulator would measure "reasonable" against after an incident. Implement the voluntary standard as if it were mandatory; it is the cheapest insurance in the country, and for EU-exposed clients it is not optional anyway.

E7. United Kingdom

What it is. Principles-based and sector-led, no AI Act. Five cross-sector principles (safety, transparency, fairness, accountability, contestability) enforced through existing regulators: the FCA for finance, the ICO for data, the CMA for competition. A 2025 government blueprint signalled targeted legislation later for frontier-model gaps.

Who it touches. UK businesses through whichever regulator already covers them.

What a CAIO does about it. Map which regulator owns you and read their AI guidance specifically; the principles only bite through sector rules. As in Australia, EU exposure imports the EU AI Act regardless of domestic policy.

E8. Financial services

What it is. The oldest and deepest AI-adjacent rulebook, built on model risk management. The US Federal Reserve's SR 11-7 (2011) required governance, validation, documentation and monitoring of models, and was extended in practice to AI and machine learning; in April 2026 it was superseded by SR 26-2, joint Fed, OCC and FDIC guidance that is principles-based and risk-proportionate, replacing annual revalidation with risk-based cadences, most relevant to banks above \$30 billion in assets. Alongside it: consumer-protection rules requiring explainable adverse-action reasons for AI credit decisions, and the EU's DORA for operational resilience.

Insurance specifically. The NAIC Model Bulletin (December 2023, adopted by 20-plus US jurisdictions by mid-2026) requires insurers to run a written AI Systems Program with board and senior-management accountability, bias and model testing, and third-party AI oversight. New York's DFS goes further: no AI in underwriting or pricing without a documented risk assessment showing no unfair discrimination.

What a CAIO does about it. In banking: plug into the existing model-risk function rather than duplicating it; your job is extending fifteen years of validation discipline to LLMs and agents, and the incumbent teams are allies, not rivals. In insurance: the written AIS Program is the deliverable, and the board-accountability requirement is your mandate argument gift-wrapped. Across the sector: every credit-adjacent model needs explainability sufficient for an adverse-action letter, which rules out some architectures at design time, not at launch time.

E9. Healthcare

What it is. Regulated AI at the product level, improvised governance at the organisational level. The US FDA had authorised more than 1,000 AI-enabled medical devices by early 2025 and has published lifecycle-

management draft guidance and ten Good Machine Learning Practice principles (representative clinical data, independent test sets, continuous monitoring). Notably, as of early 2026, no generative-AI-powered device had yet been authorised: the frontier of the technology is ahead of the frontier of approval. Beneath device law sits HIPAA: patient data in prompts or training sets is regulated data, full stop.

Who it touches. Providers, health tech vendors, and any consultant who goes near clinical or patient-adjacent workflows.

What a CAIO does about it. Draw the line publicly between clinical AI (device-regulated, clinician-owned, slow by design) and administrative AI (scheduling, documentation, coding, correspondence), and build your program on the administrative side where the burden is HIPAA discipline rather than device approval. That is where the hours leak anyway. Ensure no patient data touches non-compliant tools, get business associate agreements in writing, and keep humans signing every clinical-adjacent output.

E10. Legal services

What it is. ABA Formal Opinion 512 (July 2024): six duties for lawyers using generative AI: competence, confidentiality, communication, candour (verify outputs; no hallucinated citations), supervision (firm policies and training), and reasonable fees (you cannot bill clients for teaching yourself AI). Meanwhile courts sanction hallucinated citations routinely; the fee awards in the worst cases have exceeded \$1.5 million.

Who it touches. Every law firm and in-house team, in practice, whatever jurisdiction, because the duties restate professional obligations that exist everywhere.

What a CAIO does about it. Law firms are a near-perfect fractional client: the opinion effectively mandates a use policy, tool vetting, verification workflows and training records, and almost no firm has

anyone to build them. The deliverables are Appendix F's templates with a citation-verification step added. The sanctions cases are your cold-open slide.

E11. The artifact list: what all of this reduces to

Strip every regime above to what it demands in practice and you get eight documents and processes. This is the whole job of AI governance, concretely, and each item maps to named requirements across the regimes:

1. **An AI use policy.** Who may use which tools, on which data, for which purposes, with what approval routes.
2. **A use-case register.** A live inventory of every AI system, its owner, purpose, data and risk tier.
3. **Risk and impact assessments.** Per consequential system: bias testing, impact analysis, records thereof.
4. **An audit trail.** Logs of versions, decisions and human overrides, retained per the strictest applicable rule (California's four years is a safe default for employment uses).
5. **Sign-off workflow.** A named accountable owner per system, executive acceptance of residual risk, governance minutes.
6. **A vendor due-diligence file.** Contracts, data-handling terms, evaluation results for every procured AI product.
7. **Training records.** Evidence staff are AI-literate, which the EU already requires and everyone else effectively does.
8. **An incident response plan.** Detection, rollback, notification, remediation, and who does what at 4pm on a Friday.

Templates for the first of these, and the policy one-pager, are in Appendix F. If you can produce these eight artifacts for a real organisation, you are not studying AI governance. You are practising it, and by the survey evidence, with 77% of organisations working on AI

governance and qualified people their single scarcest input, you are practising the most under-supplied specialty in the field.

Appendix F: The Templates

Five documents, full text, ready to copy. Replace the square brackets, delete what does not apply, and keep every document to the length shown, because the length is part of the design. Each template earns its place in a chapter of this book: the pitch memo in Chapter 10, the shadow audit in Chapter 16, the engagement letter in Chapter 33, the policy in Chapter 26, the results memo in Chapters 18 and 35.

A note on voice before you copy anything. These are business documents, not AI documents. No jargon your CFO would not use. Every claim carries a number or names its owner. If a sentence could appear in a vendor brochure, delete it.

F1. The internal pitch memo (role creation)

One page. Email or print. This is how the internal ladder of Chapter 10 converts a proof artifact into a mandate. Send it after your first measured win, never before.

To: [CEO / Managing Director] **From:** [You] **Date:** [date] **Re: A proposal: give AI in this company an owner**

What I have found. Over the past [8] weeks I have been mapping how we currently use AI. We pay for [4] AI tools today, costing roughly \$[X] a month. [1] is used weekly. Nobody owns the question of whether any of this makes us money. Meanwhile, our most repetitive work, [name the process, e.g. re-keying supplier invoices in accounts], consumes about [Y] hours a week and no tool touches it.

What I have already done about it. On [date] I ran a small test on [process]. Baseline: [e.g. 40 minutes per item, 30 items a week]. With [tool/method] and proper checking: [e.g. 12 minutes per item, same error rate]. That is [Z] hours a week back, worth roughly \$[X] a year in

[department]. The one-page write-up is attached. [Colleague name] has verified the numbers.

What I am proposing. That we treat AI the way we treat anything that costs money: give it one accountable owner. Specifically, that I take ownership for the next 90 days, alongside my current role, with: - authority to run [2] further pilots in [departments], chosen by expected return; - a working budget of \$[amount, keep it modest]; - [2] hours a week of access to you for decisions that cross department lines; - an agreed measure of success, proposed below.

What success looks like by day 90. A complete inventory of our AI spend and usage. Baselines for our [3] most repetitive processes. At least [1] further deployed improvement with measured results. A one-page usage policy so nobody pastes customer data somewhere they should not. A written recommendation on what the ongoing ownership of this should look like.

What this costs if I am wrong. The budget and some of my hours, all capped above. **What it costs to do nothing:** we keep spending \$[X] a month with no owner, and the [Y] hours a week keeps leaking.

May I have 20 minutes this week to walk you through the attached result?

F2. The shadow audit memo (skeleton)

Two pages maximum. This is the signature move of Chapter 16: an unsolicited, specific, generous diagnosis of a business you can see from the outside, written like a consultant's document, given away to open a door. Everything in it must come from observable fact or first-hand test; if you have not verified a claim, cut it.

[Business name]: what I noticed, and what it is probably costing Prepared by [you], [date]. No charge, no obligation.

Prepared from public information and first-hand checks; I have no inside knowledge of your systems.

Why I wrote this. I am a [role] who helps [type of business] put AI to work on measurable problems. I spent [2] hours looking at [business name] the way I would for a paying client. Three things stood out. They are below, with what each is likely costing and what I would do about it. Use this however you like; it is yours either way.

1. [Observed gap, stated plainly, e.g. Enquiries answered slowly outside business hours.] What I saw: [the test you ran, e.g. I sent an enquiry through your website form on Tuesday 7pm; the reply arrived Thursday 10:20am]. What that typically costs: [industry-grounded arithmetic, e.g. for a business your size, after-hours enquiries are commonly a third of the total, and response time is the strongest single predictor of which quote wins]. What I would do: [one sentence, concrete, e.g. an assistant that drafts an answer from your own price list and past jobs within minutes, with a human approving each send].

2. [Second gap: repeat the pattern: saw / costs / would do.]

3. [Third gap: repeat the pattern.]

What I would tackle first and why. Of the three, [#] has the best ratio of value to effort: [one line of arithmetic]. A sensible first step is a [2 to 4]-week pilot with a baseline measured first, a defined check on quality, and an agreed number that decides whether it lives or dies.

Who I am. [Two sentences. One proof artifact with a number in it. No life story.]

If any of this is useful, I am glad. If you would like the same depth on the inside of the business, my [assessment offer, e.g. paid two-week AI assessment] is how that usually starts: [one line on what it includes]. Either way, you are welcome to this document.

[Name, contact]

F3. The engagement letter checklist

Not a template letter, deliberately: your lawyer drafts the letter once and you reuse it for years. This is the checklist of what must be in it before you sign anything as a fractional operator or consultant. Chapter 33 explains each item's war story.

Parties and scope - ☐ Named parties, and the specific entity you contract with (the trading company, not the group). - ☐ Scope written as outcomes and deliverables, not unlimited access to you: what is included, listed; what is excluded, listed ("additional projects quoted separately"). - ☐ Days or hours per month, and what happens to unused capacity (it lapses; it does not bank, or your quiet months become free months). - ☐ Named client-side owner you report to, and the meeting cadence.

Money - ☐ Retainer amount, invoiced [monthly in advance], payment terms [7 or 14 days]. - ☐ Deposit or first month up front before work starts. - ☐ Late payment consequence stated (work pauses; interest accrues). - ☐ Rate for out-of-scope work, and the rule that out-of-scope work needs written approval first. - ☐ Expenses and tool subscriptions: who pays, with a monthly cap. - ☐ Price review date (annually at minimum; this market reprices yearly).

The AI-specific clauses (the ones generic templates miss) - ☐ You advise and implement; the client owns decisions and outcomes. Final sign-off on anything customer-facing or consequential rests with a named client executive. - ☐ No guarantee of specific AI outputs or model behaviour; you warrant your process and professional skill, not the model's every sentence. - ☐ Data handling: what client data you may access, where it may be processed, which tools are approved, and that the client is responsible for the lawfulness of the data they give you. - ☐ Client is responsible for compliance decisions in their regulated domain; you flag, they rule. - ☐ Third-party tool terms pass through: if a vendor changes terms or prices, that is not your breach.

IP - [] Deliverables built for the client (their custom prompts, workflows, documentation) belong to the client on payment. - [] Your pre-existing methods, templates and know-how stay yours, licensed to the client for internal use. This clause is your business; never trade it away. - [] You may describe the engagement and anonymised results for marketing unless the client opts out in writing; named case studies and testimonials by separate consent.

Protection and exit - [] Liability capped at [fees paid in the prior 3 to 6 months]; no liability for consequential loss. - [] Confidentiality both ways. - [] Non-solicitation of each other's staff, [12] months. - [] No exclusivity, and no non-compete that stops you serving the same industry (conflict handling per your Chapter 11 rules: no two direct competitors at once without both consents). - [] Term and termination: [3-month] initial term, then rolling monthly with [30 days] notice either way; immediate termination for non-payment. - [] Handover obligations on exit: documentation current, credentials transferred, [X] hours of transition included. This clause is also your sales asset: it proves the client is never hostage. - [] Insurance noted: professional indemnity and cyber, with amounts.

F4. The one-page AI policy

Genuinely one page. This is Chapter 26's first governance artifact and usually the first document you deliver in any engagement. It is written for staff, not lawyers: plain rules people can follow on a busy Tuesday.

[Company] AI Use Policy Owner: [name]. Effective: [date]. Review: [date + 6 months]. Version [1.0].

Why this exists. AI tools save us real time and we encourage their use. A few rules keep that safe for our customers, our staff and the company. Follow these and use the tools freely.

1. Approved tools. Use the tools on the approved list: [list tools and account type, e.g. company workspace accounts only]. Anything not on the list needs a yes from [owner] before company information goes into it. Asking costs nothing and usually takes a day.

2. What never goes into any AI tool. Customer names and contact details in identifiable form. Financial account numbers, passwords and credentials. Health or other sensitive personal information. Anything covered by an NDA. Anything you would not put in an email to an outside party. When unsure, strip the identifying details or ask [owner].

3. A human checks before it ships. AI output is a draft. Anything that leaves the company (emails, quotes, proposals, published content) or feeds a decision about a person (hiring, performance, credit, pricing for an individual) gets reviewed by a person who takes responsibility for it. The reviewer's name goes on it, not the tool's.

4. AI does not decide about people on its own. No tool may make or effectively make hiring, firing, promotion, lending or similar consequential decisions. Tools may assist; a named human decides, and we keep records of those decisions for [4] years.

5. Be straight about it. Customer-facing bots identify themselves as automated. We do not present AI-generated content as a specific person's work where that matters. We label synthetic images and audio.

6. When something goes wrong, say so fast. If an AI tool produces something harmful, wrong in a way that reached a customer, or leaks data, tell [owner] the same day. No blame attaches to reporting; problems we hear about early are cheap.

7. New uses are welcome. Got an idea for using AI on your work? Tell [owner]. Most ideas get a quick yes and some help. That is how this policy grows the company instead of restricting it.

Breaches of rules 2 to 4 are treated as seriously as any other data or conduct breach. Everything else in this policy is

designed to make the yes easy.

F5. The monthly results memo

One page, sent on the same day every month, whether the month was good or bad. Chapter 35 calls this the document that keeps the seat: the client or CEO forwards it, files it, and rehires it. Numbers first, prose second, always the same shape so twelve of them stack into an annual story.

AI results memo: [Company], [month, year] From [you]. [Nth] memo in this engagement.

The number that matters. [One headline figure, e.g. 62 hours of staff time returned this month across the three live systems, worth roughly \$[X] at loaded cost. Running annual rate: \$[Y].]

What ran this month. - [System 1, e.g. invoice extraction]: [volume, e.g. 1,240 documents processed], [quality, e.g. 98.6% straight-through, 17 flagged to Maria for review], [delta vs baseline, e.g. 31 hours saved vs the pre-deployment baseline]. - **[System 2]:** [same shape: volume, quality, delta]. - **[System 3]:** [same shape].

What broke, and what we did. [Honest, brief, e.g. The supplier portal changed its invoice format on the 14th; extraction accuracy dropped for two days before the monitor caught it; fixed on the 16th, checks added.] (If nothing broke, say what was tested instead. An empty section here reads as not looking.)

What changed in the business because of this. [One observation a number cannot carry, e.g. Accounts closed the month two days earlier; Sarah's team used the recovered hours on the debtor follow-ups that were always deferred, and collections improved \$[Z].]

Next month. [The one or two things you will ship or measure, with dates. Keep last month's promises visible: state whether you did what memo [N-1] said you would.]

Decision needed from you. [One item maximum, stated as a choice with your recommendation, e.g. The pilot in dispatch cleared its kill criteria: 22% faster job scheduling at equal error rates. Recommend we make it permanent and extend to the second depot; cost \$[X]/month. A yes by the 10th keeps the schedule.] (If nothing is needed: "Nothing needed from you this month; the above is for the record.")

Use them, adapt them, and keep every version you ever send. Twelve months of these five documents, with real numbers in them, is a portfolio no certificate can imitate.

Appendix G: Glossary

Every term this book uses and every term a vendor, a job ad or a regulator will use at you, one plain sentence each. This appendix assumes you know nothing about AI at all, which is the correct starting assumption for most of the people who end up excellent at this work.

The test applied to every definition below: could you say it across a desk to a business owner without either of you flinching. Where a term has a technical meaning that is more precise than the business meaning, the business meaning is given, because that is the one you need in the room.

Read G1 first. Twelve terms unlock the rest of the appendix, and most of the market.

G1. Start here: the twelve terms that unlock everything

Model. The thing that does the work. Somebody spent an enormous amount of money teaching a piece of software to predict what comes next in a piece of text, and the result is a model. You do not build one. You use one.

Large language model, or LLM. The kind of model behind the current wave. It reads text and produces text, which turns out to cover most office work.

Prompt. What you type. The instruction plus the context. Most of the difference between useless output and excellent output is here.

Token. The unit models read and write in, roughly three-quarters of a word. It matters only because it is the unit you get billed in.

Training versus inference. Training is building the model, done by a handful of companies at vast expense. Inference is using it, which costs fractions of a cent. Businesses do the second, essentially never the first.

Hallucination. When the model states something false with complete confidence. It always answers, whether or not it knows. This is the central limitation of the technology and every serious design decision in this book exists because of it.

Context. What the model knows about your situation right now. It has read the internet and has never heard of your company, so anything specific to you has to be supplied.

API. The plug that lets other software use a model directly, without a person typing. It is how deployments run unattended, and it costs cents.

Automation, and where AI sits inside it. Automation is a sequence of steps running without a human doing each one. AI is usually one step inside a larger automation, not the whole thing. Confusing the two is the most common beginner error in this field.

Baseline. The measurement of how something performs before you change it. Without one, no claimed improvement means anything, and you have no business quoting a number.

Human in the loop. A person reviews or approves output before it takes effect. This is the control that makes almost everything else safe, and it is a design choice rather than an admission of weakness.

Deployment. A system that is actually being relied on for real work, with a named owner, monitoring, and a plan for when it breaks. The opposite of a demo. Most of what companies call AI adoption never reaches this state, which is what Chapter 3 is about.

G2. The full glossary, A to Z

Accuracy. How often a system gets it right, usually stated as a percentage by people hoping you will not ask the follow-up. The useful questions are what it gets wrong, whether the errors are random or clustered, and whether anybody would notice.

Adoption. The share of people who actually use a deployed tool in their real work, which is the number that decides whether a deployment lived or died.

Agent (agentic AI). An AI system that can take a goal and carry out multiple steps toward it, using tools like email, browsers or databases, rather than just answering a single prompt.

AI (artificial intelligence). Software that performs tasks which previously required human judgment, such as writing, reading, classifying and deciding what comes next.

AI governance. The policies, records and human checks that keep an organisation's AI use safe, legal and accountable.

AI literacy. Practical working knowledge of what AI tools do well, what they do badly, and how to use them on real work; several jurisdictions now attach legal expectations to it for staff who use AI.

AI policy. The document, ideally one page, that tells staff which tools they may use, on what data, with what checks.

Algorithmic discrimination. When an automated system produces unfairly worse outcomes for a protected group, which several laws now make the employer's problem regardless of intent.

API (application programming interface). The plug that lets one piece of software use another directly, which is how businesses use AI models inside their own systems at cents per task.

Audit trail. The kept records of what an AI system did, when, and who approved what, so questions asked later have answers.

Automated decision-making technology. The phrase newer laws increasingly use instead of "AI," because it captures what regulators actually care about: software that makes or materially influences a decision about a person, whether or not anything clever is happening inside it.

Automation. Making a multi-step task run without a human doing each step; AI is often one component inside a larger automation.

Autonomy level. How much a system is allowed to do without a person checking, ranging from every output approved, through spot checks, to exception-only review. It is earned rather than assumed, and it is recorded per system in the register.

Baseline. The measurement of how a process performs before you change it, without which no claimed improvement means anything.

Batch processing. Sending work to a model in bulk and accepting a slower answer in exchange for a lower price, commonly around half. Useful for anything that does not need to happen this second.

Benchmark. A standard test used to compare models. Useful for the industry, close to useless for you, because your work is not the test. Judge on your own tasks.

Bias. A systematic tilt in a model's outputs, usually inherited from the data it learned from, which testing can catch and unexamined deployment cannot.

Blast radius. The worst thing a system can send, delete, spend or commit to, exactly as configured, if everything goes as wrong as it can go. Establishing it before switching anything on is the single most valuable habit in Chapter 24.

Build versus buy. The recurring decision between constructing a solution from models directly or paying a vendor for a packaged product.

Caching. Storing repeated context so it does not have to be paid for every time, which cuts the cost of a repetitive task substantially.

CAIO (Chief AI Officer). The executive who owns the question of whether AI makes the organisation money, with the mandate and budget to make the answer yes.

Change management. The work of getting humans to actually alter how they work, which is where most AI value is won or lost.

Chatbot. A conversational interface to an AI system or a script; quality ranges from genuinely useful to the front-desk embarrassment of Chapter 3.

Classification. Sorting things into categories: this email is a complaint, this invoice is a duplicate, this document is a contract. Unglamorous, extremely reliable, and the quiet engine of most useful deployments.

Compute. Processing power, and by extension the cost of it. It appears in every AI budget conversation because models run on expensive chips.

Connector. A ready-made link between two pieces of software, so they can pass information without a human. Whether good connectors exist for a client's systems decides which platform you use, more than any other factor.

Context window. The amount of text a model can consider at once, which limits how much briefing and source material you can give it in one go.

Copilot. Marketing shorthand for an AI assistant embedded inside an existing product, suggesting and drafting while a human stays in control.

Credits. A vendor's internal currency that converts into usage at rates the vendor controls. Always ask what one credit buys in the underlying unit.

Deep learning. The family of techniques behind modern AI, built on neural networks with many layers; you will never need more detail than that in a business meeting.

Deployment. Moving an AI solution from experiment to being a routine, owned, monitored part of how the business operates.

Deterministic and non-deterministic. A deterministic system does the same thing every time; a non-deterministic one may not. Models are non-deterministic by nature, which is why fixed workflows are easier to trust than agents, and why testing means testing repeatedly.

Drift. The slow degradation of an AI system's performance as the world changes around it, which is why systems need owners and monitoring, not just launches.

Embedding. A way of turning text into numbers so that similar meanings sit near each other, which is what makes searching by meaning possible.

EU AI Act. The European Union's comprehensive AI law: banned uses, heavy duties on high-risk uses, transparency duties on chatbots and synthetic media, and penalties reaching into the tens of millions or a percentage of global turnover. Appendix E carries the current timeline.

Evaluation, or evals. A repeatable test set you run against your own system to check whether it still works after you change something. The difference between a professional deployment and a hopeful one.

Extraction. Pulling specific pieces of information out of unstructured material, such as the amount and due date from an invoice.

Fallback. What the system does when it cannot proceed: hand to a human, retry, or stop safely. A system without a defined fallback has an undefined one, which is usually silence.

Fine-tuning. Additional training that adjusts an existing model's behaviour using your examples; expensive, occasionally right, and usually the wrong first answer.

Foundation model. A large general-purpose model, trained at enormous cost by a handful of companies, that everyone else builds on.

Fractional CAIO. An operator who holds the AI leadership seat part-time for several companies at once, on monthly retainer.

Frontier model. One of the most capable models available at a given moment; the frontier moves several times a year.

Generative AI. AI that produces new content, text, images, audio, code, rather than only classifying or scoring what exists.

GPU (graphics processing unit). The chip type AI models run on, and the reason “compute” appears in every AI budget conversation.

Grounding. Making a model answer from specified source material rather than from what it absorbed in training. Retrieval is the usual mechanism; citations are the usual evidence.

Guardrails. Technical and procedural limits on what an AI system can say or do: topics refused, actions blocked, outputs checked before release.

Hallucination. A model’s confident production of false information; plainly, the machine always answers whether or not it knows.

High-risk. A regulatory classification rather than an opinion. Where a law applies it, obligations follow, and the categories usually involve decisions about people. Appendix E carries the detail by jurisdiction.

Human in the loop. A system design where a person reviews or approves AI output before it takes effect, mandatory anywhere consequences are real.

Inference. Running a trained model to get an output, the thing you pay per use; training is building the model, inference is using it.

Integration. Connecting an AI system to the software a business already runs, which is usually more of the work and more of the value than the AI part.

ISO 42001. The certifiable international standard for an AI management system, increasingly used as a procurement checkbox and governance benchmark.

Kill criteria. The pre-agreed numbers that decide a pilot dies, set before it starts, so the decision is arithmetic instead of politics.

Knowledge base. The collection of documents a system answers from. Its quality caps the quality of every answer, which is why curation is the real project.

Latency. How long the system takes to respond. It matters enormously for anything a customer is waiting on and barely at all for anything running overnight.

LLM (large language model). The engine of the current AI wave: a model trained on colossal amounts of text that produces what most plausibly comes next.

Loaded hourly rate. What one hour of an employee actually costs the business, including on-costs, divided by genuinely productive hours. Every savings figure you ever quote stands on this number, and Chapter 39 builds one line by line.

Machine learning. Software that learns patterns from data instead of following hand-written rules; the umbrella over almost everything in this glossary.

MLOps. The engineering discipline of running machine learning in production: versioning, monitoring, retraining, reliability.

Model. The trained artifact itself, the thing that turns your input into output; different models trade off capability, speed and cost.

Multimodal. A model that works across more than one medium: text, images, audio, video, in and out.

Neural network. The layered mathematical structure modern AI is built from, loosely inspired by neurons and best left as a metaphor.

NIST AI RMF. The United States government's voluntary AI risk framework, organised as Govern, Map, Measure, Manage, with a

companion profile addressing generative AI specifically. It is the shared vocabulary of American AI governance and it is not a law.

No-code and low-code. Tools that let somebody build working software by configuring rather than programming. Most of what this book teaches you to build is built this way.

OCR (optical character recognition). Turning images of documents into machine-readable text, the unglamorous workhorse of document automation.

Open-source model. A model whose weights are published for anyone to run and modify, trading some capability for control, privacy and cost options.

Orchestration. Coordinating the steps, tools and model calls that make up a working system. The workflow platform usually does it, and it is where most of your build time goes.

Per-resolution pricing. Paying only for issues an AI system actually resolves rather than per seat. Attractive, and the definition of “resolved” is the entire negotiation.

Per-seat pricing. A flat amount per person per month. Predictable, and the meter most likely to leave you paying for people who never log in.

PII (personally identifiable information). Data that identifies a person, and the category of data your one-page policy exists to keep out of the wrong tools.

Pilot. A limited, measured trial of an AI solution on real work, with a baseline in front of it and kill criteria behind it.

Production. The state of being relied on for real work, with an owner, monitoring and a plan for failure; the opposite of a demo.

Prompt. The instruction and context you give a model; the quality of the prompt is most of the quality of the output.

Prompt injection. An attack where malicious text inside content the model reads tries to hijack its instructions, a reason customer-facing systems need red-teaming.

Proof of concept (PoC). A quick demonstration that something can work at all, which is not evidence it will work on your messy data at volume; see pilot.

RAG (retrieval-augmented generation). Having the model answer from your documents by fetching relevant passages first, so answers come with references instead of from memory.

Rate limit. A cap on how much a system can do in a period. Vendors impose them; you should also impose your own, because a rate limit is the cheapest protection against a runaway system.

Reasoning model. A model that works through a problem in steps before answering, which improves hard tasks, costs more and takes longer. Use it where the thinking is the difficulty, not where the volume is.

Red-teaming. Deliberately attacking your own AI system before launch, trying to make it fail, leak or misbehave, and fixing what you find.

Register (use-case register). The live inventory of every AI system in an organisation, with owner, purpose, data and risk tier; the second governance artifact and increasingly a legal expectation.

Retention. How long a vendor keeps your inputs and outputs. One of the three questions to re-ask every vendor every year.

Runbook. The one page that says what a system does, how to tell if it is broken, who owns it, and how to switch it off. The artifact that makes a handoff real.

Sandbox. A safe, walled-off environment for testing where nothing can reach real customers or real data.

Shadow AI. Staff using unapproved AI tools on company work, usually a sign of real demand plus an absent sanctioned path.

Shadow run. Running a new system alongside the existing process without acting on its output, so you can compare the two honestly before anything is at stake.

SOC 2. A widely used security audit report that a client's procurement team may ask a vendor for. Not about AI specifically, and frequently the first thing requested.

Structured output. Making a model return information in a fixed shape, such as named fields, so other software can use it without a human in between.

Synthetic media. Images, audio or video generated rather than recorded. Several jurisdictions now attach disclosure obligations to it.

System of record. The one system that holds the truth about something, as opposed to the several that hold stale copies. Finding out which is which is half of reading a business.

System prompt. The standing instructions a deployed AI system carries into every conversation: its role, rules, tone and limits.

Temperature. A setting that controls how varied a model's answers are. Lower for anything that must be consistent, higher for anything that should be creative. It is a dial, not a mystery.

Throughput. How much work a system gets through in a period, which is the number that matters for anything running at volume.

Token. The unit models read and write in, roughly three-quarters of a word, and the unit AI usage is priced in.

Tool use (function calling). Giving a model the ability to do things rather than only say things: look something up, send something, write to a system. It is what separates an assistant from an agent, and it is where permissions start to matter.

Training. The compute-intensive process of building a model from data, done by model makers; businesses almost never train models, they use them.

Transcription. Turning speech into text, now near-instant and near-free, which quietly revolutionised meetings, calls and dictation.

Transparency obligation. A legal duty to tell people when they are dealing with AI or looking at AI-generated content. Now real law in some jurisdictions and good practice everywhere.

Use case. One specific task or process AI is applied to; the discipline of choosing them by volume, pain and measurability is Chapter 20.

Vector database. A database built to search embeddings, finding content by meaning rather than keyword; the storage layer under most RAG systems.

Vendor lock-in. The cost of leaving. Ask what it takes to get your data and your configurations out, before you go in.

Voice agent. A system that holds a spoken conversation on the phone. The most publicly visible thing you will ever deploy and the one to pilot hardest.

Wrapper. A product that is mostly a thin layer over someone else's model; sometimes worth the margin for its workflow, often not, always worth the ten minutes to check.

Zero-shot and few-shot. Asking a model to do something with no examples, or with two or three. Few-shot is usually better and is the technical name for the ordinary act of showing the machine what good looks like.

G3. Words vendors use that mean less than they sound like

None of these are lies exactly. All of them are load-bearing in a sales conversation and empty in a technical one, and knowing that is worth a discount.

AI-powered. Contains a model call somewhere. Says nothing about where, how much, or whether it helps.

Proprietary AI. Almost always means a prompt, a set of rules, or a fine-tune sitting on top of a model made by somebody else. Ask which model. A serious vendor answers in one sentence.

Self-learning. Rarely means what a listener assumes. Ask precisely what changes over time, based on what, and who reviews it.

Autonomous. Ask what it can do without a human, then ask what caps it. If the second answer does not exist, the first one is the problem.

Enterprise-grade. Sometimes means real security, access control and support. Sometimes means the price. Ask which controls specifically.

Seamless integration. Ask which systems, using which connector, maintained by whom, and what happens when the other system changes its format.

Trained on your data. Ambiguous by design. It might mean the system answers from your documents, which is retrieval and is good. It might mean your data was used to train a model, which is a different thing and usually not what you want. Make them say which.

Up to X% improvement. The word doing the work is “up to.” Ask for the median rather than the best case, and ask what the comparison was against.

The general habit, which Chapter 21 turns into three questions: when a phrase makes you feel reassured rather than informed, that is the phrase

to ask about.

Appendix H: The Tools and Platforms Reference

Chapter 21 gave you the map: six categories, learn categories not brands, and three questions that collapse any vendor's act. This appendix is the reference behind that map, written for a reader who has never bought a piece of software in their life.

Thirteen categories, each one covering what it actually is in plain words, who it is for, how it charges you, how to judge one, and the mistake beginners make. Then three starter stacks with what they cost, a buying checklist, and a short list of things not to buy.

On prices. Every figure in this appendix is a range, stated in whole dollars per user per month, per month, per document, per minute or per million words, and every range is deliberately wide. Ranges are used rather than plan names because plans get renamed, repackaged and repriced several times a year, and a book that named them would be wrong before it was printed. Figures here are current to 2026 and the next edition restates them. Treat any figure as an order of magnitude that tells you whether something is a coffee, a phone bill or a salary, and check the vendor's own page before you quote a client a number. Chapter 21's habit stands: one deliberate hour a month keeps your map honest.

On what is missing. No product recommendations. This appendix names categories and, where a name genuinely helps a beginner picture the category, examples. It does not rank vendors, because a ranking printed in a book is a ranking that ages badly and, worse, teaches you to memorise instead of judge.

H1. How AI products charge you: the six meters

Learn this section and you can read any pricing page in the market in ninety seconds. There are only six ways these products bill, and knowing

which meter you are on tells you what happens to your bill when the business grows.

Per seat. A flat amount per person per month. Predictable, easy to budget, and the meter you want for anything humans sit in front of. The trap is paying for seats nobody uses, which is the single most common line in every subscription audit you will ever run.

Per task, operation or run. You pay for each thing the system does. Workflow automation platforms mostly work this way. The trap is that the arithmetic is trivial at low volume and unpleasant at high volume, so always price a platform at the volume the business will hit in a year, not the volume it has today.

Per token, or per word. Model providers charge for the text going in and the text coming out, measured in tokens, which are roughly three-quarters of a word each. Input is usually cheaper than output. This is the cheapest meter in the market by a wide margin and it is the one underneath almost everything else you will be quoted.

Per minute. Voice systems, mostly. You pay for time on the line, usually plus a platform fee. Easy to model against the labour it displaces, because reception time is already measured in minutes.

Per document, per page or per item. Document processing. Simple to forecast if you know your volumes, and you should, because Appendix I's purchasing section makes you count them.

Per outcome. The newest meter, most visible in customer support, where vendors charge per issue actually resolved rather than per seat. Attractive because it aligns the vendor with the result, and worth reading carefully, because the definition of "resolved" is the whole contract.

Credits, which are not a seventh meter. Many vendors now sell credits that convert into some blend of the above at rates only they control. Credits are a pricing fog, not a pricing model. When you meet

them, ask exactly what one credit buys, in the underlying unit, and watch how comfortable the answer is.

The change that caught the market out. Until recently, a seat price was the whole price for anything a human sat in front of. That is no longer true. The major vendors have begun stacking a consumption meter on top of the seat, so a licence buys access and the work the AI actually does is billed separately, in credits or at underlying model rates. Read every quote for two meters rather than one, and when you build a client's budget, put a line in it for consumption even when the vendor's headline figure does not.

The one number to carry into every meeting. The raw intelligence underneath nearly every product in this appendix costs cents per task at the model provider. Everything above that is packaging: interface, integrations, support, compliance, evaluation. Packaging is often worth paying for. It is never worth paying for without knowing you are paying for it.

H2. Chat assistants and copilots

What it is. A conversation window connected to a general-purpose AI model. You type, it answers, and it can handle anything made of words, numbers or reasoning. The best-known examples are ChatGPT, Claude, Google's Gemini and Microsoft Copilot.

Who it is for. Everybody, starting on day one. This is where individual work gets faster, and it is where every deployment you ever build gets prototyped before it gets automated.

How it charges. Per seat. Free tiers exist and are genuinely useful for learning. Business tiers across the major vendors run roughly \$18 to \$30 per user per month when paid annually, a few dollars more monthly, with enterprise tiers above that and premium seats for heavy users well above that again. Consider this the cheapest professional tool in the

building, and then read the previous section again, because several of these vendors now bill agent and automation usage on top of the seat.

How to choose. Which model writes the nicest sentences matters far less than people think, because the leaders leapfrog each other every few months. Choose on four things instead. Business-tier data handling, meaning your prompts are not used to train the model and an administrator can control accounts. Whether it fits the suite the company already runs, which in practice tends to decide between Copilot in a Microsoft shop and Gemini in a Google shop. Whether it can be given the company's own context in a managed way, through projects, custom instructions or connected document stores. And whether the people who need it will actually open it, which is a training question rather than a software question.

The beginner mistake. Buying licences and calling it a rollout. A chat licence with no training and no named use cases is a monthly donation, and it is the largest single item in the subscription graveyard of most companies that told their board they had “adopted AI.”

H3. Workflow automation platforms

What it is. The plumbing between systems. Something happens, then a sequence of steps runs automatically, updating other systems along the way, and increasingly one of those steps asks an AI model to read, write or decide something. Zapier, Make, n8n and Power Automate are the names you will meet most.

Who it is for. You, constantly. This is the workhorse of a deployment practice and most of Chapter 22's ten builds run on it.

How it charges. In tiers, but on meters that are not the same meter, and this is the most expensive thing beginners get wrong in this appendix. Free tiers exist on all of them with small monthly allowances. Paid entry tiers start around \$10 to \$20 a month, and realistic small-

business production use on the cloud tiers commonly lands between \$20 and \$100 a month, rising into the hundreds and beyond at serious volume.

The meter is the part to understand. Some platforms charge for every step in an automation, some for every module action, and some for each whole run of a workflow regardless of how many steps it contains. The same automation, with the same volume, can therefore differ by an order of magnitude between two platforms. Before you recommend one, write down the number of runs a month and the number of steps per run, then price the same job on two platforms. It takes fifteen minutes and it is the difference between a \$30 line item and a \$600 one. Self-hosted options trade the subscription for the work of running the software yourself, which is a real cost even when it never appears as an invoice.

How to choose. First and above everything: does it already connect to the systems this business runs? A platform with a well-maintained native connection to the client's accounting package beats a theoretically better platform without one, every time. Then, in order: can the client's own team eventually read what you built, because a rat's nest nobody understands is a hostage situation rather than a handoff; what does it cost on its own meter at the volume they will actually hit; and what happens when a step fails, because a platform that fails silently will eventually embarrass you in front of a customer. Test the error alerting harder than anything else.

The beginner mistake. Building the clever version. The build that runs the same way every time, handles 95% of cases and fails loudly on the rest is worth more than the elegant one, because you can hand it over and somebody else can fix it.

H4. Document AI and data extraction

What it is. Software that reads documents and produces structured information: pulling the fields off an invoice, the dates and obligations

out of a contract, the answers off a form, and writing them into a system instead of a human retyping them.

Who it is for. Any business where information arrives as paper or PDF and leaves as keystrokes, which is most of them.

How it charges. Per page or per document, and the spread inside that is enormous because two different things are being sold under one name. Plain text recognition, meaning turning a picture of a page into characters, has been commoditised and runs at roughly a dollar or two per thousand pages across the large cloud providers. Structured extraction, meaning pulling named fields and tables out reliably, runs an order or two of magnitude higher, commonly in the range of \$30 to \$70 per thousand pages. Specialist bookkeeping and contract tools sell subscriptions instead, from roughly \$20 to a few hundred a month.

Two traps. Your real bill is the sum of every model that fires on a document, not the single headline rate, so a page that goes through recognition, then classification, then extraction is billed three times. And at least one major provider charges an hourly fee for each processor you leave deployed whether or not any document goes through it, which quietly produces a few hundred dollars a year of billing for a service nobody is using. Check for idle charges before you leave anything switched on.

Note also that a general model with a well-built extraction prompt now handles a good share of what specialist products charged serious money for a few years ago, so this category has the fastest-moving buy-versus-assemble line of the thirteen. Re-run the comparison each time rather than trusting last year's answer.

How to choose. Accuracy on their documents, never the vendor's demo set, which means a trial on fifty real samples before anybody signs. Whether it writes into the system of record directly, because extraction that lands in another inbox has simply relocated the retyping. How it behaves when it is unsure, since the good products flag low-confidence

fields for review rather than guessing confidently, and Chapter 23 teaches you to treat that review queue as a design feature. And where the documents are stored and processed, because this is the category where the sensitive information lives.

The beginner mistake. Judging it on the average accuracy figure. What matters is what happens on the 3% it gets wrong, and whether anybody would notice.

H5. Transcription and meeting notes

What it is. Software that turns speech into text and meetings into summaries, actions and records. Standalone notetakers, and the recorders now built into the major meeting platforms.

Who it is for. Anybody whose week contains meetings. This is the most reliably useful and least controversial category in the entire appendix, and it is often the first thing you switch on in an engagement because nobody objects to it.

How it charges. Per seat, roughly \$8 to \$40 per user per month depending on tier, with free tiers capped by minutes rather than features. The major meeting platforms also ship their own recording and summary features, frequently inside a tier the company already pays for. Check that before buying anything, because a surprising number of businesses pay twice for the same transcript.

How to choose. Accuracy on your accents, your jargon and your industry's product names, tested on a real recording rather than a clean demo. Where recordings and transcripts are stored, and for how long. Whether summaries can flow into other systems rather than dying inside the app. And the consent position, because recording rules vary by jurisdiction and the etiquette varies by client, so recording notices in calendar invites are standard practice and checking the local rules is part of the job.

The beginner mistake. Recording without telling people. It is the fastest way to turn a harmless deployment into an incident.

H6. Conversational voice agents

What it is. A system that answers or makes phone calls and holds a spoken conversation: taking bookings, answering common questions, handling after-hours overflow, making reminder calls.

Who it is for. Businesses that live on the phone, which in practice means trades, clinics, service businesses and anybody losing calls after 5pm.

How it charges. Per minute, and the advertised rate is not the rate. Platforms commonly headline somewhere between five and twenty-five cents a minute, but that figure is usually the orchestration layer alone. The bill you actually receive adds speech recognition, the model doing the thinking, the voice doing the speaking, and the telephone line itself. Budget fifteen to thirty-five cents a minute all in, which is roughly double most headline figures, and a realistic small-business deployment lands in the low hundreds a month. Compare that against the cost of reception labour and the arithmetic is still loud, which is exactly why this category gets oversold.

How to choose. Judge three things and let everything else go. Does it handle mess gracefully when a caller interrupts, wanders off script or has a strong accent. Does it hand off to a human quickly and smoothly the moment it is out of depth, and can you set exactly when that happens. And is every call logged and reviewable. A voice agent is the most public thing you will ever deploy: it fails in front of customers, in real time, with nobody standing between it and the caller.

The beginner mistake. Deploying it first because it demos well. Deploy it late in an engagement, after two quieter systems have earned

you the credibility to survive its first bad week, and pilot it harder than anything else you ever build.

H7. Customer support AI

What it is. Systems that read incoming customer messages, answer the routine ones from the company's own help material, route the rest, and hand the difficult ones to a person with the context attached.

Who it is for. Any business with a shared inbox that has become a place where things get lost, which Appendix I's question 44 will find in about four minutes.

How it charges. Increasingly per resolution, meaning you pay only for issues the system closes without a human, which is an alignment of interests worth taking seriously. The going range is roughly one to two dollars per automated resolution, charged on top of the per-seat cost of the underlying support platform rather than instead of it.

Where per-resolution pricing is offered, the entire negotiation is the definition of "resolved." Some vendors count only issues the customer confirms were solved. Others count any conversation the system contained without escalating, which includes the customer who gave up. The same ticket volume can cost twice as much under the second definition. Get the definition in writing, ask what happens when a customer replies that the answer did not help, and ask to see the report that lets you audit what you were billed for.

How to choose. The quality of the help material it will answer from, which is usually the real project. Whether it says "I do not know" and escalates, rather than inventing an answer, which you must test deliberately before launch. Whether the human sees the full history when a conversation is handed over. And whether it can be switched off in one click by somebody who is not you.

The beginner mistake. Pointing it at a knowledge base nobody has updated in three years, which produces a confident distributor of wrong answers with the company's logo on it.

H8. Internal knowledge and search

What it is. An assistant that answers staff questions from the company's own documents, policies and past work, and shows which document each answer came from. The technique underneath is usually retrieval, meaning it fetches relevant passages first and answers from those rather than from memory.

Who it is for. Businesses where one person knows where everything is and gets interrupted all day, which Appendix I's questions 97 and 98 find every time.

How it charges. At small scale, nothing extra, because the project and workspace features of the chat assistants in H2 do this adequately for a business with a few hundred documents. Purpose-built platforms charge per seat or per document indexed and run from tens to several hundred dollars a month at the small end.

The enterprise end of this category deserves a warning, because it is where the biggest numbers in this appendix live. Serious enterprise search platforms are quote-only, are commonly reported in the range of fifty to seventy-five dollars per user per month, and carry seat minimums that put an effective floor somewhere around sixty thousand dollars a year before anything is switched on. Reported total cost of ownership runs at two to three times the licence once connectors, permissions work and content cleanup are counted. None of that makes them bad products. It makes them products a two-hundred-person business almost never needs, and a category where "we'll take the enterprise one" is an expensive reflex.

How to choose. Citations on every answer, non-negotiable. Whether it respects who is allowed to see what, because a search tool that surfaces the salary spreadsheet to everybody is a serious incident. How stale documents are handled, which is a curation discipline rather than a feature. And whether it lives where staff already work, because a separate destination they have to remember to visit will be abandoned by week five.

The beginner mistake. Treating this as a software project. It is a curation project with a software step at the end, and the paid work is deciding which documents are canon, fixing the worst of them and dating everything.

H9. Agent platforms

What it is. Systems where an AI is given a goal, some tools and some permissions, and works out the steps itself rather than following a sequence you defined.

Who it is for. Work too variable for fixed plumbing: researching a company and compiling a brief, reconciling mismatched records, triaging a queue where every item needs judgment.

How it charges. Usage-based and moving fast, typically tens to hundreds of dollars a month at small-business scale, and capable of surprising you, because an agent that decides to take forty steps costs forty steps.

How to choose. The first question is whether you need it at all. A fixed workflow covering 95% of cases is cheaper to run, far easier to debug and does the same thing every time, which an agent by definition does not. Where the variability is genuine and the value is high, judge the permissions model first, because you must be able to cap what the agent can touch, send, spend or delete before it runs. Then the audit trail, because every action must be logged. Then whether you can test it at

volume before real customers or real data are exposed. And then the spend cap, which should be a hard limit rather than an alert.

The beginner mistake. Reaching for an agent because it is the exciting category. This is the one to watch most closely and trust most slowly.

H10. AI inside the software you already own

What it is. Not a category you buy so much as one you discover. The CRM that now drafts follow-ups, the accounting package that chases debtors, the job-management or practice-management platform that quietly shipped an assistant last quarter.

Who it is for. Every client, before you propose anything else.

How it charges. Included in a tier they already pay for, or a per-seat uplift, or a credit allowance. All three are common and the first is more common than people expect.

How to choose. Adopt the built-in feature if it genuinely uses the business's own data and workflow rather than being a chat window bolted on for the vendor's earnings call, if it can be configured to the company's tone and rules, and if its output can be checked before it reaches a customer. Plenty of baked-in features fail all three.

The beginner mistake. Skipping this category. Thirty minutes in the settings of the two biggest systems a client pays for, before you propose any build, is the cheapest credibility available in this work, and somebody in that business is almost always paying for something switched off. Chapter 39's engagement found \$17,040 a year that way in the first week.

H11. Model APIs, used directly

What it is. The plug that lets software use an AI model without a human in a chat window. This is what every product in this appendix is built on,

and you can use it directly from a workflow platform without writing code.

Who it is for. You, once you are past the first few builds. It is how you replace an expensive specialist product with a step in a workflow you already run.

How it charges. Per million tokens, priced separately for text going in and text coming out, with output always dearer than input. As this edition goes to press the most capable models across the major providers cluster around five dollars per million words in and twenty-five to thirty out, while the small fast models sit at a few cents to thirty cents in. That is roughly a hundredfold spread between the top and the bottom of the same market, and it is the single most useful cost fact in this appendix, because most business tasks do not need the top.

Three things make the meter cheaper than it looks. Caching, where repeated context is billed at a fraction of the normal input rate. Batching, where work that can wait is commonly billed at half price. And the plain fact that a typical business task consumes a tiny number of tokens, so per-task cost lands in fractions of a cent even on an expensive model.

One thing makes cross-vendor comparison harder than it looks, and almost nobody knows it. Providers count tokens differently, and newer model generations have changed how they count, in at least one case producing something like thirty percent more tokens for exactly the same text. A lower headline price per token is therefore not automatically a lower price. Compare on cost per completed task, measured on your own work, and let the per-token figures be background.

How to choose. Use a capable model while you are getting the task right, then test whether a cheaper, faster one holds the quality once the briefing is good. It very often does, and the difference at volume is real. Also check the data handling terms attached to API access, which are usually stronger than the consumer terms and are one of the reasons

business deployments run here rather than on somebody's personal account.

The beginner mistake. Assuming this is the technical option reserved for engineers. Calling a model from a workflow platform is a form with a box in it.

H12. Build tools for people who do not code

What it is. Two overlapping families. Application builders that produce a working internal tool, form or small database from a description. And coding assistants, which matter to you mainly because the contractors in Chapter 25 use them, and knowing that shapes what a build should honestly cost in 2026.

Who it is for. The internal tool that is currently a spreadsheet with eleven tabs and one custodian.

How it charges. Per seat, commonly \$20 to \$50 a month, sometimes with usage credits on top. Hosting for anything you publish is usually extra and usually small.

How to choose. What happens when it breaks and who can fix it, which is the question that decides whether you have built an asset or a liability. Whether the data lives somewhere the client controls. Whether you can export what you built. And whether the client's own team can maintain it, because the handoff in step seven of Chapter 19's loop is not optional.

The beginner mistake. Building an application when a workflow and a shared document would have done. Every application you create becomes something somebody has to own forever.

H13. Media generation, and governance tooling

Two smaller categories, grouped because most readers will touch them lightly.

Media generation covers images, video, voice cloning and music. It charges per generation or per credit, from a few dollars a month upward. It is genuinely useful for the content production line in Chapter 22's tenth build and genuinely dangerous everywhere identity, likeness or claims are involved. Judge it on rights, meaning what the vendor grants you over what it produces; on disclosure, because transparency obligations around synthetic media are now real law in Europe and are covered in Appendix E; and on whether anybody in the business would be embarrassed if the method became public.

Governance and monitoring tooling covers products that log AI usage, enforce policy, redact sensitive data before it reaches a model, and evaluate output quality over time. It charges per seat or per volume and starts around the price of a chat licence. The honest guidance for the businesses this book teaches you to serve is that a spreadsheet register, a one-page policy and business-tier accounts cover the ground for a long time, and Chapter 26 builds exactly that. Buy tooling here when the register stops fitting in a spreadsheet, which for a two-hundred-person business is a long way off.

H14. Three starter stacks

What a business actually needs, at three sizes. These are complete stacks, not shopping lists, and each one is deliberately smaller than a vendor would propose.

The sole operator or micro business, roughly \$60 to \$120 a month. One chat assistant on a business tier for the owner. One meeting notetaker, or the one already included in their meeting platform. One workflow automation platform on its entry tier. That is the whole stack, and it will carry a business for a year.

The small business, ten to fifty staff, roughly \$400 to \$1,200 a month. Chat assistants on business tiers for the eight to fifteen people who will genuinely use them, not for everybody. Notetakers for the client-facing team. A workflow automation platform on a production tier sized to real volume. One document processing tool if invoice or form volume justifies it. Whatever AI is already included in their main operating system, switched on and configured. Nothing else until something in the register earns it.

The mid-sized business, fifty to two hundred and fifty staff, roughly \$2,000 to \$8,000 a month. The above at scale, plus a support AI or an internal knowledge assistant where the volume is real, plus model API access for the builds that no longer belong on a subscription, plus the first genuine spend on access control and logging. At this size the biggest saving available is almost never a new tool. It is consolidation, because a business this size is usually running three products that overlap.

A note on the ratio. Across all three, expect tooling to cost a small fraction of the labour value it moves. When a proposed stack costs a meaningful share of the saving, something in the stack is wrong, and it is usually a wrapped commodity priced as an enterprise product.

H15. The buying checklist

Eleven questions, in order, before any AI product is bought. Ask them out loud in front of the client and watch your standing rise in real time.

1. Does software this business already pays for do this? Thirty minutes in the settings, before anything else.
2. What model does this run on, and what happens to our data?
3. What does this do that the underlying model plus a workflow platform cannot?
4. Show me it failing. What inputs break it, and what happens then?

5. Which meter am I on, and what does my bill look like at three times today's volume?
6. What does the trial look like on fifty of our real records, not your demo set?
7. Where is our data stored and processed, and can we get all of it out?
8. Who owns what this produces?
9. What happens on the day this vendor is acquired or shuts down?
10. Can somebody in this business, who is not me, switch it off in one click?
11. Who here will own this after handoff, and have they agreed out loud?

Questions two, three and four are Chapter 21's three questions, and they remain the fastest way to find out whether you are talking to a company that has done the engineering. Question eleven is the one that decides whether the deployment is alive in six months.

H16. What not to buy

Anything sold on a countdown timer. Serious infrastructure is not sold this way.

Anything whose demo used the vendor's data. You have learned nothing about your own.

Anything replacing a decision that should stay human. Hiring, credit, pricing to individuals, and anything with a legal or safety consequence. Chapter 22's ninth build explains the design that keeps these safe, and Appendix L covers what happens when they are not.

Anything nobody in the business asked for. A tool bought because the technology is impressive is a tool that becomes a subscription line eighteen months later, and you will meet it again as a finding in somebody else's audit.

Anything you cannot explain to the person who will use it, in one sentence, without using a word they would have to look up. That test has retired more bad purchases than any comparison table ever printed.

Appendix I: The Diagnostic Question Bank

One hundred and fifty questions, grouped by business function, written to be read aloud in a client's office without adaptation. Chapter 20 taught the theory of reading a business and Chapter 39 showed the eighteen questions one engagement actually used. This is the library those eighteen were selected from.

How to use it. Never ask all of these. A working assessment uses fifteen to twenty-five, chosen after the opening conversation tells you which functions carry the weight. Read the section for the function you are about to walk, mark five or six, and go. A consultant reading questions off a list at speed produces a survey; a consultant asking six good questions and then following the answers produces findings.

Four rules that make every question below work harder.

Ask, then wait. The useful part of the answer arrives after the silence, not before it. Count to five in your head before you speak again, every time, and you will hear things the previous three consultants did not.

Ask for the number, then ask where the number came from. "How many quotes a week?" is worth something. "And where does that figure come from?" is worth more, because half the time the honest answer is that nobody knows, and that is a finding.

Ask to be shown. Every question in this bank has a better version, which is "show me." Watching a person do the task for four minutes beats twenty minutes of them describing it. Chapter 39's question fourteen exists for this reason.

Never ask a question whose answer you will not use. If you are not going to price this function, do not interview it for an hour. Walk it, note it, and say so in the report.

A note on order. The sections run in the sequence a business runs: money in, work sold, work delivered, money collected, people who do it, the systems underneath, and the risks around it. Following that order keeps the conversation in the client's logic rather than yours.

I1. Opening questions, for the owner or chief executive

Ask these first, before any function is walked. They set the map and they tell you where the political weight sits.

1. Walk me through what this business does from the moment a customer first contacts you to the moment the money is in the account.
2. What are you personally the bottleneck on right now?
3. What do you do in a normal week that somebody earning half your salary could do?
4. Which part of this business would break first if you doubled revenue next year?
5. What are you spending money on that you suspect is waste but have never proved?
6. What did you try to fix in the last two years that did not stick, and what happened?
7. If you had to lose one office role tomorrow, which one would hurt least, and why?
8. What keeps you awake that is not money?
9. Who here will resist this, and what are they right about?
10. What would have to be true in ninety days for you to say this was worth the money?
11. Who else has to agree before anything happens here?
12. What has a competitor done in the last year that you noticed and did not like?

Question six is the one that saves you from repeating somebody else's failure. Question nine surfaces the political map before you walk into it, and it flatters nobody, which is why people answer it straight. Question eleven is the only one on this list with a commercial purpose, and asking it early prevents the engagement that dies in month two because a co-owner nobody mentioned said no.

12. Sales and business development

1. How does a lead reach you, through every channel, including the ones you would not list on the website?
2. What happens in the first five minutes after an enquiry arrives, and who does it?
3. How long does it actually take to respond to a new enquiry, measured rather than estimated?
4. How many enquiries did you get last month, and where is that number recorded?
5. What proportion of enquiries never get a reply at all?
6. Who writes the quotes, and what happens when that person is on leave?
7. How long does a quote take to produce, from the end of the conversation to it landing with the customer?
8. How many quotes go out a week, and how many convert?
9. What is in a quote that is the same every time, and what genuinely changes?
10. Where does your pricing logic live, and how much of it is in one person's head?
11. What do you do when a quote goes quiet, and who does it?
12. What does a lost deal cost you, on average, in gross profit?
13. What does your CRM tell you that you actually trust, and what do you ignore?
14. When did somebody last go through the pipeline and clear out what is dead?

Question 24 is the money question of the whole section. If the client can answer it, every proposal you write afterwards has a denominator. If they cannot, help them build it in the meeting; it takes four minutes and it changes how they see everything you subsequently propose.

I3. Marketing

1. What have you published in the last ninety days, on any channel?
2. Who writes it, and what else is that person responsible for?
3. What did you intend to publish and not get to?
4. Where do your best customers actually come from, and how do you know?
5. What do you spend on advertising, and what does it return?
6. Who answers the questions that come in through social channels, and how fast?
7. What content exists already, in any form, that has never been used twice?
8. What do customers ask before they buy, every single time?
9. What is the most common reason somebody chooses you over the alternative, in their words rather than yours?
10. What does your competition publish that you notice?

Question 33 is a quiet goldmine. Almost every business is sitting on recorded webinars, past proposals, answered emails and a founder who talks well, none of it reused. Question 34 gives you the content plan and the knowledge base contents in one answer.

I4. Customer service and support

1. Where do customer messages arrive, across every inbox, form, phone line and channel?
2. How many come in a day, and where is that measured?
3. What is your median first response time, and what do you tell customers it is?

4. Who reads the shared inbox first thing, and how long does that take before any work happens?
5. What proportion of messages are the same handful of questions?
6. What is the single most common question, and how many times a week is it answered from scratch?
7. What happens to a message that arrives at 6pm on Friday?
8. How do you know if something got missed?
9. What does an escalation look like, and who decides it is one?
10. What do you do about complaints, and where is the record?
11. How many calls come in that nobody answers, and where would that number be?
12. What does a customer have to repeat when they are handed from one person to another?

Question 44 is the diagnostic. If the answer is “the customer chases us”, you have found both a service problem and a build. Question 48 finds the retyping, which is where the fastest wins usually are.

I5. Operations and delivery

1. Take me through your week. What happens on which day, and who does it?
2. What does your team do that is the same every single time?
3. What arrives here in one format and gets typed into something else?
4. What do you wait for, and who do you wait on?
5. What goes wrong often enough that you have a workaround for it?
6. If I gave you one more person tomorrow, what would you put them on?
7. What do you measure, where does that number come from, and who checks it?
8. Show me. Do that task now, at normal speed, while I watch and time it.
9. How many of these do you do in a day, a week, a month?

10. What is the longest part of it, and what makes it long?
11. What do you do when it goes wrong, and how often is that?
12. If this part vanished tomorrow, what would you do with the time?
13. What gets scheduled, and how does the schedule change during a normal day?
14. Who has to be asked before a job can proceed, and what are they usually doing when asked?
15. What does the person doing this job need to know that is not written down anywhere?
16. What did you have to redo last week, and why?
17. What information do you copy from one screen to another, and how many times a day?
18. What would happen to this function if the most experienced person here resigned on Friday?

Question 54 is the highest-yield question in the entire bank. Nobody hesitates, everybody answers honestly, and the answer is a direct nomination of the most painful capacity gap in that function, ranked by the person closest to it. Question 66 is the one that reframes a productivity finding as a continuity risk, which is the version the board cares about.

I6. Purchasing, supply and inventory

1. What do you order regularly, and who decides when?
2. How does a supplier invoice get from arriving to being paid?
3. How many supplier invoices a month, and who keys them in?
4. How do you know what you have in stock, and how often is that wrong?
5. What do you run out of, and what happens when you do?
6. Who checks that what you were charged matches what you agreed?
7. When did you last review supplier pricing, and how long did it take?

8. What do you order that you could stop ordering and nobody would notice?

Question 69 is where document AI lives in most businesses. Ask for the count and the keystroke time, then ask who checks the keying, because the checking is usually the larger number.

17. Finance, billing and collections

1. How does an invoice get raised, and how long after the work is done?
2. What proportion of invoices go out late, and why?
3. What are your debtor days, and what were they a year ago?
4. Who chases overdue money, how, and how many hours a week does it take?
5. What is the largest amount currently overdue, and by how long?
6. What do you write off in a year?
7. What happens when a customer disputes an invoice?
8. How do you decide who gets credit and how much?
9. How long does the month-end close take, and what is the slowest part?
10. Who builds the management reports, from which systems, and how long does it take?
11. How many places does a number have to be copied to before management sees it?
12. What report does somebody produce that nobody reads?
13. What do you pay for in software, in total, and when did anybody last look at the full list?
14. What is your cost of borrowing, or what would it be if you needed money next week?

Question 87 pays for the assessment on its own more often than any other question in the bank. Ask for the card statement, not the list somebody remembers. Question 88 is what turns a debtor-days

improvement into a defensible interest figure rather than a hand-wave, and Chapter 39 shows that arithmetic in full.

18. People, hiring and training

1. How many people have you hired in the last twelve months, and how many left?
2. What does it cost you to replace somebody in this role, all in?
3. How long does a new starter take to be useful, and what makes it that long?
4. Who trains them, and what else is that person supposed to be doing?
5. What is written down that a new person could learn from, and how current is it?
6. How many applications does a job ad attract, and who reads them?
7. What do you check before you make an offer, and how long does that take?
8. What does your induction consist of, honestly?
9. Who is the person everyone interrupts, and how many times a day?
10. What do people ask that person, and could the answer have been written down?

Questions 97 and 98 run together and they find the internal knowledge assistant build every time. Get the interrupted person to keep tally marks for five working days. The number is always higher than they guessed, and having counted it themselves, they stop being an obstacle to fixing it.

19. Data and systems

1. List every piece of software this business pays for, including the ones on somebody's personal card.

2. Which system holds the truth about a customer, and which ones hold a stale copy?
3. What talks to what, and where does a human sit between two systems moving information by hand?
4. What do you export to a spreadsheet, and what happens to the spreadsheet afterwards?
5. Which spreadsheet would hurt most if it disappeared, and who maintains it?
6. What data do you have that you have never looked at?
7. How clean is your customer data, honestly, and when was it last audited?
8. Who has administrative access to each system, and when was that last reviewed?
9. What happens to a customer record when someone leaves the company?
10. What did you buy that never got fully implemented?
11. What features are you paying for and not using in the two biggest systems here?
12. When did your main vendors last ship something new, and did anybody read the release notes?

Questions 108 through 110 are the free-money block. Thirty minutes in the settings of the two largest systems, before you propose any build, is the cheapest credibility available in this work. Chapter 21 makes the same argument at length.

110. Compliance, risk and legal

1. What are you regulated by, and who in the business knows the detail?
2. What would an auditor or a regulator ask to see, and could you produce it today?
3. What data do you hold that you would not want to lose or leak?

4. Where does customer data physically live, in which services and which countries?
5. What AI tools are staff already using, on what data, with whose approval?
6. What is in your contracts with customers about how you may use their information?
7. What does your insurance actually cover, and when did you last read the schedule?
8. Who would be responsible if an automated message caused a real problem for a customer?
9. What have your customers started asking you about AI in their procurement questionnaires?
10. Has anybody here made a decision about a person, hiring, credit, pricing or service level, with software helping?

Question 115 is a shadow AI audit in one sentence and it very rarely gets a clean answer. Ask it of the function leads rather than the chief executive, because the chief executive genuinely does not know.

Question 120 finds the highest-risk existing use in the business, which is almost never the thing anybody was worried about. Appendix L covers what to do with both answers.

I11. Leadership, reporting and decisions

1. What do you look at every Monday morning to know how the business is going?
2. Which of those numbers do you trust, and which do you quietly discount?
3. What decision did you make last month that you would like to have made with better information?
4. What question do you ask that nobody can answer quickly?
5. How long does it take to find out that something has gone wrong?
6. What is on the agenda of your management meeting, and what actually gets discussed?

7. What are you planning to do in the next twelve months that changes the shape of the business?
8. What has to be true for you to hire another person in the office?
9. Who owns technology decisions here, and how are they made?
10. What is the budget for this kind of work, and who signs it off?

Question 123 is the one that produces the sentence you will quote back in the findings report. Question 125 is your best route to the reporting build, because the answer is usually a number of days that shocks the person saying it.

I12. The questions that decide whether to build

Ask these of yourself about every candidate process, before it goes anywhere near a recommendation. If a process cannot survive all eight, it does not go in the report.

1. How many times a month does this happen, counted rather than estimated?
2. What does one instance cost, at the loaded hourly rate, timed rather than guessed?
3. Does anybody feel the pain, or is this only visible in a spreadsheet?
4. Is there a baseline available before we change anything, and can we get it this week?
5. What is the worst thing that happens if the machine gets this wrong, and who finds out?
6. Where does the human checkpoint sit, and does the business have a person free to stand there?
7. Does the software they already own do this, if somebody configured it?
8. Who owns this on the client side after handoff, and have they agreed in person?

Question 133 is the one that gets skipped and the one that kills deployments. A process nobody minds doing will not survive the change

management, no matter how good the arithmetic looks. Question 136 is the specific mistake Chapter 41's underperforming build made, and it is the most common failure in this entire discipline.

I13. The questions to ask yourself afterwards

1. Which of the answers I got today contradicted another answer, and which one is true?
2. What did I see that nobody mentioned?
3. What did somebody get defensive about, and why?
4. Which number did I accept without asking for its source?
5. What is the largest cost in this business that I am declining to touch, and can I write the reason in three sentences?
6. What could I recommend they do this week that costs them nothing?
7. What am I proposing because it is genuinely right, and what am I proposing because I know how to build it?
8. If this engagement fails in six months, what will the reason turn out to have been?
9. Who in this business has to succeed personally for this to work, and do they know that yet?
10. What would I tell a friend to do if there were no fee attached?
11. Is the thing I am about to recommend the biggest opportunity here, or the most convenient one?
12. Can every number in my report survive somebody pointing at it and asking where it came from?

Question 145 is the discipline that separates an adviser from a supplier, and it is uncomfortable by design. Question 150 is the test Chapter 39 builds the whole tally around; if the answer is no for any row, that row does not go in.

Appendix J: The Career Transition Kit

Everything between deciding you want the seat and holding it: how to write your experience so it reads as AI leadership, how to position yourself publicly, how to answer the questions that only get asked of career changers, and what to do in the first ninety days once you are in.

Appendix D is the interview bank, and it is the document to prepare with once you are in a process. This appendix is what happens before and after that: the paper that gets you into the room, and the quarter that decides whether you keep the seat. The two overlap in one section only, and it is flagged where it does.

One framing that governs everything below. You are not applying to be an AI expert. You are applying to be the person who makes AI produce money in a specific kind of business, which is a different job that a different kind of person is better at. Chapter 8's argument is that the translator is scarcer than the technologist, and every document in this appendix is written to make that argument on your behalf without you having to say it out loud.

J1. The positioning sentence

Write this before you touch a resume, a profile or an application. One sentence, in this shape:

I help [type of business] [do a specific thing] using AI, and I have [specific evidence].

Weak version: "I am passionate about AI transformation and helping organisations unlock value."

Working version: “I help mid-sized distribution businesses cut the admin load in their sales and finance teams using AI, and I have shipped four systems that took ninety hours a month out of a sixty-person company.”

The difference has nothing to do with tone. The second sentence contains a buyer, a problem, a mechanism and a number, which are the four things anybody deciding whether to talk to you is trying to establish in the first six seconds.

Three rules for writing yours. Name a business type narrow enough that somebody could tell you were not talking about them. Name a problem the business feels rather than a capability you have. And attach evidence with a number in it, even if the number is small, because a small measured number outranks a large adjective in every audience that matters.

If you cannot yet fill the evidence slot, that is not a writing problem. Go and run Appendix K, and come back in thirty days holding something.

J2. Resume language

The structural rule. Your resume is an argument rather than a chronology with AI sprinkled through it, and the order of the argument is fixed: the positioning sentence, the evidence, then the history that makes the evidence plausible.

The summary block. Four lines at the top, no more. Your positioning sentence, your industry depth stated as years, the scope you have run stated in people or budget or revenue, and the AI work stated as outcomes. Never a list of adjectives. Never the word “passionate.”

Example of the shape, using an invented career for illustration:

Operations leader, nineteen years in wholesale distribution, most recently running a forty-person operation across two sites. Since 2025, has designed and deployed six AI systems in live businesses, removing 4,100 hours a year

of manual work and cutting quote turnaround from four days to under one. Comfortable in front of a board and on the floor with the people whose work changes.

The evidence section. This is the section most people do not have and it is the one that gets read. Put it above the employment history. Three to six entries, each in the same four-part form: what the problem was, what you did, what changed, and how it was measured.

Quote turnaround, building services contractor, 2026. Estimators spent 55 minutes assembling each of 46 quotes a week. Built a drafting system from the company’s own scope library and pricing rules, with estimator review retained. Assembly fell to 21 minutes and turnaround from 4.2 days to 0.8. Baseline measured over four weeks before build; after figures from the same system export.

The last clause of that entry does more work than the rest of it combined. Anybody senior reading a resume is silently asking who measured this, and an applicant who answers before being asked is a rarity.

The rewriting table. What people write on the left, what lands on the right.

What people write	What lands
Passionate about AI and emerging technologies	Deployed six AI systems into live operations across two businesses since 2025
Led AI transformation initiatives	Owned the deployment of four processes, each with a measured baseline and a named internal owner at handoff
Experienced with ChatGPT, Claude and Copilot	Chose and defended the tool stack for a sixty-person business, then trained forty staff on it in three sessions

What people write	What lands
Strong understanding of AI governance	Wrote and installed the AI policy, use-case register and sign-off process now in operation at a 118-person company
Improved efficiency using automation	Removed 26 hours a week of document assembly, verified against a four-week pre-build baseline
Championed innovation across the business	Killed two proposed projects that did not clear their cost case, in writing, before spend was committed
Prompt engineering expertise	Built the briefing and template library that took first-draft acceptance from 40% to 76%
Collaborated with cross-functional stakeholders	Ran the working sessions with estimating, accounts and customer service that produced the process maps and the pricing rules

Notice the pattern. Every line on the right contains at least one of: a number, a name for what was produced, or a decision that had a cost. Lines on the left contain none of the three, which is why they are invisible.

The word to delete everywhere. “Helped.” If you helped, say what you did. If you cannot say what you did, it does not belong on the page.

What to do with a career that predates AI entirely. Nothing defensive. Your nineteen years in an industry are the reason you can find the money in it, and the resume should say so in the summary block rather than apologising in the cover letter. What ages badly is a resume that hides the years; what reads well is one that uses them as the qualification for the judgment part of the job. Chapter 14 makes the full argument.

Length. Two pages. The evidence section is the part nobody skims.

J3. LinkedIn and public positioning

The market for this seat runs substantially on inbound. People find you, read three things, and decide whether to have a conversation. Optimise for those three things.

The headline. Not your job title. The positioning sentence, compressed. “Operations leader turning AI into measured cost reduction for distribution businesses” outperforms “Chief AI Officer” for somebody who is not yet one, and it outperforms “AI Enthusiast | Futurist | Speaker” for absolutely everybody.

The about section. Five short paragraphs, in this order. What kind of business you work with. The problem you solve, stated the way an owner would state it. What you have actually shipped, with numbers. How you work, in two sentences, including what you will not do. And how to start a conversation, with a specific first step rather than “let’s connect.”

Write it in the second person as little as possible and in the first person throughout. The industry norm of writing about yourself in the third person reads as a press release, which is the tone this seat is least well served by.

The featured section. This is the one people skip and it is the highest-yield real estate on the profile. Put your artifacts here: a results memo with the client details removed, a shadow audit memo written for a public company, a one-page AI policy you wrote, a short write-up of a deployment with the before and after. Three items. Dated. Chapter 15’s whole point is that these can be manufactured without permission, and this is where they get seen.

The experience section. Rewrite your current role’s description to lead with the AI work even if it is 10% of the job, because that is the part the reader is scanning for. Do not invent a title you do not hold. Do describe the scope of what you own accurately, and do use the same four-part evidence form as the resume.

Activity. One post a week, on one narrow theme, for three months. Write about what you did and what it cost, not about what AI is going to do to the world. The market is drowning in the second and starved of the first. A single post describing a build that did not work, with the arithmetic of why, will out-perform twenty posts of commentary, and it will attract exactly the kind of reader who hires.

What to remove. Certificates from short video courses listed as credentials. Skill endorsements for things you have not done. Anything that describes you as a thought leader. The book's position on certification is consistent and worth repeating here: no job ad requires one, proof outranks paper, and Chapter 37 is where the honest version of that argument lives.

J4. The transition interview questions

Appendix D covers the full interview process, including the board rubric, the failure-story set and the governance cases, and you should prepare with it. What follows is the smaller set asked only of people arriving from another discipline. They are the questions that decide these processes, and they are usually asked in the first fifteen minutes.

“You do not have an AI background. Why should we hire you over someone who does?”

Strong answer names the actual failure mode of the alternative, without disparaging anybody, and then produces evidence. Something in the shape of: most AI programmes that fail do not fail on the technology, they fail because nobody translated between the people who build and the people who decide, and because nobody measured a baseline before changing anything. Then give the specific example of a build you shipped, what you measured, and the internal resistance you handled. Then close honestly on the boundary: name the things you would hire or contract for rather than pretend to.

Red flag to avoid: claiming technical depth you do not have. It gets tested in the next round and the recovery is impossible.

“How technical are you, really?”

Answer it precisely, because the vagueness is what damages you rather than the level. State what you can do unaided, what you can specify and evaluate, and what you would bring in help for. A strong version sounds like: I can build and run workflow automations with model calls in them, I can write and evaluate a specification for a developer and judge whether what came back is acceptable, and I would contract a data engineer for anything touching the warehouse. Then add the thing that actually matters, which is what you do about the gap: name what you have learned in the last ninety days and how.

“What have you actually shipped?”

The question this whole book is designed to let you answer. Two or three systems, each in the four-part form, one of which should be something that is still running without you. That last detail is the strongest single sentence available to a career changer, because it separates the person who demonstrated something from the person who deployed something.

“Who did you upset, and how did you handle it?”

Every AI deployment changes somebody’s work, and interviewers at this level are testing whether you have been near real change or only near slide decks. Name the person’s legitimate concern, what you did about it, and whether it worked. If it did not work, say so and say what you would do differently. Chapter 6’s argument about the sceptics being right about the wrong people is the frame here.

“What would you do in your first ninety days?”

Do not present a plan for the technology. Present a plan for finding out where the money is, in this order: the interviews and the walkthroughs, the baseline discipline, one deployment shipped and measured, the

governance artifacts installed, and a written recommendation on what to do next with what was deliberately declined. Section J6 below is the long version, and bringing a one-page version of it to the interview is a legitimate and effective move.

“What is the biggest risk you see for us in AI?”

The trap is answering with a generic risk. The strong answer names a risk specific to this company, which means you researched them, and then names the cheap mitigation. For most businesses the honest answer is that staff are already using tools nobody approved on data nobody classified, and the mitigation is an amnesty, a one-page policy and a register, which costs almost nothing and takes about two days. Appendix L gives you the full vocabulary.

“Why are you leaving what you do now?”

Answer forward, not backward. The seat lets you own an outcome you have spent years watching from beside. Any answer that spends more than one sentence on the deficiencies of your current employer costs you the round.

“What do you want to be paid?”

Have a number and a range, and know Appendix B before you walk in. Do not name a number in the first conversation if you can gracefully defer it; if pressed, give the range and attach it to scope. The strongest version attaches the number to what you will own rather than to what you are worth, which moves the conversation to scope, which is where you want it.

Two questions to ask them that Appendix D does not cover. Ask what happened to the last person or team who ran AI here, which Appendix D does cover and is worth repeating because it is the highest-yield question in the process. Then ask: which executive here is most sceptical about this, and would I have your support when I agree with them about something? A company that cannot name its sceptic does not

know its own politics, and a chief executive who bristles at the second half of that question has just told you what the job is really like.

J5. The offer conversation

Three things are worth more than the last increment of salary, and all three are negotiable when the salary often is not.

The mandate, in writing. What you own, what budget comes with it, and who has to agree before you can act. Chapter 4's whole warning is about the decorative version of this seat, and the difference between the real and decorative versions is visible in a paragraph.

Access. A standing slot with the chief executive, and attendance at whatever forum makes decisions. Without it you will be told about changes rather than consulted on them, which is how the role becomes an internal help desk.

The measure. Agree what success looks like at ninety days and at twelve months, in writing, before you start. Doing this protects you from the most common way these roles end, which is a change of expectation that nobody recorded. It also, usefully, tells you in the negotiation whether the expectation is achievable, because some of them are not, and finding that out before you resign is worth a great deal.

Ask for the work before you ask for the title, and take a smaller title with a real mandate over a larger one without. The market checks proof, not letterhead.

J6. The first ninety days in an internal seat

The plan below assumes you are inside the business with a mandate. It is deliberately unglamorous, and it is designed so that at day ninety you can hold up something measured rather than something planned.

Days 1 to 14: find out where the money is.

Interview the chief executive and every function lead using Appendix I's sets. Walk six processes with a stopwatch. Build the loaded-hour figure with the finance team so the number is theirs. Inventory every system and subscription, including the ones on somebody's personal card. Ask every function lead what AI tools their people are already using, and record the answers without consequences, which is the amnesty in Chapter 24.

Say almost nothing in these two weeks. The temptation to arrive with answers is enormous and it costs you the rest of the year, because the answers you arrive with are about the last company you were in.

Days 15 to 30: write the tally and pick one.

Produce the tally: volume, time, rate, cost, with a source note on every row. Identify what is addressable and haircut it honestly. Write down what you are recommending against and why, before you write what you are recommending. Then choose one process against Chapter 17's four criteria and take its baseline.

Circulate the tally, not the recommendation. Let the numbers be argued with for a week. Every challenge you survive in that week is a challenge you will not face in month six.

Days 31 to 60: ship one thing and install the governance.

Build the one process. Approval on every output. Shadow-run it, then run it live, then sit with the people whose work it changes and fix what they trip on. Write the runbook and name an owner who is not you.

In the same period, and this is the part that gets skipped, install the governance kit: the one-page policy, the use-case register, the sign-off rules, and the hour of staff training. Chapter 26 covers the whole kit and it takes about two days of your time. Doing it in the first sixty days rather than the second is what turns you from the person who bought tools into the person who owns the function, and it is the single strongest defence against the failure mode in J7.

Days 61 to 90: measure, report, and set the next three.

Close the measurement. Write the results memo using Chapter 18's four moves. Present it to whoever agreed the measure with you at the offer stage, with the arithmetic visible and the sources named.

Then produce the ninety-day readout: what was built, what it returned against baseline, what missed and why, what the register now contains, and the next three processes in order with what each is worth. Chapter 41 shows the full format, and the internal version differs from the consulting version in exactly one way, which is that you also report what capability the organisation gained rather than only what it saved.

What you are holding at day 90. One system running without you with a named internal owner. A measured result with sources. A tally the finance function has already argued with and accepted. A policy, a register and a trained staff. A written recommendation on the next three. And a documented list of what you declined, which is the artifact that makes everything else believable.

J7. The four ways internal AI roles end early

Nothing shipped in the first quarter. The role was created out of anxiety and it will be dissolved out of impatience. Ship something small and measured by day sixty even if it is not the biggest opportunity, because the political clock runs faster than the value clock.

Everything shipped, nothing measured. A year of activity with no baseline produces a review meeting where somebody asks what it returned and the honest answer is a shrug. Measure before you change anything, every time, without exception.

Owning the tools instead of the outcome. The role slides into procurement and licence administration, which is a job that gets absorbed into IT at the next reorganisation. Stay attached to processes and numbers rather than to a stack.

Winning the argument and losing the room. The technically correct recommendation delivered over the objection of the person who has to live with it is a recommendation that quietly fails in implementation. Chapter 6 is the long version. The short version is that the person who will resist is usually right about something, and finding out what before you propose anything is the cheapest political insurance available.

Everything in this appendix assumes you are building evidence rather than credentials. If you want the argument about which of the two the market actually checks, and the honest case for the one credential worth considering, Chapter 37 is where it sits.

Appendix K: Your First Thirty Days

Two thirty-day plans, week by week, one for the reader who stays employed and one for the reader who is building a practice. Chapter 9 told you which track is yours. This is what the first month of it looks like on a calendar.

Appendix A is a different document and the two run well together. Appendix A builds the skill: thirty days of using the machine on real work until you are genuinely literate. This appendix builds the position: thirty days of visible motion that ends with you holding something you did not have on day one. Run them in parallel if you have the hours, which most people do, because the tasks here are largely evenings, conversations and documents rather than study. Run Appendix A first if you cannot yet make a chat tool produce something you would send to a client, because motion without competence is just noise with your name on it.

Three rules for the month, both tracks.

Everything is dated. Every document you produce carries a date and your name. In thirty days you are building an evidence file, and undated evidence is an opinion.

Nothing waits for permission. Not one task in either track requires anybody's approval. This is deliberate, and it is the central argument of Chapter 15.

One hour a day, and one longer block on a weekend. That is the honest budget. People who try to do this in a single heroic weekend produce nothing that survives contact with week three.

K1. Before day one: four decisions, one evening

Make these on the Sunday before you start. They take about ninety minutes together and they prevent three weeks of drift.

Decide your track. Employed or consulting. Chapter 9's six questions and the grid give you the answer; if you scored into "both in parallel," run the employed track for these thirty days and start the consulting track on day thirty-one. Doing both at once in month one produces two half-finished months.

Decide your industry. One. The industry you already know, which for most readers is the one they have spent the last decade inside. This decision narrows every other decision in the month: which processes you study, whose language you learn, which fifty businesses go on a list, which job ads you read. Readers who skip this decision spend thirty days being generally interested in AI, which is worth nothing to anybody.

Decide your practice target. One business you can access and improve. Employed readers: a process inside your own employer. Consulting readers: your own admin, a friend's business, or a former employer who will let you near something. It must be a real business with real volume, because everything in this month attaches to it.

Decide your two hours. Put them in the calendar as recurring appointments with a name on them, for all four weeks, now. Not "AI time." Something specific enough that you will not move it, like "Fenwick baseline work." Chapter 17's whole failure analysis comes down to people who did not do this.

K2. The employed track

You already have the thing consultants spend years buying: legitimate access to a real business, its people, its systems and its numbers. This month converts that access into a position.

Week one: find the process and take the baseline.

Day 1. Write one page describing your employer to somebody who has never heard of it: what it sells, to whom, how the money arrives, how many people, which systems. You will discover in the writing that you do not know two or three of these things, and finding out is day two.

Day 2. List every repetitive task you can see from where you sit. Not the ones you have opinions about. The ones you can watch. Aim for fifteen. Use Appendix I's operations section if the list stalls.

Day 3. Score each one against Chapter 17's four criteria: recurring, measurable, hated, low blast radius. Most will fail at least one. Circle the three that pass all four.

Day 4. Pick one. Choose the hated one over the large one. A process people resent doing gets adopted; a process people are neutral about gets quietly abandoned in week six, which is the single most common failure in this discipline.

Day 5. Design the baseline measurement. What exactly you will count, how, for how long, and where you will record it. One spreadsheet, dated, with a column for the source of each figure.

Weekend block, two hours. Start the baseline. It needs a week of real data, so it starts now and finishes at the end of week two. While it runs, write the process map: trigger, steps, who does each, what system holds what, where the waiting happens.

Week two: build it, quietly, and let the baseline finish.

Day 8. Get the task working manually in a chat window before you automate anything. Chapter 21's rule: a task you cannot get right interactively will never come right unattended. Do it five times by hand.

Day 9. Write the briefing properly. The company's real examples, the tone rules, what never to say, the escalation rule. This is the work; everything else is plumbing.

Day 10. Build the plumbing on a workflow platform's free tier. Every output queued for human approval, always, on a pilot.

Day 11. Break it deliberately. Feed it the ugliest real inputs you can find. Note every failure. Fix the three worst.

Day 12. Run it in shadow: the machine does the task alongside the human, nobody acts on the machine's output, and you compare. Chapter 23 covers why this is the safest week you will ever spend.

Weekend block. Close the baseline. Total it. Write down the before number and where it came from, in one paragraph, with the date.

Week three: run it on real work and make it visible.

Day 15. Switch it on for real, with approval on every output, and tell your manager in one sentence what you are doing and why. Not a request. A statement of something already working, which is a fundamentally different conversation.

Day 16. Sit with the person whose work it changes and watch them use it. Fix whatever they trip on that day. Adoption is decided this week.

Day 17. Start the after measurement, same method, same spreadsheet, same source discipline.

Day 18. Write the runbook: what it does, what to do when it fails, who owns it, how to switch it off. One page. Nobody ever writes this and it is the thing that makes you look like a professional rather than an enthusiast.

Day 19. Ask three colleagues what else in their week looks like this. Write down every answer. That list is your next six months and your internal pipeline.

Weekend block. Read Chapter 18. Draft the results memo against its four moves: baseline, change, number, next.

Week four: the memo, the ask, and the position.

Day 22. Finish the results memo. One page. A real number with a real baseline behind it. Dated, with your name on it.

Day 23. Send it, to your manager, copied to nobody. Ask for twenty minutes.

Day 24. Have the twenty minutes. Walk the numbers, not the technology. Bring the runbook. Answer the two silent questions from Chapter 18 before they are asked: what does it cost, and what happens when it breaks.

Day 25. Make the ask. Appendix F1 is the internal pitch memo, and this is the day it exists for. Authority for two more pilots, a small working budget, two hours a week of access, and an agreed measure of success. Ask for the work before you ask for the title, always.

Day 26. Update your professional profile with what you now have, using Appendix J's language. One measured result outranks four courses.

Day 27. Book the next process. The one from day 19's list with the loudest complaint attached.

Weekend block. Write the ninety-day plan: three processes, in order, with what each is worth and when each will be measured. Send it, unrequested, to the person who can approve it.

What you are holding on day 30. One deployed system running without you, a measured before-and-after with the sources written down, a one-page runbook, a results memo with a date on it, a queue of the next processes, and a manager who has read all of it. That is the proof ladder from Chapter 15, climbed once, in a month, without permission.

K3. The consulting track

You have no access, so this month buys some. It ends with conversations booked and one piece of work you can show a stranger.

Week one: choose the water and build the list.

Day 1. Write your one-industry decision as a sentence, in the form “I work with [type of business] doing between [X] and [Y], on [the specific problem].” It will feel presumptuous. Write it anyway; you will revise it in week four and again in month six.

Day 2. Build the list. Chapter 27’s method, fifty businesses in your chosen industry that you can see from outside, in a spreadsheet with a column for the empty-seat signals. Aim for twenty on day two.

Day 3. Finish the fifty. Add the decision-maker’s name for each one, which for owner-led businesses of this size is usually on the website or findable in ten seconds.

Day 4. Score them. Reachable decision-maker, visible process, industry you know, size that can pay. Rank the top ten.

Day 5. Set up the practice business. Your own admin, a friend’s company, or a former employer. Get access to something real. This is the day people stall, and the fix is to lower the bar: the practice business does not have to be impressive, it has to be real.

Weekend block, three hours. Run Chapter 16’s outside study on target number one: test their response time, use their chatbot, read their last thirty reviews, read their job ads, walk their public process, estimate the arithmetic.

Week two: build something you can show, and write the first memos.

Day 8. Baseline one process in the practice business. Count it, time it, write down the loaded hourly rate using Chapter 39’s method. One page.

Day 9. Get the task working manually. Five real runs by hand in a chat window.

Day 10. Build it. Free tier, approval on every output, workflow platform of your choice. Chapter 22's pattern three or five if you want the simplest possible first build.

Day 11. Write shadow audit memo number one, using Appendix F2's skeleton. Two pages. What you noticed, what it likely costs, what you would do, who you are.

Day 12. Write memos two and three. They get faster. The outside study is the slow part; the writing is twenty minutes once you have done three.

Weekend block. Send the first three memos. No attachment, no pitch, no calendar link. Chapter 28 covers the mechanics; the discipline is that you are giving something away and asking for nothing on the first touch.

Week three: volume, and the first conversations.

Day 15. Outside study on targets four through six. You will find you can now do one in forty minutes.

Day 16. Memos four, five, six. Send them.

Day 17. Follow up on memos one to three, day three or four after sending, per Chapter 16's cadence. One line, no pressure.

Day 18. Measure the practice build. Before and after, sources noted, dated. This is your first case study and it does not need a client's name on it.

Day 19. Set up the business properly: an entity, a business bank account, a professional indemnity quote, an accountant conversation. Chapter 33 covers what to ask for. Do not skip this because it is boring; do it now while nothing is urgent.

Weekend block. Memos seven through ten. You are aiming for twenty over the month, because Chapter 16's honest expectation is a handful of replies and one or two real conversations from twenty well-built audits.

Week four: convert, and price.

Day 22. Memos eleven to fourteen.

Day 23. Any reply gets a conversation booked inside two days. On the call you ask questions, you do not pitch. Appendix I's opening set is the script.

Day 24. Write your rate card. Chapter 32's four bands, adapted to your market, on one page. Write the assessment fee down as a fixed number and stop negotiating with yourself about it.

Day 25. Write your assessment offer as a one-page document: what it includes, how long it takes, what they get, what it costs, what happens if they take the report elsewhere. Chapter 40's option B belongs in it and you must mean it.

Day 26. Memos fifteen to eighteen, plus follow-ups on everything sent in weeks two and three.

Day 27. Build your proof page. One page, or one simple website: what you do, the one measured result you now have, the assessment offer, how to reach you. It does not need to be beautiful. It needs to exist by day thirty.

Weekend block. Memos nineteen and twenty. Then the close-out: read every reply and every non-reply, and write four sentences on what you would change about the memos next month. That review is worth more than memos twenty-one through thirty would have been.

What you are holding on day 30. Twenty shadow audit memos sent, a list of fifty ranked targets, one measured build with a before-and-after you can show a stranger, a rate card, an assessment offer, an entity and an insurance quote, a proof page, and, on the honest expectation, one or two live conversations. If you have one live conversation on day thirty you are exactly where you should be. If you have zero, the diagnosis is almost always memo quality rather than volume, and Chapter 16 is the place to go.

K4. What both tracks share

The log. One document, every day, three lines: what you did, how long it took, what happened. It takes ninety seconds and it becomes the raw material for every memo, case study and interview answer you write for the next two years.

The weekly review, Friday, twenty minutes. What shipped, what the numbers say, what is stuck, what is next week. This is Chapter 41's weekly memo, practised on yourself before a client ever pays for it, and the practice matters because the format is a discipline rather than a template.

The one hour of currency. Once in the month, not weekly: skim what the major model providers shipped, check the changelogs of the platforms you actually use, and re-test one assumption you have been carrying. Chapter 21 makes the case; the trap in this market is confidence in the stale, not ignorance of the new.

The refusal. At least once this month, say no to something. A tool you do not need, a process that should be deleted rather than automated, a conversation with somebody who cannot buy. The habit of declining is the professional muscle that Chapter 40's "what we recommend against" section runs on, and it is easier to build now than later.

K5. If you fall behind

You will. Here is the triage, in order of what actually matters.

The baseline is not optional. If you have measured nothing, you have nothing, whatever else you built. Go back and measure.

One finished thing beats four started things. If week three arrives and you have three half-builds, kill two.

Memos sent beats memos perfected. A consulting reader with eight sent memos is ahead of one with twenty drafts. The eighth memo teaches you

more than the first seven combined, and it only teaches you if it goes out.

The conversation is the deliverable. If you are employed and you have not yet said out loud to your manager what you are doing, do that before you build anything else. If you are consulting and you have not spoken to a single business owner, drop everything else this week and fix that.

Thirty-one days is not a failure. The date is a forcing function, not a judgment. What matters is that on day thirty you are holding something dated that you were not holding on day one.

K6. The thirty days after these thirty days

Employed readers: run the loop again on the process from day 19's list, and this time bring somebody with you, because a second person trained is worth more politically than a second system built. Then read Chapter 10, which is about converting a run of wins into a mandate, and Chapter 11, if you want the second income the same work can carry.

Consulting readers: keep the memos running at five a week while you deliver whatever the month produced. The failure pattern is universal and predictable, which is that the first paying conversation stops the outreach, and ninety days later the pipeline is empty. Chapter 34's rule covers it in four words: always be two conversations deep.

Both: whatever you build in month two, write it down the same way. Dated, sourced, measured. Twelve months of that and you hold a portfolio no course can imitate and no competitor can borrow.

Appendix L: The Risk and Governance Primer

Three groups of people now ask hard questions about AI, and they ask them of whoever is holding the seat. Boards ask because they are personally exposed. Insurers ask because they are pricing something they do not yet fully understand. Buyers ask, through procurement, because their own auditors made them.

This appendix is what those three groups are actually worried about, in plain language, and what a good answer sounds like. Appendix E is the regulation cheat sheet and carries the laws, jurisdictions and dates. Chapter 24 covers data handling and Chapter 26 covers installing the governance kit. This appendix is the conversation those three documents prepare you for.

Nothing here is legal advice, and one section says openly that I will not tell you what an insurance form asks, because I do not know what yours says and a guess would be worse than silence. What follows is the operator's version: what the risk actually is, what evidence answers it, and what to say in the room.

L1. The idea that makes all of this simple

Risk follows the decision, not the technology.

Almost every mistake in this area comes from asking “is this AI risky?” It is the wrong question and it produces two wrong answers, one panicked and one complacent. The right question is: what decision does this affect, who does it affect, and what happens if it is wrong?

A model drafting an internal meeting summary is not risky in any meaningful sense, however sophisticated it is. A spreadsheet formula that ranks job applicants is meaningfully risky, and has almost nothing clever in it at all. The regulators have converged on this view, and the

newer laws are being written around automated decisions about people rather than around a technology definition, which is a shift Appendix E covers in the Colorado entry.

So the whole primer reduces to a sorting exercise you can do in an afternoon:

Tier one: it affects a person's rights, money, health, safety or employment. Hiring, firing, promotion, credit, pricing to an individual, insurance, medical, safety, access to a service. Full checks, human decision-maker, records kept, and get advice.

Tier two: it reaches a customer. Anything a customer reads, hears or receives. Human approval until proven, tone and claims rules, an audit trail, and the ability to switch it off in one click.

Tier three: it stays inside the building. Drafts, summaries, internal search, analysis. Light touch. Sensible data rules and a named owner.

Write every AI use in the business into one of those three tiers. That single page, produced in an afternoon, will answer more board questions than any framework you could buy.

L2. The five risks, in plain words

Learn these five and you can hold any conversation in this appendix, because every question a board, insurer or buyer asks is a version of one of them.

One: it makes something up, and somebody acts on it. The machine always answers, whether or not it knows. Confidently wrong output is the defining failure of this technology and it does not announce itself. The damage is done when the wrong answer reaches a customer, a regulator or a decision. What controls it: a human checkpoint scaled to the stakes, answers that cite their source, and a system that says it does not know rather than guessing.

Two: it leaks something. Confidential or personal information goes into a tool that keeps it, trains on it, or stores it somewhere the business did not intend. In practice this almost never looks like a breach in the dramatic sense. It usually looks like a staff member pasting a client list into a free account on a personal login. What controls it: the three piles in Chapter 24, business-tier accounts rather than consumer ones, and knowing where the data physically goes.

Three: it treats a person unfairly. A system produces systematically worse outcomes for a group of people, usually because it learned from data that already did. This is the risk with the sharpest legal edge, and it lives entirely in tier one. What controls it: keeping the decision with a human, testing outcomes rather than intentions, keeping the records, and not automating selection at all in the places where selection is contested.

Four: it does something nobody authorised. A system with permissions takes an action outside what anyone intended: sends the wrong thing, sends to the wrong list, spends money, deletes something, commits the business to something. What controls it: Chapter 24's blast-radius habit, hard caps on volume, value and scope, and permissions granted narrowly rather than conveniently.

Five: it quietly stops working. Nothing crashes. The output slowly gets worse, or a supplier changes a format, or a rule stops matching reality, and because there is no owner nobody notices for two months. What controls it: a named human owner for every system, monitoring that alerts rather than logs, and the quarterly walk of the register.

Notice that four of the five controls are organisational rather than technical. That is not a coincidence and it is the reason this seat is not an engineering seat.

L3. The evidence that answers most questions

Chapter 26 installs the full governance kit and Appendix E lists the eight artifacts a regulator or auditor may want. In practice, four of them answer the overwhelming majority of questions that boards, insurers and buyers actually ask.

The one-page policy. Which tools are approved, what may go into them, what must be checked, what must never be automated. One page, dated, owned by a named person, reviewed twice a year. Appendix F carries the template.

The register. Every AI system in use, with a plain-words description, a named owner, the data it touches, its autonomy level, its checkpoint and the date it was last reviewed. A spreadsheet is fine and will be fine for years.

The audit trail. Records of what the system did, when, and who approved what. For anything in tier one, keep them for years rather than months; several jurisdictions now specify multi-year retention for employment-related automated decisions, and Appendix E carries the detail.

The named human checkpoint. Written down, per system, per category: who reviews, what they review, and what they are checking for. This is the artifact that most often does not exist, and it is the first one a serious questioner asks about.

When somebody asks you a governance question you were not expecting, the honest and effective move is almost always to answer from these four. “Here is the policy, here is the register entry for that system, here is the log, and here is the person who reviews it” answers a question more completely than any framework name.

L4. What boards ask

Directors are asking whether they are personally exposed and whether somebody competent is holding this. The subject happens to be AI.

Answer the real question and the meeting goes well.

Ten questions, with what a good answer contains.

“Are we allowed to be doing what we are doing?” The one behind most of the others. Answer with the tier sorting, not with a regulation name: nothing we run makes a decision about a person, everything customer-facing has a human approving it, and here is the register. Then name the one thing that would change the answer, because there is usually one, and a board that hears the exception from you trusts everything else you said.

“Who owns this?” One name. If the honest answer is a committee, the seat is empty and the board has just found that out, which is uncomfortable and correct.

“What is the worst thing that could happen?” Do not minimise. Name the actual worst case for the specific systems running, then name the cap that bounds it. Something in the shape of: the worst case is a wrong figure reaching a customer in a quote, the cap is that no quote leaves without an estimator approving it, and that checkpoint is permanent rather than temporary.

“What are our staff already using that we do not know about?” Almost always the most productive question in the room, and the honest answer at the start of a tenure is that you do not fully know and here is the amnesty running to find out. Chapter 24 covers how to run it. Never claim there is no shadow use. There is.

“Is our data being used to train someone else’s model?” Answer per tool, from the vendor file. For business-tier and API access the answer is generally no by contract, and for consumer accounts it may well be yes, which is the argument for the policy.

“What happens if the vendor disappears or triples the price?” Name the concentration honestly, name what would be painful to

replace, and name what is trivially replaceable because it sits on a workflow platform you control.

“Are we insured for this?” Do not answer from memory. Say what you believe the position is, and that you are having it confirmed with the broker in writing. Section L5 explains why that is the only safe answer.

“What are our customers going to ask us about this?”

Increasingly a procurement question flowing upstream, and section L6 is the answer.

“How do we know it is working?” The baseline discipline. Numbers against measured baselines, monthly, with the sources named. This is where the seat earns its budget.

“What would you stop doing tomorrow if you had to?” A test of judgment. Have an answer ready. The best one names the system with the highest risk-to-value ratio, which shows you have ranked them rather than defended them all.

The tone that works. Calm, specific, and volunteering the bad news before you are asked for it. A board’s confidence is built almost entirely by the person who tells them the uncomfortable thing first, and Chapter 41’s readout makes the same argument commercially.

L5. What insurers care about

Here is where I stop short, deliberately.

I am not going to print what an insurance proposal form asks about AI, because forms differ by insurer, by market, by class of cover and by year, and a confident paragraph invented in a book is exactly the kind of thing that gets repeated in a client meeting and turns out to be wrong. Chapter 33 sets the baseline: carry professional indemnity before your first paid engagement, declare what you actually do, and add public liability and

cyber cover. What follows is how to have the conversation properly rather than what any given form says.

The exposure, in plain terms, is threefold. There is the advice you give, which is professional indemnity territory: you recommended a system, the client relied on it, and it produced a loss. There is the data you touch, which is cyber and privacy territory: you had access to a client's systems and something escaped. And there is the work the system does after you leave, which is the genuinely awkward one, because an automated system keeps acting long after your engagement ends, and the question of whose exposure that is deserves an answer before it matters rather than after.

What to put to your broker, in writing, once a year. Describe your work accurately, using the words you use with clients, including that you build and configure automated systems that send communications and process data on clients' behalf. Ask four things and get the answers in writing. Does my policy respond to a claim arising from an automated system I built. Does it respond after the engagement has ended, and for how long. Are there exclusions relating to artificial intelligence, automated decision-making, or technology errors and omissions, and what exactly do they exclude. And is my liability cap in client contracts consistent with what this policy will actually pay.

That last question is the one that quietly ruins people. A contractual liability wider than your cover is a personal exposure, and Chapter 33 flags it for the same reason. Read your policy before you agree to a cap, not after.

What to put to the client's broker or risk manager, when a client asks. Three things a client should be able to establish about any automated system in their business: whether it is disclosed to their insurer, whether it makes or materially influences decisions about people, and who is contractually responsible when it errs. If a client cannot answer the third, that is a finding for your report rather than an

argument for your services, and writing it up as a finding is the more professional move.

What you can do without any of this being resolved. Keep the records. Every question in this territory, from any insurer in any market, gets easier to answer when there is a register, a log and a named checkpoint, because every one of them is ultimately asking whether somebody was paying attention. Documented attention is the only universally acceptable answer.

L6. What procurement asks

This is the fastest-moving of the three and the one most likely to arrive without warning, usually as a spreadsheet from a client's client.

Why it is happening. Large buyers audit their suppliers, suppliers now use AI, and so the standard vendor security questionnaires grew AI sections. There is now a dedicated, vendor-neutral control framework for exactly this: the Cloud Security Alliance's AI Controls Matrix, published in 2025, running to well over two hundred control objectives across eighteen domains, and mapped across to the major standards including ISO 42001 and the NIST AI framework. It ships with a companion questionnaire explicitly designed for evaluating third parties. You do not need to memorise it. You need to know it exists, because when a client's procurement team sends you something that looks like a two-hundred-line audit, it is not an overreaction and it is not personal.

The nine questions that recur, whatever the form is called.

Which AI systems touch our data, and what do they do with it. Answer from the register, naming the systems rather than the category.

Where is our data processed and stored, and in which countries. Answer per vendor from the vendor file, and know that "the vendor is American" is not an answer about where the processing happens.

Is our data used to train models. Answer per tool, and quote the contractual term rather than your impression of it.

Do you use AI to make or influence decisions about individuals. This is the question with teeth. The safe and usually true answer is no, with the checkpoint that guarantees it.

What human review exists, and who performs it. Named role, what they check, how often.

How long do you retain AI inputs and outputs, and how are they deleted. From your data handling terms and the vendors’.

What is your incident process if an AI system produces a harmful or incorrect output. Chapter 24’s five steps, written down before you are asked.

Do you have an AI policy, and can we see it. Yes, and yes. This is why the one-page policy is worth writing on day one of any engagement.

Which standards or frameworks do you align to. Naming a recognised framework and saying honestly which parts you follow beats claiming a certification you do not hold. Certification claims get checked.

The rule for answering. Answer precisely, answer short, and never claim a control you do not have. Procurement teams are not looking for perfection; they are looking for a supplier who knows what they do and does not bluff. An honest “we do not do that, here is what we do instead” clears more questionnaires than an optimistic yes, because the optimistic yes gets tested in the follow-up call.

The commercial opportunity in this, which most operators miss. When a client is struggling to answer their own customer’s AI questionnaire, that is a live, funded, deadline-driven problem in the exact shape of the governance kit from Chapter 26. It is one of the easiest paid engagements to win in the entire market, because the buyer has an

external deadline and no internal capability, and the work is two days once you have done it twice.

L7. Three sentences worth memorising

“That decision stays with a person, and here is who.” The answer to most of tier one, most of the time.

“I can tell you exactly what it can do, because we capped it before we switched it on.” The answer that separates somebody who deployed a system from somebody who bought one.

“I do not know, and I will have that answer for you by Thursday.” The one that builds the most trust and gets used the least. Use it, and then actually deliver on Thursday.

L8. When to stop and get advice

You are an operator, not a lawyer, and the professional skill is knowing the line. Get proper advice, in the client’s jurisdiction, before anything goes live, in these situations.

Anything that makes or materially influences a decision about a person’s employment, credit, insurance, housing, education, healthcare or access to a service.

Anything in a regulated profession where a professional body has issued guidance on AI use, which now includes legal, medical, financial advice and accounting in many jurisdictions.

Anything touching health data, biometric data or children.

Anything where personal data crosses a border into a jurisdiction with different rules.

Anything where the client’s own contracts with their customers restrict how information may be processed, which is a clause more common than

most owners realise and which Appendix I's question 116 is designed to surface.

Saying "this needs a lawyer's eye before we switch it on" costs you nothing and gains you a great deal. The operators who get into trouble in this market are almost never the ones who paused.

L9. The afternoon that makes you defensible

If you do nothing else from this appendix, do this, in a single afternoon, for whatever business you are responsible for.

List every AI use, including the unofficial ones. Sort each into the three tiers from section L1. For anything in tier one, write the name of the human who makes the decision. For anything in tier two, write who approves output before it reaches a customer. Write the one-page policy from Appendix F. Put a date and your name on all of it.

That afternoon produces the register, the tiering, the checkpoints and the policy, which is four of the eight artifacts and the four that answer most questions. It is genuinely an afternoon's work. The reason so few businesses have done it has nothing to do with difficulty or cost. Nobody owns it, which is where this entire book started.

The seat is being created faster than anyone can fill it. The window closes when the qualified show up.

Three in four CEOs now say they have or are hiring a Chief AI Officer. Job postings for the role grew 478% in a single year. And at the same time, 95% of corporate AI projects deliver nothing, because the person who can stand between the machine and the business barely exists.

That gap is the biggest career opening since the internet. It pays \$300,000 or more in a salaried seat, and \$5,000 to \$30,000 a month per client for the operators who hold it across several businesses at once. No code required. The scarce skill is knowing how businesses actually run.

INSIDE THIS BOOK

- The Window: why this seat exists now, and the three times in history this exact door has opened before
- Four paths in: climb inside your company, moonlight it, go fractional, or run the agency model
- The Proof Ladder and the Shadow Audit: manufacture credibility in 30 days, without anyone's permission
- The craft: ten AI deployments you can ship into any business, end to end
- Getting clients and getting paid: the assessment-first close, pricing, contracts, and the honest numbers of a fractional practice
- The salary tables, job-ad decoder, interview bank, regulation cheat sheet and every template you need

Benjamin Simkin has spent thirty years building production systems and the same thirty in the business world, where his work has driven over \$3.1 billion in client revenue. He founded AI First Foundations, where he re-engineers real businesses around AI and trains the people who run that work.

ISBN / BARCODE