Benefits Too Big to Ignore:

A Skeptic's Guide to AI

BY MATT BRADLEY

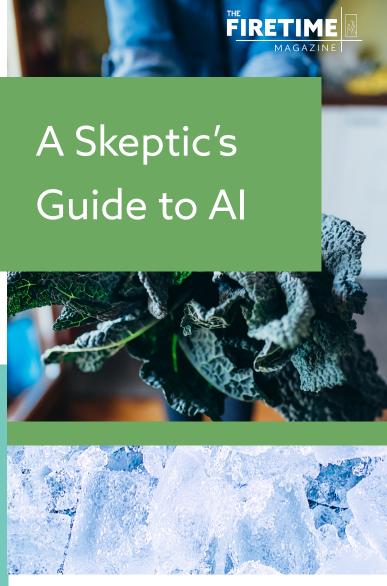**The Kale Industrial Complex and Cold Shower Conspiracy**

I have a habit of refusing to do things simply because they're suddenly trendy.

Take, for example, the Great Kale Conspiracy of the 2010s. Maybe you remember it (or perhaps you were part of it). One day, we were all eating normal vegetables like lettuce; the next, kale was in every salad and side dish at the supermarket. And it wasn't just creeping into recipes where it didn't belong; it was waging a full-scale invasion of American culture. Endless articles materialized about its miraculous health benefits. Countless people were suddenly whispering, "Have you tried the new kale curry from the food truck at the farmers market?" Smoothie shops started charging an extra couple of bucks to add kale to your drink—and people gladly paid up.

Clearly, the Kale Industrial Complex was operating in full force.

And I was having none of it.

Well, I guess I was having *some* of it, since I once willingly tried two bites of raw kale, grimaced through every bitter moment, and confirmed what I had always suspected: I absolutely despised it.

Of course, that could be because kale tastes and smells like the grass clippings I throw in my yard debris bin. But I have a sneaking suspicion that my aversion also came from everyone continually telling me I should eat it.

That's the sort of stuff that drives me bonkers.

Here's another, more recent example: the Cold Shower Conspiracy. In the last few months alone, I can recall at least three conversations about ice plunges and cold water therapy—and I'm probably missing a couple. While I was eating breakfast with a dear friend, he insisted that starting each day with a cold shower sharpens his mental acuity and fills him with instant energy. While I was enjoying a beer in my backyard on a Saturday afternoon, I saw my neighbor setting up his inflatable ice bath with a smile on his face, shouting that I could use it whenever I wanted. And while I was getting my hair

cut the other day, my barber excitedly explained—scissors in hand—that cold water immersion does wonders for blood circulation and cognitive clarity.

And yet, much to my good friend's chagrin, I've never taken a cold shower—at least not on purpose, and certainly not since the Cold Shower Conspiracy began. What's more, I have no plans to ever take up the practice, mostly because everyone keeps telling me that I should.

That's really the heart of it: I'm skeptical—and, let's face it, just plain *stubborn*—when masses of people suddenly embrace something trendy and insist that I try it too.

So when the AI craze hit the hearth industry, I was prepared to resist it with every fiber of my being.

The tipping point came at an NCSG show in 2023. It was at a large, lavish casino with acres of convention space—but no matter where I went, people were talking about AI. *Every* vendor at *every* booth sang the same refrain: AI would revolutionize our outdated industry, solve our age-old problems, and make us all wildly rich.

Naturally, I dug in my heels. For months afterward, I refused to touch it. I had real work to do—work that involved real humans, real relationships, and real problems.

But here's the thing about real work: Sometimes there's simply too much of it.

By the fourth quarter of 2024, I was drowning. Late nights bled into early mornings. I'd lie awake at 1 a.m., mentally sorting through an endless to-do list that grew faster than I could shrink it. The work itself was good—I've always loved what I do—but I was burning out.

Then Tim Reed sent me a quote that stopped me cold: "I want AI to do my laundry and dishes so that I can do art and writing, not for AI to do my art and writing so that I can do my laundry and dishes."

Those [35 words from Joanna Maciejewska](#)—an author I'd never heard of then and still know next to nothing about now—hit me at exactly the right

moment. Something suddenly clicked: If AI could help me serve my business partners better and spend more time with my family, then why was I being so resistant? Pride? Principle? Plain old-fashioned obstinacy?

In the end, I decided to give it a shot. Not because I thought it would revolutionize everything in my life—but because I thought it might help me work smarter instead of harder.

And you know what? It did. Not in the world-changing ways promised by all those vendors on the casino floor, but in practical ways that helped me reclaim my evenings and finally get some sleep.

Given that, here's what I've come to believe: AI definitely won't save the world, and it probably won't destroy it (though I suppose the latter is possible). But when it's used thoughtfully, it can free humans up to focus on what actually matters most.

So if you've been standing on the AI sidelines—skeptical, stubborn, or simply too busy to care—I get it. But if you're ready to reclaim some of your time and energy, here are three simple strategies I'd highly recommend:

1. Begin with the end in mind.
2. Make AI interactions intentional.
3. Keep sharpening the saw.

To be crystal clear, I'm no AI expert. I'm just a guy who wants to do great work and spend tons of time with family. So these strategies aren't revolutionary. They're just lessons I've learned about using AI without losing my mind or selling my soul.

With that said, let's take a deep dive into each of these strategies now.

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>
> Joanna Maciejewska

Strategy 1: Begin With the End in Mind

In the foreword of the 15th-anniversary edition of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey reflects on how much the world has changed since the book was first published. "Life is more complex, more stressful, more demanding," he writes. "We have transitioned from the Industrial Age into the Information/Knowledge Worker Age, with all of its profound consequences."

He acknowledges that we face challenges "unimagined even one and two decades ago"—challenges that are "not only of a new order of magnitude" but "altogether different in kind."

And then he poses the question that's on each of his readers' minds: "Are the seven habits of highly effective people still relevant" in the digital age?

His answer cuts straight to the chase: "The greater the change and the more difficult our challenges, the *more* relevant the habits become. Why?" Because, he claims, "our problems and our pain are universal and increasing, and the solutions to the problems are and will always be based upon universal, timeless, self-evident principles."

One of those timeless principles—the second of his seven habits—is to begin with the end in mind. "To begin with the end in mind," Covey explains, "means to start with a clear understanding of your destination."

When I finally stopped resisting AI, I quickly learned that this particular principle was more important than ever, just as Covey predicted. Because when I first started using ChatGPT, I'd open it and type in a specific task—"clean up this spreadsheet" or "create a customer service hierarchy"—without sharing *why* that task even mattered or *what* I ultimately wanted. I treated it like an intellectual slot machine, hoping it would give me a quick win if I just pulled the lever enough.

The results were predictably terrible. The "cleaned" spreadsheets came back with scrambled cells and missing data. The customer service hierarchy sounded smooth but didn't mention any of the actual problems that my partners face. Everything AI produced technically answered my request but completely missed the point—simply because I'd never actually explained the point in the first place.

But let me explain what's worked better for me by using a running example: getting AI to document all of the systems and processes in a hearth business. As Zack Estes argues in "Exceptions Create Chaos, Standards Create Clarity," every business needs clear, documented systems and processes—the kind that help teams execute consistently, whether the owner's there or not. But here's the problem: It's hard to find someone with the time, focus, and diligence to document these systems. It's the kind of tedious work that virtually everyone knows needs doing but nearly nobody wants to do.

This is the sort of situation where AI can actually help—but only if you begin with the end in mind.

For example, don't just ask AI to "write an installation scheduling process." Instead, start off slow and paint the complete picture: "My company's mission is to create cozy spaces where families can experience special moments every day and make warm memories that last a lifetime—even in an age of distraction. Our core values include defaulting to generosity, treating all of our customers

like family, and making stuff that's complex seem simple. Help me create an installation scheduling process that reflects these core values and can be learned by a new hire in two days. Include specific scripts for common installation scenarios and guidance for when to escalate jobs to a manager."

See the difference? You're not asking for generic instructions that could work anywhere. You're asking for a specific process that aligns with your vision, embodies your values, and helps you achieve your mission.

Simply put, AI works best when you paint the big picture first. So share your mission. Explain your values. Clarify your constraints. Provide examples that show what you want.

In an age of unprecedented changes, timeless principles matter more than ever, just as Covey knew. And in a world that profits from your distraction, beginning with the end in mind isn't just helpful—it's essential. Because in the age of AI, clarity of purpose is the difference between getting meaningful results and wasting time watching the intellectual slot machine spin.

Strategy 2: Make AI Interactions Intentional

After building a solid foundation by beginning with the end in mind, it's tempting to think that AI will adeptly answer every question and perfectly process every request. But in reality, the conversation is just getting started—and it's going to take tons of intentional interaction on your part to ensure it unfolds productively.

To understand why, let's go back to an ancient philosopher's view on one of our oldest inventions: the alphabet. Socrates, the founder of Western philosophy, was openly opposed to the written word, just as it was revolutionizing ancient Greece. He saw it as dead language—as marks on a page that sat there passively, unable to defend themselves or respond to questions. Real wisdom, he believed, emerged only through active conversation— through a lively exchange that transformed both student and teacher.

That's why in *Phaedrus*, one of his famous dialogues, he warns that writing would "create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they [would]

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not use their memories; they [would] trust [in] the external written characters and not remember of themselves." The result? They would have "not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they [would] appear to be omniscient and [would] generally know nothing."

Two millennia later, we've built thinking machines on the very foundations that Socrates feared— massive libraries of written text, layer upon layer of those "external characters" he warned against. Every AI system, including the one that helped me edit these words, represents a triumph of recorded knowledge over lived wisdom. If Socrates thought that writing would make us passive, what would he make of Large Language Model AI, which is nothing but letters all the way down?

The dangers he identified are the same ones we face today, only amplified. Because if you use AI passively instead of actively, you'll get

smart-sounding fluff instead of hard-won wisdom. After all, AI isn't magic. It's more like an incredibly efficient intern who happens to forget every conversation you've had right after it's over. Every chat exists in a vacuum. So unless you intentionally engage with AI from start to finish, you'll get responses that sound smooth but lack substance.

Given that reality, how do we avoid becoming what Socrates feared—people who appear to know everything but actually understand nothing—while still harnessing the power of AI?

After I started using AI, I wrestled with this question for weeks. But then, during an [AI workshop hosted by Akimbo](#), I discovered the CRAFT framework, which stands for Context, Role, Audience, Format, and Tone. Suddenly, I saw my mistake: I was having monologues with AI instead of dialogues. I was making the exact error Socrates had warned against in ancient Athens—and the CRAFT framework offered an antidote.

Let me show you what I mean by returning to our running example. Say you're documenting your process for scheduling installations. Without CRAFT, you might ask AI something like this: "Write an installation scheduling process that aligns with my company's mission, vision, and core values." The result? Generic business jargon that could apply to almost any company.

But here's how you could use CRAFT to paint the complete picture and get better results:

- **Context:** "Our installation team is overwhelmed. We're booking eight to twelve weeks out, customers are calling for updates daily, and our scheduler just gave notice. We need a process that prevents double-booking, keeps customers informed, and can be learned by a new hire in two days."
- **Role:** "You're an operations consultant who specializes in helping trade businesses create simple, effective processes that real people will actually follow."
- **Audience:** "This process is for our office staff— varying from tech-savvy twenty-somethings to team members who still prefer paper calendars. It needs to work for everyone."

- **Format:** "Create a step-by-step process document with clear headers, bullet points for quick reference, and a visual flowchart showing decision points."
- **Tone:** "Professional but conversational (like you're training a friend, not writing a technical manual)."

Using CRAFT will give you far better results than starting a chat without context. Instead of lifeless instructions, you'll get something your team can actually use.

But here's the hard truth: CRAFT is just the opening move. The real work begins when AI delivers its first draft. Because that draft—no matter how thoughtfully prompted—will probably still miss the mark.

So let's say that AI's first scheduling process sounds something like this: check calendar, confirm availability, book appointment, send confirmation. That's fine on paper but useless in practice. Because it doesn't take into account that your installers don't work past 3:00 p.m. on Fridays. Or that certain customers will pay double for Saturday installations during the burn season, even though you're technically closed. Or that you prioritize gas fireplace remodels and put off gas log replacements.

So you push back. You tell AI about Bill, a brilliant installer who packs up at 2:45 every Friday without fail. You tell it about the Johnsons, who happily paid weekend rates because they both worked stressful jobs Monday through Friday. You tell it that your company makes the best money by installing gas fireplaces instead of replacing gas logs. Each round of revision adds another layer of reality and another degree of utility.

Then comes the crucial step: You take the latest draft to your team. Your installation manager immediately asks, "What happens when a major job *has* to run past 4:00 p.m. on a Friday because of the customer's tricky schedule?" Your newest employee says during a staff meeting, "Could you clarify the difference between gas fireplaces and gas logs again?" Your lead installer bluntly inquires, "Does this process account for traffic jams between jobs?"

So you go back to AI with this feedback, then take

what it gives you back to your team. And you keep going round and round until you've created something that actually works, even when three customers call your store one fall morning and demand that their installations be finished by Thanksgiving.

This is what Socrates meant by dialogue—not just exchanging empty words, but wrestling with ideas until truth emerges. It's messy and exhausting, which is exactly the opposite of what was promised by all the tech prophets on the casino floor. But in my experience, it's the key to creating useful content with AI.

Strategy 3: Keep Sharpening the Saw

Those familiar with Covey's work will recognize that I'm borrowing from his playbook yet again. "Sharpen the saw"—his seventh habit—is about nurturing your talents, developing your discipline, and fine-tuning your faculties. In the age of AI, this principle matters more than ever.

Why? Because the tools we use daily shape not only *what* we think, but *how* we think—just as Nicholas Carr warned in "Is Google Making Us Stupid?"

In this article from 2008, Carr lamented that the internet was rewiring his brain. He used to immerse himself in long books and lengthy articles, he explained, but after years online, he found his concentration drifting after a few paragraphs. "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words," he writes. "Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."

The internet, Carr argued, isn't just a tool for accessing information—it's fundamentally changing how we think. And, as such, it's turning us into what playwright Richard Foreman called "pancake people"—intellects spread wide and thin, knowing a little about everything but nothing in-depth.

Then comes Carr's haunting conclusion: "As we come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, it is our own intelligence that flattens into artificial intelligence."

When I read that line for the hundredth time while I was outlining this article, I had to close my laptop and take a walk. Because I realized that's exactly what I'd been doing since I started using AI—skimming instead of reading, reacting instead of re-

flecting, consuming instead of contemplating.

To my mind, that's the real danger of AI: Not the apocalyptic scenarios about job loss or rogue robots, but something far more subtle—the slow erosion of our capacity for deep thought. Each time we outsource our thinking to AI without exercising our own cognitive muscles, they atrophy a little more.

So how can we prevent such flattening? How can we keep our mental edge while still benefiting from AI's assistance?

The answer is actually quite simple: Read deeply and often.

Returning once more to our running example, if you're working on that installation scheduling process, start by reading business books about crafting clear and consistent systems.

But don't stop there. Read great novels by Dickens that demand that you track several storylines at once and keep tabs on a litany of complex characters. Read works of theology from *Evangelization and Culture* that require you to hold multiple concepts in mind as you wander through a winding argument. Read the poems of Walt Whitman that make you pause mid-stanza to untangle their meaning.

This kind of reading—the kind that makes our brain feel like it's about to burst—is our best defense against mental flattening.

After all, we "were never born to read," as the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf notes in *Proust and the Squid*, so we've got to protect the skill with everything we've got. Unlike verbal speech, which she explains develops naturally, reading is a human invention that physically rewires our brains. Every literate person has painstakingly built new neural pathways, she notes, rewiring circuits meant for other things and repurposing them to decode meaning from marks on a page.

This rewiring creates what Wolf calls the "reading brain"—and it's nothing short of miraculous. When we read deeply, we don't just process information. As Carr explains, the kind of "deep reading that a sequence of printed pages pro-

motes is valuable not just for the knowledge we acquire from the author's words but for the intellectual vibrations those words set off within our own minds. In the quiet spaces opened up by the sustained, undistracted reading of a book . . . we make our own associations, draw our own inferences and analogies, foster our own ideas." That's why Carr and Wolf agree that deep reading is inseparable from deep thinking.

But here's the catch: The neural connections that enable deep reading require constant use. Otherwise, they atrophy. And every time we default to skimming or let AI do our thinking, those carefully built pathways weaken a little more.

The good news? The principle works both ways. Every time we choose a book over a summary or wrestle with a difficult text instead of asking AI to explain it, we're literally strengthening the neural architecture that makes complex thought possible.

This is what Covey meant by sharpening the saw—not just maintaining your tools, but constantly improving them. In our case, the tool is our mind, and the whetstone is deep reading.

So sure: Use AI as a tool to handle monotonous tasks so you can focus on work that matters more.

Because in the end, your customers aren't paying for AI-generated solutions. They're paying for your years of experience, your hard-won wisdom, and your ability to solve their unique problems in ways that no computer ever could.

That's not artificial intelligence—that's the real deal.

And in an age of AI, it's more valuable than ever.

Benefits Too Big to Ignore

As I've wrestled with the AI trend, I've been struck by a historical pattern that keeps emerging.

Over 2,000 years ago, Socrates worried that the written word would create passive thinkers. In 2008, Nicholas Carr worried that the internet would turn us into shallow minds spread wide and thin. And now here we are, worried that AI will flatten us further, turning us into intellectual crepes.

Each generation, it seems, fears that new technology will diminish our humanity.

And you know what? Their worries are warranted.

After all, writing *did* change how we use our memories. The internet *has* affected our attention spans. And AI? Well, the jury's still out, but the early research suggests that it could seriously damage our thinking.

Yet here's what most of the cynics miss: We always get to choose how we use the tools we create.

Yes, writing can make us lazy and forgetful—*if* we choose to read passively instead of actively. But it can also allow us to build on the best that's been known and thought across centuries and cultures.

Yes, the internet can turn us into surface skimmers—*if* we choose to power browse instead of actually read. But it can also give us instant access to information that would have been impossible to find 30

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years ago.

And yes, AI can flatten our intelligence—*if* we choose to outsource our thinking instead of augmenting it. But it can also free us up to focus on what humans do best: connect with those around us, come up with creative solutions, and respond to difficult times with courage and compassion.

The decision, as always, is ours.

Which brings me back to that quote from the very beginning: "I want AI to do my laundry and dishes so that I can do art and writing, not for AI to do my art and writing so that I can do my laundry and dishes."

That's it exactly: We should use AI to handle the mundane so we can pursue the meaningful.

So maybe kale can lower my cholesterol a little. And maybe cold showers can boost my mental focus a bit. But those benefits just aren't enough to change my stubborn mind.

But AI has helped me serve my business partners better while giving me more time with my family.

And the deeper work I've done and the special memories I've made haven't flattened me out. On the contrary, they've given me greater meaning and made me more human.

And those benefits are too big to ignore—even for an AI skeptic.