

DON'T OUTSOURCE YOUR THINKING

BY TIM REED



What is it that makes us human? More than opposable thumbs or anything else biological, it's our minds. The ability to think about what "ought" to be done versus what "is" done—and reason about why we exist at all—is what separates us from the rest of the created order on our planet.

The challenge has always been how to maximize our finite abilities—whether it be the wheel, the horse-drawn carriage, the scroll, or the computer—with the limited time that we have. And the pressure of this dichotomy is what's led to every innovation we can think of, from the chariot to the printing press to the vaccine and the airplane.

With each innovation that comes, we have a choice with both a benefit and a tradeoff. In the case of an airplane, I have the choice to use it or not. The benefit of using it is that I get to go places I never could have been otherwise; the tradeoff is that my legs might get weaker. Going the other way, choosing not to use the airplane means that my legs will likely remain strong, but I'll have to give up the idea of ever seeing London in person.

The question that we've always had to wrestle with is this: "What am I willing to outsource in order to maximize my limitations—and am I okay with the tradeoffs?"

Today's world of AI presents us with incredible benefits that, until just a few years ago, no one would have ever dreamed of. For myself, I've been amazed at how many difficult and granular tasks are now automated at the click of a button.

Want to analyze four different spreadsheets to understand data trends between them? Want to know what your website needs in order to boost your SEO? Want to automatically turn your Google Forms into a PDF that gets emailed to the sales manager? Just a simple prompt and the click of a button is all it takes.

And of course, we've all seen how AI generates content in the blink of an eye—be it an email, a blog post, or a three-act play for your kid's after-school program.

"With each innovation that comes, we have a choice with both **a benefit and a tradeoff.**"

Obviously, AI has the potential to benefit our world and make it better. But as we sit on the precipice of the AI explosion, we run the risk of outsourcing our most important resource—our ability to think.

Why should I read *Fahrenheit 451* and write an essay about the relationship between freedom and censorship when I could just ask ChatGPT to do it for me?

The danger is the shortcut.

And, because someone's always taking it, we each feel the temptation to do the same—because we don't want to be left behind.

I would argue that when machines are used to serve human needs and improve quality of life, we should utilize them for all that they're worth—until they're no longer helpful.

If I want to be able to hold my grandkids in 20 years, prudence would suggest exercising with a weight machine in my 40s so that my arms are strong enough in my 60s. But if there comes a point where I decide to stop exercising because I've found something else that can hold my grandkids for me, something has gone seriously wrong.

Just because you *can* lie in a comfortable bed all day doesn't mean that you *ought* to lie in a comfortable bed that day.

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The question for us is what tasks and abilities do we want to outsource—and what do we want to keep for ourselves because doing the task or working on the ability is in itself worth it?

For myself, you'll never see me read through an SEO report again—I'm feeding that to AI and asking for a punch list of what needs to be updated. In the same way, writing product descriptions for each service part on a given gas fireplace? No thanks. I know where I'm sending that. Organizing customer service tickets into categories and automatically putting them up on a communal board? That's going to AI all day long.

But the deeper, more human tasks—responding to a difficult customer, sending a thank-you note to a friend, writing an article for *The Fire Time Magazine*—I'll save these for myself.

Because the inefficiency, the pain, and the time of real human work do something in me. It makes me more into the version of myself that I want to be—more thoughtful, kind, wise, and compassionate.

Just like the monkey in the lab, each time we hit the easy button, something happens to us—and we need to be very



careful what situations we use the easy button for.

Our world is already distracting us into oblivion, and, just like in *Brave New World*, each dopamine hit that comes with the immediate gratification of distraction keeps us from truly asking what we are doing and who it is that we're serving.

And if we choose to use AI to outsource our thinking to a machine that's comprised of the combined wisdom of the internet—and whatever puppet masters are behind its programming—God help us all.

Outsourcing our abilities to other things—be it automobiles, takeout food, or Excel spreadsheets—has a major upside if we're unable (or uninterested) in learning the necessary skills. And leveraging

that time to do something of even greater meaning is truly a gift.

So, where it's helpful for you and your company, use AI to its full potential. Use it to make things better. Use it to serve more people. And use it to create prosperity for those you serve.

But be very careful when you use it to replace human touch and human connection.

And, above all else, never outsource your thinking.

Because, just as Dr. Frost found in C.S. Lewis's masterpiece *That Hideous Strength*, if we outsource our thinking for long enough, we might find that we don't like where it's taking us—and are completely powerless to stop it.

“What tasks and abilities do we want to outsource—and what do we want to keep for ourselves because doing the task or working on the ability is in itself worth it?”



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