

Artificial Intelligence as a Colleague: Rethinking How We Work with AI

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December 2025

Artificial intelligence is often framed in polarising terms. It is either presented as a revolutionary force that will replace human workers or as a disruptive technology that should be treated with suspicion and restraint. In practice, however, many professionals are already engaging with AI in a far more grounded and pragmatic way. Rather than treating AI as a replacement for human expertise, it is increasingly being used as a *colleague*: a support, a sounding board, and a cognitive partner embedded in everyday work.

For many professionals, generative AI tools such as ChatGPT are now part of daily workflows. They are used to draft, summarise, test ideas, clarify thinking, and explore alternative approaches to complex problems. This shift represents not only a technological change, but a cultural one. AI is moving from being a tool we operate to something we collaborate with, reshaping how work is done and how professional value is defined.

This article explores the concept of artificial intelligence as a workplace colleague. It examines how professionals are using AI in practice, the benefits and limits of this approach, and the implications for judgement, accountability, and professional identity.

From Tool to Colleague

Historically, workplace technology has been understood as a tool: something that performs a defined task at the direction of a human user. Spreadsheets calculate, databases store information, and email transmits messages. Generative AI challenges this traditional framing. It does not simply execute instructions; it responds, adapts, and engages in dialogue.

When AI is used as a colleague, it behaves less like software and more like an always-available junior team member. Professionals may use it to draft initial versions of documents, sense-check arguments, reframe complex material for different audiences, or identify gaps in reasoning. Importantly, the human remains in control. The professional decides what to ask, what to accept, what to reject, and what ultimately proceeds.

This mirrors how work is often delegated within teams. Drafts are reviewed, ideas are tested, and outputs are refined. AI does not remove the need for expertise; it creates a different starting point for applying it.

Cognitive Offloading and Capacity

One of the most immediate benefits of using AI as a colleague is cognitive offloading. Many professional roles involve sustained mental effort: synthesising information, managing competing priorities, and making decisions under time pressure. AI can absorb some of this load by handling first-pass tasks that would otherwise consume time and attention.

For example, using AI to prepare a draft or summary allows the professional to focus on higher-order work such as strategy, nuance, risk assessment, and stakeholder impact. Rather than starting from a blank page, the professional reacts, refines, and improves. This can increase both efficiency and quality.

Used appropriately, AI expands professional capacity rather than diminishing it. It allows individuals to operate more effectively, particularly in environments where resources are constrained and expectations are high.

AI as a Thinking Partner

Beyond efficiency, many professionals use AI as a thinking partner. This involves asking questions, exploring scenarios, and testing assumptions. In this role, AI functions as a neutral interlocutor: one without organisational politics, fatigue, or personal agendas.

This can be particularly valuable in governance, legal, policy, and leadership contexts, where decisions are complex and consequences significant. AI can help articulate alternative viewpoints, identify potential risks, or surface considerations that may otherwise be overlooked. It does not replace experience or judgement, but it can prompt deeper reflection.

The effectiveness of AI as a thinking partner depends heavily on the quality of human engagement. Vague questions produce superficial answers. Thoughtful prompts produce more useful insights. In this sense, AI collaboration rewards professional skill rather than undermining it.

Boundaries, Judgement, and Accountability

Treating AI as a colleague requires clear boundaries. Unlike a human colleague, AI does not exercise judgement, hold values, or bear responsibility. It cannot be accountable for outcomes. This distinction is fundamental.

AI systems can produce inaccuracies, reinforce biases, or present information with unwarranted confidence. They lack contextual awareness and cannot assess ethical, relational, or organisational consequences. For this reason, AI outputs must always be subject to human review and professional judgement.

Using AI responsibly means understanding when its input is appropriate and when human discretion must prevail. AI may assist in drafting advice, but it should not determine it. It may suggest options, but it should not make decisions. Accountability remains human, regardless of how sophisticated the technology becomes.

Confidence and Professional Identity

For some professionals, working with AI as a colleague raises questions about confidence and identity. If AI assists with drafting or analysis, does that diminish individual expertise or originality?

In practice, the opposite is often true. Professionals who use AI effectively tend to demonstrate stronger judgement, clearer communication, and greater strategic focus. The value they bring lies not in producing raw text or information, but in interpreting, contextualising, and applying it responsibly.

Professional identity is not threatened by AI collaboration; it is redefined. Expertise increasingly involves knowing how to work with AI thoughtfully, rather than whether to use it at all.

Organisational Culture and Governance

At an organisational level, recognising AI as a workplace colleague has important cultural implications. It encourages transparency about AI use, rather than secrecy or stigma. It supports the development of shared standards, governance frameworks, and ethical guidelines that reflect how AI is actually used in practice.

Organisations that prohibit or ignore AI use risk creating informal, ungoverned practices. By contrast, organisations that acknowledge AI's role can focus on training, risk management, and responsible integration. This approach aligns with contemporary governance principles: realism, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Artificial intelligence is already embedded in professional life, not as a replacement for human expertise, but as a collaborator. When used thoughtfully, AI can function as a colleague: supporting thinking, enhancing productivity, and enabling professionals to focus on what matters most.

The critical issue is not whether AI is used, but how. Treating AI as a colleague requires clear boundaries, strong judgement, and ethical awareness. It demands that professionals remain accountable, reflective, and intentional in their engagement with technology.

As workplaces continue to evolve, the most effective professionals will not be those who resist AI, nor those who defer to it uncritically, but those who know how to work alongside it with confidence, responsibility, and humanity.

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