

A little and often – Advice from a long-term user of AI

Clive Smallman

December 2025

Living with AI, Not Chasing It

Artificial intelligence did not arrive in my working life with a bang. First it formed the early part of my career: research in machine learning and commercial applications of knowledge-based systems. Then the second AI winter set in.

More recently, AI crept in quietly: first as decision support, then as automation, and now as something closer to a thinking partner. After four decades working across technology, business, and higher education, what strikes me most about AI is not its power but its *ordinary usefulness* when used well.

The biggest mistake people make with AI is treating it as a revolution that requires total transformation overnight. That framing creates fear, resistance, or superficial experimentation that goes nowhere. My experience suggests something far more modest and effective: *a little and often*. Small, repeated uses of AI, embedded into everyday practice, accumulate into genuine capability. This piece offers practical advice from long-term use, focused less on tools and more on habits of thinking.

From Expert Systems to Everyday Assistance

My first encounters with AI were not with generative models but with early expert systems and decision-support tools in the 1980s and 1990s. These systems promised to codify expertise, if we could just extract it cleanly enough. They were brittle, expensive, and difficult to maintain. But they taught an important lesson: AI works best when it *augments human judgment*, not when it tries to replace it.

Today's AI systems are dramatically more capable, but the principle remains. AI is not a substitute for experience, context, or ethical judgment. It is a multiplier. Used poorly, it amplifies confusion. Used well, it amplifies clarity.

The “Little and Often” Principle

The most productive AI users I observe are not those running moonshot experiments, but those making frequent, low-risk applications part of their routine. The “little and often” principle has three dimensions.

First, *small scope*. Start with tasks that are bounded and familiar: drafting, summarising, rephrasing, checking assumptions, generating alternatives. These are cognitively expensive but low-risk activities, ideal for AI support.

Second, *high frequency*. Use AI daily, not occasionally. Capability comes from repetition. Just as literacy develops through regular reading and writing, AI fluency develops through everyday interaction.

Third, *reflective use*. Each interaction should teach the user something, about their own thinking, about the limits of the tool, or about better ways to frame questions.

Over time, this pattern builds trust without dependency.

Prompting Is Thinking Made Visible

Much has been made of “prompt engineering,” but in practice, prompting is simply structured thinking made explicit. The quality of AI output is tightly coupled to the quality of the user’s input. This is not a technical insight; it is a cognitive one.

Good prompts clarify:

- the task,
- the audience,
- the constraints,
- the standards of quality.

In doing so, they force the user to think more clearly. I often tell students and executives that AI does not replace thinking, it *exposes* it. When the output is poor, it is usually because the thinking was vague, rushed, or confused.

Used regularly, AI becomes a mirror. It shows you how precise (or imprecise) your own reasoning really is.

AI as a Drafting Partner, Not an Authority

One of the most productive shifts I made was treating AI as a first-draft partner rather than a source of truth. This reframes the relationship entirely.

AI drafts quickly, without ego or fatigue. Humans edit with judgment, context, and responsibility. This division of labour is powerful. It accelerates work while preserving accountability.

Problems arise when users defer authority to the system, accepting outputs uncritically, or assuming correctness because the language sounds confident. Long-term users learn to *interrogate* AI:

Why this framing? What’s missing? What assumptions are embedded here?

The value is not in the answer but in the dialogue.

Building Judgment Through Disagreement

One underappreciated benefit of AI is its usefulness as a *constructive adversary*. I often ask AI to argue against my position, stress-test an idea, or identify weaknesses in a proposal. This is not because the system is right, but because it is fast, articulate, and relentless.

Over time, this practice sharpens judgment. It encourages intellectual humility without undermining confidence. The goal is not agreement with the machine, but better reasoning by the human.

This is particularly valuable in leadership, governance, and policy contexts where blind spots are costly and dissent is often muted.

Avoiding the Productivity Trap

AI undeniably increases productivity, but productivity is not the same as value. One of the risks of frequent AI use is mistaking speed for progress. Producing more content, more analysis, more options does not automatically lead to better outcomes.

The discipline required is *selectivity*. AI makes it easy to generate; humans must decide what matters. Long-term users learn to slow down at decision points even as they speed up preparation.

“A little and often” applies here too: small productivity gains, applied consistently, without overwhelming the system or the person.

Ethics, Agency, and Staying Human

AI raises serious ethical questions, but for everyday users the most immediate issue is agency. Who is thinking? Who is deciding? Who is responsible?

The danger is not that AI becomes truly intelligent, but that humans become passive. Long-term use should increase confidence, not erode it. If you find yourself deferring, outsourcing judgment, or avoiding responsibility, it is time to step back.

Used well, AI should leave you *more engaged*, not less. It should free cognitive space for empathy, creativity, and strategic thinking, the things machines do not do well.

Teaching AI Through Use, Not Instruction

One final observation from higher education: AI literacy is not effectively taught through policy documents or technical workshops alone. It is learned through use, reflection, and guided practice.

Students and professionals need permission to experiment, fail, and learn. A little and often. Low stakes, high frequency. Reflection built in.

The same advice applies to organisations. Culture changes through behaviour, not directives.

The Quiet Advantage

AI does not need to be dramatic to be transformative. Its real power lies in quiet, cumulative advantage. Those who use it thoughtfully, regularly, and critically will outpace those waiting for certainty or chasing novelty.

A little and often is not a strategy of caution, it is a strategy of mastery.

Clive Smallman is a professor, business advisor, and technology practitioner with over 40 years' experience across IT, higher education, and leadership development. He has taught the full MBA curriculum, advised governments and institutions on strategy and governance, and works extensively on the practical integration of artificial intelligence into professional and organisational life. His work focuses on clarity, judgment, and sustainable capability rather than technological hype.