

BEYOND THE ARTEFACT

Generative AI Will Not Replace Transformation Professionals — It Will Expose Who Only Produces the Paperwork

Giovanni Leonardi

November 2023

The profession must stop defending its artefacts and reclaim judgement, consequence and change as its real work



Generative AI Will Not Replace Transformation Professionals — It Will Expose Who Only Produces the Paperwork

Transformation · No. 372

Originally written November 2023 | Re-edited and re-rendered for the WhereBeyond Edition,

“The threat is not that AI can produce our artefacts; it is that we have mistaken those artefacts for our contribution.”

We Are Asking the Wrong Question

The transformation profession is debating whether generative AI is a help or a threat. That framing is already too comfortable.

It allows us to discuss the technology as an external force: a new assistant that may increase productivity, or a rival that may remove jobs. It keeps our attention on what the machine can do and away from the more difficult question—what have we allowed transformation work to become?

If our professional identity rests on drafting business cases, summarising workshops, producing status reports, maintaining action logs and turning familiar analysis into polished slides, then generative AI is plainly a threat. It can already create credible first drafts of much of that work in minutes.

We should not defend those tasks as though the volume of documentation were the value of the profession.

The threat is not that AI can produce our artefacts; it is that we have mistaken those artefacts for our contribution.

Transformation was never meant to be the manufacture of management reassurance. It is the disciplined work of changing how an organisation creates value while consequences, interests and evidence remain contested. That work requires judgement. It requires someone to expose the trade-off hidden inside a convenient consensus, connect decisions across organisational boundaries and remain accountable when the chosen path becomes difficult.

Generative AI can help us do that work. It cannot absolve us from it.

Stop Measuring Professionalism by Effort

We have built a quiet status system around labour that is easy to observe.

The analyst who spends three days consolidating interview notes appears diligent. The programme manager who assembles a forty-page board pack appears in control. The consultant who produces an elaborate operating-model deck appears authoritative. The organisation pays for visible effort and receives visible artefacts.

Now a practitioner can ask a generative model to structure the notes, compare themes, draft options and prepare a first version of the pack before lunch. The immediate reaction is often anxiety: if the work takes less time, will it be valued less?

That anxiety reveals the problem. We priced the effort because we failed to define the outcome.

Consider a composite transformation team preparing a decision on whether to centralise a customer-support process. Four analysts spend two weeks reviewing 63 interview records, eight process documents and three years of service data. Their pack describes five themes, four risks and three options. The executive meeting ends without a decision because the paper never states which trade-off matters most: lower unit cost or greater local discretion.

A generative tool could have reduced the synthesis to two days. It would not have resolved the trade-off. The missing work was not summarisation. It was judgement made explicit.

The professional contribution begins where fluent drafting stops.

Reclaim the Work the Machine Cannot Own

Generative AI changes the economics of cognition. Routine synthesis, translation, comparison and drafting will become cheaper. That does not make transformation expertise less necessary. It makes low-value intermediation harder to disguise as expertise.

We should welcome that pressure.

The profession must move its centre of gravity:

- from producing information to testing what the information means
- from documenting stakeholder views to exposing where interests conflict
- from reporting progress to identifying which decision progress now depends upon
- from describing operating models to assigning real authority and consequence
- from facilitating agreement to distinguishing genuine commitment from polite attendance
- from delivering a plan to maintaining a credible chain between change, behaviour and value

This is not a retreat into soft skills. It is a demand for greater technical, commercial and organisational depth. A practitioner cannot judge an AI-enabled operating model without understanding data, process, controls, people and economics well enough to challenge the plausible language the technology produces.

Generative AI raises the standard because it makes plausible language abundant.

When a convincing draft becomes cheap, the scarce professional skill is knowing what must be true before anyone should act on it.

Do Not Confuse Adoption with Abdication

There is a serious objection. Generative models can produce inaccurate statements, reproduce bias, expose confidential information and create false confidence. Junior practitioners may accept fluent answers without learning the craft behind them. Organisations may use productivity claims to remove capacity before they understand the new risks. Some roles will be reduced or redesigned.

All of this is real. Enthusiasm without control is not transformation; it is experimentation with consequences assigned to someone else.

But the answer cannot be professional protectionism. Refusing the tools will not preserve standards. It will leave their use informal, hidden and governed by convenience. Nor should we create a ceremonial approval process that makes every useful application slower than the work it replaces.

We need bounded, visible use:

- protect sensitive information and use approved environments
- verify claims against source material and record material assumptions

- keep named human accountability for decisions and communications
- distinguish drafting assistance from analytical evidence
- test outputs for who or what they systematically overlook
- preserve routes for challenge when automated work shapes an important decision

These are not reasons to keep working as before. They are the new disciplines of responsible practice.

End the Apprenticeship of Administration

The profession also needs to reconsider how people learn.

For years, junior practitioners have been given the work seniors no longer wish to do: minutes, trackers, first drafts, data consolidation and presentation production. Some of that labour teaches context and precision. Much of it teaches compliance with templates.

If generative AI removes the repetitive portion, we must not conclude that apprenticeship has disappeared. We must build a better one.

New practitioners should learn how to interrogate an output, trace a claim, design a decision, read organisational power, quantify an assumption, recognise operational consequence and say when the evidence does not support the preferred answer. They should sit closer to difficult conversations, not further away behind an automated drafting process.

Senior people must also change. It is not credible to delegate AI use downward while preserving judgement as an unexplained instinct. Experienced practitioners need to make their reasoning visible: why one option is reversible and another is not, why a stakeholder's apparent objection signals a deeper constraint, why a benefit will fail without a change in authority.

The machine can accelerate the artefact. The profession must accelerate the transfer of judgement.

Our Choice Is Not Help or Threat

Generative AI will help some transformation professionals and threaten others, but the dividing line will not be a job title. It will be the nature of the contribution.

Those who use the technology merely to produce more paperwork will accelerate the very bureaucracy transformation is supposed to remove. Those who avoid it to protect familiar work will become slower without becoming wiser. Those who combine it with disciplined judgement can spend less time manufacturing evidence of activity and more time confronting the decisions that change requires.

We should act now.

1. Automate the draft, never the accountability.
2. Use saved time to deepen evidence and challenge, not increase document volume.
3. Train practitioners in verification, consequence and decision design.
4. Rewrite roles around outcomes and judgement rather than artefact production.
5. Make responsible AI use part of professional practice, not a hidden shortcut.

This is not a call to make transformation professionals more technological for its own sake. It is a call to recover the purpose of the profession.

We do not need to prove that humans can write a better first draft. We need to prove that transformation professionals can see what the draft conceals, decide what the organisation is avoiding and carry change through to real operating consequence.

If generative AI forces us to make that contribution explicit, it is not the end of the profession.

It is the end of the excuse.