

How The Trades Figured Out The Best Use For AI

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Builders working on jobsites have had to leverage the tech out of necessity, leading to surprising advantages.

The most interesting thing happening in artificial intelligence right now isn't in Silicon Valley. It's in a mechanical room in Dallas where a second-year tech just diagnosed a chiller issue in minutes using context that used to live exclusively in a 20-year veteran's head.

While the tech world ties itself in knots debating whether AI will eliminate jobs, the skilled trades are showing the rest of us what AI is actually good at today. Not as a replacement, but as a capability multiplier. That distinction makes all the difference in the world.

The AI Blind Spot

I'm deep into conversations around AI right now. And I'm seeing two camps clearly emerge.

One is all about anxiety, the fear that AI is going to hollow out entire functions, and maybe whole companies along with them.

The other is all about doing the same work, faster and cheaper.

Both miss the bigger story. There's a third reality playing out right now, and it's moving fast enough that by the time most leaders recognize it, the gap will already be hard to close. It's not that AI shrinks what exists. It expands what's possible. The



real question isn't how to do the same work with fewer people. It's what becomes possible when every person on your team has capabilities that didn't exist a year ago.

If you're not asking that question yet, you're building your strategy around yesterday's version of what a team can do.

How Trades Use AI Today

I co-founded BuildOps, a platform for commercial contractors – the people who physically go to a building and make it work. No amount of AI is going to install a chiller or pull wire through conduit. The work is irreducibly human.

And that's exactly why these workers have figured out the best use of AI in construction faster than the rest of the industry.

Because the core of their work has always been physical, the conversation was never “Will AI replace us?” Instead, long before AI made its widespread debut, they asked, “How do we do this?” Answering that question is something AI is good at today, something that gives them a clear advantage in figuring out the best way to do the physical work.

That clarity, forced on them by the nature of the job, is the same clarity every industry – not just construction – needs right now. Once you stop worrying about what AI takes away and start paying attention to what it adds, you make better decisions, in any industry.

Construction’s Can-Do Narrative

The replacement narrative falls apart the moment you look at what’s actually happening on the ground.

When we surveyed hundreds of commercial contractors last fall, 78% said AI can improve how they work; 80% said it will be essential to stay competitive within three years; and 81% said they feel confident in their ability to adopt it. These aren’t people bracing for a layoff wave. They’re gearing up to do more.

This pattern is showing up everywhere: small, focused teams attempting and pulling off things that were out of reach 18 months ago. Not because they got bigger. Because each person on the team got more capable.

AI is changing what a small, focused team can credibly attempt. That’s happening, to a degree, in every industry. But it’s really apparent in construction with teams on the jobsite.

Beyond Cost Cutting

The easy way to use AI is as a cost-cutting lever. Ask it for summaries. Use it to shave a few minutes off a workflow. Celebrate the incremental gain.

The harder and more important move is to treat it as a capability shift.


If you walk into this moment asking “How many people can I cut?” you’ll get a smaller company. You might hit your margin target this quarter and then spend the next few years wondering why you’re losing market share to competitors you’ve never heard of.

If you walk in asking “What can my people do now that they couldn’t do before?” that’s a different trajectory entirely. That’s how a 40-person team starts to operate with the force of 100.

But that only happens if you’re willing to redesign the work itself. Job descriptions, team structures, even who you hire first, they all change when you assume every person on your team has access to a constantly improving set of capabilities.

Stop measuring AI by what it removes. Start measuring it by what it unlocks.

The trades got to this conclusion before most workers because they had no choice. When someone has to be on a jobsite tacking fasteners in place, you can’t entertain the replacement fantasy for long. You’re forced into the more interesting question: how can this person do this job more effectively when I put these additional AI tools in their hands?

You should be asking the same thing right now. Because if you’re only counting what AI might take away, you’ll miss what matters most: what your people are suddenly capable of doing. 



About the Author

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