

AI and the Thinking Gap

A point of view on judgment decline and what the data is actually telling us

Are we using AI to think better, or instead of thinking altogether?

AI adoption is often described as a question of speed: which organisations move fastest, which workers adapt earliest. When in reality is better understood as a question of honesty, about what is actually happening to the quality of thinking, once the novelty has settled.

The tool sits slightly outside the usual technology narrative. Most platforms reward adoption directly. AI is more complicated. The same model, given to two people with different cognitive habits, produces entirely different outcomes. For one it sharpens reasoning. For the other it quietly replaces it. The difference is not in the tool. It is in what the person brings to it.

This matters more than people think, The patterns forming around AI use are not encouraging. People reach for it the way they reach for google. Before they try to think, not after. A vague question gets a vague answer. A properly reasoned question gets something genuinely useful. That gap is not technical. It is the gap between someone who has done the thinking and someone who has outsourced it.

That doesn't mean AI use inevitably leads to diminished thinking. Used with discipline, it does the opposite. There is a second group of people who arrive with a question they have already tried to answer and use the tool to interrogate their own conclusions. Their thinking gets sharper precisely because they are doing the thinking. The tool just makes the gaps harder to hide.

What makes this more than abstract is the data. Anthropic published research in March tracking real usage across 800 occupations. 75% of programming tasks are now AI-assisted. Hiring of workers aged 22 to 25 in the most exposed roles is down 20% year on year. Those figures are not simply about AI replacing tasks. They are about AI replacing people who never developed the judgment to work alongside it. The career ladder is not disappearing. It is losing its first few steps, the rungs where judgment used to be built.

There are no universally right answers. Heavy AI use can produce exceptional thinking. Restraint can too. Both can work, and both can fail.

The irony is worth sitting with. The people least at risk from AI are the ones who think clearly enough that they could function without it. The people most at risk are not the ones who ignore the tools. They are the ones who use them without bringing any thinking to the exchange at all.



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