Are You Actually Succeeding — Or Just Looking Like It?

What AI adoption reveals about how we've confused performance with achievement

6 min read

> *Three weeks. That's how long it takes for most people to go from "AI is going to change everything" to quietly closing the tab and doing the work themselves.*

A Microsoft study tracking 300,000 employees found a pattern: excitement spikes when people first use AI tools, then crashes. Outputs feel generic. The AI sounds confident but gets things wrong. People give up.

This isn't just a tech problem. It's a symptom of something much bigger — and it affects how we work, how we lead, and maybe even who we are.

■ AI Isn't a Software Update. It's a Management Test.

Most companies treat AI like a new app you install and forget about. Click, done. But that's the wrong mental model entirely.

Think of it this way: imagine you suddenly have a brilliant but brand-new intern. They're fast, they know a lot, and they can draft things in seconds. But they have no idea what your client actually needs. They don't know what 'good' looks like in your field. And they'll confidently hand you work full of mistakes without flagging a single one.

Would you just hand them a task and trust the result blindly? No. You'd give context, check their work, and teach them over time where they shine and where they fall short.

That's exactly what using AI well requires. It's not a technical skill — it's a management skill.

> **THE 6 SKILLS THAT ACTUALLY MATTER**
>
> Giving useful context · Knowing when to trust the output · Breaking big tasks into chunks · Iterating critically · Embedding it into your workflow · Knowing where it fails

Notice anything? None of those are coding skills. They're the same skills great managers use with people. Which means the best AI users in any organization aren't the most technical employees — they're the ones who already know how to delegate, give feedback, and judge quality.

■■ The Jagged Frontier: Where Confidence Becomes Dangerous

Here's the unsettling part. AI doesn't fail gradually. It fails suddenly — and it never tells you when it's about to.

Researchers from Harvard and BCG tested this with consultants. On tasks where AI was good, performance improved dramatically. But on tasks just outside AI's abilities? Consultants who used AI performed **19 percentage points worse** than those who didn't use it at all. Why? Because they trusted the output without having the expertise to catch the errors.

This is the "jagged frontier" — a hidden edge where competence drops off a cliff. And AI never waves a flag to say "you've crossed it."

Two strategies help navigate this:

THE CENTAUR	THE CYBORG
Keep a clear division: you handle strategy and judgment, AI handles generation and options. Best for high-stakes work where accountability matters.	Fluid back-and-forth with the machine throughout the process. Best for creative, iterative work where refinement is the point.

The key in both cases? **You must know the frontier.** That means building a personal map of where AI reliably helps and where it quietly fails you — and being willing to share those failure cases with your team instead of hiding them.

■ Success vs. Successfulness: The Bigger Game

Here's where we zoom out. The AI problem is actually just one corner of a much larger cultural shift.

We live in a world increasingly built around the *performance* of achievement, not achievement itself. There's a useful distinction to make here:

SUCCESS	SUCCESSFULNESS
Something real — a finished project, a genuine skill, an honest moment of growth.	How many people are watching. Metrics. Followers. The appearance of achievement.

We've slowly started optimizing for the second one while forgetting the first. And scale has become the cheat code: if something has millions of views, we assume it must be good. **Quantity masquerades as quality.**

This creates four unspoken rules that quietly govern how we behave:

1. **Perform belief.** You don't have to actually believe the narrative — just act like you do in public. "Playing the game" has become a moral expectation.

2. **Don't get caught.** The only real failure isn't doing something wrong — it's being *seen* doing it.

3. **Loudness signals doubt.** The louder someone defends a value, the less they may actually trust it.

4. **Public and private blur.** We perform in private and guard ourselves in public, reversing what used to be natural.

> *When performance replaces substance, we don't just lose honesty — we lose the ability to tell the difference.*

■ Ontological Burnout: Running on Empty

This pressure creates something harder to name than regular burnout. Call it **ontological burnout** — not just exhaustion, but the quiet loss of *why* you're doing any of it.

It happens when your work feels like a role you're playing rather than something you actually believe in. When you know all the steps of the job but have forgotten the soul of it.

AI accelerates this in a specific way: by automating the "boring" early tasks — research, first drafts, the grunt work — we might be accidentally gutting the process by which people develop real judgment.

A junior lawyer who never writes a bad first brief doesn't become a senior lawyer who can spot a bad brief at a glance. A young journalist who never struggles through a rough draft doesn't develop the instinct for what's newsworthy. **The struggle was the education.**

There's a real risk that the next generation inherits powerful AI tools but loses the domain expertise needed to actually verify what those tools produce.

■ The Only Real Rebellion

So what do you do about all of this?

The answer isn't to quit AI or reject the modern world. It's simpler and harder: **stay honest with yourself about what you actually know, what you actually did, and what you actually believe.**

Here's a concrete test: *Would the 15-year-old version of you be proud of who you've become?*

Not impressed by your metrics. Not dazzled by your title. Actually *proud* — in the way a teenager is proud before they learn to perform pride for others.

That version of you didn't care about successfulness. They cared about whether something was real.

AI isn't the enemy of authentic work. But it *is* a mirror. The way an organization adopts it reveals whether it has the judgment culture to use it well. The way an individual uses it reveals whether they know where they end and the machine begins.

We've always had the option of outsourcing our thinking to authorities, trends, and social scripts. AI just makes that option faster, slicker, and easier to hide behind.

The question isn't whether to use it. It's whether you're still the one doing the thinking.

In your work right now — are you building something real,
or performing the idea of building something?

WORTH SITTING WITH.