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The AI Productivity Paradox

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I've been pretty much all in on generative AI since I first encountered it in late 2022. What started as curiosity quickly became habit, and then something closer to instinct. It's now woven into almost everything I do.

The results, at least on the surface, are exactly what you would expect. Work that used to take hours now takes minutes. A lot of the small, repetitive tasks that once slowed everything down have faded into the background. By any normal measure, that should create more time, more space, and less stress.

But that's not what happened.

If anything, the opposite is true. I'm working harder than I ever have. The time I thought I was getting back never really turned into breathing room. It turned into additional projects, more decisions, and a broader sense of responsibility. The work didn't disappear. It changed form and expanded to fill the space.

That shift is what I keep coming back to. AI removes friction, but it also changes the nature of the work that remains. In legal, that doesn't just mean efficiency improves. It changes the operating environment. Expectations rise. Response times shorten. More work stays active at once. The bottleneck never really goes away; it just shows up somewhere else.

What's left is often the most valuable part of the job, but also the most mentally demanding. The day feels less weighed down by administrative drag and more defined by constant evaluation. There is more context to hold, more decisions to make, and fewer natural pauses between them. That can feel energizing, especially at first. It can also be exhausting in a way that is harder to recognize.

Part of what makes this easy to miss is that I genuinely like working this way. Using AI is engaging, fast, and useful. Because of that, it becomes easier to ignore the signals that would normally tell me to slow down. I didn't notice at first that I wasn't simply becoming more efficient. I was steadily increasing the amount I was carrying.

And it's not just me. Our small team is handling far more than we used to, with fewer people and less friction in the system. That is exciting. We're moving faster and delivering at a level that would have felt out of reach not that long ago. But it also means there are more moving pieces at any given moment, and keeping them all in motion takes real effort. The work flows better, but it does not necessarily feel lighter.

I'm starting to realize that reclaimed time does not stay reclaimed unless you protect it. Otherwise, it gets absorbed immediately. There is always another initiative to move forward, another problem to solve, another chance to push things further. Without deliberate limits, expansion becomes the default.

That is where I think the real risk starts to show up, not only for individuals but for organizations. As teams become more efficient, expectations shift almost without anyone noticing.

In legal, that can be especially easy to normalize because the external signs look positive. Service improves and work moves faster. But underneath that progress, the pressure may simply be

moving into a different layer of the system. The limiting factor is no longer just process or time. It becomes attention, judgment, and the ability to manage complexity without burning out.

If that's true, then the answer is not to pull back from AI. It is to be more deliberate about how we adopt it. The guardrails cannot stop at privacy, security, and accuracy. They also have to include capacity. Teams need to decide ahead of time how efficiency gains will be used, what kinds of work should expand, and what should not. They need to be honest about how much parallel work is actually sustainable. And they need to treat some of that regained time as worth protecting.

For leaders, that requires a real shift in mindset. Efficiency gains should not automatically reset expectations. Teams need room to absorb new tools, stabilize new ways of working, and decide what creates real value. Otherwise, they just keep accelerating without ever feeling ahead.

AI is still one of the most powerful tools we have to improve how work gets done. But if we are not careful, it will quietly raise the bar faster than we can sustainably meet it. The real challenge is not just adopting AI. It is learning how to live with the pace it creates.