



MONDAY, AUGUST 10, 2026 · THE SIGNAL BRIEF · WORK DESIGN

Start with a job you can check

When work says “use AI,” you do not need to settle what you think about the technology. Choose one small job where you can still judge the result.

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An illustrative scene: compare the organized result with source notes you already understand.



THE SIGNAL BRIEF / A CAREFUL FIRST USE

The first mistake isn't refusing to use AI. It's giving it a job you cannot safely check.

"We need to start using AI." Maybe it came up in a meeting. Maybe it appeared in your goals for the year. Either way, the instruction arrives without the part that would make it useful: use it to do what, with which work, and who answers when the result is wrong?

If your reaction is somewhere between curiosity and quiet dread, you do not need a verdict on AI before you try one task. You need to decide what job—if any—you are willing to give it.

Choose a task you can grade

People often hear "start using AI" as two choices: hand over the work and hope, or refuse and wait for the mandate to pass. There is a third option: give the tool one job at a time, and keep the judgment.

Narrow: one task with clear edges, not "help me with my job."

Reversible: if the result is poor, you can discard it without lasting cost.

Checkable: you already know the source material well enough to spot errors.

That last test matters most. Organizing notes you took yourself is easy to inspect line by line.

Recommending which vendor to drop based on contracts you have not read is not. The same assistant can be appropriate for one task and a poor choice for the other. The difference is whether you can recognize a bad answer before it becomes a decision.

**FIVE RUNGS / 01—03**

Start on ground you know

Say you have two pages of rough notes from a project debrief. You were there; you know what happened. That makes the notes a reasonable starting point, subject to your organization's rules about approved tools and information.

1. Start with material you understand. Use your own notes, draft, or a document you have actually read. Before pasting anything, check company policy and the tool's terms. Do not enter confidential, customer, employee, or proprietary information unless they explicitly allow it. When unsure, leave it out.
2. Ask for a bounded output. Try "organize these notes into themes" or "list the decisions and open questions." Avoid "write the final report and assess the team." You want an output you can accept, revise, or delete—not a verdict you cannot evaluate.
3. Compare it with the source. Put the result beside the original. Did it merge two different problems? Turn a passing comment into the main theme? Drop an important "but"? This is the rung that teaches you what the tool does well and where it slips.

The comparison is the lesson. A smooth summary can still change emphasis, combine separate points, or lose a caveat. Catching that on familiar material helps you decide where the tool is useful—and where it is not.

**FIVE RUNGS / 04—05**

Ask, then decide

4. Ask what is missing. “What questions would a reader ask that these notes don’t answer?” The tool may surface a real gap—or offer questions that merely sound thorough. Keep the ones that help; discard the rest.
5. Make the call yourself. You decide what is true, what gets said, and what gets sent. A polished answer does not transfer responsibility.

Borrow a prompt

I’m new to using AI for work, and I want to start carefully. The task I need help with is [task]. Please help me produce [specific, reversible output] from [material I understand and am allowed to share]. Flag uncertainty and questions rather than filling gaps with guesses. I will compare your output with the source before using it.

For consequential financial, legal, health, or employment decisions, use AI to help identify questions; it does not replace the person accountable for answering them.

The goal is capability, not comfort

Comfort can come from stopping the checks. Capability comes from checking on purpose, on small jobs, until you know what the tool is good for in your hands—and what it is not.

If you already use AI at work, which rung do you skip? My guess is the third: the output looks finished, so checking it starts to feel optional.

Reply with one thing: Do you use AI at work? Yes or no is plenty.

M.R.

Source and scope. Adapted from Don Long’s supplied article, “They Told You to Use AI. Start Here.” The ladder and examples are author guidance, not a validated safety framework. Check workplace policy and tool terms; this issue does not verify or endorse any provider’s data practices. The prompt is an editorial adaptation, not a guarantee of safe or accurate output.

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