



# The Work Is Safe. The Business Isn't.

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**Why AI won't take your trade — and what it's already taking from the operator who ignores it**

*The trades are safe from AI. The businesses built on them are not — and that gap is the entire opportunity.*

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## I. Bagging Groceries in Alabama

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My first job was at a Winn-Dixie in Alabama. I cleaned the bathrooms. I ran a register, bagged groceries, stocked shelves, and pulled pallets off the truck before the doors opened.

It was not a career. It was a job, and it taught me the only thing that has ever mattered in business: somebody has to actually do the work. The truck arrives whether or not you feel like unloading it.

I have spent the twenty-five years since building software companies. I have a dozen patents and one company that got acquired. None of that changed the lesson from the loading dock. It only changed what the work looked like.

I am writing this because a lot of people who have never pulled a pallet are telling people who have that they are safe. That advice is half right, and the half that is wrong is going to cost some good operators their business.

You started with your hands. Nothing says you have to end there.

## II. The Backbone Nobody Counts

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And those trades are not a sideshow in the American economy. They are the floor it stands on — nearly 30 million US businesses have no employees at all, and most of them are one person, one truck, and one phone.

That figure is from the Census Bureau's Nonemployer Statistics. There are roughly 8 million businesses in this country with employees. There are almost four times as many without.

In landscaping alone, the Census counts about 118,000 companies with employees and another 517,000 sole proprietors. No single company controls more than about five percent of that market.

That is what most of American business actually is. One person who knows how to do something, a truck, and a list of people who call when they need it done.

## III. The Comfortable Story

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The comfortable story goes like this: AI is coming for the desk jobs, and the trades will be fine. Nobody has built a robot that can carry a dishwasher down a basement stair.

The comfortable story is mostly true, and the best evidence for it is not from a magazine. In March 2026, researchers at Anthropic published a study measuring which jobs AI is actually being used for — not which jobs it could theoretically do, but real usage mapped against the Department of Labor's task database for roughly 800 occupations.

At the bottom of their list, 30 percent of American workers showed zero coverage. Their tasks turned up too rarely in the data to register. That group includes cooks, motorcycle mechanics, lifeguards, bartenders, and dishwashers.

At the top were computer programmers, at 75 percent. Then customer service representatives. Then data entry clerks, at 67 percent.

The same study found the most exposed workers earn 47 percent more than the least exposed, and are far more credentialed. People with graduate degrees are 4.5 percent of the unexposed group and 17.4 percent of the most exposed.

Read that again. The people who have been explaining the risk to you are carrying more of it than you are.

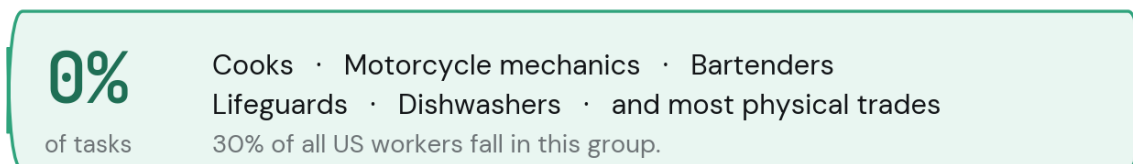
## Which jobs AI is actually being used for

Share of an occupation's tasks appearing in real AI usage

### MOST EXPOSED



### ZERO MEASURABLE EXPOSURE



Source: Anthropic, "Labor market impacts of AI," March 2026.

Roughly 800 occupations mapped against the Dept. of Labor task database.

You have probably seen the television ad where a woman sits on her bathroom floor surrounded by toilet parts, photographs two components she does not recognize, asks her phone how they fit together, and puts the toilet back together. That ad is real, and it is a fair picture of where this technology is right now.

So let us grant the comfortable story everything it asks for. Your trade is safe. Nobody is automating the physical work.

**Nobody is automating a couch up three flights of stairs. Somebody is already automating the phone call that books it.**

## IV. The Work Is Safe. The Business Isn't.

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Here is what the comfortable story misses. That study measured occupations. It did not measure owners.

You are not classified as a groundskeeping worker or a laborer. You do that job, and then you run a company on top of it. The mowing is safe. The four hours on Sunday night spent writing quotes, chasing invoices, returning calls, and figuring out what to post — that is not the trade. That is language work, and language work is the exposed column.

We have been here before, and it has a name. It was called the internet.

The internet never took a single plumbing job. What it took was the Yellow Pages ad. The plumber who put up a website, and later claimed his listing on the map, quietly took the customers of the plumber who did not. The trade was untouched. The business changed completely.

And the numbers from that shift are not a horror story. In 2011, McKinsey surveyed 4,800 small and medium businesses and found the internet had created 2.6 jobs for every one it eliminated. A parallel study in France counted 500,000 jobs destroyed over fifteen years and 1.2 million created.

Some businesses died. Travel agencies, video rental, classified ads — the businesses made of information. The businesses made of physical work survived. But every last one of them had to change how it got found.

Now the best number in that study, and the one nobody quotes. Seventy-five percent of the internet's economic impact went to traditional companies that never thought of themselves as

internet businesses at all.

Not to the tech firms. To the shops, the contractors, the movers. The winnings went to the operators who used it, not the people who built it.

That is the pattern, and it is running again — faster. Small firms used AI at roughly half the large-firm rate in early 2024. By August 2025 the gap had nearly closed, with small businesses adopting faster and reversing the usual lag.

## V. Replacement, Augmentation, and Horizontal Growth

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There are two versions of the AI story. The loud one keeps failing in public, and it is worth looking at the wreckage before deciding what to believe.

**Customer service.** In February 2024, a European fintech announced with its AI vendor that its assistant had handled 2.3 million conversations in one month, doing the work of 700 full-time agents and cutting resolution time from 11 minutes to under 2, on track to save \$40 million that year. By May 2025 the chief executive said publicly that cost had been too dominant a factor in the decision and the result was lower quality. The company began hiring humans back. It has since disputed the word "reversal," calling the new model a hybrid rather than a retreat. Both things are true, and the admission is the part that matters.

**Software development.** In June 2026, Gartner projected that AI coding costs will overtake the average developer's salary by 2028. Their survey found 23 percent of technology leaders already spending \$200 to \$500 per developer per month on tokens, and 6 percent spending more than \$2,000. The comparison uses a global average salary near \$2,000 a month, not a US one — but the direction is the point. In one widely reported case, a single employee at a venture-backed startup ran up \$81,267 in AI costs in one week building a browser game.

**And the study nobody expected.** A nonprofit research group ran a controlled trial with 16 experienced developers on 246 real tasks in codebases they had worked in for five years. Allowed to use AI, they took 19 percent longer. They had predicted a 24 percent speedup, and after finishing, still believed they had been 20 percent faster.

Sit with that last one. A 39-point gap between what the clock said and what the professionals felt.

So does AI help a professional or not? The honest answer requires a distinction most articles skip.

**Vertical growth is getting better at your craft.** The evidence there is weak. Near-zero measured gain for experts in the customer support research. Negative in the developer trial. AI is not going to make you better at loading a truck, reading a lawn, or handling a difficult owner.

**Horizontal growth is how much ground one professional can cover.** That is where the gains are, and there is no obvious ceiling on it. A customer support study of 5,179 agents published through the National Bureau of Economic Research found average productivity up 14 percent, and up 34 percent for the least experienced workers.

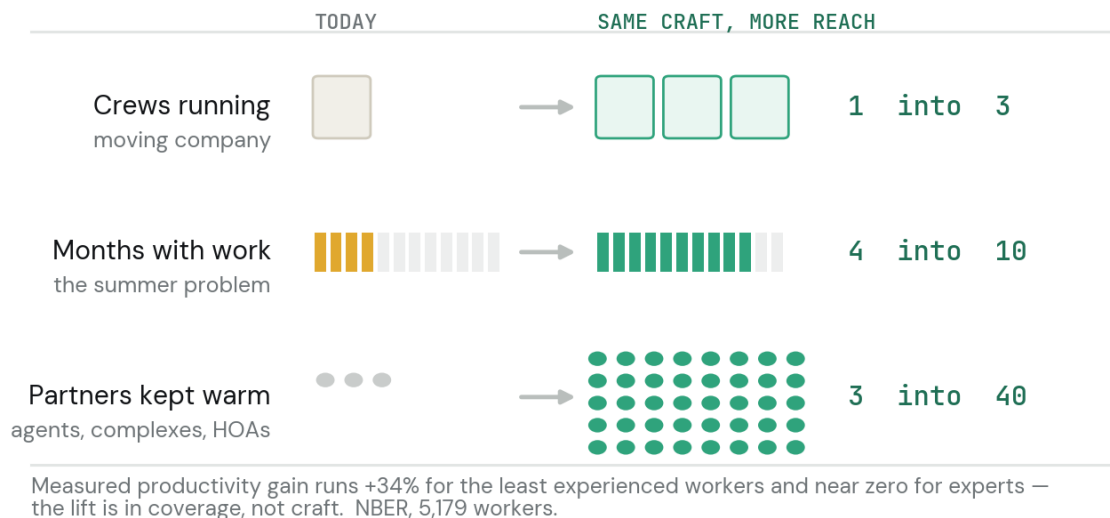
The mover does not carry couches better. He runs three crews instead of one, works October through April, and keeps forty referral relationships warm at the same time.

Which brings us back to the woman on the bathroom floor. AI got her through one toilet. It did not make her a plumber. The second time something breaks, she is calling somebody.

There is a business consequence in that, and it runs opposite to the panic. More homeowners will try, and more will fail halfway through on a Saturday. Every one of those failures becomes a phone call — to whoever is findable at that moment.

## AI will not make you better at the work

It multiplies how much of it one person can reach



You are not competing with the machine. You are competing with the operator down the road who is using it.

**AI barely moves the ceiling on your craft. It removes the ceiling on your reach.**

## VI. What Actually Stops You

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Ask most operators what they need and they say more customers. The data says otherwise.

In 2024, the Associated General Contractors surveyed roughly 1,500 firms and found 94 percent with craft openings called those positions hard to fill. That same year, Angi surveyed 1,200 trade professionals and found more than 66 percent said they could grow if they could find more quality workers.

Here is the part most people get backwards, and I had it backwards too. Finding help is a marketing problem.

It is the same work as finding customers. You are identifying an audience, building awareness with them, making an offer, and following up with the ones who respond. The only thing that changes is who is on the other end. A company that can fill its truck can fill its crew, because it is the same machinery pointed at a different list.

And the cost of not solving it is measurable. Society for Human Resource Management benchmarking puts cost per hire at \$5,475 and time to fill at about 42 days. The landscaping trade association estimates replacing a crew laborer at 20 to 30 percent of annual wages — roughly \$7,400 to \$12,400 — and a crew leader at 40 to 60 percent, or \$22,000 to \$35,000.

The second wall is different. Once you have crews, the question stops being how many jobs you can win and becomes how many you can keep.

Landscaping firms reported 89 percent annual customer retention in 2025, up from 88 percent — while net margins fell from 19 to 17 percent. Retention is the lever that still works when pricing does not.

Recurring revenue also changes what the business is worth. In lawn care, each additional ten percentage points of contracted commercial revenue is associated with roughly half a turn to a full turn of added EBITDA multiple at the \$2 million to \$10 million level.

So: launching is a labor problem, growing is a retention problem, and both are marketing problems wearing work boots.

Meanwhile the lead money keeps going out the door. Across 3,211 home services campaigns analyzed in 2025, average cost per lead was \$90.92, rising 10.51 percent year over year — roughly double the all-industry increase. Those leads are often sold to three to five competitors at once. Shared leads close at 10 to 20 percent. Leads you own close at 30 to 50.

A lead is not what it costs. It is what it costs divided by how often it closes.

**Two-thirds of tradespeople say they could grow if they could find the help. That is a marketing problem, not a hiring problem.**

## VII. The Three Rungs

Nobody goes from one truck to three crews in a straight line. Service businesses climb in three recognizable stages, and each one has a different problem. Knowing which rung you are on decides what is worth your Sunday night.

### How service businesses actually climb

Each rung has a different constraint



Most operators stall on rung two, because the two jobs that lift them off it — recruiting and partnerships — are the two nobody has time for.

**Rung one: a man and a truck.** You are the business. Every hour of admin is an hour off the job. Revenue tracks your calendar exactly, and vacation costs you money twice. The work here is not software. It is a claimed and complete map listing, a system for asking every finished customer for a review, and answering the phone. That is nearly free, and it is the highest-return thing available to you.

Reviews are not vanity at this stage. A Harvard study of restaurant data found a one-star rating increase drove a 5 to 9 percent revenue increase — and the effect appeared only for independents, not chains.

**Rung two: people and trucks.** You hire, and you immediately meet the labor wall. Now the constraint is crews, not calls, and your job quietly changes from doing the work to selling it and staffing it. Revenue per truck and per crew becomes the number that matters. The landscape trade association puts average revenue per employee at about \$123,000, rising to \$156,000 at firms over \$10 million.

This rung is where most operators stall, because the two jobs that would get them off it — recruiting and partnership building — are exactly the two nobody has time for.

**Rung three: subscriptions and local tie-ins.** The business stops selling jobs and starts selling arrangements. Maintenance plans. Seasonal contracts. Standing relationships with apartment complexes, agents, and property managers who send work without being asked each time.

This is the rung where the business becomes worth something separate from you. Small businesses in these trades trade hands at roughly 2.6 to 3.2 times seller's discretionary earnings, and the operators at the top of that range are almost always the ones with contracted, transferable revenue.

Most of what follows is aimed at rungs two and three. If you are on rung one, take the free work first — it still applies, and skipping it makes everything after it more expensive.

## VIII. Three Businesses, Two Agents

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Let us hire two people.

**The first hire is Sage.** Her job is business development. She builds the list of every real estate agent, apartment complex, property manager, and association board in your territory. She researches each one before anybody contacts them. She writes the first note, and the second, and the one three months later that finally gets answered. She keeps forty relationships warm at once and never forgets a follow-up.

**The second hire is Aria.** Her job is marketing. She posts consistently instead of when you remember. She asks every finished customer for a review and answers the ones that come back. She writes the recruiting ad in March so the crew exists in June. She keeps you visible in the trade area between jobs, which is when people decide who to call.

Read those two descriptions again. Neither one is exotic. Both are exactly what a growing service business needs and exactly what nobody in a growing service business has time to do.

**Now price them.** A sales development representative averaged \$56,681 in base pay in 2026. The Bureau of Labor Statistics puts the median for marketing specialists at \$76,950, though a small local employer would hire near the bottom of that range — call it \$55,000. Add payroll taxes and benefits at the usual quarter on top, and the pair costs roughly \$140,000 a year.

Then add hiring. The Society for Human Resource Management benchmarks cost per hire at \$5,475 and time to fill at 42 days. So you are eleven thousand dollars and three months into the process before either of them has sent a single message.

**That is why you have not hired them.** Not because you do not need the work done. Because at \$140,000 a year against a business doing \$700,000, those two roles cost more than they can possibly return in year one, and you would be managing them on top of running crews.

So you do both jobs yourself, badly, at nine o'clock at night, in the hour after the trucks are back and before you fall asleep.

**Now change one thing.** What if Sage and Aria cost \$35,000 a year for the pair. And what if ten of them — a Sage and an Aria for each of five brands, or for each of five people on a team — cost the same as two.

Run that against a business at \$700,000. You have replaced \$140,000 of payroll you were never going to spend with \$35,000 you can. You have four months of the year back. And the work that only ever happened when you had a slow week now happens every day, whether or not you had a slow week.

That is why I built Kinetic Tricks.

Sage and Aria are AI agents. They are powered by you, not the other way around — every message they write comes to you before it reaches a human being, and nothing goes out that you have not read. They do the legwork. You keep the judgment, which was always the part that was actually yours.

What follows is what those two do inside each of the three businesses. Every number is sourced, and every assumption is labeled. Where an industry has no reliable figure, I say so rather than

making one up.

## Moving and hauling

The average moving company runs about six employees and roughly a million dollars in revenue. And most of them are built entirely around summer, which is the actual problem — a business with one season is a business with one crisis.

Going horizontal means finding the work that happens the other eight months.

**What Sage works on.** Real estate agents, tracked by active listing rather than contacted after the fact. Apartment complexes and leasing offices, for preferred-vendor placement and lease-signing promotions where a move credit is bundled into the package. Commercial and office relocation, which is off-season and higher-ticket. Reciprocal arrangements with storage facilities. University housing offices, whose calendar is fixed years in advance.

**What Aria works on.** Off-season demand, built through steady presence from October to April. Continuous crew recruiting, so the bench exists in June rather than being scrambled for in July. A review request after every completed move. Content that differentiates on care, in a trade whose reputation for service is poor enough that ordinary competence stands out.

**The agent math, and why ten beats one.** The National Association of Realtors reports a median of 9 to 10 transaction sides per agent per year. Every closing is potentially two moves — the seller leaving and the buyer arriving.

One agent is a rounding error. Ten agents is roughly 90 to 100 closings, or up to 200 move opportunities a year, arriving steadily rather than all in June.

What that converts to is your number, not mine — there is no credible published conversion rate from agent relationships to booked moves, and I am not going to invent one. But run it yourself. At an average local move of \$1,697 and a 15 percent conversion, thirty of those two hundred become jobs: about \$51,000 in revenue at roughly 25 to 45 percent gross margin. At 30 percent conversion it is double that.

The relationship is the asset, not the job. An agent who sends you work in year one sends more in year three.

One legal note worth having, because it is widely misunderstood. The Real Estate Settlement Procedures Act restricts paid referrals for settlement services — title, mortgage, appraisal, inspection. Moving is not a settlement service, so RESPA does not bar a referral arrangement with an agent. State license law and brokerage policy still do apply, so check both.

## Property management and short-term rentals

This business has a buyer who advertises his own problem in public.

Professional management of single-family rentals went from 30 to 36 percent between 2017 and 2024 — about 1.3 million properties moving into managers' hands. The owners who have not moved yet are visible to anyone willing to look.

**What Sage works on.** Enumerating self-managed listings across a county and reading the public signals: thin review counts, phone-camera photos, calendar holes in peak weeks, and the same nightly rate in February as in July. Then outreach built on the owner's own numbers rather than a pitch. Alongside that: realtors, real estate investors, and CPAs, who meet owners at the moment of acquisition. Out-of-state owners specifically, since distance is the single strongest predictor of needing help. And long-cycle nurture, because owners convert on their frustration timing, not yours.

**What Aria works on.** Building a direct-booking guest list, which reduces platform dependence. Filling near-term vacancies by going to that owned list first. Owner-facing content that demonstrates competence before the conversation starts. And recruiting turnover cleaners, which is this trade's version of the labor wall.

**The donut hole math.** US short-term rental occupancy ran 54.9 percent in the first half of 2025 and about 55.5 percent at midyear. Average daily rate was \$246.62 in December 2025.

Turn that around. A property at 55 percent occupancy has roughly 200 unbooked nights a year. Some of that is seasonal and unavoidable. But a meaningful share is gap nights — the one, two, and three-night holes between bookings that minimum-stay settings make unfillable.

Recover twenty of those nights on one property and you have added about \$4,900 in gross bookings. At a 20 percent management fee, that is roughly \$990 to the manager, on a property already under management, with no new owner acquired and no new staff hired.

Now run it across sixty doors: about \$59,000 in fee revenue at almost no incremental cost.

**And here is what that does to what you own.** Property management businesses change hands at an average earnings multiple near 2.7. Because that \$59,000 arrives with the cost base already covered, most of it drops to earnings. At 2.7 times, you have added something on the order of \$150,000 to the value of the business — from filling nights you already had.

The general form is worth memorizing: **enterprise value created equals new recurring revenue, times incremental margin, times your multiple.** Fill in your own three numbers.

One caution. Published claims about gap-night losses and dynamic pricing gains come almost entirely from companies selling pricing software, and they range from 15 to 40 percent. The most independent figure available studied 541 listings across 34 countries and found a 36 percent average revenue increase moving from static to dynamic pricing. Treat that as directional and measure your own.

## **Lawn care and landscaping**

Route density is the whole business. An operator with tight routes and one with scattered customers are not running the same company, and drive time is the difference.

The goal is not more customers. It is more customers next to each other. One house on a street is a loss after drive time. Eight houses on a street is a route.

**What Sage works on.** Prospecting by street rather than by lead — targeting the immediate neighbors of every existing customer, because the second house on a block costs almost nothing to serve. Homeowner association and commercial property manager bid cycles, tracked so you arrive before the request for proposals rather than after the decision. Seasonal upsell sequencing into the existing base. And referral partners: realtors, landscape designers, irrigation contractors.

**What Aria works on.** Seasonal crew recruiting, run continuously rather than in March panic. Street-level awareness aimed at the blocks you already serve, so the neighbors know the truck. Review generation. Before-and-after content, which works better in this trade than in either of the others.

**The density and contract math.** Well-run operations target drive time under 15 percent of paid hours, and route optimization is generally credited with cutting it by a quarter to 40 percent. Every hour moved from driving to mowing is billable on trucks and people you already pay for.

On the commercial side, a typical community association maintenance contract runs \$45,000 to \$60,000 a year, with larger associations ranging much higher. One of those replaces dozens of residential accounts and arrives on a known renewal calendar.

Retention is the quiet compounder. The trade reported 89 percent annual customer retention in 2025 while net margins fell from 19 to 17 percent. Every point of retention you hold is a customer you do not have to buy again at \$90 a lead.

## **IX. What It Costs, What It Returns**

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Three questions decide whether any of this is worth doing. What do I stop paying for. What do I make that I was not making. And what does it do to the value of what I own.

**What you stop paying for**

Operators at this size are already spending. Somewhere between \$25,000 and \$80,000 a year goes out the door at the \$500,000 to \$1 million mark, and a large share buys leads sold to three or four competitors at the same moment.

That is the real comparison. Not new spending against zero, but the same money buying work that closes at 30 to 50 percent instead of 10 to 20. Set that against the \$140,000 of payroll from the last section that you were never going to spend, and the arithmetic stops being close.

**What you make that you were not making**

Every figure is already in this paper. Two hundred move opportunities a year from ten agent relationships. Sixty thousand dollars of fee revenue from nights already on the calendar. Drive time cut by a quarter on trucks you already own. Five to nine percent more revenue from a single star.

None of those come from a machine doing your trade. All of them come from work that was not getting done because there is one of you and the day ends.

**What it does to what you own**

This is the part most operators never calculate. Businesses in these trades sell at roughly 2.6 to 3.2 times seller's discretionary earnings, and property management firms near 2.7 times earnings. Buyers pay premiums for contracted, transferable revenue and discount everything that depends on you personally.

So a dollar of new recurring revenue is not worth a dollar. It is worth its margin times your multiple, every year, and again on the day you sell.

| The work                   | Done by hand                   | Done continuously                   |
|----------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Finding the right buyers   | Whenever there's a slow week   | Every day, against a full territory |
| Research before contact    | Rarely — no time               | Before every message                |
| First outreach             | In batches, when panic sets in | Steady, in small numbers            |
| Follow-up past attempt two | Almost never happens           | Weeks or months, without reminders  |

| The work              | Done by hand                      | Done continuously                         |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| Partner relationships | The three people you already know | Forty, kept warm year-round               |
| Recruiting            | When somebody quits               | Continuously, so a bench exists           |
| Content and presence  | When you remember                 | Consistent, without you writing it        |
| Asking for reviews    | The ones you think of             | Every completed job                       |
| Approval              | —                                 | You, on your phone, before anything sends |

It is all legwork. That is the point. When a machine does the legwork, the downside is small and the only real question is whether your competitor starts before you do.

## X. Where This Leaves You

If you are still in the truck, take the free rung first. Claim the listing, ask every customer for the review, answer the phone. You do not need to buy anything to do that, and skipping it makes everything after it more expensive.

If you are already running crews, and you are writing quotes at nine at night because that is the only time the phone stops, the constraint is not your work ethic. It is that there is one of you.

**"I'm not a tech person."** Fair. So here is the only question that actually matters.

Can you email an employee with specific instructions about what you want done?

Then this is for you. That is the entire skill.

We built it for people who do not care about AI and have no interest in learning how to use it. Nothing to configure, nothing to study, no new vocabulary to pick up. If you can tell a crew leader what the morning looks like, you can run this, because it is the same act.

That is not a happy accident. It is the design. An owner who is scaling has already learned the hard part, which is giving clear instructions to people who work for him. Sage and Aria need that and nothing else.

The one thing worth saying twice: nothing goes out without you. Every message, every post, every piece of outreach comes for approval before it reaches a human being. That is not a setting you

can switch off — it is how the thing is built. There is a whole category of tools that will send ten thousand messages in your name and let you find out afterward what they said. That approach burns the one asset a local business cannot replace, which is its name in a town where people talk.

**One note about my own situation.** I run two companies. The other one is network assurance software for regional telephone companies — every bit as unglamorous as hauling furniture, with the same problem yours has. One person cannot both do the work and keep the pipeline full. So I built the thing I needed, pointed it at my own company first, and have been running it there ever since.

I am deliberately not going to show you my numbers. They come from enterprise software, where a single deal takes nine months and a pipeline figure would look ridiculous sitting next to a moving job. Quoting them here would set an expectation I have no business setting, and it would tell you nothing useful about what a week looks like for a lawn crew.

I would rather you trusted the arithmetic in this paper. Every figure in it comes from your industry's published data or from inputs you supply yourself, which means you can check all of it without taking my word for anything.

None of this is really about software. It is about what you own in five years — whether it is still a job with your name on it that stops the day you stop, or a business designed to keep growing when you are not standing in the middle of it. That is what scaling actually means, and it is the only version worth the hours.

You should be able to build that without missing your kid's soccer match.

If you want to talk it through, put fifteen minutes on my calendar at [cal.com/shawn-ennis](https://cal.com/shawn-ennis). No prep needed. No slide deck. If the answer is that you are not ready yet, I will tell you that and tell you what to do instead.

The last time every business in America had to change how it found customers, we called it the internet. It made more than it broke, and most of what it made went to ordinary businesses run by people who moved a little earlier than their competition.

That is happening again. Your work is safe. Your business is up to you.

**You started with your hands. Nothing says you have to end there.**

## About the Author

**Shawn Ennis** owns two businesses and invests in others. He started out cleaning bathrooms and pulling pallets at a grocery store in Alabama, and has spent the twenty-five years since learning the same lesson over and over: the work is rarely the hard part. Selling it is.

His other company builds software for regional telephone companies. Before that he founded a company he sold to Oracle in 2021. He holds a dozen patents and co-hosts the Transformation Leaders Podcast.

He built Kinetic Tricks because he needed it himself, and he runs both of his businesses on it.

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