

The AI layoff story is too clean.

That is the first thing wrong with it. Clean stories are usually selling something. The company says AI made the cut inevitable. The investor hears margin discipline. The employee hears replacement. The public hears future shock. Everybody gets a story that flatters their existing fear.

You can see the shape of it in the corporate language around 2026 layoffs. SHRM reported Cisco announcing record revenue and then cutting thousands of jobs while talking about restructuring around AI infrastructure. The explanation is not necessarily false. That is what makes it slippery. AI may be part of the story. So are capital allocation, investor appetite, old overhiring, margin pressure, and the pleasure executives get from sounding like they are already living in the future. The phrase "because of AI" can carry all of that without having to confess any of it.

But the more interesting thing about AI and work is not that machines can now do more. That part is obvious. The interesting thing is what remains after they do it.

Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor have a useful frame for this. Software work, they argue, is not just writing code. It is a decide-execute-deliver sandwich. Decide what should be built. Execute the work. Deliver something that survives contact with users, systems, bugs, integration, politics, maintenance, and accountability. AI is very good at compressing the middle. It makes execution faster. It can write code, generate drafts, summarize documents, build prototypes, and push a half-formed idea into visible shape.

That sounds like the whole job only if you were already pretending the middle was the whole job.

Most professional panic right now comes from that confusion. For years, a lot of knowledge work let people hide inside execution. Not because people are lazy. Because execution is legible. It produces artifacts. Decks. Tickets. Drafts. Meetings. Pull requests. Roadmaps. Reports. Calendars full enough to feel like proof. If someone asks what you did, you can point to the thing.

Decision is harder to point at. Taste is harder to point at. Judgment is harder to point at. Commitment is almost invisible until it compounds. Accountability usually appears only when something breaks.

So modern work built a culture that over-rewarded visible motion. Then AI arrived and made visible motion cheaper.

That is not the end of work. It is the end of a hiding place.

The first hiding place is optionality.

David Perell calls it hugging the X-axis: moving horizontally from possibility to possibility without compounding upward into depth. Optionality feels like freedom because nothing has claimed you yet. No craft has trapped you. No audience has disappointed you. No company, city, relationship, thesis, or body of work has forced you to become specific.

There is a useful early phase where optionality is healthy. You try things. You collect samples. You learn what kind of pain you can tolerate. But optionality becomes poison when it turns into identity. Someone with infinite options often has no obligation to become anything. I have watched people spend years collecting starting points and calling it a career. I have done it myself.

AI makes this worse before it makes it better. It gives optionality an engine. You can prototype ten ideas

before lunch. Generate twenty content angles. Rewrite the strategy three ways. Spin up a product mock, a landing page, a research brief, a pitch, a code scaffold, a customer persona, a logo, a plan.

That can be useful. It can also become spiritual junk food. You get the pleasure of beginning without the humiliation of committing.

The second hiding place is process.

Process is not bad. Bad process is bad. Good process protects attention, records decisions, catches mistakes, and keeps groups from eating themselves alive. The problem starts when process becomes a substitute for action. A plan can feel like courage. A framework can feel like judgment. A meeting can feel like alignment. A roadmap can feel like progress, especially before anyone has had to ship the thing.

The June reading notes that fed this draft kept circling the same nerve: processes are comforting fictions. Sarris on school, Estrina on charm, Hall on agency, Guzey on exceptional talent. Different subjects, same pattern. The official path often protects the average case and suppresses the exceptional one. The person who gets somewhere is often the person willing to violate the script in a specific direction.

AI is brutal to process theater because it can perform the ceremony instantly. It can write the plan. It can summarize the meeting. It can create the checklist. It can make the project look administratively mature before anyone has made the hard choice.

That means process loses some of its old protective camouflage. If the process artifact can be generated in thirty seconds, the artifact cannot be the proof anymore. The proof has to move somewhere else: to the decision, the taste, the shipped work, the maintenance, the thing that changes because someone took responsibility.

This is where Repenning and Sterman's capability trap matters. Organizations under pressure tend to work harder instead of getting better. They chase immediate output. They cut the time that would have gone into repair, learning, maintenance, and improvement. Performance gets worse, pressure rises, and the loop tightens. Nobody gets credit for fixing problems that never happened.

AI can become a capability trap accelerant. If it helps a team produce more visible work without improving the system that receives that work, the team may feel more productive while becoming less capable. More tickets closed. More drafts generated. More code merged. More campaigns launched. More surface area to maintain. More debt hidden under speed.

The third hiding place is lightness.

The internet loves light things. Posts. Takes. Threads. Clips. Swipeable opinions. Output that travels well because it does not weigh much. Lightness is not evil. Some ideas should be light. A joke should not arrive wearing a backpack. A quick observation does not need a cathedral.

But a life made entirely of light output starts to feel thin. No number of tweets becomes a book. No number of prototypes becomes a company. No number of vibe-coded demos becomes a product unless someone carries the ugly weight of integration, support, distribution, and trust.

This is where Cal Newport's critique of pseudo-productivity fits. When work lacks clear measures, visible activity becomes a proxy for value. The worker looks busy. The organization feels alive. The machine hums. But the question remains: did anything get heavier? Did any capability deepen? Did any promise become

more trustworthy?

AI can flood the zone with lightness. It can create infinite first drafts, infinite summaries, infinite mockups, infinite synthetic movement. The temptation is to confuse lower friction with greater seriousness. But seriousness is not how fast a thing can appear. Seriousness is what survives after appearance stops being impressive.

That is why the AI layoff narrative feels both true and fake.

Part of it is true because automation changes labor. Some roles are built around repeatable execution. Some companies will cut people because software can now do enough of the task. Some workers will get hurt. Any theory that skips that is just pundit cologne.

And it is fake because "AI did it" has become a socially acceptable mask for older motives: cost cutting, overhiring correction, investor pressure, management fashion, executive wish-casting. SHRM's reporting captures this mess well. Some displacement is real. Some is anticipatory. Some is financial restructuring dressed in the clothes of technological inevitability. The same story can be true in one department and theater in another.

The cleaner question is not whether AI replaces work. The cleaner question is what kind of work remains worth paying humans to do once execution gets cheap.

A lot of people will answer with taste. That is close, but too pretty. Taste without accountability becomes another aesthetic performance. The harder answer is responsibility over the whole sandwich.

Decide what matters. Execute enough to make it real. Deliver it into the world and stay with the consequences.

That full loop is the work.

AI can help with it. It can sharpen a decision, accelerate execution, test alternatives, surface counterarguments, and make the first version less painful. But it cannot make commitment painless. It cannot decide what you are willing to be judged by. It cannot turn a lightweight life into a heavy one unless someone chooses weight.

This is why the people who benefit most from AI may not be the ones with the best prompts. They may be the ones with the highest tolerance for commitment. People who know what they are building. People who can tell the difference between motion and progress. People who can use speed without worshipping it.

The uncomfortable possibility is that AI is not making work meaningless. It is making fake work harder to defend.

If your job was mostly producing artifacts that signaled progress, AI is a threat. If your organization rewarded process theater, AI will make the theater cheaper and more absurd. If your career was optimized for keeping options open forever, AI will hand you more options than you can metabolize. If your creative life was built around lightweight output, AI will bury you in weightless abundance.

But if your work was already anchored in judgment, commitment, depth, and delivery, AI looks different. It is not a replacement for the work. It is pressure on the parts that were never the real work anyway.

The middle got cheaper.

Now we find out who was hiding there.