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The One Thing Nobody's Talking About With Startups and AI

Somewhere between all the grand proclamations and the depressing doomsday scenarios is the actual truth.



Aaron Dinin, PhD



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I was giving feedback on a student's presentation. It wasn't a bad presentation. Clean, organized, well-delivered. But there was something about it that felt... familiar. The phrasing. The rhythm. The way the slides were formatted.

So I asked him what was intended as an innocent question: "Hey, how much of this did you use AI to help prepare?"

He froze. Then he got defensive. "What do you mean?" he asked. "You think I cheated or something?"

I could hear the edge in his voice. He thought I was accusing him of using ChatGPT to take a shortcut. He thought I was saying it was *too good* and I was about to charge him with some sort of honor code violation.

But what I was actually saying — what I was *thinking* — was the exact opposite.

He thought I was accusing him of cheating. But what I was really doing was something worse: holding him to a higher standard.

That's what nobody is talking about with AI.

Everyone wants to debate whether the machines are going to take our jobs or automate entire industries. But that's not the real shift that's coming. The real shift — the one that's already happening quietly — is that AI is going to raise the bar for everyone.

It's not replacing us. It's just taking away our excuses.

The AI Nobody's Worried About

When people talk about AI and startups, the conversation usually sounds like a doomsday prophecy: *AI will kill creativity. AI will make us lazy. AI will replace us all.*

But I don't buy it.

If you've actually *used* these tools, you know they don't do the hard part. By that I mean they don't find meaning or make taste. They don't decide which stories matter, or which customers to serve, or what the right tradeoffs are when everything feels impossible.

What AI does is raise the baseline.

Ten years ago, a startup with a polished website, clear documentation, and a few decent demo videos would have been impressive. Today, that's a bare minimum. And next year, the expectations will be even higher because now everyone has the ability to make their work look — at least superficially — great. And when that happens, “great” stops being good enough.

That's what my student didn't realize. I wasn't judging him for using AI. I was judging him for not using it *well enough*.

If you've got access to tools that can generate flawless sentences, create beautiful slides, check for errors, and even help structure your arguments, then I expect your work to reflect that. I expect zero typos. I expect coherent logic. I expect clear formatting. Those are minimums. In other words, I'm not worried about your work being automated. I'm worried about whether your ideas can be elevated.

The same is true for founders.

Your customers don't care whether you're building with or without AI. They only care about how successfully your product solves their problem. And if your competitor is using AI to ship better features, create better tutorials, and respond to customers faster, your “good-enough” version won't be good enough anymore.

That's the paradox of AI. It's not lowering standards. It's raising them.

The Real Shift AI Is Creating

I sometimes hear founders brag about how much faster AI lets them work — as if speed is the victory condition.

And yes, speed matters. AI helps us write code faster, produce content faster, analyze data faster. But speed is just the first-order effect. The second-order effect — the one that'll define who actually survives in the AI era — is quality. After all, when everyone has the same speed advantage, the only thing left to compete on is how thoughtfully you *use* it.

That's the new frontier of entrepreneurship: using technology not as a crutch, but as a lever.

The companies that win won't be the ones who simply use AI to automate what they were already doing. They'll be the ones who use AI to *reimagine* what's possible — to deliver customer experiences that feel personal, responsive, almost impossibly high-touch.

Imagine a customer service team that answers instantly and empathetically. Or onboarding tutorials that adapt to a user's skill level in real time. Or marketing that feels more like a conversation than a campaign.

That's the standard you're up against now.

When I told my student I expected better, it wasn't because I wanted to punish him for using AI. It was because I wanted to remind him that AI isn't a cheat code. It's a new baseline.

And if you're building a startup right now, you have to assume the baseline is shifting faster than you realize.

Your users aren't comparing you to other scrappy startups. They're comparing you to whatever their best experience *on the internet* is. The

smoothness of Apple. The personalization of Spotify. The responsiveness of OpenAI.

They don't care that you're underfunded or early-stage. They care whether you deliver what they now know is possible.

The End of “Good Enough”

When I was younger, I used to give students (and myself) the benefit of the doubt. If the presentation had a few typos, or the pitch deck felt a little flat, I'd tell them not to worry — it's hard work, and perfection isn't the goal.

But that was before we all had AI in our pockets.

Now? No excuses.

If the grammar is off, it's because you didn't take 30 seconds to fix it.

If the visuals are boring, it's because you didn't spend an hour experimenting with better tools.

If the ideas are shallow, it's because you didn't push past what the model gave you.

AI doesn't lower the bar. It exposes whether you're willing to meet it.

Because the future isn't going to reward the people who resist these tools, or the people who worship them. It's going to reward the people who learn to use them to raise expectations — both for themselves and for everyone around them. And the founders who figure that out early are the ones who'll define what comes next.

That’s the one thing nobody’s talking about with AI. The real disruption isn’t what AI replaces. The real disruption is the new expectations AI creates.

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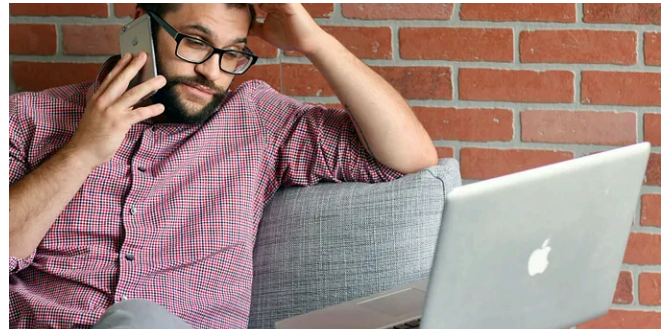



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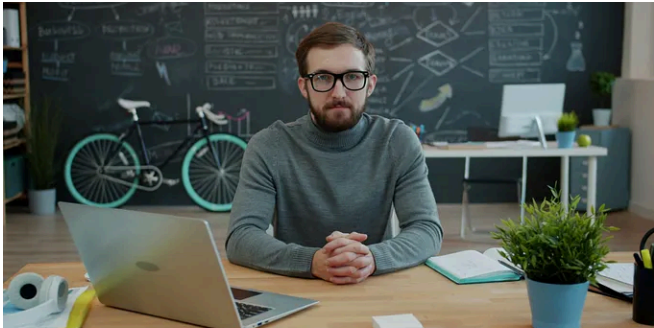


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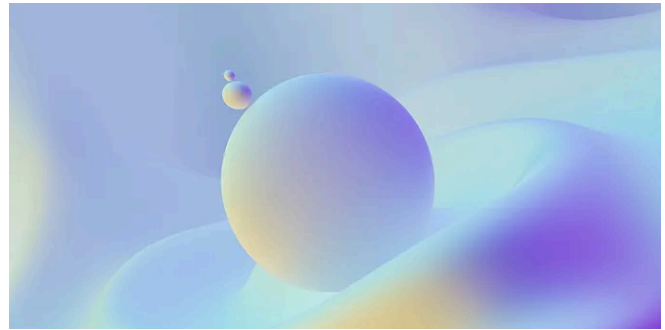


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