## **The Layoff** Hit Me **(and Why Your Business Needs to Pay Attention to AI, Now)**

I recently became a statistic: part of a “reduction in force". And honestly, it kills me. Not just because it happened, but because I saw it coming, and I tried so hard to prevent it—or at least, to mitigate its impact on the incredible people I worked with. My frustration isn't about unemployment; it's about the missed opportunities I witnessed daily, and the deep, almost willful, resistance to embracing Artificial Intelligence among so many knowledge workers.

As an operations manager with over three decades of hands-on experience, I was constantly pleading my peers for their teams to explore and implement AI. The potential I was "evangelical" about then? I've since realized I *underestimated* it. Every week, new, accessible technologies are emerging, and the need for businesses to embrace them isn't a future concern—it's a present imperative.

The other night, I had drinks with recently made former co-workers. Ehile reminicing, there was the lamentation over the additional stress, the increased workload, the constant "firefighting" they're now facing. And sitting there, I could see a hundred ways their burdens could be relieved, their productivity boosted, their businesses strengthened. I could envision practical, low-cost AI solutions that would free them from tedious tasks, provide them with clearer insights, and help them solve problems proactively. But the momentum was never in my favor.

It’s almost laughable: the "old man" in the room, the one closest to retirement, was the most vocal advocate for embracing this technology. While a few team members I worked closely with did embrace it, I could never get many of my peers on board. They often worried about AI inserting factual errors or losing the "human touch". Some feared their skills would become redundant, or that learning new tools would be too much effort on top of their already swamped schedules. There was a pervasive "status quo bias"—a preference to keep doing things the old way. Even when I showed them how AI could streamline email summaries, assist with complex CAPA reports, or help capture critical engineering discussions, the resistance remained.

But here’s the stark truth I’ve seen amplified since my departure: It’s not the future. It *is* today. The companies that don’t recognize this will have a huge struggle ahead of them. They will face:

Think about it:

* **Wasted Time & Effort?** AI can draft emails, summarize reports, or analyze data, saving managers nearly 3 hours a week on communication alone.
* **Firefighting?** AI can help prevent problems before they happen, like predicting equipment failures to cut downtime by up to 30%.
* **Losing Know-How?** AI can capture the undocumented wisdom of your seasoned pros, turning their verbal explanations and even videos into searchable knowledge that new hires can access on demand.
* **Guesswork?** AI analyzes massive amounts of data to give you clear insights for smarter, faster decisions.
* **Tight Budgets?** Powerful AI tools like ChatGPT, Gemini, and Perplexity AI have robust free tiers or cost less than $20/month. We're talking *real* results without breaking the bank.

The truth is, many of the operational inefficiencies, project delays, and customer service challenges that plague companies could be addressed with practical, low-cost/free AI solutions. Tools like ChatGPT, NotebookLM, Gemini, Claude, and PerplexityI offer capabilities for writing, research, data analysis, content creation, and problem-solving, often for less than $20 a month, or even with robust free tiers. Each of these can save your team members hours a week. Initially they may treat is as Google on steroids, but it willb ecome so much more

My experience, though personal, is a microcosm of a larger issue facing SMBs across the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The "human capital deficit"—a lack of understanding of AI's practical applications and a cultural resistance born from fear or lack of clarity—is often the primary barrier to AI adoption, not a mere lack of technical tools.

But there's hope. Practical, hands-on training, delivered by those who understand real-world operational challenges, can bridge this gap. It's about empowering teams with simple, actionable AI skills, demonstrating clear ROI, and fostering a culture where AI is seen as an augmentation tool, enhancing human capabilities rather than replacing them.