

What AI Reveals About How Work Really Gets Done

AI is bringing long-standing barriers to execution into view. Recognizing what those barriers reveal can change where leaders invest their transformation efforts.

By Lara Blackert

The conversation about AI is moving quickly toward AI-native workflows and autonomous systems across functions. The prevailing assumption is that redesigning processes around these tools will improve enterprise performance.

Process efficiency is part of the opportunity. In my experience, however, the more persistent constraints sit around the process: how decisions are made, where ownership resides, how work crosses boundaries, and whether accountability holds when execution becomes difficult.

The constraint extends beyond process

Hiring offers a visible signal of how work actually moves through an organization.

Candidates apply and hear nothing back. Recruiters cannot close loops because decisions remain unresolved. Choices that should take days stretch into weeks. Processes appear active, yet never fully reach an outcome.

From the outside, this can look like a breakdown in execution. Inside the system, the pattern is more precise. Decisions linger. Accountability is distributed just enough that no one can move decisively. Work continues while requiring more coordination, interpretation, and escalation than it should.

Technology did not create these conditions and cannot resolve them on its own.

AI inherits the system it enters

AI can accelerate workflows, reduce manual effort, and improve access to information. It does not automatically change the conditions that determine whether work advances from activity to outcome.

Those conditions are structural: who has the authority to decide and when; where ownership begins and ends; how work moves across functions; which dependencies are necessary; and what happens when priorities compete or a decision carries risk.

Together, these conditions form the Enterprise Performance Architecture of an organization. They determine whether talent, technology, and strategy can be converted into coordinated execution or whether performance slows under the weight of the enterprise itself.

AI does not replace that architecture. It runs through it.

That means AI inherits every strength and every constraint already in place. If decision rights are unclear, faster information will make the ambiguity visible sooner. If ownership is shared but undefined, automation may accelerate the handoff without resolving who is accountable for the outcome. If alignment depends on side conversations rather than a credible operating structure, AI will expose the gap in real time.

The organization may become faster at producing work without becoming better at completing it.

Visibility can be mistaken for transformation

When new technology enters an organization, the initial gains are often easy to see. A task that took hours now takes minutes. A team can draft, analyze, summarize, or respond at a pace that was previously impossible. These improvements are real, but they can create a misleading sense that the enterprise itself has transformed.

Transformation requires more than increased activity at the task level. It requires the organization to make better decisions, move work across boundaries with less friction, maintain clear ownership, and translate insight into action. If those conditions remain unchanged, AI may compress the front end of the work while the rest of the system continues to wait.

A faster analysis still sits idle when no one has authority to act on it. An automated workflow still stalls when exceptions require several layers of approval. More information does not improve performance when leaders continue to revisit decisions or teams remain uncertain about what matters most.

The system does not necessarily become more effective. It becomes more visible.

The hiring market is an early signal

Organizations now have more tools than ever to source candidates, screen applications, schedule interviews, generate communications, and analyze talent data. The mechanics can move at extraordinary speed.

Yet many candidates experience silence, inconsistent communication, and processes that extend without resolution. Recruiters often operate between hiring leaders, approval requirements, shifting priorities, and unclear decision ownership. Technology can move information through that system, but it cannot decide which role truly matters, resolve competing stakeholder expectations, or create accountability for closing the loop.

The uneven experience is not proof that the tools have failed. It is evidence that the architecture required to support consistent execution has not always kept pace with the capability now available.

This pattern will not remain limited to hiring. As AI moves deeper into workforce planning, performance management, service delivery, and enterprise decision-making, the same structural constraints will become harder to overlook.

Enterprise value appears across the full workflow

Task-level productivity is measurable and attractive. Enterprise value depends on what happens before and after the automated task: which work enters the process, what information the system can use, who reviews exceptions, where judgement remains human, and which outcome the enterprise is optimizing.

This broader view changes the business case. Leaders must account for coordination cost, control requirements, quality, adoption, redesigned roles, and the capacity released for higher-value work. Time saved is an input. Performance is the outcome.

From AI strategy to enterprise redesign

Leaders should examine AI use cases and process automation within a broader question: Is the enterprise designed to convert this new speed and intelligence into performance?

That inquiry begins with decision rights, ownership across functional boundaries, the approvals that protect genuine risk, and the information that should trigger action. It also requires leaders to understand whether incentives reinforce enterprise outcomes or preserve functional activity.

These are not technology questions. They are enterprise design questions. They require leaders to simplify decision architecture, clarify ownership, reduce unnecessary dependencies, redesign escalation pathways, and create operating models flexible enough to adapt as the work changes.

Without that redesign, AI risks becoming another layer placed on top of an already burdened system. The organization may automate the visible work while preserving the friction that determines whether anything meaningful changes.

What AI makes impossible to ignore

AI's arrival in the people function reveals whether the enterprise was designed to execute. Leaders who interpret every exposed weakness as a technology gap will add tools while leaving the underlying constraint intact. Leaders who read those weaknesses as signals about structure, authority, ownership, and execution can use AI as a catalyst for more consequential redesign.

The opportunity is not merely to make existing work faster. It is to reconsider why the work moves the way it does, what no longer serves the outcome, and which conditions must change for better performance to become possible.

AI will accelerate what the organization is already designed to do. The pursuit of better begins with redesigning the system it will accelerate.