

Cracking AI Skills for Advertising

The future of skills in an era of AI-driven advertising



Konrad Shek

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About the Advertising Association

The Advertising Association represents UK advertisers, agencies, media owners, and tech companies. Founded in 1926, we promote the rights, roles and responsibilities of advertising domestically and internationally, acting as the link between practitioners and the politicians and policymakers whose decisions impact the sector.

Our mission is to promote the role and rights of responsible advertising – advertising that is trusted, inclusive and sustainable – and its value to people, society, businesses and the economy.

In concert with the advertising industry's think tank Credos, we produce and disseminate research and reports that enable our members to make informed decisions. Our work is focused around several policy areas and industry programmes including trust in advertising, data and e-privacy, digital advertising, promoting growth and many more.

Prologue

The UK advertising industry stands at an inflection point. Over the past two decades, it has demonstrated remarkable adaptability, embracing the internet revolution, mobile transformation and programmatic automation to become a cornerstone of UK soft power and economic success. Even though each technological shift has brought initial uncertainty, it has been followed by new opportunities, expanded capabilities, and often, entirely new categories of professional roles.

Today, AI presents the most significant technological transformation the industry has yet encountered. Unlike previous digital innovations, which primarily changed how we reached audiences or bought media, AI is reshaping the fundamental nature of advertising work itself – from strategic planning and creative development to measurement and optimisation. The technology is not merely automating existing processes it is redefining what human expertise means in an AI-augmented world.

This transformation brings both unprecedented opportunity and genuine uncertainty. Early indicators suggest divergent paths: some organisations use AI to enhance human capabilities and create new value, while others¹ treat it as a wholesale replacement for human expertise. We believe that the difference lies not in the technology itself, but in how organisations

approach the integration of AI into their workflows, and the skills they develop to work effectively alongside these new tools.

Yet this transformation is also revealing unexpected complexities. Research shows that AI adoption can create new forms of cognitive debt,² where efficiency gains mask the erosion of critical thinking capabilities essential for advertising excellence. It generates psychological safety challenges that determine whether teams embrace or resist AI integration. And it creates inclusion gaps across race, gender, age and geography that threaten to create new inequalities as well as entrench existing ones unless addressed systematically.

Understanding these complexities is crucial because the challenge facing advertising professionals is fundamentally about adaptation rather than replacement. AI excels at processing vast amounts of data, identifying patterns at scale, and executing optimisation tasks with superhuman speed. However, it struggles with strategic thinking, cultural nuance, creative breakthrough, and the complex human understanding that drives effective advertising. The professionals who will thrive are those who learn to combine AI's computational power with distinctly human capabilities, creating value that neither could achieve alone.

This reality demands a new approach to professional development. Traditional advertising skills remain important, but they must be complemented by new competencies: understanding how AI systems work and where they fail, learning to collaborate effectively with AI tools, developing enhanced critical thinking to validate AI outputs, and

maintaining the creative and strategic capabilities that remain uniquely human.

The Advertising Association's AI Taskforce³ was established to address precisely these challenges. Rather than speculating about an uncertain future, we have sought to understand how AI is currently transforming advertising practice and what this means for the skills that professionals need to succeed. This book represents our collective analysis of these changes, and a practical framework for navigating them.

Our fundamental premise is that AI should augment human capability rather than simply replace it. This is not just an optimistic hope but a strategic imperative. The organisations that use AI to enhance human creativity, strategic thinking, and client relationships will create competitive advantages that pure automation cannot match. However, realising this potential requires deliberate effort from industry to develop the right capabilities.

The book unfolds in four parts, with interconnected themes that weave throughout. In part one, we establish AI's current impact. In part two, we explore the six distinctly human capabilities – from strategic curiosity to emotional intelligence – that become more valuable in AI-augmented environments, including the critical thinking skills that AI adoption paradoxically threatens to erode. We examine how psychological safety enables effective human-AI collaboration, before part three, in which we address the inclusion imperative: ensuring AI transformation doesn't neglect talent based on race, gender, age, or geography. Finally, we explore scaling solutions from education

partnerships to international policy approaches, drawing lessons from other nations grappling with similar transformations, and the emerging agent-driven future.

This is not about the distant future of advertising. The changes we describe are happening now, and the skills we discuss are needed today. Whether you are a graduate entering the industry, a mid-career professional seeking to adapt, or a leader responsible for organisational transformation, the guidance here is designed to be immediately useful and actionable.

The advertising industry has always been built on human creativity, strategic insight, and deep understanding of consumer behaviour. AI doesn't change these fundamentals – it provides new tools to express them more effectively. The question is not whether AI will transform advertising, but whether we will guide that transformation to amplify the best of human capability while leveraging the unique strengths of AI.

The decisions made by individuals and organisations in the short term will determine whether AI becomes a force for enhancement, or displacement, in advertising. This book is our contribution to ensuring it becomes the former – helping to build an industry where technology amplifies human potential rather than replacing it.

The future of advertising will be neither fully human nor fully artificial, but something new: a collaboration between human insight and machine capability that creates possibilities neither could achieve alone. Understanding how to participate effectively in that collaboration is the essential skill for the AI era in advertising.

Konrad Shek
Advertising Association



Part I: The Foundations

Chapter 1

AI in advertising

To develop a skills strategy for the AI-era, we need to map the current landscape of AI deployment in advertising. This technology was first adopted in AI-powered targeting and delivery, but it is now rapidly transforming the entire media lifecycle. Understanding where AI is being deployed – and critically, what these developments mean for advertising professionals – forms the foundation of any meaningful discussion about future skills requirements.

To date, the most visible transformation has occurred in strategic planning and creative development. Traditionally, creative brief development relied heavily on human intuition and experience, with planners drawing on past campaigns and market knowledge to guide new strategies. Today, AI-powered tools can analyse vast datasets, including historical campaign performance, consumer sentiment data, and competitive intelligence, to identify patterns that human planners might overlook. These systems excel at processing scale – examining thousands of campaigns simultaneously to spot correlations between creative elements and performance outcomes.

However, this shift demands new competencies particularly for creative strategists. Rather than

relying on instinct, professionals must now interpret data and learn to work alongside AI tools while maintaining creative vision. This requires knowledge of data analysis, prompt engineering, and synthesising AI-generated insights with human creativity. The most effective creative briefs will still require human oversight to ensure strategic coherence and creative ambition, as AI systems are not yet able to achieve human levels of nuanced cultural context, emotional subtlety, and breakthrough creative thinking.

Audience identification represents another area of profound change. AI excels at processing behavioural data, demographic information, and psychographic indicators at scale to identify audience segments. It can uncover lookalike audiences – groups sharing characteristics with existing customers – and discover entirely new segments based on previously unrecognised patterns in consumer behaviour. AI can also remove human bias from targeting by focusing on performance metrics rather than demographic stereotypes. However, this capability comes with significant limitations. AI can identify correlations yet struggles with causation,⁴ and may perpetuate biases present in training data,⁵ requiring human oversight to ensure ethical and effective targeting.⁶

For media planners, this evolution means moving from traditional demographic targeting to becoming audience architects, capable of interpreting AI-generated segments and translating them into actionable strategies. Success requires understanding data science principles, privacy regulations, and the ability to validate AI recommendations against

business objectives. The role fundamentally shifts from reactive analysis to proactive strategy development.

Content creation has similarly been transformed, though perhaps not as dramatically as industry rhetoric might suggest. AI can now produce large volumes of content quickly while maintaining consistency across channels, making it efficient for certain applications such as product descriptions, social media variants, and email subject lines. However, the quality varies significantly, depending on the complexity and creativity required. While AI-generated content can deliver efficiency gains, it often lacks the nuance and breakthrough thinking that distinguishes memorable advertising.⁷

The reality is that the most effective approach combines AI efficiency with human creativity and strategic thinking. Content creators must become AI collaborators, learning to brief AI systems effectively while maintaining editorial oversight. This includes understanding AI content generation tools, developing quality assessment frameworks, and knowing when human intervention is essential. The professionals who thrive will be those who view AI as a powerful assistant rather than a replacement for human creativity.

Media planning and execution have been revolutionised through predictive analytics and behaviour modelling. AI systems can analyse historical data to predict campaign performance and consumer behaviour with unprecedented sophistication. Marketing Mix Modelling – the statistical analysis technique that measures the impact of various marketing activities – has been

significantly enhanced by AI's ability to process diverse data sources and identify complex interaction patterns that traditional methods might miss.

This advancement requires media planners to interpret predictive models, understand their confidence intervals, and make strategic decisions based on probabilistic rather than deterministic outcomes. The critical limitation remains that predictive models are only as good as their training data and assumptions. Market disruptions, cultural shifts, or unprecedented events can render predictions inaccurate, requiring human judgement to recognise when models may be failing.

The rise of dynamic creative systems exemplifies AI's real-time optimisation capabilities. These systems serve different ad variations to different users in real-time, optimising based on performance data. This also extends to programmatic advertising, where AI evaluates millions of factors to determine optimal ad placement and pricing within milliseconds.⁸ Campaign managers must now understand algorithmic optimisation, learn to set appropriate parameters, interpret performance signals, and know when to override automated decisions. This requires technical literacy combined with strategic thinking – understanding not just what the algorithms are doing, but why they're making particular choices.

Measurement and attribution have become increasingly sophisticated as AI-enhanced systems provide insights into creative effectiveness, cross-channel attribution, and campaign incrementality. As privacy regulations limit the more intrusive tracking methods, AI can help model consumer behaviour

and predict outcomes without granular tracking data. However, this apparent advancement comes with a critical caveat: poorly calibrated AI measurement systems can provide false precision.⁹

Analysts must therefore become model interpreters, understanding statistical confidence, the difference between correlation and causation, and the limitations of modelled data. They must learn to communicate uncertainty effectively and validate AI insights against business results. The challenge lies not just in technical competency, but in maintaining healthy scepticism about automated insights while leveraging their genuine value.

Brand safety and fraud prevention represent areas where AI's pattern recognition capabilities offer clear advantages. These systems can detect harmful content and fraudulent activity by identifying patterns in vast datasets, categorising content based on established standards while protecting against various forms of digital fraud. Yet even here, human oversight remains crucial. Brand safety professionals must understand AI detection capabilities and limitations, learning to configure systems appropriately and recognise when human review is necessary. This includes understanding the bias and accuracy trade-offs inherent in automated content moderation.

Looking toward emerging opportunities, we are seeing AI personas serving as digital brand ambassadors, enhanced business messaging capabilities, and AI-optimised ad formats that adapt dynamically to context and user behaviour. Perhaps most intriguingly, we may soon see AI agents marketing to other AI agents, fundamentally

changing the advertising ecosystem. These developments require professionals to become comfortable with experimental technologies while maintaining focus on core marketing principles, including understanding conversational AI, voice interfaces, and emerging platforms.

This overview of AI deployment reveals a fundamental shift in required competencies. Success in AI-enhanced advertising demands technical literacy – understanding how AI systems work, their capabilities, and limitations without needing to become programmers. It requires data interpretation skills that go beyond basic analytics to understand statistical models, confidence intervals, and the crucial difference between correlation and causation. Most importantly, it demands mastering human-AI collaboration: learning when to trust AI tools, when to override them, and how to combine AI efficiency with human creativity.

Ethical awareness becomes paramount as professionals must understand the implications of bias, privacy, and the societal impact of AI-driven advertising decisions. The rapid evolution of AI capabilities requires acceptance of continuous learning and adaptation. Perhaps most critically of all, success demands maintaining strategic thinking. Ultimately, it is important to maintain focus on long-term business objectives and consumer value while navigating increasing technological complexity.

The real challenge isn't just about understanding where AI is being deployed, but in developing the skills to work effectively alongside these systems while preserving the human insights that drive truly effective advertising. While AI offers tremendous

opportunities for efficiency and effectiveness, it also risks commoditising advertising if it's not thoughtfully implemented. The professionals who will thrive are those who use AI to amplify human creativity and strategic thinking rather than replace it. The following chapters will explore these capabilities in depth, examining both what makes humans valuable in AI-augmented environments and how organisations can create inclusive conditions for effective human-AI collaboration.

Chapter 2

What are AI skills?

AI skills are important as they are fundamental to the take-up of AI. The recent advances in computing power and increases in data production and availability have meant that AI can now perform tasks previously exclusive to humans.

As AI transforms advertising, companies face a critical question: should they hire more computer scientists and machine learning engineers, or should they teach existing staff to work with AI? The answer may surprise you. To understand why, we first need to examine what makes AI fundamentally different from conventional computing.

The core difference between AI and conventional computing lies in its approach to problem solving. Conventional computing uses predetermined rules, producing deterministic outcomes where identical inputs produce identical outputs.

AI systems, in contrast, learn patterns and relationships from data rather than explicitly programmed instructions. Through machine learning techniques, these systems can identify complex correlations within datasets. They then develop their own models for understanding information. This enables AI to generate predictions and insights using probabilistic models even when there is a degree of uncertainty or incompleteness.

This ability to handle uncertainty differs fundamentally from traditional computing. Where conventional systems require precise rules and complete information, AI can make reasoned inferences from partial data, adapt to new situations, and provide useful outputs despite inherent uncertainties in the input.

This flexibility has unlocked AI's potential across diverse applications, especially in areas such as advertising, where perfect information is rarely available, yet meaningful commercial decisions must still be made. This gives AI a clear advantage over conventional computing. But the single most transformative development has been the emergence of generative AI, built on large language models (LLMs).¹⁰

The level of sophistication in generative AI outputs means that AI is now taking on much more complex tasks, such as context-sensitive reasoning and problem solving, mimicking human-like dialogue, content creation and producing multimodal outputs. While the potential productivity gains are evident, it has major implications for employers, employees and the nature of work.

The key question we need to address is how do we develop an AI ready workforce – in particular, what skills are needed and how do we acquire them?

In this book we define AI skills as the knowledge required to work effectively with AI systems and applications. Broadly speaking, these skills fall into two distinct but complementary categories: technical AI skills and AI literacy skills.

Technical AI skills have traditionally formed the core of AI competency. Programming languages

such as Python, R, and Julia have been essential for building AI models and algorithms. Equally crucial are data modelling and analytics capabilities, as AI systems depend on high-quality data for effective learning and decision-making. These techniques involve an understanding about how to collect, clean, interpret, and model data effectively.

Machine learning and deep learning knowledge represent another fundamental requirement, encompassing the ability to design, train, and evaluate various models and architectures.

Technical competency also extends to familiarity with AI-specific libraries and frameworks such as TensorFlow, PyTorch, and scikit-learn, which enable efficient development and deployment of solutions. A solid mathematical foundation in linear algebra, calculus, probability, and statistics is necessary for understanding and optimising AI algorithms. Natural language processing expertise is becoming increasingly important as AI applications expand into human language analysis, while understanding AI ethics – including considerations of bias, fairness, and responsible implementation – has become critical in today’s landscape.

Although these skills would represent an excellent set of technical abilities, should everyone be learning these skills to future-proof them in a world of AI-driven advertising? Indeed, if it were the right solution then surely the answer would be to encourage all young people to take up computer science or mathematics degrees! But anecdotal evidence suggests that having a computer science degree is no guarantee of getting a job,^{11 12} despite reported AI skills shortages.¹³

This is because, firstly, recruiting large numbers of computer scientists and engineers to address a problem is not a viable solution for most organisations. There are limits to how many scientists or engineers could be absorbed at one time. This challenge becomes even harder if you lack the systems and procedures in place, along with experienced computer scientists or engineers to coach and mentor junior employees to develop better coding or debugging skills.

Secondly, having a set of narrow technical skills does not necessarily mean that you can apply them to other fields or domains such as advertising and marketing. Nor is it necessary to have computer science and deep programming skills – outside of AI development – to use AI effectively. Think about how computers are integral to our lives: most people need to know how to use a computer, but not everyone needs to know how a microprocessor works.

This shift towards broader accessibility is further supported by three current trends that explain why AI skills now require a different approach. First, AI can itself now perform many tasks currently done by mid-level engineers,¹⁴ reducing the demand for some technical roles. Second, agentic AI – systems that can autonomously complete specific tasks across various domains – is making many technical processes more accessible to non-specialists.¹⁵ Thirdly, CEOs report difficulty in achieving expected returns on AI investments,¹⁶ which suggests that technical skills alone are insufficient for successful implementation.

These trends suggest a recalibration in how we think about AI skills. Rather than expecting

advertising executives to become technical experts or simply hiring more computer scientists, the solution appears to lie with combining AI literacy alongside domain expertise.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, AI literacy encompasses several core non-technical skills that have broader workplace importance. For example, critical thinking enables professionals to assess AI outputs thoughtfully, question underlying assumptions, and ensure fairness and accuracy in deployed systems. Problem-solving skills allow individuals to leverage AI to tackle complex challenges and develop innovative solutions across various domains. Creativity proves essential for developing novel AI applications and improving existing processes. Meanwhile, collaboration facilitates effective partnerships between humans and AI systems.

Beyond these core skills, communication and emotional intelligence are particularly valuable for explaining AI concepts to non-experts and understanding the broader human impact of AI.

Broader AI literacy should encompass understanding of both the potential and limitations of AI, recognising appropriate opportunities for integration, and maintaining awareness of associated risks and ethical considerations. Responsible implementation requires attention to data privacy, security, sustainability and regulatory compliance when deploying AI solutions.

Arguably, today and tomorrow's advertising professionals need to develop AI literacy alongside their deep knowledge of advertising principles, consumer behaviour, and market dynamics.

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The path forward is clear: rather than recruiting armies of computer scientists or transforming advertising professionals into technical specialists, organisations should focus on developing AI literacy across their existing teams. This means building critical thinking, problem-solving and collaborative skills alongside a practical understanding of AI's capabilities and limitations. The goal isn't to replace domain expertise with technical knowledge, but to enhance advertising acumen with AI fluency – creating professionals who can leverage AI tools effectively while maintaining the strategic insight that drives successful campaigns.

While this framework provides direction, successful implementation requires a strategic approach. How do we develop this combination of skills to maximise both individual and organisational value? The next chapter explores the strategic value of complementarity.

Chapter 3

The Value of Complementarity

The most successful companies aren't simply replacing human talent, arguably, they're discovering how human creativity and AI capability can amplify each other. This transformation is also revealing a fundamental truth: AI is not skill neutral.¹⁷ By skill non-neutrality, we mean that some jobs will disappear, others will adapt, and entirely new categories will emerge because of AI.

However, one of the key organisational challenges for any skills strategy is predicting exactly what skills meet the requirements of emerging roles, or those that will emerge in the future, driven by AI advancements. Predicting these requirements is proving particularly difficult because they are shifting constantly as AI capabilities improve.

Fundamentally, predicting the right skills requires a deeper analysis of the current jobs available within the workplace and the tasks within the remit of those jobs. This is because, strictly speaking, AI automates tasks, not jobs. Jobs can therefore evolve by adding new tasks or subtracting redundant ones. Consider how a creative director's role has evolved: they now use AI tools like Midjourney for rapid concept visualisation (task addition) while stepping back from hands-on execution (task subtraction). However, their ability to prompt AI effectively depends entirely

on their understanding of brand strategy, consumer psychology, and visual storytelling – skills that make their AI outputs strategically relevant rather than merely aesthetically pleasing.

The creative director's evolution illustrates a broader pattern and demonstrates complementarity in action. In other words, the creative director's strategic judgement must now work alongside AI literacy, creating value that neither skill could generate alone. Their traditional brand knowledge enhances their ability to refine AI outputs, while their new prompt engineering skills are made more effective by their understanding of creative principles. Similarly, media planners now combine traditional audience insights with AI-powered attribution modelling, creating campaigns that human intuition alone couldn't optimise. Copywriters pair brand voice expertise with AI content generation, where their understanding of tone and messaging transforms generic AI output into compelling, on-brand communications. Account managers who blend client relationship skills with data interpretation capabilities can translate AI-generated insights into compelling strategic narratives that clients can act upon.

The advertising industry's project-based nature makes skill complementarity even more crucial. Clients increasingly expect integrated campaigns spanning traditional creative, programmatic media, and AI-enhanced personalisation – delivered by teams who can work fluidly across these disciplines. A single skill is rarely sufficient to perform a job or a task satisfactorily. Instead, employees are often required to possess a 'skills bundle' or a 'skills stack',

to perform a job effectively.¹⁸ This blending of skills can make employees stand out, particularly when that combination is rare, giving them a competitive edge in an increasingly AI-augmented industry.

Extrapolating research by Stephany and Teutloff on skill complementarity¹⁹ helps explain why some advertising and marketing professionals will thrive and others may struggle with AI adoption. Three patterns emerge from this analysis. First, skills that work across multiple functions are more valuable than narrow technical abilities. Strategic thinking, for instance, enhances creative development, media planning, and client management equally. Second, skills that enhance different types of work, command higher premiums. Client management capabilities that span B2B tech accounts and FMCG brands will prove more valuable than only possessing category-specific knowledge. Third, complementary skills amplify each skill's effectiveness, creating value greater than their sum. For example, data analysis skills become exponentially more powerful when combined with creative instincts, generating insights that pure analytics cannot deliver.

This suggests a strategic approach to talent development that goes beyond traditional departmental boundaries. The most valuable team members will be those who can identify and occupy the intersection points between human creativity and AI capabilities. Which account managers combine relationship building with data interpretation? Which creatives understand both brand storytelling and AI prompt engineering? Which strategists can translate consumer insights into effective AI training parameters? These professionals won't just use AI

tools – they will orchestrate human-AI collaboration to create outcomes that neither could achieve independently.

In an industry where client briefs increasingly demand ‘AI-enhanced creativity’ and ‘data-driven storytelling’, the organisations that thrive will be those whose talent can seamlessly blend human insight with AI. The future workforce advantage lies not in possessing the ‘right’ individual skills, but in curating complementary skill portfolios that position professionals at these critical intersection points. As AI capabilities expand exponentially, the premium will go to those who can choreograph this human-AI partnership, making complementarity not just a nice-to-have in advertising’s AI-driven future, but the fundamental requirement for competitive advantage, career resilience, and creative excellence.



Part II: The Human Advantage

Chapter 4

The Skills AI Can't Steal

James Calvert, Global Chief Enablement Officer at VML, recalls the moment that crystallised his understanding of AI's role in advertising. Working on a client presentation, he fed a rough brief into ChatGPT and watched it generate a perfectly serviceable set of slides in seconds. His initial delight quickly shifted to a more complex realisation: if AI could handle routine creative tasks this efficiently, what new value could human professionals bring to the process?

Rather than viewing this as a threat, James began to see it as an opportunity to focus on the distinctly human capabilities that become more valuable when combined with AI's computational power. His experience mirrors the broader trends occurring across advertising: as AI handles more routine tasks, certain human skills become not just relevant but essential for creating work that resonates, persuades, and drives business results.

James sees a widening gap emerging as AI becomes more pervasive – not between the tech-savvy and the technophobe – but between those who simply input formulaic prompts and those who have learned to guide AI towards producing exceptional outputs. This growing divide suggests that certain human skills will increase dramatically in value,

creating what he describes as a form of talent arbitrage in the workplace.

This evolution reveals a crucial insight about human-AI collaboration in advertising. The most effective professionals are not those who compete with AI's capabilities, but those who develop complementary strengths that amplify what AI can accomplish. When AI can generate dozens of headline variations in minutes, the human ability to recognise which one captures the right emotional truth becomes exponentially more valuable. When AI can analyse vast datasets to identify audience segments, the human capacity to understand cultural nuance and develop empathetic messaging becomes the differentiating factor.

Research supports this collaborative approach. A Harvard Business Review study,²⁰ involving 1,500 firms across various industries, demonstrated that the biggest performance improvements occurred when humans and intelligent machines worked together, enhancing each other's strengths. Additionally, recent findings from MIT's Center for Collective Intelligence,²¹ published in Nature Human Behaviour, revealed that successful collaboration depended heavily on task type. In other words, combinations worked best when each party focussed on what they do better than the other.

In advertising contexts, this collaboration could manifest itself as AI handling data processing, pattern recognition, and iterative optimisation, while humans provide strategic direction, creative vision, and cultural interpretation.

The challenge for advertising professionals lies therefore in systematically developing these

amplifying capabilities. As such, James identified six key traits that he thought were particularly valuable for advertising professionals working in AI-augmented environments:

1. Strategic Curiosity: Asking Questions AI Cannot

AI systems excel at providing answers to direct queries, but they fundamentally lack the capacity for genuine curiosity – the ability to sense what questions matter most. This creates significant opportunity for professionals who can identify the right problems to solve. For James, the root of creativity is all about asking good and great questions – questions that can be simultaneously strange, silly, piercing and beautiful.

In advertising, strategic curiosity manifests as the ability to spot the unarticulated client challenge beneath the stated brief, to recognise emerging cultural tensions that the data hasn't yet captured, or to identify the unconventional angle that transforms a campaign from competent to compelling. When AI can process thousands of data points about consumer behaviour, the human ability to ask questions such as, 'What are we not seeing?' or 'What assumptions are we making?' becomes critical.

To develop this capability, practice systematic questioning techniques after any client briefing: What cultural dynamics might challenge conventional wisdom about the target audience? What business pressures might be influencing the stated objectives? What competitive moves could change the landscape before campaign launch?

The most effective practitioners develop curiosity rituals: weekly sessions reviewing adjacent industries for unexpected insights, monthly exploration of demographic groups outside their typical targets, quarterly deep dives into cultural movements that don't yet appear in mainstream research. This isn't intellectual indulgence, it's systematic preparation for spotting opportunities that AI's training data cannot yet reveal.

2. Contextual Judgement Under Uncertainty

One of AI's greatest limitations in advertising contexts is its struggle with ambiguous situations requiring judgement calls. AI can optimise towards clear metrics, but advertising decisions often involve weighing competing priorities, incomplete information, and stakeholder interests that resist simple quantification.

James describes this capability to make judgements under uncertainty through the lens of deadline pressure, for example when pitches are due and time is running out. Here judgement means squinting at partial evidence, juggling misaligned priorities, listening to both instincts and team input – while still managing to sleep at night! Consider a crisis communication scenario. Of course, AI can draft several responses and analyse sentiment data, but deciding which issue requires an immediate response or more information, choosing between defensive and proactive messaging strategies, or balancing corporate messaging with authentic brand voice requires distinctly human judgement.

This capability can be developed through deliberate practice with ambiguous scenarios. For

example, after any significant decision – whether strategic, creative, or operational – practitioners should try investing fifteen minutes documenting not just what was decided, but how different factors were weighted, what assumptions were made, and where uncertainty was accepted. This reflection builds pattern recognition for similar future decisions.

Effective judgement also requires developing comfort with provisional decision-making. In AI-augmented workflows, humans often need to provide direction based on incomplete AI analysis, then adjust course as more information becomes available. This demands both confidence in initial assessment and strategic flexibility as circumstances evolve.

3. Emotional Intelligence and Cultural Resonance

While AI can analyse sentiment data and generate emotionally targeted content, it fundamentally lacks the embodied or lived-in experience necessary for a genuine emotional response that resonates with audiences. AI cannot feel the cultural moment, sense the unspoken tensions in a focus group, or recognise when technically correct messaging feels tone-deaf.

This creates substantial opportunity for professionals who can bridge analytical insights with emotional truth. When Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign²² succeeded globally, the breakthrough wasn't because AI identified the target demographic – it was because human creatives recognised an authentic emotional tension that data alone couldn't capture.

Developing emotional intelligence for advertising requires both systematic observation and personal reflection. Hence, it is important to think about how different demographic groups respond to emotional appeals, not just through survey data but through immersive observation. Practitioners can attend community events, engage with diverse social media communities, and seek opportunities to understand lived experiences different from their own.

Equally important is developing emotional self-awareness. Regular reflection on own responses to creative work builds the sensitivity needed to recognise authentic emotional connection. When evaluating creative concepts, it is important to self-reflect with questions such as: what do I feel when experiencing this work? Can I articulate why this emotional response may or may not translate to the intended audience?

4. Multi-Sensory Thinking

AI currently operates primarily in digital, text-based environments, while the physical world is textured, scented and ambient. Human professionals retain significant advantages in understanding how advertising works across physical and sensory dimensions. The weight of paper stock in a direct mail piece, the acoustic properties of a radio spot, the way outdoor advertising interacts with urban environments – these considerations require embodied human experience.

This extends beyond purely physical considerations; to include understanding how digital experiences feel across different devices, contexts, and usage patterns. AI can generate multiple creative

iterations and optimise for engagement metrics, but humans must consider whether an intrusive mobile ad format serves long-term brand relationships, or how a video campaign might be experienced differently when viewed on commute versus at home.

The key is developing systematic sensory awareness. When reviewing creative work, deliberately consider all sensory dimensions: How does this sound when read aloud? How would this feel as a physical object? What would this experience be like for someone using assistive technology? How does the pacing feel across different platforms? As James asks: where's your chance to add something delightfully physical – a flourish that says a real person cared?

5. Adaptive Improvisation in Collaborative Contexts

AI systems excel at optimisation but struggle with the kind of real-time adaptation that characterises effective collaboration. In client presentations, creative reviews, or strategy sessions, the ability to read social dynamics, adapt messaging on the fly, and improvisation remains distinctly human.

This capability becomes particularly valuable in AI-augmented workflows where humans must interpret AI outputs for diverse stakeholders, translate technical capabilities into strategic opportunities, and adapt AI-generated content for specific contextual needs. As James observes, improvisation functions as both a creative and social muscle.

The magic of human collaboration lies in its unpredictability. AI won't interrupt with a messy tangential idea, laugh at an unexpected connection, or follow your raised eyebrow down an unplanned path. But humans do, and this spontaneous building on ideas often produces breakthrough thinking that neither humans nor AI could achieve independently.

Developing improvisational skills requires practice in low-stakes environments. This can include participating in structured brainstorming sessions that prioritise building on others' ideas rather than defending your own can help with this. Also, practicing the presentation of AI-generated insights to different audiences, adapting your explanation based on their responses and questions.

The goal isn't to become a performer, but to develop comfort with uncertainty and skill in collaborative meaning-making. These are essential capabilities when working with AI tools that require human interpretation and contextualisation.

6. Continuous Learning and Synthesis

Perhaps most critical of all, professionals working in AI-augmented environments need to become effective learners who can synthesise insights across rapidly evolving domains. This is because AI tools change frequently, client challenges evolve, and cultural contexts shift. In other words, success requires ongoing capability development rather than mastery of fixed skills.

The world isn't standing still, and neither should we. AI skills go beyond just learning new AI tools. Success requires the development of frameworks for evaluating new technologies and integrating them

effectively with existing capabilities. It also requires becoming comfortable with repeatedly being a beginner while maintaining professional competence.

Effective learning strategies might include acquiring adjacent skills on a quarterly or annual basis, which is sufficient to stretch individuals. This could include topics such as motion design, life drawing, cultural semiotics, prompt engineering, linguistic anthropology and even studies on irrational behaviour. The key is selecting skills that enhance your ability to work effectively with AI rather than learning for its own sake.

James emphasises that this isn't only about mastering skills, but informing advertising practice, maintaining momentum, and staying ahead of rapid change. The most successful practitioners develop learning partnerships with colleagues, creating structured opportunities to share insights and collectively make sense of rapid technological change. This collaborative approach to learning mirrors the collaborative relationship with AI tools themselves; neither purely individual nor purely automated but thoughtfully designed to amplify human capability.

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These six traits illustrate the complementarity principle in action. Rather than competing with AI's computational strengths, they represent distinctly human capabilities that become more valuable when combined with AI tools. Strategic curiosity guides AI towards meaningful problems, contextual judgement interprets AI outputs for complex situations, and

emotional intelligence ensures AI-generated content resonates authentically. Meanwhile, sensory intelligence, adaptive improvisation, and continuous learning enable professionals to work fluidly across the human-AI collaboration that defines modern advertising practice. The professionals who develop these traits won't just survive AI adoption, they'll orchestrate it, creating work that neither humans nor AI could achieve independently. As James's experience demonstrates, the question isn't whether AI will change advertising, but whether we'll develop the complementary capabilities needed to amplify its potential, while preserving the human insight that makes great advertising truly resonate.

Chapter 5 Applied AI Literacy

Having now identified the irreplaceable human capabilities in AI-augmented advertising, the question becomes how do we apply these skills when working with AI systems? What's needed is applied AI literacy. Applied AI literacy isn't about technical proficiency – it's about leveraging strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, and emotional intelligence to enhance rather than diminish human expertise. This means knowing when to trust AI outputs and when to question them; how to craft prompts that yield strategically relevant results, and how to translate AI-generated insights into compelling creative work that resonates with human audiences.

Like navigating traffic, a person develops real competence driving a car when they understand when to accelerate, brake, and read other drivers' intentions. Extrapolating this example to AI means that we need to enable collaboration with machines while maintaining the human insight that distinguishes exceptional advertising work. It transforms AI from replacement threat into capability amplifier, enabling outcomes neither human nor artificial intelligence could achieve independently.

Just as digital literacy became essential for navigating the internet age, AI literacy now

encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to understand, interact with, and critically evaluate AI systems.

While in practice, this means AI can outperform humans in processing datasets to identify correlations between creative elements and performance, it also requires humans to interpret these patterns within cultural context. AI can segment audiences based on behavioural indicators, but it is humans who can evaluate whether segments align with strategic objectives. To put it simply, success lies in leveraging AI's computational strengths while preserving human capabilities for interpretation and strategic thinking.

Consider how this might work in campaign development. An AI system analysing historical performance data concludes that video content performs 40% better than static imagery for a particular demographic. A technically literate yet strategically naive approach would simply implement more video content. Applied AI literacy would involve asking deeper questions.

Asking deeper questions forms the foundation of strategic curiosity. Rather than accepting outputs passively, curious professionals use AI to explore questions they might not have considered independently. Effective collaboration begins with questioning frameworks beyond basic prompting. When briefing AI for market research, ask not just 'What are the trends?' but 'What assumptions might these trends challenge?' and 'What adjacent markets show relevant patterns?'

The most effective practitioners develop systematic approaches to expanding their questioning

when working with AI. After receiving any AI-generated insight, the key is to implement structured follow-up questions to drill deeper into the evidence base, interpretations and assumptions.

Building on this foundation of systematic questioning, contextual judgement becomes essential for evaluating AI outputs and determining when to trust, modify, or override AI recommendations. Unlike rule-based systems that operate within defined parameters, AI systems can produce outputs that appear sophisticated but lack strategic coherence or cultural sensitivity.

Effective contextual judgement in AI collaboration requires developing evaluation frameworks that go beyond accuracy to encompass appropriateness, strategic alignment, and cultural resonance. When AI generates creative concepts, contextual judgement evaluates not only whether the concepts are technically correct but whether they serve broader strategic objectives, align with brand values, and resonate with intended audiences in culturally appropriate ways.

Consider a media planning scenario where AI is providing recommended specific channel allocations based on performance data. Contextual judgement involves evaluating these recommendations against market conditions that may not be reflected in historical data. For example: competitive landscape changes, seasonal variations, cultural events, or emerging platform trends. The AI provides data-driven suggestions; the human judgement determines strategic appropriateness.

Developing contextual judgement for AI collaboration requires building systematic evaluation

habits. This means creating decision logs that document not just what was decided, but how AI insights were weighted against other factors. The goal isn't to second-guess every AI recommendation, but to develop calibrated confidence – knowing when AI insights align with strategic objectives and when human override becomes necessary.

Emotional intelligence extends beyond individual emotional awareness to encompass the understanding of how AI integration affects team dynamics, client relationships, and consumer connections. While AI can process and analyse emotional data, it lacks genuine emotional understanding or empathy, making emotional intelligence even more important in AI-augmented environments.

Emotional intelligence in AI collaboration manifests in multiple dimensions. Professionals must understand how their own emotional responses to AI capabilities affect decision-making. The excitement of discovering AI's efficiency can lead to over-reliance, while frustration with AI limitations might cause premature abandonment of the tool or the project itself. Self-awareness becomes essential for balanced AI integration.

Emotionally intelligent professionals recognise when some team members adopt AI tools enthusiastically and others remain hesitant. They know how to navigate these differences constructively. Most importantly, emotional intelligence ensures that AI-enhanced advertising maintains authentic emotional connections with consumers. AI can analyse sentiment data and generate emotionally targeted content, but it cannot

feel cultural moments or recognise when technically correct messaging feels tone-deaf.

Craft consideration becomes crucial for maintaining quality and authenticity when AI handles increasing portions of content creation and creative development. While AI can generate text, images, and even video content efficiently, craft consideration ensures that efficiency gains don't compromise the thoughtful attention to detail that distinguishes exceptional advertising work from algorithmic output.

Craft consideration in AI collaboration involves understanding how different AI tools affect the tactile, sensory, and experiential dimensions of advertising work. When AI generates written content, craft consideration evaluates not just accuracy and relevance but rhythm, tone, and subtle messaging nuances that affect reader experience. When AI creates visual content, craft consideration assesses composition, colour relationships, and cultural symbolism that contribute to overall impact.

For example, creative teams are experimenting with using AI to generate campaigns optimised for haptic and sensory engagement,²³ building physical prototypes to test how audiences experience the work beyond visual channels. Prototyping AI-generated concepts for touch-responsive ads or vibration-enabled notifications reveals what screen review cannot: how haptic patterns reinforce brand recognition, how physical sensations affect engagement, or how multi-sensory elements enhance memorability. This hands-on experimentation with AI outputs transforms it from a content generator into a partner for sensory storytelling.

Practical craft consideration involves a systematic review process that examines AI outputs through multiple lenses. This might include reading content aloud to assess rhythm and flow, testing content with diverse audiences to evaluate cultural resonance, and comparing outputs against brand voice guidelines to ensure consistency. Some creative tasks benefit from AI ideation followed by human refinement; others work better with human conceptualisation supported by AI execution.

Adaptive improvisation enables navigation of unpredictable scenarios while leveraging AI capabilities effectively. Unlike humans, who can adapt communication styles and strategies in real-time, AI systems operate within defined parameters, requiring human adaptation to bridge gaps between AI capabilities and contextual needs.

Adaptive improvisation manifests most clearly in client presentations and collaborative sessions where AI-generated insights must be interpreted for diverse audiences with varying levels of technical understanding and different strategic priorities. Rather than presenting AI outputs directly, adaptive improvisation involves translating AI insights into compelling narratives that address specific audience concerns and business objectives.

This capability requires developing comfort with real-time AI integration using AI tools to support presentations and strategy sessions without becoming dependent on predetermined AI outputs. Effective practitioners learn to prompt AI systems during conversations, interpret results quickly, and integrate insights seamlessly into ongoing discussions.

Finally, continuous learning transforms when AI becomes a learning partner rather than just a productivity tool. Rather than simply using AI to complete tasks more efficiently, continuous learning involves using AI capabilities to expand understanding, explore new domains, and develop insights that inform professional growth.

This approach treats AI interaction as active learning rather than passive consumption. When working with AI on campaign analysis, continuous learning means not just accepting AI insights but understanding the analytical approaches that generated those insights. When using AI for creative ideation, continuous learning involves recognising the patterns and associations that inform AI suggestions and applying these approaches to independent creative thinking.

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It is important to view AI collaboration as continuous experimentation rather than settled practice. In other words, regularly test new approaches to human-AI integration, evaluate the effectiveness of different collaboration strategies, and adapt methods based on changing AI capabilities and evolving professional requirements.

Applied AI literacy represents the bridge between understanding AI's potential and leveraging that potential effectively in advertising practice. It combines technical competence with strategic wisdom, enabling professionals to collaborate with AI systems while maintaining the human capabilities that distinguish exceptional advertising work. The six

human capabilities mentioned in Chapter 4 therefore require systematic development to remain effective.

However, effective human-AI collaboration requires more than just applying individual capabilities skilfully. As we'll explore in the next chapter, the very ease of AI assistance can subtly undermine the cognitive foundations that make these human capabilities possible in the first place. Understanding this tension becomes crucial for maintaining the analytical rigour that drives advertising effectiveness while capturing the efficiency benefits that AI provides.

Chapter 6

Preserving Critical Thinking

The previous chapters have explored how AI can transform advertising workflows, and which human capabilities become more valuable in AI-augmented environments. However, emerging research^{24 25} reveals a critical challenge in that the tools designed to enhance human creativity and productivity may inadvertently undermine our capacity for the critical thinking required for exceptional advertising work.

This presents a fundamental tension for advertising professionals. While AI tools promise unprecedented efficiency in content creation, campaign ideation, and strategic planning, the research suggests that increased reliance on these tools may weaken the cognitive abilities essential for breakthrough creative thinking and strategic insight.

This mirrors the adoption of other familiar technology adoption cycles such as the calculator in the classroom. Critics argued that it would significantly reduce most people's ability to perform mental arithmetic. This has indeed occurred to some extent. However, this change isn't inherently problematic so long as the freed capacity is redirected toward learning and developing higher-level mathematical reasoning and problem-solving skills.²⁶

The key question to determine is whether AI tools will enable similar cognitive reallocation toward more

abstract, strategic and creative work, or simply create dependencies that weaken overall analytical capability.

Understanding this tension – and developing strategies to navigate it – becomes crucial to leveraging AI while maintaining the analytical rigour that drives advertising effectiveness.

Research by Lee et al²⁷ provides compelling evidence that AI assistance fundamentally alters how our brains process complex tasks. Studies tracking neural activity during writing tasks have found that brain connectivity systematically scales down with the amount of external support provided. In particular, participants working without assistance showed the strongest, widest-ranging neural connections, while those using AI assistance showed the weakest overall mental engagement.

This finding has direct implications for advertising practice. If we consistently rely on AI support, the risk is that we weaken the neural connections that enable strategic thinking, creative conceptualisation, and critical evaluation. For an industry built on the ability to synthesise complex market insights, develop innovative creative solutions, and evaluate campaign effectiveness, this is a significant concern. It is therefore important we understand the mechanics behind it.

The mechanism behind this cognitive reduction centres on what some researchers have described as reduced ‘cognitive friction’.²⁸ AI tools make information processing remarkably efficient, but this convenience diminishes a person’s inclination to critically evaluate outputs. In advertising contexts, this could translate into reduced scrutiny of AI-

generated market analyses, creative concepts, and strategic recommendations – precisely the areas where critical evaluation determines campaign success.

Again, understanding how AI transforms critical thinking processes becomes essential for maintaining the analytical capabilities discussed in earlier chapters. Interestingly, the research with knowledge workers conducted by Lee et al revealed that rather than eliminating critical thinking processes entirely, AI shifts their focus in three key areas.

First, cognitive focus shifts from information gathering to verification. From an advertising perspective, this might mean advertising professionals increasingly finding themselves validating AI-generated analyses instead of researching consumer insights or market trends from first principles. While this appears more efficient, it represents a fundamental change in how market intelligence is developed and internalised.

Second, problem-solving evolves into response integration. This might mean creative process shifting from developing original solutions to incorporating AI suggestions into campaign strategies. However, this change could affect both the depth of creative exploration and the sense of ownership professionals feel towards their work.

Finally, task execution transforms to task stewardship. By this we mean that professionals move from hands-on work to overseeing and guiding AI outputs. This transition requires different skills, but may reduce the tacit knowledge that comes from direct engagement with creative challenges.

These shifts have direct implications for advertising and connect directly to the human capabilities discussed in earlier chapters. Strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, and emotional intelligence all require the kind of deep cognitive engagement that AI assistance may inadvertently reduce.

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Perhaps most concerning for advertising practice is the relationship between confidence in AI capabilities and critical thinking depth. Lee et al's research found that higher confidence in AI tools correlates with reduced critical evaluation of their outputs, while higher self-confidence correlates with increased critical thinking.

This dynamic creates particular risks in advertising environments, where confidence in AI capabilities may reduce the depth of strategic analysis that distinguishes breakthrough campaigns from routine work. The professionals who become most adept at using AI tools may simultaneously become less critical evaluators of their outputs – a troubling paradox for an industry where analytical rigour drives competitive advantage.

The implications extend beyond individual decision-making to team dynamics and client relationships. It could mean that teams who develop high confidence in AI-generated insights may present recommendations with a conviction that exceeds the actual analytical foundation supporting those recommendations.

The cognitive impacts extend also to memory formation, and there are some fears it could harm our ability to recall information. Research by Kosmyna et al²⁹ has shown that when participants were asked to quote from their own AI-assisted work, a significant majority failed to provide accurate quotations, compared to a much smaller percentage of those working without AI assistance.

For advertising professionals, this memory impairment could affect multiple critical capabilities: loss of creative ownership, failure to recall campaign details for client presentations, inability to build upon previous creative concepts, difficulty in maintaining consistent brand messaging, and an inability to learn from performance data in order to inform future strategies. An inability to accurately remember work details would undermine both professional competence and the iterative learning process essential for creative development.

Also significant is the reduced sense of ownership if AI is heavily relied on to produce the output. This is because – in advertising – creative ownership and personal investment drive innovation and client relationships, hence diminished ownership could fundamentally alter the industry’s creative culture.

These issues connect directly to the craft and sensory consideration capabilities discussed earlier. The tactile, iterative process of developing creative concepts requires the kind of deep engagement that builds both memory and ownership. AI assistance, while efficient, may reduce this essential foundation of professional expertise.

This accumulation of avoided mental effort creates what Kosmyna et al call ‘cognitive debt’ –

short-term efficiency gains that result in long-term skill degradation. For advertising professionals, cognitive debt could manifest itself as a reduced ability to evaluate a campaign strategy without AI assistance, weakened instincts for consumer behaviour and market dynamics, diminished capacity for original creative thinking, and increased susceptibility to biased or incorrect AI-generated insights.

Worst case scenario: this phenomenon directly threatens the continuous learning capability identified as essential for AI-augmented work. As professionals become increasingly dependent on AI tools, their capacity to develop new insights and adapt to changing market conditions may actually diminish rather than expand.

The implications extend beyond individual capabilities to organisational competence. Agencies that systematically rely on AI assistance may find their collective strategic and creative capabilities eroding over time, even as their operational efficiency increases.

Beyond organisational impacts, the fear is that this cognitive debt threatens industry-wide creative diversity. If advertisers or agencies systematically rely on the same AI tools trained on similar datasets, the industry risks a convergence of ideas and creative output that would undermine the differentiation and originality that drive competitive advantage. When multiple organisations use comparable AI assistance for campaign development, the resulting work may converge toward predictable patterns and solutions, eliminating the creative distinctiveness that separates breakthrough campaigns from routine advertising.

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Given the implications, advertising professionals need to find specific strategies to preserve critical thinking capabilities while leveraging AI benefits. The evidence suggests that hybrid approaches that combine AI assistance with AI-free learning phases optimise both immediate productivity and long-term cognitive development.

Arguably, organisations may want to ensure that junior advertising professionals develop experience in unassisted creative and strategic work without AI tools to give them the space to develop the foundational cognitive patterns essential for creative and strategic thinking. Once these patterns are established AI tools could then be used to enhance rather than replace core capabilities.

This progressive approach aligns with the skills development framework discussed in earlier chapters. Strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, and emotional intelligence all require the deep cognitive engagement that comes from working through complex challenges without AI assistance.

Organisations must also implement systematic approaches to evaluating AI outputs. These should include mandatory verification processes requiring validation of AI-generated insights against external sources and market data, regular analysis sessions where teams specifically challenge AI recommendations, and comprehensive documentation of reasoning behind accepting or rejecting AI suggestions.

These protocols serve multiple purposes: maintaining analytical rigour, building critical evaluation skills, and creating audit trails that support client discussions and strategic refinement.

Preserving critical thinking capabilities requires intentional practice beyond systematic evaluation. Organisations might allocate specific projects where teams work without AI assistance, rotate professionals between AI-assisted and traditional workflows, and implement training programmes focused on analytical reasoning adapted for advertising contexts.

This maintenance work directly supports the adaptive improvisation and continuous learning capabilities discussed earlier. Professionals who maintain strong cognitive skills independently can more effectively guide and evaluate AI tools in collaborative contexts.

It follows that professionals who understand the risks and implications of uncritical AI adoption will engage more thoughtfully with AI outputs. Organisations should therefore emphasise how critical evaluation improves campaign effectiveness, highlight risks of uncritical AI adoption including brand damage and strategic missteps, and frame analytical rigour as both competitive advantage and career development opportunity.

Given the inverse relationship between confidence in AI and critical thinking,³⁰ agencies must help professionals develop appropriate self-confidence levels to stimulate more critical thinking. This includes sharing examples of AI failures relevant to advertising, celebrating instances where human insight outperformed AI outputs, and

ensuring training programmesⁱ build both AI proficiency and traditional advertising skills simultaneously.

Preserving critical thinking capabilities requires organisational structures that support both AI integration and cognitive preservation. This could be implemented via hybrid team structures that combine AI-native professionals with traditional advertising experts in order to maintain diverse cognitive approaches while facilitating knowledge transfer.

Quality assurance roles focused specifically on evaluating AI-assisted work may become more essential in the future. These positions would require professionals who understand both AI capabilities and traditional advertising excellence, ensuring that efficiency gains don't compromise strategic or creative quality.

Arguably, there is a need for innovation spaces for experimental, AI-free creative exploration to preserve and create new pathways to breakthrough thinking. These environments could allow teams to develop original concepts without AI influence, maintaining the cognitive skills essential for industry-leading work – particularly capabilities that appear likely to remain uniquely human: contextual judgement for understanding cultural and emotional nuances, strategic intuition for recognising patterns in ambiguous conditions, authentic creativity reflecting genuine human insight, and ethical reasoning for navigating moral implications of advertising messages.

ⁱ Trade bodies like the IPA offer a catalogue of AI training courses for agencies.

Rather than competing with AI, advertising professionals should develop complementary capabilities, including sophisticated AI guidance, expert-level output evaluation, strategic integration of AI insights with human intuition, and comprehensive understanding of how AI tools enhance broader advertising practice.

This approach aligns with the human-AI collaboration principles discussed throughout this book. The goal is not to avoid AI tools but to use them strategically while preserving the cognitive capabilities that enable exceptional advertising work.

Organisations seeking to balance AI efficiency with cognitive preservation should consider implementing structured approaches to AI integration. This could begin with an assessment of current team capabilities and identification of areas where critical thinking skills are strongest and weakest. The next step would require the development of training programmes that build both AI proficiency and analytical skills simultaneously, rather than treating them as separate competencies.

Project structures that alternate between AI-assisted and unassisted work need to be created. This would allow teams to develop expertise in both approaches. Then there is the need to establish evaluation criteria that measure both efficiency and quality outcomes, ensuring that productivity gains don't compromise strategic or creative excellence.

Finally, to preserve employees' cognitive skills over the long-term, organisations should monitor team self-confidence levels and provide calibration training when confidence in AI exceeds critical evaluation habits. Celebrate examples of better

human insight to maintain motivation for cognitive engagement alongside AI collaboration.

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The evidence presented above is both a warning and opportunity. Uncritical adoption of AI assistance can weaken the cognitive capabilities essential for advertising excellence. However, intentional strategies for AI integration can preserve and enhance human cognitive abilities while capturing efficiency benefits.

Success in AI-augmented advertising requires deliberate choices about when to use AI assistance and when to engage human cognitive capabilities directly. This intentionality must operate at both individual and organisational levels, shaping how professionals develop their careers and how agencies structure their operations.

The future of advertising depends on mastering this balance between AI efficiency and human insight. By understanding the cognitive implications of AI adoption and implementing strategies to preserve critical thinking capabilities, advertising professionals can navigate toward a future where AI enhances rather than diminishes human creative and strategic potential. The research provides a clear roadmap: we must become more thoughtful about how we integrate AI tools, more intentional about preserving cognitive capabilities, and more strategic about the balance between efficiency and insight that drives advertising excellence.

Chapter 7

Psychological Safety in AI Integration

Most agencies are solving the wrong problem. While they fixate on technical integration – which APIs to use, which platforms to deploy – they miss the deeper challenge that will determine whether AI transforms their business or merely becomes another expensive tool gathering digital dust. The real disruption isn't technological; it's cultural.

Consider what happens when AI takes over the cognitive and creative tasks that once defined expertise. Creative directors who built their careers on ideation now find themselves negotiating with generative algorithms. Analysts who once owned insights must learn to interrogate outputs they didn't create. Account managers discover that AI can draft client presentations faster than they can open PowerPoint. Without intentional adaptation, these professionals don't become AI-augmented experts – they become passive operators of systems they don't truly understand.

This is why psychological safety is crucial. Whether you're leading an agency, managing a team, or working as an individual contributor, psychological safety shapes your relationship with AI. While organisational leaders set the tone, anyone can model the behaviours that build trust, encourage experimentation, and normalise productive challenge.

Employees can only develop AI resilience if they feel secure enough to continuously learn, experiment, and challenge the technology itself. However, psychological safety is a widely misunderstood term. The conventional definition – a ‘shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking’^{31 32} – has unintentionally fuelled this misunderstanding.

Indeed, how can it be safe to take risks? Research by Behave³³ highlights this confusion: while 82% of organisations claim to prioritise psychological safety, only 16% of HR leaders accurately grasp its essence. The majority (44%) erroneously equate it with blanket comfort and protection; a misconception that actively undermines the role of productive discomfort in learning and growth.

True psychological safety demands duality. Dr Alexandra Dobra-Kiel at Behave calls this ‘an environment where employees balance comfort and discomfort to take well-calibrated risks’.

A well-calibrated risk might mean experimenting with AI-generated copy for internal documents before client-facing materials, or questioning an AI recommendation when it conflicts with domain expertise rather than deferring automatically to the algorithm.

Behave’s framework translates this balance into three enablers for embedding psychological safety in an organisation: growth, belonging, and resilience. Each enabler blends comfort and discomfort. In the context of AI integration, this balance prevents both dangerous extremes: the complacency that treats AI as infallible and the resistance that sees it only as a threat.

This misunderstanding has tangible consequences. When agencies conflate safety with comfort, they instinctively protect employees from AI's challenges rather than preparing them to master those challenges. The result is superficial integration: mandatory training sessions that teach tool usage without building true fluency, AI implementations that remain siloed within technical teams, and workforces that use AI without understanding it.

AI's deeper disruption lies in how it redraws the boundaries of human expertise. The skills that once defined professional identity – the creative director's ability to generate ideas, the analyst's capacity to spot patterns, the strategist's talent for synthesis – must now be reimagined in collaboration with AI. This shift doesn't just change workflows; it challenges the very foundation of how people see themselves professionally.

Without psychological safety, agencies face three critical breakdowns. 1) Growth stalls when AI knowledge remains trapped in technical silos, limiting cross-functional fluency. 2) Belonging fractures when upskilling becomes an elite privilege rather than an inclusive process, or when AI outputs go unchallenged because people feel unable to question algorithmic authority. 3) Resilience collapses when fears about AI go unaddressed and strategic decisions become passive acceptance of machine recommendations.

Left unaddressed, these breakdowns don't just slow AI integration, they erode what makes agencies indispensable. To address these breakdowns, agencies need a framework that embeds

psychological safety into AI integration – one that fosters growth, belonging, and resilience.

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Growth accelerates when collaboration meets humility. The uneven distribution of AI knowledge across teams creates dangerous silos where technical understanding remains isolated from strategic application. True collaboration ensures that engineers teach marketers how AI models actually work, enabling more sophisticated campaign design. Data scientists and creative teams co-design analytics tools that are both technically sound and strategically effective. This cross-pollination prevents AI from becoming a black box that only technical specialists understand.

Humility complements collaboration by fostering an iterative learning mindset. AI technology evolves rapidly, and teams that think they've 'mastered' it quickly become obsolete. When a product team notices their AI chatbot misunderstands user queries, humility drives them to continuously refine the system rather than blame users for not adapting to its limitations. This mindset treats AI fluency as an ongoing journey rather than a destination.

Belonging deepens through participation and examination. AI skills can easily become elite expertise reserved for technical roles, excluding other team members from meaningful engagement with the technology. Inclusive participation means designers attend AI workshops to learn image-generation tools independently, strategists experiment with data analysis platforms, and account

managers understand how recommendation algorithms work. This democratisation ensures AI becomes a shared organisational capability rather than only a departmental speciality.

Examination ensures that this participation remains rigorous. Without critical validation, AI-generated outputs can perpetuate biases, contain errors, or misalign with organisational goals. When editors fact-check AI-generated articles before publication, they're not just correcting mistakes – they're maintaining the human judgement that ensures AI augments rather than replaces professional expertise. This culture of examination prevents passive acceptance of algorithmic recommendations.

Resilience strengthens through disagreement and vulnerability. Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of AI integration is the tendency to accept machine-generated insights without deeper analysis. AI models trained on historical data can reinforce existing biases or miss creative opportunities that require human intuition. For example, when a sales team debates an AI-prioritised lead list and adjusts criteria based on their market knowledge, they're demonstrating the kind of constructive disagreement that leads to better outcomes than either human or artificial intelligence could achieve alone.

Finally, vulnerability addresses the emotional reality of AI integration. The fear that AI will replace human roles creates resistance that undermines adoption efforts. When copywriters openly share concerns about AI-generated content potentially replacing their work and then participate in training sessions to learn how AI can enhance their creative

process, they transform anxiety into engagement. This emotional safety allows people to experiment with AI tools without feeling they're hastening their own obsolescence.

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The future of AI in advertising won't be won by the best algorithms, it will be shaped by the cultures best equipped to harness them. Organisations that fail to embed psychological safety risk letting AI diminish expertise rather than elevate it. The growth-belonging-resilience framework is not just a strategy, it's a necessity. Organisations that cultivate psychological safety won't just adapt to AI; they'll lead with it, ensuring AI becomes a tool for expansion rather than erosion. The choice is clear: shape AI, or be shaped by it.

The background of the page is a faded, artistic rendering of a museum gallery. It features several classical statues of men in draped robes, standing on a series of steps that lead up to a building with classical architectural details like columns and doorways. The overall tone is light and ethereal, with a focus on the architectural and sculptural elements.

Part III: Building Inclusive Capabilities

Chapter 8

From Classrooms to Careers

The advertising industry's AI transformation creates unprecedented challenges for talent development. Ones that extend beyond current workforce skills to encompass how future professionals are educated and prepared for AI-augmented careers.ⁱⁱ Understanding this educational dimension becomes crucial for the advertising industry seeking to build sustainable talent pipelines and for professionals navigating career development in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

Unfortunately, education and technology haven't always been the closest of allies. It wasn't that long ago that calculators were banned in the classroom, as the devices were seen as a form of cheating; a cheap workaround that prevented children from understanding the fundamentals of mathematics. However, businesses see new technologies as essential to boost workplace productivity, making pen and paper arithmetic obsolete.

As Chapter 6 explored, this parallel proves instructive: calculators did weaken mental arithmetic skills, but this cognitive reallocation proved

ⁱⁱ This chapter benefited from input from with Marcos Angelides, Managing Director of L'Oréal Lab & Head of AI Operations at Publicis Media, whose insights on education-industry partnerships informed the analysis that follows.

beneficial when educators ensured students built foundational competencies before introducing calculator assistance. The critical lesson was sequencing – not prohibition, but developmental timing.

Similar tensions now surround AI tools in educational settings, with many institutions prohibiting AI assistance even though employers increasingly expect technological fluency. There are signs that attitudes are softening with schools across the UK trialling the use of ‘deepfake teachers’.³⁴ But without the right balance we risk preventing children from learning the very skills that will be critical for their future careers, and the growth of British industry.

The disconnect between educational restrictions and workplace expectations creates particular challenges for advertising industry recruitment. This is why it’s more crucial than ever for educators and employers to collaborate to develop AI literacy that will prepare students for professional practice while maintaining academic rigour.

The challenge intensifies, given the impossibility of completely restricting AI access. Detection tools remain unreliable, with high rates of false positives. OpenAI’s own AI detection tool believed that William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was ‘highly likely’ to have been written by AI.³⁵

AI literacy in advertising contexts differs significantly from general technological education. The capabilities discussed in earlier chapters – strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, emotional intelligence, craft consideration, adaptive improvisation, and continuous learning – require

educational approaches that emphasise critical thinking and communication skills alongside technical proficiency.

Emphasising the importance of communication, Nvidia CEO Jensen Huang said that children should no longer be encouraged to learn to code. 'It is our job to create computing technology such that nobody has to program. And that the programming language is human.'³⁶

Because of this, many experts, including Conor Grenan, Chief AI Architect at NYU Stern³⁷, argue that focusing on English literature and humanities subjects will be more important than ever. This emphasis on communication and critical thinking aligns with advertising's inherently interdisciplinary nature. The industry has always drawn talent from diverse educational backgrounds: literature, psychology, sociology, economics, and design. AI integration doesn't eliminate this diversity but rather enhances the value of humanities education that develops analytical reasoning, cultural understanding, and persuasive communication capabilities essential for AI-augmented advertising work.

This creates a paradox for educators: research shows AI can generate more novel ideas than humans in laboratory settings,³⁸ yet Chapter 6 demonstrated how over reliance on AI can weaken the cognitive capabilities that enable breakthrough thinking. The resolution lies in understanding that AI's divergent thinking advantage comes from lack of self-censorship, not genuine creative insight. Educators should therefore teach students to harness AI's uninhibited idea generation, while developing

the critical judgment to evaluate, refine, and contextualise those ideas.

This dual capability – using AI for uninhibited ideation while maintaining critical evaluation – exemplifies the developmental sequencing that advertising education must embrace. Students who first develop evaluative judgment through traditional creative exercises can then use AI as an ideation catalyst without becoming dependent on its outputs. Those who rely on AI from the outset may generate numerous ideas but lack the critical faculties to distinguish breakthrough concepts from algorithmic mediocrity. Research supports this concern: individuals learning new material with AI assistance can develop measurably shallower knowledge compared to using web search³⁹ suggesting that AI's efficiency may come at the expense of deep comprehension and potentially the kind of understanding advertising professionals need for strategic work.

The implications extend beyond education, to people management and professional development. Nearly 47% of Gen Z already believe they receive better career advice from ChatGPT than from their actual managers.⁴⁰ While this statistic might be a surprise to some, AI mentors can usefully supplement human guidance by offering synthesised wisdom without personal bias, helping junior staff to navigate the workspace more effectively, to understand expectations, and explore career-advancing opportunities. Until now, only a fortunate few had family or friends to give them constructive career advice. Human mentors will retain an important role providing the contextual knowledge

and cultural insight that distinguishes exceptional advertising work. The developmental principle remains – students must first develop judgement about what constitutes good advice, before they can effectively evaluate AI recommendations. Otherwise, they risk mistaking confidence for competence, both in AI outputs and in their own capabilities.

But most importantly, AI in education has an opportunity to balance the playing field for all children.

Over the past 50 years, one of the strongest predictors of a child's academic success, and future earning potential, was classroom size. Children with access to one-on-one tuition performed significantly better than those who didn't. Yet only a tiny percentage of families could afford such a privilege.

Now, for the first time in history, every child can have access to a personal tutor – one that is continuously available and has endless patience and infinite knowledge – regardless of economic background.

This democratisation could significantly expand the diversity of talent entering advertising careers, bringing perspectives and experiences that enhance industry creativity and market understanding.

However, realising this potential requires intentional integration strategies rather than passive AI adoption. Educational institutions must develop frameworks that leverage AI capabilities while ensuring students develop the critical thinking and creative capabilities essential for professional success. This means using AI tools to enhance rather than replace human learning processes, much like

calculators eventually enhanced mathematical understanding.

Organisations also need to adapt their recruitment and talent development strategies to account for varying levels of AI experience among new graduates. Some candidates may have extensive AI tool experience, yet require training in applying it to advertising context. Others may have strong foundational advertising capabilities, yet need introduction to AI collaboration techniques.

Professional development programmes should recognise that AI literacy develops continuously rather than through one-time training. The rapid evolution of AI capabilities means that continuous professional development becomes essential for career advancement. It requires the creation of learning environments that encourage experimentation with new AI tools while maintaining focus on the human capabilities that drive advertising excellence.

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Looking toward implementation, three priority areas emerge from this developmental framework. Each addresses a distinct dimension of the education-industry partnership challenge while reinforcing the principle that AI integration must enhance, rather than replace, human cognitive development. Success requires moving beyond ad hoc collaboration toward systematic partnerships structured around the developmental sequencing explored throughout this chapter.

Curriculum co-design and assessment innovation represents the most fundamental priority. Industry-education partnerships must move beyond traditional recruitment relationships to collaboratively design learning pathways that are explicitly structured around developmental sequencing: foundational capabilities first, AI augmentation second, critical evaluation throughout. A formal ‘AI Futures’ initiative – bringing together educators, employers, and government in systematic collaboration – could provide the structural foundation for such partnerships. Effective co-design includes specialised apprenticeship schemes combining theoretical learning with hands-on AI-augmented work, joint curriculum development ensuring students develop both technical proficiency and strategic judgment, and internship programmes providing real-world exposure to how advertising agencies deploy AI tools while maintaining human creative leadership. Faculty development becomes essential here – educators need direct experience with industry AI applications to teach effectively, perhaps through residencies at agencies, joint research projects, or ongoing professional development that keeps academic instruction current with rapid technological evolution.

However, curriculum design alone fails without solving the assessment challenge. When AI can generate professionally competent essays, presentations, and creative work, traditional evaluation methods become unreliable – as OpenAI’s misclassification of Shakespeare dramatically illustrates. The futility of detection tools requires fundamentally rethinking what and how we

evaluate. Assessment must shift from evaluating outputs to evaluating processes and judgment, requiring students to: document decision-making in real-time, defend recommendations in live presentations responding to unexpected questions, conduct comparative analyses demonstrating why they chose certain AI suggestions over others, and articulate the strategic reasoning behind AI-assisted work. In advertising contexts specifically, evaluation should assess students' ability to contextualise AI outputs within brand strategy, evaluate creative concepts against cultural nuance that AI misses, and integrate AI insights with the emotional intelligence essential for persuasive communication. Industry professionals must help develop these assessment frameworks, as academic institutions lack the contextual knowledge to evaluate whether students have genuinely developed advertising judgment versus merely learned effective prompting. Without solving assessment, even the most sophisticated curriculum design will fail – students will optimise for grades rather than learning, undermining the entire developmental sequence this chapter has advocated.

Continuous learning infrastructure addresses the temporal challenge: AI capabilities evolve rapidly as traditional education operates on a slower academic year cycle. This mismatch makes one-time training insufficient for advertising careers that now require ongoing adaptation to technological change. The solution requires systematic approaches that keep both students and practitioners' knowledge current. For example, the educator training programmes discussed above, ongoing partnership mechanisms

enabling agencies to access cutting-edge research while providing educators with real-world application contexts, and professional development initiatives recognising that AI literacy requires career-long learning rather than front-loaded education. This infrastructure might include shared innovation spaces where educational and industry participants together experiment with emerging AI applications, research collaborations exploring effective AI integration in advertising contexts while informing educational practice, and formal mechanisms for quarterly dialogue between industry representatives and educational administrators about evolving skills requirements. The traditional model of graduation-then-practice becomes insufficient when technological capabilities change faster than curricula can meet. Advertisers and agencies benefit from these ongoing relationships by accessing emerging talent and research insights, while educational institutions gain real-world validation of their teaching approaches – a reciprocal arrangement serving both parties’ strategic interests.

Inclusion and early engagement ensure that AI’s democratisation potential materialises rather than inadvertently increasing inequality. The advertising industry has both ethical responsibility and business incentive to support diverse talent development, as multicultural markets require perspectives from varied backgrounds. This means several concrete actions: actively supporting educational programmes reaching underrepresented communities; providing scholarships and resources specifically for students from disadvantaged backgrounds; and creating outreach initiatives demonstrating advertising career

accessibility regardless of economic circumstances. Early engagement becomes particularly important given AI development speed and education's long timeline. Rather than waiting until university to introduce AI concepts, industry engagement with secondary education can inspire interest while building foundational capabilities: developing AI modules for GCSE and A-Level students, integrating AI applications into existing subjects such as psychology and media studies, and providing school visits demonstrating real advertising career pathways. Competitive learning opportunities such as AI competitions and hackathons designed specifically for advertising applications can showcase student capabilities to potential employers while providing practical experience with creative-technical integration. These initiatives extend beyond charity to encompass strategic talent development: ensuring the next generation of advertising professionals includes the diverse perspectives essential for creative excellence and market understanding.

These three priorities require supporting mechanisms to function effectively. Regular stakeholder consultation maintains alignment between educational development and industry requirements through formal dialogue mechanisms. AI learning laboratories and innovation hubs – while requiring significant investment – can provide concentrated learning experiences and technological infrastructure that traditional classrooms cannot offer. However, these should be understood as enablers rather than priorities themselves – valuable when they support curriculum co-design, continuous learning, and inclusive access, but insufficient

without the strategic foundations those priorities establish. The success of implementation depends on viewing all components as interconnected rather than isolated initiatives. Effective curriculum co-design requires continuous learning infrastructure to remain current – which benefits from diverse participant perspectives that inclusion efforts provide, which can be enhanced through competitive learning opportunities that appropriate technological infrastructure makes possible.

The advertising industry’s educational challenge isn’t whether to integrate AI, but how to sequence that integration to enhance rather than undermine human capability. Chapter 6 demonstrated the cognitive risks of uncritical AI adoption for current professionals; this chapter has outlined how developmental sequencing – foundational skills first, AI augmentation second, critical evaluation throughout – can prevent those risks for future talent. The stakes are substantial. Educational choices made today will determine whether the next generation of advertising professionals uses AI as a cognitive enhancer, or becomes dependent on it as a cognitive crutch. Get the timing right, and AI democratises advertising excellence: expanding access to personalised learning, bringing diverse perspectives into the industry, and elevating human creativity through technological collaboration. Get it wrong, and we train a generation that can prompt tools but can’t think strategically, generate ideas but can’t evaluate them, and achieve efficiency while losing the judgment that separates breakthrough work from algorithmic mediocrity. The future of advertising talent depends on educators and

employers collaborating to maintain the discipline that made calculators enhancers rather than replacements. Those who master this balance – preserving the cognitive capabilities that drive advertising excellence while capturing AI’s efficiency benefits – will shape the industry’s next chapter. The alternative is accepting mediocrity as the new standard. The choice belongs to those currently shaping educational practice, and the window for getting it right is narrowing as AI capabilities accelerate faster than educational institutions can adapt.

Chapter 9 Diversity, Inclusion and Responsible AI Policy

Beyond the demographic divides around who uses AI, there is also the divide around who is represented by AI. AI output serves as a cultural mirror, reflecting the decisions society has made over the last 50-100 years about who is seen, whose stories are told, and whose are left out. Every dataset – and therefore every image, video or line of copy generated from the model it was used to train – carries the weight of decades of creative, cultural and economic choices. They replicate the hierarchies we once normalised, re-presenting old inequalities in new digital forms. The challenge for our industry is to use AI not to repeat those patterns but to reveal and correct them in addition to the active work being done in ‘red-teaming’ and fine-tuning models to mitigate these historical biases.

In advertising, where influence and visibility have always been currency, the implications are profound. When a model defaults to showing a white male CEO (which some do 97 times out of 100⁴¹) or a narrow body ideal, it’s a reflection of the narrow cultural base found in its data.

Responsible AI is about getting us all learning to look deeper, see the patterns and work with intent to protect and extend the level of diversity and

representation that has so far been hard-won in advertising.

The notion of responsible AI simply means that we make accountability part of the creative process itself. It begins with using critical thinking skills and asking the right questions of the technology: Who might the data exclude? Whose experiences are simplified or missing? And of the practitioner: Is the person creating the prompt a member of the community being represented? Who should evaluate whether these outputs avoid harm or perpetuate a stereotype? When we centre inclusion and transparency in the way we design, deploy and use AI – and make this a point of policy - creativity at scale becomes not just faster, but fairer.

But how do organisations move from aspiration to implementation? The gap between recognising AI's potential to perpetuate bias and establishing effective safeguards, has proven challenging for most agencies. Policy documents exist but often remain as statements of values rather than operational frameworks that guide daily creative decisions. The Brandtech Group's work implementing AI governance across advertising contexts offers a practical blueprint – one tested through deployment rather than designed in the abstract.⁴²

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A responsible AI policy only matters if it's lived. It must move beyond a document on a shared drive and become part of everyday creative decision-making – guiding how briefs are written, how content is produced and appraised and by whom.

The aim is to make responsible choices intuitive and normalised, not separate and additional.

The Brandtech Group, who work with major advertising clients to implement AI responsibly at scale, has developed a Six Pillar framework that translates responsible AI principles into operational practice. These pillars emerged from real-world implementation challenges across diverse agency contexts, providing the structure practitioners need to move beyond tick-box compliance into scalable policy that enables confident AI use while keeping diversity and inclusion at the heart. The framework addresses the full lifecycle of AI deployment in advertising – from initial tool selection through to public-facing transparency.

Pillar 1: AI x DE&I Policy

This pillar connects technology to a company's human principles, translating existing DE&I commitments into practical guidance for teams. When the same standards that govern casting, representation in imagery, and authenticity of language are applied to AI outputs, often at much greater scale, the technology strengthens brand integrity and allyship to its communities, instead of undermining them.

Pillar 2: AI Use Case Approval Policy

This pillar defines the boundaries of responsible use as principles, which help teams understand why something would be a viable use case or not, possibly mitigating the need for one-by-one sign off from a legal or AI governance team. For example, a principle might state: 'We don't use AI for creating

content about Black History Month or to celebrate our partnership with our chosen Breast Cancer Awareness charity, because we don't believe in using AI to fabricate lived experiences or where the risk of reproducing cultural stereotypes is high'. An approval process that is clear about the why, empowers innovation within understood limits, giving teams speed without sacrificing sensitivity.

Pillar 3: AI Tool Selection Policy

With new AI tools emerging constantly, this pillar establishes a transparent framework for evaluating which platforms or foundation models align with company values and data standards. Organisations must assess not just technical capabilities but the provenance of training data, model transparency, data handling practices, and vendor accountability. This due diligence ensures that approved platforms meet requirements for privacy, ownership, protection, transparency and fairness – establishing the foundation upon which all other pillars depend.

Pillar 4: AI Humans Policy

Synthetic humans represent one of AI's most complex frontiers. While public discourse around AI-generated people can be intense, this pillar provides clear guidance on when AI-generated people can appear in campaigns and under what conditions. It protects real talent through consent-based agreements and remuneration and transparent contractual usage rights, ensuring AI augments rather than replaces human contribution in front of the camera. When applied responsibly, it opens new

creative possibilities while safeguarding trust between brands, audiences and talent communities.

Pillar 5: Public-Facing AI Policy

Transparency is at the core of public trust. This pillar sets out how brands communicate their use of AI clearly and confidently, whether it's through labelling, watermarking or disclosure statements. In a landscape where audiences and regulators expect openness, this approach is increasingly important, and when done thoughtfully it can be a clear signal of integrity.

Pillar 6: AI x Sustainability Policy

This pillar provides frameworks for marketers to understand and measure the environmental impact of their AI use, versus traditional workflows; making sustainability a practical part of creative decision-making. It should add a dimension around partner selection that prioritises transparency, sustainable infrastructure, and measurable mitigations, ensuring that efficiency gains are matched by accountability. Rather than discouraging innovation, this policy empowers marketers to choose consciously; to balance creative potential with measurable impact. It positions sustainability as a creative constraint that sparks smarter, leaner, and more future-proof work, ensuring that the efficiency AI brings to production also extends to its environmental footprint.

Together, these pillars turn responsibility into a creative advantage. They allow practitioners to move fast. Speed of adoption is often a core source of competitive advantage, but with confidence; knowing

that inclusion is built into the process, not added as a safeguard at the end.

While Brandtech’s framework provides comprehensive coverage, implementation varies by organisational context and resources. Large agencies with dedicated legal, governance, and sustainability teams can operationalise all six pillars systematically. Smaller agencies may need to prioritise – perhaps starting with Pillars 1, 2, and 5 (DE&I alignment, use case approval, and public transparency) before expanding to more resource-intensive areas such as sustainability measurement. The framework’s value lies not in simultaneous adoption of all pillars but in providing a comprehensive roadmap that organisations can adapt to their capacity, maturity, and strategic priorities.

These capabilities build on themes explored throughout this book. The critical thinking preservation discussed in Chapter 6 enables practitioners to spot bias in AI outputs rather than accepting them uncritically. The psychological safety explored in Chapter 7 creates environments where team members feel secure raising concerns about potentially harmful content – essential when questioning AI recommendations or challenging prevailing creative directions. And the developmental sequencing outlined in Chapter 8 ensures future professionals learn to evaluate representation and fairness from the beginning of their careers. Responsible AI isn’t a separate discipline – it’s the application of fundamental advertising capabilities to new technological contexts.

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Yet frameworks alone don't ensure responsible AI deployment – they require leadership capabilities that extend beyond policy implementation. The most enduring capability for future leaders in advertising will not be technical mastery but responsible design: the ability to understand how technology intersects with culture and to embed inclusion into every stage of the process. The Six Pillars provide structure; these leadership capabilities provide the judgment to apply them effectively.

Leadership and clarity matter more than ever. In an age of accelerating innovation, the danger is not that machines will outthink us, but that we will disconnect the acts of thinking and feeling deeply ourselves. The more capable the tools become, the greater the need for human judgment, transparency and intention.

Critical AI literacy will become a baseline skill: knowing how systems are trained, where bias begins, and how to question outputs intelligently.

Cultural fluency will be equally essential: recognising that every dataset carries history, and that representation is not a box to tick but a lens to apply.

Adaptive governance will help leaders design policies that evolve with technology, guided by principles rather than fixed rules.

And underpinning all of it will be empathy, the capacity to see the human consequence behind every creative or technical decision.

These are the capabilities that will distinguish responsible AI leadership from reactive management. Technology should bring us closer to consumers, not push us further away. The most effective leaders will

bring maximum conscience and reflection to their work – recognising that good outputs depend on good inputs, and that every creative decision begins with understanding who it is for and why it matters. They will hold a strong point of view on purpose, value and audience, ensuring that AI serves real human needs rather than abstract efficiencies.

The cultural mirror AI holds up reflects decades of decisions about whose stories matter and whose are marginalised. We cannot change history, but we can change what comes next. The Six Pillars provide a framework for making AI reflect not just who advertising has historically served, but who it should serve in a more inclusive future. Organisations that embed these principles won't just avoid reputational and legal risks – they'll gain competitive advantage through authentic connection with diverse audiences who can distinguish manufactured representation from genuine inclusion. Technology should bring brands closer to all their audiences, not just those historically overrepresented in datasets. The question isn't whether AI will transform advertising's creative process – it's whether that transformation will perpetuate historical inequities, or finally correct them. The choice, and the responsibility, belongs to everyone shaping creative decisions today.

Chapter 10 Gender and AI

Every technological shift creates new forms of advantage and exclusion, but the AI revolution is moving faster than most organisations can adapt to. As the industry rushes to integrate AI into their workflows, a familiar pattern emerges: early adoption rates differ significantly by gender, with women consistently more cautious about embracing AI tools.

Harvard research suggests that women are adopting AI tools at a 25 percent lower rate than men on average,⁴³ though more recent data indicates that this gap may be narrowing as AI becomes more mainstream.⁴⁴ Even if convergence is occurring, the early adoption gap has compounding effects. In an industry where efficiency increasingly determines advancement, and where AI fluency is becoming as fundamental as digital literacy once was, this difference threatens to entrench workplace inequalities in lasting ways.

The question isn't whether this caution is justified – it's whether organisations are wise enough to understand what it reveals. What if the people most hesitant to embrace AI are the ones who understand its implications best?

Women appear to be consistently more cautious about integrating AI tools into their workflows, expressing concerns about ethics and authenticity

that many dismiss as obstacles to progress. But these concerns might represent exactly the kind of critical thinking that responsible AI adoption requires.

Industry observers recognise that different groups face distinct barriers to AI adoption. Speaking at Meta's 2025 International Women's Day event, Global AI Policy & Governance Lead Farzana Dudhwala highlighted how women are more likely to view AI assistance as a form of 'cheating' – a perception that seems to be borne out by a Harvard Business School study.⁴⁵ Rather than accepting this as inevitable, Dudhwala argued that addressing these concerns through transparent AI governance and clear ethical frameworks is essential to empowering women to fully benefit from AI tools without compromising their professional integrity.

This pattern extends globally: women are 16 percentage points less likely than men to use AI in the same job.⁴⁶ Researchers at the University of Chicago's research⁴⁷ found similar results and warned that generative AI risks creating a new gender pay gap unless businesses actively support equitable adoption. This isn't merely about individual preferences – it's about structural changes to how professional value is measured and rewarded. As AI tools become standard for productivity and efficiency, those who adopt them early gain compounding advantages in output, skill development, and career progression.

If we look closer to home and focus on the UK's advertising industry, the stats are slightly more progressive but still highlight the gap. The 2025 All In Census⁴⁸ reports that of those that use generative AI to regularly complete tasks, men rank higher at

45%, and women are 6 percentage points behind at 39%.

This AI-driven gender gap poses very real issues for career progression. As men increasingly use AI to enhance efficiency while building technical fluency, women risk appearing less productive during the critical adoption period. The timing compounds an already troubling trajectory: the IPA's 2024 agency census⁴⁹ shows the existing gender pay gap widening, with current trends – if unchanged – suggesting gender parity won't be achieved until 2158. The AI adoption gap threatens to accelerate this already troubling timeline, creating a technological multiplier effect on existing inequalities.

But the conventional narrative – that women simply need to become more comfortable with AI – misses something crucial. The ethical concerns that women express more frequently aren't necessarily obstacles to overcome, they might represent exactly the kind of critical thinking that responsible AI adoption requires. While early adopters rush to integrate AI tools, women's heightened awareness of ethical implications, quality concerns, and potential unintended consequences could prove invaluable as organisations grapple with AI's longer-term implications.

Consider what this caution represents. Women's reluctance to view AI as a shortcut reflects a deeper understanding that professional expertise cannot be fully automated – that the value lies not in the output itself but in the human judgment, creativity, and strategic thinking that shapes it. This perspective aligns with emerging best practices for AI integration, which emphasise human oversight,

critical evaluation, and ethical consideration rather than blind automation.

This suggests that the real challenge isn't convincing women to mirror men's AI usage patterns. Instead, it's creating organisational conditions where thoughtful, ethical AI adoption is valued and rewarded equally to rapid productivity gains. This requires addressing the systemic factors that create differential adoption patterns in the first place.

The irony is stark: the very qualities that make women more hesitant about AI adoption – attention to ethical implications, concern about authenticity, focus on quality over speed – are the same qualities that distinguish superior AI implementation from mere tool usage. While rapid adopters may gain short-term productivity advantages, sustainable AI integration requires exactly the kind of thoughtful, critical approach that women more commonly demonstrate.

Women's reluctance to embrace AI uncritically exemplifies the critical thinking preservation Chapter 6 identified as essential for responsible AI adoption. While rapid integration may bring short-term productivity gains, sustainable implementation requires the analytical rigor that prevents cognitive debt – qualities that women's adoption patterns more commonly demonstrate. The ethical concerns women express more frequently parallel the responsible AI principles explored in Chapter 9, particularly around authenticity and representation. When women question AI's implications, they're demonstrating the cultural fluency that distinguishes superior AI implementation from mere tool usage.

Workplace cultures that emphasise individual achievement and competitive productivity naturally favour early AI adoption, regardless of implementation quality. Performance evaluation systems that measure output volume over strategic thinking inadvertently penalise those who approach AI more cautiously. Training programmes that focus on tool proficiency rather than critical AI literacy may address symptoms while ignoring root causes.

The psychological safety framework explored in Chapter 7 becomes even more critical when viewed through a gender lens. Without psychological safety, women's ethical concerns about AI get dismissed as technophobia rather than recognised as valuable critical thinking. Growth stalls when AI knowledge-sharing privileges technical proficiency over ethical implementation – inadvertently signalling that women's cautious approach is deficient rather than sophisticated. Belonging fractures when rapid adoption becomes the metric of engagement, penalising those who approach AI more thoughtfully. And resilience collapses when concerns about authenticity and quality – more frequently expressed by women – find no organisational forum for serious consideration. Creating space for these concerns isn't accommodation; it's how organisations access the critical thinking necessary for responsible AI adoption.

This isn't about lowering standards or accommodating reluctance. It's about recognising that sustainable AI adoption requires the very qualities that current patterns of gender-differentiated usage reveal. Organisations that create inclusive environments for AI experimentation – where ethical

concerns are treated as valuable input rather than obstacles – will ultimately develop more robust, responsible AI strategies.

The agencies that will thrive aren't necessarily those where everyone adopts AI at the same rate, but those where different approaches to AI integration are recognised as complementary strengths. The strategic thinking, emotional intelligence, and analytical rigor that women bring to AI adoption aren't barriers to overcome; indeed, they're strengths to leverage.

This reframing transforms the challenge from closing a usage gap, to leveraging diverse approaches for better outcomes. It suggests that rather than pushing women to adopt AI like their male colleagues, organisations should be leaning into women's more cautious approach while simultaneously addressing the structural factors that prevent their concerns from being heard and valued.

The path forward requires more than training programmes or confidence-building initiatives. It demands fundamental changes to how AI adoption is measured, rewarded, and integrated into career advancement. It means recognising that, in the rush to embrace AI's productivity benefits, the industry risks overlooking the critical thinking and ethical consideration that will ultimately determine whether AI enhances or diminishes professional capability.

The future belongs not to those who adopt AI fastest, but to those who adopt it most thoughtfully. Women's patterns of AI engagement – characterised by ethical consideration, quality focus, and strategic caution – may reveal the path toward sustainable integration that the industry urgently needs.

Organisations face a choice: treat women's caution as a deficit to correct through confidence-building training, or recognise it as sophisticated critical thinking that should inform how everyone approaches AI. The first path risks widening both the skills gap and the pay gap it threatens to amplify. The second path – valuing thoughtful adoption, restructuring performance metrics, and creating space for ethical concerns – offers the possibility that AI integration might finally narrow rather than widen workplace inequalities. Which path organisations choose will determine whether AI becomes another technology that entrenches gender disparities or the first that genuinely disrupts them.

Translating this understanding into practice requires specific organisational changes. Performance evaluation systems must value ethical consideration alongside productivity gains – measuring not just output volume but the quality of AI implementation and strategic thinking. Training programmes should emphasise critical AI literacy over tool proficiency, teaching practitioners to evaluate AI outputs rigorously rather than accept them uncritically. Career advancement criteria need revision to ensure that thoughtful, responsible AI adoption is rewarded equally to rapid integration. And crucially, organisations must create forums where concerns about AI ethics and authenticity – more frequently raised by women – are treated as valuable strategic input rather than obstacles to progress. Potentially, it positions women as ideal candidates for Responsible AI Leadership roles. Without these structural changes, even well-intentioned initiatives risk treating symptoms while leaving root causes intact.

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If women's specific approach to AI represents valuable critical thinking rather than a deficit, how should organisations support diverse adoption patterns in practice? One answer comes from addressing structural barriers at critical career junctures. Women returning to the workforce after career breaks face a particularly acute version of the AI skills challenge, in which extended absence from rapidly evolving technology creates reintegration obstacles that standard training fails to address.

The 'Back2Business' initiative,⁵⁰ supported by ad agency VCCP, recognises this specific vulnerability. Rather than treating returning professionals as deficient, the programme acknowledges that career breaks – often related to caregiving responsibilities – require targeted support addressing both technical skills and the confidence gaps that professional absence creates.

The agency's participation in Women in AI events extends this philosophy, combining practical skills development with the kind of inspirational framework that helps participants reframe their relationship with technology. By sharing concrete examples of successful AI integration within their own operations – including work from their AI creative agency Faith – these initiatives move beyond abstract possibility to demonstrate tangible pathways for AI-enhanced creativity.

While systematic evaluation of such programmes remains limited, participant feedback suggests value beyond technical training. As one participant noted:

‘Feeling much more empowered to embrace AI’. The emphasis on empowerment, rather than merely education, reveals how effective interventions must address psychological barriers alongside knowledge gaps – creating conditions in which returning professionals can engage with AI tools without feeling they’re acknowledging obsolescence.

This approach offers a model for how organisations can actively counteract the systemic factors that create unequal AI adoption. Rather than assuming that training alone will close gaps, it acknowledges that different groups face different barriers and require correspondingly different forms of support. The focus on career transition points recognises that technological disruption often compounds existing workplace inequalities unless intervention is both targeted and timely. Initiatives like Back2Business demonstrate what becomes possible when organisations treat women’s cautious approach to AI not as reluctance to overcome, but as critical thinking to harness – addressing barriers, while valuing the very qualities that make thoughtful AI adoption possible.

Chapter 11 Don't Overlook Age

The advertising industry faces a demographic AI divide that mirrors broader workplace trends, but carries unique implications for creative collaboration.

Unlike other industries where age-based technology adoption primarily affects individual productivity, advertising's collaborative creative culture means that generational differences in AI engagement can fundamentally alter how teams develop ideas, share expertise, and deliver client work.

Research reveals stark generational divergences in AI adoption patterns. McKinsey's data⁵¹ shows employees aged 35–44 showing the highest levels of expertise (62%), compared to just 22% of those over 65. However, the advertising industry shows different patterns: the All In Census⁵² finds peak usage among employees under 25, with regular usage dropping to 33% among those aged 55–64. This variation suggests industry-specific dynamics shape how different age groups engage with AI tools.

These statistics require careful interpretation within advertising industry contexts. The older demographic may include significant numbers of C-suite executives who, according to the same survey, represent the single largest group using AI tools. This pattern suggests the age-based divide may reflect

role-specific applications rather than wholesale technological avoidance. Senior executives might embrace AI for strategic analysis and business intelligence while remaining disconnected from execution-level tools their junior colleagues use daily.

This creates a particular challenge: organisational AI adoption endorsed at the top but implemented differently across hierarchical levels, potentially limits knowledge transfer and shared understanding of AI's practical capabilities and limitations.

These statistical patterns become more concerning when we consider how they affect advertising's core collaborative processes. Understanding these patterns requires recognising how advertising's creative process depends on multi-generational collaboration in ways that AI adoption can disrupt. A campaign brief typically involves strategic directors (often 50+) defining objectives, mid-career account leads (35-45) managing client expectations, and junior creatives (25-35) executing concepts. When only the junior team uses AI tools for ideation, concept development, or asset creation, the seasoned strategists reviewing work may struggle to evaluate whether AI-generated ideas reflect genuine strategic insight or merely algorithmically competent execution. This creates evaluation gaps that can undermine the mentorship and quality control that traditional creative development depends upon.

The age-based AI divide threatens to disrupt these collaborative dynamics. When older professionals avoid AI tools, agencies risk creating knowledge silos in which strategic insights remain disconnected from AI-enhanced execution capabilities. For instance, a

creative director with 25 years of consumer psychology expertise might brief a campaign emphasising emotional resonance, while junior designers use AI tools to generate visuals optimised for engagement metrics the senior director doesn't understand. The resulting creative work may technically execute the brief while missing the strategic intent – and neither generation has the shared language or tool familiarity to recognise or correct the misalignment.

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The mentorship relationships that traditionally characterise advertising career development face particular strain under AI adoption. Advertising mentorship has historically worked through portfolio review – senior creatives evaluating junior work, asking questions about strategic choices, pushing for deeper thinking about consumer response.

When junior professionals generate concepts with AI assistance, senior mentors may struggle to provide meaningful feedback if they don't understand the tool's capabilities or limitations. Can they evaluate whether an AI-generated concept genuinely addresses the brief, or are they assessing algorithmic competence they can't properly judge?

This evaluation gap undermines the developmental conversations that build strategic thinking. The connection to Chapter 6's discussion of critical thinking preservation becomes stark: if mentors can't guide critical evaluation of AI outputs, junior professionals may never develop the analytical

rigor that distinguishes strategic creativity from tool proficiency.

These mentorship challenges are compounded by the fact that different age cohorts bring distinct perspectives on AI's role in creative work that reflect career-stage considerations. Younger professionals, often in execution-focused roles, may view AI as liberation from the routine tasks that enables creative exploration. Mid-career professionals, typically managing client relationships and project delivery, may see AI as efficiency enhancement that improves campaign turnaround. Senior professionals, responsible for strategic direction, may approach AI through the lens of competitive advantage and business development.

These age-based dynamics intersect with themes explored throughout this book. The psychological safety framework from Chapter 7 becomes crucial: senior professionals must feel secure enough to admit uncertainty about AI tools without losing authority, while junior professionals need permission to question strategic guidance when they possess superior AI knowledge.

The critical thinking preservation discussed in Chapter 6 matters across generations: older professionals who dismiss AI outputs without understanding them forfeit valuable analytical tools, while younger professionals who accept AI recommendations uncritically never develop the strategic judgment that experience builds. And the principles from Chapter 9 benefit from age diversity: senior professionals' caution about authenticity and representation can temper junior professionals' enthusiasm for rapid AI adoption.

These varying perspectives become challenging when they operate in isolation. The most effective AI integration requires synthesis across these viewpoints – combining execution efficiency with client relationship insight and strategic business perspective. The speed of AI development compounds these challenges, as capabilities evolve monthly, creating continuous learning requirements that may disadvantage professionals with limited time for technology exploration.

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However, age-based differences also reveal opportunities for enhanced collaboration. Rather than viewing generational divides as obstacles, agencies can leverage them as complementary capabilities. Senior professionals' strategic expertise becomes more valuable when combined with AI analytical capabilities, while their experience in pattern recognition and consumer psychology provides essential context for interpreting AI-generated insights.

Creating effective integration requires structured knowledge transfer mechanisms that work in both directions. Younger professionals can serve as AI implementation guides, helping senior colleagues understand tool capabilities and optimal application contexts. Senior professionals can provide strategic frameworks for evaluating AI outputs and contextual knowledge for interpreting results within broader market understanding. In reality this might look like a younger designer walking a senior creative director through how Midjourney's prompting affects

visual output, explaining why certain descriptors produce more strategic-aligned results. In return, the senior creative director provides frameworks for evaluating whether AI-generated concepts capture the emotional resonance that years of consumer research suggest will drive campaign effectiveness.

This mutual exchange – technical proficiency meeting strategic wisdom – creates richer AI integration than either perspective alone could achieve.

Training approaches must account for different learning preferences and career priorities across age groups, while addressing AI's continuous evolution. Rather than one-size-fits-all workshops, agencies might implement tiered learning structures: senior professionals benefit from quarterly executive briefings focused on competitive intelligence – how competitors use AI, what client expectations are emerging, which strategic opportunities AI creates. These sessions emphasise business implications over technical mechanics. Junior professionals need more frequent, hands-on technical workshops demonstrating new tool capabilities with immediate application to current client work. Mid-career professionals – balancing client management with team leadership – benefit most from scenario-based training showing how to integrate AI into existing workflows without disrupting client relationships or delivery timelines. Critically, all training should include cross-generational elements where different age groups learn from each other's perspectives on the same AI applications.

Creating sustainable AI adoption also requires addressing underlying concerns that may drive

avoidance. Senior professionals may worry that AI adoption signals displacement of their strategic expertise – a concern that agencies must address directly rather than ignore. Leadership needs to communicate explicitly that AI enhances rather than replaces strategic judgment, ideally through concrete demonstration rather than reassurance. When senior strategists see AI augment their decades of consumer psychology insight with real-time sentiment analysis, or watch AI help them test more creative variations than previously possible, they experience AI as power tool rather than replacement threat. Similarly, showcasing senior professionals who successfully integrate AI – perhaps through internal case studies or lunch-and-learn sessions – normalises adoption across age groups while demonstrating that strategic expertise becomes more valuable, not less so, when combined with AI analytical capabilities. Measurement and incentive structures must demonstrate AI value across different professional contexts and career stages too.

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As client organisations develop their own AI capabilities and expectations, advertising agencies will face pressure to demonstrate AI competence across all client interaction points. When a client-side marketing director expects AI-informed insights, they may question whether a seasoned account director without AI fluency can provide strategic leadership – regardless of that director’s decades of relationship expertise. This creates career advancement risks: younger professionals with AI

capabilities may gain client access disproportionate to their own strategic experience, while senior professionals risk marginalisation from client-facing roles. Preventing this requires ensuring all client-facing professionals – regardless of age – can discuss AI’s strategic implications confidently, even if they’re not personally executing AI-driven work. Senior professionals need conversational fluency about AI applications sufficient to guide strategic decisions and maintain client confidence, without necessarily becoming tool experts. This creates business imperatives for AI adoption that transcend individual preference differences and requires agencies to develop collaboration structures that leverage different generational strengths while ensuring knowledge transfer across age groups.

Success requires recognising that effective AI integration isn’t about achieving uniform adoption across age groups, but about creating complementary capabilities that enhance overall team performance. Senior professionals don’t need to become AI tool experts, yet they should understand AI capabilities sufficiently to guide strategic application. Junior professionals can’t be expected to have decades of market experience, yet they should appreciate the contextual knowledge that informs effective AI utilisation.

UK demographic trends intensify these challenges. With an aging working population – by 2030, 47% of all over 50s are forecast to be part of the UK labour force⁵³ – advertising agencies can no longer assume age-based technology gaps will resolve through generational replacement. The focus must shift from expecting natural generational adoption to

actively supporting all professionals regardless of age in embracing AI benefits. This requires systematic approaches to ongoing AI education that accommodate different professional contexts: regularly updated training programmes, practical implementation guides, and role-specific AI applications become essential infrastructure for maintaining competitive capabilities across generational divides.

The future of advertising depends on creating collaborative structures that harness age-based differences as complementary strengths, rather than allowing them to create dysfunction. The choice is stark: develop systematic approaches to cross-generational AI collaboration or watch strategic expertise and technological capability diverge into separate silos that undermine both. Agencies that master bidirectional mentorship – where senior strategists and junior technologists genuinely learn from each other – will develop AI integration that neither age group could achieve alone.

Those that allow age-based divides to persist will find themselves outcompeted by organisations in which strategic wisdom and technological fluency inform each other. The demographic mathematics are unforgiving: advertising's future depends on synthesising capabilities across generations, not hoping one generation will simply adopt another's approach.

Chapter 12

Bridging the AI Skills Regional Divide

The AI skills gap isn't just a London problem, it's a national problem. While the capital's agencies rush to integrate AI tools, talent in Birmingham, Manchester, and Glasgow, for example, face a different reality: fragmented training resources, limited access to cutting-edge technology, and fewer opportunities to develop AI fluency. This regional divide threatens to entrench existing inequalities in an industry already criticised for its London-centric bias, potentially costing the UK economy billions as creative talent outside the capital falls behind in critical skills development.

Geography determines AI opportunity in UK advertising. London-based professionals have access to industry events, vendor demonstrations, and peer networks that facilitate AI learning. Meanwhile, a strategist in Newcastle or a creative in Cardiff must piece together AI knowledge from podcasts, YouTube tutorials, and social media posts – a patchwork education that creates wildly inconsistent skill levels and widens the already substantial regional talent gap.

Regional initiatives are beginning to address this imbalance. Place-based training programmes, university partnerships, and decentralised skill development models demonstrate that AI education

can be democratised beyond London's borders. These approaches combine academic rigour with practical industry application, creating pathways for talent development that don't require geographic relocation. For example, VCCP's Challenger Academy, located in Stoke and partnered with local universities, aims to decentralise skill development beyond the industry's London-centric model, combining investments in teacher training and curriculum development with practical contributions such as tool access for schools and ongoing mentorship.

Yet democratising AI access reveals an unexpected paradox. While limited access clearly hinders regional talent development, unrestricted access carries its own risks. The ease of AI-generated insights can erode the fundamental analytical skills that distinguish strategic thinking from mere content production.

This efficiency trap is already visible across the industry. Junior strategists increasingly rely on AI-generated summaries rather than wrestling with raw research data. Account managers use algorithmic insights instead of developing their own client intuition. The outputs look professional, but the underlying judgment – the ability to spot what others miss, to sit with ambiguity, to develop original perspective – atrophies from disuse.

What makes someone valuable in the long run isn't just the ability to generate output. It's the ability to think independently, to bring original perspective and judgment to complex problems. To effectively use AI in strategy, professionals need to develop the ability to judge its outputs. And judgment doesn't

come from tools, it comes from time spent with raw material, watching focus groups, sitting in ambiguity.

Without that foundation, AI prompts become a guessing game. The outputs might look right and sound right, but only someone who's done the thinking knows if they are right. This creates a critical challenge for regional talent development: how do you democratise AI access while ensuring the fundamental skills that make AI valuable aren't lost in the process?

Modern strategists must navigate two interconnected paths. The first is traditional: learning how to think, spot insight, build arguments, and shape ideas. The second is newer: learning how and when to delegate parts of that process to AI. The order matters crucially – learn to do it yourself before asking the same of AI.

If you skip the first path, the second becomes risky. You'll have tools but no judgment, outputs but no understanding. But if you develop both capabilities in parallel – building judgment as you build AI fluency – you stay in control. You learn how to brief the machine with clarity and edit its answers with confidence. You know when the prompt is wrong and when the insight is worth following.

This dual-path approach becomes even more critical when addressing regional disparities. Areas with limited access to traditional industry learning – the informal networks, mentorship, and peer learning that London concentrates – must be particularly intentional about developing both AI literacy and the fundamental skills that make AI usage valuable.

The solution requires rethinking how the industry approaches talent development outside London.

Rather than simply replicating London's training models, regional programmes must become more sophisticated, addressing both technological access and the deeper analytical capabilities that AI amplifies but cannot replace.

The future advertising landscape is likely to feature new hybrid roles that blend traditional creative skills with AI fluency. Some agencies are experimenting with AI strategists who bridge technology and planning, while others are creating creative-technologist pairings that combine human imagination with algorithmic capability. These roles demand exactly the kind of dual expertise that regional talent development must foster.

Agencies face a pivotal decision about AI integration: whether to create standalone AI divisions, or embed AI capabilities across all departments. The integrated approach – where AI becomes everyone's responsibility rather, than a specialist function – offers particular advantages for addressing regional disparities. It ensures that AI fluency develops alongside domain expertise rather than replacing it.

Addressing the regional AI divide requires coordinated action across multiple levels. Individual professionals must take ownership of their AI education, dedicating consistent time to skill development regardless of their geographic location. This means moving beyond passive consumption of AI content to active experimentation with tools, critical evaluation of outputs, and continuous refinement of both prompting and analytical capabilities.

Organisations must establish structured access programmes that provide regional talent with both technological tools and the educational framework to use them effectively. This includes partnerships with educational institutions, teacher training initiatives, and an industry-academia collaboration that brings practical AI application to regional markets.

Perhaps most importantly, the industry must cultivate cultures that value thoughtful AI usage over rapid adoption. This means de-stigmatising AI usage while simultaneously maintaining rigorous standards for the human judgment that makes AI valuable. It requires multigenerational mentorship that combines AI fluency with traditional strategic thinking skills.

The regional AI skills divide represents both a challenge and an opportunity for UK advertising. While London's concentration of resources creates natural advantages, the democratisation of AI tools and training can level the playing field in unprecedented ways. Success will depend on whether the industry can build inclusive development pathways that nurture talent regardless of geography, while maintaining the rigorous standards that distinguish strategic thinking from algorithmic output.

The future belongs not to those with the best postcode, but to those who can most thoughtfully combine human judgment with artificial intelligence capabilities. Regional talent development that achieves this balance won't just close geographic gaps, it will define the industry's evolution towards more thoughtful, sustainable AI integration.

Chapter 13

Case Study: Building London's AI Future

While Chapter 12 examined the challenges facing regional talent development, understanding how successful AI education initiatives emerge and scale provides valuable insights for addressing geographic disparities. The London AI Campus, despite its capital location, offers a replicable model for industry-education collaboration that could be adapted across different regions. Its development also illustrates how personal motivation, institutional partnership, and systematic thinking can combine to create meaningful change – lessons particularly relevant for regional areas seeking to build their own AI capabilities with fewer existing resources.

The challenge of developing AI-ready talent extends beyond individual skill acquisition to encompassing systemic changes in how industries and educational institutions collaborate. While advertising professionals must adapt to AI-augmented workflows, the industry also faces a fundamental question: how do we ensure a pipeline of future talent equipped with both foundational knowledge and practical AI capabilities?

At its heart, this challenge requires new models of industry-education partnership that go beyond traditional work experience programmes or university recruitment. The London AI Campus,

launched in October 2024 as partnership between Google and Camden Council, provides a compelling case study in how larger organisations can work with local education authorities to address emerging skills gaps while serving broader community development goals. But this personal account also reveals how strategic initiatives often emerge from the intersection of professional expertise, community awareness, and individual reflection.

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer attended the Campus launch and called it a ‘seismic moment’ – and highlighted its importance and role in the UK’s economic growth narrative. Yet the idea for the London AI Campus emerged from a remarkably personal starting point. Amy Brown, working at Google, found herself in a familiar parental situation in 2023 thinking about how to help her daughter navigate GCSE choices but at the same time feeling overwhelmed by the role AI would inevitably play in her future. This personal moment of uncertainty crystallised broader questions about how young people could prepare for AI-transformed careers.

Amy’s professional perspective at Google provided firsthand insight into AI’s transformational potential, but it was a specific challenge that catalysed action. At the topping out ceremony for Google’s King’s Cross headquarters, then-MP Sir Keir Starmer posed a direct question to attendees: what could they do to help young people growing up within sight of the new building believe they could one day work inside it? As Amy later reflected, ‘That challenge stuck.’

The moment when inspiration struck was unplanned – cycling home from work, mulling over

the challenge, wider goals and emerging principles. As she noted, 'As often happens, the idea came when I least expected it.' While Amy didn't have any immediate answers, she knew that Google was committed to playing a meaningful role in the community and she'd gained experience through work on a few local projects that gave her some insight.

One of those projects had been organising a work experience programme for a hundred Year 12 students from Camden. This project came about in 2020 when Camden Council reached out to Google for help when many employers were forced to cancel their work experience opportunities because of COVID. Google were able to create a Virtual Work Experience Week using Google Classroom and many Google mentors. This now remains in operation, but takes place in person.

This project sparked Amy's own passion for supporting and empowering the next, and connected her to the experienced team at Camden Learning who later become crucial and trusted partners in the project.

Google and Google DeepMind have many established programmes, including Grow with Google, Be Internet Legends and Experience AI, which all help everyday people gain new skills, build AI literacy and share that knowledge with others. And the UK had established expertise in the field of AI. It's a thriving industry with a growing need for a diversity of talent. The ambition became to create an initiative, starting in Camden, that would support young people to become leaders in the field of AI.

Amy began exploring how to make that a reality. Having already spent several summers running the work experience programme, she knew a conversation with Camden Learning would be a good place to start. As an education partnership working closely with schools and the council to improve teaching, learning, and student outcomes, the team knew more than anyone about the type of support the area needed, and how to make it happen. They shared Amy's enthusiasm for the ambition, while grounding the project in the reality that pupil numbers across the UK, and especially in London, were falling. A standalone academy was not the answer.

The discussions resulted in a firm conclusion that young people did not need an additional A-level subject. Instead, they needed wraparound support plus an AI enrichment curriculum to support foundational subjects such as Maths, Further Maths, Physics and Computer Science.

When designing the programme, the team established four key principles:

1. **Inclusivity:** AI needed to work for everyone. This meant widening access to students from all backgrounds, and encouraging them to consider future careers in AI.
2. **Academia:** Effective AI careers needed deep foundational knowledge to enable students gain a place at one of the UK's top universities and access career opportunities.
3. **Complementarity:** Educational disruption often fails when new initiatives compete with existing institutions rather than enhancing them. This meant

working with existing sixth forms rather than creating alternative pathways.

4. **Aspiration:** Psychological barriers to career advancement often prove more significant than technical obstacles.^{54 55} Building confidence and providing direct industry exposure addressed the cultural capital gaps that traditionally excluded certain communities from high-value careers.

These principles reflect a nuanced understanding of skills development as encompassing technical capabilities, foundational knowledge, institutional relationships, and psychological preparation. Most industry education initiatives focus on only one or two of these dimensions.

With Camden Learning, they had a ready-made partner working with all 10 local sixth forms, and the experience of running programmes benefiting students. It also transpired that they had access to an underutilised, council-owned educational building in Somers Town with space for three classes. This space provided suitable facilities to support students from across the borough and was conveniently just a 10-minute walk from Google's King's Cross offices.

The Campus operates as an enrichment programme rather than replacement education, supporting 32 STEM A-Level students through a two-year curriculum. Students attend Wednesday afternoon sessions covering AI fundamentals, practical model development with UCL's Build a Brain team, and research-focused sustainability applications.

The progression from fundamentals to specialisation to research application mirrors professional development pathways in advertising

and other AI-adopting industries. First-year students progress from AI fundamentals to practical model development with the Build a Brain team. This progression mirrors the questioning and exploration capabilities discussed in earlier chapters, as students learn not just how AI works, but when and why to apply different approaches. The emphasis on fundamentals over tool-specific training develops the deep curiosity needed to ask better questions of AI systems.

Second-year students complete Extended Project Qualifications, earning them UCAS points they can put towards university applications, developing the kind of independent research capabilities increasingly valuable in AI-augmented work environments. This research-heavy module directly builds the capability to synthesise incomplete information and make reasoned decisions under uncertainty.

Guest speakers including the Prime Minister, DeepMind researchers and data scientists provide direct exposure to career pathways and industry expectations.

The team has also broadened its reach, offering out-of-school programmes and opportunities for all Camden students to improve their access to technology and grow their AI skills through after school sessions. And, through a Google.org grant they have been scaling Raspberry Pi and Google DeepMind's Experience AI programme for teacher training.

Amy's experience in building this initiative offers instructive insights about the realities of translating ideas into institutional change. During the early development stages, a colleague provided what Amy

later described as ‘perhaps the most helpful piece of advice’: hire a teacher (they did) and keep going when things get hard. Being warned that the journey would be challenging, and to persist anyway, proved invaluable preparation.

As Amy observed, ‘Google is a place where ideas can happen, but like any big company, manifesting them often takes patience, persistence and an awful lot of cross-functional collaboration.’ This honest assessment reveals the organisational complexity involved in industry-education partnerships, even within companies known for innovation.

The personal rewards, however, were significant. Amy described nearly being moved to tears watching students participate in a Q&A with the Prime Minister during his campus visit. ‘What was also really encouraging was the excitement and support of colleagues for the programme, each a willing volunteer driven by their own personal altruism’, she reflected. This organic colleague engagement – providing mentorships, guest speaking, procuring equipment, or setting up digital infrastructure – demonstrates how successful initiatives can mobilise broader organisational commitment.

The advertising industry faces similar talent pipeline challenges to those addressed by the London AI Campus, but with distinct characteristics that require adapted approaches. Technology companies and advertising agencies need professionals who combine deep foundational knowledge with AI literacy. However, the creative and client-service dimensions of advertising work create additional requirements for cultural intelligence and collaborative skills.

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The London AI Campus case study demonstrates how to develop the human capabilities essential for AI collaboration identified in earlier chapters. Analysis of the Camden model reveals three strategic principles for advertising industry application.

1. Proactive Talent Pipeline Development

Rather than reactive recruitment, advertising agencies must invest in long-term partnership building with educational institutions and community organisations. The Camden model demonstrates that effective partnerships require dedicated resources, sustained leadership commitment, and multi-stakeholder value creation that addresses community development alongside industry needs.

2. Capability-Based Skills Development

Industry-education partnerships should explicitly target the six human capabilities (strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, emotional intelligence, craft consideration, adaptive improvisation, and continuous learning) rather than generic ‘AI literacy’. This requires programme design that emphasises research, synthesis, and collaborative problem-solving over technical training, while building deep foundational knowledge alongside AI applications.

3. Systematic Long-Term Investment: The two-year Campus model demonstrates that developing AI-collaborative capabilities requires sustained development rather than short-term

training. Organisations must design career development pathways that build these capabilities systematically over time, focusing on candidates who demonstrate learning agility and foundational aptitude rather than specific AI tool experience.

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The question facing advertising leaders is not whether such partnerships are worthwhile, but how to design them effectively within their specific contexts and constraints. The Camden model provides a framework for thinking systematically about industry-education collaboration as it highlights the personal commitment and institutional persistence required for success.

While industry-education partnerships offer promising approaches to skills development challenges, it is important to avoid creating new forms of inequality if access remains limited to certain communities or institutions. The advertising industry's engagement with such initiatives must consider both competitive advantage and broader social responsibility.



Part IV: Scaling Solutions

Chapter 14

Reconfiguring Lifelong Learning

The advertising industry faces a fundamental reimagining of professional development as AI reshapes not just the tools of creative practice but the very nature of expertise itself. While Chapter 5 explored applied AI literacy as a bridge between human capabilities and technological advancement, this chapter examines how lifelong learning must transform to meet the realities of human-AI collaboration in advertising. The challenge extends beyond simply adding new skills – it requires recognising that AI integration fundamentally changes what it means to learn and excel in creative work. Hence, traditional lifelong learning – acquiring discrete skills in response to technological change – may prove inadequate for an industry increasingly defined by dynamic human-AI partnerships.

The Learning and Work Institute 2024 Adult Participation in Learning survey⁵⁶ showed just over one half (52%) of adults in the UK report that they were either currently learning, or have done so within the past three years. This is the highest participation in learning in the history of the survey and continues a post-pandemic trend of increased participation. The research highlighted significant demographic and geographical variations in learning engagement.

Age emerged as a particularly strong factor, with participation rates declining by 4% for each additional year of age, indicating that older adults are considerably less likely to engage in learning opportunities. Geographic disparities were equally pronounced, with adults living in London demonstrating 50% higher participation rates compared to those in the South-West region. Employment status also proved influential, as working individuals were twice as likely to participate in learning, compared to those who were unemployed.

For advertising professionals navigating an AI-augmented landscape, these participation rates reveal both the challenge of engaging adults in continuous learning, and the opportunity to develop more compelling approaches to professional development.

The challenge lies in moving beyond the narrow and often critiqued ‘what works’ thinking that dominates AI and learning. The problem with this approach is that it focuses on a narrow framing of efficacy and – sometimes unsupported – claims of increased efficiency, while ignoring the complex ways that learning and technology interact and the role of social context in learning.⁵⁷

The opportunity emerges from recognising that AI is not simply a technological tool, but rather a constantly moving collection of different meanings and practices attributed to it by different stakeholders. This understanding opens space for advertising professionals to move beyond reactive skill development toward proactive engagement with industry transformation.

The shift from fixed training programmes to adaptive learning experiences emphasises education as a continuous journey rather than a destination. For advertising professionals, this requires developing computational thinking, critical thinking, and creative capabilities that support human-AI collaboration in both professional and personal contexts.

The advertising industry's relationship with AI learning cannot be separated from broader questions about purpose and direction. Current AI tools require human effort to correct bias in ways that generate information sensitive to human qualities such as human rights and equality. This observation carries particular weight for an industry whose creative output can shape cultural narratives and social understanding.

Critical thinking – as explored in Chapter 6 – also needs to extend beyond individual responsibility and to become embedded in the lifelong learning system itself to prevent cognitive erosion at scale. Traditional approaches that place the burden on individuals to continuously reskill without considering how people might shape technology implementation. AI is often treated as a cure-all, where learning is inevitable, technology is rarely questioned, and the relationships between learning and technology are ignored. This creates a dynamic where workplaces constantly respond to technological development driven almost exclusively by economic interests. It is also particularly problematic for an industry in which creativity, cultural sensitivity, and strategic thinking remain fundamentally human domains.

For the advertising industry, this means moving beyond questions of ‘How will AI affect our work?’ toward ‘How do we want AI to affect our work?’ This reframing opens space for more collaborative approaches to AI implementation. Rather than simply responding to technological change, advertising professionals can actively shape how AI integration occurs within their practice.

Hence, organisations need to think about value creation frameworks, where conversations about learning focus on the kind of value the individual or organisation seeks to create. For agencies, this might involve exploring what kinds of creative and strategic value emerge from human-AI collaboration rather than simply training staff to use AI tools more efficiently.

As people’s experiences evolve over time, they develop stories about their learning and value creation. These stories become particularly important for advertisers, agencies and the media where informal learning activities are mostly invisible to everyone not directly involved, with learners themselves often unaware they are learning.

The challenge for advertising agencies lies in making these learning processes visible and valuable. Digital technology using natural language processing and learning analytics can help reveal people’s engagement in learning activities and their value creation stories.

Network awareness tools can help raise awareness about informal networked learning, creativity, and innovative practices that professionals engage in, generating dynamic visualisations about knowledge networks and continuously revealing knowledge

processes, participation evolution, and emergence of new topics.

However, reconfiguring lifelong learning must address fundamental questions about the relationship between human and AI. When defining human intelligence as the ability to solve problems or create solutions that are valuable in a given context, it becomes difficult to consider machine learning systems as truly intelligent in the way that involves contextual judgements about process and products.

This distinction carries profound implications for advertising education and practice. We should be cautious about calling systems that adapt according to predefined mechanisms truly 'intelligent' when they cannot generate self-reflective value judgements or socio-cultural perspectives. Machine learning systems may be very good at using elaborate models fed with massive data, but they are not 'intelligent' in the critical and creative way that humans are.

For advertising professionals, this suggests that reconfigured lifelong learning must emphasise developing distinctly human capabilities rather than simply learning to work with AI tools.

Computational thinking competency becomes an asset that complements critical and creative thinking skills for understanding AI and developing human-AI collaboration.

The advertising industry's approach to computational thinking development must recognise that understanding the challenges of analysing problems in specific socio-cultural contexts is essential. This perspective proves crucial for advertising professionals who must evaluate AI-

generated content within specific brand, cultural, and strategic contexts.

The transformation of lifelong learning in advertising must also address organisational structures and leadership approaches. Leaders need to foster a culture of lifelong learning that encourages all workforce members to develop thinking skills to better incorporate AI-human improvements in their work.

However, the organisational transformation required extends beyond skill development to fundamental questions about work design and human agency. Research demonstrates that successful AI implementation requires systems designed to meet the needs of organisations and employees rather than simply keeping up with new technologies.

This insight proves particularly relevant for advertising agencies where creative processes, client relationships, and strategic thinking remain fundamentally human domains. Rather than placing the burden on individuals to continuously respond to technological change, agencies must develop approaches that enable people to shape technology implementation.

The reconfiguration of lifelong learning in advertising must also address accessibility and equity. While technology-enabled learning makes education more accessible, challenges remain including technology requirements, digital literacy needs, and varying quality. The digital divide disproportionately affects marginalised communities, with unequal access to technology widening gaps.

Moving forward, the advertising industry's approach must embrace a perspective that recognises AI as one actor among others in a reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities. This perspective demands that advertising professionals develop capabilities for engaging with the limitations and failures that accompany AI and digital technology.

For an industry built on creative problem-solving and strategic adaptation, this critical engagement with technological limitation and failure becomes essential. The reconfiguration of lifelong learning in advertising ultimately requires moving toward new ways of learning that recognise the fundamental interconnectedness of human creativity, technological capability, and social context.

Rather than simply adding AI literacy to existing frameworks, the advertising industry must embrace a fundamental reconfiguration that recognises learning as an ongoing, social, and technologically mediated process of value creation. Effective human-AI collaboration in advertising requires not just technical skills but the critical thinking, creative capability, and contextual judgement that distinguish human intelligence.

The path forward involves developing learning approaches that leverage AI's computational strengths while preserving and enhancing the human capabilities that drive advertising excellence. This means creating learning environments in which strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, emotional intelligence, and continuous learning can develop in dynamic relationship with AI capabilities rather than in opposition to them.

For advertising professionals, the reconfiguration of lifelong learning offers the opportunity to shape an industry future where human creativity and AI capability combine to produce work that neither could achieve independently. However, realising this potential requires moving beyond narrow approaches toward learning frameworks that recognise the complex, evolving, and fundamentally social nature of human-AI collaboration in creative professional practice.

The advertising industry's embrace of reconfigured lifelong learning will ultimately determine whether AI integration enhances or diminishes the creative and strategic capabilities that make advertising valuable. By developing learning approaches grounded in human agency, critical evaluation, and creative excellence, the industry can ensure that technological advancement serves rather than replaces the human insight that drives exceptional advertising work.

Chapter 15 Supercharging SMEs

The transformation of advertising through artificial intelligence extends far beyond the gleaming offices of multinational agencies and global brands. Small and medium-sized enterprises represent the backbone of the UK economy, delivering 52% of economic turnover according to the Federation of Small Businesses,⁵⁸ while constituting over 99% of the business population.⁵⁹

The relationship between SMEs and digital advertising has proven mutually beneficial over the past decade, with 81% of small businesses using paid digital advertising; reporting it as important to their success, according to IAB research.⁶⁰ This symbiotic relationship becomes even more critical as artificial intelligence reshapes the advertising landscape. The consumer journey increasingly involves AI-mediated touchpoints, from voice search and recommendation engines to chatbot interactions and personalised content delivery. Research from the Futurescape study⁶¹ demonstrates that AI is fundamentally reshaping how consumers discover and evaluate products and services, with algorithmic recommendations playing an increasingly central role in purchase decisions. Small businesses that fail to

understand and engage with these AI-driven pathways risk becoming invisible in an economy where automated systems increasingly determine which brands receive consumer attention.

However, the very characteristics that make SMEs agile and innovative – lean teams, limited resources, pragmatic decision-making – also create barriers to AI adoption, which require fundamentally different approaches from those employed by larger organisations. Where multinational agencies can afford dedicated AI specialists and experimental budgets, small businesses must integrate AI capabilities within existing roles and constrained budgets while maintaining the operational focus that drives immediate business results.

Current research reveals a complex adoption landscape in which size significantly influences AI implementation patterns. Although studies demonstrate that AI adoption among SMEs is accelerating, regular and widespread use remains limited compared to larger companies.⁶² The divide appears most pronounced between micro-businesses and larger SMEs, with B2B-focused companies showing greater adoption rates than consumer-facing enterprises. This variation reflects different resource constraints, technical requirements, and competitive pressures that shape how artificial intelligence can realistically be deployed within smaller organisations.

The barriers facing SME AI adoption prove both predictable and surmountable, though they require targeted intervention strategies. Security concerns about data privacy, regulatory compliance, liability, and cybersecurity create legitimate hesitations that cannot be dismissed as technophobia. For businesses

operating with minimal IT infrastructure and limited legal resources, the prospect of inadvertently exposing customer data or violating emerging AI regulations represents existential risks rather than manageable challenges.

Knowledge gaps present equally significant obstacles; though ones that traditional training approaches often fail to address effectively. AI expertise commands premium salaries in a competitive market where larger, more visible companies systematically attract top talent. Small businesses cannot compete for specialist AI developers or data scientists, creating an expertise vacuum that leaves critical decisions about tool selection, implementation, and optimisation to generalists who may lack the technical background to evaluate options effectively.

Cost considerations compound these challenges, though not always in ways that might be expected. While many AI tools offer surprisingly affordable entry points, the hidden costs of implementation – staff training, workflow redesign, quality assurance, and ongoing optimisation – can quickly overwhelm modest budgets. More importantly, small businesses often lack the analytical frameworks necessary to evaluate investment, making it difficult to justify initial expenditure or optimise ongoing usage for maximum benefit.

These barriers become particularly concerning when viewed against the backdrop of AI's transformative impact on consumer behaviour and market dynamics. The psychological safety frameworks discussed in Chapter 8 prove especially relevant for SME contexts, where failed technology

investments can have disproportionate consequences. Creating environments in which small business owners feel secure enough to experiment with AI tools while maintaining operational stability requires different approaches from those employed in larger organisations with dedicated innovation budgets.

Yet the potential benefits of AI adoption for small businesses prove substantial enough to justify significant effort in overcoming these barriers. Consider the transformative impact of chatbots for customer service in businesses with limited staff resources. A well-implemented conversational AI system can handle routine enquiries around the clock, freeing human resources for complex problem-solving and relationship building while providing customers with immediate responses that were previously impossible for understaffed organisations.

The transformative impact extends to previously inaccessible markets. When ITV launched its GenAI creative production service, they enabled SMEs to produce TV adverts in under 10 hours for a fraction of traditional costs, demonstrating how AI can democratise premium advertising channels that were historically beyond the reach of smaller businesses.

Data analysis capabilities offer even greater value propositions for businesses that have historically relied on intuition and limited analytics. AI-powered tools can process customer behaviour data, identify purchasing patterns, and optimise advertising spend with sophistication that was previously available only to enterprises with dedicated analytics teams. For a local restaurant, this might mean understanding

which menu items drive repeat visits; for a consulting firm, it could reveal which content topics generate the most qualified leads.

Content creation represents perhaps the most immediately accessible AI application for resource-constrained businesses. Small marketing teams can leverage AI assistance to maintain consistent social media presence, generate email campaign variations, and develop website content at scales that would otherwise require significant additional staffing. However, realising these benefits requires the applied AI literacy discussed in Chapter 5, ensuring that efficiency gains don't compromise the authentic voice and local knowledge that often differentiate small businesses from larger competitors.

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Case Study: Democratising TV advertising through AI – ITV's SME transformation

ITV's journey to democratise TV advertising through AI exemplifies how thoughtful AI implementation can transform traditional industry barriers into accessible opportunities for SMEs. For many years, one of the main perceived barriers preventing SMEs from testing TV advertising was the cost and complexity of creative production.

ITV's in-house creative production team of five people had successfully scaled to produce 1,000 ads across approximately 200 new-to-TV SMEs using a range of techniques. However, the broadcaster recognised an opportunity to scale this further, democratising creative production to enable brands

of all sizes to afford quality TV advertising from their very first campaign.

Following months of intensive experimentation through a cross-departmental team, ITV launched its GenAI creative production service in September 2024. The service was designed exclusively for new-to-TV SMEs, with initial campaigns for Northern Ireland furniture store Sheepbridge Interiors and South Wales travel agent Travel House.

Working with creative effectiveness specialists System1 to measure impact, the team produced ads in under 10 hours for a fraction of traditional costs; adverts that exceeded category norms. This dramatic improvement was achieved using licensed tools, controlled end-to-end by their Creative Production Lead who maintained human oversight throughout the process.

Dennis Niblock, Sheepbridge Interiors' owner, captured the impact: 'We thought a TV ad of this quality was far out of our reach, so it's been a real game changer for us to be the first to use this new service from ITV.'

Katie Davies, Travel House marketer, emphasised the business potential: 'We are excited to see our TV advert go live and are confident this innovative production approach will be a significant benefit and revenue driver for Travel House.'

Building on this success, ITV integrated AI production techniques across all 1,000 ads to drive efficiency while freeing creative producers to focus on creative work. The company then leveraged Magnite's streamr.ai⁶³ technology to create ITV GenAI Ads Manager – a bespoke service that creates

GenAI ads sourced from customers' online footprint in under thirty seconds with low-cost entry packages.

Recognising that all TV advertising must be approved by Clearcast, ITV integrated the BCAP Code⁶⁴ into their GenAI Ads Manager to facilitate the necessary clearance process, demonstrating how AI implementation must account for industry regulations from the outset.

ITV trained every member of their commercial team to use the platform, ensuring widespread capability to support SME clients effectively. This comprehensive training approach reflects the importance of building internal AI literacy alongside technological capability.

The strategy's success earned recognition through the 'Best AI Innovation (Creative)' Broadcast Innovation award in 2024 and the New Ad Format award at the European Video Awards in 2025, validating the approach as an industry model for AI democratisation.

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The strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, and emotional intelligence identified as essential human capabilities in Chapter 5 become even more critical in SME contexts where individual decisions carry greater relative impact. A misaligned AI tool or poorly executed automation can damage customer relationships in ways that prove difficult for small businesses to recover from, making thoughtful implementation essential rather than optional.

Bridging the AI skills gap for SMEs requires educational approaches that acknowledge the

practical constraints and specific needs of smaller organisations. Traditional corporate training programmes, designed for larger teams with diverse specialisations, often prove impractical for businesses where individual employees wear multiple hats and cannot afford extended time away from operational responsibilities. Instead, effective SME AI education must be modular, immediately applicable, and designed to integrate with existing workflows rather than requiring wholesale process redesign.

Targeted bootcamp initiatives show particular promise when designed specifically for small business contexts. Unlike academic courses that emphasise theoretical foundations, practical bootcamps can focus on immediate application of specific AI tools to common business challenges. A weekend workshop might cover chatbot implementation for customer service, basic analytics setup for campaign optimisation, and content creation workflows that maintain brand voice while leveraging AI efficiency.

Mentorship programmes create another crucial intervention point, connecting successful AI adopters with businesses beginning their transformation journey. However, effective mentorship for SMEs requires matching based on business size and complexity rather than just industry sector. A small agency that has successfully integrated AI tools into client delivery can provide more relevant guidance than a large corporation with dedicated AI teams, even within the same service category.

The gender dynamics explored in Chapter 10 prove particularly relevant for SME AI adoption,

given that nearly half of all early-stage entrepreneurs in the UK were women in 2023, representing a significant increase from around one-third in 2018. This trend toward female entrepreneurship intersects with research showing women's more cautious approach to AI adoption, creating both challenges and opportunities for small business AI integration.

Women-led businesses may approach AI implementation more thoughtfully, with greater attention to ethical implications and quality considerations that align with the responsible adoption practices this book advocates. However, they may also face additional barriers in accessing technical support and confidence-building resources in AI contexts that traditionally skew male. Targeted support programmes that address these specific dynamics while building on women's strengths in strategic thinking and relationship management could prove particularly effective.

The age-based adoption patterns discussed in Chapter 11 also manifest differently in SME contexts, where business owners and key decision-makers often span multiple generations within small teams. Unlike larger organisations that can accommodate diverse comfort levels through role specialisation, small businesses require approaches that bring all team members along the AI adoption journey regardless of their initial technical confidence or experience.

Practical support and implementation guidance prove as important as education in enabling SME AI adoption. Many small businesses possess the conceptual understanding necessary to benefit from AI tools but lack the technical infrastructure or

implementation expertise to translate that understanding into operational capability. Providing access to pre-configured AI solutions, step-by-step implementation guides, and ongoing technical support can bridge the gap between awareness and effective deployment.

Confidence-building emerges as a crucial factor that traditional technology adoption frameworks often underestimate. Small business owners typically possess deep expertise in their domains – whether creative services, professional consulting, or retail operations, but may feel inadequate when confronting AI technologies that seem to require specialised technical knowledge. Demonstrating how AI tools can enhance rather than replace domain expertise helps overcome initial resistance while positioning technology adoption as business evolution rather than fundamental disruption.

Building AI literacy within SME contexts also requires addressing the continuous learning challenges that smaller organisations face. The rapid evolution of AI capabilities means that one-time training quickly becomes obsolete, yet small businesses often lack the resources for ongoing professional development that larger organisations take for granted. Creating sustainable learning pathways might involve industry associations, local business networks, or peer learning groups that share costs while building collective expertise.

The collaborative approaches discussed throughout this book prove particularly valuable for SMEs, which often benefit from shared resources and collective problem-solving. Industry-specific AI user groups can provide forums for sharing

implementation experiences, troubleshooting common challenges, and identifying cost-effective solutions that work across similar business contexts. These peer networks often prove more valuable than formal training programmes for ongoing learning and problem-solving.

Regional considerations, explored in Chapter 12, intersect meaningfully with SME challenges, as small businesses outside major metropolitan areas may face additional barriers in accessing AI expertise and support. However, the democratising potential of AI tools also creates opportunities for geographical advantages, enabling small businesses in lower-cost locations to compete more effectively with metropolitan competitors through enhanced productivity and capability.

International examples offer useful models of policy approaches that specifically support SME AI adoption. Germany's AI Studio initiative,⁶⁵ providing mobile and stationary interactive demonstrators to support employers, also includes visits to SME to provide workshops that explain AI technologies in user-friendly terms. This practical, business-focused education model addresses the knowledge gaps that prevent small businesses from understanding AI's commercial applications without requiring extensive technical infrastructure.

Similarly, Singapore's approach to supporting SME AI adoption focuses on making advanced digital solutions accessible to smaller businesses ready to experiment with new technologies. The government has developed various initiatives specifically designed to make Generative AI more

accessible to SMEs, recognising the productivity gains these technologies can deliver.⁶⁶

Looking toward practical implementation, SMEs benefit from adoption strategies that emphasise gradual integration rather than comprehensive transformation. Beginning with clearly defined, low-risk applications allows small businesses to build confidence and competence while minimising disruption to core operations. Customer service chatbots, basic social media automation, or simple email personalisation represent entry points that provide immediate value while establishing foundations for more sophisticated applications.

Successful SME AI adoption often follows patterns that mirror the psychological safety frameworks essential for larger organisations but adapted to smaller team dynamics. Growth occurs when business owners and employees collaborate to identify pain points that AI might address while maintaining humility about technological limitations. Belonging develops when all team members feel included in AI exploration.⁶⁷ Resilience emerges when businesses feel confident in their ability to experiment with AI tools while maintaining operational stability.

The measurement and evaluation approaches discussed throughout this book require particular adaptation for SME contexts, where sophisticated analytics may prove impractical but basic performance tracking remains essential. Small businesses need simple frameworks for assessing whether AI implementations deliver promised benefits while identifying opportunities for optimisation or expansion. These frameworks must

balance analytical rigour with practical constraints, providing actionable insights without requiring dedicated analytics expertise.

Quality assurance for AI outputs becomes even more critical in SME contexts, where individual mistakes can have disproportionate impact on customer relationships and business reputation. However, quality assurance approaches must be lightweight and integrated into existing workflows rather than requiring separate oversight processes that small teams cannot sustain. This might involve systematic spot-checking of AI-generated content, regular customer feedback collection, or simple performance monitoring that flags potential issues for human review.

The future competitiveness of SMEs increasingly depends on their ability to harness AI capabilities without losing the agility, personal service, and local knowledge that traditionally provide competitive advantages over larger organisations. This requires approaches that enhance rather than replace human expertise while building the technical literacy necessary to evaluate and implement AI solutions effectively.

Supporting SME AI adoption represents both economic imperative and strategic opportunity for the broader advertising industry. Small businesses that successfully integrate AI capabilities become more sophisticated clients for agencies while representing a larger addressable market for AI-enhanced services. Conversely, SMEs that fall behind in AI adoption may struggle to compete effectively, ultimately reducing the diversity and vibrancy of the

business ecosystem that supports the advertising industry.

The path forward requires coordinated effort across industry associations, educational institutions, technology providers, and government agencies to create support structures specifically designed for SME needs. This includes developing practical training programmes, providing access to appropriate tools and technical support, and creating peer networks that enable shared learning and problem-solving.

Most importantly, supporting SME AI adoption requires recognising that small businesses bring unique strengths to the AI transformation challenge. Their pragmatic approach to technology adoption, close customer relationships, and operational agility provide advantages that larger organisations often struggle to maintain. By building on these strengths while addressing specific barriers and constraints, the advertising industry can ensure that AI transformation enhances rather than diminishes the diversity and innovation that SMEs contribute to the broader business ecosystem.

The success of this effort will ultimately determine whether AI becomes a democratising force that levels competitive playing fields, or a differentiator that advantages only those with significant resources and technical expertise. The stakes extend beyond individual business success to encompass the fundamental structure of the UK economy and the role that diverse, innovative small businesses play in driving economic growth and social progress.

Chapter 16

International Perspectives

The advertising industry's AI transformation unfolds within a broader global context of workforce adaptation that offers both instructive successes and cautionary tales. As countries worldwide grapple with similar challenges of skills gaps and technological disruption, their diverse approaches provide valuable insights for understanding what works – and what falls short – in preparing creative industries for an AI-augmented future.

The scale of the challenge becomes clear when examining OECD analysis across developed economies. Research spanning Australia, Germany, Singapore and the United States reveals that only 0.3% to 5.5% of training courses currently deliver AI content, despite one in three job vacancies having high AI exposure.⁶⁸ This supply-demand mismatch reflects a fundamental tension between rapidly advancing AI capabilities and educational systems struggling to keep pace. Most troubling for creative industries, the majority of existing programmes focus on advanced technical AI skills rather than the broader literacy⁶⁹ that enables thoughtful integration of AI tools into creative workflows.

International approaches to this challenge reveal a critical divide between countries pursuing narrow

expertise versus broad engagement. China exemplifies the expert-focused model, prioritising world-class universities and curricula and aims to lead the world in new trends in the development of AI.⁷⁰ This emphasis on elite capability development, while impressive in research outputs, may miss the distributed nature of AI adoption across creative teams. Sweden follows a similar path, seeking to develop innovative strength and international attractiveness for leading AI competence, positioning itself among Nordic leaders in start-ups and investments but potentially overlooking the workforce breadth that advertising transformation requires.⁷¹

Canada demonstrates another variant of the narrow approach, describing ideal AI teams as consisting of domain experts with PhDs, business experts with MBAs, and AI experts with advanced degrees.⁷² While such teams undoubtedly produce sophisticated AI applications, this model doesn't address how the majority of advertising professionals – account managers, creative directors, strategists, and producers – can effectively collaborate with AI systems in their daily work.

The limitations of narrow approaches become apparent when examining their outcomes. Countries emphasising world leadership and cutting-edge research, including China and Sweden, score lower on AI readiness indices than those adopting broader strategies.⁷³ This suggests that while elite expertise drives innovation, widespread capability enables adoption – precisely what advertising agencies need to transform their operations while preserving creative excellence.

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In contrast, the United States and Singapore have adopted comprehensive approaches that prioritise inclusive engagement over exclusive expertise. The United States emphasises broad STEM literacy, with STEM skills comprising 69% of skills development instances, focusing on general literacy, computational thinking, and digital capabilities.⁷⁴ Rather than pursuing technical mastery, American strategy seeks to create a STEM-literate public that is better equipped to handle rapid technological change and participate in civil society. This foundational approach recognises that effective AI adoption depends on widespread understanding rather than concentrated expertise.

Singapore's approach, however, may be more suitable for the advertising industry. Rather than focusing on AI-specific applications, Singapore emphasises flexibility, professional skills, and experience, recognising that there is an increasing demand for soft skills to support enterprise transformation. The country distinguishes between 'critical core skills' – professional capabilities essential for business transformation – and 'priority skills' – those highly transferable across multiple job roles.⁷⁵ This framework speaks to advertising's need for professionals who can combine creative insight with AI augmentation, understanding both technological possibilities and creative constraints.

Singapore's practical implementation offers concrete lessons for the UK's advertising industry. The country focuses on task-based job redesign and

workforce upskilling, with redesign processes centred around affected employees and guided by their needs. Employees provide insight into how proposed AI solutions fit their tasks, ensuring technological integration serves creative, rather than replacing it. Singapore's Skills Future initiative targets adults in AI-affected roles through accessible two-day courses eligible for government subsidy, demonstrating how practical, workplace-focused training can democratise AI capabilities without requiring extensive technical backgrounds.

Austria's Digital Everywhere initiative⁷⁶ provides another model worthy of emulation. It is in the process of planning and delivering 3,500 workshops across all municipalities to boost basic digital competencies including AI awareness. Conducted in venues from youth centres to retirement homes, this grassroots approach recognises that AI literacy benefits entire communities, not just technical specialists. For the advertising industry, this suggests value in organisation-wide AI education that includes finance, operations, and administrative staff alongside creative teams.

Germany's AI Studios⁷⁷ offer yet another approach, providing mobile and stationary interactive demonstrators to support employers, particularly SMEs, in AI adoption. These workshops explain AI technologies and implications in user-friendly terms, helping businesses navigate adoption complexities. This practical, business-focused education model could prove invaluable for smaller advertising agencies and marketing departments struggling to understand AI's commercial applications without extensive technical infrastructure.

The international evidence suggests that talent development strategies also influence adoption success. Most countries focus on attracting international talent and fostering exchanges, comprising 38% of talent pipeline efforts. China aims to increase efforts to promote academic exchange and collaboration at the international level, seeking to attract the world's leading talent.⁷⁸ While this approach may accelerate research advancement, it doesn't necessarily address the needs of specific sectors such as advertising, which demands AI-literate creative professionals who understand cultural context, brand strategy, and client communication.

Against this international backdrop, the UK's National AI Strategy published in 2021,⁷⁹ demonstrates both significant strengths and notable gaps. The UK government seeks to build upon the £46 million already invested in Turing AI Fellowships to attract leading researchers, enabling flexible work between academia and other sectors. The strategy includes a target of 2,500 new Masters conversion courses in AI and data science with up to 1,000 scholarships for underrepresented groups, achieving impressive diversity outcomes. In its first year there were 1,200 students enrolled for the conversion course. Of those there were over 40% women students, one quarter black students, and 15% disabled students. These programmes demonstrate that inclusive AI education can achieve both diversity and scale when properly designed and funded.

The UK's visa reforms position it well for international talent attraction through new routes

including Global Talent visas for AI leaders,⁸⁰ High Potential Individual routes for top university graduates, and scale-up routes supporting fast-growing companies. This comprehensive approach to talent mobility reflects understanding that AI capability requires both domestic development and international expertise.

However, critical gaps emerge when considering the needs of the advertising industry. The strategy acknowledges that only 18% agreed there was sufficient provision of training and development in AI skills available to the current UK workforce, with many industries reporting they have not found training that suits their needs: including training that is business-focused, modular and flexible. This directly impacts the advertising industry whose organisations need practical AI integration support rather than theoretical foundations.

Unlike Singapore's emphasis on transferable skills and soft capabilities, the UK strategy lacks specific provisions for creative industries where AI serves as augmentation rather than replacement. The current focus on technical expertise and research excellence, while valuable, doesn't address how creative professionals can effectively collaborate with AI systems while preserving the human insight that distinguishes exceptional work.

International research indicates that broader, nationwide approaches to AI education correlate with higher readiness scores than narrower, expert-driven strategies. Countries prioritising inclusive, diverse ecosystems involving various stakeholders rank higher in AI readiness than those focusing primarily on elite capabilities. This finding proves

particularly relevant for the advertising industry's need to democratise AI understanding across creative teams rather than concentrating expertise in technical specialists.

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The evidence outlined above suggests several adaptations that could enhance UK approaches for advertising transformation. Singapore's skills framework distinguishing between core and priority capabilities could guide advertising-specific development. Core skills including prompt engineering and AI tool evaluation, while priority skills encompass ethics, creative process adaptation, and human-AI collaboration techniques. Germany's collaborative model between research institutes, universities, and government could be adapted through industry-academic partnerships providing hands-on AI experience for creative professionals.

The success of broad-based literacy approaches suggests the UK advertising industry needs foundational AI understanding across all roles, not just technical specialists. This aligns with the experience of the United States and Singapore, cited earlier, which suggests that countries emphasising comprehensive education achieve higher AI readiness than those pursuing exclusive expertise. For the advertising industry, this implies value in organisation-wide AI fluency that enables informed decision-making about tool adoption, workflow integration, and creative process enhancement.

The international perspective ultimately reveals that successful AI workforce transformation requires

balancing technical capability with broad engagement, elite expertise with democratic access, and research excellence with practical application. The UK's current strategy provides strong foundations in talent attraction and advanced education but requires enhancement in practical, business-focused training that serves creative industries' specific needs. Learning from Singapore's skills frameworks, Germany's business support, and broader international emphasis on inclusive education could help ensure that UK advertising agencies achieve both technological sophistication and creative excellence in their AI transformation journey.

Chapter 17

An Agent-Driven Advertising Future

As the advertising industry adapts to AI, a new frontier is already emerging that will define the next phase of transformation: the rise of autonomous AI agents. Understanding this evolution becomes crucial not for immediate implementation, but for strategic preparation and skill development that will determine competitive advantage in the coming decade.

The AI systems transforming advertising today – the content generators, audience analysers, and campaign optimisers discussed in earlier chapters – represent sophisticated tools requiring human direction. They respond to prompts, process data, and generate outputs, but fundamentally remain reactive systems dependent on human goal setting and oversight. Agentic AI represents a qualitative shift: systems capable of autonomous goal pursuit across complex, multi-step processes. Rather than waiting for human instruction, these agents can interpret high-level objectives, develop implementation strategies, and execute campaigns with minimal human intervention.

This transition signals the emergence of what practitioners and commentators describe as the ‘agent attention economy’⁸¹ – a fundamental paradigm shift from the human attention economy that has shaped advertising practice for decades. In

the traditional human attention economy, advertising success depends on capturing human attention through compelling headlines, striking visuals, emotional appeals, and persuasive messaging. Metrics focus on click-through rates, engagement time, and conversion rates driven by human psychological responses. Search engine optimisation targets human search behaviour, while creative development aims to trigger emotional and rational responses that drive purchasing decisions.

The emerging agent attention economy operates according to entirely different principles. AI agents are not attracted to flashy headlines, do not linger to admire visual design, and remain uninfluenced by emotional marketing appeals. Instead, agent attention is determined by structured data quality, semantic clarity, machine readability, metadata completeness, and logical argumentation. When AI agents perform tasks, they allocate attention by seeking structured data directly relevant to their objectives, evaluating the reliability and completeness of data sources, making recommendations based on semantic relevance rather than surface similarity, and prioritising services with clearly defined interfaces.

Early manifestations of this transition already appear in programmatic advertising, where algorithms autonomously adjust bidding strategies and audience targeting based on performance data rather than creative appeal. Consider how this evolution might transform campaign development. Today's AI-assisted workflow involves human strategists using AI tools for research, ideation, and optimisation – a collaborative process requiring constant human oversight. Tomorrow's agentic

systems could interpret client briefs, conduct market research, develop creative concepts, and optimise performance independently, presenting humans with completed campaign strategies rather than component insights.

This fundamental difference has profound implications for an advertising practice that extends far beyond tool usage to encompass the very nature of how advertising messages are structured and delivered. In a world where AI agents increasingly make purchasing decisions, recommend services, and manage procurement processes on behalf of humans and organisations, traditional advertising approaches must evolve to deliver both agent-legible information and human emotional connection. The shift from human-to-human marketing to agent-to-agent (A2A) marketing requires advertising professionals to develop capabilities they may never have considered essential to their practice.

The transition manifests across multiple dimensions of advertising work. Rather than creating campaigns designed to capture human attention, professionals must learn to structure information for optimal machine interpretation. Instead of developing emotional appeals, the focus shifts to semantic clarity and logical argumentation that AI agents can process effectively. Campaign measurement evolves from tracking human engagement metrics to monitoring agent interaction patterns and decision-making processes. This represents perhaps the most significant transformation advertising has faced since the emergence of digital media.

This transition doesn't eliminate human value but fundamentally redefines it. The strategic curiosity, contextual judgement and emotional intelligence identified in Chapter 4 become not just valuable but essential – representing the uniquely human capabilities that guide, evaluate, and refine agent-generated outcomes while ensuring that agent-to-agent communication serves broader human objectives. Understanding how to navigate between human and agent attention economies becomes crucial for advertising professionals who must serve both audiences effectively.

The shift toward agentic AI creates three strategic imperatives that will reshape advertising practice. Goal definition and framework development emerges as perhaps the most critical skill for the agent-driven era. Unlike current AI tools that require specific prompts, agentic systems work from high-level objectives and develop their own implementation approaches. Success depends on translating client business objectives into clear, measurable goals that autonomous agents can pursue while ensuring alignment with brand values and strategic priorities.

This capability extends beyond traditional campaign planning to encompass systems thinking about how multiple agents might collaborate within the emerging A2A protocol framework.⁸² The A2A protocol is an open standard that enables AI agents to communicate and collaborate across different platforms and frameworks, regardless of their underlying technologies. Rather than managing individual tools, professionals must orchestrate networks of autonomous systems working toward

coordinated objectives. The account director who once briefed human teams now designs goal architectures that guide artificial agents operating in an environment where structured data and semantic clarity determine visibility and influence. This evolution demands new forms of strategic thinking that account for agent capabilities, limitations, and interaction patterns that may not mirror human collaborative dynamics.

Equally critical are the evaluation and verification capabilities that become essential as agents make increasingly consequential decisions with limited human oversight. Unlike human colleagues whose reasoning can be discussed, AI agents often employ complex decision-making processes that resist easy interpretation. Professionals must develop systematic approaches to evaluating agent outputs, verifying alignment with strategic objectives, and identifying when agent decisions require human review.

This involves both technical skills for monitoring agent behaviour and analytical capabilities for assessing whether autonomous actions serve broader business objectives. The challenge lies in distinguishing between agent efficiency – rapid task completion – and agent effectiveness – meaningful progress toward strategic goals. In the agent attention economy, effectiveness must be measured not just by human response but by how well campaigns position brands within the structured data landscapes that determine agent recommendations and decisions.

The third strategic imperative involves project stewardship that requires fundamental reconfiguration from traditional management

approaches. Traditional project management coordinates human team members through communication, motivation, and oversight. Managing autonomous agents involves different challenges: defining success criteria, establishing autonomy boundaries, and intervening when agents deviate from intended paths while allowing flexibility in implementation approaches. This shift from direct management to strategic stewardship becomes even more complex when considering how agents will interact with other agents rather than just human audiences.

Several trends visible today preview the agent-driven transformation and provide insight into how the transition from human to agent attention economy will manifest in practice. Programmatic advertising already demonstrates basic agentic behaviour, with algorithms autonomously adjusting bidding strategies, shifting budget allocations, and modifying targeting parameters based on performance feedback. These systems increasingly operate with minimal human oversight, making thousands of optimisation decisions daily while demonstrating both the potential and the limitations of autonomous decision-making in advertising contexts.

More significantly, these programmatic systems reveal early patterns of A2A interaction, where advertising algorithms compete for agent attention through bid optimisation, audience targeting efficiency, and performance data rather than creative appeal. Success in these environments depends on structured data quality, semantic clarity, and logical argumentation – precisely the factors that will

determine visibility in the broader agent attention economy.

Customer service chatbots represent another early manifestation, moving beyond scripted responses to autonomous problem-solving that includes escalation decisions, solution development, and follow-up actions. The most sophisticated examples can interpret customer intent, access multiple data sources, and resolve complex issues, all without human intervention. These developments provide valuable insight into how agents might handle more complex advertising challenges while highlighting the ongoing need for human oversight in situations requiring cultural sensitivity or strategic judgement.

Content personalisation systems show emerging agentic capabilities in their ability to autonomously adapt messaging, adjust creative elements, and optimise delivery timing based on individual user behaviour patterns. These systems increasingly operate as autonomous creative directors for personalised communication, demonstrating how agents might eventually handle sophisticated creative decisions while revealing the boundaries of what algorithmic creativity can achieve without human strategic direction. Importantly, these systems already show preference for structured, semantically clear content over traditional creative appeals.

Marketing automation platforms demonstrate agent-like coordination across multiple channels, autonomously adjusting email campaigns based on social media engagement, modifying website content based on advertising performance, and coordinating offline events with digital touchpoints. These integrated systems preview how future agents might

orchestrate complex, multi-channel campaigns while highlighting the sophisticated goal setting and evaluation frameworks that human professionals must develop to guide such autonomous coordination effectively.

The human capabilities identified throughout this book remain relevant but require new applications in agentic environments shaped by the transition to an agent attention economy. Strategic curiosity transforms from questioning data and insights to questioning agent goals and methodologies while understanding how information must be structured to capture agent attention. Rather than asking, ‘What does this data tell us?’ professionals must learn to ask, ‘Are we asking the agent to pursue the right objectives, and are we presenting information in ways that agents can effectively process and act upon?’

This evolution requires developing comfort with higher-level abstraction while maintaining the investigative instincts that drive breakthrough advertising insights. In the agent attention economy, curiosity must extend to understanding how semantic structures, metadata frameworks, and logical argumentation can be optimised to influence agent decision-making processes effectively.

Contextual judgement becomes crucial for evaluating agent decisions against factors that autonomous systems may not consider: market timing, competitive dynamics, cultural sensitivities, and brand reputation implications. Agents excel at optimisation within defined parameters, yet struggle with the nuanced judgement that comes from deep market understanding. Professionals must develop

the ability to recognise when contextual factors require human override of agent recommendations, balancing efficiency with strategic appropriateness while understanding how such interventions affect positioning within the agent attention economy.

This capability becomes particularly important when considering how A2A interactions might influence brand perception and market position. While agents may make logical, data-driven decisions, humans must ensure these decisions serve broader strategic objectives that encompass both immediate efficiency and long-term brand value.

Emotional intelligence guides the design of agent behaviour that serves human relationships rather than mere algorithmic efficiency. While agents can analyse sentiment data and optimise for engagement metrics, humans must ensure that autonomous systems serve authentic communication goals. This requires understanding how agent-mediated interactions affect brand relationships and maintaining the empathetic perspective that distinguishes meaningful communication from mechanical optimisation.

In the context of the agent attention economy, emotional intelligence also involves understanding how to design agent interactions that preserve human values while operating effectively within machine-readable frameworks. This dual focus – serving both human emotional needs and agent processing requirements – represents one of the most complex challenges advertising professionals will face.

Adaptive improvisation enables navigation of situations where agent capabilities prove insufficient

or inappropriate. When client needs shift unexpectedly, or market conditions change rapidly, humans must step in to redirect agent activity or override autonomous decisions. This capability requires developing comfort with uncertainty while building confidence in human judgement when it conflicts with agent recommendations.

The development of these evolved capabilities requires systematic preparation rather than reactive adaptation. Organisations preparing for agent-driven advertising should begin developing competencies through progressive autonomy development that gradually expands the decision-making authority of current AI systems while building human oversight capabilities. Starting with clearly defined, low-risk applications where agent autonomy can be tested safely – routine social media optimisation, basic audience segmentation, or simple content variation testing – allowing teams to build confidence and competence gradually while learning to structure information for agent consumption.

This progressive approach enables organisations to expand agent authority systematically as both technological capabilities and human oversight competencies develop. Hybrid team structures that combine human strategic direction with agent execution provide practical experience while maintaining control. Creative directors can focus on brand strategy and creative vision while agents handle execution variations and optimisation. Account managers can maintain client relationships while agents manage routine communication and reporting.

Developing effective hybrid structures requires quality assurance frameworks specifically designed for agent outputs, which become essential infrastructure for agentic operations. Unlike human work that can be evaluated through discussion, agent outputs require systematic assessment protocols that examine both technical accuracy and strategic appropriateness. These frameworks must scale with agent capabilities while maintaining standards that protect brand reputation and strategic effectiveness within both human and agent attention economies.

The timeline for widespread agent adoption in advertising remains uncertain, but early preparation provides competitive advantage for organisations willing to invest in understanding and experimentation. Organisations should invest in understanding current agentic capabilities through pilot programmes that test autonomous systems in controlled environments while building human skills for agent collaboration. These experimental programmes provide valuable learning opportunities while limiting risk exposure during the technology's developmental phase.

Educational partnerships with institutions developing agentic AI research can provide early exposure to emerging capabilities while contributing to responsible development practices. Industry collaboration on standards and best practices helps ensure that agent development serves advertising effectiveness rather than just technological possibility. Such partnerships also create opportunities for influence over how agentic AI develops, ensuring that industry needs and ethical considerations inform technological advancement,

while preparing for the fundamental shift from human to agent attention economies.

The psychological safety frameworks discussed in Chapter 7 become even more critical in agent-driven environments, where teams must feel secure enough to experiment with new forms of human-AI collaboration while maintaining the judgement necessary to override autonomous systems when strategic objectives require human intervention. Creating environments where professionals can safely explore agent capabilities, while maintaining confidence in their own expertise, becomes essential for successful transition to an economy where both human and agent attention must be captured and managed effectively.

The evolution toward agentic AI represents both opportunity and responsibility for the advertising industry that extends beyond immediate operational considerations to encompass broader questions about professional identity and industry direction. Organisations that develop thoughtful approaches to agent collaboration – combining autonomous efficiency with human insight while understanding how to operate effectively in both human and agent attention economies – will create competitive advantages that pure automation cannot match.

Success in the agent-driven future belongs to professionals who can orchestrate autonomous systems while preserving the strategic thinking, creative insight, and cultural understanding that make advertising effective. This isn't about replacing human capabilities but about elevating them to focus on the kinds of challenges that require uniquely human wisdom while developing new competencies

for the agent attention economy. The frameworks, skills, and principles explored throughout this book provide the foundation for this transition, transforming from immediate collaborative tools to strategic guidance systems for autonomous agents operating in an increasingly complex attention landscape.

The advertising industry's response to this evolution will determine whether AI agents become forces for creative enhancement, or algorithmic commoditisation. By preparing thoughtfully – developing the human capabilities that complement rather than compete with autonomous systems while understanding the fundamental shift from human to agent attention economies – the industry can ensure that technology amplifies rather than replaces the insights that drive exceptional advertising.

The future may feature AI agents capable of extraordinary efficiency and sophisticated optimisation operating within structured data environments that prioritise semantic clarity over emotional appeal, but it will still require human wisdom to define what objectives are worth pursuing and human judgement to evaluate whether those objectives are being achieved in ways that serve both business goals and human values. Understanding how to provide that guidance while operating effectively in both human and agent attention economies represents the essential skill for the advertising industry's agent-driven future.

The journey from AI-assisted collaboration to agent-orchestrated campaigns is already under development, with organisations such as IAB Tech Lab publishing its Agentic Roadmap⁸³ for digital

advertising. But the human capabilities required remain consistent: strategic curiosity, contextual judgement, emotional intelligence, and adaptive improvisation. Developing these skills now – while AI systems remain collaborative tools rather than autonomous agents – prepares advertising professionals not just for today's challenges, but for tomorrow's transformations. The future of advertising belongs to those who understand that mastering AI skills means mastering the distinctly human capabilities that give technology purpose and direction.

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