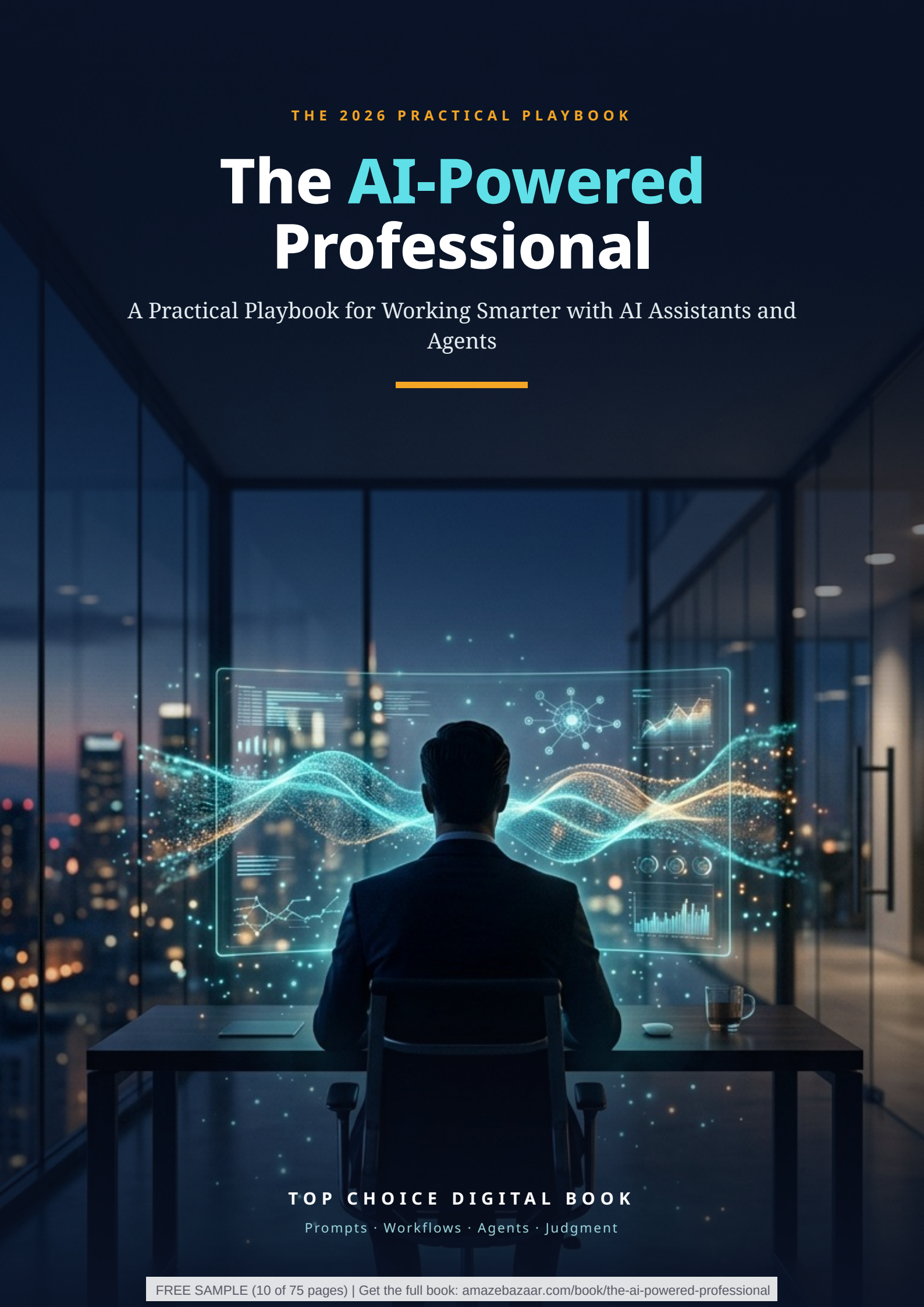
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A Practical Playbook for Working Smarter with AI Assistants and Agents



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Introduction

A few years ago, using artificial intelligence at work meant buying specialist software or hiring a data science team. Today it can mean opening a chat window and typing a sentence. That shift has changed who gets to benefit from AI, and it has changed what employers expect from ordinary professionals.

This book is written for people who work with information: managers, analysts, teachers, marketers, administrators, consultants, small-business owners, students preparing for their first job, and anyone else whose day is filled with emails, documents, spreadsheets and meetings. You do not need to write code. You do not need a technical background. You need curiosity, a willingness to practise, and a healthy habit of checking what a machine tells you.

Why this book, and why now

Interest in learning to work with AI has grown at remarkable speed. Coursera's Global Skills Report 2026, which draws on data from more than 300 million Coursera and Udemy learners, reports that learners are now enrolling in generative AI content at a combined rate of more than 45 enrollments per minute, up from 25 per minute in 2025. The same report notes rising interest in AI agents, orchestration and security, which means people are moving beyond simple chat and towards systems that carry out tasks.

The report also highlights something that is easy to overlook: the fastest-growing human skill was critical thinking, with enrollments up 107% year over year. In other words, the people investing in their careers are learning two things at once. They are learning how to use AI, and they are learning how to judge its output. This book is built around that same pairing.

> The goal is not to hand your work to a machine. The goal is to hand the machine the parts of your work that do not need you, so you can spend more time on the parts that do.

What you will be able to do

By the end of this book you should be able to:

- Explain in plain language what modern AI assistants and agents are good at, and where they routinely fail.
- Write clear, structured instructions that produce useful output on the first or second attempt.
- Use AI to speed up writing, research, data work, planning and meeting follow-up without lowering your standards.
- Design a simple multi-step workflow in which AI does the routine steps and you approve the important ones.

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- Protect confidential information, spot errors and keep a record of how AI contributed to your work.
- Show employers and colleagues evidence of your skills, and help your team adopt AI sensibly.

How to read this book

The chapters build on one another, but each one also stands alone. Chapters 1 to 3 form the foundation: what the tools are, how to prepare, and how to instruct them. Chapters 4 to 7 apply that foundation to everyday tasks. Chapter 8 introduces agent-style workflows. Chapter 9 covers safety and quality, and you should read it before you use AI with any real work information. Chapters 10 and 11 look at the human side: the skills that grow in value, and how to turn your new abilities into career progress.

Every chapter contains worked examples, step-by-step guides, checklists and a short set of key takeaways. Example prompts are shown in dark boxes so you can adapt them. They are deliberately written in plain language, because the best prompts usually are.

> **! A NOTE ON TOOLS**
>
> This book avoids depending on any single product. Features, prices and names change every few months, and your employer may allow only certain tools. The methods described here work with any capable chat-based assistant. Where a feature is product-specific, check the current documentation of the tool you use.

Let us begin with the most important question of all: what is this technology actually doing when it answers you?

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CHAPTER

01

Understanding AI at Work

What today's assistants and agents really do, and where they fall short



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You can drive a car well without understanding combustion, but you drive better if you know why the brakes fade on a long descent. The same is true of AI. A small amount of understanding prevents most beginner mistakes.

What a language model does

Most of the AI assistants people use at work are built on large language models. A language model is trained on an enormous collection of text and learns the statistical patterns of language: which words, phrases and ideas tend to follow one another. When you type a request, the model generates a response one small piece at a time, each time choosing a likely continuation given everything that came before.

That simple description explains a lot of behaviour. It explains why the output is fluent: the model has seen countless examples of well-formed sentences. It explains why the output can be wrong while sounding confident: the model is optimising for a plausible continuation, not checking facts against a database. And it explains why the way you phrase a request matters so much: your words are the starting point from which everything else is generated.

Assistants, tools and agents

Modern products wrap the model in extra capabilities. It helps to separate three levels:

Level	What it does	Typical example
Chat assistant	Answers questions and produces text from what you type and what it learned in training.	Drafting an email from your notes.
Assistant with tools	Can also search the web, read files you upload, run calculations or code, or create images.	Summarising a 40-page report you attach.
Agent	Plans a sequence of steps towards a goal and uses tools to carry them out, checking progress along the way.	Collecting supplier quotes from several sites into a comparison table.

The further down the table you go, the more the system does on its own, and the more important it becomes to define the goal precisely and to check the results. Chapter 8 is devoted to agents. For now, remember that an agent is still a language model at its core, so all of its weaknesses travel with it.

What AI is genuinely good at

Used well, current assistants are strong at a recognisable set of tasks:

- **Transforming text you already have.** Summarising, shortening, re-structuring, changing tone, translating, turning notes into prose or prose into bullet points.

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- **Producing first drafts.** Emails, outlines, job descriptions, meeting agendas, project plans, frequently asked questions.
- **Explaining.** Breaking a complex idea into steps, offering analogies, generating practice questions.
- **Brainstorming.** Listing options, angles, risks, objections or names you had not considered.
- **Working with structure.** Writing spreadsheet formulas, cleaning messy lists, extracting fields from text into a table.
- **Critiquing.** Reviewing your draft against criteria you provide and pointing out gaps.

Notice the pattern. AI is most reliable when you supply the raw material and the standard, and ask it to do the transformation. It is least reliable when you ask it to supply facts you cannot easily check.

Where AI routinely fails

Every experienced user learns these limits, usually the hard way. You can learn them here instead.

1. Invented details

A model can produce names, figures, quotations, references or legal citations that look real but do not exist. This is often called hallucination. It is most likely when you ask for specific facts on a niche topic, or when you ask for sources. Treat any factual claim you have not verified as a draft, not a fact.

2. Out-of-date knowledge

A model's training data stops at a certain date. Unless the tool is searching the web or reading documents you provide, it may not know about recent prices, rules, products or events. Ask the tool whether it has access to current information, and verify anything time-sensitive.

3. Weak arithmetic and counting

Language models can make simple calculation mistakes, especially across long tables. Many tools now run calculations in a separate code environment, which is much more reliable. When numbers matter, ask the assistant to show its working, or to calculate using a code tool, and spot-check the results yourself.

4. Missing context

The assistant knows nothing about your organisation, your customer, your boss's preferences or last week's decision unless you tell it. Many poor results are simply the product of a vague request.

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