

ESSAY 14

BETTER JUDGMENT IN THE AGE OF AI

When AI Decides What Deserves Your **Attention**

"Judgment doesn't begin at the choice. It begins with what gets our attention."

When AI Decides What Deserves Your Attention

By Alen Mayer

Most conversations about AI and judgment begin at the recommendation. Should we trust the forecast? Should we follow the analysis? Should we act on the suggestion?

Those are real questions. They are also late ones.

Before AI recommends anything, it has often already decided something else: what you will look at. A ranked list doesn't feel like a decision. It feels like a convenience. But when a system ranks, it tells you what to look at first, and by implication what can wait.

■ BEFORE THE DECISION, THERE IS THE VIEW

Think about what AI does inside an ordinary working day.

It ranks the deals you should review. It summarizes the report you didn't have time to read. It flags customers at risk, transactions that look unusual, candidates worth interviewing, issues that seem urgent.

Nothing in the system has to say "ignore this." It only has to put something else above it.

Before AI influences what we decide, it can influence what we notice.

■ THE MONDAY MORNING BRIEFING

Picture a sales leader opening an AI-generated briefing.

Top five deals requiring attention today.

The system ranks deals on value, probability of closing, recent buyer activity, stage movement and response rates. Sensible criteria. Most experienced sales managers would choose several of them.

Now add one more detail. The system also has access to the customer-success notes. It knows one major account had a serious implementation problem six weeks ago. That account is up for renewal in ten weeks, and it is one of the largest in the portfolio.

It still doesn't make the top five.

It was not missed because the data was absent. The data was there. But recent activity, close probability and deal value dominate the ranking, and a renewal that has gone quiet scores low on all three. The implementation problem is in the system. It simply isn't what the system was built to weigh most heavily.

The leader works through the five deals. The follow-ups are sharp. The coaching is useful. Everything is handled well. And the account most likely to walk away this quarter gets no attention at all.

Notice what this means. You cannot fix it by simply giving the system more data. Better AI, with better access, could still produce the same briefing, because the problem isn't what the system knows. It's what the ranking was designed to treat as important.

■ WHERE THE JUDGMENT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

When we say "a human made the final decision," we picture a person choosing among options.

But the options were already chosen.

The human exercised judgment inside a frame. The frame was built earlier, from chosen variables, chosen objectives and chosen thresholds. Someone decided that value, probability and recency were the right lens. That was a reasonable choice. It was still a choice.

I'm not criticizing ranking. Attention is scarce, and a good shortlist is genuinely valuable. I would not want to go back to scanning thousands of accounts by hand. Every ranking is selective, every summary removes something, and every shortlist excludes something. That isn't a flaw. It is what makes them useful.

The mistake is treating a shortlist as a neutral picture of reality. It is one view, built to answer one question. And that question may not be the one your business faces this week.

Human judgment cannot evaluate what never reaches human attention.

This is why "human in the loop" can be reassuring and misleading at the same time. If the system controls what enters the loop, the person inside it can be diligent, capable and fully engaged, and still never see what is missing.

■ TRUST, ATTENTION, ACTION

Most discussion of AI and judgment contains two questions.

Trust: Can I rely on this information?

Attention: Is this what deserves my focus?

Action: What should I do with it?

We spend almost all our effort on the first and third. We check whether the output is accurate. We debate whether to follow the recommendation. The middle question is the one that quietly gets skipped: why are we looking at this in the first place?

A system can be accurate about everything it shows you and still be silent about what matters most.

■ SOME PROBLEMS PRODUCE NO SIGNAL

There is one further complication. AI works best where there is something to observe: activity, volume, frequency, response time. But some of the most important conditions in a business show up as missing behavior. The customer who stopped replying. The team that stopped disagreeing.

A system that flags the teams with the most conflict will send leadership to the noisy ones. The calm team, where people have decided speaking up isn't worth it, never appears.

Absence of a signal is not absence of a problem.

■ WHAT THIS COSTS YOU IF NOBODY ASKS

Multiply the Monday briefing across a year. Every account reviewed because it ranked high. Every account ignored because it ranked low. Every team that gets leadership time because it was flagged.

Over time, the system's criteria quietly become your organization's priorities.

Nobody decided that. No meeting took place. The ranking simply ran, and people worked their way down it.

You won't see the cost this week. You'll see it when the quiet account churns or the silent team loses its best people, and by then it's very hard to trace the problem back to a briefing that looked perfectly sensible.

■ TEST THE LOGIC, NOT JUST THE LIST

The answer is not to distrust every ranking, and it is not to randomly inspect whatever fell below the line. That wouldn't be better judgment either. It would just be a different kind of noise.

The better practice is to examine the selection logic itself, and to do it periodically, not just once.

What criteria determine what gets our attention? What kinds of things fall systematically outside them? Under what circumstances would those omissions matter most?

A spot-check can be useful as an illustration. Pick the account that ranked low and ask whether the ranking was right. But treat it as a probe into the logic, not as the fix.

So the question to ask of any view is this:

What might matter that this system had no reason to show me?

AI is getting very good at telling us where to look first, and that saves real time. But the view it hands us is not only incomplete. It has already allocated our attention.

So the question is no longer only whether the view is accurate. It is whether what the system put in front of us deserves the attention it received.

Judgment doesn't begin at the choice. It begins with what gets our attention.

TAKE THIS FURTHER

Build better judgment into how your team works with **AI**.

I help leaders and organizations strengthen the human capabilities behind better judgment as AI becomes part of everyday work and decision-making.

JUDGMENT LABS

A 90-minute session working through realistic AI-influenced business decisions.

WORKSHOPS

Practical training on how teams question, interpret, weigh and decide with AI.

KEYNOTES

Reframing what human judgment requires as AI becomes more capable.

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