



CULTURE COUNCIL

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What's This?

RETHINKING ROI: HOW AI AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES DELIVER REAL VALUE

AI isn't just about cutting-edge innovation or tech buzzwords. It's about solving real business problems and creating tangible, measurable value.

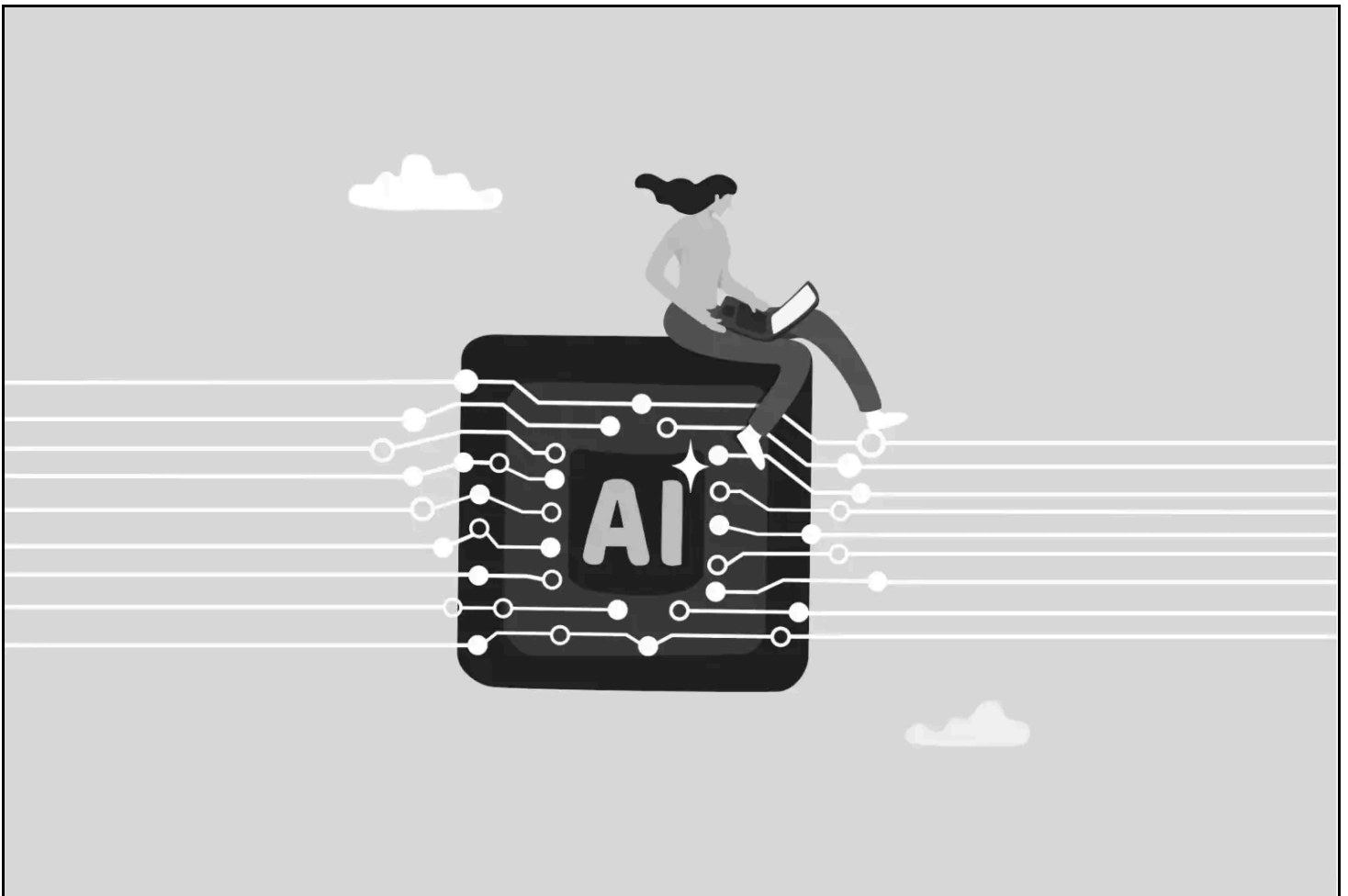
By **JESSICA BILLINGSLEY**

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In today's business landscape, AI and emerging technologies are everywhere. As a tech entrepreneur, I've seen both the excitement and the anxiety around this. Everyone wants to be at the forefront of innovation, but there's a question many seem to overlook: Where is the real return on investment (**ROI**)? Too often, businesses dive into AI without a clear understanding of what it can actually do for them.

Start With the Right Questions

The first thing I tell executives is to ask the right questions. Instead of "What can AI do?" ask "What should AI do for my business?" The tech world is full of buzzwords, but not all of them lead to real business outcomes. AI shouldn't be implemented for its own sake. Instead, focus on high-impact areas where it can streamline processes, cut costs, and boost efficiency.

For example, an e-commerce company I worked with reduced costs by adopting an AI tool. This saved them \$3 million annually—exactly what businesses should prioritize.

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Finding AI's Sweet Spot: High-Complexity, Short-Time-Horizon Tasks

The key to unlocking AI's potential is understanding where it delivers the most value. Based on my experience, AI delivers the most ROI when applied to high-complexity tasks that require quick turnaround times. Think about the areas in your business that involve repetitive, data-heavy processes that eat up your team's time. These are prime candidates for AI optimization.

Understanding Time Horizon and Task Complexity

When thinking about how AI fits into business, it's essential to distinguish between the complexity of a task and its time horizon. Some tasks are highly complex but need to be done quickly, while others take much longer to develop and execute, requiring strategic foresight and long-term planning.

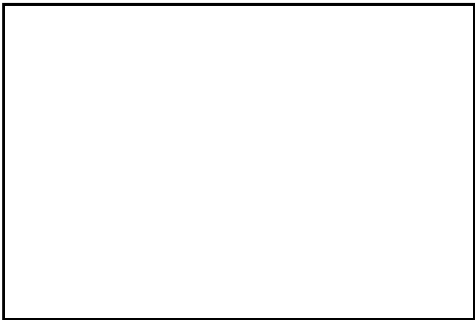
Consider professionals like doctors, attorneys, accountants and engineers. Their daily work often involves short-time-horizon tasks—they need immediate results, but these tasks are highly complex, drawing on their specialized knowledge and expertise. For example, a doctor diagnosing a patient or an attorney interpreting legal documents are performing intricate work that demands quick and accurate decision-making. These are areas where AI can make a real impact, handling data-heavy, repetitive processes in these professionals' work, freeing them to focus on tasks that require human judgment.

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However, when it comes to long-time-horizon tasks, like those that executives are responsible for—planning over multiple years to achieve specific goals, managing workstreams and driving strategic initiatives—AI falls short. AI struggles with strategic planning requiring foresight and adaptability.

There's an old adage about a plane taking off and being just on error results in the plane arriving at a completely wrong destination. If you try to apply AI's predictive models too far into the future. The

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while they can identify patterns, they don't account for unpredictable shifts or trends that could completely alter the course of a business.

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AI also lacks the ability to excel at cross-domain innovation, where connections between seemingly unrelated fields lead to groundbreaking ideas. Consider biomedical researchers who, inspired by the Japanese art of origami, **developed foldable medical devices** like heart stents that can expand once inserted, enabling less invasive surgery. This kind of abstract leap—from origami to life-saving medical technology—is beyond AI's capabilities. AI is great at processing vast amounts of data within a specific domain, but it struggles to make these kinds of creative connections across disciplines.

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In short, AI thrives in short-term, high-complexity tasks but falters when it comes to long-term strategy and innovation. As business leaders, we need to recognize where AI can deliver real value today and where human creativity and judgment remain irreplaceable.

Getting Started: Small Steps, Big Results

One thing I often hear from executives is that they don't know where to start with AI. My advice? Start small. You don't need to overhaul your entire business overnight. Begin by identifying one or two areas where AI could have an immediate impact, implement a cost-effective tool and measure the results.

Take the case of a digital real estate startup I worked with. The founders weren't technical experts, but they used simple tools like Google Sheets formulas and AI-powered suggestions to automate their workflows. They even wrote their entire e-commerce site using ChatGPT. In doing so, they saved between \$50,000 and \$100,000 by not hiring a developer or technical team. This is a perfect example of how small businesses can achieve big results.

The key is to empower your team to experiment with these technologies. Encourage them to look at their daily workflows and identify areas where AI could save time or improve efficiency. The beauty of AI is that small-scale implementations can often lead to substantial long-term benefits.

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The Bottom Line: Take Action Now

The message I want to leave you with is simple: Don't wait. AI and emerging technologies are not just the future—they're the present. And they're ready to deliver real ROI for your business if you know where to apply them. My challenge to you is to go back to your teams and ask: Where are we spending time on high-complexity, short-deadline tasks that AI could handle? Once you've identified those areas, take the first step. Implement a cost-effective AI solution and measure the impact. You'll likely be surprised by how quickly the benefits start to add up.

AI isn't just about cutting-edge innovation or tech buzzwords. It's about solving real business problems and creating tangible, measurable value. The sooner you start, the sooner you'll see the results.

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