



THE SOUL OF THE PROFESSION

AI, Entry-Level Work, and the Future of Advancement



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Executive Summary

The advancement profession is entering an era of rapid experimentation with artificial intelligence. We are told that autonomous AI agents could automate nearly every aspect of an advancement operation: data entry, research, prospect identification, portfolio management, meeting preparation, stewardship, communications, data maintenance, and other activities that have historically occupied significant portions of advancement staff members' time.

Much of this experimentation is marketed to our field as an opportunity to eliminate “low-value” work so that fundraisers can spend more time on “high-value” human relationships. No one disputes that fundraisers should be out in front of donors more.

We ask a different question: **What happens to a profession when it automates the work through which people become professionals?**

Entry-level advancement jobs are not simply collections of low-value tasks. *They are the on ramp into the profession.* They are where people acquire institutional knowledge, practice judgment, observe experienced fundraisers, learn how donors behave, develop technical fluency, and begin building the professional capital that eventually allows them to assume more senior and consequential roles.

Some of the work performed in entry-level advancement positions is tedious. Some should absolutely be automated. The question is not whether automation is permissible. It is whether advancement leaders are accounting for the developmental function of the work they automate. Increasingly, it seems to us that they are not.

This matters because the advancement profession already has significant inequities in compensation, representation, and access to leadership. If organizations disproportionately eliminate the roles through which people enter and advance within the profession, the effects will not be evenly distributed. **The result could be a profession that is more productive in the short term but less capable of sustaining itself in the long term.**

This is not an argument against technology. It is an argument for the soul of the profession.

Advancement leaders should ask not only what AI can do for today's workforce, but what happens to tomorrow's workforce when AI performs the work through which people learn to become fundraisers.



The Questions We Are Not Asking

The current conversation about AI in advancement is understandably focused on capability:

- Can AI identify prospects?
- Can it summarize research?
- Can it prepare a fundraiser for a meeting?
- Can it draft correspondence?
- Can an AI agent perform fundraising or donor relations tasks autonomously?
- Can an advancement organization redesign its workforce around these capabilities?

These are reasonable questions, but they are not sufficient.

Increasingly, the conversation has moved beyond using AI as a tool and toward using AI as a component of the workforce itself. Advancement leaders are being invited to consider AI agents as organizational actors: entities with defined responsibilities, measurable outputs, and roles within the structure of an advancement department. This represents a significant conceptual shift.

When AI is a *tool*, the primary question is: What can this technology help a person do?

But when AI becomes part of *workforce design*, the question becomes: What work should a person do at all?

That second question has consequences that extend far beyond productivity. It is a question about careers, about professional formation. It is a question about who gets to enter a profession and who gets to stay there.

And ultimately, it is a question about what kind of profession advancement intends to become.



The On Ramp is the Profession

There is a persistent tendency to describe entry-level work according to the complexity of the individual tasks involved:

- Enter a gift.
- Research a prospect.
- Update a record.
- Prepare a briefing.
- Schedule a meeting.
- Draft a follow-up.
- Pull a list.
- Document an interaction.

These tasks may be relatively straightforward. But task complexity is not the same thing as economic value, and it is *certainly* not the same thing as developmental value. **A task can be easy and economical to automate and still be essential to professional development.**

A junior advancement professional may spend considerable time performing tasks that are individually routine while simultaneously developing capabilities that will become extraordinarily valuable over the course of a career.

Consider the kinds of skills built by early-career fundraisers:

- They learn how to distinguish meaningful information from noise.
- They learn what constitutes a useful research question.
- They learn how a prospect's interests intersect with an organization's priorities.
- They learn what a productive donor meeting looks like.
- They learn to recognize signals.
- They learn how to document strategy.
- They learn how to work inside an institution.
- They learn how experienced fundraisers think.
- Eventually, if given the opportunity, they begin to exercise that judgment themselves.

The work is therefore doing two things simultaneously: it produces an organizational output AND it produces a professional.

AI automation discussions tend to measure the first thing and ignore the second.



We Have Confused Low-Paid with Low-Value

The language of “low-value work” itself deserves scrutiny.

In organizational settings, work is often implicitly assigned value according to its compensation, status, seniority, or perceived complexity. An employee's salary represents the organization's current price for that person's labor. It does not represent the total economic value of the work, the potential value of the individual, or the developmental value of the experience.

The fundraising profession itself—as evidenced by best practices laid out by CFRE International and the Association of Fundraising Professionals—is quite clear on this distinction already and has long recognized that fundraising expertise develops through experience and professional performance. The CFRE credentialing framework, for example, explicitly incorporates professional practice and documented fundraising performance into its certification process.

And yet, vendors and promoters of AI agents for advancement are trying to play both sides: they call the work of early career advancement professionals low value when describing the people who perform it, while simultaneously calling the same work high value when describing the capabilities they want an AI agent to perform.

“You can’t say that the same work is low value when a low-paid human does it, but high value when an AI agent does it.”

So which one is it? You can’t say that the same work is low value when a low-paid human does it, but high value when an AI agent does it.

The Missing Rung

Every mature profession requires some mechanism for transforming novices into experienced practitioners. Advancement is no exception.

People enter the profession in different ways and through different roles. Successful fundraisers started their careers as administrative assistants, development associates, and even business analysts. But the basic pattern is familiar: early-career employees acquire knowledge and judgment through exposure to the work, gradually assume more



responsibility, and eventually become capable of performing work that requires significantly more discretion.

The organizational ladder is therefore also a learning system, and AI-enabled workforce redesign risks damaging or even destroying that system.

Suppose an organization eliminates a collection of foundational entry-level responsibilities because an AI agent can perform them faster and at greater quantity. The organization may rationally conclude that it has improved productivity. But it has also removed a set of experiences through which employees previously developed professional judgment.

If enough of those experiences disappear, the profession has a problem: **Where will experienced fundraisers come from?** They do not emerge fully formed from Zeus' head.

If every organization does the same thing, the profession collectively has outsourced the production of its future practitioners without establishing who will produce them. This is the missing-rung problem. A profession cannot indefinitely remove the bottom of its career ladder and assume that the top will remain populated.

AI Can Make Today's Fundraisers Better While Making Tomorrow's Fundraisers Worse

This is perhaps the most important paradox in the debate, because it's true that AI agents may genuinely make experienced fundraisers more productive.

An experienced fundraiser who can delegate research, synthesis, preparation, documentation, and administrative work to an AI agent may have more time for donor relationships and strategic thinking. And they ought to.

That can be good for the fundraiser. It can be good for the institution. It can be good for donors. And it can be good for philanthropy.

But the same intervention can simultaneously make it harder for inexperienced people to acquire the capabilities that experienced fundraisers already possess.

The experienced fundraiser does not need AI to teach them how to recognize a meaningful donor signal. They already learned that. The junior fundraiser may have needed years of



exposure to develop that ability. The AI system inherits the output of the experienced professional's accumulated judgment without necessarily reproducing the developmental process through which that judgment was acquired.

This creates a vicious problem: AI can increase the productivity of today's experienced fundraisers while reducing the profession's capacity to produce tomorrow's experienced fundraisers. And when those experienced fundraisers are promoting AI agents as part of a workforce development strategy, they are essentially pulling the ladder up behind them so no one else can climb it.

Who Gets to Enter the Profession?

The workforce consequences become more significant when considered alongside the advancement profession's existing inequalities.

Fundraising is not an evenly distributed labor market. Compensation, representation, access to leadership, and career advancement have never been independent of race, gender, socioeconomic status, professional networks, and institutional opportunity. That means we cannot reasonably or ethically treat the disappearance of entry-level roles as a neutral event. We can't use passive voice here.

If the profession has historically provided people with an opportunity to enter at one level and advance over time, eliminating that entry point changes the accessibility of the profession itself. This is particularly important for people who do not begin their careers with the networks or credentials

necessary to enter directly into senior advancement positions. The entry-level position may be the mechanism through which they acquire those networks and credentials.

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So when leaders discuss eliminating entry-level work, they should also ask:

1. Who loses access to the profession when the entry point disappears?
and
2. Who benefits from a profession that becomes increasingly dependent on already-experienced workers?

These are workforce equity questions, not technology questions.



The Leadership Blind Spot

The current enthusiasm around AI agents in advancement is particularly striking because much of the conversation is occurring among people who are far removed from entry-level work.

Senior advancement leaders are being asked to imagine “Human + AI” organizations, redesign workflows, and determine which responsibilities should belong to humans and which can belong to AI agents.

The questions being posed are increasingly organizational rather than technological:

- Where can AI give us back time?
- Where can it make us better at our jobs?
- How might it allow us to rethink how our organizations are designed?

These are legitimate questions.

Senior leaders also have legitimate fiduciary responsibilities. A chief advancement officer cannot simply disregard the possibility that a technology could allow an organization to raise more money, improve service, or operate more efficiently. There may be circumstances in which choosing not to automate would itself be irresponsible.

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A profession that optimizes today's workforce without investing in tomorrow's workforce may discover, too late, that tomorrow's workforce never arrives.

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But there is a question missing from much of this conversation: **Who gets the benefit of the time we save?**

Consider a senior fundraiser whose time is consumed by initial prospect qualification, meeting preparation, follow-up, writing, and other preparatory work. An AI agent may genuinely give that person back hours that can be spent cultivating donors, developing

strategy, and exercising judgment. That can be an excellent use of technology.

But the same work has a different function for someone earlier in their career.



The early-career fundraiser preparing the briefing is not merely producing a briefing. They are learning how to determine what information matters. They are learning how to recognize a meaningful signal in a donor's history. They are learning how experienced fundraisers think about relationships, capacity, timing, and opportunity. They are learning the vocabulary and judgment of the profession.

So, what happens to this early-career fundraiser who has not yet developed the skills to shortcut with an AI agent?

An experienced fundraiser who no longer prepares a donor briefing may have decades of accumulated experience from which to exercise judgment. A person at the beginning of their career does not. If the preparatory work disappears before they have had the opportunity to perform it, observe its consequences, receive feedback, and gradually take on more complex responsibilities, the organization has not simply eliminated a task. It has eliminated a learning opportunity.

This creates a difficult tension between the rationality of individual organizational decisions and the sustainability of the profession as a whole.

A leader may reasonably conclude:

“Given our current budget, we can generate greater fundraising capacity by deploying an autonomous AI agent rather than hiring additional entry-level staff.”

That may be a rational decision for an institution today. But if every institution makes the same decision, the profession collectively incurs a different cost as the work through which fundraisers have traditionally developed is systematically removed.

The organizations making these decisions today are drawing on a workforce that was developed through years of entry-level work. They are benefiting from an apprenticeship system they did not have to create themselves.

This is what makes the current enthusiasm about AI agents more consequential than a discussion about efficiency. **We are not simply deciding which tasks should be automated. We are making decisions about the structure of the profession itself.**



And those decisions distribute benefits unevenly. Increased efficiency is not the same thing as shared opportunity.

The senior professional may get more time for strategy. The organization may get more output for the same budget. The technology provider gets revenue. Investors may get returns.

But what does the person at the bottom of the career ladder get?

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We cannot reasonably or ethically treat the disappearance of entry-level roles as a neutral event.

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If the answer is fewer opportunities to enter the profession, fewer opportunities to practice foundational skills, and fewer opportunities to advance into the jobs that today's leaders occupy, then we are failing the aspiring advancement leaders of today and disincentivizing those of tomorrow.

And a profession that optimizes today's workforce without investing in tomorrow's workforce may discover, too late, that tomorrow's workforce never arrives.

“AI for Good” is Not an Ethical Analysis

The nonprofit sector is particularly susceptible to a comforting marketing catchphrase: “AI for Good.” The phrase is attractive because it allows organizations to place technological transformation inside an existing moral framework.

But “AI for Good” is not an ethical conclusion: it is a fig leaf to give us permission to yield professional agency and center AI inevitability. We humans have an ethical responsibility to examine what AI really means for our profession:

- Good for whom?
- Who gets what benefits?
- Who bears the costs?
- Who gets more productive?
- Who loses employment?
- Who gains authority?
- Who loses bargaining power?
- Who gets access to the profession?
- Who loses that access?



An AI system can simultaneously produce a positive outcome for an institution and a negative outcome for the profession as a whole. It can increase philanthropic revenue while reducing career opportunities for future fundraisers who need to know how to increase philanthropic revenue. It can make a senior fundraiser more productive while eliminating the junior role that would have produced the next senior fundraiser. It can improve an organization's current capacity while weakening the profession's future capacity.

The ethical question is not whether AI can do good. AI is a tool and a product, and using it makes someone money. Probably not you.

The real ethical question is: Who gets the good, and who is asked to absorb the cost?

The Dignity of the Profession

There is a deeper issue beneath classifying AI as part of workforce planning: the dignity of the profession itself.

When we describe the work performed by entry-level professionals as “low value” because it is routine, inexpensive, or performed by junior employees, we are making a statement about what we believe counts as professional work.

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A profession is dignified when it takes seriously the people who perform its work.

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We risk constructing a hierarchy in which the only work worthy of a human doing it is work performed by people who have already achieved seniority. That is backwards.

Professional dignity does not require that every task be intellectually complex. A profession is dignified when it takes seriously the people who perform its work, the knowledge they develop, and the responsibility the profession has to transmit that knowledge.

The junior employee is not merely an inexpensive pair of hands. They are a new practitioner and an emerging professional. If we eliminate their work without replacing the developmental function of that work, we are not merely changing workflows.

We are changing who gets to become a professional.



A Different Standard for AI Adoption

None of this requires advancement organizations to reject AI. It requires them to adopt it more thoughtfully.

Before automating an entry-level function, leaders should ask:

1. **What problem are we actually solving?** Are we eliminating unnecessary work, or are we eliminating a position because the position is inexpensive to replace?
2. **What capability does this work currently develop?** What do employees learn by doing it?
3. **Is the task low-value, or merely low-complexity?** Are we conflating the two?
4. **What happens to the apprenticeship function?** If AI performs the work, where will employees acquire the same knowledge and judgment?
5. **What happens to the career ladder?** What is the new pathway from inexperienced professional to experienced professional?
6. **Who bears the cost?** Employees, applicants, early-career professionals, institutions, vendors, or the profession as a whole?
7. **Who benefits?** Does the benefit accrue primarily to the institution, the donor, the fundraiser, the technology vendor, or some combination?
8. **What are the equity implications?** Who currently occupies the role being automated? Who is most likely to lose access to the profession if the role disappears?
9. **Are we improving current capacity at the expense of future capacity?** A productivity gain today is not necessarily sustainable if it consumes the system that creates future expertise.
10. **If this role disappears, what replaces it?** Not merely the task, the whole function.

A Profession Worth Preserving

The advancement profession should embrace technology. It should eliminate pointless administrative work. It should use AI to help professionals think better, prepare better, synthesize information better, and spend more time doing work that genuinely requires human judgment.

But technological progress should not be defined solely by how much human labor can be removed.

A profession is not merely a collection of tasks waiting to be optimized. It is a body of knowledge. It is a community of practice. It is a system for transmitting judgment. It is a career ladder. It is a means by which inexperienced people become experienced people. It is, ultimately, a human institution.

The advancement profession has an opportunity to build an AI-enabled future that is more productive without becoming less human. But that requires leaders to recognize a fundamental truth: The work at the bottom of the profession is not separate from the profession. It is how the profession sustains itself.

If we remove the on-ramp, we cannot be surprised when fewer people arrive. If we eliminate the apprenticeship, we cannot assume the skills will remain available to teach or to learn. If we consume today's professional capacity without investing in tomorrow's, we should not call the result sustainable.

The question before advancement is therefore not whether AI will change the profession, because it will. It already has.

We should instead be asking: **What should humans continue to learn by doing?**

And ultimately: **What kind of advancement profession do we want the people who come after us to inherit?**

That is not a technology question. It is the soul of the profession.

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