

FROM INCREDIBLE PROMISE TO INTELLIGENT PRACTICE

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A PRACTICE
BASED
WHITEPAPER

Translating Generative AI into Real-World Capabilities →

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01

OVERVIEW

— FOREWORD & EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
& INTRODUCTION —

FOREWORD

This paper is not about the hype around generative AI. This paper is about how we're using new tech to stay true to our commitment to elevate creativity in everything we do

JACQUES BURGER
Co-Founder & Chief Executive Officer
The Up&Up Group

Across our group, generative AI has moved from curiosity to capability. The most important shift for us has not been technological, but behavioural. The conversations, frameworks and practices captured in this paper reveal a clear pattern: Value is not created by access to tools, but by how intelligently we choose to apply them.

AI is most powerful when it sharpens judgment. It cannot replace it. It accelerates research, expands thinking, stress-tests ideas, and increases productivity in tasks – not jobs. But in every discipline across our group, the same approach remains: Human context, accountability, and diversity of skill-sets remain our decisive advantage. The organisations that will win are not those that adopt AI fastest, but those that embed it most thoughtfully.

This paper should be read as a practical guide that reflects our lived experience: Where AI is working, where restraint is required, and how governance must mature. It introduces Intelligent Practice as our approach to blending new technology with our people – and a way

of ensuring our services are elevated, rather than diluted.

Years from now, the tools will be unrecognisable. What must remain constant is our commitment to creativity, trust and performance. This paper is an invitation to lead deliberately in a moment that rewards speed, but ultimately demands wisdom.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We believe that using AI is not the same as creating meaningful value with Generative AI.

Our Intelligent Practice approach integrates human expertise, data, AI and automation to drive meaningful value for our clients – not just activity.

80%

OF STAFF REPORT THAT THEIR AI SKILLS HAVE IMPROVED IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS

81%

OF STAFF FEELING SUPPORTED TO USE AI CONFIDENTLY.

01/ Using AI is no longer a challenge, creating real value with it is.

02/ Context matters. From evolving regulations to innovation in tech, to ethical concerns, to responsible adoption: business impact cannot be measured by efficiency-only metrics.

03/ Efficiency, effectiveness, trust, and capability are four value levers that build sustainable impact: Only when looked at together.

04/ Better work doesn't mean more of the same: Using Generative AI to improve quality, protect brands, and strengthen our teams delivers confidence not only internally, but between brands and consumers.

05/ Strategy, creativity, judgment, and cultural understanding is still the cornerstone of effective marketing – not AI.

06/ Prioritising incremental, compounding impact promotes the sustainable growth of brands and consumer trust.

07/ Knowing where to use AI and where to avoid it is critical for the growth of our brands, and consumer trust.

08/ Human judgment remains central to the work we do, as AI reshapes workflows up-front, not down the line.

09/ AI is influencing workflows, not just outputs – which signals maturity in our AI adoption journey.



INTRODUCTION

The promise that generative AI holds is immense, and throughout the past 5 years when this technology entered the mainstream innovation has reached an all-time high.

It's an incredibly hard task to keep up-to-date with tech that promises to disrupt everything: From ways of working, to job security, to the lack of regulation around it, to adoption struggles – the excitement about potential is real.

We've taken an approach to new tech by not losing focus of what makes The Up&Up Group successful, but by finding real, tangible ways tech can complement what we do. And to grow accordingly.

The Up&Up Group is an award-winning creative group of companies, and we're in the business of up.

- **(Advertising) M+C Saatchi Abel:** Creating more distinctive brands that stand out.
- **(Media) Connect:** Designing for attention in a distracted world.
- **(Public Relations & Reputation) Razor:** Finding and leading the most powerful conversations.
- **(Sponsorship & Experiential) Leverage:** Turning audiences into a brand's fan base.
- **(Relationship Design) Black&White:** Unlocking the potential of customer touchpoints.
- **(Content Marketing) 2Stories:** Creating stories people love and buy.

**EVERYTHING WE DO IS DESIGNED TO
ELEVATE CLIENT COLLABORATION,
CREATE SMARTER SOLUTIONS
AND DRIVE AGILITY.**



02

THE
HYPE IS
REAL

The advertising industry has been flooded with claims about the promise of AI – at Cannes Lions 2025¹, everybody from big global groups to smaller independents wanted to show off their latest tech, and today, nine out of 10 agencies now claim to use some form of AI (with about two-thirds using generative AI)².

This enthusiasm reflects a genuine inflection point: Gen AI's sudden rise captured the world's imagination, and the advertising industry jumped at the chance of capitalising on the promise of faster, better, and cheaper.

In 2026, a healthy reality check is settling in. Not every AI demo or pilot yields real value. Many of these pilots struggle to scale into real workflows to deliver measurable return on investment³.

Smart advertisers are moving beyond experimentation toward disciplined implementation⁴, asking hard questions about whether AI is truly changing how work is done, versus if it's genuinely improving outcomes.



GARTNER HYPE CYCLE |
Read More here

In South Africa, marketing teams echo a pragmatic view: They see AI as a powerful enhancer of content and strategy, but the “human element is still necessary” and marketing cannot depend entirely on automation. In other words, AI can amplify, but not replace – it's a tool to eliminate the drudgery, which allows greater thinking capabilities.

The past two years mark a breakout moment for AI in advertising. Generative AI's ability to create (copy, images, music and video) represents a step-change in the perception of marketing productivity. In a McKinsey study⁵ from 2025, they estimate generative AI could add US\$2.6-4.4 trillion in global economic value across industries. Analysts predicted that in 2025, nearly 30% of all outbound marketing messages from enterprises will be AI-generated⁶.

This boom was sparked by how accessible tools like ChatGPT have become, and how the models are advancing. New applications are emerging on a weekly basis, and cloud platforms and APIs have made advanced artificial intelligence accessible to everybody. The result is an inflection point where AI is transitioning from a niche experiment to a proven marketing tool⁷.

At the same time, marketing teams

worldwide are at different stages of AI adoption. While nearly all are piloting or planning uses, only a small cohort has fully scaled generative AI with transformative impact⁸.

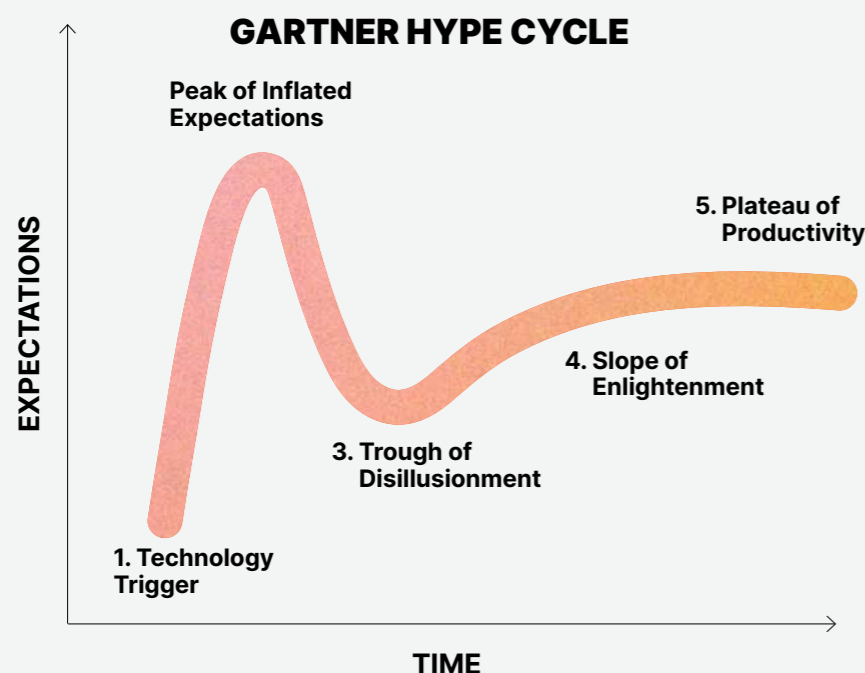


MIT STUDY | **Download the pdf**

If we bring it closer to home, there are a few stark local realities that influence these global trend cycles and predictions:

A survey of African executives found over one-third cite “limited infrastructure” as a roadblock to scaling AI⁹. To give you an idea how limited we are: Africa has less than 1% of global data centre capacity¹⁰.

Regulation and policy are another key factor. South Africa's existing data laws (like the Protection of Personal Information Act, POPIA) provide important privacy guardrails, but they were “not built with generative AI in mind”¹¹. Across the rest of Africa, AI regulation is still evolving and somewhat fragmented, creating further uncertainty. Organisations worry about how to navigate intellectual property and privacy issues with AI in the absence of clear guidelines. There is consensus that appropriate legal frameworks are needed to define ethical boundaries and standards for AI¹². The recommendation from experts is for multi-stakeholder working groups (i.e. government, academia, industry) to continuously review and update regulations so that innovation can proceed in an



“optimal and accountable environment”¹³.

Ethics is another hurdle: Not just from a usage perspective, but from a brand and agency perspective. On a global level, Cannes Lions introduced new integrity standards¹⁴ to combat the manipulation Generative AI allows – but that’s in reaction to a symptom of AI-use, and does not address the root of the problem.

Foundationally, generative AI models are trained on datasets that incorporate copyrighted works (text and imagery) often without explicit consent (as in the case of Stable Diffusion), which has led to ongoing litigation¹⁵. Ethical liabilities (like the creation of deepfakes or asking an image generation tool to alter photography without the model/photographer’s

consent) poses a strong question around whether speed and cost advantages promised by generative AI outweighs the risk of authenticity, consumer trust, and respect for creative and personal rights¹⁶.

Cultural and talent factors are another critical factor to consider. There is both excitement and anxiety about AI’s impact on jobs in a country with a 33% unemployment rate¹⁷.

While the promise of AI is that at some point in the future the tech will displace some roles, a more realistic view would be to see how workers can be upskilled and reskilled so that people can use AI to enhance what they currently do. Employers and government can help by incentivising retention and training, which

in turn could generate new opportunities. Culturally, South Africa has a leapfrogging mindset: Think how African businesses have focused on mobile banking¹⁸ due to scarce traditional infrastructure and access – and AI could enable the same.

From AI translators preserving indigenous languages to the automation of financial reports in local dialects¹⁹. This sort of ingenuity bodes well, and public-private partnerships can play a vital role in pooling resources to roll out AI widely and equitably.

Ultimately, addressing local realities: From closing infrastructure gaps to crafting sensible regulations and building an AI-ready workforce – will ensure we can move from promise to practice.



1 <https://www.forrester.com/blogs/cannes-lions-2025-the-ai-challenge-for-brands-and-agencies/>
 2 <https://www.thecurrent.com/marketing-strategy-ai-reshaping-cannes-media-agency-model/>
 3 <https://www.thecurrent.com/marketing-strategy-ai-reshaping-cannes-media-agency-model>
 4 <https://mitsloan.mit.edu/ideas-made-to-matter/scaling-ai-results-strategies-mit-sloan-management-review/>
 5 <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/leading-not-lagging-africas-gen-ai-opportunity>
 6 <https://aws.amazon.com/blogs/industries/advertising-week-new-york-2023s-key-generative-ai-takeaways/#:~:text=With%20an%20ability%20to%20create,the%20result%20of%20generative%20AI>
 7 <https://www.gartner.com/en/articles/beyond-chatgpt-the-future-of-generative-ai-for-enterprises/>
 8 https://mlq.ai/media/quarterly_decks/v0.1_State_of_AI_in_Business_2025_Report.pdf/
 9 <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/leading-not-lagging-africas-gen-ai-opportunity>
 10 <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/world-bank-backs-africa-digital-data-push-with-100-million-raxio-deal-2025-04-03/>
 11 <https://themediainline.co.za/2025/09/four-essential-actions-to-safeguard-ai-adoption-in-south-africa/#:~:text=The%20first%20action%20is%20to,frameworks%20designed%20to%20govern%20it>
 12 <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/south-africa-and-artificial-intelligence>
 13 <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2023/south-africa-and-artificial-intelligence#:~:text=AI%20risks,and%20accountable%20environment%20for%20all>
 14 <https://www.canneslions.com/statement-cannes-lions-introduces-global-integrity-standards/>
 15 <https://www.judiciary.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Getty-Images-v-Stability-AI.pdf/>
 16 https://data.aclum.org/storage/2025/01/FTC_www_ftc_gov_policy_advocacy-research_tech-at-ftc_2025_01_ai-risk-consumer-harm.pdf/
 17 <https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2025.pdf/>
 18 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/globalindex/brief/data-from-the-global-findex-2021-the-impact-of-mobile-money-in-sub-saharan-africa/>
 19 <https://www.up.ac.za/news/found-translation/>

03

THE REALITY

In practice, AI's impact has been much more incremental than explosive. AI innovation, when explained, is not radically new – it's marketing jargon. For others, it's revolution. For us, it's a natural evolution of how we work.

HELLO INTELLIGENT PRACTICE

WE'VE DEVELOPED AN APPROACH CALLED INTELLIGENT PRACTICE, WHICH IS THE WAY IN WHICH WE INTEGRATE:

(01)

HUMAN INTELLIGENCE

200+ multi-disciplinary strategy, technology and creative team members

(02)

DATA

With access to some of the most robust consumer data sets like GWI, YouGov and Brandwatch, as well as our Eighty20 partnership, our solutions are fuelled by data-driven insights.

(03)

AI

Our teams are equipped to leverage the power AI responsibly to expand what's possible across strategic, creative and operational delivery.

(04)

AUTOMATION

We're constantly looking at ways to automate our processes to deliver greater agility and transparency for our Clients.

It's an approach that ensures we continue delivering exceptional work as a creative group of companies, while ensuring we keep a keen eye on technological advances.



04

WHAT THIS MEANS

As a business, we've invested in setting up a specialised team that focuses on generative AI and Automation to complement what we already do. This team has:

- **Developed the Up&Up Group Policy** which guides our teams on responsible and sustainable use of generative AI and Automation
- **Developed training** for the group to instil a common lexicon around the ever-changing world of AI and Automation
- **Deployed generative AI tools** that complement our business, and amplifies creative outputs.



05

MAPPING AI APPLICATIONS ACROSS DISCIPLINES

—HOW WE'RE APPLYING AI
ACROSS OUR BUSINESS—

We've carefully reconciled the capabilities of tools with our scope of work and invested in AI-powered tools that unlock small wins, that build big success stories.

This approach helps us train staff on principles, not on ever-changing tech, while at the same time allowing for the integration of tools in a way that doesn't disrupt business as usual.

THE BIGGEST FACTOR TO CONSIDER WHEN MAPPING AI APPLICATIONS WOULD BE THE DEPENDENCIES OF THE JOB. SOMETIMES AI CAN HELP, BUT OTHER TIMES, AI CAN HINDER.

DEPENDENCIES:

	TEAM	INTELLIGENT PRACTICE	EXAMPLES
→ AI Policy: If there's no policy in place, the use of AI in marketing collateral can open brands up to severe reputational risk.	Strategy	AI can accelerate research (across competitors, trends, audiences, sectors) – but strategy is fundamentally human-led.	Prompt Templates that tie to a strategic framework (I.e SWOT analysis, competitor mapping)
→ Creative Guardrails: Having AI principles to guide the application also is critical to ensure clarity, and distinctive marketing collateral.	Creative	AI can help with concepting, and in live work if clients are comfortable.	Composing imagery, developing look/feel, social assets
→ AI readiness: How well creative teams are acquainted with Generative AI tools also factor into delivery. If there's a certain comfort level, timing isn't an issue. If testing is needed, timing becomes an issue.	Production	Repetitive tasks (roll-out of different sizes/format) can be automated	Modular design that is templatised, but with variations
→ Timing: Quick turnaround jobs rely on tech in place, teams' availability, and experience navigating tools. Iterative prompting takes time – which isn't always in supply.	Operations	AI can assist in automating labour-intensive work that doesn't have a human impact	A GPT that filters irrelevant CVs when it comes to talent planning



PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS



In Relationships

BY MASEGO MOTSOGI

MD: M+C Saatchi Abel

AI has not changed the fundamentals of our business, but it has materially raised expectations. Clients no longer judge us purely on output; they judge us on the clarity of our thinking, the speed of our insight, and our ability to help them make confident decisions in increasingly complex environments. GenAI has compressed research timelines and expanded access to information, allowing us to enter client conversations informed and directional rather than exploratory. It enables faster scenario modelling, sharper strategic starting points, and more responsive partnership.

However, while AI accelerates process, it does not replace judgment. It does not understand internal politics, board sensitivities, legacy tensions, or the

nuanced realities of a client's operating context. That responsibility remains firmly human. This is where Intelligent Practice becomes critical for us. Not as a tool, but as an approach. It is the disciplined integration of AI into how we work with clear guardrails, human oversight, and contextual accountability.

Intelligent Practice demands deliberate application, transparency with clients, and a clear articulation of where augmentation ends and authorship begins. Over the next five years, transparency around AI usage will become standard, intelligence will shift from novelty to infrastructure, and the true differentiator will be proprietary data, institutional knowledge, and leadership layered on top of technology. For us, embedding Intelligent Practice as a strategic operating philosophy (and not a productivity shortcut) will strengthen trust, distinctiveness, and sustained growth in both client and partner relationships.



In Creativity

BY NEO MASHIGO

CCO: *The Up&Up Group*

Creativity has never been about tools. It has always been about tension – between culture and commerce, instinct and evidence, risk and responsibility. AI doesn't threaten that tension; it intensifies it. What I see is not the automation of creativity, but the exposure of it. When everyone has access to generative tools, the baseline rises. Craft becomes faster. References become infinite. Production becomes frictionless. But stand-out creativity? That becomes rarer. And therefore more valuable.

Through the lens of Intelligent Practice, AI is not a shortcut to ideas; it is a discipline around how we generate, interrogate and refine them. It allows us to explore more territories at speed, to prototype before we persuade, to test ideas before we commit.

It can stretch thinking laterally, surface unseen connections, and help teams escape the gravitational pull of the obvious. But it cannot feel culture shifting. It cannot sense when a brand needs bravery rather than optimisation. That is still human work.

The future of creativity will not belong to those who use AI most aggressively, but to those who use it most intentionally. Intelligent Practice demands that we protect the distinct voice of our brands, resist homogenised language, and apply judgment with rigor. It requires clear authorship, ethical clarity, and creative leadership that knows when to amplify with technology and when to strip it away. In five years, AI will be embedded in every creative workflow. The differentiator will not be access, but taste. Not output, but point of view. The role of the agencies will evolve from idea generation to creating true, valuable meaning – ensuring that in a world of infinite content, the work still moves people, shifts culture, and builds enduring brands.



In PR

BY WYNAND COETZER

Partner & Head of Strategy: *Razor*

In PR, Generative AI has proved most valuable as an accelerator of research and a “thinking partner” in terms of creating scenarios or frameworks for clients. However, AI should never be used in high-risk scenarios, especially when a brand's reputation is at stake. AI lacks deep contextual understanding of a brand's history, sensitivities and stakeholder dynamics, and unchecked use can lead to generic outputs that erode originality and credibility.

A dead giveaway for us is also speed. When someone responds to a relatively complex ask within an hour, you can assume AI was involved. Human judgment remains central. I think most people assume that AI is correct. More often than not it is close – but not perfect.

Nothing can replace the contextual knowledge you have of a clients' business. AI will never be able to “know” all of those factors. I think there will be two types of creativity in the future: Those that focus on quantity of output will probably be more reliant on AI. But this novelty will fade, and brands will place a premium on human-made creativity.



In Digital Creative

BY RORY MACROBERT

Digital ECD: *M+C Saatchi Abel*

In digital creative work, Generative AI has expanded the scope and scale of what teams can produce, particularly when combined with strong animation, design and art direction capabilities. Used well, it unlocks new forms of content exploration. The creative aesthetic of AI is bland, tasteless and forgettable. While anyone can use AI to create content, without an edge or a unique vision, that content will find itself in the depths of the sea of AI slop. The need for old-school craft is more important today than ever before.

AI's arrival has made me realise just how rare true creativity really is, and how creativity is something that breathes life into people. AI can understand

the mechanics of humour, or the facts of a cultural insight, but has no lived experience with which to create anything of substance. Accuracy must never be taken at face value. While GenAI often sounds impressive, when you dive into the details, you'll often find the gaps in its understanding. It's powerful at dumb work, or to set the foundations of a project – but the detail and the insights need to come from the person using it.

My hope is that people don't forget that humans are creative animals. ROI, speed of deployment, automation – these are all massive positives brought on by emerging technologies, by themselves don't make anything of interest to the consumer. As the creative field upgrades its software, the work we produce still needs to connect to the flesh-and-blood people that consumer it – and that means greater emotion, and creativity that makes you truly feel something.



In CRM

BY KATHRYN MCKAY

Partner: *Black&White*

Within CRM, Generative AI has enabled faster conceptualisation through visualisation, storyboarding and journey mapping, helping teams and clients align earlier around ideas. Its strength lies in simplifying complexity and accelerating early-state thinking. However, over-reliance introduces real risks: Flattening creative voice, weakening instincts and shortening the exploratory process that foster strong conceptual thinking.

I do worry that we always aim to stand out from a sea of sameness and the temptation to rely on AI will no help us to elevate creativity.

Human judgment remains essential in deciding when to push beyond the first solution and preserve originality. Used responsibly, AI streamlines processes and clarifies thinking – but it must never replace curiosity, intuition or the disciplined creative journey that leads to distinctive CRM experiences.

My hope is that the excitement of AI isn't overtaken by unilateral adoption. And I guess I hope it makes us better. Creatively, conceptually, for ourselves, and for our clients – but ultimately for the work.



In Media

BY BONGIWE MVUYANA

Strategy Partner: *Connect*

In media, generative AI has delivered tangible value by accelerating analysis across large, complex datasets. This has enabled faster pattern recognition, scenario modeling and strategic conversations with senior clients.

The use of AI must never replace human ingenuity. Our lived experiences shape the intelligence that helps us to connect with each other, solve daily problems, create cultures and engage the world in a nuanced way. This is why we must always be the ones shaping our strategies and using AI as a strategic apprentice that takes on the heavy lifting in analysis, scenario planning and visualisation

– freeing us up to focus more on strategic thinking. Judgment has shifted toward evaluating relevance and robustness, with AI often used to stress-test strategic recommendations through counterarguments and alternative scenarios.

The key trade-off lies between efficiencies and trust in media automation. Media people often find themselves “going into the weeds” in the many excel sheets and lines of data that we go through. This may offer one comfort in having gone through every line item themselves – but this control is something we have to accept.

We need to loosen a bit, in order to make space for deep thinking and stronger strategies. My hope is that in the next 5 years, creativity will be more behaviour-informed and nuanced across platforms, now that we’re able to model campaigns to the right patterns and insights.



In Strategy

BY MAKOSHA MAJA-RASETHABA

Chief Strategy Officer: *M+C Saatchi Abel*

In strategy, generative AI has proven useful as a springboard to reduce research time, supporting framework development and helping sell ideas through clearer visualisation.

However, using AI to write strategy introduces significant risk. Without deep business, brand and cultural context, AI outputs tend to be generic, inaccurate or misaligned. Human judgment has

become even more critical, particularly in validating insights, interrogating assumptions and ensuring relevant to brands’ realities. The core trade-offs I’ve seen are speed versus depth, and convenience versus contextual accuracy.

At its best, AI sharpens thinking and accelerates momentums. At its worst, it shortcuts the very insight that strategy exists to provide. My hope is that creativity gets better. AI and tech can never do what humans can, and this should be an opportunity for a return to what makes us most human, and understanding how to use AI and tech to augment – not replace.



06

OUR PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES

AI BY THE NUMBERS

As a group, we've been on a journey to upskill our teams in using Generative AI in real, responsible and practical ways. Continuous training and capability are a consistent part of how we're staying ahead of the curve, and our staff survey reveals adoption is maturing.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I understand when it is appropriate to use AI in my work	0.9%	0.9%	6.1%	49.1%	43%
I feel confident in judging the quality of AI outputs	0.9%	0.9%	18.4%	43%	36.8%
I know when not to use AI	0.9%	1.8%	9.6%	40.4%	47.4%
I feel supported by training and peers when using AI tools	1.8%	3.5%	42.1%	34.2%	18.4%

Our survey highlighted three initiatives that have built confidence and improved adoption:

01. Our policy is clear and practical, making our people feel safe.
02. Our inspiration sessions are helping people see the possibilities.
03. Our training workshops are consistently building staff skills.

21%
NO

DO YOU FEEL CONFIDENT USING AI TOOLS FOR YOUR SPECIFIC ROLE OR TASKS?

79%
YES

14%
AI RARELY IMPROVES MY WORK

WHICH STATEMENT BEST REFLECTS YOUR EXPERIENCE?

53%
AI SOMETIMES IMPROVES MY WORK

33%
AI USUALLY IMPROVES MY WORK

12% IT'S EMBEDDED IN MY WORKFLOWS

8% IT'S PART OF WHAT I DO

11% I AM AWARE OF IT

AT WHAT STAGE WOULD YOU SAY YOU ARE IN ADOPTING AI?

36%
I USE IT REGULARLY

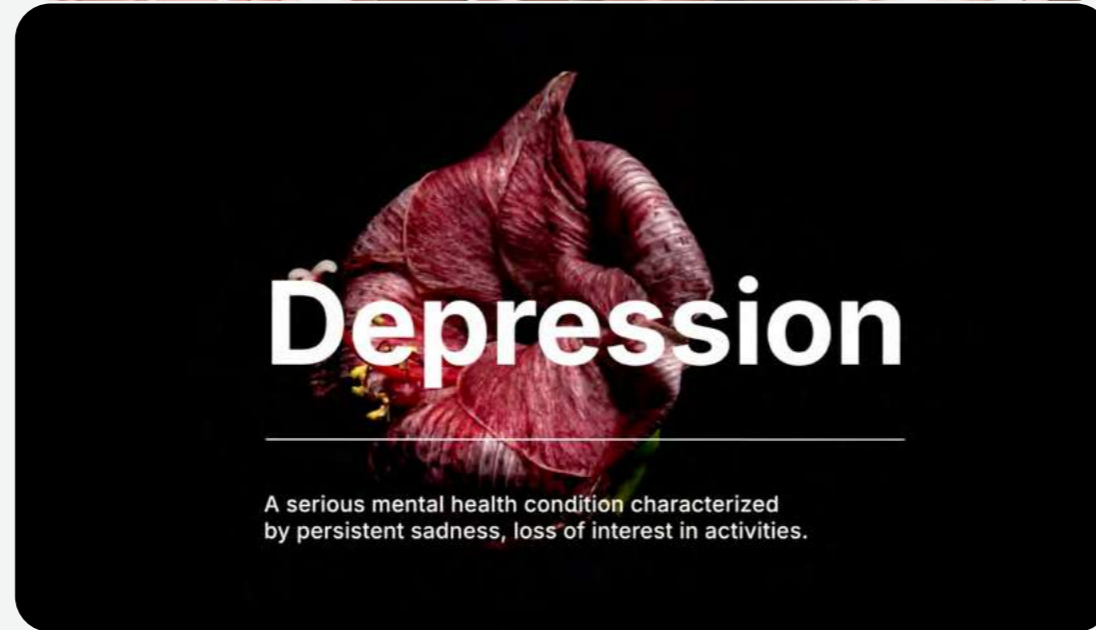
33%
I EXPERIMENT WITH IT

In practice

Advtech

We created a proactive series of shorts for ADvTech that brought to life the real-world consequences of what the world would look like without women. Each story took a human angle to help challenge the perception.

From Women in engineering, to women in tech, what started off with a truly human insight, ended being a blended ad that happened to incorporate the use of AI.



 WATCH ADVERT

In practice

Standard Bank

In a market saturated with digital services, we were looking for a way to help Standard Bank stand out.

To do so in a culturally relevant way, we leveraged South Africa's love for music (and its aversion to disruptive advertising) to create personalised videos with a commercial message.

From Amapiano to Gospel, we used AI-driven music creation to create genre-specific ads that were served through YouTube Music's Freemium model, creating culturally resonant work that cost 2cents per view.



07

FROM PROMISE TO PRACTICE

—A ROADMAP FOR MARKETERS—

Navigating new tech and the incorporation of it into your business is a multi-faceted challenge that comprises variable that directly and indirectly impact success.

GENERATIVE AI IMPACTS THREE KEY THINGS:

People //

Are you upskilling your people to become multi-disciplined?

Process //

Are you factoring in the cost of changing process to accommodate new tech?

Progress //

Do you have a clear perspective on where you want to go, and measurable goals that can demonstrate progress?

01.

DEFINE THE SCOPE

- Reconcile AI's promise with the potential in your business and work from there. Are there repetitive tasks that can be automated? How does that impact people, process, and progress?
- Define guardrails around risks and ethics to make sure the rules are set
- This is how you build momentum

02.

STARTING POINT

- Establish a clear, defensible position around how your organisation wants to use AI in marketing collateral, and what that means for the organisation, people, process, and progress.
- This can take the shape of a policy, AI principles, or even a playbook.
- Once you have a "why", you have a compass.

03.

ACCOUNTABILITY

- Decide who owns AI-policy decisions, and who enforces them
 - This enables confidence and streamlines adoption
- Change management becomes a big part of adoption of new tech, and a phased approach with clear measurable objectives ensures progression and company-wide clarity.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT AI SUSTAINABLY

PHASE 1: AWARENESS

Build a common lexicon around AI through workshops, demo's, lunch-and-learn sessions. This gives everybody the same baseline.

PHASE 2: EXPERIMENTATION

Test safe, high-value use cases that can convert small wins into big impact. This inspires confidence.

PHASE 3: ADVOCACY

Use small wins as success stories, to encourage a culture shift. This shows what's possible and inspires business units to think what's possible in their departments.

PHASE 4: STRUCTURE

Documenting success and using it to progress formalises adoption. This encourages adoption without AI-fatigue.

PHASE 5: INCENTIVISE

Build behaviour change across the business. From KPIs, to training hours, to rewards through performance reviews – this drives business as usual.

OUR ON-THE-GROUND REALITY

If the last two years are anything to go by, using AI is not the same as creating value with AI.

Just because something is “AI-powered”, or “made in collaboration with AI” – it doesn’t make whatever you’ve done more valuable.

With our Intelligent Practice approach, The Up&Up group is prioritising effectiveness, accountability and trust.

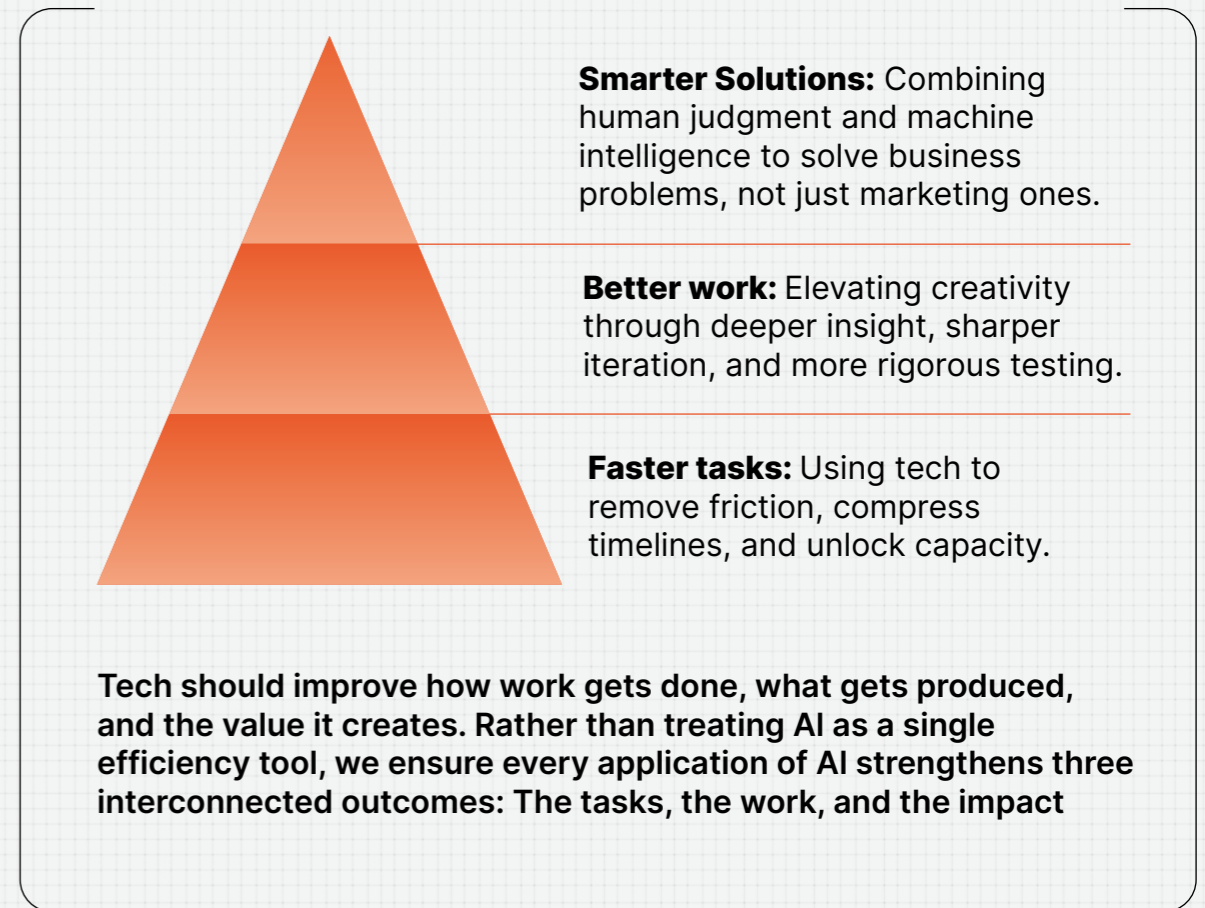
The time for novelty is gone. The deliberate embedding of tools where it amplifies and doesn’t distract is where we’ve seen the most value. A recurring risk we’ve seen is an over-reliance on activity-based indicators.

“We’ve saved x amount of time.”
“We’ve produced hundreds of assets.”
“We’ve reduced cost by x”.

These metrics are impressive at first glance, but insufficient when looking at sustainably building brands. Faster production doesn’t guarantee better work, and lower costs do not automatically translate into business growth.

Overestimating short-term efficiency gains while underinvesting in organisational changes required to unlock long-term impact is the going to be the true marker of success for both agencies and brands.

We’re looking at how well we can produce, not how much.



We believe AI amplifies human intelligence, and our Intelligent Practice approach looks at four different value levers that bring this to life:

01 / Efficiency

Reducing friction, manual effort, and unnecessary rework

02 / Effectiveness

Improving the quality, relevance and performance of outputs

03 / Trust

Managing legal, ethical and reputational risk

04 / Capability

Strengthening our teams, rather than replacing them

80%

OF STAFF REPORT THAT THEIR AI SKILLS HAVE IMPROVED IN THE PAST 6 MONTHS

87%

NEARLY 87% OF RESPONDENTS EXPECT AI TO PLAY A BIGGER ROLE IN THEIR WORK IN THE FUTURE.

89%

REPORT UNDERSTANDING OUR AI POLICY, AND OVER 80% FEEL SUPPORTED USING AI CONFIDENTLY IN THEIR ROLE.

OUR APPROACH

We are looking at incremental but compounding impact, rather than explosive – and it starts with responsible adoption.

Across strategy, creative, production and operations, Intelligent Practice has show that AI creates value by:

- Compressing research cycles without shortcutting strategic thinking
- Increasing the range of creative exploration, where time permits
- Reducing executional drag in production through automation and modular design systems
- Improving operational clarity by removing low-value, labour intensive tasks.

At the same time, responsible adoption also means recognising where AI does not add value – and this is a philosophy we’re advocating for across the business.

A recurring barrier to AI adoption across the industry is uncertainty – from legalities, to ethics, to organisational expectations. Within The Up&Up Group, we’ve laid a foundation that enables adoption to sustainably grow.

This combination is incredibly important: Policy alone doesn’t enable adoption, and neither does enthusiasm without guardrails. Our survey found that both are present, setting our people up for responsible experimentation, rather than avoidance or misuse.

WHERE TO NEXT?

We've trained 66% of staff on practical applications – but capability growth extends beyond structured programmes. Continuous learning through inspiration sessions, Weekly Reads, and consultation has inspired use throughout our building.

AI adoption isn't just dependent on central instruction and theory. Respondents frequently described "learning by doing", reinforcing the idea that AI is now part of our working toolkit, rather than an external innovation layer. Daily application, peer learning, and practical necessity has made AI-use throughout the group more of a cultural move than a compliance-driven roll-out.

WHERE AI IS CHANGING HOW WE WORK

Across roles and disciplines, respondents consistently describe using AI at the start of the work process. Research, summarisation, ideation, and first drafts are the most commonly referenced applications. Teams are expanding their baseline of work: The framing of ideas,

synthesising information overload, and exploring options – where human judgment and taste then refine rough ideas.

As one respondent puts it: "(AI) is not about the final answer It's about getting to a better starting point faster."

IGNORING THE PROMISE OF AI IN PRACTICE

Going beyond hype is one of our key tenets, and asking why instead of how has enabled us to stay the course. In our survey, there was little evidence of blind reliance on AI. Nearly 50% of respondents explicitly frame AI as augmenting rather than replacing their work, and qualitative responses repeatedly stress caution, verification, and contextual awareness. This allows the value of AI to increase the importance of human skills, such as judgment, taste and ethics.

This reflects a shift from curiosity to intent, and something we're incredibly proud of. People aren't asking whether AI belongs in their work, they're after more intelligent ways to apply it – and

more importantly, responsible ways to incorporate it. This marks a move beyond tech for the sake of tech – but a focus to creative excellence.

RECONCILING REALITY WITH PROMISE

AI cannot fix unclear briefs, weak strategic foundations, or reduce costs without trade-offs in scope, governance or capability investment. Least of all, it doesn't eliminate the need for senior judgment and human experience.

What it does enable is better informed decision making, reduced risk through policy adherence, and the delivery of high value, strategically sound creative work.

The shift from promise to practice is ultimately about confidence: Confidence that AI is improving outcomes, not just a tool that makes things "faster, better and cheaper". Confidence that brands are protected and not exposed. And confidence that people and partners are being empowered, and amplified, to ultimately power our belief that creativity elevates everything.





GENERATIVE AI WILL CONTINUE TO RESHAPE HOW TEAMS WORK, HOW WORK GETS DONE, AND HOW BRANDS CONNECT WITH AUDIENCES. IF YOU'D LIKE TO DISCUSS THE IDEAS IN THIS PAPER, OR EXPLORE HOW THEY APPLY TO YOUR ORGANISATION, CONTACT NIVAL.MAHARAJ@THEUPANDUPGROUP.COM