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The Glass Mine

How Disruptive Tech Unlocks Radical
Transparency in Africa.

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Executive Summary

The Imperative of Digital Synchronisation

Strategic forecasts across the resources sector definitively position Artificial Intelligence and autonomous fleets as the future of mining. However, a significant readiness gap exists within African operations, where legacy infrastructure inhibits the deployment of advanced automation. Fundamental to this transition is the axiom that one cannot automate what is not visible. Currently, many operations function as Black Boxes, characterised by siloed data repositories where safety metrics and production statistics remain isolated from one another. Diagnostic analysis of strategic assets in the Mpumalanga coal belt confirms that this operational opacity functions as a structural constraint, consistently capping production between 5.6 and 5.8 Mtpa, not due to geological scarcity, but due to unsynchronised workflows and undetected inefficiencies.



This paper proposes the Glass Mine ecosystem: a unified digital infrastructure designed to transition operations from retrospective reporting to real-time, predictive oversight. By integrating Internet of Things (IoT) sensors with Machine Learning algorithms, this framework converts passive data into actionable intelligence across three critical operational pillars:



Safety (Active Risk Mitigation):

Transitioning from static physical demarcation to dynamic geofencing. The system utilises wearable technology to enforce exclusion zones around high-risk areas, such as unsupported boxcuts (the initial excavations designed to expose the mineral deposit), providing active deterrence against unauthorised entry.



Water (Compliance & Assurance):

Replacing manual metering with predictive algorithmic modelling. By correlating pressure sensor data with environmental inputs, the system estimates flow rates with **98.4%** accuracy, enabling predictive management of water balance to ensure regulatory compliance.



Operations (Asset Synchronisation):

Eliminating the structural production ceiling through the deployment of a digital twin. This establishes a single source of truth for both owner and contractor fleets, enabling the real-time identification of bottlenecks and the optimisation of cycle times.

Strategic Value Proposition: Transparency is the prerequisite for autonomy. By establishing a granular digital baseline for manual processes, operators effectively bridge the infrastructure gap. Implementation of this oversight model is projected to yield maintenance cost reductions of **20–25%** and a **15%** improvement in overall operational efficiency. Consequently, the primary disruptive lever available to operators today is not the immediate acquisition of autonomous assets, but the total digitisation of the existing mining value chain.

Introduction



Introduction

The Disruption is Visibility

The Disruption is Visibility

The next frontier of disruption is not mechanical; it is digital synchronisation. Digitising a mining operation is a means to an end for value. However, a prerequisite for the realisation of value is the timely sharing of information and insights in an appropriate format for consumption. Organisations driving digital transformation need to enable easier access for both their employees and machines to aggregate, curate, and share information across sites and assets. Collaboration need no longer be a visit, an event, or an email. In the new era, reliable information must be instantaneous and available to applicable members of different teams wherever they are; improving hand-offs, maximising efficiency, and minimising errors. While the world moves toward AI-driven, fully automated mines, a critical readiness gap persists in African operations that currently lack the infrastructure to support this transition. The fundamental constraint is that you cannot automate what you cannot see: until physical processes are captured as transparent, real-time data, advanced algorithms lack the necessary inputs to drive operational decisions.



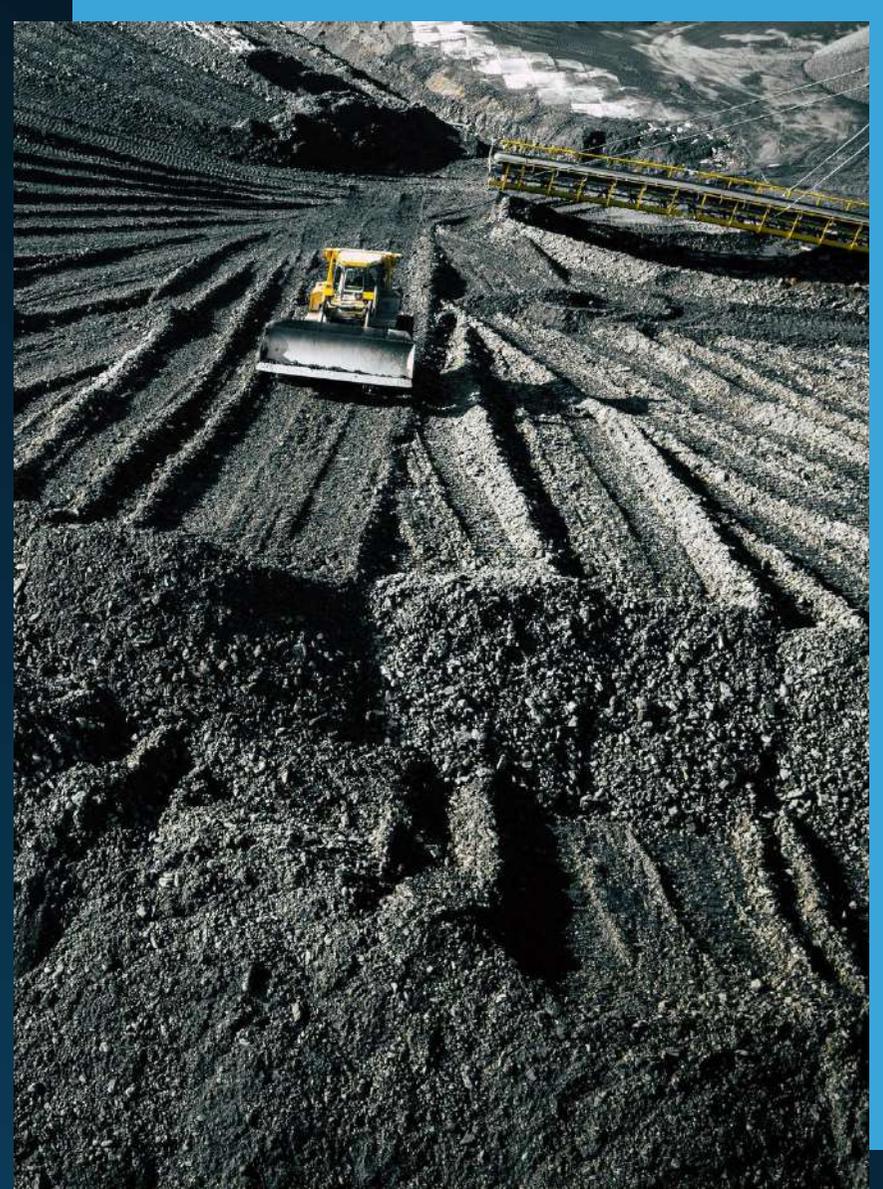
Complex opencast operations currently function in silos – capital-intensive inputs are processed, and commodities are extracted - but the friction in the middle remains opaque. Safety breaches, water wastage, and contractor delays are often only visible in retrospective month-end reports, long after the losses are suffered by the mining operation. This research proposes a radical shift to “The Glass Mine.” We argue that the true disruption is real-time oversight. By leveraging IoT and Machine Learning to unify safety, environmental, and operational data, our approach transcends traditional reporting to provide comprehensive visibility into the mining asset. We draw on deep diagnostic research from Mpumalanga, the South African coal belt, to demonstrate how data transparency is key to breaking structural barriers; increasing production caps and predicting water compliance failures with 98.4% accuracy before they threaten the license to operate.

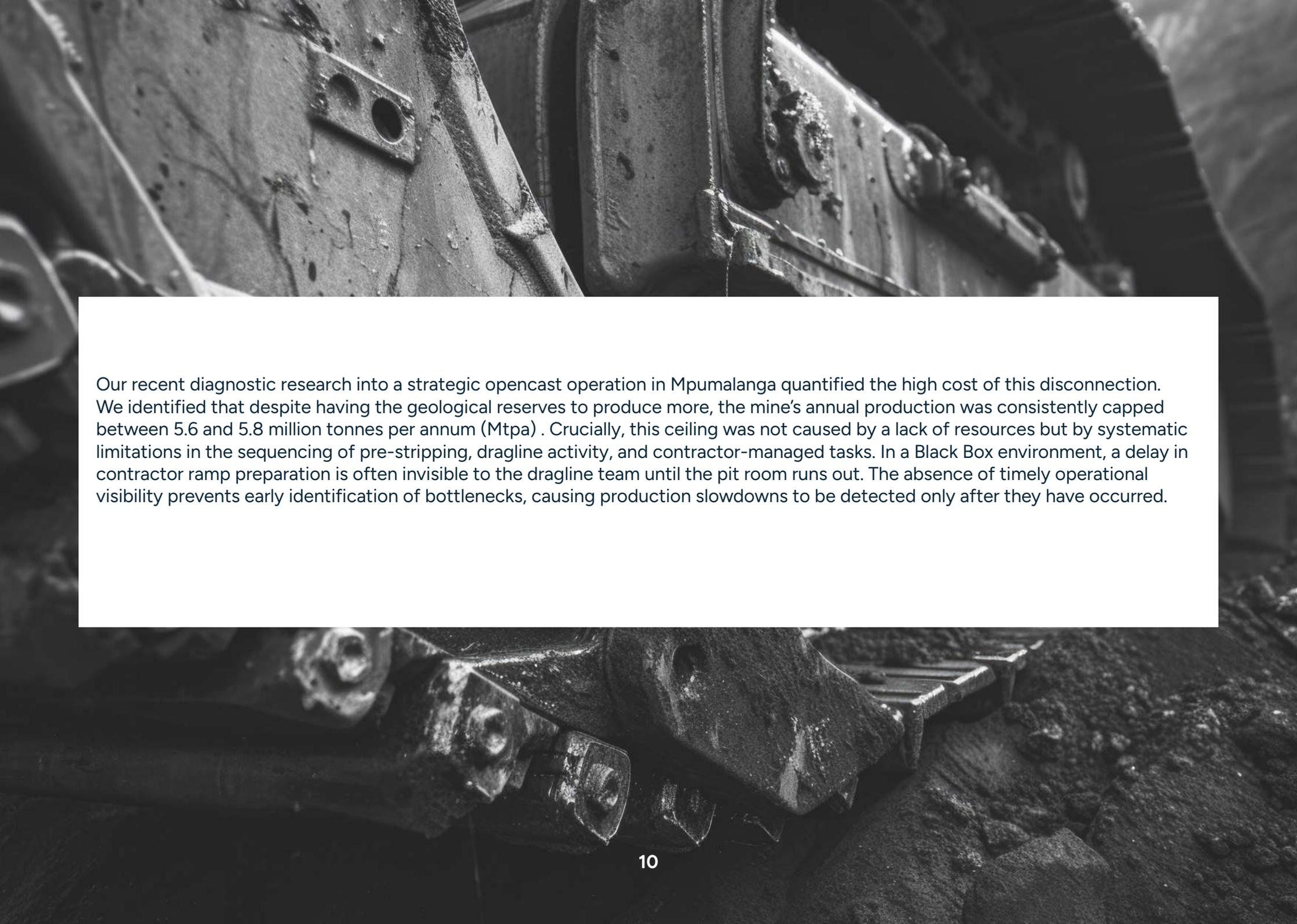
The Landscape

The landscape

The Cost of the “Black Box”

Global industrial trends definitively identify AI as the future of mining. Still, there is a disconnect between the global promise of autonomous fleets and the African reality of legacy infrastructure. In many operations, data remains trapped in silos: safety data sits idle with SHEQ (the integrated department managing Safety, Health, Environment, and Quality compliance), while production data sits idle with the Dragline Superintendent (the senior operational lead responsible for the massive excavation machinery used to strip overburden). These systems do not communicate with each other, creating a tax on efficiency.





Our recent diagnostic research into a strategic opencast operation in Mpumalanga quantified the high cost of this disconnection. We identified that despite having the geological reserves to produce more, the mine's annual production was consistently capped between 5.6 and 5.8 million tonnes per annum (Mtpa) . Crucially, this ceiling was not caused by a lack of resources but by systematic limitations in the sequencing of pre-stripping, dragline activity, and contractor-managed tasks. In a Black Box environment, a delay in contractor ramp preparation is often invisible to the dragline team until the pit room runs out. The absence of timely operational visibility prevents early identification of bottlenecks, causing production slowdowns to be detected only after they have occurred.



Three Core Pillars of Mining

Three Core Pillars of Mining 4.0

To future-proof the industry, we must disrupt this model. We propose the Glass Mine Ecosystem - a unified digital layer that turns passive data into active oversight across three critical pillars.

Pillar A: Disruption in SAFETY (The Digital Guardian)

From static barriers to immersive prevention

In the traditional mine, safety protocols are often reactive and static. Our diagnostic analysis highlights that reliance on physical tape barriers is insufficient to stop fatigued workers from entering hazardous zones like unsupported boxcuts (the initial excavations designed to expose the mineral deposit). The Glass Mine replaces these passive measures with active intelligence. By deploying IoT geofencing and wearable tags, we create invisible digital walls that trigger immediate vibration alerts when a threshold is breached, shifting the focus from lag indicators (accident reports) to lead indicators (preventative alerts).





Pillar B: Disruption in WATER (The License to Operate)

From manual metering to predictive compliance

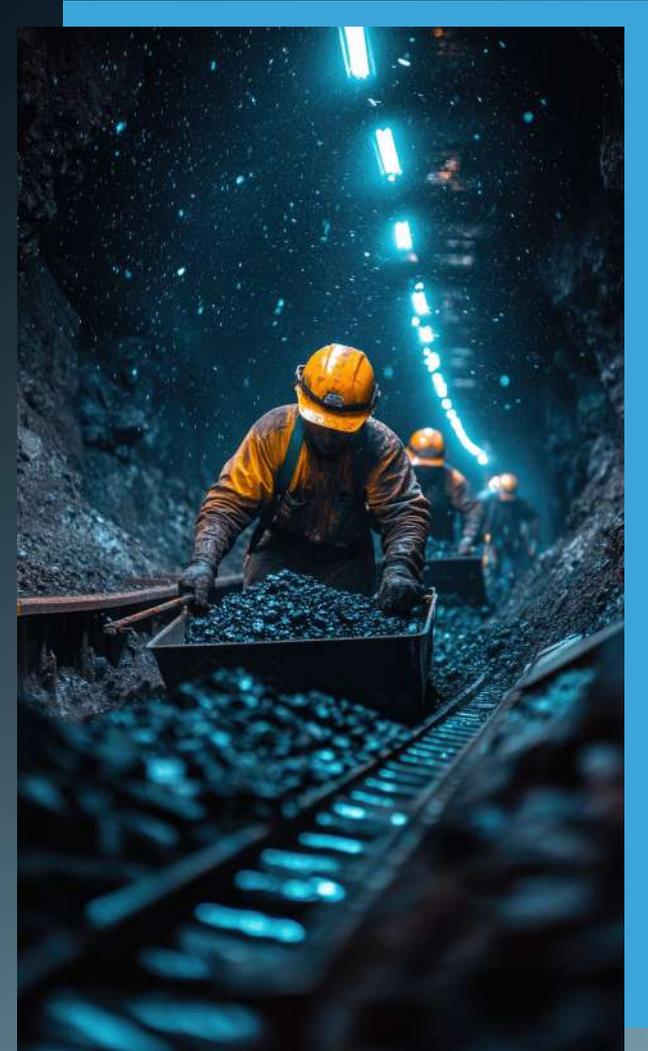
Water is an existential risk for African mining, yet our research indicates that many operations are vulnerable to blind spots caused by uncalibrated flowmeters and inconsistent manual monitoring. The disruption here lies in replacing hardware with math. We propose using IoT pressure sensors combined with Machine Learning (ML) to accurately estimate flow rates without relying on traditional meters. These ML models have demonstrated the ability to predict water flow with up to 98.4% accuracy, detecting abnormal usage or leaks in real-time . To future-proof this system, we overlay Generative AI to transform simple monitoring into predictive maintenance. The AI analyses weather forecasts, pit conditions, and mining activity to generate optimal pumping and drainage schedules automatically. This system moves beyond just flagging an alert; it simulates future overflow scenarios and recommends specific interventions, ensuring that control dams never breach the critical freeboard level and that the mine remains perpetually audit-ready .

Pillar C: Disruption in OPERATIONS (The Synchronisation)

From “Siloed Contracting” to “The Digital Twin”

Our diagnostic research into strategic Mpumalanga operations identified a severe structural ceiling: production is frequently capped between 5.6 and 5.8 Mtpa. This limitation is not geological but operational, stemming primarily from uncoordinated sequencing between owner fleets and contractor pre-stripping teams. In the absence of unified real-time data, the operation frequently suffers from process desynchronisation, a critical inefficiency where the mine’s primary excavation asset is forced into idleness while awaiting the completion of upstream preparatory works by external contractors. The Glass Mine resolves this fragmentation by deploying a unified telemetry layer that serves as a single source of truth for all on-site activities. Rather than monitoring distinct fleets in isolation, the system integrates spatial data to track real-time volumetric progress against the mine plan. This ensures that contractor pre-strip targets are visibly aligned with the dragline’s critical path, flagging potential sequencing gaps days before they result in idleness .

By visualising this data in a metaverse interface, supervisors can track dragline locations and active ramps on a live, centralised dashboard. This visibility allows instant identification of bottlenecks, detecting if a contractor is falling behind on a boxcut, and reallocating resources proactively. The return on investment for this level of transparency is documented: global benchmarks indicate that adopting such IoT monitoring systems can reduce maintenance costs by 20% to 25% and drive a 15% improvement in overall operational efficiency . This is how we break the production cap: not by buying more machines, but by synchronising the ones we already have.



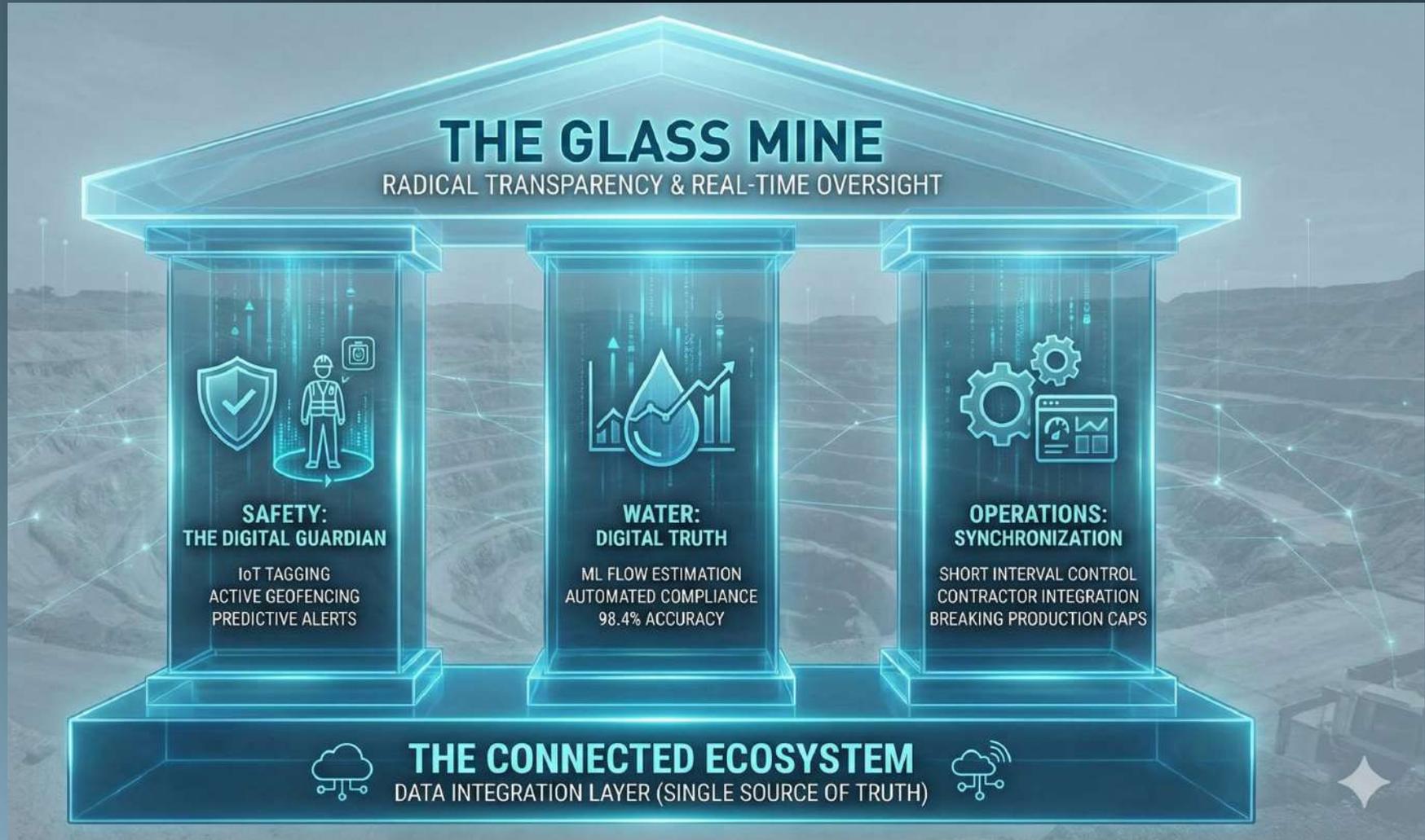


Figure 1: The Glass Mine Diagram

Conclusion



Conclusion

The Foundation of the Future

The disruptive technologies conversation is often dominated by robotics. However, the evidence is clear: you cannot have a fully autonomous mine until you have a transparent one. The Glass Mine is the prerequisite for the future. It acts as the bridge that closes the readiness gap, turning safety into a digital system, water into a manageable metric, and operations into a synchronised dance.

For the delegates, the message is clear. The most disruptive action an operator can take is not necessarily to buy a new autonomous fleet, but to turn on the lights, transforming their operation from a Black Box into a transparent, data-driven ecosystem.