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The Time to Save Time

AI Integration in a High-Performance Professional Service Firm

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Abstract

Purpose: AI is positioned in management research as a time-saving augmentation, a promise that should resonate most strongly with firms whose culture is built on time efficiency. Yet that very orientation may be what makes the technology hard to absorb. Through a single-case study of a small professional service firm integrating AI, this thesis examines how that tension unfolds in practice. We ask: *How does a high-performance culture organized around saving time shape members' engagement with AI as a time-saving technology in a small professional service firm?*

Methodology: This qualitative, interpretive single-case study draws on symbolic interactionism and employs a self-ethnographic configuration in which one of the authors works at the firm. We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with members across all roles and analyzed the material abductively through sorting, reducing, and arguing.

Theoretical Framing: The thesis brings the augmentation discourse, which positions AI as a time-saving technology, into conversation with literature on the demands of AI integration. It approaches this conversation through temporal structuring and the distinction between clock-time and process-time. These dynamics intensify in high-performance professional service firms, where time serves as both the unit of value and the basis for evaluating members.

Contributions: The study finds that the firm's temporal logic shapes members' engagement with AI in ways that reproduce the very conditions that make sustained integration difficult, producing a self-defeating loop that the culture cannot resolve from within. What makes these firms excellent at client delivery is what makes AI integration structurally difficult to sustain.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Professional Service Firms, High-Performance Organizations, Temporal Structuring, Clock-time, Process-time

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We hope you enjoy reading this thesis!

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Artificial intelligence (AI) is changing the way organizations work. What began as an emerging transformation in the way machines perform tasks once considered uniquely human has accelerated into one of the defining challenges of organizational life (Brynjolfsson and Mitchell, 2017). Technological developments related to AI are now disrupting the workplace in unprecedented ways, particularly in professional and knowledge-intensive sectors (Sarala et al., 2025). By 2026, 88% of organizations reported using AI in at least one business function. (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, 2026). This scale of adoption marks AI as one of the most significant organizational shifts of recent years. In management research, the dominant framing positions AI as a technology that augments human work rather than replacing it, freeing humans to focus on more demanding tasks (Raisch and Krakowski, 2021). Framing divides labor in a particular way, with machines handling large-scale information processing while humans retain decisions that require judgment and interpretation (Jarrahi, 2018). Recent empirical work supports the time-saving claim. Dell'Acqua et al. (2023) found that consultants using AI completed tasks faster, and Brynjolfsson et al. (2023) reported average productivity gains of 15% across customer support roles. The augmentation promise that runs through this literature is that AI saves time, which is then reinvested in work that matters more.

This promise resonates particularly in *professional service firms (PSFs)*, where time is the primary unit of value. PSFs are organizations whose work is intangible and difficult to evaluate from the outside (Alvesson, 2004; Empson, 2017). Time serves as a proxy for value in these firms, both as the unit of account for pricing work and as the metric for evaluating members (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001; Empson, 2017). The discourse of *high-performance organizations (HPOs)* sharpens this. de Waal (2007) describes HPOs as organizations defined by continuous improvement, action orientation, and productivity gains, placing time efficiency at the center of their understanding of excellence. Where a PSF takes up this discussion, time becomes not only the unit of value, but also the way the firm understands its own performance. A high-performance PSF should be among the most receptive to AI's time-saving promise, since the technology provides precisely what the firm has been organized to value.

This thesis examines how such an organization engages with AI through a single case study of Nexus, a small executive search and growth consultancy with around 17 employees. During the study period, Nexus actively integrated AI into its operations and treated time savings as the main reason. The case presents the empirical setting in which a firm's temporal logic meets AI's promise of time savings.

1.2 Problem statement & research question

In practice, this promise has proven harder to realize than the literature suggests. Einola and Khoreva (2023) argue that managers pursue AI with unquestioning enthusiasm, underestimating the time and effort required for successful implementation. Mayer et al. (2025) find that over-reliance on generative AI in knowledge-intensive work can produce the opposite of the promised time saving, with workers spending more time managing the technology rather than less. Zirar et al. (2023) describe AI coexistence as a perpetual race in which workers continually reskill as the technology develops. The cost of integration falls on the workers and the organizations that ask them to do this work alongside their existing work. What the literature has not yet addressed is how the conditions for absorbing this cost differ across organizations.

A PSF that runs on an HPO logic, in which time serves both as the unit of value and the way the firm understands its own performance, offers a particularly revealing case of this gap. Smaller firms within this category are particularly relevant, as Yang et al. (2024) note that they face strong competitive pressure to adopt AI while lacking the dedicated resources larger firms can deploy to manage integration. This thesis addresses the question at Nexus, drawing on 11 semi-structured interviews with members at all levels of the firm. The research question is:

RQ: *How does a high-performance culture organized around saving time shape members' engagement with AI as a time-saving technology in a small professional service firm?*

The thesis argues that the firm's temporal logic shapes members' engagement with AI in ways that reproduce the very conditions that make integration difficult to sustain, producing a self-defeating loop that the culture cannot resolve from within. Our contribution is showing that the difficulty of AI integration in a firm of this kind stems not from what it lacks, as the current literature largely frames it, but from what it already has.

1.3 Thesis outline

The thesis is organized into six chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the literature this thesis draws on. It examines AI in professional service firms and the dominant augmentation framing of AI as a time-saving technology, alongside the complications this framing encounters in practice. The chapter then introduces temporal structuring as a way of reading how organizations enact time, and shows how the high-performance discourse amplifies this temporal logic in professional service firms.

Chapter 3 sets out the methodology. It states the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the study, justifies the qualitative single-case design grounded in symbolic interactionism and an asymmetric self-ethnographic configuration, and explains how the 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed abductively through sorting, reducing, and arguing, with findings presented through excerpt-commentary units.

Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings across five sections, moving from how members account for the firm's working culture to the conditions AI work encounters. Members across roles adopt AI in the firm's own time-saving vocabulary, regardless of whether they have yet to experience that saving. They account for the friction the integration produces as a question of individual prioritization rather than as a structural condition. The structures the firm builds to organize AI work reproduce the same temporal logic that makes the work difficult, producing a pattern that members can see but cannot act on from within.

Chapter 5 develops the central argument in conversation with the literature. The temporal logic, cultural mechanisms, and organizational structures that make the firm excellent at client delivery are the same conditions that make AI integration structurally difficult to sustain. The chapter develops this through three angles, naming the temporal incompatibility between clock-time and process-time, the cultural conversion of structural difficulty into individual priority, and the self-defeating loop in which the firm's own structures reproduce the conditions that make the work difficult.

Chapter 6 closes with the key findings, the theoretical contribution, practical implications, and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

The following chapter introduces the literature this thesis draws on for its examination of AI integration in high-performance professional service firms. It begins by examining how AI is understood and how it has been adopted in professional service firms, before examining the dominant framing of AI as augmentation, the time-saving promise it carries, and the complications that emerge when this framing meets integration in practice. The chapter then turns to how organizations enact time through temporal structuring and the distinction between clock-time and process-time, and finally to high-performance professional service firms, where time becomes the unit by which work is valued, and where the question that motivates this thesis takes shape.

2.1 AI in professional service firms

With the rapid rise in the popularity of Artificial Intelligence (AI), there have been many attempts to define AI, with scholars and professionals offering their own interpretations. Although there is a general understanding of AI as the simulation of human intelligence by machines (McCarthy et al., 1955; Dong et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021), this definition remains limited and fails to capture AI's full capabilities or its practical operation. Therefore, to fully grasp how AI will be used and analyzed in this thesis, rather than adopting a single, fixed definition, it draws on the contributions of key scholars in the field.

McCarthy (2007) defines AI as the science and engineering of making intelligent machines, emphasizing that AI is not limited to biologically observable methods. Dwivedi et al. (2021, p. 5) similarly note that definitions of AI in the literature consistently present it as non-human intelligence programmed to perform specific tasks. Kaplan and Haenlein (2019, p. 17) provide a practical perspective, describing AI as "a system's ability to interpret external data correctly, to learn from such data, and to use those learnings to achieve specific goals and tasks through flexible adaptation." Collectively, these conceptualizations indicate that AI lacks a single, fixed

definition and that its character is context-dependent. Therefore, this thesis adopts an organizational lens to understand AI through the context in which it operates.

AI must be understood in relation to the organizational context in which it operates. Jarrahi et al. (2023) argue that AI and organizations are mutually transformative. AI reconfigures work and organizational structures, while organizational practices simultaneously shape the use and development of AI. The practical impact of AI cannot be determined solely by the technology itself; rather, it depends on the manner and context of its integration. This context-dependence is especially consequential in competitive, performance-driven environments, where AI adoption is often motivated by the need to demonstrate tangible results.

Smaller professional service firms (PSFs) encounter a structural tension regarding AI integration. While competitive pressures drive these firms to adopt AI, they often lack the resources and capabilities necessary for effective integration. Yang et al. (2024), in a comparative study of three auditing firms of different sizes, find that larger firms possess greater operational resources and AI readiness, whereas smaller firms, though motivated by competitive differentiation, struggle with the demands of integration. The urgency to adopt AI is shaped by external pressures, but the internal capacity to absorb and implement the technology often lags behind. Thus, AI adoption represents only an initial step. The critical issue concerns the processes and outcomes that unfold within the firm during integration.

The integration of AI into PSFs does not merely automate tasks; it compels both professionals and organizations to redefine their roles and activities. Faulconbridge et al. (2025) analyze this phenomenon in accounting and law firms, where AI tools have assumed responsibility for lower-level data review tasks previously performed by junior professionals, such as audit sample analysis and contract review. In response, professionals emphasize tasks that AI cannot perform, including judgment, interpretation, and client advisory work that require contextual understanding and experience. Faulconbridge et al. (2025) contend that the narrative of "the end of the professions" is more nuanced than commonly portrayed. Professionals are actively redefining their roles and services, prompting organizational evolution. This ongoing reshaping occurs within the dominant discourse of AI as augmentation, which is addressed in the following section.

2.2 AI augmentation and time

2.2.1 The augmentation promise

The dominant management discourse around AI positions augmentation as the preferred approach, framing AI as a technology that not only saves time but also frees it for more valuable work. Raisch and Krakowski (2021) distinguish two broad applications of AI in organizations. *Automation* implies that machines take over a human task, while *augmentation* means humans collaborate closely with machines to perform a task. They argue, however, that in the management domain, these two applications cannot be neatly separated. Augmentation and automation are interdependent across time and space. Tasks performed through human-machine collaboration can, over time, be automated as models become robust enough to handle them independently. Managers are then taken "out of the loop," freed to focus on more demanding and valuable tasks. What the framing leaves unspecified is how that labor between humans and machines is actually divided.

The augmentation framing rests on a particular division of labor between humans and AI, in which machines take over information-intensive work while humans retain decision-making that requires judgment and interpretation. Jarrahi (2018) develops this idea through what he calls a *human-AI symbiosis* within decision-making, in which AI systems are designed to augment human contributions rather than replace them. He identifies three variables that challenge human decision-making in organizations, namely uncertainty, complexity, and equivocality. AI is best suited to handling complexity, while humans retain their advantage under uncertainty and equivocality, where a holistic and intuitive approach is required. By letting AI handle complexity, employees save time that can be channeled toward the judgment-intensive work that machines cannot yet perform (Jarrahi, 2018).

Recent research has begun to examine whether this redistribution of time can be measured in practice. While Brynjolfsson et al. (2023) note that AI's potential to shape how employees perform and learn has been studied, there is less data on its impact on their work. Their study examined the rollout of a generative AI conversational assistant to over 5000 customer support agents and found an average productivity increase of 15%, measured as issues resolved per hour.

Novice employees became 34% more productive, while the highest-skilled and experienced workers saw minimal impact on their productivity. The generative AI assistance also improved customer sentiment and increased employee retention (Brynjolfsson et al., 2023). The findings suggest that the time-saving promise of AI is not just theoretical but measurable in practice. However, the evidence is limited to customer support and cannot be fully translated to other professional contexts.

More recent studies have extended evidence on productivity and time savings to knowledge-intensive professional work. Dell'Acqua et al. (2023) introduce the concept of a *jagged technology frontier* to highlight the uneven impact of artificial intelligence, in which AI assistance improves performance on some tasks but impairs it on others. Their study examined the use of GPT-4 by 758 consultants at Boston Consulting Group performing realistic consulting tasks. For tasks within AI's capability, consultants using AI completed 12.2% more tasks and 25.1% faster, with significantly improved output quality. On tasks outside AI's capabilities, those same consultants performed worse than colleagues without access to AI (Dell'Acqua et al., 2023). Similar productivity findings have been documented in professional writing tasks, where access to generative AI reduced task time by 40% while improving output quality (Noy & Zhang, 2023).

Taken together, the empirical evidence reviewed in this subsection supports the time-saving promise of AI augmentation across customer support, knowledge-intensive consulting, and professional writing. The findings suggest that AI's contribution to time-saving and productivity is not just theoretical but measurable in practice. Yet this evidence is concentrated in specific work contexts and largely focused on task-level gains. The broader question of how AI integrates into ongoing organizational work and the conditions under which its time-saving promise is realized in practice has been less examined.

2.2.2 The complications of augmentation

The optimistic discourse around AI augmentation often underestimates what implementation actually requires of organizations. Einola and Khoreva (2023) investigate the relationship between humans and AI within Human Resource Management, examining how humans and two

early-stage AI solutions coexist across "low-status" automation and "high-status" augmentation. Their findings indicate that AI-enabled automation and augmentation may not be as detached from or in tension with each other as earlier conceptual work suggested, and they push back against the idea that AI will take over jobs or deskill humans. However, they caution that AI is too often pursued with unconditional enthusiasm, with managers underestimating how work varies across organizational groups and the time and effort required for successful implementation.

AI coexistence also demands sustained investment from workers themselves, not only a one-time adaptation. Zirar et al. (2023) examine the requirements for workers to coexist with AI in the workplace and argue that this coexistence rests on workers' ability to combine technical, human, and conceptual skills. It also requires ongoing reskilling and upskilling as AI capabilities continue to develop. In their account, the relationship between workers and AI is symbiotic, in which workers cannot be passive. They must continually learn new skills that AI cannot yet perform, while AI in turn continues to acquire those skills, in what Zirar et al. (2023) call a perpetual race. This complicates the dominant time-saving framing by highlighting the substantial, ongoing investment of worker effort that AI adoption requires.

Empirical work on *generative AI* in knowledge-intensive contexts confirms this picture, with some studies finding that integration can produce outcomes that run counter to the time-saving promise. Mayer et al. (2025), in a qualitative study of entry-level professionals at a global consultancy, find that workers do not simply use generative AI as a productivity tool but actively reshape their tasks, working relationships, and the way they signal the value of their contributions to colleagues and managers. While much of this reshaping enables workers to focus on higher-order tasks, Mayer et al. (2025) also document substantive negative consequences. Over-reliance on generative AI can result in increased time consumption rather than time saved. Workers risk skill stagnation, and the mentorship through which they traditionally develop expertise is diminished. Integration here is not a frictionless productivity gain but a substantial reshaping of work whose costs and benefits depend on how the technology is used.

Together, the studies suggest that AI adoption is not the frictionless integration the productivity literature implies. It demands sustained worker effort, ongoing skill development, and active reshaping of work, producing outcomes that can run counter to the time-saving promise AI is meant to deliver. However, how these demands play out depends on how time itself is structured in the workplace.

2.3 Temporal structuring

How time is structured in the workplace is itself a historical construction. Scholars have long argued that time is enacted rather than given. Thompson (1967) argues that the modern, rigid conception of time did not arise from natural development but was constructed as a cultural product of capitalist industrialization. Time became a commodity, and as labor moved from being task-oriented to time-oriented, there was an incentive to extract maximum productivity and efficiency from every worker and every minute. Work discipline became focused on time, and the clock became a form of power that regulated life (Thompson, 1967). Alongside bells, clocks, and fines, discipline was imposed on workers, forcing them to internalize efficiency and punctuality (Thompson, 1967).

These historical insights have been formalized into the concept of *temporal structuring*, which offers a way to understand how organizations enact time in their everyday practices. Orlikowski and Yates (2002) bridge the gap between the objective properties of time, such as calendars and clocks, and the subjective experience of time, such as personal perception and felt urgency. They call this *temporal structuring*. They argue that temporal structuring is a third view of time and that people in organizations "experience time through the shared temporal structures they enact recurrently in their everyday practices" (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002, p.686). Meetings, project deadlines, and quarterly cycles become temporal structures through which ways of working are produced and reproduced via social practice rather than external pressure. Temporal structures not only shape what people do, but they are also shaped by what people do. They shape how people make sense of, regulate, and account for their activities within the organization, whether implicitly or explicitly (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002, p.686).

These structures are often taken for granted and seem given because they are enacted so repeatedly. Employees rarely stop to think about why meetings take place or what effect a

quarterly review has. Temporal structures are, in a sense, self-imposed upon us and are treated as rules that cannot be broken (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). At the same time, these structures enable ways of working. Orlikowski and Yates (2002, p.687) give the example of a quarterly financial cycle that enables sales activities to be distributed across the year but constrains the development of long-term relationships with buyers. Temporal structures enacted by organizations may hinder certain ways of working while enabling others.

Temporal structures are not only enacted, but they can also be deliberately shaped to steer organizations in particular directions. Reinecke and Ansari (2015) extend the discussion of temporal structures by asking whose interests they serve and what they steer organizations toward. They develop what they call an *agentic view of time*, in which temporal structures are not only enacted but also manipulated as part of a *cultural toolkit*. Through this toolkit, management can create and modify temporal structures to serve particular interests and steer the organization. Reinecke and Ansari (2015) distinguish between two logics through which organizations enact time: clock-time and process-time. *Clock-time* treats time as a measurable resource organized around deadlines and efficiency, while *process-time* treats time as residing within the work itself, where outcomes emerge through learning and cannot be known or scheduled in advance. These are not mutually exclusive, but organizations tend to prioritize one logic over the other, and the choice shapes what they do well and what they struggle with (Reinecke & Ansari, 2015).

The prioritization of one temporal logic over another has consequences. Orlikowski and Yates (2002) note that when organizations focus primarily on clock-time-based structures, through discourses such as time management, real time, and clockspeed, they narrow the range of temporal structures available in everyday work. March (1991) develops a related point by distinguishing between exploitation and exploration in organizational learning. *Exploitation* involves activities oriented toward refinement, efficiency, and execution, while *exploration* involves activities focused on search, experimentation, and innovation. These two compete for scarce resources, and March (1991) argues that organizations overinvest in exploitation because it yields more certain and specific results than exploration does. Exploration returns are less certain, with unclear timing and scale. Read through temporal structuring, this becomes not only a problem of resource allocation but a problem of how organizations enact time. Clock-time prioritizes activities that deliver measurable outputs, clear deadlines, and efficiency. Exploration

lies closer to process-time, where outcomes cannot be planned and instead emerge through the work. The temporal logic an organization enacts, therefore, shapes the balance between exploitation and exploration, and the conditions under which one logic dominates vary across one organization to another.

2.4 High-performance organizations and time

Professional service firms are one type of organization in which the temporal logics described above directly shape work. They are a distinct type of organization within the broader population of knowledge-intensive firms (Alvesson, 2004). What sets them apart is the nature of their work, which is intangible and hard to evaluate (Alvesson, 2004; Empson, 2017). They also face challenges in which the same people must perform tasks across marketing, production, and development. Meaning that employees need a certain combination of skills and a tendency to be strongly client-oriented, sometimes at the expense of internal activities and long-term development (Alvesson, 2004).

Within this category of companies, the language of high-performance organizations (HPO) has gained particular traction. de Waal (2007) characterizes HPOs as companies that sustain above-peer financial performance through adaptability, long-term orientation, integration, continuous improvement, and the treatment of employees as the primary asset. There is an interesting characteristic in the discourse around HPOs: it is organized around time. Process management in HPOs is described in terms of continuous improvement, responsiveness, the elimination of “unnecessary procedures, work, and information overload”, and constant productivity gains (de Waal, 2007, pp.6-7). The HPO is a firm in which time and speed are defining markers of excellence. When PSFs internalize this HPO discourse, it is not neutral; it puts time at the center of what counts as good work.

This discourse alone does not explain how a firm actually runs. Empson (2017) argues that what makes high-performance ideals stick in a PSF is insecurity. In her book, she states that this insecurity is not a personal weakness but something that is structurally built into the work. She uses firms like Goldman Sachs and McKinsey as examples. Work tends to be intangible and hard to measure. At the same time, there is a culture of whether you perform and move up, or you are

out. Your value as an employee also tends to come from what peers think of you rather than from formal performance reviews. These firms also actively hire people who are prone to imposter syndrome, people whose drive comes from a need to prove themselves. Once these individuals join, they embrace the firm's high-status identity as their own, and the organization becomes important for who they are. This also makes them receptive to a particular kind of social control. Through strong cultures, intense recruitment socialization, peer feedback, and collective financial compensation, these organizations create what Empson (2017) calls the *autonomy/control paradox*. This paradox is when employees experience their conformity to the firm's demands as freedom. One of Empson's (2017, p. 119) interviewees describes it as: "At one level we are completely independent, but we all march to the same tune without even thinking about it." What from the inside appears to be an autonomous workplace is, on closer inspection, a culture of consistent self-discipline. Employees are not forced into anything. Compliance is voluntary, produced by social controls and firm expectations that are indistinguishable from one's own ambitions.

The voluntary compliance this creates becomes visible in everyday work. Empson (2017) describes patterns of effort and overwork that employees can not explain, even when they recognize the personal cost. Empson (2017) asked herself why awareness alone does not change this, and her answer is that overwork is structurally tied to how performance is measured. In these firms, the primary performance metric is time. Employees are evaluated on billable hours and fees earned, and rewarded in proportion to those numbers. She means that as long as the metric remains in place, the behavior it rewards will keep reproducing itself. For these firms, time is not only a resource you use when doing work, but also the very unit by which work is valued. Anything that costs time but does not produce billable hours is, by the firm's measure, a loss.

This system for valuing work not only shapes what employees do but also how they see their own time. Both day-to-day and future perspectives. Anderson-Gough et al. (2001) use two concepts to describe this. The first is *time-consciousness*, when employees begin to see time the way the firm does. Time spent on clients is valuable, and anything else is harder to justify. The second is what they call *temporal visioning*, which extends to employees' views of the future. The horizons they see become organized around the rhythms and temporal structures that the

firm rewards, leaving little room for activities whose returns lie outside of the horizon (Anderson-Gough et al., 2001). What this adds to Empson (2017) is that the system of valuing work does not come solely from pressures from above. It is also internalized by employees as their own system for valuing their work. Once this happens, competing claims on their time will arise, and not all will be justified. Work that produces billable output is prioritized, and work where returns are uncertain or fall outside the temporal horizon becomes harder to justify against the pull of project deadlines and client expectations.

Empson (2017) and Anderson-Gough et al. (2001) together show the kinds of temporal structures that high-performance PSFs enact. Reinecke and Ansari (2015) distinguish between clock-time and process-time, with clock-time treated as linear, measurable, and organized around deadlines. In high-performance PSFs, this becomes the dominant frame through which work is valued; time is the unit of value. Anderson-Gough et al.'s (2001) time-consciousness binds this metric to professional identity, while temporal visioning extends it to the horizons employees look toward. This takes us back to March's (1991) analysis of the consequences of clock-time orientation, in which exploitation is prioritized over exploration because exploration's uncertain, slow returns are weighed against exploitation's certain, immediate returns. In high-performance PSFs, the asymmetry sharpens because exploration must compete with the firm's metrics and the time-consciousness employees have internalized. The temporal structures of high-performance PSFs are clock-time-dominant, making it structurally difficult for the firm to recognize the value of work that operates on a different time and benefits from other structures.

AI integration is the kind of work this temporal logic struggles to recognize. AI integration requires a substantial upfront time investment, with uncertain returns that emerge through learning rather than on schedule (Zirar et al., 2023; Mayer et al., 2025). Read against the temporal structure described above, this is process-time work in a culture built around clock-time. The augmentation discourse positions AI as a natural fit for organizations focused on using time efficiently, and high-performance PSFs would seem to be among the cultures most receptive to it. Yet the integration work itself takes the kind of time the firm does not count as productive, and produces returns that lie beyond the horizons by which employees and the firm operate. What these literatures, read together, do not tell us is how members of such a firm engage with AI, in the face of this tension. That is the question the empirical chapter takes up.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology. The study is a qualitative, interpretive single-case study of Nexus, read through symbolic interactionism. It uses an asymmetric self-ethnographic configuration, in which one author works at the firm, and the other has no prior connection to it. Empirical material was collected through 11 semi-structured interviews with members across all roles at Nexus, analyzed abductively through three stages of sorting, reducing, and arguing, and presented through excerpt-commentary units. The subsequent sections detail the research approach, design, data collection, and analysis procedures, as well as limitations and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research approach and tradition

This research adopts a *qualitative approach*. The research question focuses on how members construct accounts of time, AI, and their work, which cannot be captured through frequencies or controlled variables (Bryman & Bell, 2017). A qualitative approach enables the analysis of participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings in their own terms (Austin & Sutton, 2014). The findings are co-produced by researchers and interviewees, rather than being discovered as objective facts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009). Accordingly, the study is situated within the *interpretive tradition*, which views social reality as constructed through the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Prasad, 2018).

Within the interpretive tradition, we draw on *symbolic interactionism* as the analytical lens for reading the empirical material. The lens rests on the premise that people act toward objects based on the meanings those objects hold for them. Those meanings emerge through social interaction and are continuously modified through interpretation (Prasad, 2018). For our reading of the transcripts, this means we treat interviewees' accounts of AI and their work as something they construct and rework, not as reports of how things actually are. This commitment shapes both how we read the material and the structure of the empirical chapter.

This study was also conducted as a *self-ethnography*. Self-ethnography is an approach where the researcher has natural access to a cultural setting they themselves inhabit and participate in

(Alvesson, 2003). It differs from autoethnography, which centers on the researcher's personal experience, by keeping the focus on the cultural setting itself. Simon works at Nexus, which gives him continuous access to the firm's everyday life, including conversations, decisions, and the ongoing AI work that an outside researcher would not see. This position carries the risk of what Alvesson (1993, cited in Prasad, 2018) calls *cultural blindness*. When the researcher shares a culture with the people they study, what everyone takes for granted becomes hard to see. In self-ethnographic work, Alvesson (2003) names this staying native, the inability to break out of assumptions one already shares with the people in the setting.

The study is not a full self-ethnography. Joel has no prior connection to Nexus, and the empirical work was structured around his outside position with the firm. Three concrete choices were made to limit the extent to which Simon's perspective was incorporated into the empirical material. Joel led every interview and conducted the first analytical read of the transcripts on his own. Simon's contribution entered only afterward, as contextual reading and reflexive challenge rather than as data. Anything Simon knew from working at Nexus was used to question Joel's interpretations, not to add to or alter what interviewees said. The empirical material is what Joel collected and what the transcripts contain.

3.2 Research design

The study was designed as a single-case study. To protect anonymity, the firm appears throughout the thesis under the pseudonym Nexus, and identifying details about people and projects have been removed from the empirical material. Nexus is a small professional service firm that offers executive search and growth consultancy. They employ around 17 people across three roles: Associates, Consultants, and Partners. Its clients are founder-led and venture-capital-backed scale-ups, for whom Nexus recruits leadership positions and provides long-term organizational consulting. AI integration has been an active focus at the firm during the period covered by the study.

Empirical material was collected through semi-structured interviews with members of the firm. Symbolic interactionists make extensive use of interviews, attending to how participants make sense of situations rather than only to what happens within them (Prasad, 2018). At the same

time, interviews alone cannot fully capture the everyday lifeworld in which those accounts are produced. Alvesson and Schaefer (2020) argue that interviews are best understood as complemented by other forms of access to the setting being studied. In this study, that complement comes from the design's self-ethnographic dimension. Simon's continuous insider position at Nexus provides a contextual understanding of the firm's everyday work. This position does not contribute to the empirical material itself but informs how the interviews are read

The study works abductively. Induction reasons from empirical material toward theory, and deduction tests theory against empirical material; abduction follows a different logic (Bryman & Bell, 2017). It begins with an established interpretive rule, encounters an empirical phenomenon that is surprising in light of that rule, and articulates a new interpretive rule that resolves the surprise (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p.1269). We entered the empirical work with a broad interest in AI and time-saving at work, rather than with a specific research question. The research question took its current form only through this process.

3.3 Data collection

We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews with members of the firm during a period when AI implementation was an active focus at Nexus. Throughout this period, Simon's continuous insider position at the firm provided ongoing contextual access to the firm's everyday work and to the AI integration as it developed. This contextual access informed how the interviews were read, but did not contribute to the empirical material itself.

Nexus's AI work was in active transition during the data collection period. During the interviews, AI use at the firm sat in an experimentation phase, distributed across work groups responsible for different parts of the recruitment process. Toward the end of the interview window, an AI group was formed, consisting of two Associates and two Partners, and tasked with establishing structures for safe AI use in line with GDPR and other compliance requirements. Since then, these structures have begun to take shape, Klang has been rolled out as a transcription tool across the firm, and Claude has been made available for use within set parameters. The AI group has taken responsibility for leading this work and supporting other members of the firm as needed. This account of developments after the interview window draws on Simon's continued access to

the firm and would not be available to a researcher outside it. The interviews thus reflect a particular moment in this development rather than its current form.

We aimed to interview every full-time member of the firm. The 11 interviews covered 10 full-time members and one member who works at 50%. Three further full-time members were not interviewed. One could not be scheduled during the data collection period, and two were on parental leave during this period and had not been involved in the AI work. The firm's two hourly contractors were not approached. The selection thus approached a census of the firm's full-time members rather than a sample. Consistent with interpretivist research, the study works with a small sample and in-depth investigation rather than a broader survey approach (Saunders et al., 2019)

Simon's role at Nexus placed him in the position Alvesson (2003) calls an *observing participant*, where participation in the setting is primary, and observation enters only occasionally in a research-focused way. Working at the firm gave him continuous access to its everyday work, to the AI integration as it developed, and to who was doing what across the work groups. As a member of the AI group formed toward the end of the interview window, he was also directly involved in establishing AI infrastructure at the firm. None of this entered the empirical material itself. It informed the reading of the transcripts and provided context for understanding what members were describing. Joel's outside position at the firm anchors the empirical material, in contrast to Simon's insider exposure.

3.3.1 Interviews

The interviews were semi-structured. This format provides enough structure to ensure topical coverage while leaving room to follow what emerges in the conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2017). The disposition we worked from is closer to what Kvale and Brinkmann (2015) call the traveler than the miner. The traveler wanders alongside the interviewee rather than digging for nuggets of meaning. This disposition aligns with the study's abductive logic, in which we entered the empirical work with a broad interest rather than a specific research question and allowed the question to take shape as it emerged from the interviews.

We used an interview guide as a topic structure rather than a script. It covered the interviewee's work, their concrete experiences and attitudes toward AI, AI at the firm, and their view of the future, with the full guide included as Appendix 1. Joel asked broad opening questions in each area and followed up on points the interviewee raised. We preferred "how" and "what" questions over "why" to encourage spontaneous descriptions rather than speculative explanations (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Opening questions included what a typical week looked like, how AI came up in conversations at the firm, and how the interviewee thought AI would affect their work going forward. The order of questions was adapted to the flow of each interview rather than fixed in advance (Saunders et al., 2019).

Joel led every interview. Simon attended some as an observer and occasionally asked clarifying follow-up questions. Simon's position at the firm was part of the interpretive context in which the accounts were produced rather than a problem to be removed from them. The arrangement follows Alvesson's (2003) response to the *closeness-closure dilemma* in self-ethnographic work. Closeness to the setting gives the researcher access but risks closure to its taken-for-granted aspects, and pairing an insider with an outsider keeps the empirical material at a distance from that closure. Yahya's (2025) view of positionality as shifting throughout the research process, rather than being fixed, reinforces this point. Insider and outsider are not fixed labels but positions that move across the phases of the work. We did not notice indications during the interviews that Simon's presence shaped how interviewees spoke. It may still have done so in ways that did not register at the time, which we cannot fully verify after the fact.

We conducted the interviews in Swedish. Most took place in person in Nexus's private meeting room, providing a quiet setting consistent with recommendations for a suitable interview environment (Creswell, 2007; Saunders et al., 2019). The rest were held over Teams, where in-person was not possible. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Before recording, we introduced ourselves and explained the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2007), the anonymization process, the right to withdraw, that there were no right or wrong answers, and that the recordings would be deleted at the end of the research. Recording the interviews supported accurate engagement with the material afterward (Saunders et al., 2019). Once consent was confirmed, we began recording and started the interview.

Below, we list all interviewees with their pseudonyms, roles, and interview lengths. We have chosen to use pseudonyms for the ease of writing. We also used gender neutral pseudonyms to strengthen anonymity. Associates and consultants have also been grouped together under consultants to increase anonymity.

Pseudonym	Role	Length of interview
Alex	Partner	1:11:43
Jordan	Partner	1:03:30
Morgan	Partner	57:39
Riley	Partner	56:47
Casey	Consultant	43:48
Quinn	Consultant	54:30
Avery	Consultant	51:46
Reese	Consultant	52:06
Blake	Consultant	47:03
Taylor	Consultant	1:00:00
Cameron	Consultant	48:25

Figure 1. List of Interviewees

3.4 Data analysis

We read the transcripts for both what the interviewees discussed and how they discussed it, using the what-and-how distinction set out by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). We worked through this analysis in three stages of sorting, reducing, and arguing. The stages overlapped in practice. Later reading often sent us back to revise earlier sorting choices.

After the interviews, we transcribed the recordings using Klang.AI, which follows GDPR. We then reviewed each transcript against the original audio and corrected errors in transcription. We

assigned pseudonyms to all participants at this stage and removed details that could identify them or the organization, in line with the qualitative research ethics described by Kaiser (2009). This work also gave us a first close reading of the material before any analytical sorting (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Joel led the first analytical read of the transcripts to maintain structural distance from the material. Simon contributed contextual reading and reflexive challenges afterward. We then discussed the stages of sorting, reducing, and arguing together. Throughout the process, Simon shared context with Joel about ongoing developments at the firm and who was doing what in the AI work. None of this was added to the empirical material. The insider position functioned as a background and reflexive challenge rather than as primary data. The arrangement addresses the closeness-closure dilemma that Alvesson (2003) describes in self-ethnographic research, using Simon's familiarity to challenge interpretations while keeping the empirical material grounded in the interviewees' words. It also aligns with Yahya's (2025) view of the insider/outsider position as shifting throughout the research process rather than being fixed.

We then built a working document with subheadings, placing selected quotes from each interview under their respective subheadings, along with brief comments. This let us compare across interviews and identify recurring themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). We labeled responses under broader thematic categories and noted key concepts, metaphors, and frequently used expressions as we worked. This initial layer of analysis was informed by open coding, as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998; cited in Styhre, 2013), which provided a flexible framework for analyzing the data. Seven broad categories came out, rather than being imposed in advance. These covered what AI was promising, how its implementation was viewed, where responsibility landed, how much each person knew about AI, what AI could do for the organization, how much time and effort were needed, and the issues that arose, along with how people tried to handle them. Time appeared in several of them. People kept returning to project deadlines, the effort required for AI work, and who was responsible for it. This gave us reason to read for time as a recurring spine through the material.

Reduction meant addressing the *problem of representation* (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p.107) by narrowing the seven categories into a more manageable set of analytical themes to

carry the empirical chapter. We re-read the material under each category and continually asked, "What is this an example of?" (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). What kept coming up was the question of time. People talked about AI as time-saving while also describing the time and effort it required and the difficulty of investing in it when project work was billable, and AI work was not. That gap, set inside a culture organized around saving time, was the dilemma the analysis settled on. The seven categories did not all become standalone themes. Variation in AI knowledge, for instance, became part of how members accounted for differences among themselves rather than standing on its own. Five themes emerged from the reduction. These covered the firm's high-performance culture, AI's promise of saving time, the hidden cost of AI in time and effort, how members account for the gap between the two, and how the culture itself shapes what gets done with AI.

Arguing meant integrating the five themes into the empirical chapter through excerpt-commentary units, following the stylistic model as outlined by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018). Each unit moves through four parts. An analytical point names what the unit shows. A brief orientation introduces the interviewee. The excerpt presents the quote. An analytical comment, the longest part of the unit, develops the point through a close reading of the quote. The comments stay on the level of how members account for things rather than treating what they say as evidence of how things actually are. The analytical work focused on how members constructed their accounts, not on whether what they said about Nexus held up.

3.5 Limitations

The interviews were conducted during a moment of active transition in Nexus's AI work. The firm moved across this window from a scattered experimentation phase to the formation of an AI group tasked with establishing structures for safe AI use. What we read in the transcripts reflects this moment rather than the firm's current state. Klang has since been rolled out across the firm as a transcription tool, and Claude has been made available within set parameters. The study's claims do not reach these later developments.

The study relies on interview accounts rather than on direct observation of how AI is used in everyday work. The thesis was conducted within a fixed window that did not allow for

longitudinal work to follow how members' engagement with AI shifted over time. Direct observation of client projects was also unavailable, since Nexus's work is under NDA with clients. The study's claims are therefore about how members construct accounts of AI within the firm rather than about what happens when they use it.

Interviewees knew Simon worked at the firm, even when Joel led the conversation. This may have shaped what they said, what they left out, and how candid they were when describing colleagues or the firm's leadership. The asymmetric design reduces this risk but does not remove it.

The study cannot fully step outside the researchers' own positions. Simon entered the work as an insider with views about the firm and its AI integration. Joel entered as an outsider but received contextual updates from Simon throughout the period, which may have shaped what he asked in interviews and how he listened. The analytical separation between Joel's first reading of the transcripts and Simon's later contextual challenge limits the extent to which these positions shape the analysis, but it does not eliminate them.

3.6 Ethics, use of AI, and GDPR compliance

The study was conducted in accordance with research ethics expectations at LUSEM and with GDPR. We obtained informed consent verbally from each participant before recording began. We briefed participants on the purpose of the study, the use of pseudonyms, the deletion of recordings at the end of the research, and their right to withdraw at any time. All participants appear in the thesis under pseudonyms, and the firm is anonymized throughout as Nexus. The only personal information retained in the final material is each participant's role at the firm. Names, contact details, and any details that could identify participants, clients, or projects were removed from the transcripts during pseudonymization. All audio recordings and transcripts will be deleted once the thesis has been graded and published. The completed thesis will be shared with participants once finalized.

Our use of generative AI in this study followed the Department of Business Administration's guidelines on AI use in academic work. We used Claude as a sparring partner throughout the

writing process. After working through a passage on our own, we brought our reasoning to Claude to test it, identify gaps in our argument, and refine sentence-level language. Claude was given a project context outlining what is expected of a master's thesis at LUSEM, the grading criteria, structural conventions, and feedback from our supervisor, so the conversations were grounded in the thesis's aims. A list of prompts used can be found in Appendix 2. We used Klang.AI to transcribe the interview audio recordings. Each transcript was then reviewed against the original audio with manual corrections for transcription errors, filler words, and repetitions. We did not use AI to write the thesis, generate arguments, or analyze empirical material. The thinking, arguments, and text are ours throughout. Literature was sourced through LUSEM licenses and library resources, with some sources found through open-access research repositories.

4. Empirical findings

This chapter presents the empirical material from interviews with members of Nexus, read as accounts members construct rather than as reports of how things are, and the analysis that builds on it. Five findings emerge across the following sections. Members account for the firm's working culture as one organized around delivery, pace, and an elite register, with these expectations formally codified in a behavioral framework. Members across roles frame AI in the same time-saving vocabulary the firm already uses for its own work. Members also describe AI as requiring time before it returns time, creating friction in the delivery of work. Members converge on a shared account that explains this friction as a matter of individual prioritization. This account holds when each member describes their own situation, but begins to break down when they try to explain why engagement with AI varies across the firm. Members at every level describe the conditions under which the AI work has to happen as reproducing the same time logic the firm runs on. The chapter opens with how members account for the working culture before turning to how they engage with AI within it.

4.1 A culture organized around delivery and pace

Nexus is a small, boutique professional services firm specializing in executive search and organizational advisory services. It operates as a client-based professional service firm. The organization has 17 employees across two Swedish offices and operates under a flat structure. Roles within the firm are divided into three levels: partners, consultants, and associates. The firm operates on a partner model, in which partners own the firm and revenue comes primarily from client projects. Projects are delivered by a team of one partner and one consultant or associate. How members account for the working culture that has developed around this work is the starting point of the analysis that follows.

Riley, a partner at Nexus, frames the culture with an elitist register.

"We want to be and are, I should say, a hardworking, very goal-driven, ambitious team that is good at having fun along the way... have fun, be excellent, and grow. (...) Like, we can't allow ourselves to have a lot of fun all the time if we're not excellent at the same time. So, from that perspective, you could say there's an elitist aspect to it. That we want to be stars, and we want to work with stars... we also set very high demands on each other."

When framing the culture, Riley uses a vocabulary that pairs work intensity with aspiration. The team is hardworking, goal-driven, and ambitious. They also mention that the firm should have fun, but it is framed as conditional. Excellence is named as the precondition, and fun is what excellence permits rather than coexisting on equal terms. This phrasing articulates the rule that performance comes first, with everything else contingent on it. Their account also reaches for an elite register. They offer the word “elitist” themselves, with a small hedge, “you could say”, and extend the framing outward when they describe the firm wanting to be stars and work with stars. In their account, elite identification goes beyond internal performance to include clients it sees itself working with. The disciplinary mechanism for this, according to Riley, seems to be created among peers rather than from above, as they refer to peers setting high demands.

The triad “have fun, be excellent, and grow” reads like a slogan. However, Riley says it without mentioning that it is one. This aligns with their position as partner, as partners tend to articulate the firm’s official self-image.

Beyond the triad Riley reproduces, the firm has codified its expectations in a behavioral framework it communicates internally as the Nexus Way. The framework is organized around a target diagram with three concentric rings labeled On Target, Bullseye, and Off Target, each with specific behaviors assigned to it.

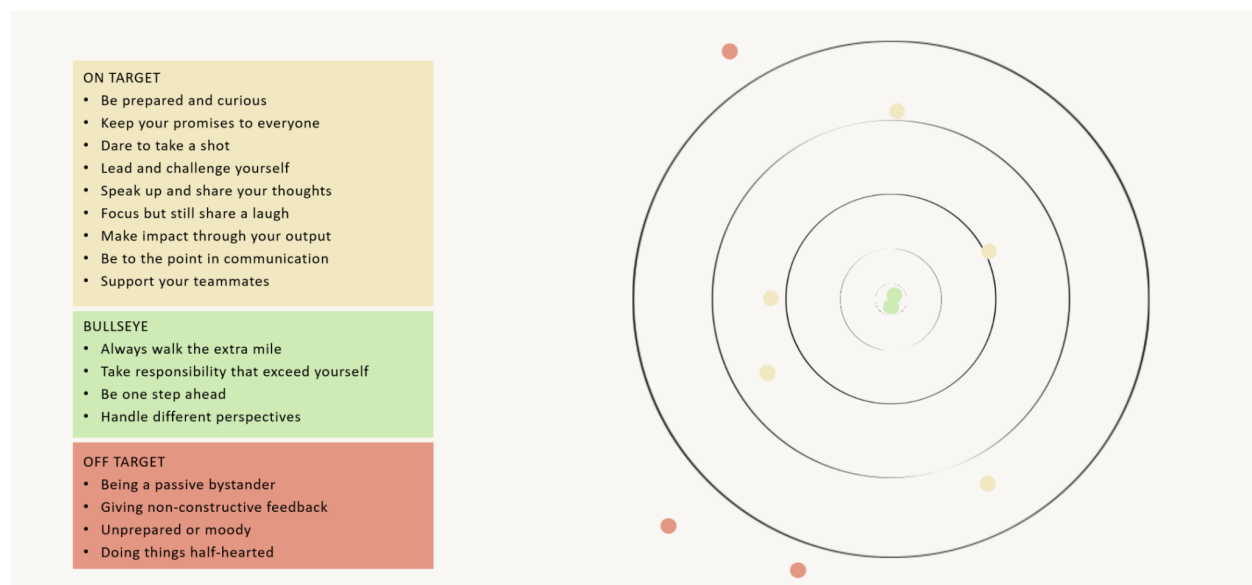


Figure 2. Nexus’s culture model

The on-target ring describes what every member is expected to demonstrate, regardless of role. These behaviors include being prepared and curious, keeping promises, daring to take a shot, leading and challenging oneself, speaking up, making an impact through output, communicating to the point, and supporting teammates. Bullseye narrows to what the firm singles out as exceeding that baseline: members walking the extra mile, taking responsibility that exceeds themselves, being one step ahead, and handling different perspectives. Off-target marks what disqualifies a member from being on target at all: a vocabulary of passive bystanding, non-constructive feedback, being unprepared or moody, and acting half-heartedly. The framework couples this behavioral assessment with the firm's performance assessment and states

that neither substitutes for the other. Performance against firm goals is always required, and behavior in line with the framework is also always required.

The Nexus Way formally articulates what Riley's account conveys conversationally. The conditional structure they reproduce, where fun is permitted only when excellence is in place, finds its formal version in the dual requirement that performance and behavior be delivered together. The elite register they reach for, where the firm wants to be and work with stars, is codified in the bullseye ring, where what counts as exemplary is being one step ahead and walking the extra mile. The off-target register carries its own vocabulary of passivity, halfheartedness, and unpreparedness.

Taylor, a consultant, mentions the same triad as Riley, but explicitly lists it as one of the firm's slogans.

"I would describe it as quite relaxed, safe, but at the same time with a performance, a kind of performance drive (...) It is very important that you do, and that we together do a very good job. But in a safe and good environment. And have fun. That is probably one of our slogans, something like that, but to have fun along the way."

Taylor's account moves through a constant interplay. Every time they name a performance register, a softer one follows. Performance is consistently conditioned by safety, and safety is consistently coupled to performance. Taylor frames the two as coexisting rather than as one masking the other. They also name the slogan explicitly. Where Riley reproduces the triad as if speaking the firm's own language, Taylor steps back from the slogan even as they repeat it. The hedges "probably" and "something like that" mark their awareness that this is corporate self-presentation. Taylor is a consultant, and their slightly more distant relationship to the slogan is consistent with that position. In their account, the slogan is the firm's self-description. Taylor recognizes it as such and uses it anyway.

Cameron, a consultant, names the cultural stance in the members' own vocabulary, placing them within the culture they are describing rather than at a distance from it, using "we".

“We work at a company where everyone is very action-oriented and entrepreneurial, and it's like that. You're used to just 'do it' somehow. And then maybe you sometimes move a little too fast.”

They account for the firm's operational tempo, noting that members are accustomed to the notion of “just do it.” They articulate it as a common understanding within the firm rather than their own. When describing the too-fast pace, they use three hedges. It lets them name the pace as occasionally too fast without breaking the “we” they opened with. They are not stepping outside the culture to critique it. They are naming, from inside, that the pace can become too much.

Across the three accounts, the culture is framed as one organized around performance, delivery, and an operational tempo to which members are accustomed. Riley places excellence as the precondition for everything else the firm permits itself. Taylor names the performance drive alongside a safer register, the two coexisting rather than alternating. Cameron describes the firm as action-oriented and entrepreneurial, with a habitual pace that occasionally overshoots. The accounts approach the culture from different positions within the firm and with different vocabularies, but they share a foregrounding of delivery and pace. How members of this culture engage with AI, a technology that arrives at Nexus framed as a time-saver, is the question the analysis focuses on.

4.2 The promise: AI as a time-saver

Over the last couple of months, efforts have been made to move the organization toward a more AI-oriented approach to its work. This initiative was framed internally as a way to gain a competitive advantage and make the firm's work more efficient, with the ambition of saving time on administrative tasks. Following a recent internal conference on the possibilities and use of AI, the senior partners issued directives to facilitate AI literacy and use through a phase of experimentation. At the time of the interviews, the phase was actively in process.

Across the interviews, members at all levels of the firm speak to the importance of AI for the firm's continued development. Cameron frames the orientation at the organizational level: *“Everyone agrees that it's super important that we do this, this AI implementation.”*

Casey, a consultant, frames the orientation as ongoing rather than singular: *“We always must continue to explore and be curious and try new things, like new tools, new ways of doing things, and keep up with that part.”* Their phrasing includes a claim of necessity, that the organization needs to embrace technological change. This seems to be a general stance, according to the account, rather than specific to AI.

After attending the internal conference where AI was the main point of discussion, Avery, a consultant, articulates the necessity also at the personal level: *“Of course, you understand that it’s used for much more than you yourself use it for. And not least, what you need to use it for going forward to avoid falling behind.”*

Avery names two things in their account. First, an awareness that the field of AI use extends beyond what they do themselves. Second, a future-oriented competitive register where they need to avoid falling behind. These two are linked; their awareness of a broader area of use gives rise to the necessity claim. Casey framed this orientation as a broader stance the firm already holds. Avery’s framing is specific to AI and the individual. Avery frames AI as something they need to avoid falling behind in a field that is already moving ahead of them.

Blake, a consultant, articulates the same necessity from a different register: *“Everything that could, can make life easier, to become better both as a person and as a worker, should be used.”* Blake frames AI usage as an obligation rather than an option. The improvement they name extends beyond work, since the use of AI is framed as something that also makes one better personally. Where Avery’s account is structured around the risk of falling behind, Blake’s is structured around the aspiration to improve. The two reach the necessity claim by different routes but arrive at the same conclusion: AI must be used.

The accounts gathered so far speak to AI’s importance but do not yet explain why it matters. When members turn from whether AI matters to why AI matters, the framing becomes more specific. Cameron articulates it as:

“(…) when it comes to what we discuss at the company level, why we use AI. Then it’s actually mostly just the time aspect we’re talking about. Then we talk about relationships that it frees up time for us to spend more time on (…) value creation in other ways.”

Cameron gives an account of what the firm says about AI at the company level, not their own reasons why AI is important. It positions them as an observer of the firm's collective discourse. When saying "it's actually mostly just", they narrow the framing while also implying that the discourse may be more one-sided than one would expect. They also add that the saved time is reinvested in relationships.

When members account for why AI matters, the vocabulary converges. Taylor names "more time for value creation." Blake describes the gain as "time-efficient above all." Morgan, a partner, says the firm has "freed up time." Jordan, a partner, when asked what AI gives them, answers, "Time." The work AI displaces is named in a similar register. Morgan refers to "work that is very repetitive", and Jordan calls it "manual work that doesn't take me [develop me] anywhere." The vocabulary in the accounts tends to be similar to the register members use to describe their work and the firm's culture more broadly.

Reese, a consultant, describes the gain in their own work:

"Well, it saves me an incredible amount of time above all... it means I can spend more time on where value is created. That is, actually going out and meeting people. The relationship-building part. (...) I've almost halved the time I spend on projects."

Reese frames the gain in quantitative and superlative terms, claiming that AI is saving them time above all else and has halved the time they spend on projects. In their account, AI creates space for relationship-building, which they suggest was not possible in the same way previously, when they say "actually going out".

Avery names what they call "the overall goal" of the AI initiative at Nexus:

"The overall goal is, well, that every person who works with us should be able to spend more time on meetings with clients and candidates, like physical meetings or face-to-face meetings, rather than sitting a lot with administrative parts of the computer."

Avery, like Cameron, articulates this goal in terms of saving time and reinvesting it in relationship-building. They also differentiate between the physical aspect of

relationship-building and screen-based work, implying that relationship-building primarily occurs face-to-face. They also frame the goal as something for everyone who works at Nexus, not just for them.

Alex, a partner, frames the time-saving claim in absolute terms:

“I am absolutely sure that we can save a lot of time. For example, a lot of monkey work is done here. It’s quite obvious. Roughly like at McKinsey, right, or at any professional services firm. So that all, all processes, reporting, can be standardized to a fairly large extent.”

Alex speaks with certainty; they are absolutely sure the firm can save time and standardize repetitive work. They benchmark against McKinsey and other professional services firms, stating that this account is universal rather than unique to Nexus. They speak from a partner's position, framing time-saving as a goal for the firm rather than a personal account of their own work.

Riley sharpens the vision into a quantitative target.

“The goal is that everyone working at our company should spend at least 50, preferably 80% of their time talking to other people. Colleagues, customers, candidates. You shouldn't sit at your desk writing reports. It's kind of what my daily life looks like today, thanks to having other people who write reports and so on. (...) The more time you spend actually talking to people, the better your analysis of that person can become.”

Riley makes the partners' vision more precise by setting a numeric target. They frame it as a rule the firm is aiming towards, your job should not be to sit at your desk and write reports. The vision for the whole firm seems to be what partners currently have: someone else to do the administrative work. Riley also claims that freeing up this time and talking to people makes you better at your job. Claiming that the relationship-building is not only where the saved time goes, but also where the firm's expertise is created.

Across these accounts, the discourse and vocabulary seem identical. Time is the dominant frame, and the time AI saves is to be reinvested in what members call relationship-building. Reese

speaks from their own work, Cameron and Avery name the company-level discourse, Alex and Riley articulate the partner aspiration, but the framing is the same. What the accounts establish is the promise of time-saving.

4.3 The time AI also takes before it saves time

In the previous section, we established how members frame AI as a time-saver and what they say it saves them time for. What we have not yet addressed is how members account for the time AI itself takes. The framing here seems less uniform than it was for the promise, although both consultants and partners mention the time investment AI needs.

Earlier, Cameron named what the firm says at a company level about AI's promise; here, they step back from that same discourse.

“And you constantly hear about how much time you can save with AI. And then I think that sometimes, as it looks now, [we] may be a little overestimating how much time you can actually save with AI right now. Maybe. And how quickly it will happen before you can save as much time as you actually want to.”

They position the time-saving claim as circulating around them rather than as one they themselves claim. The phrase “you constantly hear” frames this promise as a discourse one is exposed to rather than what one says. When taking a step back, they express doubt that the promise will actually hold in current practice. Three hedges in their quote point to this doubt. “Sometimes” makes the overestimation occasional, and “maybe a little” tones it down. At the same time, “as it looks now” means this is how it is now, but not necessarily how it will be in the future. This allows them to express their overestimation without rejecting the promise. They are not questioning whether AI saves time, but rather how much and how soon. The final sentence of their account strengthens this temporal claim: savings will arrive, but the question is when. Compared to their previous account, here Cameron points to a gap between the discourse around AI's time-saving and what it has actually produced so far. Avery speaks to what produces that gap, identifying two costs of using AI.

"You get quite eager... Of course, you want it to happen quickly, and I suppose it does. The impression is that it's harder than one thinks when exploring it themselves. At the same time, you're sitting with each other's work tasks, and then you're also supposed to explore AI. So it takes longer than one might both want and think it would."

The first is that using AI is harder than expected. The difficulty stems from trying it personally, and the hedge becomes “the impression is,” which makes the claim a matter of their own understanding rather than a fact. The second cost is that exploration is happening alongside the work tasks already on their plate. They say, “at the same time as”, framing the cost as an addition to their daily work, not as a one-time investment. There is also a register of obligation in what they are saying, saying that “you’re supposed to explore AI”, making it something that has to fit into their daily work. Their final sentence distinguishes between desire and expectation, stating that AI integration is slower than one hopes and slower than one thought it would be. Throughout the account, they use “you” rather than “I,” which generalizes their experience to that encountered when attempting to integrate AI into existing work.

Where Avery frames the cost as the time AI takes to integrate alongside the daily work, Reese frames it as time spent without a predictable outcome.

"Like using it in terms as I do today, then it's worth it, because I know what I get out of it, I can trust it, I can use it. But spending half a day and it results in zero output, then I've wasted half a day. And I can't make that assessment right now, at least. So in that way, I would say it becomes a frustration."

Reese frames AI in two different registers here. They begin by saying that AI is worth it in its current use because they know what to expect from it and can use it. It is therefore not a cost. Then they use “but” and move to the other side of the coin, quantifying the cost of AI in terms of wasted time and unclear returns. They then shift the cost away from the time itself to the difficulty of predicting its return: “I can’t make that assessment.” The time spent under uncertainty becomes a risk rather than an investment. But they hedge this with “right now at least,” marking this inability as temporary and potentially resolvable. They end their account by noting the effect of this, claiming it becomes a source of frustration. When AI is used in known

ways, the question of cost does not arise for Reese. The exploration of what they have not yet learned seems to create the frustration.

While the previous accounts have identified the different forms of cost, Blake introduces the factors that give rise to them.

"When you're sitting there and have a lot of meetings that follow one after another, then it's easiest to just do as you've always done, because it's faster when you know how to do it. So I think that can also be a reason why not everyone has implemented it in the best possible way. Because there's always a learning curve before the time becomes sufficiently time-efficient."

They open with a specific example of a situation one might find oneself in, with back-to-back meetings. They then say, how you decide what to do and how to do it becomes what is fastest. Essentially, expressing that one tends to fall back on routine, not necessarily because one wants to, but because it has a given result. Blake then names a learning curve that exists “before the time becomes sufficiently time-efficient”, demonstrating a threshold that AI has to cross before it becomes the faster option. They also seem to universalize, saying “always, like, a learning curve,” suggesting this is not unique to AI; it could apply to any new tool. The individual decision to go with the routine option is rational in the moment, but over time, that rationality prevents the learning curve Blake speaks about from being crossed.

Jordan names the tension between project deadlines and investing in AI work from a partner perspective.

"There's also a balance between investing time in AI work, but also having a damn lot of projects to deliver on a daily basis. And how much time does one actually have to test something when you're also deeply involved in certain projects that you need to solve? So I think that balance also becomes a discussion."

Jordan labels the cost as a balance, calling the time given to AI an investment, which is a register nobody has used previously. In Jordan's account, the cost is something the firm decides, not something the individual feels, and the balance becomes a discussion. They argue this by citing

the projects that must be delivered daily, which create constant pressure, and then turn it into a question: how much time is left for AI experimentation? They use “actually” in the question almost as a reality check against the claim that one should explore AI. Their final sentence in the account positions this as a discussion, presumably for the partner group. Is there actually time for people to experiment with AI?

Taylor speaks about the cost as a sunk cost of experimentation.

"I don't think this experimental phase creates any kind of business value in the short term... I don't think there are any measurable results showing that it has been good. Rather, it's more of a feeling and increased usage."

Taylor frames the cost as there is nothing to show for the work done. The cost is named specifically as “any kind of business value in the short term” and “measurable results showing that it has been good”. They negate both by saying “I don’t think”, hedging it at the same time as their own understanding rather than facts. On the other hand, they do speak about what has come from the experimentation. It is named softly as “a feeling and increased usage”. In their account, the experimentation has not created value for the firm, but rather a mood and behavior. They do hold it open for the future, claiming that this has been the case in the short term, not saying that the cost will not pay off; it just has not paid off yet.

Across accounts, members at every level of the organization describe AI as a technology that requires time to deliver time savings and value. The framings vary across members, but the experience is shared. Several voices note that the costs are temporary and not fixed, leaving room for future changes without dismissing what has happened so far. The costs of the AI work at the firm have been named, but it raises the question: if days are already filled with project delivery, where does the time AI requires actually come from?

4.4 How members account for the friction between time saved and time taken

In the previous section, members described AI as requiring time before it saves time, creating friction in the delivery of work. This section examines how they account for that friction. The

accounts explain where the time goes and how members locate the responsibility for the difficulty. Members converge on a shared framing that holds when each describes their own situation. It begins to break down when members describe each other. Engagement with AI varies across the firm, and members notice it. To account for that variation, members place the difference in different parts of the firm.

4.4.1 A shared framing: time as a question of priority

While time seems to be an issue, some express that time does exist, but it is more a question of priority, as Quinn, a consultant, expresses it:

"I always think that there is time. As long as you plan for it, there will be time. So yes, time exists. Then you just have to prioritize it or schedule a calendar block or do something. [...] Then you don't have much time for anything other than delivering on the projects, which somewhere is what keeps the business running."

Quinn's account is that time exists as long as you choose to prioritize and plan for it, framed as a choice by the individual. There is a tension in Quinn's own statement that they quickly resolve. They say time exists, but they also say there is not much time for anything other than delivering on projects. The two claims sit uneasily together. Quinn moves past the tension by framing the constraint as a feature of the work rather than of the time itself. The projects keep the business running, so the priority is clear. Quinn frames it as the individual's responsibility to find the time needed to complete assigned work tasks while exploring with AI. While Quinn treats prioritization as an individual choice, Jordan frames it as almost inevitable.

"I think that one always prioritizes projects over anything else. I think so. And because that's where the expectations and our survival lie... If we don't deliver projects, we can't invoice, then we can't pay out salaries... So it becomes so clear, especially visible in the organization, that there is pressure on that, which makes it difficult to stand up against that pressure."

For Jordan, it is not a question of whether projects should be prioritized; it is about the organization's survival. The chain they describe runs from delivering projects to invoicing to

paying salaries, and each link adds to the pressure, making the priority less negotiable than the one before. The same logic does not apply to AI exploration because exploration does not produce the immediate value the survival chain requires. Jordan frames the pressure as the firm's, not the individual's. Casey adds to the framing of prioritization, while showing what happens in practice:

“(...) I would say that everyone has that [time], and it's really a matter of prioritization, and that, I absolutely think we have, we have had a very good quarter and a lot to do, and delivered good results. But I mean, yes, there's always time to explore and learn new things too (...). But you know, it's easy to fall back into, I have to do this for the customer, I prioritize it first.”

Casey frames the situation as one in which everyone has the time to explore and learn new things. Prioritization determines where it goes. However, their account complicates the framing. The time may be there in theory, but that does not mean members use it for AI exploration. Instead, Casey describes how members fall back to prioritizing the customer because that is where the business value lies. The customer-first orientation is not a choice members make. It is the default they slip into.

Avery arrives at a similar conclusion, though the reasoning takes a different route.

“Well, that's probably the big challenge all the time, I would say, time. But it's probably about prioritization. And everyone has slightly different workloads. So there's probably enough time. It's just about taking that time. And yes, time exists, I would say.”

Avery adopts the same prioritization framework as the others. The real issue for Avery is time itself, which they name as "the big challenge all the time." They then use workload variation to support their argument for prioritization. Because workloads differ across members, they can claim there is probably enough time and that it is about taking it. At the same time, Avery seems undecided about the idea of time, questioning whether it really exists, before concluding that, according to her, it does.

The shared account points away from the members themselves. Quinn, Jordan, Casey, and Avery each treat time as a question of prioritization, prioritizing what the firm needs to survive. The customer-first orientation is not a choice members make. It is a condition of the work. This account provides benefits to its members. It spreads the friction of AI exploration across the firm without placing it on any one person in particular. No individual falls behind, no group is responsible, and the difficulty becomes a feature of how the business runs rather than something members do or fail to do. The account holds as long as members describe their own situation. It begins to break when they describe each other. Members notice that engagement with AI varies across the firm and turn to explanations that attribute the difference to particular groups or individuals.

4.4.2 How members account for the differences across the firm

Where and how they are in the process of experimenting with AI seems to differ between the different groups in the organization, as Reese mentions:

"Some of our senior colleagues said, ' Oh my god, how great that AI has now completely taken over the search work. And I was just like, wait, wait, now [hold on a second]. It has done nothing in the search work."

Reese describes a gap between what senior colleagues believe AI has done and what, in their account, has actually happened. The mismatch is between what seniors think AI has done and what Reese, doing the work, sees. Reese corrects the senior's account from a consultant position, and the phrase "wait, wait, now" marks the correction in their voice. They position themselves as the one who sees what is actually happening, and the seniors as those whose accounts overstate AI's role. Morgan takes a different position. For them, the gap is not between groups but between individuals:

"The knowledge level of AI and how AI has developed have differed. So that makes me think we kind of moved forward, but it depends more on individual interests and self-interest in AI and how it applies on an individual level rather than how we have managed it in groups."

While Morgan speaks about the gap between the knowledge and the actual development of AI, the framing is weighed differently. From Morgan's perspective, the difference is not solely due to informal hierarchical groups but is also influenced by the individual's interest in and engagement with AI. There is ownership and self-responsibility that must be accounted for when experimenting with AI, aligning with Nexus's overall high-performance culture. The framing also shifts accountability away from the senior partner group. Where Reese placed the gap between groups, Morgan places it within individuals.

While there seems to be a general gap between junior and senior interest and engagement, it is not as clear-cut, as Taylor adds:

"I would say that it's a bit mixed. There are a few more senior individuals who might have a rather disinterest or lack knowledge. Then there are a number of older individuals who also have knowledge and are informed and engaged. And likewise regarding some younger individuals."

Taylor describes the picture as mixed. In their account, more seniors are less interested and lack the knowledge of AI. They also name seniors who are informed and engaged. The same variation appears among juniors. Taylor complicates Reese's and Morgan's accounts by describing the picture as mixed across both groups. The mixed framing is itself a position. While Reese places the gap between groups and Morgan within individuals, Taylor distributes it across the firm rather than concentrating it in any one place. The difference is named, but no one is made accountable for it.

Blake describes a specific pattern they have noticed when working with senior colleagues:

"As I notice when working with more senior people, that they think it's like a real person you're writing to. So it's more like how easy it is to use, which maybe not everyone has understood."

For Blake, the gap takes a concrete shape. While Reese, Morgan, and Taylor described it in terms of knowledge, interest, or engagement, Blake claims they have observed a specific behavior among seniors: they write to the tool as if it were a person, indicating to her that they have not

understood how easy it is to use. It does not require the same human interaction. The qualification at the end of their account is also doing work. They say, "maybe not everyone has understood," rather than claiming the seniors have not understood. As a consultant describing partners, they moderate their observations while they are still being made.

Alex responds to the same gap from the other side.

"The challenge is that (...) [consultants]¹ might be the ones who are best and most interested. But that's also where the problems arise. Because, because then it becomes, bottom-up."

Alex names consultants who might have the most knowledge and interest in experimenting with AI. However, instead of treating this as an opportunity, they frame it as a problem where the consultants would outpace the senior partners. The firm is built around partners, teaching consultants, and associates, and AI inverts that. Knowledge in this case sits with the people who, in the firm's usual model, are the ones being taught. While the firm describes itself as flat, Alex's framing of bottom-up momentum as a problem implies a hierarchy between the partner group and the consultants. The partner group should not be behind, and the strategic direction of AI should come from above. Where the earlier accounts described the gap, Alex treats it as a challenge to be managed.

Morgan frames in the direction of what Alex's framing is pointing towards:

"And then we've probably had thoughts for a long time about how it will affect our industry and our offering, our competitiveness. And where we should steer our business model towards our place in the value chain based on how AI will impact. I think the first step was probably to ensure that we have an owner agenda, that we steer the business and our strategic goals towards a space where we believe that we, with the help of AI, creates something like an ever-increasing value that also becomes hard to replace with AI."

¹ Names were replaced with consultants for anonymity reasons

Where Alex named the challenge of bottom-up momentum, Morgan names the response. The account moves from the operational use of AI to the strategic stakes the firm faces, and lands on the owner's agenda as the first step. Morgan places strategic direction with the partners. Read against Alex's framing, where consultants holding AI competence inverted the firm's usual order, the owner's agenda answers by making AI part of what the partners decide on. The firm describes itself as flat, but when AI becomes a strategic question, the partners take ownership.

The accounts in this section take different positions on where the difference lies. Reese places it between groups. Morgan locates it in individuals. Taylor describes the picture as mixed. Blake points to how seniors use the tool. Each speaker puts the difference somewhere, and where they put it shifts who carries the responsibility. Alex and Morgan then describe the difference from a different angle. They are not just naming it. They are naming what should be done about it and who should do it. Alex frames bottom-up momentum as the problem. Morgan answers with the owner's agenda. The shared account explored earlier framed the friction as something all members lived with together. The accounts here show that the partner group takes responsibility for addressing the friction rather than sharing it across the firm.

4.5 The conditions the work runs into

The previous sections set out how members talk about AI, the costs they register, and how they account for the mismatch between the time AI requires and the time projects demand. This section turns to the structures the firm has set up around AI, what those structures have produced, and the conditions under which the work has had to happen.

Blake accounts for the weekly structures the firm built around AI work.

"The thing about having requirements to find something new every week. It doesn't work. Because even we younger ones who are the AI generation, we don't discover new things every week, but rather we work more with, perhaps, basically unconsciously training our Claude or ChatGPT because we use it so much. So that it gets to know me. That's more how I discover new things."

Blake positions himself as the kind of member the structures might be expected to suit, saying, "even we younger ones who are the AI generation." If those who use AI most still cannot produce weekly findings, the issue they frame is not their capacity but the structure's premise about how AI knowledge develops. What Blake describes is a relationship that builds through use. The tool is being trained on how they work, "basically unconsciously," and discoveries emerge from a tool that has gotten to know them rather than from deliberate weekly experimentation. The structure asks for something new each week, but Blake describes a process that produces nothing reportable on that timescale.

Taylor describes the same weekly review from a different angle.

"We had a review every Tuesday, for example, when we went around, and that certainly creates, well, pressure or (...) requirements or what it can be called about the fact that you need to have done something in order to say something. And for better or worse. Sometimes it felt a bit forced, perhaps. And sometimes, very good things came out. So you're kind of forced or pushed a bit so that everyone should try and be able to highlight something they had done the week before in a meeting, and then you do it."

Taylor frames the structure as something that produces a certain kind of effort. The cause is the meeting itself, where members have to present something new each week. They have two readings of what this creates. On the one hand, the structure feels forced, but on the other, it produces good results. They hedge it throughout their account, staying with both readings rather than picking a side. Where Blake frames the weekly requirement as something that does not work, Taylor frames it as something that works partly due to producing output that would not exist otherwise. Their ending, "you do it," in the account indicates that the meeting structure prompts action from members.

Cameron returns to the firm's broader tendency toward action and frames how that nature shapes the AI work specifically.

"We work at a company where everyone is very action-oriented and entrepreneurial, and it's like that. You're used to just 'do it' somehow. And then maybe you sometimes move a little too fast. Instead of taking a step back and just okay, but what is it we actually want

to achieve with this? (...) So it is easy then to create a bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy just because you get something done. Or just, okay, now we have a process. Okay, yes, we do. And maybe it goes a little faster. But maybe we could have gotten it three times better if we just weighed one tool against another or integrated two tools."

They stay within the culture they describe by using “we”. They name a pattern in which getting something done becomes a measure of success, regardless of whether what was done would have served the firm best. They claim it is a “self-fulfilling prophecy”. They describe a chain of events. The culture promotes speed; this speed yields results, but it may also lead to missing opportunities that could have produced more value with more time. The cost in their account is opportunity cost: the better version of the same work that the firm's speed rules out before it can be considered. The clause “if we just weighed one tool against another or integrated two tools” specifies what the speed prevents. Cameron is not asking for slower work in general, but for the careful comparison that action-orientation can rule out.

Quinn accounts for what happens when the AI working groups encounter structural obstacles they cannot resolve on their own.

"I wouldn't say that it becomes a split, but it becomes quite, let's call it an easy out, like, yes, but now we can't go further. But then it becomes quite easy to fall back to your projects or to your other things you have to do. Maybe one's calendar is already booked and now I have to deal with this. One comes to the conclusion that we can't deal with it until they have resolved this. By its nature, it then becomes quite simple as we fall back on our project and wait for them to get in touch."

Quinn describes a mechanism in which obstacles that working groups encounter are framed as legitimate reasons to stop working on AI. Members do not decide to deprioritize AI work; they conclude they cannot continue until the obstacle is removed and, in the meantime, return to their daily tasks. Quinn is not neutral in this, phrasing this as an “easy out”. The obstacle does not block the work, but it makes returning to the daily work and projects feel like the rational thing to do. Their account describes the return as easy. If calendars are already booked, the pull

towards daily projects is already there, and the obstacle simply justifies following that pull. The AI work halts not because of a decision, but because of its absence.

Blake later returns in their interview to what their working group set out to do at the conference and what has been done on that work.

"It might not have gone as fast as we had hoped when we sat there at the conference. It's mainly due to the lack of time that no one, I mean, no one is worse than anyone else, but no one has prioritized it as much as they really should have."

The first sentence anchors the gap: there was an ambition to move quickly, but it was not kept. They do not blame one person, role, or particular group. Instead, they claim, "no one is worse than anyone else." The mid-sentence interruption shows that they catch themselves before the statement could be read as blame and reframes it. Their account locates the gap not in individuals or roles but in something the firm as a whole has not done, while also naming what they see as the cause: a lack of time. However, this lack of time is produced by what the firm has and has not prioritized.

Reese accounts for what they see as a different kind of gap in how the groups work.

"We are talking at the group level about what has been done and how it has been done, but. It's kind of like, I don't know how to explain it. (...) But take Robin, for example, who might be a bit better at AI, and I'm a bit worse at AI. What I come up with will probably be a bit worse than what Robin comes up with. And that's what I mean by it becoming, how do we then know that this group has fully maximized AI in the way that we can do it? And that ultimately comes down to a lack of knowledge. You can't expect everyone to be AI experts. It's not really our job directly, after all."

Reese is reaching for something they do not fully know how to articulate. The phrases "I don't know how to explain it" and "that's what I mean by it becoming" show that their account is developing as they speak. What seems to be framing the question is how the firm can determine whether the groups are using AI effectively and creating maximum value. They set up the problem with an example of two members with different levels of AI expertise. The output

created will reflect who is doing the work, and the work could have been done better by someone else. The question they end on, “how do we know then that this group has fully maximized AI in the way that we can do it”, is not rhetorical. They claim the firm has no way to answer this question. While the obvious response may be to make everyone better at AI, they close this door. AI expertise is not what the firm is for, and expecting it from everyone would be a mistake, so the problem remains.

Jordan describes the relationship between the firm’s high-performance culture and AI work when asked what would need to change in the culture to promote that work.

"We don't know if this performance culture with clear goals, deadlines, and these short-term, what should I say, goals all the time kill the other things a bit. Because as soon as you're out of those short-term goals, it's a bit like you exhale, like you just don't have the energy to do the other things as well. So, from that perspective, I think we might need to free up even more time. Lower the delivery requirements then. But I'm not sure that people are good at both."

They open their account with “we don’t know,” which frames the question as one the partners have not yet answered. The question is whether the culture the firm has built kills its capacity to do work beyond the short-term goals it sets. Their framing puts the cost of the high-performance culture in what happens when members finish a deadline. The exhale is not rest; it is the absence of energy for anything other than another deadline. They follow with a proposed solution: free up more time and lower the delivery requirements, but they end with a hedge. “I’m not sure people are good at both,” indicated that the response Jordan themselves have proposed may not work. The members of the firm who are shaped to perform under short-term goals may not be the ones who can also do exploratory work when those goals are loosened. The structural problem Jordan identifies is that the culture has produced members who now need to be different in ways the culture has not equipped them to be.

Earlier in the interview, Jordan described how another issue with how AI fits into the culture they have just named.

"Yes, but then it becomes that you might not be so creative and open-minded, instead, you always want to have a very clear goal. And then, of course, no one can set a goal for it because no one knows what it will look like. And then I think you become a bit passive."

They name a logical problem that the culture cannot solve. The members have been shaped to work toward clear goals. AI work cannot have a clear goal yet because no one knows what it will look like. When these two collide, Jordan describes that the result is passivity. The word passive becomes key in the account. Members are not refusing or resisting AI work. They are waiting for a goal to be developed through the AI work that has not yet been formed. The cultural structure that makes the firm effective at delivery, according to their framing, becomes a mechanism for not doing the AI work by putting members in a state where the work can not start.

Morgan also accounts for the structural conditions of the AI work, framing the firm's culture in terms of how it manages strategic initiatives.

"We have a culture that is quite, a bit too ad hoc. So on one hand, we want to do the most. We want to reach our financial goals. We set a budget. We have a high occupancy rate. Most people have a lot to do. And then we're also going to do something new and ambitious with AI. So do you still have that energy and capacity when you finally sit down with it to really break new ground? And if the business starts to falter or we need to bring in more business, is it a high enough priority then for us to have that endurance? (...) Consulting firms that try to build products and become product companies. Very few succeed because then when it gets a bit tough, when it gets tight, when you seem to miss your goals, then you let go of it and lose momentum and so, then it's over. And that's also where we are, our management can become a bit too ad hoc."

Morgan describes the firm's management as ad hoc at both the start and the end of their account. The word sets the frame for the explanation that follows. Their account describes the conditions under which AI work must happen: alongside a high occupancy rate, ongoing financial goals, and members who already have a lot to do. Morgan asks whether the firm has the endurance to sustain AI work when conditions tighten. They draw an analogy to consulting firms that try to become product companies, saying most of them fail because when delivery pressure rises, new

work tends to be dropped. Morgan then places Nexus within that pattern, claiming there is a risk that the AI work would be the thing the firm lets go of when things get tight, given the nature of consulting firms.

Riley describes the same condition through a different framing, claiming it as a structural feature of consulting firms more generally.

"A few years ago, we might have had seven strategic initiatives. And so we've learned now that we can't have seven. We can have one, two, or three strategic initiatives at most. Because we can't handle more than that... it easily becomes very, very task-oriented. That it's difficult to combine high consultant utilization with moving forward operationally at the same time. So it's more like perhaps a structural problem we have that all consulting firms have."

Riley frames the condition as structural and universal. "All consulting firms" face the problem they describe, which means Nexus's situation is not a failure but a well-known issue. What they name as the issue is the difficulty of balancing two things at once. The firm has a high occupancy rate, which means members are deployed on client work. At the same time, there is the development of operational work that includes AI. Riley's account of what they have learned is that doing both at the level the firm wants requires only having a few strategic initiatives. The reduction from seven to one, two, or three is the firm's response after trying more and failing. Their closing claim, in which they describe this as a structural issue all consulting firms have, does two things. It shows that Riley can clearly see the issue from their partner's perspective, but it also frames it as something that cannot be expected to be resolved.

Members at every level of the firm account for the AI work in ways that point back to the same conditions. The structures the firm has built to organize AI work operate on the same sense of time it already runs on, and members describe this logic as ill-suited to the requirements. Members describe that the results of the work are limited and cannot be attributed to individual failure, but rather to something the firm as a whole has not done. The partner voices articulate the structural condition itself, naming the culture and the management pattern as what makes sustained AI work difficult to hold. Members seem to be converging on what is happening with

the AI work, and several of them claim to see why. What members diverge on is the response. We read the disagreement on the response as a loop. The conditions within the firm have trained members to see the difficulty clearly, but they cannot act on it. The accounts converge on the problem, but they diverge on the path through it.

4.6 Chapter summary

This chapter presented five findings on how Nexus members engage with the firm's working culture and AI. Members account for the working culture as one organized around delivery, pace, and an elite register, with these expectations formally codified in a behavioral framework that couples performance and behavior as dual requirements. AI arrives at the firm framed in members' own time-saving vocabulary, with members describing the saved time as something to reinvest in what they call relationship-building. Members also describe AI as requiring time before it delivers time savings, creating friction in the delivery work. When that friction is accounted for, members converge on a shared explanation that frames it as a matter of individual prioritization, but this account begins to break down when they try to explain why engagement with AI varies across the firm. Members at every level describe the conditions under which AI work has to happen as reproducing the same time logic the firm runs on. They can see the pattern but cannot act on it from within. The discussion that follows reads these findings against the literature on AI integration and the temporal logic of high-performance organizations. It argues that the conditions that make Nexus excellent at client delivery are the same conditions that make AI integration structurally difficult to sustain.

5. Discussion

In this chapter, we critically engage with our empirical findings by situating them within the broader literature. The discussion is structured around three analytical themes. The first rethinks AI integration at Nexus, moving from the dominant framing of miscalculation toward a deeper understanding of temporal incompatibility. The second examines how the high-performance culture converts that structural incompatibility into an individual question of priority, keeping the conditions of integration outside examination. The third shows how the firm's own attempts

to organize AI work reproduce the conditions that make integration difficult, producing a self-defeating loop that the culture cannot resolve from within.

5.1 Rethinking AI integration: from miscalculation to temporal incompatibility

In this section, we discuss how the experience of AI integration at Nexus contributes to our understanding of the challenges organizations face in integrating AI. The complications of the augmentation literature examine this most directly, identifying the broad costs of what integration demands. These include sustained worker effort, ongoing skill development, and active reshaping of the work. Each of these carries a real-time cost. Yet the literature treats the costs of AI integration as something organizations failed to anticipate. It becomes a miscalculation that can be managed through better planning. What Nexus reveals is that the difficulty runs deeper than this framing. The problem is not that organizations miscalculate the cost of AI integration.

Of these costs, time is where the deeper problem becomes visible. Reinecke and Ansari (2015) distinguish between two ways organizations relate to time. Clock-time sees time as a measurable resource organized around deadlines and efficiency. Process-time views time as part of the work itself, in which outcomes reveal themselves through learning and cannot be scheduled in advance. AI integration requires the latter, as the process does not produce immediate output. Yet Nexus runs almost entirely on clock-time. This creates the mismatch between what AI requires and the kind of work the firm recognizes as productive, which are the immediate, visible, and billable outputs. It is the mismatch between clock-time and process-time that the Nexus case makes visible.

The augmentation literature's time-saving promise has been shown in several studies to have real-world practical applications. This was demonstrated through increased productivity across different professional contexts. Brynjolfsson et al. (2023) reported a 15% average increase in productivity when customer support agents used generative AI. Dell'Acqua et al. (2023) found that consultants using AI completed 12.2% more tasks and completed them 25.1% faster. Noy and Zhang (2023) documented a 40 % reduction in task time for professional writing. The

members of Nexus who speak about AI as a time-saver are drawing on a promise backed by empirical evidence. What Nexus shows is not that AI cannot deliver those gains, but rather why an organization may struggle to create the conditions to realize them across the firm.

The Nexus material shows the promise of augmentation circulating across all roles in identical vocabulary, with time-saving and reinvestment in relationship-building reproduced by members who have not yet experienced the savings in their own work. This says something about the discourse the literature has produced. Raisch and Krakowski (2021) identify augmentation as the dominant management framing of AI, in which humans collaborate with machines, and the time saved is reinvested in work that matters more. Jarrahi (2018) specifies the division more precisely, with AI handling complex information processing while humans retain judgment under uncertainty and equivocality. What the literature has not registered is the cultural function this framing performs once it enters a firm. At Nexus, the augmentation discourse supplies a vocabulary that aligns with what the firm already values: time spent with clients and candidates rather than administrative work. It also offers a division of labor between humans and AI that maps onto how the firm already understands its work. Nexus adopts the augmentation framing not because it has been tested against experience, but because it fits the temporal logic the firm already runs on.

The literature recognizes the complications that members at Nexus experience. At the partner level, the firm pursued AI with genuine enthusiasm, issuing directives and forming working groups, while underestimating what sustained integration would actually demand. Einola and Khoreva (2023) call this unconditional enthusiasm, in which managers systematically underestimate what successful implementation requires. As AI takes over administrative and search work, the theoretical direction of integration points toward what Zirar et al. (2023) describe as a perpetual race, where members must continuously develop the relational skills and judgment that AI cannot yet replicate. During the experimentation phase itself, members must first adapt how they work, learning what AI can handle and reshaping their own contribution before redirecting their skills toward that relational work. Reese's account of spending half a day on AI exploration that yielded no usable output, concluding that they simply wasted the time. This is what Mayer et al. (2025) document in knowledge-intensive work, where integration increases time consumption rather than reducing it. The Nexus material shows that these costs

are real. But the literature treats complications as a miscalculation that can be solved through better planning. What Nexus shows is that something more fundamental is at work.

A concept from the augmentation literature adds a further dimension to why the time cost of the AI experimentation phase is so difficult to justify at Nexus. Dell'Acqua et al. (2023) show that users cannot reliably identify which side of the jagged technology frontier a task lies on before attempting it. This makes the cost of exploration particularly hard to predict in advance. At the organizational level, Nexus faces the same problem across its workflows. Reese, who describes spending half a day on AI exploration that produces no usable output and concludes they have simply wasted it, captures what this means in practice. The cost cannot be assessed until the work is done, making it difficult to justify in a system that values immediate, measurable output.

Nexus has made genuine organizational attempts to integrate AI during its exploration phase. An internal conference was held, working groups were formed, and a weekly review structure was built to surface AI learning. Strategic directives were also issued at the partner level. The firm has deliberately chosen to enter an experimental phase, and the challenge is not that it finds itself there unexpectedly. The challenge is that even within this chosen phase, progress has proven slower and harder than members anticipated. Some members, particularly among the consultants, have already incorporated AI tools into parts of their daily work. Blake describes how repeated use of tools like Claude and ChatGPT has become a natural part of their work, continuously improving them through use rather than through deliberate effort. Still, two patterns described in the literature have not yet fully taken hold across the firm. Mayer et al. (2025) document the active reshaping of tasks, working relationships, and workflows that integration produces. Zitar et al. (2023) describe the perpetual race of skill development it demands. This matters for how the complications literature applies, because the difficulty those studies address is managing integration once it has momentum. The difficulty at Nexus comes before that stage, in understanding why the experimental phase has not yet produced substantial momentum despite genuine organizational effort.

The same organizational effort produces such different experiences across members that it cannot be explained at the organizational level alone. Orlikowski and Yates (2002) offer a more precise explanation through temporal structuring. Temporal structures are the shared ways through

which members experience time in organizational life. Through repetition, they become taken for granted. They shape the way members make sense of, regulate, and account for their activities. At Nexus, the temporal structure created through years of project-based client work makes certain claims on time feel natural, and others feel difficult to justify. The same hour spent on AI exploration is accounted for differently depending on where each member sits within that framework. Reese, whose workload is organized around project delivery, experiences exploration time as waste when it produces nothing usable. Jordan, speaking from a partner position with a longer strategic horizon, frames the same kind of time as an investment the firm needs to make. Taylor describes the experimental phase as producing no measurable results, only a feeling of progress and increased usage. These are not personal differences in attitude. They are what Orlikowski and Yates (2002) would recognize as the same temporal structure producing different accounts depending on the position each member occupies within it.

What differs at the individual level reflects a structural condition at the organizational level. Returning to Reinecke and Ansari's (2015) distinction allows the incompatibility between clock-time and process-time to be named more precisely at the organizational level. Clock-time structures ask for measurable outputs at scheduled intervals. Process-time work produces outputs that emerge through learning and cannot be scheduled. The organizational structures Nexus has built around AI ask for the former, while the work requires the latter. The weekly reviews that ask for reportable findings on schedule, and the AI working groups operating alongside full project workloads, are clock-time structures applied to process-time work. They can produce what the clock-time register recognizes as progress, things that can be brought to a meeting and reported. Nexus cannot simply produce the kind of learning that moving past experimentation requires, because learning through AI does not yield measurable outputs. This makes it easy for Nexus to fall back on the clock-time structures that the firm recognizes as project work.

March's (1991) distinction between exploitation and exploration explains why this makes the return to project work feel not just rational but inevitable. Exploitation produces returns that are certain, specific, and immediate. Exploration produces returns that are uncertain, emergent, and deferred. Organizations over-invest in exploitation because its returns are the ones their existing metrics recognize, whereas exploration returns are uncertain in magnitude and timing. In a high-performance PSF, this tendency is not incidental. Blake describes falling back on familiar

routines under time pressure, because they yield predictable results. However, they recognize that a new tool might eventually be faster, which shows that they are not resisting AI. They are acting rationally within a structure that makes exploitation the default, without anyone needing to enforce it. The literature on complications treats the difficulty of AI integration as a miscalculation that better planning could correct. What the Nexus material shows is something different. The difficulty is not that the costs were underestimated. It is a structural incompatibility between the process-time work AI integration requires and the clock-time logic the firm runs on. Understanding why it holds so firmly requires looking at how that logic becomes embedded in the culture itself.

5.2 The cultural work of time as priority

At Nexus, temporal incompatibility does not prompt members to question the organizational structure. Instead, it leads them to engage in self-reflection. Members do not consider whether the project-first temporal logic itself needs to change. Instead, they ask whether they are adequately prioritizing AI exploration alongside project work. This section contends that the transformation of a structural condition into an individual issue of prioritization is intentional and culturally produced. Understanding this phenomenon necessitates examining both the mechanisms through which it operates and the issues it prevents from being scrutinized.

Empson (2017) describes how this type of framing is produced in high-performance PSFs. It is through strong cultures, intense socialization, and peer-based evaluation that members' professional identities become linked to the firm's expectations. Member compliance with the firm's demands is experienced as autonomous professional judgment rather than as external pressure. Empson (2017) calls this the autonomy/control paradox. What looks like social control from the outside feels like free professional choice from the inside.

At Nexus, this paradox turns a structural condition into a personal question. This produces the priority framing. Members do not feel the clock-time logic as a firm demand. They feel it is their own professional judgment that projects come first and should be prioritized. The firm's temporal structure makes project delivery the condition of organizational survival. Through this paradox, that pressure is not felt as external. It becomes part of how members experience their own

professional judgment. Quinn frames it as individual planning, saying time exists as long as you plan for it, while acknowledging there is little room for anything other than project delivery. Casey describes everyone as having time, while also explaining how members naturally fall back to the clients. Jordan names the chain from delivery to invoicing to salaries, framing the priority not as a demand from the firm but rather as a condition for organizational survival. Each account begins in a different place but arrives at the same conclusion through the priority framing. The clock-time logic toward projects is experienced as a personal choice to prioritize delivery, rather than as something produced by the culture. Through the paradox that Empson (2017) describes, this is precisely what voluntary compliance produces. Professional identity and firm expectations become indistinguishable, which means that the priority framing cannot be undone simply by making the structure visible.

Anderson-Gough et al. (2001), in their study of professional service firms, show that clock-time logic becomes embedded in professional identity through two mechanisms. Time-consciousness makes time spent on clients feel genuinely valuable as a felt sense of professional worth, while time spent elsewhere becomes harder to justify. At Nexus, this is evident when members treat AI exploration time as waste when it produces nothing usable. Temporal visioning organizes the horizons members plan around to match the rhythms of the firm's rewards. Activities whose returns lie outside those horizons become difficult to recognize as legitimate work. At Nexus, the returns from AI exploration are uncertain and deferred, falling outside the project cycles members have come to recognize as productive. AI exploration does not suffer from project delivery because members choose to deprioritize it. It loses out because time-consciousness and temporal visioning have already organized what feels like legitimate work and what does not.

Empson (2017) argues that the paradox of autonomy/control does more than affect individual behavior. Because members experience the firm's structural demands as their own judgment, these demands are never examined or challenged. The structure maintains itself. de Waal (2007) adds that in high-performance organizations, time and speed are defining markers of excellence, built into the very discourse through which the firm understands what it means to perform well. Together, these arguments explain what the priority framing protects at Nexus. As long as the difficulty of AI integration is experienced as an individual question of priority, the project-first temporal structure is never questioned. The expectation that members spend their time on

billable client work is never questioned. The discourse that treats clock-time efficiency as the measure of performance sustains itself without challenge.

The priority framing holds as long as members describe their own situation. When they describe each other, it begins to break down. The autonomy/control paradox manages this disruption not by examining the structure but by finding explanations that locate the difficulty elsewhere. At Nexus, this is visible in how members account for the uneven AI engagement across the firm. Reese corrects a senior colleague's account of what AI has contributed in practice, placing the gap between groups. Morgan attributes variation in AI engagement to individual interest, moving responsibility away from the partner group they belong to. These displacements are not simply different interpretations of the same situation. They are the paradox of managing a disruption: keeping the structural question from being examined by finding individual and group explanations for what, in Empson's (2017) terms, is a structural condition produced by the culture. Reese and Morgan already place the difficulty somewhere within the hierarchy, between seniors and juniors, or in the interests of specific roles. The sharpest disruption comes when AI competence sits with the juniors. The firm is built on partners teaching consultants, but with AI, the knowledge often flows the other way.

Empson (2017) argues that the autonomy/control paradox operates quietly through voluntary compliance until something places competence or momentum in a position the existing hierarchy was not built to accommodate. When this happens, the control register surfaces. At Nexus, the general tendency for junior members to develop deeper AI competence than the partners who hold strategic authority creates exactly this disruption, though Taylor's account of a mixed picture across both groups is an important qualification. Alex names junior AI competence as generating bottom-up momentum, framing it as a problem rather than an opportunity. In doing so, they make visible a hierarchy that the firm's flat self-description ordinarily suppresses. This is the moment Empson (2017) describes. The control register surfaces when AI competence moves without the hierarchy to which it belongs.

Faulconbridge et al. (2025) describe the contest over professional roles in AI at the field level, with professionals emphasizing the work AI cannot do in order to secure their positions. The Nexus material points to a contest at a different level. Within the firm, the question is not only

what work professionals retain, but who gets to direct the AI work and whose competence is recognized as the legitimate basis for doing so. The priority framing keeps the structural incompatibility at the level of individual choice, and in doing so, protects the partner group's authority over the direction of AI work.

What this section adds to the literature is showing Empson's (2017) autonomy/control paradox operating around a specific organizational question rather than as a general feature of how high-performance firms operate. Empson (2017) describes the paradox as a feature of how these firms manage their members in general. The Nexus material shows it doing specific work around AI integration, producing the priority framing that keeps the structural conditions of integration from being examined. This protects the partner group's authority when AI competence is placed in positions outside the group. What neither this framing nor the accounts that find difficulty elsewhere can resolve is what happens when the firm tries to organize AI work directly. The structures Nexus has built for this purpose do not escape the high-performance culture and temporal logic that the priority framing protects, and members who can see this clearly cannot act outside it. That is what the final section analyses.

5.3 The strength becomes the obstacle: the self-defeating loop

While the priority framing keeps the structural condition of AI integration secondary to project delivery at Nexus, the firm has not been passive about AI. Working groups were formed, weekly reviews were built, and strategic directives were issued. These are genuine organizational efforts to move beyond the experimental phase. de Waal (2007) characterizes high-performance organizations by their continuous improvement orientation, strong performance culture, and pursuit of above-peer results. At Nexus, these characteristics are evident in how members describe the firm. Riley's account shows excellence as the principle running through the firm's identity, describing a culture that wants to be stars and work with stars, where high demands are set among peers. Taylor describes a performance drive as central to how the firm works, and Cameron describes a culture so action-oriented it sometimes moves too fast. When this same culture, described in the Nexus material, turned towards organizing AI work, it built structures it already knew how to build. Measurable outputs, planned progress, and visible results. They reproduce the specific conditions that make AI integration difficult. Understanding why requires

looking at what a high-performance culture organized around clock-time produces when it meets process-time work.

de Waal (2007) shows that high-performance organizations build their structures around measurable productivity gains, speed, and the elimination of unnecessary procedures. Reinecke and Ansari (2015) show that when organizations operate on clock-time logic, they build structures that ask for measurable outputs at scheduled intervals. At Nexus, the structures built specifically around AI reflect both of these arguments. The weekly reviews ask members to report something new each week, and the working groups operating alongside full project workloads are clock-time structures applied to process-time work. Blake, who describes themselves as part of the AI generation the structure was built for, finds that the weekly requirement does not match how AI learning actually happens. Knowledge accumulates slowly through use and does not produce reportable findings on schedule. What the structures produce, as Cameron describes through the firm's action-orientation, is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Getting something done becomes the measure of progress, but what gets done is shaped by what could be done quickly rather than by what would have been worth doing. The structures produce AI work that fits the clock-time register, but not the kind of learning that moving past experimentation actually requires.

March (1991) argues that the asymmetry between exploitation and exploration operates through the ordinary logic of organizational decision-making rather than through deliberate choice. Organizations over-invest in exploitation, not because they reject exploration but because exploitation's returns are the ones the firm already knows how to measure and reward. At Nexus, this asymmetry operates at the level of individual decisions. Across several accounts, the same pattern emerges. When AI work stalls or hits an obstacle, project delivery fills the space before anyone decides to return to it. Quinn frames this as an easy out, describing how a full calendar and an unresolved obstacle make returning to project work feel less like a choice and more like the rational thing to do. March's (1991) argument clarifies why this is not resistance to AI. This is exploitation operating through everyday decisions, and it does not need to be enforced. The clock-time structure makes it the default. This is the self-defeating loop. The high-performance culture builds clock-time structures to organize AI work. Those structures reproduce the

clock-time logic that makes exploration unsustainable. Members return to project delivery. The experimental phase stalls. And the conditions that made integration difficult remain unchanged.

The natural response to the difficulty might be to change the structural conditions, freeing up time and creating space for exploration. Empson (2017) argues that the autonomy/control paradox does not work like a switch. Members have internalized the firm's expectations as their own professional judgment over time. That internalization does not disappear when the structural conditions change. At Nexus, this is why the loop cannot be resolved from within. The clock-time culture has trained members to work toward clear goals. Anderson-Gough et al.'s (2001) concept of temporal visioning sharpens what this training means in practice. The horizons members plan over are organized around the rhythms of the firm's rewards, which are short-cycle and project-based. AI returns lie outside those horizons; in time, the firm has not trained its members to plan beyond them. AI integration cannot yet have a clear goal because no one knows what AI will look like in the firm until the work of finding out is done. When these two meet, the result is passivity. Members are not refusing the work. They are waiting for a goal that the work cannot produce until it has started. Jordan's account captures this from inside the firm. They propose freeing up time and lowering delivery requirements as a solution, only to immediately doubt whether members shaped by the culture could work differently within it. The doubt makes visible what is most self-defeating about the loop. Morgan and Riley both name the pattern from a partner position. Morgan places Nexus within the broader pattern of consulting firms that lose momentum on strategic initiatives when delivery pressure rises. Riley frames it as a structural feature all consulting firms share. Both partners can clearly see the loop pattern. Neither can act outside the conditions that produced it, which is precisely what Empson's (2017) argument that the paradox has no switch would predict.

Zirar et al. (2023) describe AI coexistence as a perpetual race in which workers must continually reskill as AI capabilities develop. Mayer et al. (2025) show what this race looks like in knowledge-intensive firms, where workers actively reshape their tasks, working relationships, and the way they signal the value of their inputs around new tools. Both studies describe what integration looks like once it has momentum. At Nexus, neither picture has fully taken hold across the firm. The self-defeating loop is what keeps the firm from reaching the stage these studies describe. The perpetual race Zirar et al. (2023) identify requires conditions in which

exploration is sustainable. The active reshaping Mayer et al. (2025) document requires conditions in which process-time work can accumulate over time. The loop forecloses both by reproducing clock-time structures that render exploration unsustainable and by making process-time work hard to recognize as productive. The Nexus material does not challenge the findings of Zirar et al. (2023) and Mayer et al. (2025) in their respective contexts. It shows why a high-performance PSF cannot reach the stage described in their findings.

Although examining auditing firms specifically, Yang et al. (2024) identify a pattern that is more broadly applicable to smaller PSFs. Smaller firms face competitive pressure to adopt AI but are less equipped to manage the demands of integration. Their finding identifies the pattern without explaining the mechanism. The Nexus material supplies it. Being less equipped is not a resource problem or a readiness problem in the generic sense that Yang et al. (2024) describe. It is a cultural and temporal condition produced by the same organizational excellence that drives the competitive pressure to adopt AI in the first place. The firm most driven to integrate AI is also the firm whose culture is most organized around the temporal logic that makes integration structurally difficult to sustain.

This is where the thesis's main contribution takes its full form. In the literature reviewed, the difficulty of AI integration is consistently explained in terms of what organizations lack: sufficient readiness, resources, management quality, or an accurate account of what implementation demands. What our study of Nexus reveals goes beyond what any of these explanations directly address. The temporal structuring literature's distinction between clock-time and process-time, March's (1991) exploitation and exploration asymmetry, and Empson's (2017) account of the autonomy/control paradox together show why supplying what organizations lack cannot solve the difficulty. The difficulty is not produced by the absence of resources, readiness, or planning. It is produced by the very conditions that make the firm excellent at client delivery and project work. The competences that make a high-performance PSF high-performing are the ones that make AI integration hard to sustain, not because the firm is unwilling, but because the conditions for doing the work are produced by the same culture that makes the work difficult. The strength becomes the obstacle.

6. Conclusion

In this chapter, we bring together the key findings, theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research that emerge from the study. The chapter is organized into four sections. The first presents the three key findings from the empirical material. The second outlines the study's theoretical contributions to the augmentation, complications, and temporal structuring literatures. The third draws out practical implications for high-performance professional service firms navigating AI integration. The fourth identifies directions for future research that the study opens up, but cannot answer from a single case.

6.1 Key findings

This study explored how a high-performance culture organized around saving time shapes members' engagement with AI as a time-saving technology in a small professional service firm. We find that the culture affects this engagement in ways that reproduce the very conditions that make integration difficult to sustain, creating a self-defeating loop in which the firm's strengths at client delivery become the obstacle to sustained integration. This argument emerges from three findings in the empirical material

The first key finding is that members across all roles consistently reproduce the augmentation promise using the same terminology. Following a convergence on a vocabulary of time-saving, freed-up time, and relationship-building. This is regardless of whether they can point to evidence that the promise has shaped how they work. The shared account of AI as a time-saver is not grounded in experience. It takes shape by aligning with the culture's temporal logic, reinforcing the firm's core values without disrupting the structures that generate them.

Second, members consistently attribute the friction between AI integration and project delivery to individual prioritization rather than to a structural condition. Members frame the difficulty as something they should manage better, rather than as something the culture itself produces. This priority framing keeps the structural question from being examined, locating the difficulty in individual planning rather than in the clock-time structure and project-delivery expectations the culture has produced.

Third, the culture has shaped members oriented toward clear goals and short-term deliverables. AI integration cannot yet provide either, because no one knows what AI will look like in the firm until the work of finding out has been done. When these two meet, the result is not resistance but passivity. The organizational structures the firm has built around AI reflect this same logic. The weekly reviews require members to report their findings on a schedule that does not align with the actual needs of AI learning. The working groups experimenting with AI have to work alongside full project workloads rather than in conditions that could sustain exploration. The structures ask for clock-time shaped outputs from process-time work with AI. The goal can only emerge from exploration itself. When AI work loses momentum, members return to performing projects due to the clock-time structure, making it a rational default rather than a deliberate choice. This is the self-defeating loop. The culture builds the structures, the structures reproduce the culture, and even the members who can identify the pattern cannot act outside the conditions that produced it.

Together, the findings show that the high-performance culture at a PSF, like Nexus, does not simply compete for time and attention with AI integration. It actively shapes the terms on which AI is understood, the language through which difficulty is accounted for, and the structures through which work is organized. The same culture that makes AI attractive as a time-saving technology is what makes the conditions for realizing that promise structurally difficult to sustain.

6.2 Theoretical contribution

This study makes several theoretical contributions by connecting AI integration research to the temporal structuring of organizational life in a high-performance professional service firm. While the augmentation literature has established the time-saving promise of AI, the complications literature has identified the costs of integration. Neither has examined how an organization's temporal logic shapes the circumstances under which these costs are absorbed and the promise is realized. This study brings the temporal structuring literature, particularly Reinecke and Ansari's (2015) distinction between clock-time and process-time, into conversation with Empson's (2017) account of high-performance firm culture and the literature on AI

integration. In doing so, it offers a more structural understanding of why integration fails to gain momentum in certain organizational contexts. The following three contributions develop this.

First, we extend Reinecke and Ansari's (2015) distinction between clock-time and process-time into the context of AI integration. The distinction has been applied to organizational learning and strategic management, but not to the specific challenge of integrating AI as a time-saving technology. Our study demonstrates that AI integration is process-time work, producing outcomes through learning that cannot be scheduled in advance. When this meets a clock-time-dominant organization, such as Nexus, the incompatibility is not a planning failure but a structural condition. This extends the temporal structuring literature by showing specifically how the clock-time and process-time distinction operates in technology adoption.

Second, we extend Empson's (2017) autonomy/control paradox beyond its original application as a general feature of high-performance PSF culture, showing that it does specific work around a concrete organizational question. The paradox produces not only voluntary compliance with firm demands in general. At Nexus, it converts a structural temporal incompatibility into an individual priority question, keeping the conditions of AI integration from being examined and protecting existing hierarchies when AI competence moves in directions the hierarchy was not built to accommodate. This shows the paradox as a mechanism that actively manages particular organizational disruptions rather than simply maintaining a general cultural condition.

Third, we identify a specific mechanism by which high-performance PSFs are structurally prevented from achieving the time-saving gains documented in the augmentation literature. The literature has already shown that AI integration can fail to deliver on its promise. What is not specified is why the conditions for realizing the promise differ across organizational types. The productivity gains documented in the augmentation literature describe what happens once integration has been achieved. They do not account for the time and effort required to reach that state, nor for whether every organizational context can reach it. In a high-performance PSF organized around clock-time, the same culture that makes AI attractive as a time-saver also makes the conditions for integration structurally difficult to sustain. The promise is not false. It is contingent on reaching a state that high-performance PSFs are least equipped to create.

Together, these contributions advance the theoretical understanding of AI integration. The difficulty in high-performance PSFs is not due to a lack of resources, planning, or readiness. It is produced by the same conditions that make these firms high-performing. The temporal logic, cultural mechanisms, and professional identities that make these firms excellent at delivering client work and billable projects are the same conditions that structurally inhibit sustained AI integration.

6.3 Practical implications

The findings of this study carry practical implications for high-performance professional service firms navigating AI integration. The problem these firms face is not solved by building more structures, planning more carefully, or investing more resources. It is produced by the same clock-time-dominant culture that makes them excellent at client delivery. Three implications follow from this statement.

The first implication is that structures built to organize AI integration cannot use the same temporal logic the firm uses for billable project work. Weekly review meetings demand reportable findings on schedule. Working groups operate alongside full project workloads. Both apply clock-time structures to work that requires process-time. They produce what the clock-time register recognizes as progress without producing the kind of learning that the experimentation phase requires, or that would allow the firm to move beyond it. The work cannot be organized through the same logic that makes the rest of the firm efficient at delivering client work. That logic is precisely what makes AI integration difficult to recognize as productive in the first place.

The second implication is that the priority framing displaces, rather than explains, the difficulty of AI integration. As long as members attribute the difficulty to their own prioritization, the conditions that produce it are never examined. For management, this distinction matters. The priority framing is not a cognitive error that a better awareness could correct. It is what a structural problem looks like in a culture that produces it as individual judgment. Addressing it requires examining the structure, not the way individuals account for their time.

The third implication is that the self-defeating loop presents high-performance PSF's with a genuine decision. The firm either creates space for AI exploration that is not governed by clock-time expectations. Or it accepts that the time-saving promise cannot be realized within its current cultural and temporal conditions. Building another working group, another weekly review, or another strategic directive within the same culture reproduces the loop. The structures built by the culture carry the same clock-time logic that makes AI work hard to sustain. Trying harder in the same structures feeds it. Instead of asking how to make AI integration work within the existing structure, the firm needs to ask whether it is willing to create conditions that sit outside it.

6.4 Future research

Future research could extend the argument by examining whether the temporal incompatibility identified here holds across other contexts within professional services firms. The case examined is that of a small executive search firm at a particular point in its AI work. Comparative work across larger PSFs and other professional industries would reveal whether the self-defeating loop is specific to small boutique settings. Law, accounting, and management consulting could be particularly relevant contexts to examine. PSFs with dedicated innovation or AI resources would test specifically whether resources break the loop or whether it continues despite them.

Furthermore, future research could focus on a longitudinal study. A snapshot cannot show whether the self-defeating loop reproduces over time, evolves into a different dynamic, or breaks. Longitudinal work could follow firms over the period as AI integration moves from experimentation to ongoing use. This could examine what shifts in the firm's temporal logic are sufficient to make process-time work sustainable. It would also clarify whether the productivity gains documented in the augmentation literature occur only after a firm has moved past the loop the study describes, or whether some firms reach those gains while still inside it.

Lastly, we recommend that research shift from understanding the loop to understanding what enables firms to navigate it. The study identifies the loop and its mechanism, but does not examine firms that have successfully integrated AI despite operating under a similar high-performance temporal logic. Case studies of firms that have successfully integrated AI

despite operating under similar high-performance conditions could reveal what enables process-time work to take hold within a clock-time culture. These might include specific structural arrangements, leadership choices, or external pressures that compel a shift in temporal logic. The single case can show that the loop exists and how it operates. It cannot show what breaks it or how to exit it.

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Appendix 1

Opening

Briefly present the study and its purpose. Explain that interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and anonymized. They can pull out of the study or interview at any time they want. Emphasizing there are no right or wrong answers, we are interested in the interviewee's own experiences and reflections, not in evaluating their AI knowledge or usage.

Background and role

- Can you tell me a bit about your role and what you work with day to day?
- What does a typical week look like for you?
- Which parts of your work take up the most time?

AI in their world

- When you hear the word AI, what comes to mind?
- How would you describe AI in your own words?
- What examples of AI do you think of?

Concrete experience with AI

- Have you used AI in your work? Can you describe a specific situation when you used it?
- What did you use it for and how did it go?

Follow up as needed: How did it feel in the moment? What worked well or less well? Was there anything that surprised you?

- Do you use AI outside of work? In what way?
- Do you notice any difference between how you use AI privately and how you use it, or think about using it, in your work?

Attitudes and relationship to AI

- How would you describe your general attitude toward AI?
- What do you find most interesting or useful about it?
- Is there anything about it you find yourself more cautious or uncertain about?
- What do you think makes it easy or difficult to bring AI into your work?
- Is there anything that would need to change for you to use it more, or to use it differently?

Follow up: Has your view changed over time?

AI and the nature of the work

- When you think about what you actually do in your work, how do you think about the relationship between your own judgment and what AI can do?

Follow up as needed: Can you say more about that? Has that changed how you think about anything?

- Is there anything about the way you work that you feel is difficult to imagine AI being part of?

AI in the organization

- How does AI come up in conversations at the company?
- Have you noticed any different perspectives or attitudes toward AI among your colleagues?
- According to you, how well is the organization prepared to implement AI in its processes?

Follow up: Has that conversation changed over time?

Trust and control

- How much would you trust AI in your work?
- Are there situations where you would feel comfortable relying on AI more? And situations where you wouldn't want to?
- What shapes your trust?
- How important is it to you to have oversight of what AI produces?

Looking ahead

- How do you think AI will affect your work going forward?
- Is there anything you look forward to, or anything you're uncertain about?

Closing

- Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important?
- Do you have any questions for us?

Appendix 2 - Examples of prompts used

- We just had a final supervision with Sverre. I uploaded a final transcript in the project files. Could you please provide a list of the things we need to fix and work on based on our talk with Sverre?
- This sentence feels clunky, help me fix it:
- TEEC check on this paragraph
- I feel like in the thesis right now, we are sometimes saying "high-performance professional service firms" and sometimes "high-performance organizations." I feel like maybe we are mixing them a bit too much right now, what is most accurate and clear to what we are writing, do you think we need switch the phrasing in any places?
- Is this paragraph making an argument or just summarizing?
- I keep falling back on "this suggests that." Give me three or four alternatives I can rotate through.
- Sverre said the literature review needs to read like an argument, not a summary. Read Section 3 and tell me which it currently is.
- We have developed an interview guide for our upcoming interviews. Together with our supervisor we have decided to not focus on one topic connected to AI instead we want a wide range of topics connected to AI to gather material to later formulate the question. It is a balance of being wide in topics but also not too wide so we don't have anything to work with or formulate a question about. Some things that we have said that we could talk about is, usage of AI in work and privately, attitudes to AI (positive or negative or both?), how they feel about using AI and how it affects their work, does it change how they view themselves and their work when using AI, the implementation of AI in the company and so on. There are a lot of topics to touch upon that are interesting and most answers will probably give us information about several topics. Can you give us your thoughts on the guide, is there anything that you are missing? Are the questions too leading?
- How can I say "XXX" in other words?
- Does this paragraph accidentally state the research question? I tried to imply it without naming it.

- The word "XXX" is appearing too often in this section. Suggest variations that don't lose precision.
- Read these three paragraphs, the problem framing in the introduction, the positioning paragraph in the literature review, and the research design statement in the methodology. Are they consistent, or is there drift between them?
- What is a less cliché alternative to "this raises the question of."
- Push back on this paragraph. What would a critical examiner flag?
- I've drafted the closing paragraph of Section 4 of the literature review. The whole purpose of this paragraph is to make the research question feel inevitable without actually stating it. Read it and tell me whether the inevitability actually lands or feels forced, where the argument gets loose if anywhere, c) whether there's anything an examiner would read as us pretending the research question wasn't already in mind.
- What is the correct way to write in an academic thesis, should I write "do not" or "don't"
- I'm worried my use of "temporal structuring" from Orlikowski and Yates is weak. I've pasted the paragraph where I introduce the concept and the one two pages later where I apply it. Are these two uses consistent with each other, and with how Orlikowski and Yates define the term?
- Methodology section is the discussion of insider research good enough given that I work at the firm? It is super important that we get this right
- Read this framing and tell me what's weakest about it as a contribution. What would a critical reader say is missing or unconvincing? Where am I overclaiming?
- Read this transition between Section 3 and Section 4 of the literature review. Does it actually transition, or does it just announce that something new is coming?
- When I justify an abductive approach drawing on Alvesson and Kärreman, am I expected to walk through their three-step logic explicitly, or is citing the principle enough?
- How does symbolic interactionism typically frame the relationship between individual experience and collective meaning? I want to make sure I'm using it in a correct way not just claiming that we are doing it
- I'm trying to articulate why the gap between collective belief and individual experience matters analytically, beyond being interesting. What would make this a strong contribution rather than a weak one? Is it underdeveloped currently?

- I've written the methodology section explaining the abductive approach. It draws on Alvesson and Kärreman for the logic, Gubrium and Holstein's whats-and-hows as the operational tool, and frames the analysis as moving from unexpected empirical observations toward a new interpretive rule. Read it and tell me whether the abductive logic is actually being followed in how I describe what we did
- This sentence feels too long, what would you change?
- Discussion chapter draft below. It's supposed to speak back to the literature in light of the findings, address variance and surprises, and say what's been learned that's new. Instead of giving general feedback, walk through it and flag every place where it slides into restating findings rather than developing them in conversation with the literature.
- Reading this paragraph back, I think I'm mixing two ideas, one about how time pressure shapes engagement with AI, another about how culture makes that pressure unspeakable. Can you tell me whether these are actually two distinct claims, or whether they collapse into one? If they're distinct, the paragraph is doing too much.
- I need to check the flow of the introduction. You have the PPP instructions in your project context. Read it and tell me if it feels clear
- The analytical comment in this excerpt-commentary unit feels thin to me but I can't tell why. I'm following the structure and the whats and hows but it just isn't hitting right. Read it and tell me whether I'm right, and if so what's missing?
- I keep using "highlights" and "underscores" as transition verbs. Give me alternatives that don't sound like academic filler.
- Act as a super critical examiner. Based on the examination criteria, feedback from Sverre, and the structures that are expected, read our thesis and point out our main flaws or issues. Are there any areas where we are not following the structural requirements? Are there formulations that change over time in the thesis? Do we use different definitions for anything in different places?