Which rung is the company you built on?

AN ASSESSMENT FOR FOUNDERS

Ten questions about your AI spending, what it serves, and what changed. The first three take ninety seconds.

Founders have adopted AI faster than almost anyone. There was no procurement cycle, no committee and no business case to write. You saw what the tools could do, you paid for them, and they were in the company by the end of the week.

That speed is why the first problem is not the one most people name. Before anything can be embedded in the work it has to be aimed at something, and in a company you built the thing it is meant to serve usually lives in one place. Your head. There was never a reason to write it down, because you were in every decision and the strategy travelled with you. That holds until the tools arrive. AI purchases are quick, cheap and frequent enough that they do not feel like decisions, so they never get tested against anything. Each one is sensible on its own. Whether the set of them points where the company is going is a question only you can answer, and it is the one you have least time for.

The second problem arrives even where the aim is right. What has not happened is redesigning the work around what was bought. The tools made individual steps faster and everything around those steps stayed where it was. Something that took two hours takes twenty minutes, and then it waits for you to look at it. The person doing the work feels the gain. The company never sees it.

In a large organization the place that gain disappears is the approval chain. In a company you built, the chain is you. Of the three seats it is the founder who is most likely to have adopted this technology and least likely to have changed anything structural as a result, because there is no structure to change. There is you. So the capability landed on the single point everything was already routing through, and the company got faster at producing work that still has to come past one desk.

In *So Now What? Recognizing Four Organizational States in an AI-Driven World*, I place organizations on one of four rungs. On the second, the tools are bought, access is broad, and the work itself is unchanged. On the fourth, the work and the roles inside it have been redesigned around what the tools now make possible. In a founder-led company that includes your own role, which is usually the last one anybody looks at. About three in four organizations sit on the second rung. Roughly one in twenty are on the fourth.

What follows is a way to work out where the company you built currently sits. Three questions you can answer right now from what you already know, then seven that go further, a few of which need you to look something up.

Part one: the acid test

Answer these from memory. Do not look anything up. About ninety seconds.

1. Which of the primary strategic objectives driving the company does your AI spending serve, and where does that objective exist outside your head?

Both halves count. The first is the alignment test. The second is the founder's version of it, because an objective nobody else can read is one nobody else can buy against or be held to.

2. Which of the things you have bought took something off your desk, rather than helping you get through what is on it faster?

A specific thing that used to require you and now does not. Not a category of work you are quicker at.

3. Name one thing the company does differently now than it did two years ago, as a direct result of that spending.

Not faster. Differently. A step removed, a handoff that no longer happens, a decision made at a different level, work that used to wait on you and now does not.

What your three answers say

If you could not name an objective, the spending was not aimed at where the business is trying to go and it will not move it any closer, however well the tools themselves perform. There was a rationale for each purchase. It was just not one of the few that matter.

If you named one but could not say where it exists outside your head, the aim is real and nobody else can act on it. Either way the purchases are being tested against something only you can see, which means they are being tested roughly as often as you have a quiet hour. Writing it down is the cheapest work available to you and it is reliably the first thing postponed.

If nothing came off your desk in the second question, the capability landed on the bottleneck rather than removing it. You are now able to produce more of the work that was already waiting on your attention, which raises what arrives at your desk without raising what leaves it. That feels like productivity for a while, then like the opposite.

If you could not name anything in the third question, the honest answer is usually that individuals are doing the same work more quickly. That is a real gain and it is worth

having. It is not a company-level return and it will not show up in your results. That is the second rung, and it is where most companies of this size sit, however early they adopted.

And if you could name something, ask whether anyone's role changed with it, including yours. A process that runs differently while every job stays as it was is halfway there, and halfway is where companies that have started tend to stop. The return arrives when the people in that process are doing something different, not when they are doing the same thing with better tools.

Missing all three is the common case rather than the embarrassing one. Redesigning a company while it is running is the step almost nobody takes early, because nothing looks broken until it is.

Why the distinction is worth making. Capability that was acquired and never redesigned around does not sit still, it sits unused, and you are paying for it monthly. In a founder-led company the real cost is larger than the subscriptions, because the thing not being redesigned is the route everything takes to you. That route decides the size the company can reach, and no amount of tooling widens it. Hiring does not widen it either. Hiring into a structure nobody has redesigned usually narrows it, because now there are people waiting as well as work.

If you answered all three cleanly, you are in a small group and there is probably nothing here for you. Part two is for everyone else.

Part two: the harder half

No scoring. Some of these need you to go and look rather than remember. They are the ones worth working through before the next hire.

ON THE SPEND

4. Over the last two years, roughly what has the company committed to AI and related tooling, counting subscriptions, integration work and the time you personally spent standing it up?

Worth noting whether this was one decision or a series of smaller ones that nobody has ever added together, and which items removed work rather than creating work of their own.

5. Run question one across that list, item by item. How much of it survives?

Renewal is the practical test. Anything that cannot answer it should not be renewed. Founders who apply it tend to find the spending goes down rather than up.

ON WHAT STILL ROUTES THROUGH YOU

6. Over the last month, roughly how many decisions waited on you because you had the authority rather than because you had the judgement?

The first group is a structural problem with a fixable cause. The second is the job.

7. If you were unreachable for three weeks, name the first thing that would stop. Then name the first thing that would go wrong without anyone noticing.

The second answer is the more useful one. The things that stop are visible and somebody escalates them. The things that quietly degrade are the ones that were only ever held together by your attention.

ON WHAT WAS NEVER WRITTEN DOWN

8. Take the single thing your company does better than its competitors. Where does the knowledge for it live, and how many people have it?

If the answer is in your head, no tool you buy can operate on it and no person you hire can either. It is the same constraint in both cases, and it is why the tools have not touched the work that matters most.

9. When somebody new joins, how do they learn that, and how long before they are useful?

If the answer is by watching and asking, the company has an apprenticeship model it never chose, and its capacity to add people is limited by the time of whoever they watch.

ON WHAT THE NEXT SIZE NEEDS

10. What breaks first if the company doubles, and who currently owns fixing it before it breaks?

Most founders can name what breaks immediately. Far fewer can name the person, and the person is the more useful half of the answer.

One last thing

These questions will tell you which rung the company you built is on. What they cannot tell you is which part of the work to redesign first, because that depends on what the business actually does, where the load currently lands, and what you want the next two years to look like.

That is worth settling before the next hire or the next subscription rather than after it. A company that has chosen one thing and redesigned it has learned how to do the next one, which is the only route off the second rung. One that has not will keep buying capability it never converts, and the distance between what the company could produce and what it actually produces will stay exactly where it is.

If you would rather not work that out on your own, there is time set aside for these conversations at calendly.com/tom-mawhinney/founder-discussions

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Tom Mawhinney has worked with more than 200 organizations on the leadership, strategy and technology decisions that determine whether results actually move. He has sat as a founder, as an executive and as a board member.

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