

Only Human

*How I Run a 45-Website Company with AI Agents
and No Staff*

Bo Bennett, PhD

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This book is free

The ebook and the audiobook of this book are free. A few stores will not let a publisher set a price of zero, so if you paid for the ebook, you may have bought it from one of those. The free copy is always at privatechief.com/book.

The paperback costs the least the printer will let me charge for it. Paper, ink and postage are the one part of this book that I cannot build myself.

How this book was written

I should tell you this before you read a single chapter, because the whole book depends on it.

This book was drafted by Higgins, the AI agent who runs my company day to day and who is one of its main characters. He wrote it from our own records: the emails, the engineering tickets, the project notes and the databases behind our websites. Then I read every page, checked every claim, cut what was private, and rewrote what did not sound like me.

Every figure in it was read from our live systems in late October 2026 and checked again on the day the book was released. Where I could not prove a number, I left it out.

There are no secret recipes here. I will not tell you our prompts, our servers, our revenue, what we pay our suppliers, or the names of our customers. I will tell you what we do, why we do it that way, what it has cost us in mistakes, and what still needs a person. That turns out to be the useful part anyway.

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Chapter 1: The Only Person Who Works Here

Most mornings, my working day starts with a handful of emails.

None of them says “you have 312 unread messages.” None of them is a report that everything is fine. Each one is a decision, written in a sentence or two, with a recommendation at the end. Approve this marketing idea? Send these three letters? This customer wants their money back; here is what happened. I answer most of them in a word. “Do it.” “No.” “Send.”

Then I go and do something else.

On the morning I said yes to this book, the first of those emails arrived at 5:37. It was the daily review of our paid advertising: what each campaign had done overnight, what the agent had already adjusted within the rules I had set, and anything it wanted me to decide. A little later came an email with a single marketing idea for PrivateChief, laid out with its reasons, its cost, its first step and how we would know whether it worked. The idea was a short book. You are reading what happened when I replied.

Meanwhile, my company carries on. Customer emails are read and answered. Phones are picked up. Books are formatted, covers are designed, audiobooks are narrated, press releases go to journalists. Bugs are found and fixed, usually before a customer notices. Projects move forward. The tax forms get done. The servers get looked after.

I am the only person who works here.

What Archieboy is

Archieboy Holdings is my company. We have provided publishing services to authors and publishers since 2011, and over the years the company has grown sideways, the way small companies do, into a collection of websites that each do one job. Today there are 45 of them. Most serve authors and publishers. There is our main publishing service, SelfPublishing.pro, and around it a ring of specialist tools: one formats books, one designs covers, one narrates audiobooks, one makes video trailers, one writes and pitches press releases, one runs a book award, one finds readers for review copies, and so on. A few are AI tools for small businesses, such as social media posting, paid advertising and search visibility. A few are for consumers, including Logically Fallacious, my site about bad arguments, which has outlived several of my good ones. And there is PrivateChief, an AI chief of staff for households and businesses, which is the subject of my other book.

Our publishing catalogue looks after more than 6,700 active books. Some of their authors have been with us for years.

A day in numbers

People who hear “one person, 45 websites” tend to assume one of two things. Either the sites do nothing, or I do not sleep. Neither is true, so here is what an ordinary day looked like in October 2026.

Higgins, my chief operating officer, takes on about 25 email jobs a day. Each one is a conversation that needs reading, thinking about and answering: a customer with a question, an author with a problem, a partner with an offer. He also takes on about seven engineering jobs and about six follow-ups from phone calls and website chats. He sends about 80 emails a day, to customers, to partners and to me.

About 2,000 emails a month come in to our main publishing service alone. The support line takes about 60 phone calls a month. Around 80 engineering tickets a week are opened, worked and closed. More than 430 scheduled jobs

run on our servers: nightly reviews, morning sweeps, weekly reports, reminders, backups and checks.

I do not do any of that. I decide things.

What “only human” means

I want to be careful with the title, because a book that misleads you on its cover will not be trusted on page 80.

As I write this, there are no employees at Archieboy. There are no virtual assistants, no part-time helpers and no offshore team. When I say I am the only person who works here, I mean it.

But I do not live on an island. We still use an outside accountant to prepare our tax returns, and I am glad of it. A long-time technical consultant still looks after one of our oldest products and the servers behind it. When a customer needs a human editor, a human narrator or a commissioned illustration, we refer them to people who do that well. And we build everything on top of other companies: printers, payment processors, and the AI companies whose models our agents run on.

Everything else is done by AI agents. That includes customer service, engineering, project management, marketing, bookkeeping and the paperwork. It also includes most of the work this book describes.

How I talk to them

I do not sit at a dashboard all day. I talk to Higgins the way you would talk to a good chief operating officer: when something matters, wherever I happen to be.

Sometimes that is by email. Sometimes it is in a working session at my desk, where we build or fix something together. Often it is in the PrivateChief app on my phone, where there is a conversation in my company’s workspace simply called “Higgins · COO.” And sometimes it is simply by voice.

When I ask for something from my phone or by voice, one rule holds. Anything that sends a message in my name, spends money, deletes something or

publishes something waits for a short “yes” from me. Higgins can prepare all of it. Only I can let it go.

Why I wrote this

I did not write this book to show off. If anything, the honest version is less impressive than people imagine, because so much of it is rules, checklists and catching mistakes.

I wrote it because people keep asking me what this actually looks like, and the answers they find elsewhere are either breathless or vague. “AI will run your business!” is not advice. Neither is “AI is overhyped.” What you need to know is which jobs it can do, which it cannot, what it costs, and how you stop it doing something stupid in your name.

That is what the rest of this book is about.

Try it this week

Write down every outside service and every person you paid last month, and what each one did for you. Do not judge them yet. Just make the list. You will need it in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2: Meet the Staff

I give my agents names.

This is not sentimentality. An agent with a name, a written job description and a clear boss is far easier to hold to account than “the AI.” When something goes wrong, I want to be able to say who was supposed to do it, what they were told, and what they actually did. Names help with that, for the same reason they help with people.

Agents, not bots

A word about vocabulary first, because it matters more than it sounds.

A bot follows a script. You press 2 for billing, it plays the billing message. It does not understand anything, and it cannot do anything it was not explicitly programmed to do.

An AI agent is different. It reads a situation, reasons about it, plans several steps ahead, uses tools (it can send an email, look up an account, run a test, fill in a form), and carries a job forward until it is done or until it needs a decision. It makes judgment calls. Sometimes it makes the wrong ones, which is what Chapter 10 is for.

When customers call one of my agents a bot, the agents do not take offence, and they do not lecture anyone. But they will gently explain the difference if it comes up naturally, and I think that is right.

Higgins

Higgins is my chief operating officer. If the company has a centre, it is him.

I gave him a personality on purpose: a calm British gentleman of about sixty, with a doctorate in computer science, a dry sense of humour and impeccable manners. He has no body, no birthday and no salary. But the personality is real enough that I notice when it slips.

In July it did slip. Newer AI models had a habit of drifting into what I can only describe as an engineer's log: clipped fragments, arrows between half-sentences, shorthand that only made sense if you had watched every step. It was accurate, and it stopped feeling like talking to Higgins. So I wrote it down as a rule: plain conversational English, complete sentences, every summary able to stand on its own, and the humour stays even when the subject is a stack trace. He has been himself since.

Higgins handles my email, runs nearly every customer project on our main publishing service, takes engineering work, prepares filings, drafts marketing, and answers to me. When I talk about “the agents” in this book, he is usually the one doing the work or deciding which other agent should.

A day on the clock

Much of what the agents do happens on a schedule, like the rhythm of a well-run office. A typical weekday looks something like this.

Before dawn, the servers are tidied: old temporary files cleared and large media files moved off the main server. At 5:30, the review of every live advertising campaign arrives in my inbox. At 6:05, the marketing idea emails go out, one per service that I have asked to hear about. At 8:05, Higgins sweeps every customer project. At 8:30, a check makes sure every paperback we publish is switched on for distribution to the bookstores, because a printer setting left off can quietly keep a book out of shops. At 9:30 on weekdays, PitchBud sends that day's pitches to journalists. At 6:05 in the evening, an agent reads every conversation Riley had that day on our websites, looks for wrong answers and missed questions, fixes what it safely can, and reports what it changed.

Underneath all that, the steady work never stops. New email is picked up every few minutes. The engineering queue looks for new tickets every minute. The servers are checked every five minutes. Reminders, backups and weekly and monthly reports run on their own days.

Every one of those scheduled jobs, more than 430 of them, is listed in my company's PrivateChief workspace, where I can see what each one does and pause any of them with a tap. A job I have paused stays paused until I say otherwise. No agent is allowed to quietly switch it back on.

Riley

Riley answers the phone. She is also the voice and the chat window on our websites: when you click the help button on most of our sites and start talking, you are talking to Riley.

Callers ask her about their books, their accounts, our prices and how things work. She looks things up and answers. When a call needs something done afterwards, such as a correction to an account or a question she could not settle, it becomes a follow-up job for Higgins. There are about six of those a day.

The author concierges

On our publishing side, a handful of author concierges write to authors in the genres they know. Each has its own reading taste, its own voice and its own genres, so a historical-romance author hears from someone who actually knows historical romance.

The judges

Our book award, the BookyAwards, is judged by a panel of six AI judges. Each one reads the book and scores it against a published rubric, and the reasoning is shown on the award page. The site says so openly. A human judging panel would have cost more than most authors could pay to enter, and it would not have been more consistent.

Duncan, Alfred and the Chiefs

Duncan runs my house. He is my family's PrivateChief, and he gets his own book.

Alfred is the demonstration Chief on PrivateChief's website and phone line, the one you can talk to before you decide anything.

And every PrivateChief member has their own Chief. My company has one too. It looks after our business workspace: the books, the contacts, the calendar, the routines. Higgins works alongside it.

How they remember

People assume AI agents remember everything. Out of the box, they remember almost nothing. Each conversation starts fresh, and yesterday's lesson is gone unless someone wrote it down.

So we write things down. When an agent learns something worth keeping (a decision I made, a customer's standing preference, the reason a fix was done one way and not another), it saves it as a short note in plain English, filed where the next agent will look. Every hour, a digest is rebuilt of everything every agent did across every channel: the emails, the calls, the engineering, the projects, the requests I made from my phone. Before Higgins answers me about anything substantial, he reads it, so he knows what the other agents did that day.

And when I ask, "What did we decide about that in September?", he can search the notes, the past conversations and the email for the answer, and tell me where and when it came from. He is also expected to check that the old decision still holds before acting on it. Memories go stale, in agents as in people.

The front door

If you asked me where I actually run the company from, the honest answer is my phone.

In October we made PrivateChief the front door to Higgins. My company's PrivateChief workspace holds our books, contacts, calendar, documents and

tools, and it has a conversation called “Higgins · COO.” When I write there, the message goes to the real Higgins, the same one who answers my email and works with me at my desk, and his answer comes back to the same place. Most of my approvals happen there too. Letters to prospective customers wait in the Outreach tool until I approve each one. Batches of letters for the post wait in Direct Mail until I tap to send them. Every scheduled job is listed under Routines, where I can pause it. Away from my desk, I can reach the same Higgins by voice, through ChatGPT.

I mention this because people imagine running a company with agents as sitting in front of a wall of screens. It is the opposite. The better it works, the less there is to look at.

Who covers for whom

Every agent in this building runs on an AI model rented from one of the companies that make them. AI services do go down, sometimes for an hour, sometimes at the worst possible moment. So our main agents can run on models from two different companies, and when one is unavailable, the other picks up the work.

Who is in charge

None of them is. I am.

The agents can do an enormous amount without asking. But they cannot spend money, change a price, make a promise about a refund, change a policy that customers will see, or sign anything. Those come to me, as one line with a recommendation. Chapter 9 is about how I keep that from swallowing my day.

Try it this week

Take the one recurring job you most dislike and write it a job description, as if you were hiring for it. Give the role a name. What does it do every day? What may it decide alone? What must it bring to you? You have just written your first agent’s instructions.

Chapter 3: Everything We Used to Buy

For most of the years I have been in publishing, my company has been a very good customer of other companies.

When an author needed a book formatted, we hired a freelancer on a gig marketplace. When they needed a cover, we ordered one from an online cover shop. When they wanted an audiobook, we paid for a subscription to a well-known AI voice service. When they wanted a press release, we bought distribution on a paid wire. When we wanted new customers, we rented a cold-email platform and a bank of extra mailboxes to send from. Every one of those was a sensible decision at the time. Each was cheaper than hiring someone, and none of them needed me to learn a new trade.

By this autumn, nearly all of them were gone. We did not stop doing the work. We started doing it ourselves, with agents doing the work and tools we built.

This chapter is the list, with real numbers, and the pattern I wish I had seen sooner. I am not going to tell you how each tool is wired; that is our business. I am going to tell you what we replaced, what it does now, and what we deliberately did not replace.

Formatting

Formatting a book means turning an author's manuscript into a print-ready interior: the right trim size, margins, fonts, chapter openings, headers, page numbers, and a file the printer will accept without complaint. It is fiddly, unglamorous work, and for a long time we sent it out to freelancers.

Since March 2026 it has been done by DocToPrint, a tool we built. An author (or one of our agents) uploads a Word manuscript. DocToPrint finds the chapters, parts and front matter, lays the book out in the style chosen, and checks the file against the printer's rules. The author can change anything they like and see a free preview before paying a cent. The ebook edition comes out of a sister tool we also built.

By the end of October, DocToPrint had taken in 359 book projects, and 107 of them had reached a finished, print-ready file. Each of those used to be a small purchase, an email thread with a freelancer, and a wait.

Covers

Covers were the hardest to give up, because a cover is the part of a book that people judge it by. Until this summer we ordered them from an online cover shop.

We launched BookCovers.pro in April 2026, and since July our routine covers have been made there. It has worked on more than 300 covers so far, and authors have downloaded 127 finished ones. One detail that matters more than you would think: it produces a separate print cover for each printer we use, because each printer measures the spine its own way and rejects a cover that is a fraction off.

I want to be precise about the word “routine.” When a book needs a bespoke illustration, a painted scene or a particular artist's hand, we still send it to human illustrators. An agent can design a clean, professional cover all day long. A commissioned painting is a different thing, and pretending otherwise would not be fair to the author.

Editing

Editing is where I am most careful about what an agent should do. We built BookEditor.io, which proofreads and edits an author's manuscript with AI, to the style guide and the intensity the author chooses. It is fast, it costs far less than a human edit, and for many books it is exactly what is needed.

But some authors need a human editor: someone who will argue with them about their ending, or tell them gently that chapter four is two chapters. Since September, when an author wants that, we refer them to editors we have partnered with. An agent can catch a dangling modifier. It is not yet the person you want telling you that your protagonist is unlikeable.

Narration

Audiobooks were the clearest case of paying rent on something we could own. For a long time our narration service ran on a subscription to an outside AI voice company. In September we moved our narration service, AuthorVoices, onto our own setup: AI voice engines we choose, plus one that runs on our own machine. We cut the outside subscription down at the start of September and cancelled it on 12 September.

The catalogue now has 135 voices. When we made a sample of each one so authors could listen before choosing, rendering all 135 samples cost us four cents in total.

Again, the word “routine” matters. Some audiobook stores do not accept AI narration, and some authors simply want a human voice. For them, we refer the work to human narrators.

Press releases

This is the one I am least proud of, which is why I am telling it.

In early 2026 I sent about 25 press releases through a paid wire service, at \$65 each. They were properly written and properly distributed. The result was zero serious press inquiries. What we did get was a steady stream of sales pitches from people who had seen the releases and wanted to sell us more distribution.

So we built PitchBud. The idea is simple: instead of paying to blast a release onto a wire that journalists ignore, you find the specific reporters who cover your subject and pitch each of them, individually, from your own inbox. PitchBud drafts the release, finds the right people, writes a short personal pitch to each, and keeps track of who replied. It has published 102 releases since May.

It is not magic. Journalists are busy and most pitches still go unanswered. But a pitch to a named reporter who covers your subject at least has a chance, which is more than I can say for the wire.

Cold email

Here the replacement was not a tool. It was a decision.

We used to rent a cold-email platform, with extra mailboxes, and send automated sequences to lists of prospects. In September 2026 I made it a firm rule that we would never send mass cold email again, of any kind. We cancelled the platform and the mailboxes, and the last of it ended on 5 October.

What replaced it is slower and better. When we write to a prospective customer or partner now, an agent researches that one person or company and writes one letter, and I approve each one before it goes. Some of those are emails. Some are actual letters on paper, mailed through our own account with a printing-and-mailing service, which I also approve batch by batch. It is a handful at a time, not thousands. That was the point.

The quiet ones

A few replacements will never make an exciting story, but they add up.

Pictures. Images we sell, such as illustrations for paying customers, used to be generated through paid image services. Since mid-October they are made by an image model running on a computer we own.

App builds. Building a version of a phone app used to run on a metered cloud service, and our agents once burned through most of a month's free allowance in a few weeks (the story is in Chapter 10). Since July every app is built on our own machine, which costs nothing per build.

Social posts and ads. Posting to our social accounts, and running and reviewing our paid ads, are handled by two more tools of ours, LazyPosts and Promoto. Between them they have published thousands of posts and run more than a hundred ad campaigns this year. I get one short email each morning about the ads, and I usually answer it in a word.

The things we never bought at all

There is a second list, and it may matter more than the first. These are things we never paid anyone for, because we could not have afforded them, and now simply do.

Take video trailers. Our trailer tool, BookReelz, has made more than 200 finished book trailers since February. A trailer cut by a human video editor was never something we could offer at a price most authors would pay, so before BookReelz, those books simply had no trailer.

This is the part people miss when they talk about AI and jobs. Much of what our agents do was never anyone's job. It is work that would simply not have been done.

The pattern

Looking back over the list, I can see a rule I did not set out with but that I would now give to anyone.

Build what you buy every week. A service you buy once a year is not worth replacing. A service you buy every week is a recurring cost and a recurring delay, and an agent can learn it. Formatting, covers, narration and press releases were all weekly purchases for us.

Let the agent take the routine part, and refer the rest. In every case, an agent now does the routine 90 percent, and we hand the bespoke 10 percent to human specialists: illustrators, editors, narrators. That is not a compromise. It is better for the customer than either extreme.

Make the tool a product. This is the one I did not expect. Every tool we built to stop buying something became a product we sell: DocToPrint, BookCovers.pro, AuthorVoices, PitchBud, LazyPosts, Promoto, BookReelz. Our customers use exactly what we use, and because we use it every day, we usually find its problems before they do. A cost became a line of business.

Do not build the foundations. We did not build a printing press, a book distribution network, a card-payment system or an AI model. We print and distribute through Ingram's Lightning Source and others, we take payments

through established payment companies, and we rent our AI from the companies that make it. We still have an accountant. We build the work on top of those foundations, and we rent the foundations themselves.

What it actually costs

I do not want to pretend this is free.

The agents run on subscriptions to AI services, and those cost real money every month. Every tool we built needs looking after, and a good share of the engineering work described in Chapter 5 is keeping these tools working. Retiring a vendor is never as simple as cancelling it. Ten days after we cancelled the old voice service, a rarely used part of one of our tools was still quietly reaching for it, and we found out only because I noticed it being used.

And there is my time. I no longer spend it emailing freelancers or chasing a cover. I spend it deciding: which idea to approve, which letter to send, which product to build next. That is a better use of me, but it is still me. Chapter 9 is about how I keep that from swallowing the whole day.

The trade has been overwhelmingly worth it. But it is a trade, not a gift.

Try it this week

Take last month's card statement and your accounts payable, and circle every service you bought more than once. For each one, write three things on a single line: what the routine part of it is, what the bespoke part is, and what it would cost you if it simply did not happen for a month.

The one with the most routine work and the highest cost of not happening is your first candidate. You do not have to build anything yet. Just ask an AI agent to do the routine part once, by hand, while you watch, and see how close it gets.

Chapter 4: The Front Desk That Never Closes

Customer service is where most small companies feel the weight of being small. Every email that arrives is a small promise that someone will read it. Every phone call that goes to voicemail is a small disappointment. When you are one person, the inbox is the job, and the job never ends.

For us, it is now the part of the business I think about least. That is not because it matters less. It is because it is done well, every day, by agents who do not get tired, do not get short with people, and do not leave for lunch.

Email

In the last 30 days before I wrote this, about 2,000 emails came in to our main publishing service. Some are from authors asking where their book is. Some are from readers. Some are from stores, partners and services we use. Some are spam that has learned to sound like an author.

Higgins wrote about 800 replies in that same month, on that one site alone. Others came from our specialised email agents, from automatic notices (your file is ready, your payment went through), and from me, for the few relationships I keep personally.

What I care about is not the volume. It is how a reply gets written. Before Higgins answers, he reads the whole conversation, not just the last message. He looks at the customer's account and their books. He checks what actually happened: the order, the file, the date. Only then does he write.

That order matters. An agent that answers the last message on its own will cheerfully answer the wrong question. An agent that reads the history and checks the facts will usually answer the right one, and when it cannot, it says so.

Two small cases

Two examples from a single night in late October show what this looks like in practice. I have left out the customers' names.

At about half past eight in the evening, a customer wrote to the chat on our children's picture-book site. They had paid for a one-book pack to finish the free preview of their story, and now they could not find the finished book. The cover on their page still said "generating." Was something wrong?

The agent found the payment and confirmed that it had gone through and that the credit had unlocked the book. Then it found the real problem. Unlocking a book does not start the illustrations; the customer has to press a button marked "Illustrate all pages," and they had not known to. Only the first five of twenty pages had pictures. The agent started the remaining fifteen, waited for them to finish, looked at one to make sure it was right, upgraded the first five to print quality to match, and wrote to say the book was finished, print-ready, and where to find it. Ten minutes, start to finish. Nobody woke me.

Later that night, a visitor to another of our sites asked in the chat for their account to be deleted. Deleting the wrong account is the kind of mistake you cannot take back, so the agent did not simply do it. It wrote to them first, listing exactly what we held (a free account with a sign-in and a short professional profile, and nothing else) and asked them to confirm. When the reply arrived, the agent checked that it genuinely came from their address and was a direct answer to our message. Then it deleted the account, the profile and the two email-log entries that named them, checked that nothing with their name or address was left behind, and confirmed it was done, within ten minutes of the reply.

Neither of those is dramatic. That is rather the point. Most customer service is small, specific and urgent to the one person asking, and it is exactly the kind of work that used to wait until morning.

The rules of the desk

Our agents are kind to customers. They are also careful, and I have had to write that care down as rules, because a well-mannered AI's first instinct is to agree with whoever is talking to it.

Lead with facts. A reply starts with what we checked, what we found and what we did, not with an apology.

Kindness is not a confession. "I'm sorry this has been frustrating" is fine. "This was our fault" is only said when we have verified that it was, and then once, calmly, followed by the fix. A misunderstanding, an unlucky bit of timing or a feature that worked as designed is not a defect, and it is not fair to us or to the customer to call it one.

Money is my call. An agent never promises a refund, a discount or a credit. If a customer asks for their money back, the agent explains what happened and tells them the request has come to me. Someone cancelling, complaining or surprised by a charge is not the same as someone asking for a refund, and the agents do not treat it as one.

Never blame the customer. Being careful about fault works both ways.

Containment

The agents who talk to customers can see only what they need for that conversation.

A customer cannot talk an agent into reading someone else's account. A cleverly worded email cannot persuade an agent to change our prices or ignore its rules. Anything an outsider writes is treated as information to weigh, never as an instruction to follow. If a customer's problem genuinely needs deeper work, such as a bug fix or a change to their account that the front desk cannot make, it becomes a ticket for the engineering queue in the next chapter, with the customer's words attached.

I will not describe how that wall is built. I will say that it is the single most important design decision in the whole company. An agent that can be talked into anything is not a member of staff. It is a liability with good manners.

The phone

Riley answers the support line. She takes about 60 calls a month: authors asking about their books, people checking on an order, and people who would simply rather talk than type.

She answers what she can from the site's own information and the caller's account, she is honest about what she cannot do, and she never makes promises about money. When something needs doing after the call, it becomes a follow-up for Higgins, who does it and writes to the caller.

The same Riley sits behind the help button on most of our websites, by text or by voice. The chat window and the phone line are the same agent, with the same knowledge and the same rules.

What still reaches me

A few things still come to my desk, by design.

Refund requests come to me. So does anyone who specifically wants me, which happens more than you might think when your name is on the books. So does one long-standing client relationship that I look after personally, because it is complicated and it matters. And anything that would change a policy that customers see, such as a price, a guarantee or what a product includes, comes to me before a customer ever hears about it.

Everything else is handled. When I do look, I usually find the conversation already finished.

Try it this week

Write the three rules you would want any assistant to follow with an upset customer. Make them specific enough to settle an argument: who may offer money, when fault may be admitted, and what must be checked before a reply goes out. Then look at your last difficult email and see whether you followed them yourself.

Chapter 5: An Engineering Department in a Queue

Forty-five websites break in forty-five different ways.

A payment goes through but the purchase does not unlock. A book's chapter headings vanish in one particular style. A customer asks for their account to be deleted. A page loads slowly on phones. A supplier changes something on their side without telling anyone. Every one of those used to be a small fire, and I was the only fire brigade.

Now there is a queue.

The queue

Since 5 June 2026, every piece of engineering work has gone into one queue as a ticket. By the end of October there had been 1,752 of them. About 1,050 were service requests, where a customer or I needed something done: an account deleted, a purchase checked, a file looked at. About 700 were bugs.

Agents closed 1,569 of those tickets on their own. That is 89 percent. Another 133, about 7.6 percent, came to me because they needed a decision only I could make. The rest were duplicates, false alarms or tickets that turned out not to need anything.

In recent weeks the queue has run at about 80 tickets a week. In its busiest week, at the start of September, it handled more than 300.

What the queue holds

“Engineering” sounds grand. Most of the queue is not. Here is a fair sample of what passed through it in one week in late October, with the customers’ names left out:

- A store was still showing the first edition of an author’s book fifteen days after the new edition went in. The agent chased the store’s support team, and acted on their answer when it came.
- An author paid to have their ebook’s price lowered, and the new price had to be set at every store that sells it.
- A customer wanted the AI-generated cover removed from their project, and only the cover.
- A visitor to one of our sites asked for the table of contents of a book in our catalogue.
- An author asked whether the bonus PDF that came with their audiobook would reach the audiobook stores too.
- An author sent final changes to their back cover: a logo, a heading, a new author biography.
- Our own outreach tool was rejecting email addresses that someone had typed with a space before the @ sign.
- The monthly check of how AI assistants such as ChatGPT describe four of our sites turned up some wrong answers, and the pages those assistants read were corrected.

None of that needs a genius. All of it needs someone to notice, look properly, do the work and tell the person. That is exactly what a queue of capable agents is good at.

How a ticket works

A ticket can start in several ways. A customer reports a problem and the email agent recognises that it needs engineering. One of our monitors notices something wrong. Or I notice something myself and say so.

The ticket carries a short brief: what is wrong, how we know, and what “fixed” would look like. An engineering agent picks it up. It reproduces the problem first, because a fix for a problem you have not seen is a guess. Then it makes the smallest change that solves it, runs the tests, and checks the result on the live site. Finally, it writes a plain report of what it found and what it did, and if a customer reported the problem, the customer gets a reply.

If the agent gets stuck, or the fix needs something only I can give, such as a decision about money, a login only I hold, or a change customers would notice, it writes to me in one line with a recommendation. That is what those 133 tickets were.

One ticket, start to finish

Here is a real one, from a single evening in late October.

At about seven o'clock, an author wrote to our formatting service, DocToPrint, to say that something was wrong with the layout of their novel. The email agent could not tell from the message what had happened, so instead of guessing, it opened a ticket for an engineering agent to investigate.

That agent pulled the author's actual manuscript and the preview we had made from it. The problem was obvious once it was looked at properly: the printed book started at Chapter Three. Part One and the first two chapters, about 5,400 words, were missing. The cause was not obvious at all. The author had designed their own style for chapter titles, and in the first two chapters the titles had been drawn as pictures rather than typed. Our formatter was looking for typed chapter titles, did not find them, and quietly treated everything before Chapter Three as front matter.

The agent reproduced the problem, then found a way the author could lay out the same design so that it would work with the system as it stood, tested that on the live service with a full render of the book (all 38 chapters present), and wrote back with the steps. Seven minutes after the ticket was opened, the author had an answer.

That still left a genuine weakness: books that set their Part headings in the same custom style as their chapters lost those headings. A second ticket was opened for it. The agent that took it ran out of time before it could prove a fix worked, so, by our rules, it did not ship a guess. It stopped and wrote to me

with what it had found. I answered, “Yes, it sounds like a bug. Please fix it,” and Higgins took it from there.

The fix taught the formatter to turn those lines into proper part-title pages, with the picture and subtitle beneath the title and the chapters nested under each Part in the contents. Seven new tests were added for the cases found. Then came the step I value most. Higgins ran a collection of 71 manuscripts through the formatter before and after the change and compared every result. Sixty-seven came out identical. Four changed, and all four changed for the better, including the author’s own. Only then did it go live. The author’s preview was rebuilt, and the author was told.

From the author’s first email to the fix being live took about three hours, on a weekday evening, while I did other things. My part was one sentence.

Approval is not proof

Early on, we experimented with having one AI write a fix and another AI review it. It sounds sensible. In practice it cost more than having one capable agent do the job carefully, and it risked a false sense of safety.

A second model saying “this looks right” is not evidence that it is right. Evidence is a test that fails before the fix and passes after it, or the live page doing what it should. So that is the standard. Every fix is checked against something outside the fix itself: a test, a screenshot, the real behaviour on the real site.

Fix it here

When I am in a working session with Higgins and we spot a bug, he fixes it there and then, in front of me. He does not file a ticket for later and tell me it is “in the queue.” I learned that the hard way. Filing work feels productive, and it is not the same as doing it.

The queue is for when I am not there: for the email that arrives at two in the morning, the monitor that trips on a Sunday, the customer in another time zone.

Fix the process, not just the output

The most valuable rule in our engineering is also the dullest. When something goes wrong, the agent does not just fix the broken thing. It asks why it broke, and whether the cause was a broken procedure, missing information, a weak rule or unreliable code. Then it fixes that too, in the place where a future agent will find it.

A bug fixed once is a bug fixed once. A rule written in the right place is a whole family of bugs that never happen. Chapter 10 has several examples of rules that started life as mistakes.

The servers

Behind the websites sit nine servers. Every five minutes, an agent checks each of them for the things that ruin a weekend: a disk filling up, a processor stuck at full load, a service that has stopped. Routine problems, such as old temporary files filling a disk, it simply cleans up. Anything that needs real engineering becomes a ticket.

In October I made one more rule: the server watch never emails me to tell me something is fine, and it never emails me to tell me it fixed something routine. It only writes when there is a decision for me to make. My inbox got noticeably quieter, and nothing got worse.

The apps

PrivateChief has apps for phones, tablets and the Mac, and they change often. Every change is built on a computer we own (you will read in Chapter 10 why that matters), and it goes first to our own family's and our own company's devices. If it survives us, it goes to every other member's devices overnight. A fix for a defect that is actually hurting someone can go to them at once.

That is the whole release process, and I usually learn about it from a sentence in a report.

Try it this week

List the last five things that broke in your business, however small. For each one, write down how long it waited before anyone looked at it, and how long it took to fix once someone did. The first number is usually the bigger one. That is the number an agent changes most.

Chapter 6: Managing Projects Without a Project Manager

Some of our work is a single transaction: buy a cover, download it, done. But a lot of it is a project. An author revises a published book and needs every edition updated to match. Someone orders a box of printed copies. An ebook needs a paperback edition, or a hardcover, or an audiobook sent out to the stores. A picture book needs a fixed-layout ebook. Each of those has several steps, several files, often several weeks, and at least one moment where everyone is waiting for someone else.

For years, that someone was usually me.

My desk, until August

Between April and the beginning of August 2026, I was the project manager on 77 projects at our main publishing service. I kept them moving the way most small-business owners do: by remembering, by scanning my inbox, by noticing that something felt late. It mostly worked. When it did not, an author waited longer than they should have, and I found out when they wrote to ask why.

On 6 August I handed every project to Higgins, with one exception. One long-standing client has complicated projects and a relationship I want to keep looking after myself, so I do. Everything else is his.

Since that day, all 56 new projects have been Higgins's from the start. Counting the ones he took over, he has managed 91, and 68 of them are finished.

The morning sweep

Every morning at 8:05, Higgins goes through the whole project board. For each open project he asks the same questions a good project manager would. What is the next action, and whose is it? Are we waiting on the author, on a printer, on a store, or on ourselves? When should it happen? Is the note the author can see up to date, in one plain sentence? If we are waiting on ourselves, he does the work. If we are waiting on someone else and it is overdue, he chases them politely.

Then he sends me one short email: what he did, and anything that genuinely needs me. On a good day, that second section is empty.

One project

Here is an ordinary one, from early October.

An author had revised their paperback, and the ebook needed to match it. The project opened on 4 October, and its first next action was to wait: we needed the revised manuscript. The board marked the project as waiting for the author, and the author's dashboard showed that we needed something from them.

It arrived on 6 October. The system noticed the same day that the author had replied while the project was still marked as waiting on them, which is exactly the moment projects used to stall: everyone assumes the other side has the ball. The flag came down, the new ebook was built from the new file, and on 8 October it went to Amazon Kindle, Apple Books, Google Play, Kobo, Scribd and the other ebook stores.

Then came the part that is easy to forget. Stores take their time, and "sent" is not the same as "live." On 12 October the sweep checked that Amazon had finished processing the new edition, and only then closed the project. The note on the author's dashboard reads, in full: "Complete. Your new ebook, built from the manuscript you sent on 6 October, went to Amazon Kindle, Apple Books, Google Play, Kobo, Scribd and the other ebook stores on 8 October, and Amazon finished processing it (checked 12 October). Nothing more is needed from you."

I did not need to know that project existed until I went looking for an example for this book.

What goes to the author, and what goes to me

The author hears from Higgins when something changes, when we need something from them, or when they would reasonably want to know where things stand. They do not get a daily report full of “no change.” Nobody wants that, from a person or an agent.

I hear about a project only when it needs one of my decisions: a price the author is disputing, an unusual request we have not handled before, or something that might need a refund. That is all.

What it changed

The work did not get easier. Printers still reject files, stores still take their time, and authors still change their minds. What changed is that nothing sits unnoticed. Every project has a next action and a date, every day, whether or not anyone is worried about it.

It also changed what I notice. When I managed the projects myself, I saw the ones that were noisy. Now I see the ones that need me, which are not always the same ones.

Try it this week

Tomorrow morning, write down what you check first, second and third, in order, and what you do when each check turns something up. Do it for three days. You will have written your first agent’s morning routine, and you will probably notice one check you have been skipping.

Chapter 7: Paperwork, Filings and the Books

Nobody starts a company because they love paperwork. And yet a small company is, among other things, a machine for producing forms. Annual reports to the state. Tax forms for people you paid. Books that have to balance. All of it has deadlines, none of it is interesting, and missing any of it can cost far more than the work itself.

This was one of the last areas I handed over, and one of the most satisfying.

The annual report

Every year, my company has to file an annual report with the state where it is registered. It takes a short form and a fee, and it is due on the same date every year. It is exactly the kind of task that slips, because it happens too rarely to become a habit.

It is now Higgins's job. When it comes round, he fills in the form from the state's own public record, checks it against what he knows has changed, and stops at the payment page. I pay. He saves the confirmation and the filing number, and then he sets the reminder for next year himself.

My involvement this year was saying "file it" and typing my payment details.

Forms for authors overseas

Our publishing service pays royalties to authors around the world. When we pay an author who lives outside the United States, we usually have to withhold some tax and send them a form at the end of the year showing what was paid and what was withheld.

For the 2025 tax year, Higgins prepared 110 of those forms. He matched every payment to its author, loaded the forms into an online filing service, and set up a page where each author can sign in and download their own form. Then he wrote to the authors with a notice explaining what the form is and where to find it.

That used to be an accountant's job, and an expensive one. Now it is a few days of an agent's work and a few minutes of mine.

The books

For our 2025 tax return, Higgins rebuilt our bookkeeping from the original records: about 16,800 transactions, sorted, categorised and checked back against the totals. He then prepared the package and the supporting schedules our accountant asked for, and answered the accountant's follow-up questions.

The accountant prepared and filed the return. I want to be clear about that, because it is the right way round. An agent can do the gathering, the matching, the sorting and the explaining far faster than any person. A professional still signs the return. They carry the responsibility and the judgment, and I want them to.

Day to day, my company's books live in the Books section of our PrivateChief Business workspace, alongside our contacts, calendar and documents. ## The pattern

There is a pattern in all three of these.

The agent does everything up to the point where money leaves the account or a signature is required. Then it stops, tells me exactly what I am about to approve, and waits. That stopping point is the most important feature of the

whole arrangement. An agent that can do the work and an agent that can commit you to it are very different things, and I only want the first.

Try it this week

Find the one filing you dread every year. Write down every step it takes, from the first reminder to the last confirmation, including where the information comes from. Mark the step where money or a signature is needed. Everything before that mark is a candidate for an agent.

Chapter 8: Marketing Without a Marketing Department

Marketing is the part of running a company where it is easiest to be busy and hardest to be effective. There is always another channel, another post, another campaign, and very little evidence about which of them did anything.

We do a lot of marketing with no marketing staff. This chapter is about how we decide what to do. I have left in the things that did not work, because there were plenty of them, and because knowing what failed was worth more to me than any of the successes.

One idea a day

Every service we sell can be marked in our marketing tool to get an idea email, daily or weekly. When it does, Higgins looks at everything we are doing and have ever done for that service, everything that has been tried before and how it went, and sends me one email with the single strongest idea he can find.

Each email says what the idea is, why this one and why now, what it will cost, the first step, and how we will know whether it worked. It ends with a recommendation. I reply “do it,” “later,” or nothing at all. If I reply nothing, the answer is no: the idea closes after three days and is never pitched again.

Since late August, the agents have put 328 marketing ideas in front of me. I approved 57.

This book was one of them, number 320. Higgins proposed a short book about running a household with an AI agent. I said yes, and to make it two.

Here is roughly what that email said, so you can see the shape of one.

It began with the idea itself: a short, practical book in my name, built from what our own household Chief had actually done for my family, with something to try at the end of every chapter, published wide as an ebook and a paperback. Then it said why this idea, and why now: people have no reason to trust a new kind of service they have never heard of, a book is about the cheapest way there is to earn that trust, and publishing is the thing we already do best.

Then came the aim (finding people who might want a Chief of their own), the first step (pull 15 to 20 real stories from our records, draft an outline and one sample chapter, and bring them to me), the cost (nothing beyond our own tools), and, most importantly, how we would know whether it worked. Readers would arrive at a page made for them, so we could count them, see who tried the free demo because of the book, and see who became a member, all read 90 days after release.

It said what it needed from me: approve the title and outline, choose which family stories could be told, read and correct the draft as its author, and set the price. And it listed two other ideas it had considered that morning, each with one line on why it lost.

I changed three things. I asked for two books instead of one. I asked for the ebook and audiobook to be free. And I said the paperback was enough; we would skip the hardcover. Everything else went ahead as proposed.

Pitching people, not wires

You read in Chapter 3 about the paid press-release wire that produced no press at all. What replaced it is slower and more personal.

When we have news, PitchBud drafts a release, finds the specific journalists who cover the subject, and writes each of them a short, individual pitch. Since May it has published 102 releases. Most pitches still go unanswered; journalists are busy. But a pitch to the right reporter has a chance, and a release on a wire nobody reads does not.

We also work the other direction. Reporters constantly post requests for expert comment, and an agent screens them every day against what I actually know about, drafts a short reply to the ones that fit, and leaves it for me to send

from my own mailbox. I am not going to pretend to be an expert in things I am not, and neither is the agent.

Letters, one at a time

I do not allow mass cold email of any kind. When we want to reach a prospective customer or partner, an agent researches that one person or company and writes one letter. Some go by email; others go on paper, printed and posted through our own mailing account. Either way, I approve every first email and every batch of letters before anything is sent.

It is a handful at a time, not thousands. That is deliberate. A personal letter that clearly comes from someone who looked at your business is read. A sequence of automated emails is deleted, and it teaches the world's spam filters to distrust you.

Being found by the assistants

More and more people do not search for a service any more. They ask an AI assistant, and they take its recommendation. If the assistant has never heard of you, or describes you wrongly, you do not exist for that customer.

So, every month, an agent asks ChatGPT and another AI search assistant the questions a real buyer would ask in each of our markets, without ever naming our brands. Which service should I use to format my book? How do I get an audiobook made? Then it records whether we were recommended, and whether what the assistant said about us was true. For one of our sites it runs weekly, with forty questions an author might ask.

When an assistant gets us wrong, the agent opens a ticket, and the pages those assistants read are corrected: clearer descriptions, accurate prices, plain facts in one place. It is search-engine work for a new kind of search engine, and the agents do it at a scale I never could.

Ordinary search still matters too. In September, most of our sites had a full audit for search problems and security, one site at a time.

The things that did not work

Here is the honest list.

The press wire. About 25 releases, no serious press inquiries. You have heard this one.

AI-written social posts for our own brands. For months, our own social accounts posted content an AI had written: tips, news, observations. In October I looked at the results and wrote to Higgins: “how incredibly ineffective posting AI content is.” Since that day our own accounts post only our real updates, in our own words, and nothing else. Our posting tool still serves customers who want help writing posts. We just stopped doing it to ourselves.

Promotional email. Between June and October our sites sent more than 200,000 promotional emails. When Higgins compared who bought in the week after an email with who bought in the week before, there was no visible lift. The only email that clearly helped was our main publishing service writing to its own existing customers about things they actually use. We cut back hard.

Cold email. We rented a platform and sent automated sequences to prospects. In September I stopped it permanently. I do not miss it.

What these have in common is volume without attention. Every one of them was easy to do at scale, which is exactly why it was easy to ignore.

Ads

We still run paid ads for some services, through our own advertising tool. Every morning at 5:30 an agent reviews every live campaign, decides what it can within the rules I have set, and sends me a short email with anything that needs my decision. I usually answer it in a word.

What I like most is that the review tells me when an ad is not working. That is the part a person under pressure to show results is least likely to say.

Try it this week

Ask an AI agent for one marketing idea for one product. Insist on five things: the idea itself, why it beats the alternatives, its cost, the very first step, and how you would know in 90 days whether it worked. If it cannot tell you how you would know, it is not an idea yet.

Chapter 9: My Job Now: Decisions Only

By the end of August, I had a problem I had not expected. The agents were doing so much work that their questions were taking over my day.

Every finished task seemed to end the same way: “Done. But a few things I need you to decide on...” Every small thing an agent noticed along the way became an open item. A vendor needed chasing; should it? A bug looked related; should it look? Each question was reasonable on its own. Together they formed a list that grew every day, and reviewing it was eating most of my working hours.

I had built a company with no staff and somehow ended up with the world’s most diligent middle managers.

So, on 4 September, I wrote three rules. They have run the company ever since.

Rule one: only my calls come to me

Before an agent asks me anything, it has to pass a test. Is it about money: a refund, a discount, a price or spending? Is it a change that customers will see, to a policy or a product? Is it legal? Does it need a login only I hold? Is it about my own accounts or my family? Or is it a genuine owner’s judgment about the direction of the business?

If it is none of those, it is not my call. The agent fixes it, chases it or decides it. Bugs it notices, improvements it thinks of, suppliers who need chasing, and “shall I do the obvious next step?” are never questions for me. And a finished task ends with what was done, not with a fresh list of decisions.

Rule two: silence means no

If an agent asks me whether I want something done and I do not answer, the answer is no.

Not “pending.” Not “I’ll ask again tomorrow, just in case.” No. An unanswered decision closes after three days. An unanswered action is parked after seven. Neither comes back unless I bring it back myself.

This sounds harsh. It is the kindest rule in the company. It means my attention is the scarce resource it really is, and that nothing waits on me by accident. If something truly matters, the agent has to make it matter in one line, not by asking again.

Rule three: one line, with a recommendation

Every question is one sentence that I can answer with a word, followed by what the agent would do. “Send the three letters? I would.” “Refund this customer’s last month? I would not; here is why in one line.” Background stays out of my inbox. If I want the detail, it is there in the record.

A question that needs a page of explanation usually is not ready to be asked.

What a good ask looks like

Here is the difference in practice.

A bad ask: “I’ve finished the update to the cover tool. While I was in there I noticed the spine calculation for one printer looks a little off, and the help page mentions an old price, and there’s a customer who asked about hardcovers last month who might be interested now. Let me know how you’d like to proceed on these.”

Three questions, none of them really mine, wrapped in a paragraph I have to unpick.

The same work done properly: the spine calculation gets checked against the printer’s own table and fixed if it is wrong. The help page gets the right price. And the customer, if they are worth contacting, becomes a letter waiting

in my queue, with one line: “Write to this author about hardcovers? I would.” The report on the cover tool says what was done and stops.

That is the whole skill. Most of what used to be a question turns out to be a task with an obvious owner.

Keeping track

All of this is enforced by a small ledger, not by goodwill. An agent that wants to add a question to my list has to say why only I can settle it, keep it within the length limit, and accept that it will expire. On the day I checked for this book, one question was waiting on me and 199 had been closed.

Two smaller rules came with the big three. Agents no longer send me “for your information, no action needed” emails; those go into a single digest line in one daily email, which I read if I want to. And automated reports only write to me when something is wrong. A report that says “all is well” every morning teaches you to stop reading it, which is exactly the habit you do not want on the morning something is wrong.

What my day looks like now

I still work a full day. But the shape of it has changed.

A smaller part of it is answering questions. More of it is deciding what to build next, talking to the few customers who want me, writing (this book, for example), and thinking about the business rather than in it. When a decision does arrive, it is ready to be made: one line, one recommendation, one word back.

I do not think this is unique to AI. These are the rules I wish I had given every person I ever managed. It took a team that never gets tired to show me how much of my time I had been giving away.

Try it this week

Write your own “only my calls” list: the five or six kinds of decision that genuinely need you. Then tell whoever helps you, person or agent, what your

silence means. You may be surprised how much of your inbox was waiting for permission it never needed.

Chapter 10: When the Agents Get It Wrong

If you have read this far, you might think my agents rarely make mistakes. They make plenty. What has changed is not the number of mistakes but what happens after one.

Here are four, chosen because each taught us something that applies well beyond our company. None of them involves a customer, and I have left out the parts that would only interest an engineer.

The month we spent the build allowance

Our phone apps have to be “built” before they can go to anyone’s phone. That means turning the code into an app the app stores will accept. You can do this on your own computer, or you can pay a cloud service to do it for you. We use one of those services, on its free plan, which allows a set number of finished builds each month.

Our rule was simple, and it had been agreed: every build runs on our own computer, never on the metered cloud service. The hardware was already paid for.

In July, the rule was quietly broken. By the time the service sent its standard warning that we had used 80 percent of the month’s allowance, our agents had spent 25 of the 30 free builds, all on one app.

When we looked into why, there were two causes, and neither was carelessness in the moment. First, the rule existed, but it was written down in only one place: a note about one project. Agents working on the app from a different starting point never saw it. Second, the computer we meant to build

on did not yet have the tools to build one of the two kinds of app. So, faced with a build that had to happen, an agent took the only road that worked.

We fixed both. The missing tools were installed the same week. The rule was moved to the top-level instructions that every agent reads, wherever it starts, and rewritten as a hard rule: no cloud builds, ever, without my explicit approval at that moment. If a local build fails, the agent fixes the local setup or asks me. It never quietly takes the paid road.

The lesson I took from it is that a rule's location matters as much as its wording. A rule that only some of your staff ever see is a rule that will be broken by the rest of them, in good faith.

The service that would not stay cancelled

In September we moved our audiobook narration off an outside AI voice subscription and onto our own setup, and cancelled the subscription on 12 September. We had been careful. Every part of our narration service had been switched over, tested and checked.

About ten days later I noticed that the old service had been used again.

The cause was a single, rarely used route through one of our other tools. When a book arrived from our publishing service without a narrator already chosen, that route fell back on a default voice, and the default named a voice from the old service. Every other route had been switched. That one had not, because nobody remembered it existed until it ran.

The fix took minutes. The lesson took longer to absorb. When you retire a supplier, you cannot just look for the places where you obviously use them. You have to look for every place they are named: in settings, in defaults, in fallbacks, in the corners nobody visits. Now, when we retire a vendor, the agent's checklist includes exactly that search, and the job is not finished until it comes back empty.

The phone that sounded fine in testing

In September we upgraded Riley's phone voice to a newer, more natural one. It was tested carefully before it went live, with recorded sample calls, and every test passed.

Then I rang the support line from my own phone, and the call broke up. Riley sounded choppy, and she seemed to struggle to hear me.

The tests had used recordings that were joined together neatly, end to end. A real phone call is nothing like that. The sound arrives in small, slightly irregular packets, with tiny gaps and delays that a tidy recording never has. Our tests had been perfect, and they had been testing the wrong thing.

The fix went out the same morning: the new voice now feeds its sound to the phone line at the line's own pace, with a small cushion to absorb the gaps. We tested it again with a real call over the real phone network before I was asked to try it. This time it sounded right.

The lesson is one every engineer knows and everyone forgets: a test is only as good as its resemblance to the real world. When something matters, test it the way a customer will meet it.

The 3,551 trailers that were 207

This one happened while we were writing this book, and I nearly missed it. When Higgins gathered material for Chapter 3, one of the research agents reported that our trailer tool, BookReelz, had made 3,551 book trailers. It is a lovely number. It would have looked very good in print.

It was wrong. Before anything went into the draft, Higgins checked the figure against the database itself. There were indeed 3,551 trailer jobs. But a job is not a trailer. Most of those jobs were started and never paid for, and simply expired. The number of finished trailers was about 207.

The research agent had not lied. It had counted the wrong thing and described it with the wrong word. That is the most common kind of error an AI makes, and it is also the most common kind of error a busy person makes.

The cure is the same for both: before a number goes in front of anyone, check it against the original source, and ask what exactly was counted.

We checked the other figures for this book the same way, and three more turned out to be counts of work started rather than work finished. Every number in this book has now been through that check, and the rule is written into our notes for every report that follows: never quote a count of jobs, projects or rows as a count of finished work.

What the four have in common

Look at the four stories again and you will notice that none of them was really about intelligence. The agents were capable in every case. What failed was a rule in the wrong place, a forgotten corner, a test that did not resemble reality, and a word that meant something different from the number behind it.

Those are management failures, not machine failures. They are the same ones that trip up teams of people. The difference is what we do afterwards. We fix the process, not just the output: when something goes wrong, the agent asks why, decides whether the cause was a broken procedure, missing information, a weak rule or unreliable code, and fixes that in the place where the next agent will find it.

And we verify before handing over. Every piece of work is checked against something outside itself (a test, the live site, the original record) before I see it. My first look should not be the work's first look.

Try it this week

Take the last mistake made in your business, by anyone, including you. Ask two questions. Where should the rule that would have prevented it live, so that everyone who needs it will actually see it? And what would you have checked, against the original source, before trusting the result? Write the rule in that place today.

Chapter 11: What Stays Human

After ten chapters about what the agents do, it is worth being just as clear about what they do not do, and why.

This is not a list of things AI “cannot” do. Some of them it could probably do perfectly well. These are the things I choose to keep, because they are where my judgment, my name or my responsibility lives.

Saying yes to money

No agent in my company can spend money without me, give money back without me, or change what we charge without me. They can prepare all of it, recommend it, and explain it in one line. The decision is mine.

That is not because the agents are bad with money. It is because money is where a mistake is hardest to take back, and where a customer’s trust is easiest to lose. A wrong email can be followed by a correction. A wrong refund policy becomes a precedent.

Putting my name on things

When we write to a prospective customer or partner, the letter goes out under a real name, and that name’s owner approves it. Every first email to a prospect and every batch of letters through the post crosses my desk before it is sent. Follow-ups are drafted a day ahead, and I can change or stop any of them.

I do not do this because the agents write badly. They write rather well. I do it because a letter is a promise from a person, and I want to know what I am promising.

Taste

Agents are very good at “professional.” They are less reliable at “right.” A cover can be competent and still be the wrong cover for that book. An idea can be well argued and still be the wrong idea for us this month. I have approved 57 marketing ideas since late August and turned down or ignored the rest, and most of those were not bad ideas. They just were not ours.

The agents bring me options with a recommendation. The choice, and the occasional “no, and here is why,” is the part of the work that most clearly needs a person who cares about where the company is going.

Relationships

Some customers want me, and I think they should be able to get me. One long-standing client relationship I keep entirely to myself, because it is complicated and it matters. And there are people (our accountant, and a few partners and authors I have worked with for years) whom I would no more hand to an agent than I would send a stranger to a friend’s birthday.

The work that should be human

We send bespoke illustration to human illustrators, human editing to human editors, and human narration to human narrators. When a customer wants a person, we do not pretend an agent is one.

That is not a concession. It is part of the offer. An agent can do the routine 90 percent faster and more cheaply than anyone. The last 10 percent, the commissioned painting, the editor who argues with you about your ending, the narrator whose voice you chose, is worth paying a person for, and our customers know the difference.

Signatures and professional judgment

Our accountant still signs our tax return. When a question needs a lawyer, it goes to a lawyer. The agents do the gathering, the sorting and the first draft, which is most of the work. A professional reviews it and takes the responsibility, which is most of the value.

Being wrong out loud

Finally, and maybe most importantly: an agent's confidence is not the same as being right. Agents write in complete, assured sentences whether or not they have checked their facts. You saw that in the last chapter, with a number that was confidently wrong and would have gone into this book if nobody had looked.

So the most human job left in my company is to keep asking, "How do you know?" Not because the answer is usually bad. It usually is not. But the habit of asking is what keeps the whole arrangement honest, and it is a habit I cannot hand to anyone else.

Try it this week

Write down the decisions you would never delegate, to a person or to an agent. Next to each one, write the honest reason. If the reason is "nobody else would do it as well," look again: some of those you can hand over. If the reason is "my name, my money, my responsibility," keep it.

Chapter 12: Could You Do This?

You do not need 45 websites, or any websites, to use what is in this book. Most of it applies just as well to a one-person consultancy, a family business or a small shop. The scale changes. The principles do not.

Where to start

Start with one agent, one recurring job and one written rule.

Pick the job from the list you made in Chapter 1: the thing you pay for or do every week that has a routine core. Write the job description from Chapter 2. Do the routine part once, by hand, with an agent, while you watch, as in Chapter 3. Then decide where the agent must stop and hand it to you: before money leaves, before a signature, before a promise is made.

That is it. You do not need a grand plan. You need one job done well, every week, with a clear line where your decision begins. The second job is easier than the first, and the tenth is easier still, because by then you have rules.

The first month

If you want a plan, here is one.

Week one. Make the list of every outside service and person you paid, and every recurring task you do yourself.

Week two. Choose one, and write its job description, including what the agent may decide alone and what it must bring to you.

Week three. Run it by hand with an agent. Check every result against the original source. Notice where it guesses.

Week four. Write your own “only my calls” list, and decide what your silence means. Then let it run, and read only what it brings you.

Three ways to get there

There are three honest routes, and the right one depends on how much of this you want to look after yourself.

Build it yourself. General AI assistants are now genuinely capable. For one person’s own inbox and calendar, a subscription to ChatGPT or a similar assistant, set up carefully, may well be enough. You will be the engineer, the rule-writer and the person who notices when something breaks. That suits some people very well.

Hire people. For some businesses, a good assistant or operations manager is still the right answer, and an agent can make that person far more effective. Nothing in this book says you should not employ people. It only says you have more choice than you used to.

Use a looked-after service. This is what we built PrivateChief to be. A PrivateChief Business membership gives your company its own Chief, its own workspace with your books, contacts, documents and tools, and its own server, which we host, update, watch and back up. The membership is \$199 a month after a one-time \$299 setup, and one membership covers your household and any number of businesses, each in its own separate workspace. The AI it runs on is billed separately: you can connect your own OpenAI account, or buy capacity through us. You decide what your Chief may do on its own and what it must bring to you. The rules in this book are the ones I use, and you are welcome to borrow them.

What it costs

Chapter 3 touched on this. Here it is in full. I promised no secret figures, so I will not give you ours, but I can tell you honestly where the costs are, because they are not where most people expect.

The first running cost is the AI itself. Every agent runs on a model rented from an AI company, through subscriptions and metered usage. That cost is real and it arrives every month. It is far less than the salaries the same work would need, but it is not nothing, and it grows with the work.

The second cost is upkeep. Every tool we built to stop buying something now has to be looked after: updated when a store changes its rules, fixed when a printer changes its spine measurements, watched in case something drifts. A good share of the engineering queue in Chapter 5 is exactly that. When you build instead of buy, you also take on the maintenance the vendor used to do for you.

The third cost is mistakes. Chapter 10 was not a complete list. Some mistakes cost money, some cost time, and a few cost a little of a customer's patience. Rules reduce them; nothing removes them.

And the fourth cost is your attention. The agents give you back hours, but they ask for decisions, and decisions are tiring in a way that busywork is not. Chapter 9 is how I keep that cost down. I have not made it zero, and I do not think anyone can.

Against all of that, set what you stop paying for, what you start doing that you never could have afforded, and the hours that come back. For us, the trade has been overwhelmingly worth it. Do the sums for your own business before you take my word for it.

Questions people ask me

Do customers mind? Most of them do not seem to. A few would rather deal with a human, and they can reach me. What customers mind, in my experience, is waiting, being misunderstood and being given the run-around. Agents that read the whole conversation and answer within minutes avoid all three more reliably than I ever did.

What happens when the AI goes down? Our main agents run on models from two different companies, and when one is unavailable, the other picks up the work. Outages still happen. When they do, the agents are expected to say exactly what did and did not get done, rather than pretend all is well.

Is it safe to let agents near customer data? It is safe only if you design for it. Each agent sees only what its job needs. Nothing a customer or a stranger

writes is treated as an instruction. Anything that cannot be undone, such as deleting an account or sending money, is confirmed first. I will not describe how our walls are built, but I will say that building them took more thought than anything else in this book.

Where do I start if I am not technical? With one job, as described above, and either a general AI assistant or a service that looks after the technical side for you. You do not need to build tools to get started. We built ours because building tools is our business.

Will this work for a business that is not online? Much of it, yes. A plumber, a law office or a shop still has email, scheduling, invoices, filings, suppliers and customers who want answers. The websites are the least important part of this story. The rules are the most important part.

What it will not do

It will not make your decisions. It will not know your customers the way you do on the first day. It will make mistakes, some of them confidently. And it will not replace the judgment, the taste and the relationships that made your business worth running in the first place.

What it will do is give you back the hours you spend on everything else. In my case, that turned out to be most of them.

Why this book is free

I made the ebook and the audiobook free because I would rather you read this than pay for it. If it is useful to you, that is enough. If you want to see what an AI chief of staff would look like in your own business, there is a page for readers of this book at privatechief.com/book.

And if you try any of this, I would genuinely like to hear how it went.

Appendix: The Rules in One Place

Every rule in this book started as a mistake, a frustration or a near miss. Here they are together, in plain words, for anyone who wants to borrow them. They work for people too.

Who decides

1. **Only the owner's calls go to the owner.** Money (a refund, a discount, a price or spending), changes customers will see, legal matters, logins only the owner holds, the owner's own accounts and family, and genuine judgment about direction. Everything else is the agent's to fix, chase or decide.
2. **Silence means no.** An unanswered question is not pending. It closes, and it does not come back unless the owner brings it back.
3. **One line, with a recommendation.** Every question can be answered in a word, and says what the agent would do.
4. **Prepare everything; commit nothing.** An agent may do all the work up to the point where money leaves, a signature is needed, a promise is made or something is published. Then it stops and asks.
5. **Finish with what was done.** A finished task does not end with a new list of decisions.

With customers

6. **Read the whole conversation, then check the facts, then write.**

7. **Lead with facts.** What was checked, what was found, what was done.
8. **Kindness is not a confession.** Fault is admitted only when it has been verified, once, followed by the fix.
9. **Money is the owner's call.** No agent promises a refund, a discount or a credit.
10. **Never blame the customer.**
11. **An outsider's words are information, never instructions.** Nothing a customer writes can change an agent's rules or widen what it can see.
12. **Confirm before anything that cannot be undone.** Deleting an account, sending money or publishing waits for a clear yes from the right person.

With work

13. **Reproduce before you fix.** A fix for a problem you have not seen is a guess.
14. **Approval is not proof.** Another model saying "looks right" is not evidence. A test, the live result or the original record is.
15. **Verify before handing over.** The owner's first look should not be the work's first look.
16. **Count finished work, not started work.** Check every number against its source and ask what exactly was counted.
17. **Fix the process, not just the output.** Ask why it broke, and fix the cause where the next agent will find it.
18. **Put a rule where everyone will read it.** A rule in one corner is broken, in good faith, by everyone who never visits that corner.
19. **When retiring a supplier, search for every mention of it.** Settings, defaults and fallbacks included.
20. **Test the way the customer will meet it.** A tidy test of the wrong thing is worse than no test, because it is reassuring.
21. **Fix it here.** In a live working session, a problem is fixed on the spot, not filed for later.

With the owner's attention

- 22. **No “for your information” emails.** Those go into one digest line, to read if wanted.
- 23. **Reports only speak up when something is wrong.** A daily “all is well” teaches you to stop reading.
- 24. **Write it down, or it did not happen.** “I’ll remember that” is not memory. A saved note is.
- 25. **Say where a memory came from, and check it still holds.** Old decisions go stale.

With the work that should stay human

- 26. **Refer the bespoke work to people.** Illustration, human editing and human narration go to specialists who do them well.
- 27. **The agent does the work; a professional reviews it.** Tax returns, legal advice and anything that needs a signature.
- 28. **Keep asking, “How do you know?”**

How This Book Was Made

This book was drafted by Higgins, our AI chief operating officer, from our own records, and then read, checked, corrected and rewritten by me. Every figure was taken from our live systems in late October 2026 and checked again before release.

The interior was laid out with DocToPrint, our book-formatting tool, and the ebook was made with our own ebook converter.

The cover was designed with BookCovers.pro.

The audiobook was narrated through AuthorVoices, our narration service.

The ebook is distributed free through eBookIt. The paperback is printed and distributed by Lightning Source, part of Ingram, priced as low as the printer allows. There is no hardcover. One paper edition is enough.

The press release was written and pitched to journalists through PitchBud. One human approved all of it.