

## When AI Reveals the Process

*How using AI on everyday construction workflows can expose hidden friction—and help teams improve the work before they automate it*

**By Sue Dyer**

A project manager uses AI to draft an RFI. The draft appears in seconds. That feels like the win.

But then the PM has to find the field notes, copy information from an email, confirm which drawing applies, reformat the response for the project system, and enter several pieces of the same information again. The AI made the writing faster. It did not make the workflow faster.

That is when something useful has happened. The AI has exposed the process.

The value of that moment is not simply that a task can now be automated. It is that the team can finally see where the real friction lives—and decide whether the process itself should change.

### AI Often Shows You the Work Around the Work

Most construction teams begin using AI for something simple: drafting a report, summarizing meeting notes, organizing an RFI, or turning a voice note into a cleaner record. At first, the value is obvious. The task takes less time. The output is easier to produce. A little administrative friction disappears.

Then something more interesting starts to happen. You notice how many times the same information moves before the final document exists. A field observation gets written in a notebook, typed into an email, copied into a daily report, discussed in a meeting, and entered again somewhere else. The AI may make one step faster, but it also makes the steps around that task easier to see.

That is the opportunity. AI can reveal a process that people have learned to tolerate without ever really examining.

### The Friction Was Already There

When a workflow feels inefficient after AI is introduced, it is easy to assume the new tool created the problem. Often it did not. The friction was already built into the way the work moved.

Construction teams live with these workarounds because the project still has to get built. Someone copies information between systems because the systems do not talk. Someone waits until the end of the day to enter information because the required form is difficult to use in the field. Someone recreates context because the first record did not preserve enough of it. The team adapts, and eventually the workaround begins to look like the process itself.

AI can make those workarounds visible because it changes one part of the routine. Once one step becomes faster, the delays and duplication around it stand out more clearly.

### Look at the Workflow, Not Just the Output

Pick one workflow your team already touches with AI: daily reports, meeting notes, RFIs, submittal reviews, field observations, or issue tracking. Instead of asking only whether AI produced a good final document, follow the information from beginning to end.

Ask where the information started. How many people touched it? How many times was it rewritten, reformatted, transferred, or checked? Where did it wait? Where did context disappear? Where did someone have to search for something that had already been known earlier?

Most teams discover that the final document is not where most of the effort lives. The effort is in the handoffs before and after it. That is where friction accumulates.

## **Separate the Requirement From the Method**

This distinction is especially important in construction because many requirements are real. An owner may require a daily report. A contract may require a formal RFI. A safety process may require a documented observation. The requirement is not optional.

But the way the team currently satisfies that requirement may be entirely optional.

A superintendent may not need to write notes in one place and type them again later. A project engineer may not need to copy information from an email into three separate systems. A meeting decision may not need to be rediscovered a week later because the original context was lost.

Once you separate what must happen from how it happens today, improvement becomes possible without ignoring contractual, safety, or documentation obligations.

## **What Better Can Look Like**

The first improvements are often small. Capture information once instead of several times. Move capture closer to the moment the work occurs. Reduce unnecessary handoffs. Preserve enough context that the next person can understand what happened without starting over. Structure information so it can be found later.

AI can help with each of these tasks, but only after the workflow is understood. Otherwise, organizations risk automating the workaround. They make a broken process faster without making the work better.

The test is simple: after the AI is introduced, does the information move through the project with fewer unnecessary touches, less waiting, and less rework? If not, the technology may be improving a task while leaving the larger process untouched.

## **Do Not Automate the Mess**

There is strong pressure right now to move quickly with AI. Construction leaders are being shown agents, automation platforms, connected workflows, and increasingly autonomous systems. Those capabilities may be useful. But greater automation also increases the cost of getting the process wrong.

A manual workaround may waste one person's time. An automated workaround can repeat the same bad assumption across hundreds of records or multiple systems before anyone notices. The more authority AI receives, the more important it becomes to understand the human workflow it is entering.

Before automating a process, ask whether the process deserves to be automated in its current form.

## **AI Can Be a Process-Improvement Tool**

This may be one of AI's most practical near-term uses in construction. It is not only a tool for creating outputs. It can also become a way to examine how work actually moves.

When a team uses AI and notices repeated entry, delayed capture, unnecessary handoffs, missing context, or duplicated effort, that is useful information. Those observations reveal where the human system is asking people to compensate for poor workflow design.

The goal is not to redesign the entire organization every time someone finds friction. Start with one workflow. Understand it. Remove one unnecessary step. Learn what changes. Then decide whether AI should support, simplify, or automate more of it.

## **The Better Question**

The first question many teams ask is, "What can AI do for us?" A better question may be, "What is AI showing us about the way our work already happens?"

That shift changes AI adoption from a search for more tools into an opportunity to improve the work itself. When AI reveals friction, do not treat that friction as an inconvenience to work around. Treat it as evidence. The process is telling you where the work is harder than it needs to be. See the process first. Improve it where you can. Then let AI support the cleaner workflow. That is how a time-saving tool can become something more valuable: a way to help construction teams work better.

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## **ABOUT CONSTRUCTION AI LAB**

Construction AI Lab helps busy construction professionals stay ahead of a fast-moving AI world. We watch what is changing, connect the dots, and explain what is likely to be coming next. Our goal is simple: to give construction professionals perspective and foresight they are unlikely to find anywhere else, so they can see the AI era more clearly and be better prepared to succeed in it. Construction AI Lab is a no-cost initiative of sudyco®. ConstructionAILab.ai

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Sue Dyer is the founder of Construction AI Lab and a longtime construction industry leader whose work has focused on partnering, trust, collaboration, project culture, and improving how people and organizations work together. Her perspective on artificial intelligence is grounded in more than 45 years of experience helping complex construction teams navigate interdependence, uncertainty, conflict, and change. She is the author of *The Trusted Leader*, *The Trusted Leader Journal*, and *Partner Your Project*.

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