

Lifestyles

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Today's tech shift is less about AI and more about intelligent assistance

By Rob Shore
SPECIAL TO THE IJ

If you feel like the digital world is moving fast — perhaps too fast — you're entirely right.

Major inventions like the ATM and the internet took decades to fully weave into the fabric of society, and along the way, technology naysayers were quick to dismiss the evolution taking place. In 1985, Newsweek tech columnist Clifford Stoll wrote, "I don't believe that phone books, newspapers, magazines or corner video stores will disappear as computer networks spread. Nor do I think that my telephone will merge with my computer to become some sort of information appliance."

In 1995, Waring Partridge, AT&T's vice president of multimedia strategy, offered this insight in Wired magazine while discussing why he believed the internet would fail to capture mainstream, everyday users: "Most things that succeed don't require retraining 250 million people."

Now consider that the buzziest technology development of our lifetime, AI, was introduced to the general public by OpenAI's ChatGPT in 2022. It gained 100 million users in only two months' time.

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That kind of speed causes a natural digital whiplash. It feels like we are being forced into exactly what Partridge predicted 30 years ago: a constant, exhausting state of retraining.

But here is the good news that the headlines won't tell you: AI doesn't actually require you to learn a new language or become a tech expert. In fact, it's the first technology in human history that adapts to you rather than forcing you to adapt to it. You don't need to learn computer code; you just talk to it like a patient, helpful assistant. AI is already working to assist you.

While we hear reports of the latest Claude Code developing new apps in minutes, closer to our everyday reality, you might even be surprised to learn that you're already using basic AI every single day. When Google Search guesses the next word you want to type, or when you type the word "dog" into your photo app and it instantly pulls up every picture of your pet from the last 10 years, that's AI quietly working in the background. Your email provider (e.g., Gmail) has been using robust analytical/predictive AI that quietly helps defend your inbox from the daily assault of spam

How can this invisible assistant actually make your life easier?

Imagine you need to write a formal letter to an insurance company to dispute a claim. Instead of staring at a blank screen wrestling with the right words, you can pull up an AI tool, type in a messy, frustrated sentence and simply say: "Make this sound professional and polite." In five seconds, your assistant hands you a perfectly drafted letter for your review.

Or imagine you have family coming to visit Marin County for the weekend. You want to take them out, but one relative can't walk long distances, and everyone wants a nice lunch spot near the water. Instead of spending two hours digging through confusing websites and maps, you can simply ask an AI tool: "Plan a three-hour Saturday afternoon itinerary near Tiburon for seniors who prefer flat walking paths, and include a dog-friendly lunch recommendation." In seconds, it crafts a custom, stress-free itinerary tailored exactly to your afternoon.

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How about the last time you opened a long medical report from a doctor's portal or a sprawling update to a software privacy policy?

You are met with a dense wall of complicated text and legal definitions. You can copy that overwhelming text, paste it into an AI assistant and type: "Give me the top three takeaways from this text in plain, simple English." It instantly acts as your personal translator, stripping away the confusing jargon so you can get right to the facts.

THE GOLDEN RULE OF AI USE: SAFETY FIRST

Because these tools can translate complex jargon or draft emails so fluidly, it's easy to forget that an AI assistant isn't a human expert. It is a powerful pattern-recognizer. Because it's designed to always provide an answer, it can occasionally state incorrect information with absolute confidence.

When it comes to your safety, privacy and peace of mind, there are three critical boundaries to keep in mind.

PROTECT YOUR PRIVACY

Never paste highly sensitive personal data like your Social Security number, specific bank account numbers or your full name and date of birth into a public AI window. Keep your prompts general. For example, instead of pasting an invoice with your account details, just paste the confusing paragraphs of text you want translated.

YOU'RE THE MANAGER

Treat AI like a fast-working assistant, not an absolute authority. Let it do the heavy lifting of summarizing a dense 10-page medical report or a software policy to give you the general idea, but always cross-reference the takeaways with your actual doctor or official documentation before making any decisions

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BEWARE OF 'HALLUCINATIONS'

If an AI tool doesn't know the answer to a highly niche question, it won't always say "I don't know." Instead, it might mathematically guess what a correct answer should look like. Always verify dates, local phone numbers and specific policy rules it provides.

By keeping yourself firmly in the driver's seat as the supervisor, you can safely use AI to slash through digital frustration without ever compromising your security

TECHNOLOGY ON YOUR OWN TERMS

Technology shouldn't feel like an unending test you didn't study for. As we always tell our Senior Tech Tutor Marin clients, tech is supposed to be a tool for living, not a source of chronic frustration.

Artificial intelligence isn't arriving to push you further to the margins of our digital world. If anything, it's the first innovation that builds a bridge back over the technical jargon. By allowing you to interact with your devices using nothing but regular, everyday speech, it takes the anxiety out of the equation,

Thirty years ago, the experts thought the internet would fail because it required retraining millions of people. You already proved them wrong by adapting to desktop computers, websites and smartphones. This time, you aren't the one who needs to change. AI is simply a new tool that finally meets you on your terms, using plain English. By taking the wheel as the supervisor, you can make this technology work for you on your own timeline and for your own independence

Rob Shore is both a community volunteer and the founder of Senior Tech Tutor Marin. He serves Marin County by offering older adults one-on-one, jargon-free help with iPhones, iPads, Macs and all of the apps and programs that support them. He can be reached at shorespeak@gmail.com or 831-221-0018. Learn more at techtutormarin.com