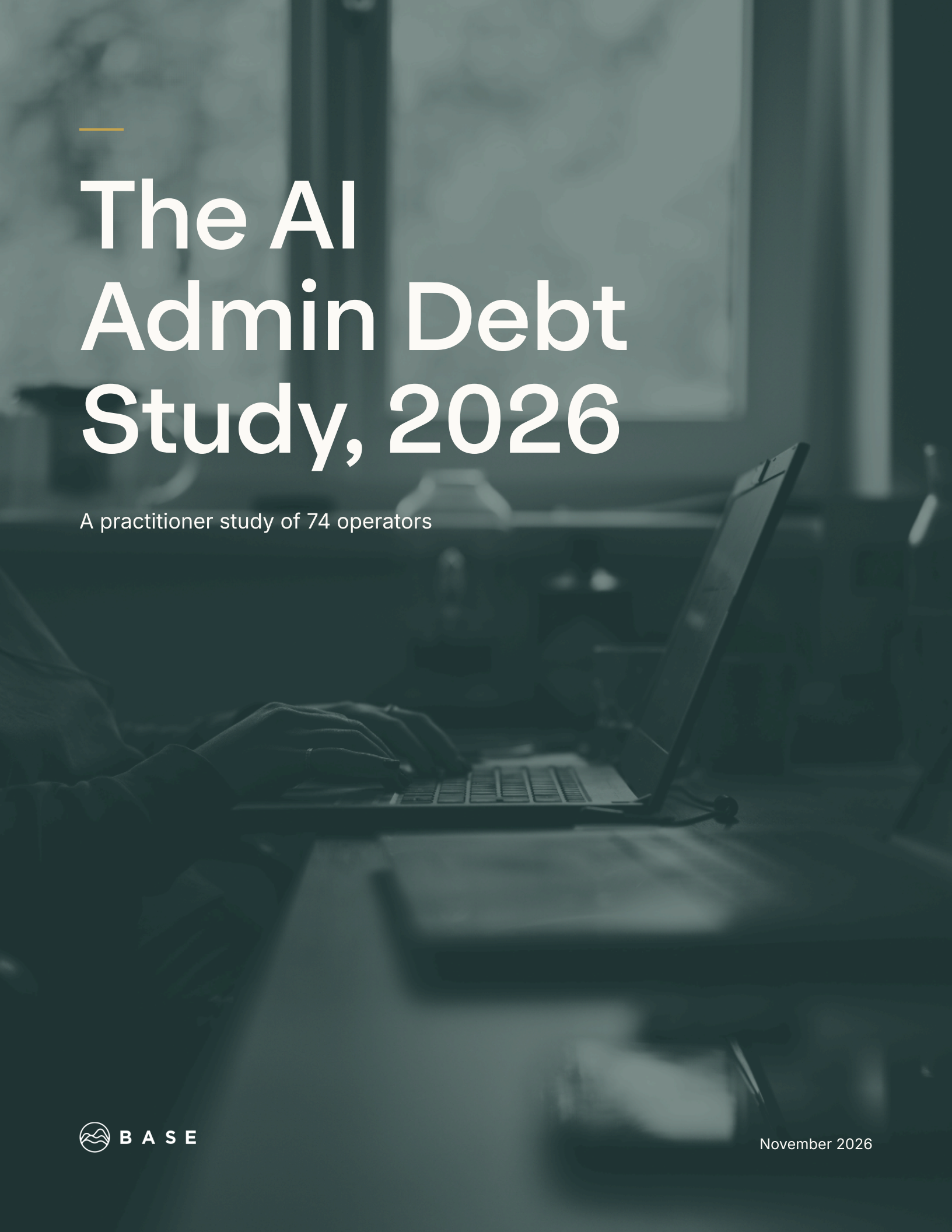


The AI Admin Debt Study, 2026

A practitioner study of 74 operators

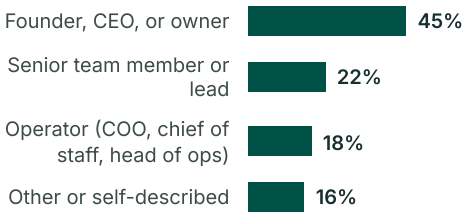
BASE

November 2026

Who responded

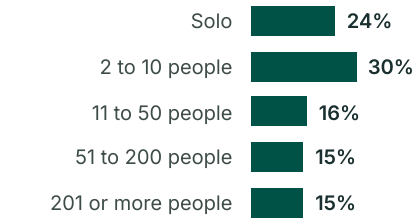
Base surveyed 74 operators between April 28 and June 15, 2026. About 7 in 10 work at companies with 50 or fewer people, and 76 percent have no human executive support today.

Which best describes your role?



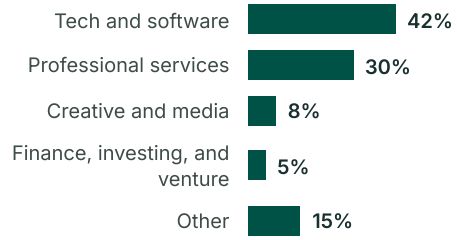
Base: 74 operators

How big is your company?



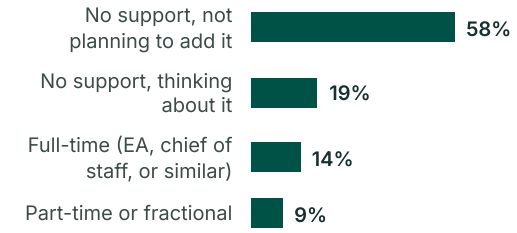
Base: 74 operators

What industry do you work in?



Base: 74 operators. Professional services includes consulting, agency, law, and accounting.

Do you have human executive support right now?



Base: 74 operators

Method and limitations

The sample. Respondents were founders, CEOs, chiefs of staff, heads of operations, and senior team leads, recruited through LinkedIn, professional Slack communities, and the Base network. The sample is self-selected and unweighted. It is not representative of executives as a whole. Every figure in this report refers to these 74 people. The study makes no projections and offers no market sizing.

Cleanup. In all, 82 submissions were received. Four exact duplicates, one junk entry, and three submissions from people affiliated with Base were removed, leaving a base of 74.

The survey. A 14-question web form. Nine multiple-choice questions covered role, company size, industry, tool count, tool retention, weekly hours, output adjustment, workflow ownership, trust in tool evaluation, perceived productivity, and current executive support. Three open-ended questions asked what is not working, what would help, and for a one or two sentence description of the respondent's experience. Two covered follow-up. The open-ended answers were the richest part of the data, and much of this report draws on them.

Recruitment. No incentive was offered beyond a copy of the report.

Limitations. The sample skews toward founders and solo or small-company operators who already use AI regularly. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number and may not sum to 100. Comparisons between smaller groups, especially the 10 respondents with full-time support, rest on small counts.

Attribution. Quotes are edited for spelling only and attributed by role and industry. No respondent is named.

Year two. Base will run the study again in 2027. The five questions behind the four findings will be kept unchanged so results can be compared.

Summary of findings

Integration of AI into how work gets done has a mixed impact on productivity unless it's done with intention.

Finding 1

Productivity and rework rise together.

77% feel more productive

68% usually adjust output

Most of the operators studied say AI makes their time feel more productive. Most also adjust AI output most of the time or almost always before they can use it.

Finding 2

The load comes from depth, not from tool count.

91% use six or fewer tools

34% spend 8+ hours a week

Only one respondent used more than 10 tools. Still, a third spend eight or more hours a week on the work that comes with using AI.

Finding 3

The AI management job has no owner.

80% manage AI themselves

68% lack a trusted evaluator

Most of the operators studied manage their own AI workflows day to day, and most do not have anyone they fully trust to decide which tools their team should use.

Finding 4

Human support changes the hours.

20% with full-time support spend 8+ hours

36% with no support spend 8+ hours

Among the operators studied, those with a full-time EA or chief of staff spend fewer hours on AI work than those with no support. The full-time group is 10 people.

Finding 1

Productivity and rework rise together

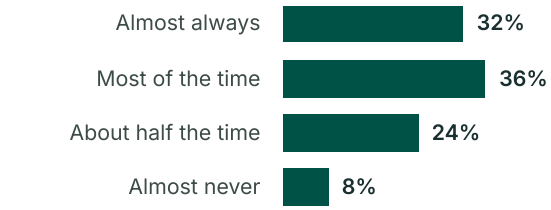
77%

say AI makes their time feel more productive.

68%

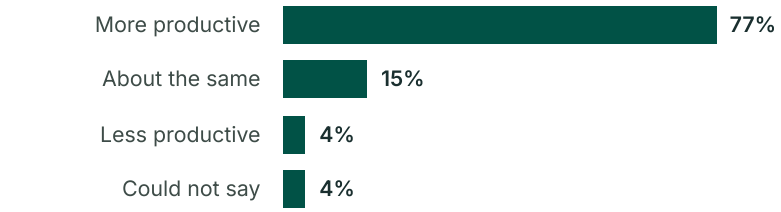
adjust AI output most of the time or almost always before they can use it.

How often do you need to adjust the output before you can use it?



Base: 74 operators

Does AI make your time feel more or less productive?



Base: 74 operators

Among the operators studied, 77 percent say AI makes their time feel more productive. Another 15 percent say it feels about the same, 4 percent say less productive, and 4 percent could not say.

At the same time, 68 percent say they adjust AI output most of the time or almost always before they can use it. Only 8 percent say they almost never need to.

The operators studied feel faster, and they also spend significant time checking, editing, and rewriting output before they can use it. Part of the time saved on the first draft goes into fixing it.

From Base

The checking, editing, and rewriting on this page is AI admin work. An AI-literate EA handles all of it: prompts, outputs, review, final polish. You see the finished version.

Finding 1, in their words

Productivity and rework rise together

What the operators studied told us about checking and fixing AI output.

> “It’s an invaluable thought and research partner. But the VERIFY part is absolutely inescapable.”

Founder, professional services

> “They are confidently wrong often. The confidence makes it harder to spot the mistakes.”

Senior team lead, tech and software

> “Even though the message might be created faster, I spend more time evaluating and rewriting.”

Senior team lead, creative and media

> “It’s often factually incorrect but we’re moving too quick to notice.”

Senior team lead, tech and software

> “85% fun, 15% intense frustration.”

Senior team lead, professional services

Finding 2

The load comes from depth, not from tool count

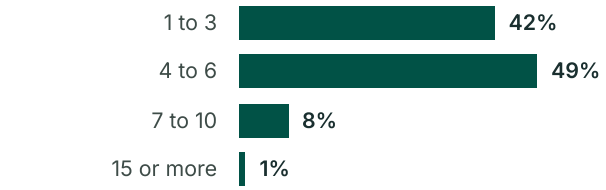
91%

use six or fewer AI tools in a normal week.

34%

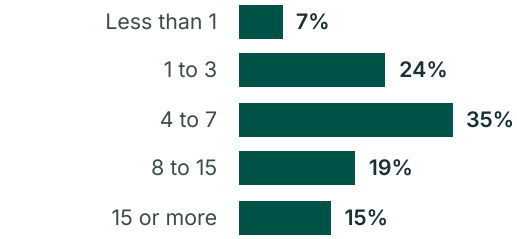
spend eight or more hours a week on the work that comes with using AI.

Roughly how many AI tools do you use in a typical work week?



Base: 74 operators. One respondent used more than 10 tools.

In a normal week, how many hours go into the work that comes with using AI?



Base: 74 operators

The usual explanation for AI overhead is tool sprawl. The operators studied do not fit that picture.

In this group, 91 percent use six or fewer AI tools in a normal week, and 42 percent use one to three. Only one respondent out of 74 used more than 10.

Among the operators studied, 34 percent spend eight or more hours a week on the work that comes with using AI: setup, prompting, checking, and fixing. Another 15 percent spend 15 or more.

Most respondents also keep the tools they adopt: 68 percent say most or all of the AI tools they picked up in the last year are still in daily use. The overhead is the week-after-week work of running a small set of tools well.

From Base

Eight hours a week is a full workday. An AI-literate EA takes on the setup, prompts, outputs, and tools, and you get those hours back.

Finding 2, in their words

The load comes from depth, not from tool count

What the operators studied told us about where the hours go.

> “It’s less about tools and more about finding time to refine my workflow.”

Founder, tech and software

> “Too many, too much change.”

Founder, tech and software

> “Every tool is solving a similar problem, with slightly different variants, but none are fully working on solving a single complete problem.”

Operator, tech and software

> “It’s less about the tools and more about the underlying processes, workflows, and best practices that I know exist but don’t really have the time to fine tune.”

Founder, venture capital

> “It feels like you need so many AI tools just to get the output you want. Half the time I feel like it would be easier, though more expensive, to train a person to do it.”

Founder, creative and media

Finding 3

The AI management job has no owner

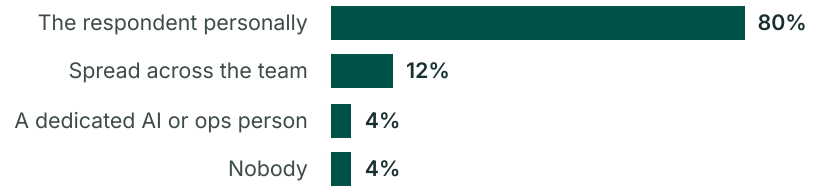
80%

manage their own AI workflows day to day.

68%

do not have someone they fully trust to decide which tools the team should use.

Who actually manages your AI workflows day-to-day?



Base: 74 operators

Do you have someone you trust to evaluate which AI tools your team should be using?



Base: 74 operators

Someone has to decide which tools to use, set them up, write the prompts, check the output, and keep the workflow running as the tools change. Among the operators studied, that someone is almost always the respondent.

In all, 80 percent manage their own AI workflows day to day. Another 12 percent say the work is spread across the team with no single owner, 4 percent have a dedicated AI or operations person, and 4 percent say nobody manages it.

Few have help with the decisions either. Asked whether they have someone they trust to evaluate which AI tools the team should use, 32 percent said yes, 30 percent said “sort of,” and 38 percent said no. Together, 68 percent of the operators studied do not have someone they fully trust to make that decision.

From Base

Base EAs are trained to spot where AI can help, build the workflow, run the tools, and keep everything current as the market moves.

Finding 3, in their words

The AI management job has no owner

What the operators studied told us about carrying the job themselves.

> “It’s like a really powerful seven year old that requires all your attention.”

Founder, tech and software

> “I’m treated as the AI expert but I don’t know enough, so I’m constantly needing to learn as well as implement.”

Operator, manufacturing

> “I am ready to take it to the next level but it is my night job.”

Senior team lead, tech and software

> “AI doesn’t know what it doesn’t know about you. Every conversation starts from scratch. The person carries the institutional memory and AI borrows it. That’s a real tax on the human.”

Chief growth officer, professional services

> “My brain can’t keep up with what my prompts can ship. I feel like my entire day is just creating and reading markdown files.”

Operator, professional services

Finding 4

Human support changes the hours

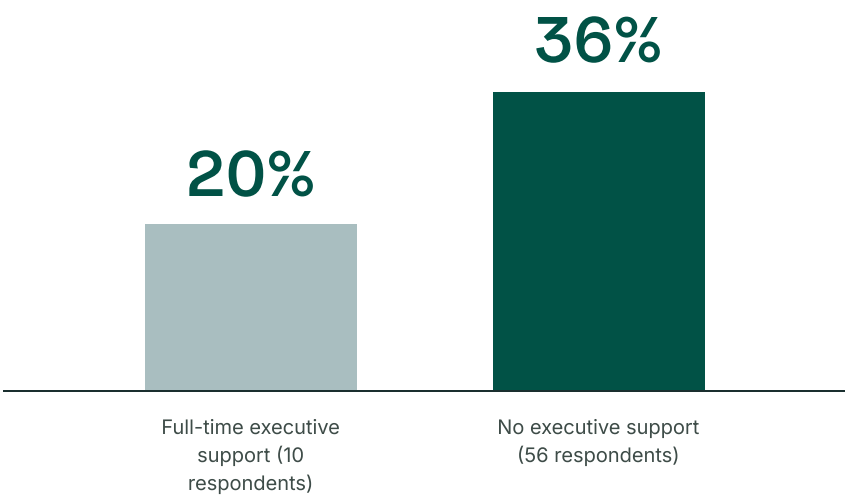
20%

of those with full-time executive support spend eight or more hours a week on AI work.

36%

of those with no executive support do.

Share spending eight or more hours a week on AI work



Base: 66 operators. Part-time and fractional support (7 respondents) is reported in the demographics only and excluded from this comparison.

The study compared respondents with full-time executive support (an EA, chief of staff, or similar) to respondents with no support at all.

Among the operators studied with full-time support, 20 percent spend eight or more hours a week on AI work. Among those with no support, 36 percent do.

The full-time group is 10 people, so the gap is a small-sample result. The study does not claim cause. Within this group of 74, the operators who have full-time human support spend fewer hours on the work that comes with AI.

From Base

A human running support alongside you changes the hours. Base places AI-literate, U.S.-based EAs who do exactly that.

Finding 4, in their words

Human support changes the hours

What the operators studied told us, grouped by whether they have full-time support.

With full-time support

"It has helped me be better, faster, and more accurate. And all this while still finishing my job at 4 pm to get my young kids out of school early."

Senior team lead, professional services

"It's helped me show up in dramatically improved ways in areas where I was historically underperforming. Specifically in research, synthesis, and preparation."

Founder, venture capital

With no support

"I feel like I have superpowers and it has opened many doors for me. Also, it feels like a trap that is hard to escape."

Founder, professional services

"Having a working first draft is so incredibly helpful for me to get started. Otherwise I spin for too long and get nothing."

Founder, professional services

In their words

Respondents were asked to describe their experience with AI in one or two sentences. These are the ones that stood out.

"I don't think there's much wrong with AI tools necessarily. I think our expectations of them are often wrong. We have to be deeply engaged to recognize when the tools hit their limits, when human talent is better, and when we are sacrificing our standards to avoid doing the work."

Founder, creative and media

"Equal parts inspired and overwhelmed."

Senior team lead, professional community platform

"AI has been a capable collaborator that accelerates execution, but only when I bring the judgment, context, and voice. It makes me faster; it hasn't made me unnecessary."

Chief growth officer, professional services

"The value is there, but it is just not as easy and direct as everyone is selling you. You need to treat these tools as tools, not as something that will replace X or Y."

Fractional AI lead, tech and software

"Honestly, the only thing that's not working for me is my time allotment on AI. I just needed to upgrade my subscription because I use Claude so much."

Founder, professional services

"The amount of time it takes on the front end to clean up bad data, tailor output, or build workflows usually makes getting to the finish line hard. It's not sustainable and I usually end up cancelling a few days in."

Founder, tech and software

"Sometimes it feels exhausting and sometimes it feels like it takes the mental load off."

Founder, creative and media

From Base

These patterns aren’t groundbreaking.

This has a name

The hours in this study are AI Admin Debt: the hours that pile up when leaders manage AI tools themselves instead of doing the work only they can do.

Base wrote the manifesto on it. It explains the problem and the way out.

Read the manifesto

About Base

Base places AI-literate, U.S.-based executive assistants with founders and leadership teams. Since 2018, we have matched hundreds of leaders with assistants from the top 1 percent of applicants. Trusted by teams at Intuit, Loom, Superhuman, Indeed, and Teach for America. basehq.com

Get in touch

Start a conversation at hello@basehq.com
Press and research inquiries: media@basehq.com

Cite this study

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