

Strategic Project Design: The New Executive Skill

A Strategic Project Design Perspective

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Why AI makes design judgment the scarce skill.

Strategic Project Design is the discipline of getting an initiative's logic right before plans, budgets, staffing, and schedules lock that logic into place.

For decades, that discipline had a built-in enforcer: effort. A credible business case took weeks to build. So did a real work breakdown or a defensible risk analysis. The work was slow, and the slowness did something useful. It gave leaders time to notice when an initiative didn't hold together, before anyone had spent money on it.

AI changed that. A competent leader can now describe an initiative to a generative tool and get back a finished-looking plan in minutes: phases, milestones, owners, risks, an executive summary. And that is the problem. When a plan takes minutes instead of weeks, the moment of doubt disappears along with the labor.

So the scarce skill is no longer writing the plan. Anyone can do that now. What's left is judging whether the initiative under the plan is worth doing at all.

A flawless plan that failed

A company approves a new operations platform. The plan is generated in an afternoon, and it looks better than the ones that used to take three weeks: clean phasing, named owners, a risk register, an executive summary a board would nod at. It gets approved fast, mostly because it looks so finished.

The rollout goes fine. The initiative still fails.

It fails on one assumption nobody wrote down: that the people on the floor would actually use the thing. They had quietly routed around the last two systems. No one checked whether this one would be different. Execution wasn't the problem. The logic underneath it was, and nobody had looked at it.

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This is what AI makes more likely. A model writes with total confidence about an initiative whose Purpose is vague, whose Outcomes are really just activities, whose measures count effort instead of results, and whose success hangs on assumptions no one has said out loud. Nothing about the plan looks wrong. It's wrong anyway, because it rests on reasoning nobody tested. Fluency is easy to mistake for rigor.

From production speed to design judgment

As finished-looking output gets cheaper, the part that still costs something moves earlier, into the design, before the plan.

The leader's job shifts with it. Less producing the answer, more deciding whether the answer is worth the organization's commitment. That means reading past a professional-looking plan and asking the questions it skipped. Does this initiative actually make sense? What has to be true for it to work? What evidence would tell us it's working? Which assumption is quietly holding the whole thing up?

None of those are planning questions. They're design questions, and they're exactly the ones AI can't answer for you.

What Strategic Project Design actually is

Strategic Project Design gets the logic right before the plan locks it in. Its backbone is the Logical Framework, the LogFrame, which makes an initiative state its reasoning instead of just listing its activities.

A well-built design puts seven things on the table:

- the larger **Goal** the initiative supports;
- the specific **Purpose**, or change the initiative must produce;
- the **Outcomes**, or deliverables required to achieve that Purpose;
- the **Inputs** and **activities** needed to produce those Outcomes;
- the **Measures** that define success;
- the **Means of Verification** that provide evidence; and
- the **Assumptions** that must hold at each level.

Underneath, it's a single hypothesis: if we do this work, and the assumptions hold, then we can deliver these Outcomes, which produce the Purpose, which serves the Goal.

Most plans never say the hypothesis out loud. They list what will be done and head straight for execution. Design forces the logic into the open while it's still cheap to change. The operations platform had a plan. What it never had was a design: a stated hypothesis with a weak link, the adoption assumption, that somebody could have spotted and tested for the price of a few conversations.

The skill is learning to read an initiative as an argument you can interrogate, not a document you approve.

Why AI raises the stakes on both sides

If AI can write the plan, can't it design the initiative too? Not really.

AI genuinely helps with design. It can dig through messy source material, throw up alternatives, poke holes in a causal chain, name assumptions you'd rather not look at, and argue the skeptic's side. Point it at your reasoning and it's a sharp sparring partner.

What it can't do is carry the risk. AI has no stake in the Outcome. It doesn't know the sponsor is leaving in March, that the team resisted the last three systems, or that the measure everyone loves has almost nothing to do with the result that matters. It knows none of that unless someone tells it.

So it cuts both ways. Hand it weak logic and it gives that logic speed, structure, and confidence. Hand it a design you've actually stress-tested and it makes the good reasoning faster instead. Same tool. The whole difference is whether a human did the design work first.

How leaders build the skill

The skill is learnable, and it doesn't take more software. It takes a change in what a leader treats as *ready*.

Identify Purpose and Goal. Write one sentence for what change *this* initiative is on the hook to deliver, and the larger Objective it feeds. Can't write the sentence? It isn't defined yet.

Separate Outcomes from Purpose Name what the initiative has to *produce* before you to achieve the Purpose. A list of deliverables and activities is not a set of results.

Decide the evidence before you start. Say in advance what would show this is working. Pick the measure afterward and you'll end up calling effort a result.

Treat assumptions as real design variables. Before you sign off on a plan, write the sentence it depends on ("this works if X"), then find the riskiest "if" and go check it. In the platform case, that one habit surfaces the adoption problem in an afternoon. It's the cheapest insurance you'll ever buy.

Use AI as a challenger, not a ghostwriter. Don't ask it to write the plan. Ask it to go after the one you've got. What assumptions is this carrying? Where is the causal logic weakest? What would a hostile sponsor say? Aim its fluency at your reasoning instead of letting it stand in for your reasoning.

An initiative isn't ready to plan because a plan exists. It's ready when the logic has been examined and can carry weight.

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The leaders who will stand out

Answers are about to be everywhere. AI will turn out strategies, roadmaps, business cases, risk registers, and project plans faster than anyone can read them. When polished output is that common, it stops proving anything.

The leaders who stand out will be the ones who can tell a convincing plan from a sound one. They won't jump from idea to execution just because the jump got easy. They'll ask what has to be true, what evidence backs the design, which assumption is carrying hidden risk, and whether the thing deserves the commitment at all. Then they'll use AI to sharpen the design rather than skip it.

Plausible answers are getting cheap. Judgment is getting valuable. Strategic Project Design is how you exercise it before the organization spends its money, its people, and its credibility.

Design before you accelerate. In an AI-accelerated workplace, that's turning into an executive skill.

Design Before You Execute

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