

Progress Over Perfection

Episode 5: People, Process, and Predictive AI

WHY THE HARD PART OF AI ADOPTION ISN'T THE TECHNOLOGY

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Introduction

Jack: Hey, everyone, welcome back to Progress Over Perfection. I'm your host, Jack, and in this episode I'm joined by Rob Hunt, our new VP of Aviation here at Evans.

Jack: Rob spent years as an FAA executive, and before he joined us, he was a longtime client, so he's seen this work from both sides of the table.

Jack: Rob knows the pressure federal leaders are under right now: experience and talent are heading out the door while the mission certainly doesn't shrink.

Jack: And his advice isn't just to do more with less — it's to let technology carry part of the load, while keeping people firmly in the loop.



Jack:We'll get into how to actually operationalize AI, and why the answer is less about the tools and more about the team.

Jack:We talk about building trust in predictive technology when the stakes are as high as they are in a place like air traffic control, and why the operators who use the system need a seat at the table from day one.

Jack:Rob also shares two things you can do with your team Monday morning — no new budget, no new software, just a different way of working. Let's get into it.

Rob:I think in a few minutes we're going to be talking about how automation can help an organization drive change, move forward, and achieve mission outcomes.

Rob:At any point over the past fifty years, this is the most exciting time to be in that space. We're taking technology, learning a lot about it, exploring it, but ultimately helping our partners, our clients, our stakeholders get the most benefit from this incredible technological time we're in.

Doing More With Less: The Federal Attrition Reality

Jack:I want to go back and start with one of the common refrains I've talked to my guests about over the previous four episodes: there's been a big outflux of talent on the federal side over the last couple of years.

Jack:If I remember correctly, in 2025 something like 130,000 people left the federal government — a really big number. And the challenge that creates is that the people who didn't leave, the government's not doing a lot of hiring, so they're truly being asked to do more with less.

Jack:I want to get your thoughts, having been on the other side. If I'm a leader in government handling this kind of severe personnel shortage, how do I manage that without feeling like I'm overloading my people with more stuff, while making sure they're supported knowing they're dealing with resource constraints as well?

Rob:Resource management, resource challenges, resource gaps have always been an issue for leaders in the federal government, no doubt for many years.

Rob:But to your point, over the past year the record attrition we've seen, and the loss of corporate knowledge numbering in the hundreds of years collectively, has been incredibly challenging.

Rob:At the same time, that presents opportunities — both for the remaining workforce and given this interesting point in time we find ourselves at with technology and its ability to make our existing workforce more efficient. That holds true across the government sector and the private sector.



Rob: That's where technologies like AI can help address a lot of that workforce gap. What we're seeing over the past probably six to twelve months is an incredible rise in the exploration and use of agentic AI, which in many ways should address some of those resource gaps and challenges.

Rob: Now, that said, human decision making, human oversight, and judgment will always be critical to any operation, any business. Certainly many tasks can be automated and really should be automated, to optimize not only the use of existing investments and resources but also to optimize mission outcomes.

Rob: But we've got to balance that urgency to use automation to address resource constraints with the fact that humans still remain at the center of what we do across the board.

Rob: We've seen that in the aviation world, where we do mission-critical operations. As the FAA, for example, continues to advance its push into artificial intelligence and other technologies, it also needs to make sure it continues to focus on how the human can use it to be more efficient and to maintain overall aviation system safety and efficiency.

Rob: The human has to be central in that service delivery. I know the FAA and other agencies and companies have constantly been trying to figure out how to use technology in a way that helps my folks get through the more rote tasks — the things where automation makes sense and are less human-value-added — and free the people to use their unique abilities, their experience, their skills, to solve the meaty stuff that automation can't.

Jack: I think AI can do more, right? It can handle more tasks. You can build agents to do a lot of things, skills or whatnot that it can take on.

Jack: But it can't take on Rob Hunt's personality. It can't bring its experience, your experience, to that. It can't use mine or any of our listeners'.

Jack: There's a great opportunity here, but as I know our consultants are facing, it's like — okay, you want me to use it, but I'm me, and what the client wants me there for is because I bring unique stuff.

Jack: I think people are struggling a little bit because AI's also got this narrative around it, that maybe you don't need to hire as much because you can use AI instead — there's a story about workforce reduction tied to AI use that's out there.

Rob: Yeah, I couldn't agree more. First off, we should learn from previous introductions of new technologies, game changers.

Rob: Now, AI probably is, once in a generation if not more, changing the way we do business across the private and government sectors. But we can lean on that experience in many ways to understand how to best operationalize AI in our workplaces.

Sit With Your Team First: Where AI Adoption Actually Starts

Jack: And I think that's exactly what you're getting into — these models, new versions seem to come out literally every few weeks. It's great, it's exciting, it's wonderful what they can do.

Jack: But how do you operationalize it in a way that actually advances mission outcomes, and not just because everyone's talking about it?

Rob: There are many facets to operationalizing a new technology, particularly AI. A key one is change management — how do you bring your team along to understand what this change is and how to best apply it in their workspace, their business flows?

Rob: I think that's a tremendous opportunity, frankly, in this time of a lot of uncertainty for employees and managers alike, given the attention and focus on job security around AI.

Rob: One way to address that is to sit down with the team and say: this is another tool in your toolbox to help you in your discipline — whatever the discipline, business analyst, contract specialist, engineer, human factors specialist.

Rob: My recommendation is to sit down with your team members, understand their current business activities, the workflows, all the tasks they do daily. With that understanding of the current state, identify how AI could help them optimize their mission set and support the overall mission outcome.

Rob: Not only is that the most effective way to adopt AI in a targeted, precise manner, it also brings the employees along — and that's going to be the tough part, isn't it?

Rob: It's like we keep saying, especially in the aviation community — at this point, in some ways, the technology is not the long pole anymore. We still have to figure some things out, but it's really the policy, the procedures, and bringing the humans along that's going to be the big challenge for senior leadership moving forward.

Jack: Yeah, I couldn't agree more.

Rob: It's been a lifelong endeavor for me — the kind of work I've done for over 30 years with government has been a lot of business process re-engineering in relation to automation, as well as change management and communications here at Evans.

Rob: But it's always about helping that employee understand, one-on-one, the care embedded in that approach. I face this daily myself — what else could I be doing with it?

Rob: When I talk to somebody about it, like you or Bob or our business advisor, they think about things I haven't thought of, and I know they're doing it because they're not after my job. They respect what I bring to the table that AI can't do. It's about getting things off your plate that shouldn't be using your brainpower — and there's a real care in that.

Rob:It has so many benefits if you take that employee-first approach when introducing this change. Not only are you bringing the employee along, but the employee knows their business processes, they know where the pain points are, they know where the rote tasks are that could be automated, and they know where the other intangibles are that we're going to continue to support.

Rob:I think that's probably the best way to introduce and manage this kind of change for the ultimate outcome of improved mission achievement — explain the burning platform, point out the benefits, and involve people early in designing the tool. That'll work itself out.

Building Trust in Predictive AI

Jack:Okay, so shifting a bit — let's say you're doing this, and you're a former employer of yours, the FAA, and many other agencies operate in a pretty high-stakes environment.

Jack:A lot of times the culture is driven by reaction — something happens that needs to be fixed. Take our friends the air traffic controllers: weather pops up, they've got to reroute a plane, and it affects the whole system.

Jack:They're starting to explore, maybe even introduce, predictive technology that can help with that. A lot of people are uncomfortable with predictive technology — it's like, I'm the best person to look at this weather, I know how the system works.

Jack:How do you take a skilled workforce like air traffic controllers, and there are examples across government and the private sector, and help them start to trust some of this automation?

Rob:Great question, and I have a couple of thoughts, though the jury's still out on how we're applying some of these new capabilities.

Rob:Conceptually, including all the relevant stakeholders — in particular the users or operators — very early in the concept design phase of the software development lifecycle is extremely important, and will continue to be important moving forward even with this technology.

Rob:One thing we are seeing is that these new technologies, AI in particular, are able to extremely accelerate all phases of the software development lifecycle.

Rob:In the past, in the air traffic management world, we'd come up with a new concept in a whiteboard session, decide we needed to visualize it in a more concrete, higher-fidelity way, and building the software to get there might take three, four, five, six months. Today, that's maybe a few hours with one of these models — and that's just the first step of concept development.

Rob:All the subsequent phases, from hardening the software to testing it to deploying and updating it, are seeing tremendous acceleration too.

Rob:But back to your question — at this point I don't see the value of bringing in the operators, the users, the impacted stakeholders early in the process changing at all.

Reimagine, Don't Just Accelerate

Rob: I will say these tools are so powerful that we shouldn't be afraid to reassess the roles of the stakeholders in that business, in that operation.

Rob: It's a two-pronged approach when it comes to adopting AI: one is how AI can help us accelerate our existing business processes, improve their accuracy, or reduce the resources needed to execute them. The other prong, the other lens, is how we can reimagine those business processes altogether.

Rob: Many business processes were put in place with an implicit constraint on what a human, or a set of humans, or other automation at the time could do. Fundamentally, some of those assumptions, those constraints, have probably changed — so it's more of a paradigm shift.

Rob: We shouldn't be afraid to ask those questions, but we can't be reckless about it. We have to keep in mind where human judgment and human decision-making sit in the business process you're reimaging.

Rob: If you have the underlying trust and good-faith collaboration with your team members, having those exciting, energizing, though perhaps a little scary discussions shouldn't be a barrier.

Jack: As you were talking about that, I was also thinking about how new versions of these models keep coming out. Quite frankly, for me the anxiety-inducing side is that by the time I think I've figured out a good application, there's a new model that can do other things.

Jack: How do I take that next-level analysis, reassess my role in this whole thing I'm used to, the way it's worked in the past? I think that creates pressure, and in some cases anxiety.

Jack: But bringing our operators into that reassessment — you were limited, you had these constraints before, you don't have them now, let's explore how we can do this better — could help with one of the biggest challenges the FAA faces: having enough controllers.

Jack: Reassessing how the system works is extremely important and could help with challenges like that.

Rob: That's a wonderful point — the speed of change, we've never seen anything like it. In many ways we're still grappling with how to manage that pace.

Rob: There's that trade-off between chasing some new feature in the model that came out two days ago versus staying focused on applying the technology you've been working with to a certain set of business processes. There's no magic answer to that dilemma, as far as I know — it's something we're learning through.

Rob: It's going to be sector-specific and even organization-specific, based on your pace, your scale, and your decision-making on how much change you want to institute and when. Recognizing those factors — the environment, the impact points — will give you a leg up in making the right decisions.

R&D and Implementation: Making It Concurrent, Not Consecutive

Jack: All right — something I know you've talked to our team about, tied to what we're discussing, is the role R&D organizations are playing.

Jack: It's not like we've got a year to spend on R&D, build a cute prototype, test it, and three years down the road maybe get something in the field. There's a big handoff in some cases between NASA and the FAA, and then the FAA does R&D up front to figure out how to get it in.

Jack: What does this shift mean if I'm a leader of an R&D shop?

Rob: Right now, if you're in the R&D world, it's both an incredible challenge, or risk, and an opportunity. Across government and the private sector we're seeing speed, speed, speed — solutions to market faster and more efficiently than we've ever seen.

Rob: If you're in charge of an R&D organization, that can be a little scary because the pressure on you is immense. At the same time, it's a tremendous opportunity to tell senior leadership: I got it, we need to get something into the field yesterday, we can't take the traditional amount of time to mature something.

Rob: Two things are important as an R&D organization considers its future. Number one, taking advantage of new technologies — the concept development and concept validation phase for something like the FAA can be extremely accelerated.

Rob: I spent about thirty minutes prompting back and forth with one of these models recently, and the result was a semi-mature conceptual solution. That's not hardened code, I don't want to misinform anyone, but something that took us three, four, five months to initially evaluate can now be done in a matter of weeks with focused effort.

Rob: Taking advantage of the technology is your number-one tool if you're an R&D organization.

Rob: The other big thing an R&D organization has to do is be extremely tied to, and collaboratively working on a daily basis with, the implementing organization.

Rob: What we've seen in the past across sectors is the R&D organization does good work off on its own, then shows up at the implementing organization's front door and says, here's a solution, we'd like you to implement this — and the implementing organization says, okay, but I need A, B, C, D, and E, and given the timeframes, we're now looking at another two or three years before it gets into the operator's hands. We can't accept that anymore.

Rob: What the R&D organization really needs is an incredibly close partnership with the implementing organization, so the solution that gets developed is effective and beneficial from an operator's and business perspective, and everything that needs to happen — training, supply chain management, the ops tail — is already accounted for as part of developing the solution.



Rob: Everything becomes concurrent and not consecutive. You're reducing a lot of the friction and handoff costs between organizations, and the end result is hitting your speed marker with an acceptable, supportable solution that can hit the field.

Rob: I can't emphasize enough how important that second piece is, because you can spend a ton of money working on a wonderful solution, but if it takes more than, frankly, six months or twelve months, depending on your sector context, it's going to be worthless. It's just too late.

Rob: We've never been in a time where technology has been able to accelerate our work like this, but it's the coordination, the partnership with the implementing organization, that's going to be critical to really make a difference.

Jack: It's interesting — you hear about tools that used to be limited to an R&D shop now being in people's hands directly, and people saying, if it's going to take you six to twelve months, how about I go get a company that can help me build this with AI?

Jack: That's not always the right answer, but it is a pressure. As you're exploring the concepts and doing the research, it's going to be good for us to work on this together in a more agile way — not a little bit, a lot more agile.

Jack: I think that's really powerful. It's one of those hidden improvements — before AI, R&D would sometimes go off in their own world and do amazing research, but at the end of the day the implementing organization hadn't looked at it, hadn't thought about A, B, and C, and now they've got to, because the tools exist to support that.

Jack: It's not just a speed thing — it's going to improve how those organizations continue to work better together.

Rob: Yeah, it's really powerful, and it's extremely exciting, the time we're in. As we were talking about earlier, everyone gets really caught up in the AI, the technology — it's a lot of fun for us technologists, we love this stuff.

Rob: But sometimes when we do that, we forget how central the human is to actually making it happen. That second part we're talking about, those partnerships that make sure the technological solutions can be executed quickly, is a lot of human work — the procedures, making sure we have the right AI validation framework, making sure this technology is legitimate and meets our standards.

Rob: That's humans managing that risk, engaging in those activities, so we can decrease time to market. That's another reason, connecting the dot back, when we have our discussions with team members about how we can use AI to improve our operations — you're central to making this happen.

Rob: Yes, we're using AI to accelerate and be more efficient in our business processes, but at the end of the day you're still there to make sure what we're implementing gets to the field, into the operator's hands, as quickly as possible.

Rob: In some ways we're closing the loop and emphasizing our human role. Evans, particularly in the aviation space, has been central to being that bridge between the R&D world and the implementation world, and if anything that bridge is going to become even more important as we move forward.

The One (Or Two) Things to Do Monday Morning

Jack: Yeah, love that, that's great. But I'd be remiss if I didn't ask — if I'm a federal program leader, we're recording this on a Friday but people may be listening any time, and you've spurred me to do something differently — what's that one thing I should do with my team Monday morning to make sure I'm implementing this technology well?

Rob: I'm actually going to go for bonus points and offer two. One thing — and we touched on this a few minutes ago — is I'd strongly recommend that next week, or whenever you're able, you work with your team to identify one or two business processes you currently have in place.

Rob: Literally sit down as a team and say, here's our business process, here are the five steps, here's the output. Look at the current state of that process, then brainstorm with your team, and ask them to own it, on how you could potentially improve that process using new technologies like AI.

Rob: Say, this is what we'd like to do on Monday, and you're having this discussion Monday, keeping the group small — three or four people — then meet again this Friday to see where you landed and what recommendations you want to make to improve the process you own and maximize this new technology. Do a check-in Wednesday to see how things are going.

Rob: That's the initial step I'd take if you haven't already done something in this space.

Jack: That makes a lot of sense. One of the exercises we did as a company, before you joined us, was similar — we only actually did the first step, identifying the business processes.

Jack: We got the list and people are working on them, but I think coming back and discussing them before you even send people off to work on things is really valuable, because everyone's going to have different ideas, and talking about those ideas, maybe ranking them, develops rapport within the organization and helps make sure you're working on the right things — not just the thing I thought of, or you thought of.

Jack: I love the come-back-Friday, five-days-later cadence — it's not, hey, we'll get back together in a month or next quarter. The momentum that establishes is kind of like the momentum around AI and automation these days, and it's going to help people adapt their mindset and work style to where we are, because it's pretty different.

Rob: Indeed. Something like this exercise, hopefully, first comes up with a potential improved business process, and second, really engages, embraces, and brings the folks along, and has them own it — because ultimately this is going to succeed or fail based on how much individual human ownership is able to really embrace this new technology and make it work for us.

Rob: Maybe perhaps on that point of helping the workforce embrace this new technology, the bonus suggestion is something like a weekly lunch-and-learn or info-sharing forum where you do a couple things with the intent of sharing information and making folks more comfortable with the new technology.



Rob:Thursdays at 12:30, a voluntary get-together, with standing agenda items — here's an exercise team we've got a few folks working on to see how we could use AI to improve business processes. Another topic is allowing folks to showcase what they've done recently with AI. A third could be, here are the latest features coming out of the latest models that might be most applicable — because the pace is just so challenging, it's hard to keep up.

Rob:What I'm getting at is another way leadership can get the word out that this is really new technology we want to embrace, and we want you to help us drive the change we're talking about.

Rob:And lower some barriers — because when we've done surveys in the past around AI fluency, we usually see three slices of the pie. One is folks who are pretty excited and are already using it fairly on a daily basis.

Rob:The second slice is folks who are familiar with it, have dabbled, but are unsure how to use it, unsure of the guardrails, so they haven't jumped in full force. The third slice is folks who say, no, I'm not going to do it because it's going to take my job. Those are real feelings we're dealing with out there, across sectors.

Rob:Things like an info-share forum, including employees in driving the change, and continued upskilling and training on the latest models — even though we've talked about the pace — I think those are some techniques that, from a broader change management perspective, I've found pretty helpful, and I think others will too.

Jack:Rob, I'm going to wrap up here, but I want to thank you so much for sharing your perspective. As I mentioned earlier, we feel extremely lucky to have you on our team now as our VP of Aviation.

Jack:And to everybody listening, Rob shared a lot of great advice and I couldn't agree with him more — make sure you support your people as they're going through dealing with this extremely quick change, and understand that they're facing it.

Jack:I can't overstate the importance of having one-on-one conversations, as someone who runs a company. This isn't about edicts coming from the top about using AI. It's about meeting people where they are, understanding their concerns, helping them see the opportunity available to us now, and helping them develop their path forward — that's one of the most important things we talked about.

Jack:So thanks, everybody, for listening. Hope you always choose to listen to Progress Over Perfection, and we'll see you next time.

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