



## The AI Impact: A Revolution Worth Your Attention?

Michael Cinquino (00:00)

Welcome everyone to episode three of Ascendle Unscripted. Today we're going to be talking about the AI Impact, A Revolution Worth Your Attention? That's a question mark at the end of that.

Our speakers today are Ben Friedberg, Senior Software Architect at Ascendle, and Jason Ling, Director of Product Strategy. If you're not familiar with Ascendle, Ascendle is your strategic partner for accelerating software revenue. They address issues from leadership vision to delivery of software into customers' hands and cover everything from product strategy and design to architecture and development. Welcome, Ben. Welcome, Jason. Ben, if you could just let the audience know a little bit about you.

And then we'll take it from there.

Ben Friedberg (00:41)

Sure thing. Thanks, Michael. So, like he said, my name is Ben Friedberg. I'm a Senior Software Architect at Ascendle. I've been working in the technology sector for about 20 years now. And I really like and care about the intersection between people and technology and how solutions and value just bubble out of that.

Michael Cinquino (01:00)

Ben, thanks for that. Jason, I've had you on the show before, but for those that don't know you, could you give us a little bit of you?

Jason Ling (01:06)

Sure, absolutely. So, I'm Jason Ling, the Director of Product Strategy here at Ascendle, very similar to Ben. I've been in the technology space for 20 years. My passion lies in the asking the annoying question of, why do you want to do that when it comes to product and tech? Like, why? Which I think is kind of a good thing why we're talking about this subject.

Michael Cinquino (01:29)

So speaking of why, a big part of this episode is why AI, it feels like. The first question I have around that is that everyone seems to be jumping on the AI bandwagon. It's everywhere. I know everybody knows that. The question that I have is, what should companies really be asking themselves before deciding on whether or not to invest in AI? And Jason, since you are there starting with why, let's start with your take on that.

Jason Ling (01:53)

I mean, the first question that all organizations should really ask themselves when it comes to their AI strategy is, what are we trying to do? Like, what value are we trying to bring to our customers? What value are we trying to bring to our organization? Why is it AI? Fundamentally, it's the, what are you trying to do and why are you trying to do it?

I don't think that's being asked across the board to be candid. Like, I just don't.

Michael Cinquino (02:20)

Got it. Yeah, Ben, you were nodding a bit as Jason was speaking. I would love to hear what you agreed with and then also some other thoughts you might have.

Ben Friedberg (02:31)

Yeah. So, I mean, so many people have come to this place because they saw a really awesome tech demo or they've used a really awesome tech demo or a really awesome tech demo has done their children's homework. And I think the thing that we need to ask ourselves is like, like Jason said, it's a lot of why, but also what are the problems I'm trying to solve? Right. It's like, and also the other really important piece of this is what can this tool actually do?

So applicability is a massive piece of this because if someone said, here is a whole set of amazing screwdrivers and you have a whole set of multi-size nails that is a completely useless application of your tool set. So that's that thing of like, like Jason said, what am I trying to do and why? And then what is actually available to me in that context.

Michael Cinquino (03:22)

So, it sounds like the first question is, do we? If so, why? And the answer might be, no, we don't. So, before we go on to the next question, I'd love to hear from both of you. Jason, what are some of the questions? Because let me say this first or ask this. Is it true? Do you feel like it's true that AI is another journey in this very long tech journey that we're on?

Of another thing where it's like, we got to have this, we got to have this thing without really considering a use case, without really considering if it's something that we can implement.

Were there other, maybe examples of devices or software that came out in the past, where we need this and the question might've been maybe not or answer might've been maybe not.

Jason Ling (04:07)

I mean, absolutely. I mean, AI and just my opinion...

AI is...20 years ago, we had smartphones. And everyone's like, I need an app. I have to have an app. I need an app. My competitor has an app. I need an app. I need to have an app in the app store. That, that's why. And it's, it's the do you? It's like, do you really need to have it?

And I think that's kind of where it is now with, with AI where it's, it's the new gold rush. I'm out here in San Francisco. I am in the crucible of all of this, all of this, where like every day five companies announce that they're doing an AI powered fill in the blank. And it's just this

massive gold rush. There's nine different LLMs that are flying around. I know there aren't nine, but still just to be a little hyperbolic, but it's all flying around.

Honestly, very similar to what we had with smartphones. The beginning of smartphones, there was like four or five different operating systems that were literally flying around. And five years later, there were two, and everybody needed an app. And then now, honestly, you have people going, I don't want an app. It's like, I don't need it. So, I think that's where we are with AI. Where it's like, I don't want to say it's the new shiny, but it's totally the new gold rush right now, because we're still trying to figure it out. Like, what are real implications?

Ben Friedberg (05:29)

Yeah. You know, Jason, I kind of want to yes and what you're saying. But I also want to point something out. You talked about the gold rush. The reason the gold rush happened was because there was gold in them, Thar Hills, right?

Jason Ling (05:43)

Absolutely.

Ben Friedberg (05:44)

And I think that's the thing, is we need to recognize like we're getting back to this like, yeah, there's this really amazing tool and it's great for changing our processes. It's great for adding brand new products.

But, it's like you're in a lot of competition and it's very easy to misapply. So that's that thing. That's what I've been having most of my conversations with people about is like, well, what can I do with this? And is that the right thing?

Jason Ling (06:00)

Absolutely. And where I'm seeing it right now is if you want to raise \$5 million in seed fund for there's four of you sitting in a WeWork or sitting in your dorm room and down in Stanford or Cal or wherever, throw together a deck that mentions you're going to do something with AI and someone is going to write you a check. That's exactly how it was during the big gold rush of mobile apps. Where like if I had a 20-slide deck and like a demo on my phone, I'm going to get funding.

Which Ben and I will agree that it's a good thing. Because I think what it is, well, it's a good thing and a bad thing. Here's why...it's a good thing because we need as many individuals out there innovating because I firmly believe no one has the right answer yet. There's no, like no killer app that justifies everything in AI. So, but I'm glad that there's so much out there that it is, it's just Wild West.

Everyone's doing it. Everyone's working on AI because the more people who work on it, and this is where I will be the, that of the negative side of it. Which as you can imagine is quite popular opinion now, is the more people who do it, the more people are going to fail. Which

means the real essence of what's going to be the practical applications of it are going to come out.

We're going to get rid of all the noise. It's basically going to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. It's self-selection. It's the, I have a thing. I raised \$12 million to do this. Great. In a year and a half, you won't exist.

Michael Cinquino (07:44)

So, let's say that AI is the right solution for our company. Let's say you've done that initial assessment and it does add up. It does add up. It does make sense why. I'd love to ask both of you what the dangers you've seen are jumping in without a plan and or some of the most common mistakes when diving into AI that you've seen made. And Ben, please feel free to kick this one off.

Ben Friedberg (08:10)

Yeah, sure thing. So, I kind of divide this into process and product, and I feel like Jason can probably handle this. We can split this up pretty easily. So, from a software development perspective, custom companies look at AI as, my gosh, I can lay off half of my development staff and it's going to write my application for me. I literally had a conversation with someone who said, Hey, listen, if I have an offshore development team, can I just give them AI and will they suddenly be 200% more productive? And, the problem is that what we have from a technology perspective is a very powerful tool that amplifies what you are capable of. It does not increase your capability. So, if you are capable of generating a whole bunch of output, a whole bunch of work product.

Michael Cinquino (08:54)

Ben can you say that again because I think it's a really important point. I think it pertains to a real paradigm in how to look at AI. Could you say that one more time about...

Ben Friedberg (09:05)

Yeah. So, AI amplifies what you are already capable of. It does not increase your capability. So, if you have a bunch of architects who have to constantly be reviewing the code that your offshore development team wrote, and because it's full of bugs or it needs to be hardened or whatever you need to do, you're just going to have to work that much harder because they're able to generate more code that's not great.

And so, from a process perspective, it's who you give the tool to. If I gave my toddler an impact drill, he is not going to be able to frame my house very well.

Michael Cinquino (09:47)

Jason, you are seemingly agreeing with the idea that AI enhances what you can already do and doesn't make you magically do new things. Do you agree with that?

Jason Ling (09:57)

I do.

To me, AI in its current models, whether it's generative AI, whether you're doing natural language processing, whatever it is, just AI as a concept. I see it as it is an unpaid intern that you have to be incredibly specific with what you want. And once you do that, you're going to get about 80 % back of what you were hoping to get, but it saved you six to 10 hours of doing.

So, it's a, is not a replacement. It's an enhancement. That's what it is. And the successful companies who are really leaning into AI, which I'm seeing a lot of in the healthcare space, in the finance space, big data spaces, totally, totally makes sense. I have to sift through gobs and gobs and gobs of data or I can throw some machine learning AI at it and get my 80%. Again, enhancing, not replacing. Where the folly is, is in the replacement model. There was earlier this year, I cannot remember the name of the company, the CEO laid off 90 % of their customer service group because they were replacing it with AI. Really curious to see how their company is going to look a year after making that decision.

It'll be an interesting data point. It'll be a very, very, very interesting data point to see that as a replacement model. But then of course you also have like, have companies that are kind of going in one of two directions, which is they're going the LLM route or to kind of like dovetail off of what Ben is saying, they're going off the workflow route. And what the workflow route means, like, what do you want to own? Do you want to own the LLM or do you want to own the workflow?

Marc Andreessen made a comment earlier this week, which I found incredibly amusing and spoke to my heart. If you are investing in the LLM currently, it is a race to the bottom. Because you are going to be spending billions of dollars to do it because it's going to take you months and months and months and a massive amount of resources to build and train an LLM. Then you have all of the hardware that you have to go around with it. And it's like, I want to own the LLM. No, you need to own the workflow.

Because the Ben's case of owning the workflow, that's that tool. That is the correct tool that you can now enhance. You want to create this workflow...this whatever process. Say with a, an insurance company, I'm just going to pull one off the top of my head. Anyone here who's an insurance company startup, I'm giving you a free product tip. You create a workflow that will allow you to more efficiently analyze insurance policies for risk factors. Fantastic.

That could take days and days and days and days with human beings. Or it could take hours with one human being using the correct tool. And by owning that workflow, you could sit there and go like, okay, first I'm going to start with chat GPT as my main LLM. Okay, maybe it's not giving me as good as I want it to. So maybe instead I'm going to use anthropic instead. And you start plugging and playing and you, but, it doesn't matter because the workflow matters.

To Ben's case, to Ben's point, to the engineer, here's the workflow. Like, here's a tool. Is this tool working for you? Nope. Okay, here, try this one. But it's not just like an all or nothing. You know, humans will never be replaced by machines.

Michael Cinquino (13:20)

Well, so to hang on this for a second, the idea that it enhances what you can do and doesn't make you do things you cannot do. And this is an off the cuff question here that you all inspired me to ask. From a future of work perspective in organizations, I would say, okay, so I'll give a pilot example. If I get on a plane, the 737s can fly themselves. I still would rather have Sully behind the controls.

I still would rather have him in case, just in case, and not somebody that's wholly reliant on machine. So, what do you think this means for human productivity in that when we become more reliant on this, our core skills weaken. So, we lose capabilities as human beings. What I'm saying is, somebody who's been an engineer 20 years, they know what they're doing, they can land the plane without the computer, right? Then you give them the computer and they're that much better of a pilot.

But if the person can't land the plane without the computer, what does that look like when that starts to happen? Because right now, we still have a bunch of people in the workforce that can land the plane because they have had to operate before it. Me being one person who existed long before there are any sort of cell phones. I know what it's like to have to look at a map literally in the car and stop at a gas station and ask for directions. Because I didn't have a global positioning system.

So what do you, just very briefly, what do you think the impact is, just from your view. I would just genuinely love to hear, what the impact is for the workforce and work at large when we're looking at this technology?

Ben Friedberg (14:56)

I think it's going to be broad, but I think it's going to be...there's going to be pluses and minuses. Look, you got a consultant to say it depends. But yeah, I mean, right. But I mean, that's the kind of thing. Look at any major technology. We have near instantaneous access to all the world's information. We mostly use it to look at cat videos. There's that thing, right? Like, I think there's going to be benefits and negatives and we can't even predict what those impacts are going to be because culturally, it's a river, right? And it's going to jump the banks and it's going to flow where it wants.

Michael Cinquino (15:33)

Jason, do you have a time?

Jason Ling (15:33)

I yeah, I mean, again, I'll just go back to date myself. It's like, go back when the iPhone first came out. Everyone said, well, we have smartphones in our pockets. We don't need computers anymore. We don't need laptops anymore. We can do everything on our phone. Clearly not, but it was just another tool. There was also this, there's still this debate and I'll, I'll just speak from the product management side of things of, of the, like, well now that we have AI, why do you need Product Managers?

Like why do you need that? And the simple answer to that is, you do because AI won't ask why? And more importantly, AI isn't going to replace product management. AI is also not going to replace engineers. AI however, will replace product managers and engineers who aren't using AI. It's just another tool.

Yeah, and I agree with you. Like we have no idea. Like we have no clue what's going on.

Michael Cinquino (16:31)

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I've been holding onto this one and I'm very excited about it, because what you guys laid out a moment ago is the exact Captain America analogy. That is good becomes great, bad becomes worse. So for a company around the AI serum, if you will, in Captain America, if you put it in the wrong hands, it's going to cause more harm than good. Could you expand on how companies can ensure they're using AI like Steve Rogers and not the Red Skull?

Jason Ling (17:01)

I'll speak from a non-technical manner because Ben here is the expert in this. I'll just speak about it from a more business holistic kind of thing. There has to be oversight. Not just from a product perspective, engineering perspective, but honestly from a philosophical perspective. There are some really deep conversations that are happening here in Silicon Valley. When, when open AI said we're no longer going to be not for profit, we're going to make money now. And this is serious. People are like the ethical ramifications behind this are you now have three entities that in their hand, hold in theory...and might be a little hyperbolic, but still hold the future of technology.

Without any checks and balances? That has to be a conversation. Michael, you're an artist. You're an actor. You're an artist. One of the big things during the SAG contract, you know exactly where I'm going with this, I could replace you with AI. I have your image and I can replace you with AI. The moral dilemmas and ethical questions have to be asked. And that's where it starts. Like forget the whole, should you use AI because it'll increase your revenue by X amount of percent, and da da da. Like, no, I think you need to go way, way, way higher than that. Going like, is this Pandora's box? And I will put all of my money on the table saying, no one has that direct answer yet.

Ben Friedberg (18:54)

Yeah. And to kind of go back to something that when I introduced myself, I said, I'm really interested in the intersection of humans and technology. This is that question, right? If you look at the beginning of Captain America, to go back to your analogy, Michael, they spent a third of the movie talking about how great a person this was. There's no replacement for us being better at our jobs, better at relating to humans, better at product strategy. There's no replacement for that.

There's a replacement for doing the work sometimes, but there's no replacement for the why and the strategy and the thought and the human-ness behind it. Be a better human, be a better professional, and this will amplify you being better at those things.

Michael Cinquino (19:44)

You know, you made me realize that I knew it, but I didn't realize it. That the dude spent basically a third of the original Captain America going, Steve Rogers is a really, really, really, really good human being. And he's just in general, just a really great guy. Who's literally willing to jump on a grenade, literally, for his fellow man. It's funny, I never really, really thought about that.

In a way, Ben, you've made me realize that it's the importance of power. Of making sure that it doesn't get into the wrong hands and doesn't get into hands where it's going to become unchecked and be this runaway train. Now, the question I have is for, you know, going from like a nonprofit to a for-profit and going down this road and to checks and balances sort of thing. One of the arguments for AI is defense. And hey, our adversaries are leaning heavily on this, so we have to keep up. And I'm kind of like, well, we have already seen this other movie called Terminator. So how do you, for leaders out there, what are some filters or questions leaders should ask to ensure they're not flying blind or not falling into the trap of AI and letting it become a runaway train? So, to make sure they're still steering the ship.

Jason Ling (20:37)

AI is not new in defense. It's just replacing a warehouse of analysts in a place that you've never heard of. I mean, again, it's the enhancement, not the replacement. It is total arms race. I mean, it is, it's an absolute arms race. But it's not like a year and a half ago when Sam Altman released Chat GPT that the world governments are like, yeah, maybe we should do this AI thing.

It's been there, since for a very long time. It's again to Ben's point, it's like it's just another tool that makes it better. And the thing is tools are agnostic. The people using the tools, however, aren't.

Michael Cinquino (21:44)

So taking this to, you maybe get granular on a business level? Maybe some of the folks that you work with going away from defense and into a business leader who might be listening to this podcast, what are some of the thoughts they should consider having around AI to make sure that they're not flying blind?

Jason Ling (22:02)

I think it goes back to our, to, kind of like the beginning conversation, which is the whole thing of like, need to ask themselves, like, why are they really doing this? Not just what, what did the numbers look like on a spreadsheet? How much revenue are we going to be saving by doing, by doing this as opposed to four other things? It's the how, how, again, how is this AI strategy going to enhance what we already do? What customer problems is it really trying to solve?



I would argue that AI is really now kind of the big, big, big catalyst of companies, successful companies, now focusing on product-led growth and not marketing-led growth. Product-led growth. You put your user, you put your customer in that center of your wheel.

Michael Cinquino (22:50)

Hmm. Ben, from a technical perspective, that same question. How should leaders be thinking, you know, to avoid the AI hype trap?

Ben Friedberg (22:59)

Two words, validation and verification. So, well, I mean, at the end of the day, you've heard trust but verify, right? The product of artificial intelligence, be it generative AI or LLMs or whatever you have it, is don't trust and verify. Because at the end of the day, this is something that we need to continue to bring humans to bear on the topic. Because there are decisions that are made that are impactful.

And we as, we as owners of technology are responsible for those choices. You used defense as an example, but I'll do seven better. Healthcare, right? Those, those are life and death choices. Financials, there's a massive amount of actual genuine discrimination that's happening in loan decisions and automating that kind of thing and not validating that it's actually supporting what you believe in is a death trap. Because what it's going to do is it's only going to allow you to amplify a very, very bad antisocial decision.

So, this is that thing as technologists continue to implement AI is understand that they need to build in validation steps, that they need to build in the human piece of it. You can't just say, AI, question mark, question mark, profit. You genuinely have to have AI people profit because without a human in the middle of that, you are going to end up in a weird feedback cycle that's going to generate the wrong answer in a very impactful way.

Jason Ling (24:43)

A really good example just on that and it's kind of dark and twisted, but it happened. Do you remember a number of years ago where Microsoft unleashed their AI bot on Twitter? You remember hearing about that story?

24 hours later, it literally was spewing the most disgusting, racist, horrifying things that human being...I think even a Hollywood scriptwriter would have a problem actually writing down. But within 24 hours, it basically absorbed everything around it and then formed an opinion about things.

And I think it was only up for a few days before Microsoft was like, we have done something horrible and yanked the plug. That right there is the absolute best example of unchecked.

Michael Cinquino (25:37)

We're coming to the end of the show. So, before we hop off, is there, I'd love to hear from both of you, one thing or near one thing a company should do after today's session if AI exploration is something they feel they should engage in. Ben?

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So, I would say characterize your problems and then also spend a lot of time understanding what you're capable of. So, take Batman for example. We're going to go nerd analogy full on here. Batman's got all those wonderful toys, right? But he knows what they all do and where to use them. Assess your toolbox and understand what you have available to you and then use that to apply to your problems and make sure you assess those too.

Michael Cinquino (26:16)

Got it. Jason?

Jason Ling (26:19)

Pretty similar. It's the, you need to sit back and go, what are you trying to accomplish? And why are you trying to accomplish it? And what do you currently have? Where are the holes that you're trying to fill? And, and again, it's the right solution for the right problem. It's like, if you're just trying to do it to do it, maybe you should ask someone else for their opinion or their perspective. Should we be doing this? Ask someone who, who, knows nothing about it.

I've always been a huge fan of explain it to me like I'm five years old. If you can do that, right on. If you can't, maybe you need to go back and think again.

Michael Cinquino (26:55)

Ben, Jason, thank you so much. I think we fit almost three movie analogies into this episode of Ascendle Unscripted. So, I am so good with that. It's always great to talk to thought leaders and kick some ideas back and forth and hear what you guys are thinking. Stay tuned. There are many more episodes of Ascendle Unscripted to come. This was episode three. Episode four is on the horizon. Until next time, thanks for joining us on Ascendle Unscripted and we'll see you in the next show.

Jason Ling (27:22)

Thank you, Michael.

Ben Friedberg (27:22)

Thanks, Michael.