

WeGetletters

by Michael W Lucas



Dear Least Helpful Technology Columnist,

AI is everywhere. Software companies are adding it to their products. Should I be concerned about my career?

—Worried

Dear Worried,

Proper consideration of your question demands carving away all evasions, mistruths, and outright deceptions. Marketing calls any kind of an algorithm AI. Ask them, and Unix is an AI. The Microsoft Excel SUM function? The peak in AI reliability. Every AI puts people out of work — after all, once upon an aeon *calculator* was a job title and changing a spreadsheet required man-hours of labor. But I'm going to assume that you mean "generative AI," partially because if your job could be done by the SUM function you wouldn't know about this column, but also because it will grant me the opportunity to threaten multimillion-dollar companies.

You have already faced the threat posed by generative AI. While you will never defeat it, that threat guarantees your future employment.

Once upon a time there was this person who vexed me so badly, I had to write a book just to complain about them. (Not why I wrote the book, nor why I griped about them therein.) My fierce vituperation was so all-encompassing, they not only changed their name but their gender so they could attempt to rebuild something from the ruins of their reputation. (Totally not why they changed their name. Nor their gender.) Now I'm gonna tell you about working with Delta. (Not that we ever actually worked together. They're just an example person. Libel laws prevent me from explicitly naming Gabriel, though he will hopefully recognize himself. That new emotion you've never experienced before, Gabriel? It's called *shame*.)

You probably have a preferred public discussion platform for technical matters, something like Reddit, the Fediverse, or the penal board web forum. Delta's that person who when they see someone ask a question, they search Google and post the first link it vomits up even though it clearly says "sponsored." When the Detroit-Farawayistan optical fiber goes

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bad, Delta offers to re-terminate the RJ45s. When someone says, "Have you tried giving the customer what they want?" or "it made too much heat so I unplugged it," that's Delta.

The Deltas of this fallen world give us the valuable opportunity to learn to route around damage.

Generative AI is, by definition, a less competent Delta.

These "generative artificial intelligences" scour the Internet collecting text strings and noting which characters often appear in which order. The programmers heard the phrase "the wisdom of crowds" and thought it wasn't satire. When you enter a string into the system, they produce a string that looks like something that would appear after your string. In other words, if you enter something that looks like a StackExchange question, they provide an answer that looks like something you would get from StackExchange. The average answer on any public technology forum is a poison to the spirit that makes my Perl look glamorous. Not Hollywood glamour. More like Eldritch Faery Queen Glamour that winds up with you chained to your keyboard condemned to write for the entertainment of the Unseelie Court until you become the greatest author on Earth, which would give you lots of practice, but as you no longer receive books from Earth you can't perform the comparison that would conclude your deal. Still, don't do that. The Faery Queen carries one heck of a grudge, especially if you smuggled lockpicks in with you.

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Yes, you can find good information on the Internet. But it's never in the first search engine result. It's probably not in your first query. Beating useful information out of the Internet is a skill developed through years of negative reinforcement, and one that these generative engines lack. The Internet contains tiny slivers of wisdom entombed amidst vast mounds of festering mediocrity, seasoned with inanity. Generative AI uses several buildings jammed with GPUs, several megawatts of power, and enough clean water to irrigate a small nation to emulate a fresh college grad who really hopes potential employers don't notice his 2.0001 "pity pass" GPA through their challenging Bachelor of Arts in General Studies, or that he's been banned from every library within bicycling distance for Extreme Bigotry. What's not to like, other than authors such as myself joining in one of the innumerable copyright violation lawsuits being assembled against these AI firms?

So no, you don't need to fear generative AI.

You must improve your skill at working around damage.

How did you cope with your Delta? Perhaps you offered a glowing performance review so they could be shunted harmlessly into Human Resources. Or you could have persuaded them to accept the valuable assignment of hexhead screw auditor. Maybe you sent them into the Hall of Backup Tapes with a ball of string so they could find their way back but wanted them to be safe on that most perilous of journeys, and so you tested the string for flammability and discovered to your "dismay" that it went up like flash paper forever marooning them amongst the reels of paper tape. I won't judge, unless the string burned left a trail of ash. You had a problem, you dealt with it in the least illegal manner possible.

Someone in your organization will catch AI Fever and look to convert your company's worthless payroll into precious payments to AI firms. The simplest way to avoid this is to remember that you already use AI. Somewhere you have a spreadsheet, right? Make sure it adds the numbers for you and boom — AI! It's not a lie. After all, marketing said it was AI and they wouldn't lie. The proper invocation of grep and awk can provide more intelligence than any of these firms.

If people insist on using generative AI, grab one of the freely available models and train it on your company's document store. You have decades of badly written emails, proposals, and white papers that can easily compete with the delusional ramblings available on Stack-Exchange. That will let you illustrate that no matter how appalling the average employee is, generative AI is worse.

Suppose the worst happens. A decree comes down from management to deploy generative AI. Solve two problems simultaneously, and have Delta deploy it.

Have a question for Michael?
Send it to letters@freebsdjournal.org



MICHAEL W LUCAS is the author of *Absolute FreeBSD*, *SSH Mastery*, and the brand-new *Run Your Own Mail Server*. His collection of these columns, *Dear Abyss*, is coming to <https://mwl.io/ks> at any moment.

Books that will help you. Or not.

“While we appreciate Mr Lucas’ unique contributions to the Journal, we do feel his specific talents are not being fully utilized. Please buy his books, his hours, autographed photos, whatever, so that he is otherwise engaged.”

— John Baldwin
FreeBSD Journal Editorial Board Chair

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