ABSORPTION

A Personal AI and the Work You Can Stop Carrying



JOHN RECTOR

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PRINT EDITION

Contents

HANDING OVER THE WORK

01 What Jo Heard 1

02 The Work Between the Steps 3

03 The Room Across the Street 5

04 Four O’Clock at the Printer 7

WHEN THE PLAN MEETS THE WORLD

05 The Visitor Who Left 8

06 The Tray Before Opening 10

07 What the Tray Told Us 11

MAKING IT LAST

08 What Counts as Done 12

09 The Person Who Needs the Answer 14

10 A Backup With Its Own Way Through 15

11 What the Next Assistant Needs 17

12 Choose One Thing to Stop Carrying 19

Reading notes 20

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CHAPTER 01

What Jo Heard

The quartet was playing the quiet movement when Jo noticed she could hear the viola. She had been in the courtyard since three, moving chairs out of a strip of sun. Her phone was zipped into a bag under the desk. At that hour on a concert day, she was usually the person someone came to find. The sound engineer might need a loading address. The hall across the street might need an answer about the rain. Tonight the people who needed answers already had them.

There was still plenty of work in the courtyard. Someone had checked the weather, found an indoor room, confirmed the musicians could move, and given the crew a single address. The hall manager knew when the hold would expire and when she could offer the room to someone else. Jo had made the choice about where to play. The assistant had kept the facts current and carried that choice to the people who needed it. When the first violin came in, Jo could listen.

I call this absorption. A necessary part of life continues to work while its routine demands recede from your attention. Automation can take over a step. An assistant can draft a message in a second and still leave you responsible for remembering when it has to go, finding the address, and checking whether anybody received it. Absorption reaches the part you used to keep in mind between steps. Someone or something is now carrying that work, with a way to reach you when your judgment matters.

There is a difference between a quiet bag under the desk and a phone that has been switched off while the sound engineer is still waiting. The test is out in the courtyard. Did the crew go to the right place? Did the hall manager get her answer in time? Silence is welcome when those things are true. It can feel identical when they are false. That is why the work of verification belongs inside the delegation.

The gallery in this book is fictional. Its people have familiar problems. They make promises with incomplete information. They have too little time to check every ordinary thing, and some decisions matter precisely because a particular person makes them. The gallery is small enough that we can follow a decision all the way to the person who lives with it.

The evening still belonged to Jo in a way that mattered. If a musician had asked whether they should dedicate the performance to a friend who had died, that would have been a different kind of question. An assistant could find the family's contact information or help with a few words. The people giving the performance would need to decide whether to make the dedication and what to say. The care with which they consider it is part of what they are offering.

You can see the difference without drawing a permanent line around whole categories of work. The assistant can help arrange a visit, remind you what you promised to bring, and see that the guest has a way home. The visit still needs you. The point of the arrangement is that you can be there with more of your attention. The useful question is which part of a relationship improves when you are less occupied by its administration.

CHAPTER 02

The Work Between the Steps

A few weeks before the concert, Jo spread a set of index cards across the gallery desk. Each card held one of the things she had been thinking about that morning. One said chairs. The next said sound. On a third she had written “Who has the key?” The cards looked like a list of chores until she tried to put them away. She could file the receipt for the chairs. She still had to remember that the truck would come while the person with the key was across town.

The work worth handing off often shows up in that interval. An invoice is entered, then sits waiting for a delivery record. A friend says Tuesday might work, and somebody has to keep Tuesday in mind until it becomes a plan or goes back into the week. A calendar holds the appointment but leaves the owner to notice that it starts ten minutes after another one across town. A record can be perfectly accurate and still leave a person carrying the next move.

To find that work, look for what you check repeatedly on ordinary days. Jo checked the same thread because the only sign the crew had an address was a reply that could come at any time. She asked the assistant to keep a record of who had confirmed and when they needed to know. If the crew was quiet, it could follow up through the agreed channel. If the driver's reply named a different address, it could show both messages and find out which one was current. The routine could now proceed during the hours Jo was hanging pictures.

The assistant needed a source for each fact, an action it could take, and a way to see whether the action landed. A draft was easy. A confirmed address required the right person to receive and acknowledge it. A missing reply called for judgment about what to do next. A short delay might be normal on Wednesday. The same delay could matter on Friday when the truck is about to leave.

Every now and then the assistant would send Jo a sentence she needed. The rest of the work stayed available in the record. That was a better arrangement than copying her on each exchange. She could find the evidence when she wanted it, and on a normal day the next move had an owner.

A few days into the experiment, the engineer told Jo that replies had grown more frequent. The assistant was watching all day. The engineer was working on a job site and usually answered gallery messages once, just before leaving. A request for confirmation at ten and a second at noon gave him extra work while making Jo's afternoon feel easier. The cost had crossed the street.

Jo asked the assistant to learn when the engineer could reasonably reply and arrange one check near that time, with an earlier call only if the answer was needed sooner. After that, the assistant could spend its day waiting for the reply without making either person wait with it. The relevant comparison was the whole arrangement before and after, including the people who received the messages.

CHAPTER 03

The Room Across the Street

The weather started looking unsettled on Wednesday. The assistant found a hall across the street that could seat the audience. The manager offered to hold it until noon Friday. She knew the gallery was considering it as a rain backup. Jo had authorized a tentative hold on those terms. The assistant took it, recorded the expiration, and checked the load-in and the entrance.

On Friday morning another group asked for the hall. The manager would honor the hold, but she needed an answer at noon. The engineer had a truck to dispatch. The weather was still ambiguous. The same room that had been a useful possibility on Wednesday now sat between three people making plans.

A personal AI should be able to tell what its words give other people reason to do. “The hall is our backup until noon” gives the engineer two possible addresses. “See you at the hall” gives the engineer a place to send the truck. The difference is visible outside the app. A sent message can move equipment, reserve a shift, or cause another person to turn down a job. Changing the calendar entry later may leave all of those consequences in place.

Jo had given the assistant a rule for moving indoors if the courtyard couldn't be kept dry and the quartet could move. In this case, the question of rain was still open. The assistant checked that the step-free entrance was usable and found out how long the crew could wait. Then it asked Jo whether to confirm the hall or let the hold go and accept the risk of calling off the courtyard concert. It asked while both choices were still available.

She chose the courtyard. The assistant released the room, told the crew where to go, and checked that the driver had the address. Its judgment showed in the work around Jo's choice. It knew which facts to settle, which alternatives were real, and when silence would start making the decision for everybody.

You can hand over a commitment in advance if you can describe the conditions under which you want it made. A clear instruction should tell the assistant what counts as evidence, what can be promised, and where an exception belongs. In the gallery's case, the first real test of that kind of instruction arrived when Jo's phone was turned off.

There is a difference between being confident about the facts and having authority to act on them. The assistant could know with certainty that a substitute hall was empty and still need permission to book it. It could also have permission to book a particular hall and be unsure whether the step-free door was working. In the first case it needs a decision. In the second it needs evidence. A generic request for approval would make Jo do two jobs the assistant can keep distinct.

Some decisions leave room for a small move while the rest is unsettled. The assistant can confirm that the hall will honor the hold, ask the crew when they need to leave, and give the manager a time for the answer. Those actions preserve a real choice. A hold that expires before anybody can reply looks like an option on a screen. It has already ceased to be an option for the people arranging the afternoon.

CHAPTER 04

Four O’Clock at the Printer

The week before the exhibition opened, the artist had approved two program covers. One used a photograph whose credit still needed confirmation. The other carried the exhibition title alone. The printer could deliver either version for Saturday morning if he got the file by four on Friday. After four he had another job on the press.

Jo would be at a school play. Before she left, she told the assistant what to do if it couldn’t reach her at 3:55. If the credit was still unconfirmed, it could send the approved title-only cover under the existing order and check the pickup time. If the printer proposed a change to the order, the gallery’s deputy director had agreed to take the call.

At 3:55 the credit was still missing. The printer confirmed the stock and pickup were as agreed. The assistant had tried the agreed urgent channel. It released the file, and at 3:57 the printer confirmed it was on the press. When Jo got to the lobby and turned her phone on, she saw the decision, the reason it applied, and the result the printer had confirmed.

Imagine the printer had run out of the agreed stock. The assistant could gather the details and call the director. It might ask whether the printer could hold the slot for a few more minutes on the existing terms. Any answer would have to account for the next morning’s pickup. An extension that pushes delivery past the opening buys a different outcome.

If the director was also unreachable, the assistant could say the gallery had no release for the substitute and tell the setup crew to prepare for opening without programs if the slot went. It could report an expired slot as an expired slot. A statement that the gallery had chosen to cancel would give a different account of what happened.

An unanswered phone is a fact about contact. The authority came from what Jo said before the play. She chose which trade to make if the clock ran out. The assistant still had to check that the actual decision matched it. This is where a fallback earns its place. It keeps other people from waiting for a decision that already has an answer, and gives them an honest account when the answer belongs to someone who cannot be reached.

CHAPTER 05

The Visitor Who Left

On opening morning the programs were on the desk. A card pointed to the exhibition guide, which held a map and the artist's recorded introduction. Jo had asked the assistant to publish the link after it could open the guide on a phone without signing in and play the recording. The assistant did both. Early visitors used the guide.

Around eleven a volunteer watched a woman scan the card and get a blank page. She tried her own phone and saw the same thing. The woman had come for the introduction, but she had a bus to catch. She left while the volunteer looked for a paper map. The guide's host later confirmed an outage. The assistant repeated its opening check and saw the failure too.

The morning test was worth doing. It ruled out an ordinary problem with the link before people arrived. Its result was also a fact about a particular time. The assistant needed to retain that fact alongside the outage and the volunteer's account. A clean record lets Jo see that the assistant followed the instruction and still left visitors dependent on a service that could go down.

The assistant had permission to update the opening page and coordinate with the desk. It removed the link from the page, put up a note pointing to the desk, and sent the approved map and transcript for the volunteer to print. The volunteer turned the card around. The assistant stopped a scheduled reminder that would have directed more people to the link. It told Jo what had failed and what the desk was preparing.

When the host said service was back, the assistant tested the signed-out link and the audio. The volunteer scanned the physical card and confirmed it worked where visitors would use it. They put the card back up and left the copies out. Now the next visitor could get the guide.

The woman on the bus still belonged in the report. Jo could send the restored guide to people who had asked for event updates and put it on the exhibition page. Nobody knew whether the woman would see either. A personal AI should keep track of who can use the repaired service, who may still need help, and who has agreed to do something about it. The first question can often be answered with a check. The second takes evidence from people. The third needs a person with authority to make the next promise.

Suppose a visitor with a printed map walked into the wrong room because a door had been moved since the last exhibition. More copies would make the mistake easier to repeat. The repair would begin with the approved map and with the signs people meet in the building. If the maps were current and the handoff failed, the question would move to the desk. A review of an incident should trace the failure to a decision you could change. It is easy to attach more procedure to the last visible step.

It is also worth noticing who bears each part of the recovery. Jo can ask the assistant to prepare a visitor update and keep track of whether it went out. Jo decides what the gallery offers people who missed something they came for. A personal visit, an apology from the artist, or an offer to open the gallery on another day would each involve someone whose time or words are theirs to commit.

CHAPTER 06

The Tray Before Opening

On Monday Jo set an empty tray on the desk. It had held the maps printed during the outage. The volunteer pointed out that she had tried the link in the opening email as well as the card. The assistant checked both routes. They led to the same host. The card and the email were separate ways to find the guide, and the same outage could take them both away.

The assistant could record that dependency in the notes and trace future backup links as part of its existing work. It could also see why having current copies on the desk before opening might help. That would give a visitor access to the map and the introduction in print while the host was down. It would cost paper and a few minutes of somebody’s time. The transcript would still lack the artist’s voice.

Requiring the tray changes a standing instruction. It adds a responsibility for the volunteer, a check for the assistant, and a possible call to Jo if the copies aren’t there. Those consequences make it a decision for the gallery. The assistant can bring the exact proposed wording and show what happens on an ordinary morning, during another outage, and when the printer jams. The proposal is easier to judge when everybody can see what it asks of them.

A single incident can be enough to bring a decision forward. The next opening was going to use the same host and the same pre-opening check. Jo could make a change before the roster went out. If all the assistant had were three complaints that a page felt slow, with no indication of where the delay came from, the next useful step might be to investigate. Repetition is evidence only after you know what is repeating.

Jo approved a trial for two openings using the gallery printer and the supplies on hand. The desk would confirm a small stack of approved maps and transcripts before opening. If the stack was missing, Jo would decide how to proceed. The assistant recorded the start, the end, and what the gallery wanted to learn. When the trial ended, the original instruction would govern until Jo approved a replacement. That detail gave the review something real to decide.

CHAPTER 07

What the Tray Told Us

At the first opening a visitor took a map straight into the exhibition. At the second, a man told the volunteer he had left his phone at home. She handed him a map and a transcript. He sat on the bench by the entrance and read the introduction. The digital guide was working at both openings. The tray had a use on an ordinary morning.

The assistant came back with a small set of observations. Current copies were ready both times. Staff could describe two people using them. Both volunteers printed a fresh stack, though the approved files were identical and usable copies remained from the first opening. The second volunteer thought a fresh batch was part of getting ready. The instruction said to have copies out. She had made her own reasonable inference about how they were supposed to get there.

A count of the remaining copies could help the desk replenish the tray. The volunteer's account answered a different question. It showed somebody getting the introduction without a phone. The assistant could make that claim with confidence. It had no basis for estimating how many visitors depended on the copies or how well the desk would handle a long outage.

Jo could keep the trial instruction if the ordinary work of preparing copies was easy to sustain and the wording led volunteers to do what she wanted. She could drop it if another way of getting the guide without a phone already worked, or if the gallery judged the benefit too small for the work it required. Here the observations supported a narrower change. Check that the current copies match the approved file. Replenish them when supplies run low. Replace them when the exhibition changes. Keep the opening test of the digital guide and let Jo decide what to do if the desk cannot confirm current copies.

The assistant proposed a rehearsal for the part the trial had missed. Before an opening, a colleague would report that the link had failed. Jo could see how quickly the volunteer pointed to the copies and whether the colleague could use them. The rehearsal would test that handoff under quiet conditions. A crowded desk or a prolonged outage would still teach the gallery something it did not yet know.

Jo approved the revision and the rehearsal. The assistant recorded the decision with the observations that led to it. At the next opening the volunteer unfolded the top map, checked it against the approved version, and set it back on the tray. The gallery got the benefit it had observed and spared itself a batch of paper it did not need.

CHAPTER 08

What Counts as Done

Before a rehearsal, ask what the person on the other side should be able to do. A volunteer can report that she put the tray out. A visitor can report that she found the right room and could read the introduction. Both statements are useful. One tells you that a step happened. The other gives evidence that the service reached a person.

Jo learns this again when the gallery lends a framed print to another venue. The carrier’s tracking page says delivered. The assistant checks the name on the receipt and finds the address is correct. The venue opens in an hour. The person who hangs the work has seen nothing. The assistant calls the receiving desk and learns the crate is in a shared mailroom behind a locked door. The carrier completed its part of the trip. The loan still depends on someone getting the crate upstairs.

When you give an instruction, write the outcome at the point where you would stop worrying about it. The crew has the address and has acknowledged it. The printer has accepted the file and confirmed pickup. The borrowing venue has the crate in the hands of the person who will open it. Ask which record or person can establish that result. An assistant may have to report a partial result if the evidence stops halfway.

Verification costs attention too. The gallery needs enough evidence to judge the arrangement and catch drift. It can usually get that from the people already doing the work. A volunteer's note about a concrete visitor experience can tell you more than a survey sent to everybody who entered. For routine confirmations, an existing receipt or acknowledgment may suffice. If the consequence is serious or the source has failed before, a second check can earn the time it takes.

The assistant should be able to say where its evidence ends. "The venue signed for the crate" is a complete and useful claim. "The print is ready to hang" requires another fact. When the system distinguishes those two, the owner can hear about the case that needs attention without having to reopen every successful one.

A new delegation can begin with a short period of direct checks. Jo might look at every delivery confirmation for the first few loans, then have the assistant bring only a missing acknowledgment or a mismatch. A later spot check should follow a delivery through to the person receiving it. An orderly list of messages mostly tells you that the messaging is orderly.

It helps to set these checks before the trial begins. If you start by asking whether the new arrangement feels better, the easiest result to see will be the work that disappeared from your own desk. Look for what happened to the obligation itself and what happened to the people who now carry it. Choose a few observations you can afford to collect, including one from somebody close to the outcome.

CHAPTER 09

The Person Who Needs the Answer

On another Friday, three systems send Jo a warning in the same minute. The calendar says a visiting artist is due. The inbox says the artist's train is delayed. The volunteer roster asks for someone to meet her. Each system has noticed part of the same change. If each passes it straight to Jo, she inherits the job of seeing how the pieces fit.

The assistant can combine them. It checks the new arrival time, asks the volunteer whether she can stay, and finds the gallery's latest time for setting up the microphone. Most of the problem may fit within its existing authority. The artist can arrive late and still speak. If the delay threatens to shorten the talk, the assistant has a decision to bring to the person who can change the program.

An interruption should arrive early enough to matter and carry enough of the situation for someone to answer. "The train is late" leaves Jo to reconstruct the evening. "The artist can be here at seven fifteen. We can start with questions and keep the talk, or push the whole program back. The volunteer can stay. I need a choice by six to update the people coming" gives her a decision she can make.

The person to contact depends on the choice. A volunteer can confirm a tray. The printer can confirm paper stock. The artist can approve a credit. Jo can decide how to change the program. Asking Jo to answer for all four would save the assistant the work of finding the right person and give it back to her.

Quiet matters here for a second reason. A person learns from the interruptions she gets. If an urgent channel carries ordinary delays, she starts leaving her phone in the bag. If it carries decisions for which she still has time to act, she has reason to pick it up. A useful assistant can keep an ordinary record available for inspection and use the urgent channel for the work that depends on someone seeing it.

CHAPTER 10

A Backup With Its Own Way Through

Jo’s rehearsal turns up a mundane surprise. The tray is stocked, but a visitor approaching from the side entrance can walk past it without seeing it. The volunteer knows where it is because she put it there. The colleague playing a visitor asks at the desk, and she points behind him. Jo moves the tray near the place both routes join.

The gallery now has two things to check. One is whether the backup relies on the same thing as the original. The paper survives a host outage. The other is whether a person can reach it when the original fails. A tray behind the visitor is still physically present. It will do little good until someone points to it or moves it into view.

This applies whenever an assistant names a fallback. An alternate inbox reached through the same locked account shares the problem. A backup contact who travels with the first one may be on the same flight. A copy of a work order that a technician can open on a phone may be unavailable in the room where the work happens. Look at the circumstance that defeats the first path, then follow the second path all the way from the person who needs it.

A fallback also preserves only what it actually provides. The printed introduction gives visitors the words. The recording carries pauses, tone, and the artist's voice. Jo might decide those matter enough to prepare another way to hear the recording. She would need to choose whether the extra equipment and work are worth it. A personal AI can make the choice visible by naming what each option delivers.

The rehearsal helps Jo spend effort in the right place. The gallery could have ordered a larger batch of maps. Moving the existing tray solved the problem the colleague actually encountered. That is one reason to try a fallback before you depend on it. The test can show that a small change in placement does more than a large change in supply.

Some failures are unusual enough that the quiet weeks between them tell you very little. The gallery might be able to rehearse its backup in five minutes. A shipping assistant could check a failed-delivery procedure on a dummy order. If a realistic test would consume a whole afternoon, the owner can decide how much uncertainty to carry and what would justify a fuller exercise. The assistant's recommendation should show the difference between a service that passed a rehearsal and one that held up in use.

An independent fallback is also a useful test of the assistant itself. If only the AI can find the current map or identify the approved printer, then an account outage sends the gallery back to its old search. The volunteer needs a file she can open and a place to look without waiting for a conversation. The easier that path is to use, the less supervision Jo has to keep in reserve.

CHAPTER 11

What the Next Assistant Needs

Halfway through the season a volunteer leaves, and the next person asks why the gallery has a paper tray when there is a code by the door. The assistant can answer because the history is available. There was an outage. A visitor left. Two openings showed that the paper was used while the guide worked. The gallery kept the copies and changed how they were replenished. Jo approved the wording.

The live instruction needs to be short enough to use at opening. The reason needs to be close enough to recover when someone wants to change it. If the two become a long pile of exceptions, the next assistant may follow the oldest paragraph or the loudest one. Keep one current instruction and a dated record of what it replaced. When a trial expires, show that it has expired. A note about what once worked is valuable evidence. The authority to do it today belongs in a different field.

This also makes it possible to move the work. If the gallery changes assistants, it should be able to give the new one the current instruction, the approved files, the place where confirmations appear, and the person to ask when the copies are missing. The old messages can explain how the rule arrived. The new assistant should be able to start by checking what applies now.

A standing instruction can outlive the conditions that made it sensible. If the gallery changes rooms, the map needs to change. If another staffed desk already provides the same material, the tray may be redundant. If the artist's recording becomes the central work in a new show, a transcript may preserve too little of the experience. The assistant can bring those changes to Jo with the reason the old rule was adopted and the evidence that the reason has weakened.

The owner should also be able to take the job back. If Jo pauses the assistant's work, the gallery still needs the approved files, the next opening time, and the name of the volunteer. A plain handoff can tell her which messages went out and which still need a reply. This is part of what makes it possible to stop thinking about a process on ordinary days. You can recover it when the day stops being ordinary.

When you take a delegation back, the assistant should check which commitments are already in motion. An invitation may still be awaiting an answer. A printer may still be holding a slot. Pausing future work should come with a clear account of the outstanding items and who has them now. That gives Jo a chance to contact people before a routine she relied on simply goes quiet.

Retirement can be gradual. If a new visitor desk replaces the tray, try following the visitor's route once before putting the old sign away. Save the reason for retiring it with the original decision. If somebody later finds the empty tray in a cupboard, the gallery can see which service took its place and why. A record like that lets a future person reason about what to restore.

CHAPTER 12

Choose One Thing to Stop Carrying

Start with an obligation that comes back often enough to recognize. Perhaps you keep reopening the calendar to see whether a meeting has an address. Perhaps you remember which supplier owes a reply because nobody else does. Perhaps you watch a shared inbox at the end of each day to see whether anyone answered a customer. Choose something with a visible finish and consequences you understand.

Write down what finished looks like, who can confirm it, and what the assistant can do to get there. Tell it where the information lives. Give it the boundary at which it should ask for judgment and the last useful time to ask. Decide what it should do if you cannot be reached. That may be a named fallback, a person who can decide, or a truthful notice to the people waiting.

Run it for a defined stretch. Ask for a record of what reached the person who needed it, what missed, what changed for the people doing the work, and which decisions came back to you. A trial can save time at your desk and create repeated work for somebody else. Ask that person what the new routine costs. There may be a simpler instruction that gives both of you more room.

At the review, look for a decision you can make with the evidence you have. Keep an arrangement that delivers the intended result at a cost people can sustain. Change the part that produces avoidable work or leaves a recurring gap. Retire a rule whose job is already covered or whose cost the people involved can no longer justify. Keep the evidence that would make you reconsider. You may find it when the next room, volunteer, or host changes.

There are things Jo still does in person. When the artist arrives early and asks how the evening feels, Jo walks with her into the empty room. They stand in front of the first picture. Jo has the time to say what she sees. Later, when visitors arrive, somebody reaches for a map at the entrance. Jo is inside with the artist and hears the door open.

Reading notes

The opening essays in this series supplied the gallery's first decisions. This edition reworks them into one story and follows the arrangement through verification, rehearsal, and handoff.

What Will AI Absorb?

Some Things Should Never Be Absorbed

The Right to Interrupt

The Cost of Keeping the Door Open

The Proof That Went to Press

The Visitor Who Already Left

What the Next Opening Needs

What the Tray Told Us