The Most Level Playing Field My Community Has Ever Had

The gatekeepers are nervous about AI. That's the opening.

By Sreenath Pillai — Founder & CEO, Vertikals

There's a lot of fear about AI right now, and most of the loudest fear comes from people who have something to lose. I want to make the opposite case — to the people nobody's making it to. If you've spent your life on the wrong side of a gate, that gate is the most open it's been in a long time. Move now.

The ladder always had a cover charge

Getting up and in used to cost things a lot of people simply don't have. The right degree. The right internships. A network you were born into or bought your way into. Capital to survive the lean years while you built. And underneath all of it, *permission* — a yes from people who often didn't look like you and weren't inclined to give it.

AI is quietly knocking rungs off that gate:

- **Capital.** You can build and launch a real product without a funded team behind you.
- **Credentials.** You can do work that used to demand a pedigree — and show the work instead of the diploma.
- **Access to expertise.** The tutor, the mentor, the translator, the specialist you could never afford is now available at any hour. For a first-gen kid with no professional network, that isn't a convenience. That's a different life.
- **Gatekeepers.** When your work speaks for itself, you depend less on who you know to vouch for you.

Be honest about what it doesn't fix

I won't sell you a fairy tale — that's how people get hurt. AI does not erase structural inequality. Access to the tools, the time, the bandwidth, the quiet room to learn is not evenly distributed either, and pretending otherwise is just a new flavor of the old lie. The systems still carry bias; some of it is baked into the models themselves.

The field is not flat. It is *flatter than it was* — and "flatter than it was" is a wider opening than the generation before mine was ever handed. Use it clear-eyed, not starry-eyed. Clear-eyed is how you actually win with it.

Why the fear is your opening

Here's the asymmetry nobody says out loud. The people most afraid of AI are the ones with the most to lose and the least reason to change — incumbents, comfortable, slow, guarding a position. Fear makes them freeze.

You don't have a position to guard. Which means your downside is small and your upside is enormous — the exact inverse of theirs. Their hesitation is a moat you can walk straight across while they stand on the far bank arguing about whether the water's safe.

And for once, almost nobody has a twenty-year head start. The tool is new enough that the field is full of beginners. That parity is rare and it is temporary — it closes the moment the comfortable finally start moving. Use it *now*, while it's open.

What to actually do with this

Not a pep talk — a plan:

- **Build proof-of-work.** A portfolio beats a pedigree now. Make things, ship them where people can see them, and let the work be your résumé.
- **Close your skill gaps fast.** Use AI as the tutor you never had access to. Learn out loud and in public.
- **Aim at the slow, scared corners.** The widest openings are in the boring, regulated, legacy industries the incumbents are too nervous to touch. Go where they won't.
- **Stop waiting for permission.** It was never coming on a schedule that served you. Build the evidence that makes you undeniable, and the gate stops mattering.
- **Then reach back.** A ladder only you climb is a fluke. A ladder your community climbs is power. Bring people up behind you — that's how a moment becomes a shift.

The field isn't fair. It's just, for this one window, less unfair than it has ever been — because the people who held the advantage are too frightened to move. Don't wait for permission that was never coming. Move while they hesitate, and bring your people with you.

That's the whole game.

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