

Human in the Loop

— *and Why the Loop Is Where It Is*

Artificial intelligence is quietly entering supplier qualification. The interesting question is not whether a machine is involved — it is where the line sits between what the machine does and what a person decides.

JEROLD HAWKINS · FOUNDER & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER · SUMMIT LINE FEDERAL SOLUTIONS

There is a question every manufacturer and every association eventually asks us, and it is almost never the first one. The first question is what it costs. The second is the one that matters: **what does your system actually do with our information, and who is accountable for what it produces?**

They are right to ask. A readiness score is not a marketing artifact. It is a judgment about whether a company is prepared to hold defense work, and it travels — to a prime, to a program office, into a decision about whether to spend another eighteen months and real money chasing a qualification. Get it wrong in one direction and a capable manufacturer is written off. Get it wrong in the other and a company invests heavily in work it was never going to win.

Artificial intelligence is now part of how assessments like ours get produced. That is not something to be defensive about, and it is not something to be casual about either. What follows is where we drew the line, and the reasoning behind it.

THE LINE IS AN ENGINEERING DECISION FIRST —

We did not keep a human in the loop for the sake of appearances. We kept one there because the alternative does not work.

The Defense Expansion Pathway™ is **a rules-based assessment instrument with a generative-AI narrative layer**. Scoring across the eight domains is deterministic. Verdict thresholds are deterministic. Routing is deterministic. The same answers produce the same score today, next quarter, and three years from now when someone pulls the file to ask why a supplier was ranked where it was.

That reproducibility is not a nice-to-have. It is the entire basis of comparison. A score only means something if it means the same thing across companies and across time — if this manufacturer's 68 is commensurate with that manufacturer's 71, and if a re-score after remediation actually measures improvement rather than a different mood in the machine. Hand the judgment to a generative model and you lose that on the first run. The number stops being a measurement and becomes an opinion with a decimal point.

So the machine is kept out of the scoring for a reason that has nothing to do with sentiment. It would break the instrument. The ethics happen to follow for free, which is usually how it goes when the engineering is right.

WHAT THE MACHINE DOES

- Drafts the written narrative that explains a result once the result exists
- Surfaces patterns across a body of evidence faster than a person can read it
- Produces a consistent first pass, so the advisor starts at review rather than at a blank page

WHAT A NAMED PERSON DOES

- Decides. Every finding is reviewed and signed by a named advisor
- Interprets what a shop floor actually showed, against what the file claims
- Carries the consequence — and holds the right to pause any finding they cannot defend

WHAT A MODEL CANNOT HOLD —

A model cannot sign anything. It cannot be called into a room and asked why it reached a conclusion. It cannot be held to a representation made to the government, and it cannot lose a reputation.

Signature is a human function because liability is. Every finding we produce is attributed to a named advisor and written to a permanent audit record showing who decided what, and when. If a finding is wrong, there is a name on it. That is deliberate, and it is not a burden we are looking to automate away.

AI drafts. A named human decides. No automated output reaches a client unreviewed.

Here is the part that surprised me. Introducing AI did not dilute human accountability in this practice. It forced us to formalize it. When a machine produces a first draft, the advisor's job narrows to the part that was always the skilled part — reading the evidence, testing the claim, deciding — and because someone has to own that decision explicitly, we had to write down who. The audit trail exists because the AI does. There is more accountability in the file now than there was before, not less.

THE RULES WE HOLD OURSELVES TO

- **The right to pause.** Any advisor may stop a finding they cannot defend, without penalty. Nobody has to carry a judgment they do not believe.
- **Separation of duty.** No advisor implements remediation in a domain they personally assessed. The person who finds the gap does not get paid to fill it.
- **Disclosure.** Clients are told plainly, in writing, where artificial intelligence is used in producing their assessment.

THE LEVERAGE POINTS OUTWARD —

The displacement conversation usually assumes the gains land inside the firm using the tool. In this work they do not.

A comprehensive readiness assessment is weeks of skilled labor — evidence review, site observation, sequencing a remediation path that a plant manager can actually execute. Drafting is a real portion of that time and none of the judgment. Compress the drafting and you do not remove a person from the process. You let the same person carry more manufacturers through it.

That matters because of what is on the other end. Michigan has thousands of capable manufacturers who could be doing defense and aerospace work and do not know where they stand. Every one that gets qualified adds a line of business, and lines of business in this state are measured in people — machinists, quality engineers, program managers, buyers. The output of the tool is more qualified suppliers. Qualified suppliers hire.

Anyone who has walked a modern Michigan plant already knows the shape of this argument. The cobot took the repetitive weld. The welder still owns the part, still reads the joint, still decides whether it passes — and the shop quotes work it could

not have quoted before. The machine took the repeatable motion. It did not take the trade.

The machine took the typing. It did not take the judgment, and it could not have.

An honest caveat, because this argument is easy to make from a distance: Summit Line is a two-person firm. We have not displaced anyone, which is not the same as having proved anything about firms that could. What we can say is that we built the division of labor deliberately, wrote it down before it was convenient, and would rather be measured against it as we grow than improvise it later.

WHAT WE REFUSE TO HOLD —

The most useful thing in this document may be a list of what we do not collect: Controlled Unclassified Information, technical drawings and specifications, and individual personnel records.

We assess whether a manufacturer can protect sensitive government information **without ever taking custody of it**. That is a design choice, not an oversight. It keeps the assessment useful and it keeps exposure low — theirs and ours. An advisory firm sitting on a pile of its clients' controlled technical data is a target, and being a target is not a service anyone asked us to provide.

What we do collect is narrow: self-reported readiness answers across the eight domains, basic firmographics, the status of supporting documentation recorded only as received, partial, or not provided, and observations made on site during a deeper assessment.

WHOSE DATA IT IS —

Results belong to the manufacturer. By default a completed assessment is visible to the manufacturer and to Summit Line, and to no one else. A manufacturer may authorize additional visibility — to an association, or to a prime looking for qualified suppliers — and that switch is theirs to flip and theirs to flip back. Consent is taken afresh for any new use rather than inherited from an earlier sign-up, and a manufacturer may withdraw and have its data deleted. De-identified aggregate findings may inform published industrial-base research in which no individual company is identifiable.

On protection: client records are separated at the database level so no company can view another's information, every account operates under least privilege, a signed confidentiality agreement precedes any collection, client data is not used to train models and is not retained by outside vendors, handling is reviewed against DFARS safeguarding requirements, and privacy terms are confirmed with counsel before any new tool is adopted.

WHERE THE INSTRUMENT STOPS —

A tool that will not tell you what it cannot do is not a tool to trust with a qualification decision. The Defense Expansion Pathway™ evaluates whether exposure is identified, governed, and evidenced. It does not make legal determinations. Export jurisdiction, commodity classification, and questions of that kind belong to qualified counsel, and we refer them there. Where a flag fires, we say so and route it. We do not answer it ourselves.

WE RAN IT ON OURSELVES FIRST — NIST SP 800-171

Before asking a single manufacturer to meet the standard, we ran the self-assessment against our own systems.

-4 → 80 → 92

We started at negative four. We posted an 80. We currently stand at 92 in SPRS, and the work is not finished. We publish the climb rather than imply we started at the top — it is the same standard we assess against, and the same evidence we ask others to produce.

HOLD US TO IT —

Summit Line assesses and advises only. We supply no parts, we perform no remediation, and we hold no financial interest in any vendor we might name. That is what makes a verdict worth anything: it cannot be bought, including by us.

If you are putting artificial intelligence anywhere near supplier data, the question worth asking is not whether the tool is impressive. It is where the loop closes — which decisions the machine is allowed to make, which ones a person owns, and whether anyone wrote the answer down before you had to ask.

This is a living document. If something here is missing, imprecise, or wrong, tell us — the argument only works if it survives being checked. **Jerold Hawkins** · jerold.hawkins@summitlinefederal.com · summitlinefederal.com

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SBA-Certified Veteran-Owned Small Business (VOSB) · Auburn Hills, MI

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