

THE EVERYTHING · FIELD GUIDES FOR TRADE BUSINESSES

The AI Excavator Playbook

How to run an earthworks business in the age of AI

— and become the excavator builders cut every site with.

THE COMPLETE SYSTEM · NO FLUFF · FREE TO SHARE

THE EVERYTHING

Read this first

Ten years ago, running a proper excavation business meant someone on the phone, a bookkeeper, and still working out the cut, the spoil and the rock allowance on a scrap of paper in the truck between sites.

Today, a small excavator with the right setup answers every builder's call the moment it lands, quotes the ground straight — the dig, the services, the spoil, the rock and water it might hit, the cut to level — and turns a handful of builders and developers into a pipeline of repeat site cuts, while a bigger outfit across town is still returning voicemails. And he spends zero nights on paperwork.

He's not smarter than you. He's not a better operator. And he's definitely not a computer person — one of the best we've seen was still pricing jobs on a pad on the passenger seat two years ago. He just worked out one thing before everyone else: **the boring half of the business** — the enquiries, the follow-ups, the honest ground-reckoned quotes, the service locates, the tip dockets, the level handover — can now do itself. So he put his energy where the money and the risk are: on site, running a safe dig, and on becoming the excavator a few good builders trust to cut a site and hand it over level.

This is the playbook for how he does it. No “50 prompts to copy”. No tech-bro nonsense. The actual system — how to think about it, what to set up, in what order, and the mistakes that make good excavators give up before it clicks. Read it start to finish and you'll run a tighter, safer, more profitable earthworks business than you do right now, even if you never spend a cent on software.

A STRAIGHT WORD ON WHAT STAYS YOURS

Nothing in here decides how a site gets cut, reads the ground, or replaces the competent operator who runs the machine — and it never replaces your look at the site, your competence, or the standards you work to. It carries the admin. What's under the surface — rock, the water table, the soil, the services — is a call for a proper site look and, where there is one, the soil report, never a number a computer invents; how a dig is kept safe, how the services are located before the bucket goes in, and how the neighbours and the ground next door are protected, is your judgement and your crew's; and the safety of the job stays with you. All of it stays yours, start to finish.

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01

CHAPTER ONE

The New Playing Field

A builder ringing round for an excavation quote can't see your machines or watch your crew work. They judge you on what they can reach — and that's where most excavators quietly lose the best builders of the year.

Your customer is often a builder or developer with a build clock ticking, or an owner-builder cutting a block — someone who needs the ground cut, level and right so their slab, footings or civil works can start. And here's what makes missing the call so costly: they ring because their program can't start until the ground's cut. The job goes to whoever gets three things right first:

- 1 Did you answer — and give a straight steer?** The first excavator to pick up and talk through the job wins the site look. Let it ring out while you're running a machine and they ring the next mob — and may move their whole build pipeline with them.
- 2 Will you turn up when you say, and is it safe and right?** A builder needs the site cut on program, the services located before the bucket goes in, and the ground left level and compacted for the next trade. Reliable and safe beats cheap and reckless every time — because a botched dig or a struck service is their problem too.
- 3 Are you straight about the ground?** The rock, the water, the spoil, the compaction — named up front. A cheap number that assumes easy ground and springs a rock variation mid-dig loses the builder for good.

Notice what none of those are about? Being the cheapest number on the phone. All three are about being reachable, reliable and straight — the exact stuff that's easy to drop at the end of a day on site. And the other side already runs on AI. The question isn't whether AI comes into earthworks — it's whether it's working for you or against you.

The good news? This is the first time the technology favours the small operator. The big firms rolling up the trade run committees, rollouts and training programs. You can decide on a Tuesday and be answering first by Friday. The playing field just flipped: the small, reliable excavator can now look and perform like the national outfit — without the overheads, and without a builder ever getting a voicemail when they need a site cut to start.

“But I'm not a computer person”

Neither are the trades doing this best. One of the fastest adopters we've seen is a trade-business owner with 26 years on the tools who only picked up a computer three years ago. His words: **“Don't worry about spelling. Don't worry about grammar.”** If you can send a text or leave a voice message, you can run everything in this playbook. Being able to say what you want is the new requirement — and excavators, who talk a builder through the ground, the access and the spoil every day, are already good at that.

**\$200–
800**
+ per month

What job-management software commonly charges in AUD — and it still makes you do the typing and the chasing. One owner was paying a grand a month for tools his team barely used. Everything in this playbook either replaces that spend or makes it earn its keep.

The firms three times your size are slow because they're big. That's your opening. This playbook is about walking through it.

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CHAPTER TWO

Think AI-First

Before we touch a single tool, we need to fix how you think about this — because the biggest mistake isn't buying the wrong software. It's bolting AI onto your old way of working and wondering why nothing changed.

Every process in your business was built on one assumption: a human has to do each step. Someone answers the builder's call. Someone works out the cut, the spoil and the rock allowance. Someone tracks the service locates, the tip dockets, the level sign-off. Your whole day is shaped around that assumption — and that assumption just died.

Don't automate your old process. Re-draw it — with the AI touching everything first, and you supervising. Three mental shifts:

Shift one — delegate outcomes, not steps

Stop thinking “which buttons do I click”. You now talk to your business the way you'd talk to a good leading hand: say the outcome, let it work out the steps. One owner reorders consumables by sending one message from the supplier counter — “grabbing gear for the Nguyen site cut” — and the order, the expense and the books sort themselves.

Shift two — AI first, you second

The AI does the first pass of everything, and you approve, tweak or overrule. The ground-reckoned quote is drafted before you sit down. One customer described it: **“Nine times out of ten it's perfect. Just go — yep, send.”** Your job shrinks to ten seconds of judgment, not forty minutes of typing.

Shift three — corrections are investments

With normal software, you fix the same mistake forever. With AI, you fix it once. Tell it a standard quote always names the dig, the service locate, the spoil disposal, the rock and water allowances and the cut-to-level — and that you never give a firm figure on ground you haven't seen — and it answers, **“I’ll remember that from now on.”** Every correction compounds. Six months in, it quotes like you, writes like you and knows your rules — because you taught it, once.

The re-imagining exercise

Walk your business and ask one question about every interaction: “What would this look like if the AI touched it first?”

INTERACTION	THE OLD WAY	AI-FIRST
Builder rings while you're running a machine	Voicemail. They ring the next excavator.	Answered and qualified, site look booked — a straight ground-reckoned figure drafted by morning.
The bucket finds rock that wasn't obvious	Awkward mid-dig call, builder feels ambushed.	Flagged the moment it's hit, the builder told what the rock-breaking costs before the work goes on.
Tip or fuel price update lands	Buried under 200 emails. Old spoil rates on your next quote.	Extracted, applied to your rates — “tip fees up, disposal line adjusted.”
A job's finished	Level and locate records on the phone, dockets in the ute.	Handover pack assembled against the job, next site cut chased from the builder.

Every chapter from here is just this exercise applied to one part of your business.

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CHAPTER THREE

Never Miss a Job Again

Let's start with the leak that costs you the most and hurts the least — because you never see the bill.

The highest-value work in excavation doesn't arrive as an emergency. It arrives as a call from a builder or developer whose build program can't start until the ground's cut — and it's perishable in a way that's brutal: whoever answers first wins the site look, and whoever's slow doesn't get a second chance, because they ring the next excavator on the list. The call buzzes in the cab at 4pm while you're running a machine mid-dig. It rings out. That builder rings the next mob, books the site look with them, and now they're the go-to. Gone — and not just this job, maybe every site that builder cuts next.

First in

wins the site

A builder rings because their program can't start until the ground's cut. A missed call isn't a deferred sale — it's the job, and often the whole build pipeline behind that builder, handed to whoever picked up. And slow response drags your search ranking down, so it costs you the next one too.

The builder ready to book doesn't leave a voicemail. They ring the next mob. Voicemail is where the best relationships of the year go to die. The AI-first fix is bigger — because an enquiry is really two problems.

Problem one — the call you couldn't take

An AI receptionist answers in your business's name, 24/7, sounds calm and normal on the phone, and captures every detail — where the site is, what's being cut, the access for the machines, whether there's likely rock or a soil report, how much spoil — while you're on a machine or asleep. And it does the thing that wins the job: it answers first, every time, so you're the excavator who books the site look while the others are still on voicemail.

Problem two — the relationship nobody built

An excavation business isn't won on one job — it's won on becoming a few good builders' and developers' go-to. Most excavators quote a job and never think past it. The one who answers first every time, turns up when he says, runs a safe dig and hands the site over level is the one that builder calls for the next site cut, and the one after, and puts onto the developer they work for.

- ✓ Every enquiry answered in your business's name — including 6pm, including Sunday, including the week every builder in town wants a site cut at once.
- ✓ A searchable record of every call — “what did we reckon on the ground and the spoil for the Rossi site?”
- ✓ Follow-ups that keep you in front of the builders and developers who matter — so when their next site comes up, you're the excavator they ring, not a number they've lost.
- ✓ Job details from the enquiry — site, what's being cut, access, likely rock — flow straight into the job, not re-typed three times.

The phone stops being the thing that costs you the best builders and becomes the thing that books the site look — and keeps you the go-to they cut every site with.

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CHAPTER FOUR

Quote the Ground Straight — Rock and All

Excavation has a quoting shape most trades don't: the number on the phone is never the job. A dig price is a *scope* — the set-out, the dig, the services located, the spoil carted, the rock and water if they're there, and the ground cut level and compacted — and the danger lives in the part of the ground you can't see.

The ground, not a number

and the rock is the tell

A dig job is a scope, not one price: the set-out to level, the dig itself, locating the services before the bucket goes in, carting and tipping the spoil, the rock or water if you hit it, and cutting and compacting the ground right for the slab. The lowballer assumes easy ground and “forgets” the rock allowance, the spoil and the compaction to look cheaper, then springs an expensive variation the moment the bucket finds rock. Reckon with the ground, price it honestly, and you're the excavator a builder trusts with their site.

Here's the honest truth of this trade: **a firm price down the phone, sight-unseen, is the red flag — not the reassurance.** Nobody can price a dig properly without seeing the block, the access and the fall, and reckoning with what's likely under the surface. The honest move is to give a rough steer, then book a site look — read the ground, check the access, reckon with the rock and the water table and, where there is one, the soil report — before you commit a scoped figure.

AI-first quoting makes that easy: the AI *qualifies* the job before a machine rolls. Here's what that looks like in a real earthworks business today.

- ✓ **It asks the right questions first.** From the enquiry, the AI works through what actually sets the price — what's being cut, the access for the machines and trucks, whether there's likely rock or a soil report, how much spoil, and the level the next stage needs — so you book the site look with the right information in hand.
- ✓ **It prices from YOUR structure.** Feed it your past jobs and it learns your rates and your spoil costs — and drafts a straight, itemised figure with the rock and water named as their own allowances, not a flat number that pretends the ground is easy.
- ✓ **It catches what a tired quote drops.** It doesn't forget the service locate, the tip fees, or the fact that a block on a slope or near water almost certainly needs the ground reckoned with before anyone commits a price.

The hidden ground

the allowance you never leave off

Here's the trust-killer of this trade: an operator assumes easy ground, leaves the rock allowance, the spoil and the compaction off the number, wins on price, then either springs a big “extra” the moment the bucket finds rock or water, or cuts the corner. The honest excavator says it plainly up front: this block could hold rock or a high water table, here's how I've allowed for it, and here's exactly what changes if we hit it — a real part of the job a straight quote names and a cheap one hides. Refusing to pretend the hole is easy isn't you being difficult. It's the whole reason a good builder should pick you.

The site look on a tricky block isn't friction — it's the sell

For any block with a slope, near water, or where the ground's unknown, the move is to give a rough steer, book the look and reckon with the ground before you commit the number. Framed right, that's not a delay — it tells a builder you won't under-quote their site and then come back cap in hand when the bucket finds rock. “I'll give you a ballpark now, and a firm scoped price once I've seen the site and read the ground, so the number I give you is one you can build your own program on” turns your honesty into the reason they picked you.

Then the bit everyone skips — staying in front of the builder. One message after a job: “Site's cut and level, locate and level records are with you — what's the next one?” That single habit wins more repeat site cuts than dropping your price ever will. AI-first, that follow-up isn't a thing you remember. It's a thing that just happens.

THE POINT ISN'T THE SOFTWARE

It's the standard: quote the whole scope straight, reckon with the ground honestly, locate the services before the bucket goes in, and hand the site over cut, level and right. An excavator with a notepad who hits that standard beats one with an app who doesn't. The AI just makes the standard effortless.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Get Paid Without the Awkward Chase

You've won the job. Now you've got to get the money — and in excavation that's rarely one invoice. There's a deposit to mobilise, the milestones as the dig moves, and the spoil and tip costs you carry along the way — and a builder who hates a surprise on the bill even more than most.

Deposit + milestones

no surprise variation

The single most reassuring thing you can do for a builder is be straight and steady on the money: a deposit to mobilise, progress claims as the job hits its marks — services located, bulk dig done, spoil carted, ground cut and compacted — and any variation had as a *conversation before the work*, not sprung after. A surprise “extra” on a dig bill — especially a rock one — is the exact thing that turns a repeat builder into a one-off. Steady, predictable billing isn't just fair — it's your strongest reason to be kept.

The chasing is a system problem, not a people problem. Fix the system and you never have the awkward conversation again.

- 1 **Take the deposit to mobilise.** A clear deposit request when the job's booked and the site look's done beats “here are our bank details” — and it commits the builder and covers getting the machines on site.
- 2 **Claim on the milestones.** Progress claims as the job moves — services located, bulk dig done, spoil carted, site cut and compacted — so nobody's carrying the whole job on trust, and the builder always knows where the number's at.
- 3 **Have the variation conversation early.** If the bucket finds rock or water that wasn't priceable from the surface, the builder hears what it costs and why *before* the work goes on. A conversation, not an ambush at invoice time.
- 4 **Escalate the tone only if you have to.** Most pay on nudge one or two. You stay the good guy the whole way.

Money is money: this is the one place you keep the AI on a short leash at the start. It drafts, you approve — until you've watched it be right for a month.

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CHAPTER SIX

The Inbox That Runs Itself

Your inbox is where quiet money leaks out and stress leaks in.

Soil reports, a builder confirming a start date, a service-locate result coming back, tip weighbridge dockets, a plant-hire invoice, a developer asking if you can fit their next site in — all mixed in with junk, all landing while you're on a machine with the dust up. One trade owner started with a backlog of 24,000 emails: “I'd read one email, it'd get lost. I wouldn't even be able to find it again.”

AI-first, the inbox becomes something that's already handled by the time you look:

- ✓ **Triaged.** The three emails that matter today float to the top, flagged with why — “this one's the service locate for the Rossi site, you're clear to dig.”
- ✓ **Drafted.** Routine replies — “yes, we cart the spoil”, “we can start Thursday once the services are located” — written and waiting. You glance, tweak, send.
- ✓ **Answered on demand.** “What did we reckon the Rossi cut at, and did the soil report come back?” — and it finds it instantly.

THE PART NOBODY EXPECTS — IT GUARDS YOUR MONEY

Because the AI reads everything, it catches things. One business: “It's already saved me thousands in mis-ordered products — it said, hold on, based on your past jobs you probably want this one.” Another had a supplier accidentally invoice at a 50% discrepancy — flagged automatically before it was paid.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Your Digital Office Manager

Every excavation business has an office manager. Usually it's you, doing it badly at 10pm.

One week

no office admin

One trade business's admin person went on leave for a week. The owner: "We haven't had her in the office for a week, and it's helped us do her job." It ended up being one of their strongest weeks — not survive the week, one of their best — because the follow-ups and the chasing didn't stop when she did.

The morning brief

Before you turn the key: today's site looks and start dates in order, which sites are waiting on a service locate before you can dig, which soil report you're waiting on, which builder should get a follow-up today, who to chase for a progress claim, and the one thing — a locate, a level, a tip docket — that'll bite you if you forget it. Two minutes with a coffee — and your leading hand knows too.

Job files that build themselves

Every photo, quote, soil report and docket attaches itself to the right job — so when the builder rings in three months for their next site, the whole history's there. The enquiry, the ground you reckoned with, the service-locate result, the tip weighbridge dockets, the level and compaction records — all in one place.

The paperwork without the dread

The service-locate record, the tip dockets, the level and compaction sign-off, the safe-dig notes — prompted, captured against the job, and kept where you can find it. Never invented for you, never a substitute for locating the services or your own competence — just stopped from going missing when it matters most.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Look Twice as Big as You Are

Here's a secret the big firms rely on you not knowing: most of “looking professional” — and “looking like an excavator a builder can trust with a site” — is presentation, and presentation is now nearly free.

A small excavator and a fifty-person outfit can send the identical, spotless, branded scoped quote — and show the same fast response, the same service-locate records, the same level handover records, and the same real reviews from builders. In a trade where a builder is trusting you to cut the ground right so their whole build stands on it, the small operator who looks reliable, safe and organised gets trusted like the big one — and kept.

The referral flywheel — on purpose, not by accident

- 1 Retain** — answer first, turn up when you say, run a safe dig and hand the site over level, so you're the excavator that builder calls for the next site cut without shopping around.
- 2 Review** — ask for the Google review the moment a builder's happiest, the day you hand over a cut, level site with the locate and level records, automatically, with the link. Reviews and fast response lift your ranking — and a builder choosing an excavator leans on both.
- 3 Refer** — excavation is the first machine on nearly every build, so you work alongside builders, developers and every following trade. The builder who found you reliable and straight puts you onto their developer, their next site, their network. It's one of the strongest referral webs in the trades.
- 4 Resell** — this is the whole game. One good builder or developer isn't a job, it's a pipeline of site cuts: the next site, and the one after. It's all in the job file. A follow-up at the right time turns one relationship into years of work.

START TODAY — EVEN WITH ZERO TECH

Ask every builder for a review the day you hand over a cut, level site, and always ask the one question that opens the ladder — “what have you got coming up next, and who else on your jobs needs a site cut?” A builder who just watched you run a safe dig and hand it over level is the most receptive you'll ever find them.

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CHAPTER NINE

The 30-Day Switch

Everything above works. The reason most excavators don't get it working is they try to do it all at once, get overwhelmed mid-job, and go back to the old way. So: one thing at a time, without stopping work.

- 1 Week 1 — Stop the biggest leak: the missed call.** Every enquiry answered and qualified, a straight steer given, the site look booked. This starts paying for the whole exercise immediately.
- 2 Week 2 — Fix quoting.** The AI qualifies the job and drafts a straight, itemised scope with the rock and water named as their own allowances from your structure; you correct it — and every correction is a lesson it keeps. Site look before any firm number on unknown ground, follow-up after every job.
- 3 Week 3 — Fix getting paid.** The deposit to mobilise, progress claims on the milestones, variations flagged early, automatic reminders — with you approving everything money-related until it's earned the leash.
- 4 Week 4 — Hand over the back office.** Inbox triaged and drafted, morning brief running, job files and locate/level records building themselves, reviews asked automatically, the next site chased from the builder network.

Why all four? Because one process never feels like much. Three is where the “holy hell” moment happens — because that's when the pieces start talking to each other. The call becomes the site look. The look becomes the scoped job. The job becomes the level handover, the review and the next site cut from the same builder.

The trust dial — how to hand over without losing sleep

You don't hand a new operator the keys to the excavator on day one. Same here:

- 1 **Weeks 1–2: it asks about everything.** Every email draft, every quote — “here's what I'd send, OK?” You approve, correct, teach.
- 2 **Weeks 3–4: it asks about the important stuff.** Routine replies just go; money, new builders, and anything with weight — scopes, rock allowances, start dates — still get your nod.
- 3 **Month two onward: it asks about exceptions.** Now it runs, and you get the morning brief and the flags. You're still the boss — you've just stopped being the bottleneck.

The mistakes that make good excavators quit before it clicks

- ✓ **Doing all four weeks at once.** Don't. One a week. Each banks a win before you add the next.
- ✓ **Bolting AI onto the old process.** If you're still typing every job into the same old software and asking AI to “help”, you've missed the point. Re-draw the process (Chapter 2).
- ✓ **Reaching for fake urgency.** The flaky operators use “sign today”. You've got a real lever — booked capacity: “I can get a machine on your site the week you need it cut” — so use that honest one, and let it do the pushing.
- ✓ **Competing on price by pretending the ground's easy.** The moment you win by assuming no rock and quietly leaving the spoil or the compaction off the number, you're the one who springs the variation and loses the builder. A builder pays for an excavator who cuts the ground right, safely and on time — being trusted with the site wins the repeat, not the lowest number.



BEFORE YOU PUT THIS DOWN

The 2-Minute Leak Audit

Most excavators aren't short of skill — they're losing builders. Your money isn't in winning strangers on a cheap number; it's in becoming a few good builders' and developers' go-to, because one relationship is a pipeline of site cuts and referrals across every trade on their builds. That's the tell: answer first, be reliable, run a safe dig, hand over a level site. Be honest — tick the ones that are true right now.

- ✓ I'm often slow to answer calls — and I don't know how many builders the delay has cost me.
- ✓ A builder's call has rung out and I never knew, and they went to the next excavator.
- ✓ I've given a firm price down the phone on ground I hadn't seen — and worn the loss when we hit rock.
- ✓ I've won a job on a cheap number that assumed easy ground and left the spoil or the compaction off.
- ✓ I've sprung a builder with a mid-dig “extra” they never saw coming.
- ✓ I don't stay in front of good builders and developers between jobs, so they lose my number.
- ✓ My service-locate results, tip dockets and level records live in the ute, not in one place.
- ✓ I've missed a start date and left a builder's program waiting without a heads-up.
- ✓ My inbox stresses me out, and important stuff — a soil report, a service locate — gets buried.
- ✓ If a builder rang about a past site cut, it'd take me a while to find the scope and the records.

0–2

Tight ship. A few tweaks and you're the go-to for more builders.

3–6

You're losing real builders in the boring half — and it's all fixable. Start with Week 1.

7+

Mate, you're doing the hard, skilled work and handing the builder to whoever answered first. Good news: it's exactly the stuff that's now easiest to fix.

The biggest lever isn't a cheaper number — it's answering first, running a safe dig, and turning each builder into a pipeline of site cuts and referrals across their builds. Your biggest tick is your biggest opportunity. Start there.

Want it set up for you?

Everything in this playbook, you can build yourself — and you should, if you've got the time and the patience. Plenty do. If you'd rather it was just done — the AI that answers your phone the moment a builder rings, qualifies the job and books the site look, drafts a straight, itemised scope with the rock and water named honestly as their own allowances, takes the deposit and claims on the milestones and flags a variation before it bites, keeps the service-locate and level records, and chases the next site cut from the builders and developers who already know you turn up when you say and hand the site over level — all in one, working in your earthworks business this week — that's what we build. It's called

- ✓ 14-day free trial. Cancel anytime. No fixed contracts, no catch.
- ✓ Nothing important — a quote, an invoice, a builder's message — ever goes out without you seeing it first.
- ✓ It lives in Microsoft Teams and the tools you already use.

See it working on your own jobs at the-everything-app.com — no credit card to look.

Honest note: this won't fix a broken business, and it won't decide how a site gets cut, read the ground, or replace the competent operator who runs the machine — that's still you, your look at the site, and your competence. What it fixes is the office job you've been doing for free after dark.