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Charting New Waters



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AI Won't Replace Equipment Finance – But It Will Reshape Who Leads It

AI won't save you. It's incumbent upon company leaders to fix hidden friction, redesign work and turn chaos into consistent, scalable performance.

By RJ Grimshaw

Most equipment finance companies think they're running one business. On paper, they are.

In reality, there's another version operating underneath it. The one powered by spreadsheets, inbox searches, side conversations and a handful of people who just know how to push deals through. That's the system that actually moves transactions.



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Leaders feel that tension daily.

You're asked to do more with less. Teams are lean. Cross training keeps getting postponed. Margins tighten. Credit tightens. Tariffs, portfolio noise, and compliance pressure all stack up.

At the same time, talent is harder to hire and harder to retain. Then you log into LinkedIn and see you're already "behind on AI" and expected to produce a strategy immediately.

Here's what matters...

Over the next five years, the companies that pull ahead won't be the ones that experimented with the most tools. They will be the ones that used this moment to redesign how work actually happens.

Not a tech rollout. A rebuild.

The real question is not which platform to buy. It's this:

If we built this company from scratch today, knowing what we know now, what would we refuse to design the same way?

Everything else follows from that.

The Divide Ahead

AI isn't going to eliminate equipment finance, but it will expose weak design. If the company was undisciplined, it will expose it.

Some companies will layer new volume onto old processes and call it growth. The workload will rise, friction will increase, and burnout will look like a staffing issue when it's really structural.

Others will use this pressure to clean up what's been tolerated for years.

Inside every organization are people who know exactly where the inefficiencies live, approvals no one can clearly explain, exceptions everyone makes but nobody documents, steps defended only by habit.

Those people are leverage.

This moment is not about technology but about finally fixing what your team complains about in private. The friction.

The Work You See and the Work You Don't

Watch your team closely. Are they doing the role for which they were hired? Pull out and review the job descriptions. Run them through ChatGPT. It's fascinating.

Then there's the shadow workload created by broken systems:

- Re-keying information
- Chasing status updates
- Digging through email threads to confirm decisions
- Fixing preventable issues

That second job doesn't appear on any job description, but you pay for it in hours, errors and morale.

AI didn't create that inefficiency. Years of "just get it done" did. That's why I love this industry, because it's an industry of "roll up your sleeves and make it happen." However, what this opportunity provides is leverage and urgency to redesign it. You have a small window.

Leadership now requires redefining what productive work looks like. I call this the value exchange. And more than ever, you're able to evaluate the value exchange between the employee and the business, and now it'll correlate more than ever.

If a role looks identical a year from now, same manual steps, same friction something stalled. In a world where tools can draft, compare, flag inconsistencies, and surface patterns in seconds, stagnation isn't neutral.

Better means this:

- Underwriters spend more time structuring risk than formatting memos.
- Docs and funding prevent exceptions instead of chasing them.

- Originators spend more time in conversations than editing emails.
- Customer service spots patterns before issues escalate.

The goal isn't headcount reduction. It's friction reduction.

Where to Start

Most AI discussions begin with features.

They should begin with a workflow.

Ask one question: *What single process, if rebuilt in the next 90 days, would remove the most friction from everything else?*

Not ten processes. One. Once you define that, technology becomes a tool inside a clear design, not the centerpiece.

A Practical 90-Day Reset

If you were to run this deliberately, it would look like this:

1. Build a small, cross-functional team.

Include credit, docs or funding, servicing, sales, and finance. People who actually touch deals.

Give them one mandate: Redesign one workflow as if you were building the company today.

Choose the process that creates the most consistent frustration — credit decisioning, doc-to-funding, renewals, collections. The one your team vents about after work.

2. Define your language.

Before fixing anything, agree on definitions.

- What qualifies as an approval?
- What defines an exception?
- Where does a renewal end and a refi begin?
- What is "small ticket" in your business?

Clarity in language removes ambiguity in execution. Your systems will eventually run on these definitions.

3. Map reality.

Take one normal deal and trace it from start to finish.

- Who touched it?
- What did they need but didn't have?
- Where did it stall?
- Where was information duplicated?

Ignore policy manuals. Focus on what actually happened. You'll see unnecessary steps, duplicated effort, and places where success depends on individual heroics instead of design. That becomes your baseline.

4. Decide what disappears.

Ask:

- What should never require manual repetition again?
- What should never begin from a blank page?
- What should never need to be chased twice?

Turn those into standards:

- We don't build credit memos from scratch.
- We don't book deals without documented checks.
- We don't send key communication without structured drafting support.

At this stage, you're not reacting to AI hype. You're defining how work will function.

That's leadership!

What Changes in the Organization

Five years from now, your org chart may look familiar.

- CEO
- Head of credit
- Head of revenue
- COO
- CFO
- CIO

You may add someone accountable for sustained transformation. The structure won't radically expand but accountability will.

- Credit owns how assisted analysis influences decisions.
- Revenue owns how automation shapes targeting and renewals.
- Operations owns workflow design without relying on month-end heroics.
- HR owns role evolution and capability building.

If job descriptions remain unchanged for years, that signals stagnation, not stability.

Where Technology Belongs

Once workflows are defined and language is standardized, the technology discussion becomes straightforward.

- Where do we need drafting support?
- Where do we need validation?
- Where are we missing patterns in our data?

Tool selection matters less than integration and ownership. Your team will quickly recognize whether you purchased software or redesigned their work.

The Bottom Line

You will continue to be asked to do more with constrained resources.

AI arrived at a moment when leverage is necessary. You can treat it as another demand layered onto your organization or you can use it to dismantle inefficiencies that have been quietly compounding for years.

If a year passes and nothing about your workflows has changed not because of cost, but because of hesitation the opportunity will have been missed. The companies that scale smoothly will be the ones that redesigned their foundations. Others will continue compensating for structural gaps with effort and overtime.

Technology alone won't determine the outcome. Leadership will. And what you choose to rebuild in the next 90 days will signal which path you are on.

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