WORKING PAPER

Intent Illiteracy

The invisible failure that happens before the prompt: why companies cannot make themselves understood by artificial intelligence

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Abstract

Corporate discourse on artificial intelligence assumes the adoption barrier is technical: learn the tool, learn the prompt. This paper proposes that the real barrier sits one step earlier and is older than the technology: most people in companies do not know how to ask. They cannot turn a real need — which they do have, and which does hurt — into a request an intelligence can understand and serve. They never reach prompt engineering, not because they lack the course, but because the failure happens before the first word is typed.

We call this phenomenon Intent Illiteracy: the inability to articulate what one needs before a system that can only serve what is articulated to it. It is the functional illiteracy of the applied-intelligence era — the person can type, the interface responds fluently, and precisely for that reason the failure is invisible: the machine always answers something, and a generic response to an empty request feels like service, not like a symptom.

The paper defines the concept, breaks down its three characteristic failures, explains the mechanism that makes it invisible and self-perpetuating, delimits it from neighboring concepts (AI literacy, the 'new illiteracy' of blind trust, the digital skills gap), and places it as the piece that completes the BRB framework: Intent Illiteracy is the deficit, the Intention Engineering Method (IEM) is the treatment, and Economic Cognitive Infrastructure (TECI) is the environment where that treatment becomes productivity. It is presented as a conceptual proposal with one falsifiable prediction, not as validated empirical finding.

Keywords: intent illiteracy, need articulation, cognitive delegation, AI adoption, small and medium enterprises, AI literacy.

> *The illiteracy of this era is not the inability to read. It is the inability to ask.*

1. The phenomenon: the failure happens before the prompt

Observe what actually happens when an average business owner sits in front of an AI system. It is not that they write a clumsy prompt: it is that they are not clear about what they came to solve. They type 'make me a marketing plan' without being able to say for which product, against which competition, with what budget, or for which decision. The machine — which can only serve what is articulated to it — returns a generic plan, correct for the average and useless for them. The owner concludes one of two things: that AI 'does not work for their business', or worse, they accept the generic plan and execute it.

The industry diagnoses that episode as a technical skill problem and prescribes prompt courses. The diagnosis is one level off. The prompt is the last mile of a journey with three earlier stretches — knowing what you need, knowing what to ask, knowing how to make yourself understood — and the person got stranded on the first one. Teaching instruction syntax to someone who cannot articulate their need is teaching calligraphy to someone with nothing to say.

This pattern has the structure of functional illiteracy. The classic functional illiterate deciphers letters but cannot use reading to operate in the world: they fill out the form without understanding it. Their equivalent in the applied-intelligence era knows how to use the app — types, sends, receives — but cannot use the interaction to decide better: they ask without knowing what they need and accept without knowing how to evaluate. The literacy they lack is not digital or technical. It is intentional.

2. Formal definition

Definition. Intent Illiteracy is the inability to turn a real need into a request that an intelligence — human or artificial — can understand and serve. It comprises three chained failures, each a condition of the next:

Failure	What the person cannot do	How it looks in practice
1. Diagnosis failure	They do not know what they need. They have a discomfort (low sales, operational chaos) but not a formulated problem.	They order from a catalog: 'make me a logo', 'give me ideas', 'a marketing plan'.
2. Formulation failure	They do not know what to ask. Even intuiting the problem, they cannot turn it into a question whose answer changes a decision.	Questions with no decision behind them; conversations that end in 'interesting'... and in nothing.
3. Transfer failure	They cannot make themselves understood. They do not transfer the context that makes their case different from the average case.	Generic answers taken as final; 'AI does not understand my business'.

All three failures occur before prompt quality is even relevant. That is why prompt training does not fix them: it operates downstream of the damage.

3. The mechanism: why it is invisible and self-perpetuating

Classic illiteracy discovers itself: whoever cannot read runs into the text and the failure is immediate and evident. Intent Illiteracy has the opposite property, and that property is what makes it dangerous: it is invisible to the person who suffers it, because the machine always responds.

A generative AI system never returns silence. Faced with the emptiest request it produces a fluent, structured response with a tone of competence. The person who could not ask receives something that looks like service — and by definition lacks the judgment to notice they received the average of the internet instead of an answer to their case. The failure of the transaction is masked by the system's courtesy. Where the classic illiterate crashes against the text, the intent illiterate slides over the answer: no impact, no signal, no learning.

Two consequences follow:

- **Self-perpetuation.** Without a failure signal there is no demand for correction. Nobody seeks literacy in a skill whose absence they do not perceive. The prompt-course market thrives precisely because it diagnoses the problem at the visible layer (the writing) and not at the invisible one (the intention).
- **Inverted selection.** Those who suffer it most notice it least — and are most convinced they 'already use AI'. Nominal adoption (having the tool, using it daily) dissociates from real adoption (deciding better because of it). A company can be an intensive AI user and intent-illiterate at the same time; in fact, that is the most common combination.

This invisibility has a verified mirror in experimental evidence: professionals assisted by AI accepted incorrect solutions when they arrived wrapped in the machine's fluency (Dell'Acqua et al., 2023). If the judgment of trained consultants slides over the plausible answer, the business owner without a method is defenseless.

4. Delimitation: what it is NOT

4.1 It is not the 'new illiteracy' of blind trust

Recent public discourse calls 'the new illiteracy' using AI as an oracle: blindly believing what it says, delegating thought to it. That phenomenon is real, but it is the exit failure — accepting without evaluating. Intent Illiteracy is the entry failure: being unable to articulate the request. They are the two halves of the same incapacity (which is why the IEM treats them together, phases 1-3 and phase 4), but the entry failure is logically prior and remains unnamed. Whoever could not ask has nothing to evaluate the answer against: blind trust is the child of the empty request.

4.2 It is not lack of AI literacy

AI literacy — understanding what a model is, what it can and cannot do, its risks — is knowledge about the tool. Intent Illiteracy is a deficit about oneself: being unable to make explicit what one needs. You can pass any AI literacy exam and remain intent-illiterate; you can ignore how a transformer works and ask with surgical precision. The constructs are orthogonal, and the second — we submit — explains more variance in business outcomes than the first.

4.3 It is not exclusive to AI

Here the concept shows its deepest root: Intent Illiteracy predates artificial intelligence. The business owner who cannot ask AI could not ask their accountant, their marketing agency, or their team either — which is why they bought generic services for decades and blamed the providers. AI did not create the deficit; it unmasked it and made it extremely expensive, because it placed every person in front of an infinitely capable servant whose performance depends entirely on the quality of the request. Artificial intelligence is the first magnifying mirror of human intention: it amplifies exactly what it receives, including nothing.

5. The concept's place in the BRB framework

With this piece, the framework is complete and every element has its own function:

The deficit	The treatment	The infrastructure
Intent Illiteracy	**IEM — Intention Engineering Method**	**ECI / TECI — Economic Cognitive Infrastructure**
Names the problem: the inability to articulate the need before an intelligence.	Corrects it: four teachable phases — intent, context, question, judgment.	Scales it: external systems that capture, process, prescribe and execute.
Diagnosis	**Method**	**Economic theory**

The relationship is clinical: you do not sell a method to someone who does not know they are ill. Intent Illiteracy is the concept that creates awareness of the problem; the IEM is what you do about it; TECI explains why doing it produces growth.

6. Falsifiable prediction

For the concept to be more than rhetoric, it risks a measurable prediction: in companies with identical access to AI tools, an Intent Illiteracy index — built by blind-rating real requests (is there an anchored decision? differential context? an acceptance standard?) — will predict the economic value obtained from AI better than hours of use, better than license spending, and better than prompt courses taken. If the index does not outperform those predictors, the concept is reduced to a label and must be abandoned.

Testable corollary: the intervention that most reduces the index is not teaching instruction-writing but practicing need articulation — stretches 1-3 of the journey. This connects with Prediction 3 of the IEM paper and shares its two-arm experimental design.

7. Epistemic status

- Intent Illiteracy is presented as a conceptual proposal with one falsifiable prediction, not as a validated finding. The term was verified as available (it does not exist as an established concept in the literature or industry discourse) on 2026-07-06.
- The cited evidence (Dell'Acqua et al. 2023 on acceptance of incorrect answers) supports the invisibility mechanism, not the full concept. 1:1 verification of the reference is pending before formal publication.
- The measurement index proposed in section 6 is yet to be built; without it, the prediction is not estimable. It is the same instrument required by Prediction 1 of the IEM — one development serves both.

8. Conclusion

For twenty years the business world talked about the digital divide: who has access to technology and who does not. That divide closed on its own — today the most powerful intelligence in history costs twenty dollars a month and answers in seconds. What was exposed when access became universal is the divide access cannot close: between those who know how to ask and those who do not. Intent Illiteracy names that divide. And naming it is the first act of literacy.

> *Artificial intelligence is the first magnifying mirror of human intention: it amplifies exactly what it receives — including nothing.*

References

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