

CHAPTER 1 · ESSENTIALS · PART I · NAMING THE SCARCITY

1. The New Scarcity

The binding scarcity of modern life is not time and not attention. It is processing capacity.

The chapter in brief

Every era has a binding resource — land, then labour, then time, then attention — and each was named late, because a shortage without a gauge is only a feeling. The attention framing gets this one nearly right and slightly wrong. Attention is the aperture; capacity is the engine behind it. You can guard the aperture perfectly and still end a competent day mentally empty.

Meanwhile the arithmetic moved in one direction only. Demand exploded: more decisions, more inputs, more switches, arriving through more surfaces than any previous generation faced. Supply did not move at all. Working memory is roughly the size it was when Robert Halladay sat down in 1958 and found two items in his inbox.

What to hold on to

- **Margin** — the reserve of thinking capacity left after the day's demands are met.
- **Demand up, supply flat.** The gap is structural, not personal.
- **Attention is the aperture, not the resource.** Guarding it is necessary and insufficient.
- **A shortage without a gauge stays invisible.** Chapter 4 supplies the gauge.

The evidence, honestly

- Working memory is small and has not grown. Miller's 1956 "magical number seven" is the famous version; later work (Cowan) revises the honest figure down to roughly four chunks.
- Information growth and observed switching rates are documented (Hilbert and López; Gloria Mark) rather than asserted.
- The claim that humans make 35,000 decisions a day is **not cited in this book**. It has no traceable source, and the chapter uses it as its first worked example of a statistic surviving on roundness alone.

THE AI THREAD AI arrived promising to give us our minds back, and in one narrow sense delivered. What no one priced is that every piece of machine output requires evaluation — read, judged, verified, chosen among. It reduced the typing and increased the judging.

Your Margin Move — The Demand Census

Count one ordinary hour: decisions made, inputs processed, switches made. Do not aim for accuracy. Aim for a rough count that surprises you. The census solves nothing; its only job is to make the invisible countable.

Printable worksheet: ThoughtMargin.com/downloads/the-demand-census.pdf

Carry forward. If the crisis is universal, why does depletion hit some people so much harder? · From *Thought Margin: Reclaiming the Capacity to Think in the Age of AI* by Rachael-Renée Rychling. A companion, not a substitute — the caveats that make the claims trustworthy live in the book.