

2. The Competence Trap

Routing systems send problems to whoever solves them best. Competence attracts load — and the load is invisible, including to the person carrying it.

The chapter in brief

Organisations, families and friend groups are all routing systems: machines for directing problems toward whoever is most likely to solve them. They optimise ruthlessly for getting the problem solved and not at all for protecting the solver. Being good at things is precisely how the load finds you.

And the load does not show. Much of what the capable person carries is cognitive rather than visible — anticipating what will be needed, identifying options, deciding, monitoring whether the resolution held. Then comes the masquerade: depletion does not announce itself. What goes first is judgment and its cousins, patience and nuance, so the overdrawn person does not feel empty. They feel like someone failing at character, and they respond by trying harder.

What to hold on to

- **The routing effect.** Competence is a magnet. Nobody designed this; it is what unmanaged routing does.
- **The invisibility problem.** Cognitive labour has no external signal, so it is neither credited nor redistributed.
- **The identity layer.** "I am the reliable one" keeps people in the trap even after they see it.
- **The absolution.** Capacity, not character. The evidence was built to be misread.

The evidence, honestly

- The cognitive-labour framework comes from Allison Daminger's interview study of thirty-five couples — anticipate, identify, decide, monitor. It is qualitative work on a particular sample: a framework worth thinking with, not an effect size.
- The routing effect itself is the book's framing, informed by that literature rather than derived from a single result. The text says so.

THE AI THREAD The routing system has found a new problem to send toward its most capable people: checking the machine's work. If you were already the person people ask, you are now also the person who catches the confident error — a new role, unpaid and largely invisible.

Your Margin Move — The Routing Map

List the ten demands that reliably come to you by default. Mark each C (Choice), D (Default) or R (Drift), and name who else could carry it. Fix nothing today. The gap between the load you chose and the load that found you is the size of your competence trap.

Printable worksheet: ThoughtMargin.com/downloads/the-routing-map.pdf

Carry forward. Seeing the trap is not escaping it. Chapter 3 prices what it costs at zero. · 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.