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SOVEREIGN PERSPECTIVES · PURPOSEFUL INTELLIGENCE

Purpose-Built Language Models

Designing for the Domain Rather Than the Benchmark

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Executive Summary

The dominant way to judge an AI model is to ask how it scores on a benchmark. That question has quietly shaped how models are built: to top the leaderboard rather than to do a particular job well. This paper argues for the opposite discipline. A model that matters to an enterprise or a nation should be built for the domain it will serve, not for the benchmark it will be measured on, because the two goals diverge, and the gap between them is exactly where real-world performance is lost.

In Brief

- Models are increasingly built to win benchmarks, but a benchmark is a proxy, and optimizing the proxy is not the same as doing the work.
- A model built for a domain is grounded in that domain's data, language, and judgments, so it performs where it counts rather than where it is scored.
- The evidence that specialization works is now overwhelming, which removes the last excuse for defaulting to a general model for specialized work.
- Purpose-built means owned, because a model can only be grounded in an institution's own knowledge if that institution controls it.
- The right question is not how a model ranks, but how well it serves the purpose it was built for.

A model built to top a benchmark is optimized for the test. A model built for a purpose is optimized for the work. They are not the same model.



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1. The Benchmark Is Not the Job

A benchmark is a useful thing: a shared yardstick that lets the field compare progress. It is also a proxy, a simplified stand-in for the messy reality of real work, and like every proxy it can be optimized directly. When the goal becomes the score, models are tuned to the shape of the test rather than to the substance of the task, and the two come apart. A model can top a leaderboard and still stumble on the specific language, context, and edge cases of a bank's compliance work or a ministry's casework, because those were never what it was optimizing for.

When a measure becomes the target, it stops measuring the thing that mattered. A model built to win the benchmark is built to win the wrong game.

2. What Purpose-Built Means

A purpose-built model starts from the job, not the yardstick. It is grounded in the domain's own data, so it knows the vocabulary, the documents, and the patterns of the work. It is shaped by the domain's judgments, so its outputs match how the institution actually decides. And it is sized and tuned for the tasks it will face, rather than padded with capability for tasks it never will. The result is a model that may not top a general leaderboard and does not need to, because it is measured on the only test that matters: whether it does the institution's work well.

Purpose-built does not mean smaller for its own sake. It means every part of the model is spent on the work the institution actually does.

3. The Evidence Has Caught Up

Two forces now favour the purpose-built model. The first is diminishing returns on scale: capability from raw size follows a flattening curve, so a smaller model tuned to the work matches a far larger general one on that work at a fraction of the cost. The second is agents: an agent runs the model far harder than a person, so the per-call efficiency of a purpose-built model compounds across every step an agent takes, and the gap between a lean owned model and a heavy rented one widens exactly where the workload is growing fastest. Purpose-built is not a compromise on capability; at the frontier of cost and fit it is the capability.

For years the objection to purpose-built models was that only the largest general models were good enough, so specialization meant settling. That objection no longer holds. Models a fraction of the size now match far larger ones, and the field has converged so tightly that the advantage of the very largest model has shrunk to the margin of measurement. The ceiling that once made specialization a compromise has fallen. Building for the domain is no longer the cautious choice; it is the higher-performing one.

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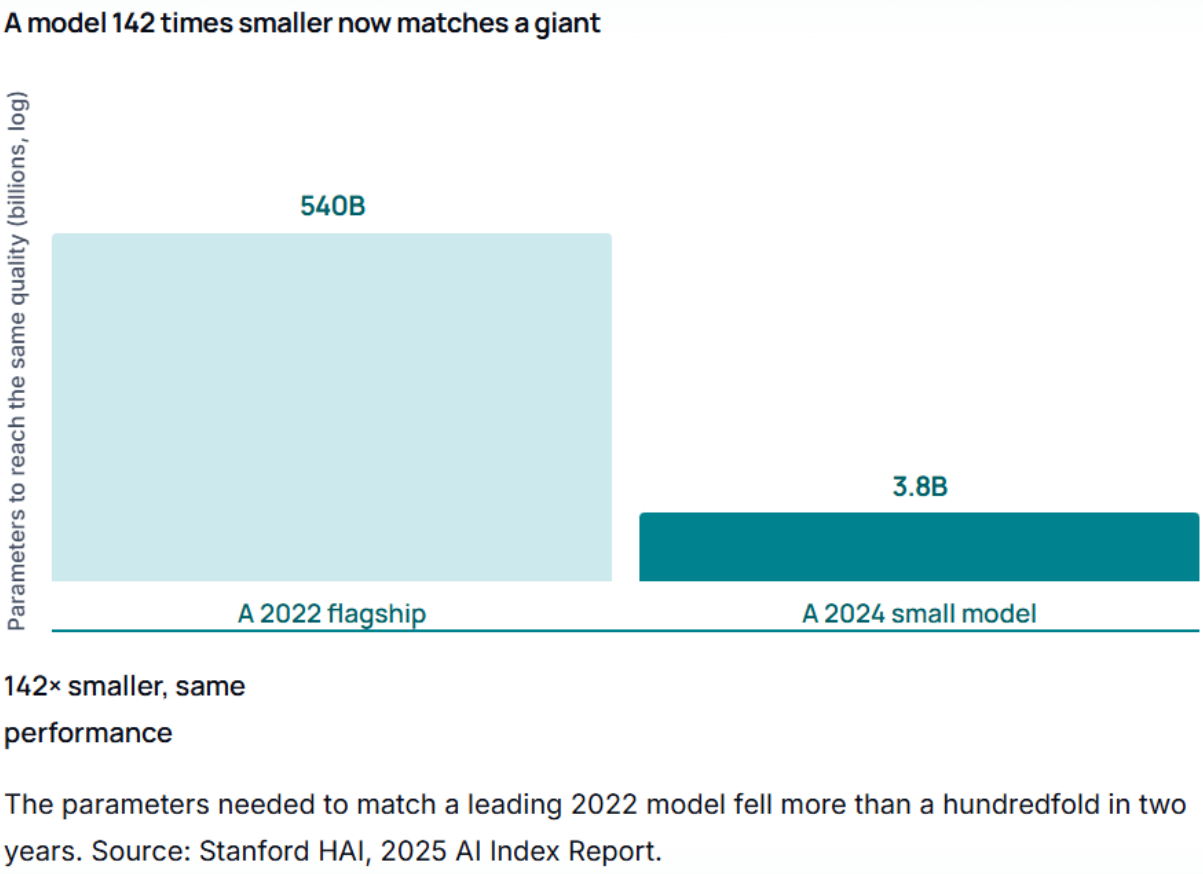

Figure 1. A model 142 times smaller now matches a giant. Source: Stanford HAI, 2025 AI Index Report.

The excuse for defaulting to a general giant, that nothing smaller was good enough, has expired.

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4. Why Purpose-Built Means Owned



A model can only be built for a purpose if it can be grounded in the knowledge that defines that purpose, and that knowledge, an institution's data, documents, decisions, and language, is the institution's own. A rented general model cannot be grounded this way without handing that knowledge to the supplier, and even then it is tuned for the supplier's aims, not the institution's. Purpose-built and owned are therefore the same decision seen from two sides: to build a model for your purpose, you must control it, and to control it, you must own it.

> **You cannot build a model for your purpose on someone else's terms. Purpose-built is a form of ownership.**

Built for the benchmark	Built for the purpose
Optimized for a general test	Optimized for the institution's work
Grounded in generic web data	Grounded in the institution's own knowledge
Tuned to rank	Tuned to decide as the institution decides
Rented, and shaped for the supplier's aims	Owned, and shaped for the owner's

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5. What Leaders Must Do

- **Judge models by the job, not the leaderboard.** Evaluate on the institution's own tasks and data, not on general benchmarks a model may have been tuned to win.
- **Start from the purpose.** Define the work first, then build or select a model for it, rather than adopting the biggest model and hoping it fits.
- **Ground it in your own knowledge.** Build the model on the institution's data, language, and judgments, which requires owning it.
- **Measure what matters.** Track performance on the real work over time, and let the model improve as it learns the domain.

> **The best model for an institution is not the one that wins the public test. It is the one built for its work and grounded in its knowledge.**

6. The Reframe

The habit of judging intelligence by its benchmark score made sense when the field was young and comparison was all anyone could do. It makes less sense now, when the models have converged and the real question is fit. An enterprise does not need the model that ranks highest in general; it needs the one that serves its purpose best, grounded in its own knowledge and shaped to its own work. That model is built on purpose, and it is owned, because a purpose cannot be served by a tool designed for someone else's test.

> **Stop asking how a model ranks. Start asking what it is for, and whether it is yours.**

About This Series

Sovereign Perspectives is a research program on the ownership and governance of intelligence, published by Concierto. Its papers examine the strategic, economic, and institutional questions that artificial intelligence raises for governments and other accountable institutions, and they are written for the leaders making those decisions. The program's aim is to advance the public argument, not to promote a product.

Sources

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