# AI levels the playing field for UK SMBs as adoption drives growth and agility



Small and medium-sized businesses are entering a new era of competitiveness, powered by artificial intelligence. According to Salesforce’s latest Small and Medium Business Trends Report, 91% of SMBs using AI have seen revenue growth, with 81% backing this optimism through active investment.

AI is transforming how SMBs operate—automating routine tasks, enabling personalised customer experiences and supporting faster, smarter decisions. Within CRM systems, AI agents now autonomously handle processes such as inventory management, pricing approvals and refunds, previously the preserve of large-scale enterprises.

Customer experience remains a top priority, with 80% of SMBs recognising its equal importance to product quality. AI tools are helping businesses scale tailored experiences by integrating sales, marketing, service and commerce through unified CRM platforms, streamlining operations and enhancing loyalty.

FinTech is another key enabler. Innovations in payment processing, cash flow management and embedded finance allow SMBs to operate more flexibly. With 76% of businesses increasing investment in digital tools, the focus is on platforms that enable scale—not just technology for its own sake.

However, challenges persist. Just 12% of SMBs have invested in AI training, and nearly a third cite the lack of skills as a major hurdle. Smaller firms, in particular, report lower confidence in adopting AI, prompting calls for national strategies to boost AI literacy and workforce capability.

Security and trust are essential. Experts advise starting with low-risk AI tasks and ensuring transparency, GDPR compliance and human oversight are built into systems. Data quality is equally vital. SMBs that unify and clean their data are unlocking powerful insights and achieving measurable performance gains.

The rise of virtual service assistants is already improving productivity, freeing teams to focus on higher-value tasks. Tools like Salesforce’s Agentforce enable increased customer capacity without compromising service. Meanwhile, AI is also reshaping internal structures, supporting leaner management while raising questions about the balance between automation and human leadership.

Salesforce’s Starter Suite and free Trailhead training platform offer accessible entry points for SMBs looking to scale with AI. Yet 43% of UK SMEs still lack formal AI plans, highlighting the need for wider ecosystem support and practical guidance.

In a marketplace where agility increasingly outweighs size, AI offers SMBs a path to punch above their weight. With the right investments in platforms, people and data, smaller firms can compete—and win—in the AI-driven economy.

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.salesforce.com/blog/we-asked-ai-about-the-future-of-smbs/?bc=DB> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.salesforce.com/blog/we-asked-ai-about-the-future-of-smbs/?bc=DB> - This article explores how artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs). It discusses the integration of AI in customer relationship management (CRM) systems, the automation of routine tasks, and the enhancement of customer experiences. The piece highlights that 91% of SMBs using AI report increased revenue and that 80% recognise customer experience as equally important as their products or services. It also covers the rise of AI agents in CRM tools, which autonomously handle tasks like processing refunds and managing inventory, enabling SMBs to compete more effectively with larger enterprises.
3. <https://www.techradar.com/pro/ai-in-customer-communication-the-opportunities-and-risks-smbs-cant-ignore> - This article examines the rapid adoption of AI by UK small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) between 2022 and 2024, noting a fivefold increase in AI investment. It highlights that AI is crucial for enhancing customer communications, offering faster responses and personalised messaging. However, it also addresses challenges such as trust issues among older consumers and concerns about data privacy and transparency. The piece emphasises the need for SMBs to implement AI responsibly to build consumer trust and improve customer satisfaction.
4. <https://www.axios.com/sponsored/new-research-open-source-ai-drives-economic-growth-and-cost-savings> - This sponsored article presents research from the Linux Foundation, commissioned by Meta, highlighting the economic and workforce benefits of open-source AI. It reveals that nearly 90% of organisations adopting AI integrate open-source technologies, which enhance productivity and competitiveness. The piece underscores that open-source AI provides cost-effective tools for SMBs to develop custom AI applications, driving industry transformation and economic growth. It also notes that AI is more likely to complement tasks rather than replace jobs, with AI-related skills commanding higher wages.
5. <https://www.axios.com/2025/07/08/ai-middle-managers-flattening-layoffs> - This article discusses the decline of middle management roles due to the rise of AI. It highlights that in small businesses, the number of employees managed by each manager has increased from slightly over three in 2019 to nearly six. The piece notes that companies like Microsoft are reducing management layers amidst mass layoffs and AI expansion strategies. While AI enables streamlined oversight and flatter organisational structures, the article cautions that this trend could backfire, as industries with more managers exhibit higher worker productivity.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/8ed08281-bcda-46b5-bfc6-8dfca8b35c0d> - This letter to the editor highlights the need for the UK government to support artificial intelligence (AI) adoption among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It argues that SMEs are crucial for embedding AI into the nation's economy but are facing productivity challenges and lagging in AI adoption, with 43% having no AI plans. The piece calls for ecosystem building, access to expert guidance, and integration of AI into familiar productivity tools to help SMEs leverage AI for growth and competitiveness.
7. <https://www.techradar.com/pro/many-smbs-say-they-cant-get-to-grips-with-ai-need-more-training> - This article reports on a study by the Institute of Coding revealing that only 12% of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have invested in AI-related staff training. It highlights that 29% of SMEs identify lack of training as the top obstacle to AI adoption, and 52% cite insufficient internal skills and knowledge. The piece notes disparities between business sizes, with 82% of medium businesses feeling confident about using AI compared to only 37% of smaller businesses. It also mentions that 59% of SMEs are calling on the government to implement a national AI skills strategy.