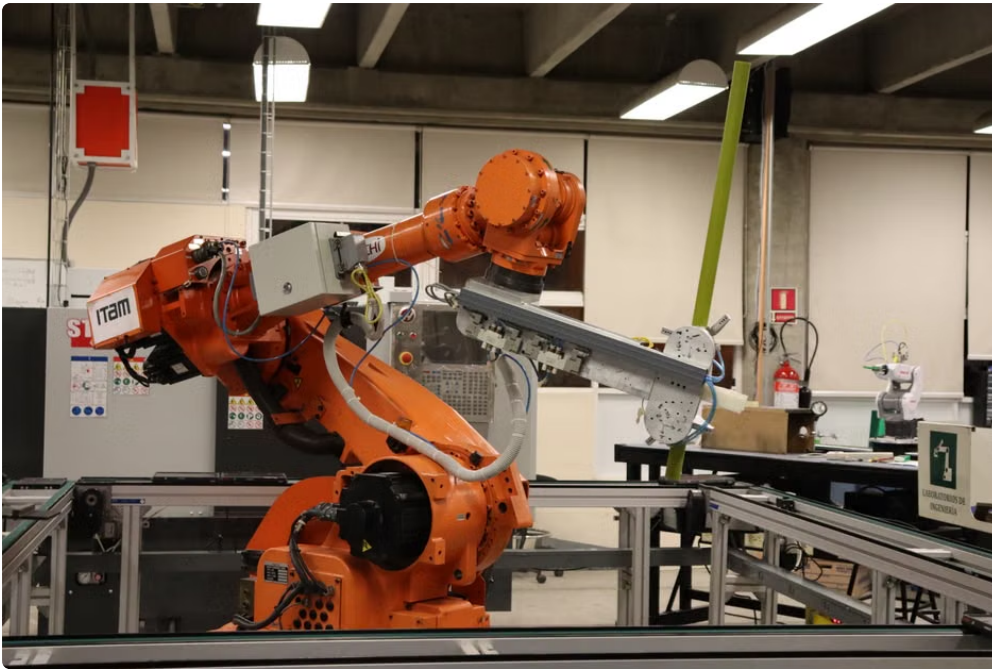


Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly drawn to AI-powered tools like ChatGPT and Microsoft's Copilot to optimize workflows, boost customer service, and speed up decision-making. Publications such as *SME News* highlight that many UK firms are already experimenting with AI applications in day-to-day operations.



Yet, despite rising AI usage, there remains a considerable gap between adopting AI tools and fundamentally redesigning business processes. Simply deploying technology without adjusting workflows is a missed opportunity—one that risks under-delivering on automation benefits and can lead to operational bottlenecks.

This situation poses a strategic [smenews.digital](https://www.smenews.digital) question: should SMEs hire new AI specialists or invest in training their existing staff to take the lead on AI automation? Organisations recognised by awards like the *Southern Enterprise Awards 2026* increasingly see the business case for upskilling their workforce as the preferred route to sustainable digital transformation.

Why AI is More Than Just New Tools

Before diving into recruitment or training decisions, the critical first step is understanding 'What changed in the workflow?'. AI tools such as ChatGPT and Copilot can automate repetitive tasks such as drafting emails, generating reports, or parsing data sets. However, if the underlying processes remain the same, automation often just speeds up a manual routine instead of creating genuine efficiency gains.

For example, if customer approval still requires multiple unnecessary reviews or redundant emails, feeding AI into the existing workflow only accelerates the inefficiency. Instead, the business case for AI hinges on rethinking approvals, handoffs, templates, and reporting formats to align with automation capabilities.

Current SME Trends: Experimentation Without Process Change

According to *AI Global Media* (imgcdn.aiglobalmedia.net) research, many SMEs dabble in AI tools—but mostly as standalone applications rather than embedded in redesigned workflows. This means they are “pilot rich but scale poor.”

The challenge is that AI adoption without process redesign often leads to:

- Fragmented automation pockets with limited cross-team benefits
- Confusion over ownership and responsibilities for AI-generated outputs
- Underutilisation of AI capabilities due to lack of staff skills beyond tool use
- Missed ROI opportunities as organisations fail to capture the full automation benefits

This gap emphasises why training is not just about tool proficiency but about understanding how to reshape workflows and governance around AI.

Training Existing Staff vs Hiring New Specialists

Many SME leaders mistakenly assume that success with AI automation requires expensive recruitment of data scientists or AI consultants. While external expertise is valuable, the core of AI-driven transformation depends on those who understand your business processes intimately—your existing staff.

Advantages of Upskilling Existing Staff

1. **Contextual Knowledge:** Current employees know what tasks are repetitive, which approvals cause bottlenecks, and where manual handoffs happen.
2. **Faster Change Adoption:** Staff involved in redesign and AI use are more likely to embrace change and champion it peer-to-peer.
3. **Cost Efficiency:** Training is typically more cost-effective than lengthy recruitment cycles and new hire onboarding.
4. **Continuous Improvement Potential:** Skilled staff can adapt automation workflows iteratively without always relying on external consultants.

Risks of Hiring External AI Specialists Alone

- **Knowledge Silos:** Specialists might implement technically sound automation that doesn't fit business context.
- **Ownership Confusion:** Without buy-in from internal teams, automated processes may not be maintained or improved.
- **Higher Costs:** Skilled AI professionals command premium salaries, which can strain SME budgets.

Building Project Leadership for AI and Automation

Successful AI automation initiatives require clear governance and leadership—another reason to build skills internally. Companies celebrated by the *Southern Enterprise Awards 2026* emphasise project ownership roles like:

- **Process Owners:** Who oversee workflow redesign and ensure automation aligns with business goals.
- **AI Champions:** Internal trainers who guide teams on effective use of tools such as ChatGPT and Copilot.
- **Data Stewards:** To manage data quality, compliance, and ethical AI practices.
- **Automation Coordinators:** Those who monitor task automation, resolve issues, and continuously optimise processes.

Establishing these roles from within fortifies organisational resilience—AI automation becomes a sustained capability, not a one-off IT project.

Calculating the Upskilling ROI: The Business Case in Numbers

Building a clear financial case helps secure leadership buy-in. Here is a simplified table outlining potential returns from training existing staff versus hiring external specialists:

Investment Area	Training Existing Staff	Hiring New Specialists
Initial Cost (£)	£5,000 - £15,000 (training courses, tool licenses)	£50,000+ (salary, recruitment fees)
Time to Productivity	3-6 months (leveraging existing business knowledge)	6-12 months (onboarding, learning business context)
Process Improvement Impact	Higher (due to contextual understanding and ongoing iteration)	Variable (may deliver initial gains but risk poor adoption)
Long-term Maintenance	In-house continuous improvement team	Dependent on external consultants or niche hires
Automation Benefits Realised	Maximised through culture change and workflow redesign	Moderate without internal ownership

The upskilling ROI becomes compelling when automation benefits—such as reduced manual effort, faster approvals, improved reporting accuracy—accumulate over time. Each manual email replaced by a smart Copilot-generated draft or each bespoke report auto-generated via ChatGPT reduces admin overhead and frees staff for value-added work.



Recommendations for SMEs Building Their AI Automation Strategy

- 1. Analyse Workflow Changes First:** Map existing processes and identify manual tasks ripe for automation before buying tools.
- 2. Invest in Role-based Training:** Equip process owners and frontline staff with skills to operate and optimise AI tools.
- 3. Define Governance and Ownership:** Assign AI Champions and Automation Coordinators for accountability.
- 4. Measure Automation Benefits:** Track time saved, error reductions, and customer experience improvements.
- 5. Foster Continuous Improvement Culture:** Encourage sharing of automation tips and workflows updates across teams.
- 6. Leverage SME Networks and Awards:** Engage with initiatives like *SME News* and *Southern Enterprise Awards* to learn best practices.

Conclusion

Here's a story that illustrates this perfectly: thought they could save money but ended up paying more.. The business case for training existing staff in AI automation is clear: it creates a sustainable foundation where automation benefits are maximised through smarter workflow design, ownership, and continuous improvement. For SMEs, this approach is not only more cost-effective, but also mitigates risks associated with external hires and fragmented AI deployments.

As AI tools mature and evolve—exemplified by ChatGPT and Copilot—organisations that equip their teams to lead automation projects internally will gain competitive advantage and agility. Far from being a mere 'AI strategy', successful implementation requires an integrated plan that puts people and processes before tools.

By taking lessons from leaders recognised by *Southern Enterprise Awards 2026* and insights from platforms such as *AI Global Media*, UK SMEs can move beyond experimentation to truly transform operations—one upskilled employee at a time.