

How SMEs Can Survive and Thrive in the AI Era

In the coming decades, AI will become as commonplace in business as the internet is today. As a result, many routine tasks will be automated or augmented by intelligent systems, allowing human workers to focus on creative, strategic, and interpersonal roles.

“AI has already begun reshaping the business world, and in the next two decades it will be a cornerstone of how every business operates,” says [Stefan Wendina](#), a transformative leader and innovator who teaches the SME4DD project’s [AI for Business course](#).

AI levels the playing field

One way AI is reshaping business is by making it easier for SMEs to compete with large enterprises. “Historically, SMEs lacked the vast resources of large corporates – they couldn’t dedicate big teams or budgets to R&D, data analysis, or 24/7 operations,” explains Wendina. “Now, AI tools, which are often affordable or even free, are helping SMEs go toe-to-toe with larger corporations, closing resource gaps and enabling them to ‘hold their own’ in ways that weren’t possible before.”

According to Wendina, some of the biggest advantages AI offers SMEs include:

- **Automate operations for efficiency** – AI can handle repetitive, time-consuming tasks with greater speed and accuracy. This frees up scarce human time for more strategic work.
- **Data-driven decision making and innovation** – AI-powered analytics can turn data into actionable insights, informing product development and marketing strategies and identifying inefficiencies.
- **Personalised customer experiences** – From AI-based recommendations to AI-driven marketing tools, small businesses can tailor their offerings and communications to individual customer preferences to improve both engagement and loyalty.
- **Access to advanced capabilities via the cloud** – Cloud platforms offer AI-as-a-service, letting SMEs tap into pre-trained AI models and massive computing power on a pay-as-you-go basis.

“By embracing AI – and doing so strategically – SMEs can not only streamline their operations but also create better products, enter new markets, and compete with larger players on quality and innovation, not just on price,” adds Wendina.

Keeping up with AI’s rapid pace of change

One of the most challenging aspects of adopting AI is its pace of change. New models, tools, and techniques are emerging almost monthly, meaning what was cutting-edge last year might be standard (or even obsolete) next year.

How can an SME even think about keep up? According to Wendina, the answer lies in a commitment to continuous learning, leveraging communities, and focusing on practical knowledge.

“It’s important to accept that you don’t need to know everything, you just need to know enough to make informed decisions and to identify opportunities and risks for your business,” he says. “Think of it like maintaining an updated toolkit that you regularly add new AI skills or knowledge as they become relevant.”

To help, Wendina offers some practical advice that SME professionals can use to help keep up with the latest AI trends:

- 1. Follow reputable sources:** Dedicate a little time each week to read up on AI developments relevant to your business. This could be subscribing to a newsletter, following thought leaders on LinkedIn or Twitter who curate AI news, or reading industry publications. Be sure to also keep an eye on publications from organisations like the EU (for policy updates) or European industry associations, while the [Stanford AI Index](#) (annual report) and the OECD or EU AI observatories provide great high-level insights. Business magazines and tech websites often have special sections for AI. By consistently scanning these, you’ll start noticing patterns and separating hype from real trends.
- 2. Join networks and communities:** There are many forums and networks where professionals share knowledge about AI. This can range from online communities (e.g., on LinkedIn or specialised forums for entrepreneurs) to local business meetups or webinars. Engaging in such communities allows you to learn from peers – maybe another SME owner solved a problem with an AI tool that you can also use? The key is not isolating yourself; peer learning can make keeping up less daunting and more practical, as you discuss real experiences rather than just reading news.
- 3. Upskilling and training:** Investing in your own education (and your team’s) is one of the best strategies. This doesn’t mean going back to university for a degree (though some might choose that). It can be short courses, workshops, or certifications focused on AI in business, such as [SME4DD’s AI for Business course](#). Look for courses designed for non-experts that focus on how to implement AI solutions.
- 4. Hands-on experimentation:** One of the fastest ways to learn is by doing. Identify a small project where you can try out an AI tool. For instance, test a chatbot on your

website, or use a free trial of an AI analytics platform on some of your data. Practical experience will teach you what the articles and courses might not, and you'll likely gain intuition on how well a tool works, what pitfalls there are, etc.

- 5. Monitor regulatory developments:** Remember that compliance is part of keeping up. Keep an eye on developments like the [EU AI Act](#), and guidelines from bodies like the [European Data Protection Board](#). While this may sound tedious, it's crucial to avoid surprises. Often, industry associations or local digital innovation hubs summarise these for SMEs.

“With the right approach and a focus on continued learning, SMEs can survive and thrive in the AI era, turning technology into a driver of resilience and differentiation,” concludes Wendina.