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AI Inclusion Report –
Inclusive Finance Powered by AI

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Foreword

AI is reshaping the global economy today, but its benefits remain unevenly distributed, leaving many SMEs at risk of exclusion. This imbalance highlights why artificial intelligence—especially Generative AI—can serve as a bridge to the future. In fintech, the outlines of this bridge are already evident. AI is making cross-border payments faster and cheaper, strengthening trust through adaptive fraud detection, and supporting smarter decisions with treasury optimization.

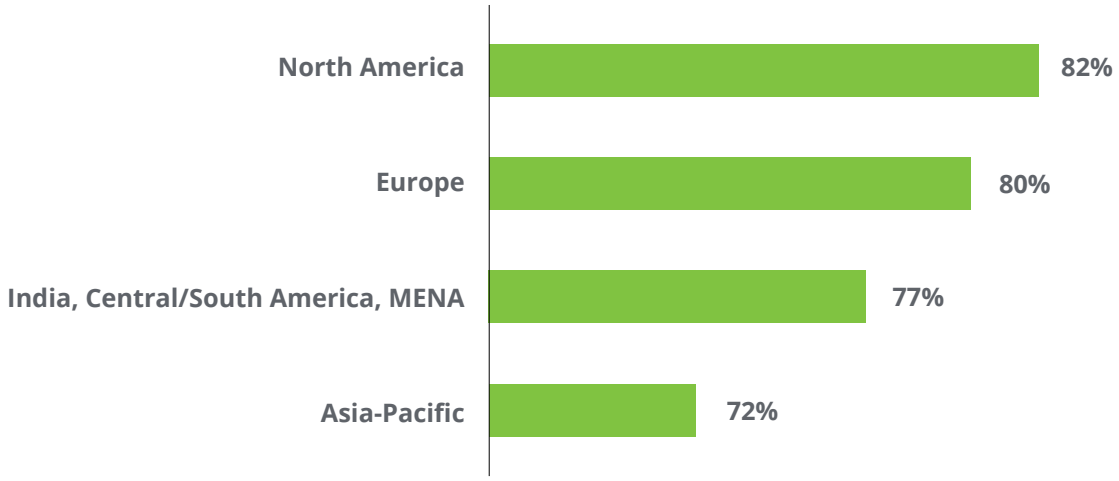
To ensure that AI leads to a financial future that benefits all, five guiding principles are shaping its development: **widening access for the underserved**, enhancing **financial literacy and confidence**, ensuring the **responsible use of AI with robust risk management**, fostering open **public–private collaboration**, and **nurturing AI talent and capabilities** for tomorrow's needs. Together, these principles turn AI from a disruptive tool into the pathway connecting today's challenges with a more trusted and equitable financial ecosystem—a true bridge to a financial future that is more trusted, equitable, and resilient.

Building on this foundation, we explore how AI is already driving tangible impact across different sectors, from improving financial resilience to expanding access to credit and inclusion. Looking ahead, sustained and coordinated efforts among businesses, policymakers and innovators will be critical to maintain momentum and close gaps further. By working together, stakeholders can accelerate the responsible adoption of AI and ensure that the benefits of AI-driven growth are shared more broadly, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable global economy.

Chapter 1:
AI Inclusion at A Turning Point

Globally, approximately 78% of companies have integrated some form of AI technology into their core business operations—a staggering increase from just 32% in 2020.[1] However, adoption varies sharply across regions. Advanced economies are rapidly integrating AI while many developing regions lag due to limited infrastructure, skills, and investment. These regional disparities risk widening the global digital divide, leaving some markets and businesses unable to fully benefit from AI-driven growth.

Figure: Worldwide Organizational AI Adoption



Source: "Artificial Intelligence Index Report 2025", Stanford

The uneven pace of AI adoption across regions carries important implications for SMEs. Companies operating in regions with advanced AI integration are better positioned to capture new market opportunities. In contrast, SMEs in regions with slower adoption face the risk of struggling to keep up with evolving customer expectations. Three major challenges stand in the way: (1) gaps in technology infrastructure, (2) shortages of talent and digital capabilities and (3) disconnect in coordination and support in the AI ecosystem among private and public stakeholders. Understanding and addressing these gaps is critical to ensuring that AI adoption is inclusive, sustainable, and growth-enhancing.

1. https://hai.stanford.edu/assets/files/hai_ai-index-report-2025_chapter4_final.pdf

Gaps in technology infrastructure

The lack of comprehensive access to affordable AI software, scalable IT infrastructure, robust cybersecurity and the cost of integrating AI with existing legacy infrastructure are among some of the key factors that restrict AI adoption for SMEs. These restrictions make it tough for SMEs to automate their operations, use predictive analytics, or scale AI solutions. According to the OECD, only 8% of SMEs are at the "transformative" level of digital maturity (i.e., prioritising digital innovation, using cutting-edge tools such as AI, blockchain, etc.), which entails a considerable difficulty in laying the technological groundwork for effective AI application.[2] SMEs that face such an infrastructure gap are likely to fall behind in their competitiveness and miss out on the opportunities AI provides for growth.

Shortages of talent and skills

A shortage of AI-related skills is also a key obstacle for SMEs. Globally, only 12% of SMEs have trained their staff on AI, while 52% reported a lack of internal skills as a major challenge.[3] This shortfall hampers their ability to efficiently deploy, scale and manage AI technologies, thereby diminishing the optimal worth of their investments in AI technologies. Besides technical expertise and resources, SMEs also face gaps in AI literacy and the ability to integrate AI-driven insights into decision-making processes.

Disconnect in coordination and support in the AI ecosystem among private and public stakeholders

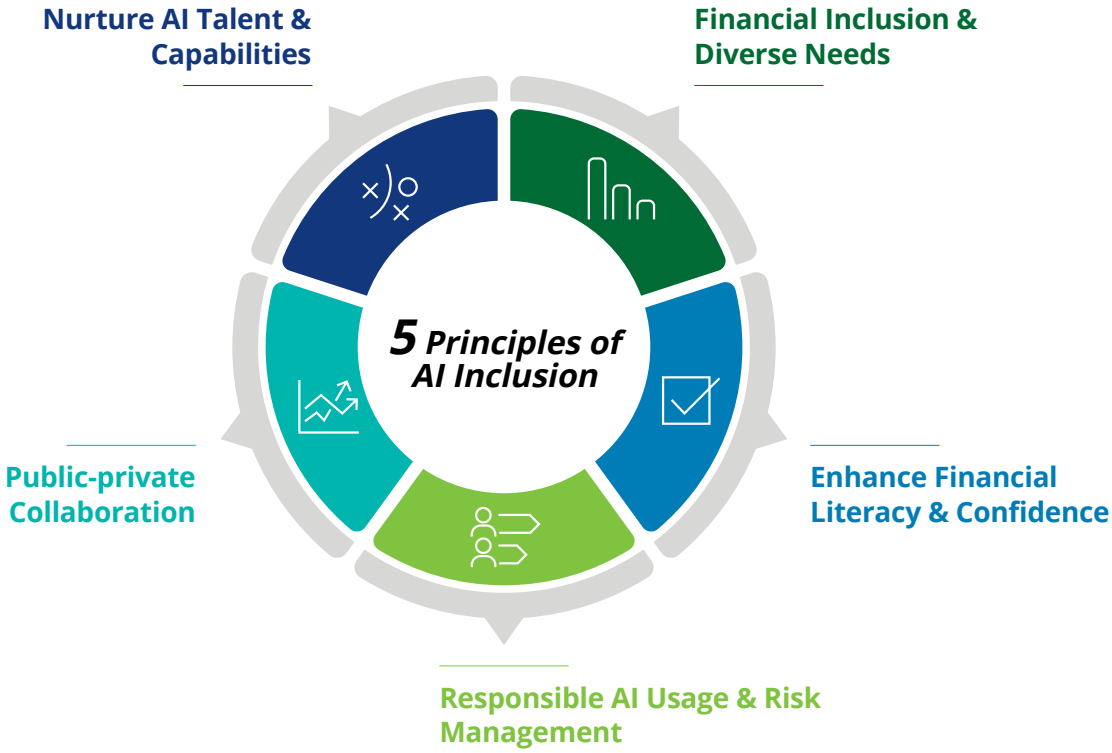
Many SMEs face structural challenges in accessing the broader AI ecosystem, including supportive policies, regulatory guidance and collaborative networks. OECD research shows that only 18% of SMEs are aware of government support on offer relating to digital adoption, limiting their ability to benefit from available programs.[4] At the same time, access to industry alliances, incubators and shared R&D platforms remains uneven, hindering their access to mentoring, training, and technical partnerships. Without stronger government-led coordination within the AI ecosystem, these gaps will continue to stifle innovation, impede the ability of SMEs to responsibly scale their AI solutions and reinforce unequal access to AI-driven growth.

The five guiding principles of AI inclusion

Addressing these gaps requires the help of the five guiding principles of AI inclusion - widening access for the underserved, enhancing financial literacy and confidence, ensuring the responsible use of AI with robust risk management, fostering open public–private collaboration, and nurturing AI talent and capabilities for tomorrow's needs. These five guiding principles are essential because they create a comprehensive framework that empowers SMEs to harness the benefits of AI effectively.

2. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/04/sme-digitalisation-for-competitiveness_3116862a/197e3077-en.pdf
3. https://www.techradar.com/pro/many-smbs-say-they-cant-get-to-grips-with-ai-need-more-training
4. https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/networks/oecd-digital-for-smes-global-initiative/FINAL-D4SME-2024-Survey-Policy-Highlights.pdf

Figure: The 5 Principles of AI Inclusion Framework



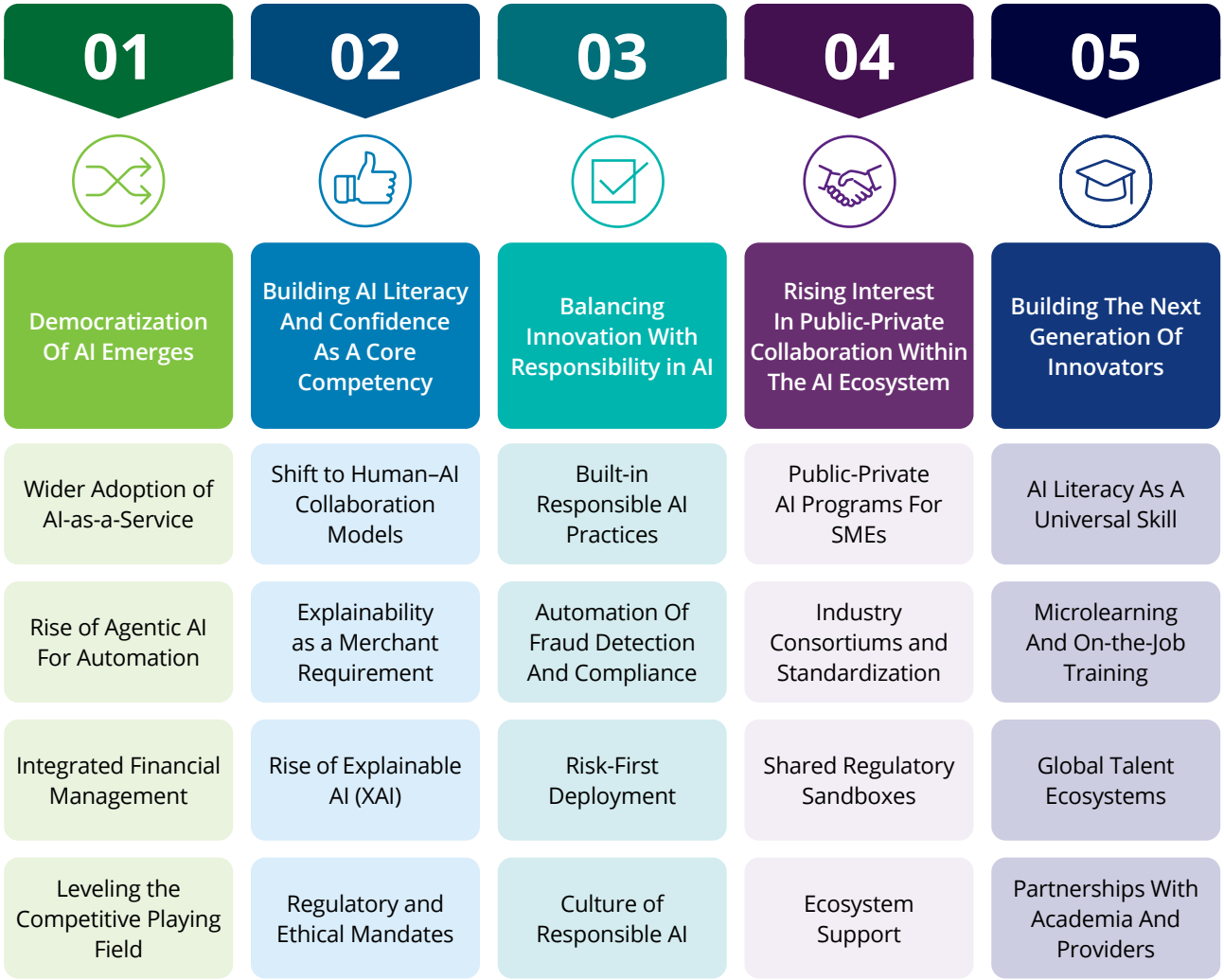
- **Widening access for the underserved** ensures that AI-driven tools and services are accessible to businesses of all sizes and backgrounds, meeting diverse needs.
- **Enhancing financial literacy and confidence** equips SMEs with the knowledge to make informed decisions about adopting and using AI technologies.
- **Ensuring the responsible use of AI with robust risk management** builds trust and safeguards against misuse or unintended harm.
- **Fostering open public–private collaboration** promotes scalable innovation by leveraging shared expertise and resources.
- **Nurturing AI talent and capabilities** develops the skills necessary to sustain long-term growth and competitiveness.

Together, these principles form a cohesive foundation that enables SMEs to adopt AI with confidence.

Chapter 2:
Emerging Trends in AI Inclusion

Emerging trends in AI are increasingly reflecting the five guiding principles of AI inclusion, demonstrating a global shift toward systems that are not only technologically advanced but also socially inclusive. This chapter explores these key trends, highlighting how they embody the core values that promote inclusive and equitable participation in the AI-driven future.

Figure: Emerging Trends Reflecting the Five AI Inclusion Principles



Source: AI For Inclusion Playbook - jointly launched by Ant International and GFTN, Deloitte

Trend 1

Democratization of AI Emerges

AI is no longer the exclusive domain of large corporations. Cloud computing, software-as-a-service (SaaS), and scalable AI platforms have lowered costs, allowing SMEs to access tools like predictive analytics and automation without investing in costly infrastructure. By lowering barriers for SMEs, this trend is helping to bridge the digital divide by enabling more businesses to benefit from AI-driven growth. This democratization of AI is being shaped by several key business shifts.

Wider adoption of AI-as-a-service: Financial AI capabilities such as payments, risk scoring, transaction monitoring and forecasting are being increasingly delivered through the cloud, enabling SMEs to access enterprise-grade tools without making large upfront investments. This lowers the barriers to entry and enables much broader access. Beyond lowering costs, cloud-based AI allows businesses to gradually expand usage, which has proved vital for smaller firms with limited budgets. This accessibility is reshaping perceptions of AI: it is no longer a privilege of large corporations but a foundational capability for smarter decision-making.

Rise of agentic AI for automation: AI agents are acting as "digital staff", automating workflow such as reconciliation, invoicing and FX hedging. They can link different systems, from accounting to banking, allowing tasks that previously required multiple teams of employees to be run seamlessly. By automating routine and repetitive tasks, SMEs can redeploy their workforce towards more strategic activities. As these AI agents evolve, they are expected to function as intelligent advisors that anticipate business needs and recommend the best course of action.

Integrated financial management: Instead of juggling multiple systems, vendors can now access AI insights directly within their day-to-day platforms, from point-of-sale systems and invoicing to digital wallets. This integration makes financial management frictionless and intuitive, delivering real-time, actionable insights that help firms adapt to changing sales trends, manage expenses, and forecast cash flow with greater accuracy. By embedding AI into familiar tools, financial management becomes an intuitive part of daily operations, removing complexity and making sophisticated capabilities accessible to users with limited technical expertise.

Levelling the competitive playing field: By equipping smaller firms with the same caliber of tools and insights as large companies, AI is reducing structural disadvantages and helping SMEs to compete more effectively. Over time, broader AI adoption among SMEs could reshape industry dynamics, thereby shifting the source of competitive advantage from scale to agility, insight, and execution. The result is a more inclusive, innovative, and resilient business ecosystem—one where success depends not on size, but on the ability to learn, adapt, and act intelligently.

Trend 2

Building AI Literacy and Confidence as a Core Competency

As AI becomes increasingly embedded in business operations, employees' ability to understand, trust, and effectively use these technologies is emerging as a critical determinant of organizational success. Addressing this gap is essential not only for maximizing the value of AI investments but also for ensuring compliance, ethical use, and sustainable competitiveness. Several emerging trends are shaping how SMEs are building this literacy and confidence.

Shift to human–AI collaboration models: Work is increasingly being designed around augmented intelligence where humans and AI make decisions together, requiring employees to be trained to interpret and refine AI outputs. This signals a fundamental shift in workplace culture, requiring organizations to rethink roles and responsibilities. The value of these systems depends on the ability of employees to critically engage with insights, identify potential errors or biases and apply contextual knowledge that algorithms cannot replicate. Building this collaborative model means investing not only in technical training but also in soft skills such as domain expertise and ethical reasoning, ensuring that humans remain at the core of AI-driven decisions.

Explainability as a merchant requirement: With AI increasingly influencing loan approvals, FX rates, and fraud alerts, SMEs are demanding transparency. AI literacy is strengthened when platforms explain why a decision was made and how merchants can take corrective action, moving AI from a "black box" to a trusted advisor. When merchants understand the rationale behind an approval, rejection, or alert, they gain confidence in the technology. This shift establishes a feedback loop where users not only adopt AI tools but actively engage with them.

Rise of explainable AI (XAI): Regulators and businesses are increasingly demanding transparency in AI decision-making. To leverage XAI effectively, employees must develop the skills to understand and communicate AI logic, risks and biases. This is not just a technical requirement but a practical necessity for organizations to maintain accountability in financial operations. As AI systems become more complex, the ability to explain their decision-making in understandable terms is of a higher priority to ensure that businesses can identify potential blind spots, mitigate unintended bias and remain compliant with evolving standards.

Regulatory and ethical mandates: Across jurisdictions—from the EU AI Act to emerging APAC data privacy laws—regulators increasingly expect businesses to understand and manage AI-driven financial processes responsibly. These frameworks reflect growing expectations for transparency, fairness, and accountability in AI use. Meeting these standards requires ongoing education and a clear understanding of how AI tools process data and influence outcomes. Strengthening ethical literacy also helps SMEs avoid potential reputational risks, build customer confidence, and position themselves as responsible adopters in an increasingly regulated marketplace.

Trend 3

Balancing Innovation with Responsibility in AI

When capturing the benefits of innovation, SMEs also face a challenge of managing the operational and regulatory risks that come with it. Without the proper frameworks in place, rapid adoption can also amplify vulnerabilities. This can range from biased algorithms and data privacy breaches to regulatory noncompliance. Establishing responsible deployment and risk mitigation strategies are therefore essential. Achieving this balance requires embedding principles, transparency and risk awareness into every stage of AI deployment. Several emerging trends are shaping how organizations manage this challenge effectively:

Built-in responsible AI practices: AI systems are now being developed with fairness, transparency and accountability embedded from the outset. Risk-aware operations, such as automated monitoring, anomaly detection and detailed logging ensure that AI decisions can be audited and corrected in real-time. Developer and merchant support frameworks and toolkits guide fintech firms to implement AI

responsibly. For SMEs, this approach reduces uncertainty and builds trust, as they can rely on platforms that actively safeguard against bias, error or misuse. Embedding responsibility into the design phase also simplifies potential governance later down the line, creating resilient, auditable systems from day one rather than retrofitting controls after deployment.

Automation of fraud detection and compliance: AI is increasingly being used for proactive monitoring, helping firms identify anomalies, detect fraud, and ensure real-time compliance with complex regulations. This enhances operational safety by reducing reliance on manual checks and minimizing human error, while also improving cost efficiency by lowering the financial burden of reporting and fraud management. These advancements are crucial for smaller firms that lack dedicated compliance teams but must still adhere to increasingly complex regulatory requirements. This not only improves resilience but also protects SMEs from reputational damage, financial penalties and operational disruptions that can arise from undetected risks.

Risk-first deployment: Instead of pursuing rapid rollouts, many organizations are adopting a risk-first approach by prioritizing pilot programs, continuous monitoring and scenario testing. By starting small and building capacity gradually, firms can identify vulnerabilities, refine processes and adapt governance structures before full implementation. For SMEs in particular, this cautious and strategic approach allows them to harness AI's benefits without exposing themselves to compliance breaches, data security risks, or costly failures that could undermine long-term trust and sustainability.

Culture of responsible AI: Beyond technology, leading companies are fostering greater awareness among their employees, executives and partners about the ethics and risks associated with AI ethics. Training programs and cross-functional accountability are becoming increasingly common, even among SMEs and merchant networks. By cultivating literacy and engagement across all levels of the business, firms can ensure that every decision made about AI adoption reflects operational considerations. In time, this fosters an environment where responsible AI becomes part of the organization's identity.

Trend 4

Rising Interest in Public-Private Collaboration Within the AI Ecosystem

As AI adoption accelerates, no single organization can drive innovation in isolation. Collaborative efforts between governments, regulators, industry associations, technology providers and businesses are becoming essential in bridging the "last mile" gap in AI inclusion. Several emerging trends illustrate how this collaboration brings benefits for SMEs.

Public-private AI programs for SMEs: Public-private AI Pilot programs and subsidized platforms are helping SMEs to access AI tools for financial management, cross-border trade and compliance. By reducing upfront costs and technical barriers, these initiatives enable SMEs to rapidly accelerate their AI transformation. For example, the Luxembourg AI Factory serves as a collaborative hub where regulators, financial institutions, and startup incubator jointly explore AI applications including advanced solution building, AI maturity assessments, data sharing frameworks, guiding businesses from ideation to execution and supporting every phase of AI adoption.

Industry consortiums and standardization: Collaborative networks of banks, fintech companies and regulators are increasingly looking into best practices for AI usage and interoperability. This provides confidence to SMEs to adopt similar practices and ultimately makes wider adoption more sustainable for smaller players. For example, Singapore's MAS Pathfinder Programme for financial sector AI adoption (PathFin.ai), led by the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), is a collaborative

initiative between the MAS and the financial industry that fosters knowledge exchange in AI implementations. Participating financial institutions share their experience implementing AI solutions while also gaining insights from the collective experiences of their peers.

Shared regulatory sandboxes: Joint experimentation spaces allow AI services to be tested under real-world regulatory supervision. These sandboxes provide a safe environment to pilot innovative tools without having to worry about compliance risks. By engaging regulators early in the process, there will be greater clarity on expectations which reduces the likelihood of making missteps. For example, the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA) recently launched an AI-focused regulatory sandbox that enables banks and fintech companies to experiment with AI-driven financial services in a controlled environment. This initiative helps accelerate adoption while ensuring that innovation remains aligned with prudential and ethical standards.

Ecosystem support: Collaborative platforms host training, mentorship, and peer-to-peer learning for SMEs. This builds AI literacy, encourages adoption, and ensures smaller businesses can scale responsibly. By creating communities of practice, SMEs can share knowledge, avoid common pitfalls, and collectively push forward adoption.

Trend 5

Building the Next Generation of Innovators

The long-term value of AI ultimately depends on employees and business owners who can understand and manage these technologies responsibly. Building AI literacy across all levels of the organization ensures that businesses can close the AI inclusion gap while maintaining high ethical and operational standards. This shift reflects a growing recognition that AI talent is not just technical, but also includes practical know-how, ethical awareness and collaborative innovation. Several key trends are shaping how AI talent is being cultivated to benefit SMEs.

AI literacy as a universal skill: Just as digital literacy became a baseline competency, AI literacy is emerging as a must-have skill for all professionals, from customer service staff using chatbots to managers interpreting AI-driven insights. Understanding how AI systems generate recommendations or automate workflows is no longer optional but a prerequisite for success. For SMEs, this shift means ensuring that every employee has at least a basic level of AI knowledge. The result is a more confident labour force that can work more effectively with AI tools.

Microlearning and on-the-job Training: Bite-sized training modules, embedded directly in AI platforms, are helping merchants and staff build skills while working. This ensures SMEs can upskill without the cost or disruption of formal training programs. Over time, microlearning fosters continuous learning habits, allowing SMEs to keep pace with rapid advances in AI without stretching limited resources.

Global talent ecosystems: Cross-border platforms and industry associations are pooling AI expertise, offering SMEs access to shared resources and specialized consultants. This collaborative model helps small businesses benefit from top-tier talent they would previously have been unable to access. Such ecosystems also promote knowledge exchange across regions, enabling SMEs to learn from global best practices and adapt them to the markets in which they operate.

Partnerships with academia and providers: Governments, universities and private companies are launching **AI learning initiatives tailored to SMEs**. They gain access to affordable or subsidized training, further lowering the barriers to AI adoption. Such collaborations also create opportunities for SMEs to participate in joint research and pilot projects, thereby embedding AI skills more deeply within their workforce.

Chapter 3:
The Time To Act is Now

Turning AI Into Opportunities for SMEs

Unlocking AI's full potential demands a strategic and integrated approach – one that aligns technology with business objectives and workforce capabilities. The following outlines how SMEs can better embed AI into their financial operations and daily workflows, ensuring that innovation drives measurable performance gains and long-term sustainability.

Integrate AI into financial operations: Managing finances efficiently is critical for business survival, yet many SMEs struggle with manual processes that are slow, costly and prone to error. AI tools can address this by making core financial operations more precise and responsive. The ideal approach begins by identifying high-impact areas where AI can deliver measurable gains, such as cross-border payments, cash flow forecasting, dynamic pricing and FX risk management. SMEs should also consider integration that aligns with existing systems and processes to minimize disruption. Clear governance over data, regular review of performance and partnerships with reliable providers will make adoption smoother and more dependable. For example, embedded AI platforms offer an integrated way to handle payments, track performance, and engage customers without disrupting daily operations. To access these benefits, SMEs should explore AI platforms that integrate seamlessly with current systems and offer modular, subscription-based access to reduce upfront costs. The greatest gains come when these tools are introduced incrementally, for example, by testing solutions in focused areas such as payments or customer engagement before scaling up. As these tools mature, they can become part of the core operating model rather than stand alone solutions.

Strengthen data foundation for scalable AI adoption: AI performance depends on data quality, accessibility, and governance; however, many SMEs still face fragmented or inconsistent data systems. Establishing a unified data foundation enables more accurate insights and smoother automation. SMEs should begin by consolidating data across departments, introducing clear data governance policies, and investing in tools that ensure accuracy, security, and interoperability. Cloud-based solutions and data-cleaning automation can help small firms build scalable, AI-ready data ecosystems without heavy infrastructure costs.

Embed AI agents and analytics into core workflows to drive smarter execution: AI agents and analytics allow SMEs to transform data into insights on purchasing trends, preferences and engagement patterns. Businesses can start by integrating analytics in areas with clear immediate benefits and expand over time as confidence grows. Combining AI insight with human judgement ensures a balanced approach that preserves adaptability and creativity. Insight-driven decision-making will enable SMEs to adapt more quickly to market changes and spot opportunities that might otherwise be missed.

Empower the workforce with AI skills and literacy: However advanced the technology, its true impact is ultimately determined by the people who wield it. For SMEs, this is particularly important as staff often perform multiple roles and must integrate AI into a diverse range of daily activities. Small businesses should embed learning into everyday work through microlearning modules, built-in platform tutorials and role specific training that align with business priorities. This approach helps overcome barriers such as time constraints and resistance to change by making learning an organizational habit. This means embedding AI literacy as a cultural norm, supported by clear communication from leadership and continuous engagement with evolving AI capabilities.

The Role of Policymakers in Bridging the "Last Mile"

Where gaps remain that the market alone cannot address, such as infrastructure limitations or cross-border data coordination, policymakers can step in with targeted interventions, incentives and guidance to ensure more inclusive AI adoption. The following sets out how policymakers continue to play an active role to shape the growth of the ecosystem where AI can be harnessed as a tool for both economic growth and social good.

Support regulatory innovation through sandboxes to accelerate adoption: Allowing fintech firms and financial institutions to experiment safely is one of the most effective ways to accelerate responsible adoption. Regulatory sandboxes provide a controlled environment where new AI-driven products can be tested under supervision, giving firms the confidence to innovate while ensuring consumer safeguards remain intact. AI-readiness assessments help regulators and firms to identify gaps in governance and compliance before launching solutions at scale. Practical steps include establishing multi-stakeholder sandboxes that bring together regulators, fintech firms and banks, as well as publishing clear assessment frameworks that firms can use to benchmark their preparedness. These mechanisms lower the entry barriers for smaller players and create channels for regulators to learn directly from market practices.

Build a future-ready workforce: A workforce of the future AI world needs reskilling and upskilling programs to equip employees with vital skills in AI governance, data literacy and ethical use of intelligent systems. Collaboration across academia, industry and training institutions can deliver specialized education while nurturing local innovation ecosystems that will enable experimentation and deployment of AI solutions. As robots and AI enter the workplace, policymakers need to ensure humans and technologies operate in partnership, not competition. By incorporating human-in-the-loop principles at both the design and deployment stages, governments can ensure automation supplements rather than replaces human work. Investment in these frameworks contributes to developing a more flexible workforce, inclusive jobs market and greater opportunities for SMEs to adopt AI and robotics responsibly.

Foster inclusive policies to extend AI access to MSMEs: For policymakers, ensuring that AI reaches beyond major cities and large enterprises is not only a question of fairness but also of economic resilience. SMEs account for the majority of employment in most economies, and rural and underbanked populations often represent untapped potential. Governments can respond by designing incentives and funding programs that encourage providers to serve underserved regions, such as subsidies for digital literacy initiatives or requirements for diverse datasets in AI model training. By removing structural barriers, regulators can ensure AI becomes a tool for inclusion rather than exclusion.

Standardize privacy frameworks for cross-border AI collaboration: Financial activity is increasingly global, yet data privacy rules remain fragmented. Standardized, privacy-preserving frameworks such as encrypted computation and federated learning allow innovation to spread while keeping personal data secure. Regulators can enhance interoperability by collaborating through regional and international bodies to align privacy principles and technical standards. They should also promote technologies that minimize data exposure and require transparency from providers about how privacy is maintained. Clear guidance on cross-border data flows reassures both firms and consumers that protections are consistent.

Final Thoughts

Guided by the five principles of AI inclusion, businesses are increasingly leveraging AI not only for operational efficiency but also for smarter decision-making, enhanced transparency and improved risk management. By integrating governance, transparency, and end-to-end ecosystem support, SMEs are showing how responsible and scalable AI can transform daily operations. However, to sustain this, coordinated action from every stakeholder in the AI ecosystem is essential. Policymakers, SMEs and industry players should continue to collaborate - to strengthen AI infrastructure, foster greater AI literacy within the workforce and align governance standards. With such collective effort, SMEs can fully realise AI's potential and contribute to a more equitable and inclusive financial future.

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