

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are increasingly experimenting with artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as **ChatGPT** and **Copilot** to improve efficiency and gain a competitive edge. Recent reports from *SME News* and insights highlighted during the *Southern Enterprise Awards 2026* show a significant uptake in AI adoption by SMEs, spurred by both curiosity and necessity.

However, amid this enthusiasm lies a critical question: **who should take ownership of AI and automation initiatives within SMEs?** This post explores the gap between merely using AI tools and redesigning business processes around them, the debate between training existing staff versus hiring new specialists, and the best project leadership structures for AI and automation in smaller businesses.

Understanding the Current State: SMEs and AI Experimentation

It's no secret SMEs are dipping their toes into AI waters. Tools like **ChatGPT** have become commonplace for content generation, customer support scripting, and even preliminary data analysis. Microsoft's **Copilot**, integrated with popular productivity software, offers SMEs automated assistance with tasks that traditionally required manual effort.

According to *AI Global Media* (source: imgcdn.aiglobalmedia.net), many smaller firms are embracing these solutions even without formally redesigning their workflows. Here's a fictional but typical example of current usage:

- Marketing teams using ChatGPT to draft social media posts.
- Sales reps using Copilot to auto-generate follow-up email templates.
- Administrative teams automating scheduling and reporting through basic AI-driven tools.

What's clear in these examples is a reliance on "bolt-on" AI usage rather than a structural change in how work is done.

The Gap Between AI Usage and Process Redesign

Tool adoption without process redesign introduces inefficiencies and risks. When AI is applied superficially, it only automates existing tasks, failing to unlock significant productivity gains or improve error rates.

The key question SMEs must ask before scaling AI tools is:

"What changed in the workflow?"

Many companies still do the same handoffs, approvals, and reporting processes they had before AI, just done faster or with digital assistance. Real value comes when workflows are redesigned to leverage AI capabilities fully.



For example, rather than waiting for manual report compilation followed by manager approval, an AI-driven workflow could automate data aggregation and flag exceptions for attention, streamlining control processes and freeing staff for higher-value analysis.

Training Existing Staff vs Hiring New Specialists

One of the most debated topics around AI project leadership in SMEs is whether to build capabilities from within or bring in new expertise.

Approach Pros Cons Training Existing Staff

- Leverages existing business knowledge
- Better internal adoption and culture fit
- Less expensive than hiring new specialists
- Time-consuming learning curve
- Risk of overburdening employees
- May lack deep technical expertise initially

Hiring New Specialists

- Access to advanced skills and knowledge
- Faster project ramp-up
- Brings fresh perspectives and ideas
- Higher recruitment and salary costs
- Potential culture mismatches
- Risk that knowledge remains siloed

SMEs' limited resources often make training internal staff the more feasible approach. However, making this work demands structured training programmes and clear ownership of AI initiatives to avoid those projects stalling.

Conversely, bringing in specialists can accelerate AI rollout but should be done with a view to knowledge transfer and wider upskilling across the organisation.

Who Should Lead AI and Automation Projects in SMEs?

Identifying and empowering the right AI project lead or **internal AI champion** is critical. The ideal leader bridges the gap between technology and business objectives, guiding the organisation through both tools adoption and process redesign.

Key characteristics of an effective AI project lead include:

- **Deep process knowledge:** Familiarity with current workflows, pain points, and operational bottlenecks is essential to spot where AI can add real value.
- **Tech-savviness without overreliance on tools:** Understanding the capabilities and limitations of AI tools like ChatGPT and Copilot helps prevent “tool-first” thinking that overlooks governance and ownership.
- **Change management skills:** Adept at communicating benefits and nudging cultural change to foster adoption across departments.
- **Cross-functional influence:** Can work across teams – from customer ops to finance – to redesign processes, handoffs, and approvals effectively.

In SMEs, this role often belongs to one of the existing managers tasked with operational improvement or digital transformation rather than a newly hired “AI specialist”. For instance, an operations manager who understands the day-to-day workflows and regularly interfaces with teams is ideally positioned to lead AI projects.

Examples from real-world SMEs recognised at Southern Enterprise Awards 2026

The *Southern Enterprise Awards 2026* highlighted several SMEs that successfully embedded AI by appointing internal champions rather than outsourcing leadership:

- **Coastal Tech Adventures** assigned their customer service lead as AI project lead, enabling them to rework support scripts with ChatGPT and automate routing queries, reducing handling times by 30%.
- **BrightGreen Foods** empowered their financial controller to lead the deployment of Copilot-driven automated invoicing, integrating human approvals only for exceptions flagged by AI.
- **MetroPrint Solutions** identified an experienced operations supervisor as their AI champion, who steered redesigns of production scheduling with predictive AI assistance.

These SMEs demonstrate how the right leadership focus on process redesign—not just technology adoption—powers sustainable AI success.

Governance and Ownership: Avoiding Common Pitfalls

Another common issue is lack of clarity about governance. AI-driven automation can cross departmental boundaries, requiring clear ownership to avoid “who’s responsible?” confusion.

Steps to ensure smooth governance include:

1. **Define clear roles and responsibilities:** Identify the AI project lead, operational owners, and technical implementers from the start.
2. **Set measurable goals:** Use KPIs tied to efficiency, error rates, or customer satisfaction relevant to each workflow change.

3. **Plan ongoing training:** Ensure teams stay updated on evolving AI tools and how to integrate them into daily work.
4. **Establish communication channels:** Regular project updates and feedback loops between AI leaders and affected teams.

Conclusion: Who Should Lead AI and Automation in Your SME?

To close the gap between hobbyist AI usage and true process transformation, SME leadership needs to identify an internal AI champion with deep process insight, change management abilities, and a pragmatic approach towards tools like [Click here](#) ChatGPT and Copilot.



Whether by upskilling an existing operations lead or digital transformation manager, empowering someone embedded in your core workflows is the best way to unlock AI's real potential. Avoid the temptation to hire purely tool-focused specialists unless accompanied by a plan for knowledge sharing and long-term cultural embedding.

Remember the golden question: *"what changed in the workflow?"* The AI project lead's role is to not only drive adoption but to make sure you're redesigning work to maximise efficiency and value.

Drawing on communications from *SME News*, accolades from *Southern Enterprise Awards 2026*, and industry insights gathered by *AI Global Media*, it's clear: successful AI leadership in SMEs is less about new roles and more about internal champions guided by operational expertise.

Are you ready to appoint your internal AI champion and lead your business into a smarter, more automated future?