



Unlocking the AI Productivity Opportunity

Findings report – January 2025 event



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Be the Business

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Be the Business, in collaboration with BT, hosted a half-day AI workshop on January 30th, 2025, at BT's offices located at One Braham Street. We employed the methodology and approach based on a framework created in partnership with UCL.

The event featured several keynote speakers throughout the day, along with two dedicated workshops where business leaders engaged with AI experts. The discussions focused on the following:

- Workshop 1: Explore how to implement AI in your business, addressing the challenges and opportunities you encounter.
- Workshop 2: Create an AI action plan, expanding on the areas you've identified where AI could be most beneficial. Only 19% of participants had an action plan prior to the workshop.

This workshop primarily targeted small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs) with 10 or more employees. This report outlines the key findings from the workshop.

Evidence used for the report

- Before and after survey of participants.
- Summaries of workshop discussions including AI and human notetakers.

How did this look in practice?

- Half-day event
- 2 hands-on workshops with one focused on barriers to implementation and identification of opportunities and the second focused on practical action to be taken by SMBs to implement AI in their businesses, tomorrow.
- 5 roundtables in each workshop
- 5 AI adoption experts facilitating the workshops
- 42 participating SMBs with employees
- 1 introduction from BT project lead
- 1 reflection session from Managing Director, The Productivity Institute
- 1 keynote from Hollie Whittles, Digital Transformation Expert
- 1 speech from Microsoft's SMB Director, UK
- 1 deep dive from BT's Head of Data Science
- Networking opportunities
- Multiple use cases
- 1 LAUNCH of the Productivity Collective, a community of practice focused on supporting AI adoption after the event

Audience engagement - the SMB experience

SMBs had the chance to:

1. Expand their network: connect with ambitious leaders from businesses employing 10+ people. Build valuable relationships.
2. Take part in hands-on workshops: collaborate in interactive sessions to uncover solutions and create actionable plans for AI adoption.
3. Access real-world use cases: learn from industry leaders like BT.
4. Meet The Productivity Collective: access a supportive community offering connections, resources and initiatives to increase productivity through technology.



Who attended?

126 individuals signed up for the workshop, showing a high level of interest. Some of these were very small firms or single person entities, and so only 60 (48%) were invited to attend.

On the day, 42 individuals (70%) of those invited from 37 different entities attended the workshop.

Of the 60 invited to attend, 68% had more than 10 employees.



The Productivity Collective Launch

This event was the launch of the Productivity Collective, a BT community for business leaders.

Meeting in person brought business leaders together to spark connections and lay foundations for a dynamic SMB community.

The event also generated valuable assets - videos, photos, and interviews - ensuring that SMB voices lead our ongoing marketing efforts. By focusing on collaborative knowledge-sharing, the event reinforced the Collective's core purpose: to support SMB leaders in growing, learning, and driving productivity.

More than just raising awareness of this initiative, the event positioned BT's role as a champion of SMB success.



“From a community perspective, the amount of people in the room that are really excited to be embarking on this journey and sharing tips from their own AI deployment is really key for us.”

Dhruvin Patel, Ocushield, SMB

Community launch statistics

- total number of event expressions of interest: 126
- total number of invitees: 60
- total number of community sign ups: 44
- total number of attendees: 42



AI workshop - an window of insight

The majority of companies present believed they were already utilising some AI tools, although survey results indicate that their adoption is inconsistent. Leaders noted that AI usage tends to be isolated among individuals rather than implemented through an overarching company policy or strategy. Tools such as Chat GPT and Microsoft Co-pilot were frequently mentioned and discussed.

An expert highlighted two primary ways AI can be applied:

- Automation: Substituting human tasks with AI to save time and cut costs.
- Augmentation: Enhancing human skills and creativity through AI tools.

Throughout the sessions, several specific examples were presented showcasing how businesses are leveraging AI tools.

One organisation that collaborates with students employs AI to create reports for parents regarding their children's progress in STEM workshops:

- Educators spend just 10 seconds writing a brief comment about each child.
- This input is then processed by AI to produce a detailed report.
- The AI-driven method is significantly quicker than the previous manual approach.
- Parents have expressed high satisfaction with the outcomes.

Chatterbug utilises AI for data analysis and research to develop their speech and language therapy models:

- They use AI to develop evidence-based training content
- Research papers and references can be input into AI tools to develop content
- They use both the paid version of ChatGPT and Google's AI tools

Tools like ChatGPT are swiftly being embraced by many individuals due to their low barriers to entry, such as minimal costs and training requirements, along with the immediate benefits they offer, particularly in terms of time savings for certain demographics and job roles. Currently, popular applications include content generation, research, LinkedIn posts, and newsletters.

However, several significant challenges have been raised by participants, such as ensuring everyone becomes proficient and comfortable with the tools, managing the risks associated with sensitive data exposure, and deciding which tools to implement.

This highlights the need for higher-level strategic thinking regarding AI adoption within organisations. Such an approach can help structure the integration process and ensure that individuals utilise AI in the most effective and appropriate manner. This poses a particular challenge for business leaders who are pressed for time while trying to navigate a rapidly evolving technology landscape.

Current AI applications

Content generation

Businesses use AI for creating LinkedIn posts, newsletters, and marketing materials. AI assists in drafting blog posts, social media updates, and even generating report summaries. Some creative agencies leverage AI for brainstorming and refining creative concepts, ensuring that human-created ideas are innovative and original. This application significantly reduces the time and cost associated with content creation, enabling businesses to maintain a consistent and engaging online presence.

Customer service

Some companies utilise AI-powered chatbots for 24/7 customer assistance. AI chatbots assist with responding to customer inquiries, personalising customer experiences, and analysing customer interactions for improved service. By automating responses to common queries, businesses can provide instant support, enhancing customer satisfaction and loyalty. This application ensures round-the-clock availability, improving response times and overall customer experience.

Automation

AI is employed to generate reports, analyse data, and streamline administrative tasks. Companies are automating financial data processing, report generation, and lead qualification processes. Chatterbug utilises AI for data analysis to develop speech and language therapy models, enhancing the efficiency of research and development. This automation frees up employees to focus on more strategic and creative work, ultimately boosting overall productivity.



Main challenges

Uncertainty

Many businesses struggle with where to start with their AI journey. Small businesses often lack a common understanding of AI, leading to uncertainty about where to begin and how to implement it effectively. To overcome this challenge, businesses should identify 1-3 key areas where AI could add value and start with small-scale initiatives to test effectiveness.

Tool selection

Choosing the right AI solutions among numerous options is challenging. There are many AI products available, making it difficult to choose the most effective ones for specific business needs. To navigate this, businesses should research relevant AI tools using resources like "theresanai4that.com," experiment with different options, and check user reviews. Focusing on specific use cases and evaluating tools based on business needs is essential.

Data security

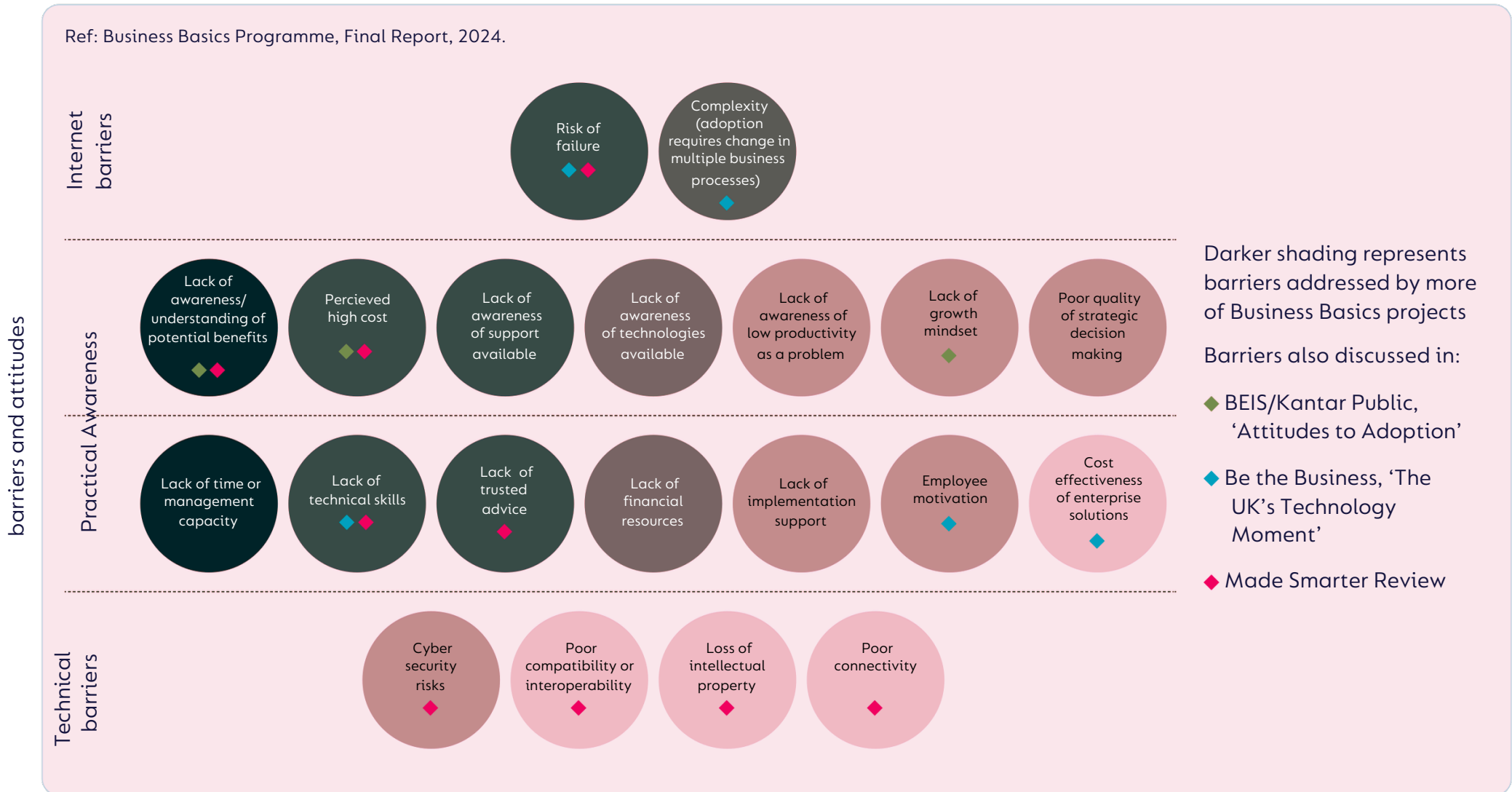
Protecting sensitive information while adopting AI tools is a major concern. Ensuring compliance with data protection regulations like GDPR is crucial, as is implementing robust data governance policies. The creative sector has specific concerns around AI potentially replacing human creativity, leading to job redundancies and shifts in business models. Maintaining data security requires careful consideration and implementation of appropriate safeguards.

Skills development

Ensuring employees are comfortable with AI tools requires training and support. Employees, particularly millennials, may be hesitant to embrace AI, leading to concerns about creativity and skill retention. Addressing this requires educating employees about AI, providing training sessions, and encouraging continuous learning. Additionally, businesses should focus on low-friction adoption and make AI adoption part of personal development plans.

Barriers to adoption of new technologies and management practices

Ref: Business Basics Programme, Final Report, 2024.



Opportunities and benefits

Improved efficiency

AI automates time-consuming processes, freeing up employees for core responsibilities. AI applications in this realm include automating financial data processing, generating reports, and assisting with tasks such as recruitment and onboarding. By streamlining operations, AI allows teams to focus on strategic initiatives and core business functions, driving productivity.

Personalisation

AI enables tailored marketing campaigns and customer experiences. Companies are using AI to personalise marketing campaigns, improve customer service through AI-powered chatbots, and analyse customer behaviour for targeted marketing efforts. This drives customer engagement and loyalty by providing customised interactions.

Enhanced decision-making

AI-driven insights support strategic planning and business operations. AI is used for processing and analysing large amounts of data quickly, which is particularly useful for improving financial management and reporting. It provides actionable insights from aggregated customer data and can assist in identifying trends in business operations.



Adoption strategies and best practices

Adoption strategies

- **Start small and expand gradually.** This approach allows businesses to test the effectiveness of AI initiatives and expand AI usage when initial implementations prove successful. Establish focus areas, prioritising use cases from easy to hard.
- **Appoint an AI champion within the organisation to drive adoption.** An AI champion can help others understand and implement AI tools, facilitating knowledge sharing among employees and driving adoption. They can play a crucial role in making AI adoption part of personal development for employees.
- **Encourage peer-to-peer learning about AI tools and applications.** This is a great way to facilitate knowledge sharing and create opportunities for staff to learn from each other's experiences with AI. Collaboration drives a deeper understanding and more widespread adoption.
- **Integrate AI into the overall business strategy, with flexible 3-6 month plans.** Make AI a key workstream within the overall strategy plan and keep AI strategies flexible due to the rapid pace of technological changes. A proactive and reactive approach to AI ensures that the business remains responsive to new products and solutions.

Best practices

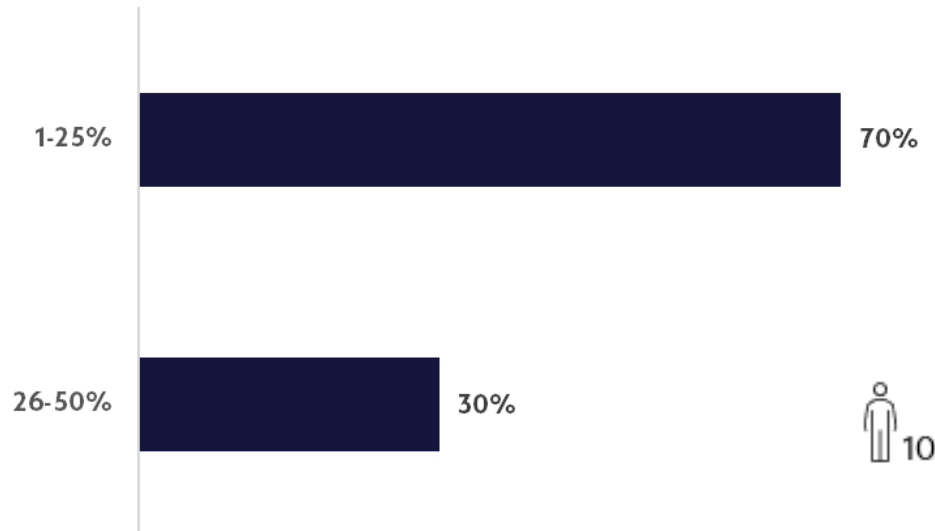
- **Educate employees about AI potential and provide necessary training.** Make sure you provide training sessions to ensure employees are comfortable with AI tools and encourage continuous learning about AI developments. Continuous education will help promote the usage of the tools.
- **Ensure consistent AI usage across the organisation with clear guidelines.** Develop guidelines for AI usage to maintain alignment with business goals and to avoid individual exploration that could lead to misuse or time-wasting. A consistent approach to AI ensures alignment and cohesion.
- **Regularly research and test new AI tools to stay current.** Continuously research new AI tools and applications, and test multiple options before committing to specific AI solutions. Remember to use AI itself (e.g., ChatGPT, Co-Pilot) to recommend tools based on business needs.
- **Consider ethical implications and maintain transparency in AI use.** Businesses should ensure AI usage aligns with company values and be transparent about AI use, especially in customer-facing applications. Prioritising data security when implementing AI solutions is key to success.

What do the surveys tell us about individuals before and after the event

All participants believe that fewer than 50% of their workforce is utilising AI, with most estimating it to be under 25%. This indicates significant variation in adoption rates among firms, despite nine out of ten respondents asserting that AI is being implemented within their organisations.

The primary barriers identified before the workshop were as follows. While other barriers were mentioned, they were not highlighted as frequently. These include obstacles discussed during the workshops.

What percentage of your employees regularly use AI tools in their work?



Which of the following barriers is your organisation currently facing in implementing AI?



What do the surveys tell us about individuals before and after the event (continued)

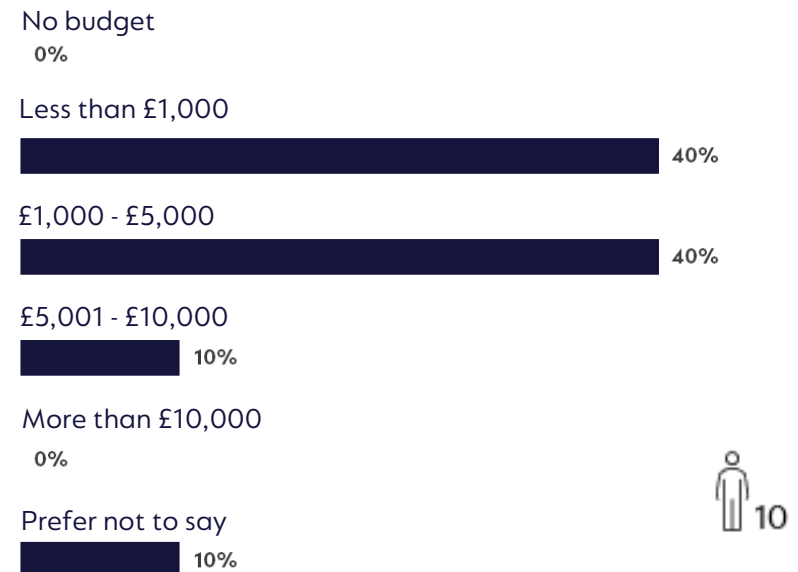
Following the workshop, the two initial barriers remained, though they were noted by a smaller percentage of respondents. Additionally, the need for staff training had grown.

Which of the following barriers do you anticipate in implementing your AI action plan?



No companies reported lacking a budget for technology tools and training; however, 50% indicated that none of their employees have received training in AI.

What is your organisation's monthly budget for technology tools and training?



What do the surveys tell us about individuals before and after the event (continued)

Following the workshop, most participants believe they will need to provide training for their staff to effectively carry out their action plans. Confidence in executing these plans remained average, indicating that additional support is essential for business leaders to move forward. Additionally, 60% of respondents expressed a desire to implement their first AI tool within three months after the workshop.

The respondents indicated that they appreciated the workshop and generally understand the next steps for executing their action plans. However, the responses differed considerably, implying that some individuals still need additional support to move forward. Nearly three-quarters expressed a desire to implement their action plans within the next month, reflecting a strong motivation among businesses to advance their initiatives in this area.

What resources will you need to implement your action plan?

Staff training



Technical expertise



Additional budget



Short guide on adoption

- Identify 1-3 key areas where AI could potentially add value and build a business case for adoption. This could be done through internal audits to identify time consuming tasks.
- Create an implementation plan, potentially starting with a small proof of concept
- Don't wait for perfect AI tools, as they will always be improving.
- Start implementing AI now to gain experience and benefits, even if better tools emerge later.
- Focus on fast experimentation and iteration rather than long-term commitments. However, still try to maintain a unified strategy across the organisation rather than a ad-hoc or piecemeal approach which could lead to greater integration challenges and increased data security risks.
- Educate and involve team members in the AI adoption process and focus on low friction adoption.
- Set clear success criteria to evaluate impact of implementations.

“I was amazed to see that there are so many tools that we as a small business haven't explored yet.”

Nahim Choudry, Bright Marketing Ideas Group

I've come away with a lot of ideas on how we can improve what we're doing.”

Tom Jenkinson, The Chiltern Brewery

Research relevant AI tools and solutions for those specific use cases.

- Use theresanai4that.com to find AI tools for specific business problems.
- Try tools quickly and check user reviews
- Use AI (like ChatGPT) to research and compare other AI tools



Application of insights for BT

The audience from the workshop were highly engaged in the discussion and networking at the event.

All participants both in the post programme survey and at the event were positive about the content. The discussion notes also highlighted key learning points for many business leaders.

The same barriers remained post workshop though, albeit to a slightly decreased percentage of respondents, showing this is a complex area to effect change with just one workshop.

These barriers were joined by staff training which highlights the workshop effectively highlighted the need to take a more strategic approach to AI adoption and implementation.

For BT, this highlights workshops can be an effective engagement tool for small businesses, however, they should be deployed as part of a package of support to effect change - showing the importance of building a community and continuing to engage with business leaders post event.

The event was attended by the expected number of SMEs and drop out rates were in line with the expected numbers, although these are not insignificant and this should be considered with any event planning, especially for free events.

Business leaders expressed a desire to train their staff to support implementation of AI, which could also be a key consideration area for cyber security. For the cyber security pilot, it is potentially worthwhile to consider if we should be encouraging business leaders to bring along a champion from their team to help meet that training requirement and to help drive forward actions.

AI has increased the conversation around data security, IP protection and risk. For cyber security solutions, BT should consider whether this concern could be an area which helps to increase interest in cyber security solutions and how to effectively market products to meet these concerns.



Conclusion

The event generated significant interest and was highly oversubscribed with 126 participant tickets booked for the 40 available places. We also maintained high attendee levels throughout the workshop, indicating strong engagement and interest from participants.

The event was effective in raising awareness of AI, engaging participants in discussion on AI implementation and building excitement for adoption. Confidence in using AI among participants has also increased.

“It’s been a phenomenal day talking about all things AI. There’s been some real actionable output from the session and real opportunity for leaders to learn from peers on what works and what doesn’t.”

Hannah Symmons, BT

More work is required to tackle some of the specific AI barriers to encourage future adoption, potentially through additional workshop activities. It appears the training barrier has increased after the workshop, but actually what we are likely to be seeing is a greater awareness of the barriers now we have moved closer to implementation. This is an important step in adoption.

Even though participants spoke clearly on actions they will take away during the roundtables, the survey data suggests they haven’t written this out in a formalised document/ plan.

In the discussions, it appears participants were planning on moving past this stage and were moving straight into adoption of some tools. What we are also likely seeing is the effect of resource constraints within small businesses to spend time after the event on an action plan.

Further evidence of strong engagement is shown though by some participants joining the Productivity Collective to continue discussions on AI adoption. Others had plans to engage with the experts in the room on offers that they made available to participants.

“An excellent and insightful event – I am buzzing with excitement at the potential for our business.”

SMB participant





About Be the Business

Be the Business is the UK's leading expert of small business productivity. As an independent charity, we work to boost small business productivity, by connecting business leaders to world-class productivity expertise. To date, we have directly added £500m to the productivity of the firms we have worked with. By combining in-depth research into different aspect of productivity, practical work with small business leaders and publishing our insights, we have become the UK's leading authority of small business productivity. Collectively we're transforming the UK's productivity, raising the value of businesses in our communities, safeguarding jobs and improving standards of living.

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Let's talk

Interested in Beyond the Hype and how we could work together?
Contact our team to discuss our approach, results and next steps.

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The Productivity Group – Be the Business | Charity Commission
charity number 1133660 | Charity overview registered in July 2017



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