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A Practical Guide to  
**Implementing  
AI in Small  
Businesses**

 **GOOD BUSINESS  
PATHFINDER** CORNWALL &  
ISLES OF SCILLY

# Small Steps, Real Benefits

Running an SME in Cornwall often means juggling a lot with a small team. Whether you're dealing with seasonal peaks, tight margins, or simply trying to keep service levels high while workloads grow, any practical way to save time and reduce time spent on low value tasks can make a real difference.

That's where AI can help. For most small businesses, AI isn't about building complicated new tech.

It's increasingly the "smart engine" helping to automate routine tasks, speed up admin, and spot useful patterns in your data. Many tools are available on affordable subscriptions, and some are already built into platforms you may be using today.

The key message is this: implementing AI is not about doing everything at once. It's about making steady improvements, learning what works for your business, and building confidence as you go.

AI works best when it supports people, not when it tries to replace good judgement.

**This guide is designed to help Cornish SMEs take practical, affordable steps towards using AI, whether you're just starting out or looking to build on what you've already tried.**




## A Cornwall example shows what's possible.

Newquay-based software developer [Flowmoco](#) helps businesses use AI in practical ways, often by improving insight (finding answers in the information you already have) and automation (taking repetitive tasks off people's plates).

One small project they supported was for a local recruitment agency, where staff were spending a large chunk of the day opening CVs, extracting key details, and re-typing them into a CRM.

A carefully scoped AI solution can help speed up that kind of work – freeing people to focus on customers and higher-value tasks. Their approach is also clear: define the outcome you want and how you'll measure it before you build anything.

 [View the full case study online](#)



# Five Steps on Your Way to Implementing AI

Think of AI adoption as a pathway rather than a one-off project. These five steps can be adapted to any size or type of business.

```

def render_inventory() -> None:
    df.select(
        pl.col("MFS_LOOP_NUMBER")
        .cast(pl.Utf8, strict=False)
        .str.strip_chars()
        .str.slice(0, prefix_len)
        .alias(prefix_col)
    )
    .filter(pl.col(prefix_col).is_not_null() & (pl.col(prefix_col) != ""))
    .group_by(prefix_col)
    .agg(pl.len().alias("count"))
    .sort(prefix_col)

    prefixes_pd: pd.DataFrame = prefixes.to_pandas()
    st.dataframe(
        prefixes_pd,
        use_container_width=True,
        hide_index=True,
        column_config={"count": st.column_config.NumberColumn(format="%", display_text="%")}
    )

    inventory_page = st.Page(render_inventory, title="Inventory")
    invoices_page = st.Page("pages/Invoices.py", title="Invoices")
    invoice_convert_page = st.Page("pages/Invoice_Convert.py", title="Invoice Convert")
    database_page = st.Page("pages/Database.py", title="Database")

    st.navigation([inventory_page, invoices_page, invoice_convert_page, database_page])
  
```

## 1. Get to grips with your digital maturity      2. Make it clear what you want to achieve      3. Give yourself achievable milestones      4. People first approach      5. Use trials, review points, and keep workload realistic

You don't need a big AI strategy document to begin. Start by spotting where AI could save time or reduce friction in the work you already do.

Look for:

Repetitive admin (copying data between systems, chasing info, scheduling, responding to routine enquiries)

Content "first drafts" (emails, proposals, job adverts, web copy, internal comms)

Customer service patterns (common questions, returns issues, booking enquiries)

Information that's hard to access (details spread across different spreadsheets, inboxes, CRM/ERP systems)

In many cases, the best early wins come from using AI to automate tasks and generate insights from existing data, not from building something brand new.

To help with this journey, you can find some useful assessments on where you are in digital maturity courtesy of UKRI.

 [View online](#)

A short, plain-English "how we use AI" statement can prevent confusion and keep everyone aligned. It doesn't need to be technical – it just needs to be clear.

It might include:

Why you're exploring AI (save time, improve service, reduce errors)

Where AI is allowed (and not allowed) to be used

A commitment to human oversight and responsible use

A promise to learn and improve over time

Even large organisations are being encouraged to set simple AI principles, a basic adoption plan, and clear training expectations.

For an SME, this can be a one-page guide and a named owner not a committee.

Not every AI idea is worth doing right now – and that's okay.

To stay low-risk and practical, prioritise:

High repetition tasks (the same thing happens often)

Clear goals (you can describe "success" in a sentence)

Structured information (forms, invoices, lists, CRM fields, stock records)

Low consequences if it goes wrong

AI is as good as the people using it. So making sure everyone feels part of the journey, trained and informed will help enormously to ensuring what you do is successful.

Good practice includes:

**Explaining:** Explain that AI is there to remove friction and support people (not replace them)

**Involving:** Involve staff in choosing and testing tools – frontline teams often know the best use cases

**Naming:** Name one or two AI Champions (curious staff who try things out and share learning)

**Keeping:** Keep learning practical: short demos, real examples from your work, "show and tell" sessions

AI is not "set and forget". Build in light-touch check-ins.

Keep it simple:

Review what you tried: what worked, what didn't, what surprised you

Track a couple of easy measures (e.g., time saved per week, fewer errors, faster response times)

Share wins and learning across the team

Decide whether to stop, fix, or scale

Flowmoco's lesson: define your goal and how you'll measure it before building. Real progress usually starts with better data and systems – not just adding AI.



# What You Can Do Tomorrow

These ideas are quick, low-cost and low-risk – focused on building confidence without making big changes.



## Treat AI output as a first draft

Make it a team habit:

AI output is a starting point – not the final answer

Always check facts, tone, and anything customer-facing

Never rely on AI alone for high-stakes decisions

This matters because generative AI can produce convincing but incorrect information, and it can sometimes create content that raises intellectual property concerns.



## Pick one safe test

Choose a task that is:

Internal (not customer-facing at first)

Low-risk if the output isn't perfect

Easy to compare "before and after"

Examples: drafting routine emails, summarising meeting notes, turning bullet points into a first draft of a policy or proposal.



## Have a 15-Minute team conversation

Ask:

"What's the most repetitive task you do every week?"

"What admin work feels like a time drain?"

"Where do we lose time searching for information?"

Never rely on AI alone for high-stakes decisions

Then agree one small thing to test this week. This helps people feel part of the journey and often surfaces the best ideas.



## Start a simple "no surprises" rule for data

One of the biggest immediate risks for SMEs is people pasting confidential customer or business information into public AI tools without realising the implications.

A clear default rule helps:

No confidential or personal data goes into public/non-enterprise AI tools

If in doubt, don't paste it

Use AI for templates and drafting, then add real details yourself

This kind of simple policy can prevent "shadow AI" behaviour and reduce the risk of data breaches.

Examples:

Choose One "AI-Friendly Default"

Default to using AI for meeting notes and action lists

Default to using AI for first drafts of routine comms

Default to using AI to turn FAQs into a standard reply library

Small defaults create momentum without needing a big programme.



## What You Can Do

# Over The Next Three Months

Once you've tested a few quick wins, you can start putting simple structure around AI so it's useful, safe, and repeatable.



### Run one small pilot with a clear goal

Choose one use case and write down:

The problem (what's happening now)

The change you want

How you'll measure success

(time saved, fewer errors, faster turnaround)

To help identify the problem and develop the skills necessary, consider one of Tech Cornwall's masterclasses, which tend to be very practical and very affordable.



View online



### Do a quick "AI readiness" check

You can keep this very practical. Ask:

Do we have a clear business problem to solve?

Is our key data organised and accessible (even if it's just in a CRM/spreadsheet)?

Do staff have basic digital confidence and willingness to learn?

Can our core systems connect to each other (even with simple integrations)?

Do we accept that the first project may not be perfect?

This kind of readiness check helps you avoid wasting time on ideas your business isn't ready to support yet.



### Tidy the data you already have

AI is only as useful as the information you feed it. Easy "data foundation" actions:

Clean up key fields in your CRM (names, categories, missing values)

Agree simple naming conventions (products, services, customer types)

Reduce duplicate records

Keep important documents in one shared location (with sensible access controls)

Flowmoco's experience highlights that AI projects sometimes reveal a deeper issue: the business isn't collecting or organising data in a way that supports better insight. Fixing that groundwork often unlocks bigger value later.



### Build skills in small, regular bursts

Short learning beats long training days. Try:

20-minute "lunch and learn" sessions

Micro-learning (small lessons built into real work)

Role-specific examples (customer service, admin, estimating, marketing)

This approach is often recommended for SMEs: focus on solving immediate pain points, integrate AI into core workflows, and build literacy through on-the-job learning.

A handy tool to establish your skills pathway to better AI adoption has been developed alongside Skills England and [can be found here](#).



### Create a one-page "how we use AI" policy

Keep it light, but cover the essentials:

What tools are approved (even if it's only one)

What data must never be shared

What needs human review (usually anything customer-facing or high-stakes)

How staff should flag problems or concerns

This matters because generative AI can produce convincing but incorrect information, and it can sometimes create content that raises intellectual property concerns.



## What You Can Do Over The Next 12 Months

Longer-term actions often bring the biggest benefits, but they're also where you may need to invest time, money, or external support.



### Review and measure without complexity

You don't need complex dashboards. Pick a few indicators that matter to your business, such as:

Admin hours saved per week

Faster customer response times

Fewer errors and adjustments

Improved staff confidence with digital tools  
(time saved, fewer errors, faster turnaround)

Traditional measures like time and cost savings matter – but it can also be useful to notice human benefits, like reduced obstacles in daily work or improved confidence.



### Stay safe, and respectful of customers and staff

As you use AI more, take extra care where:

Personal data is involved (HR, customer records)

Decisions could affect people's rights or opportunities (recruitment, pricing, finance decisions)

Outputs could cause harm if inaccurate (health, safety, legal)

Good practice includes data minimisation, human oversight, and ensuring accuracy.



### Invest where it makes sense

If your early pilots are working, you might consider:

Upgrading to enterprise versions of tools (for better security and controls)

Integrating AI with your CRM, finance, booking, or stock systems

Commissioning a small piece of tailored automation (especially where data entry is repeated)

The most realistic approach for many SMEs is not "build the most advanced AI", but to choose tools that integrate into existing systems, reduce upfront costs (often via subscription models), and deliver measurable value.



### Embed AI into everyday culture

Simple ways to normalise responsible use:

Add "AI opportunities" as a standing item in team meetings (monthly is fine)

Include basic AI guidance in inductions

Keep a shared log of useful prompts, templates, and lessons learned

Celebrate small wins (and honest learning when things don't work)

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A culture of shared learning and experimentation helps people feel ownership and reduces resistance.



### Keep governance proportionate

You don't need a big board – but you do need basic control. As you scale, consider:

Keeping a simple use case register (what you're trying, who owns it, what data it touches)

Keeping an inventory of where AI is used (even a spreadsheet is fine)

Having a clear escalation route if something goes wrong

How staff should flag problems or concerns

The [UK government AI playbook](#) stresses clear ownership, appropriate oversight, monitoring, and fallback processes, SMEs can scale this down into simple, workable habits.



## Conclusion

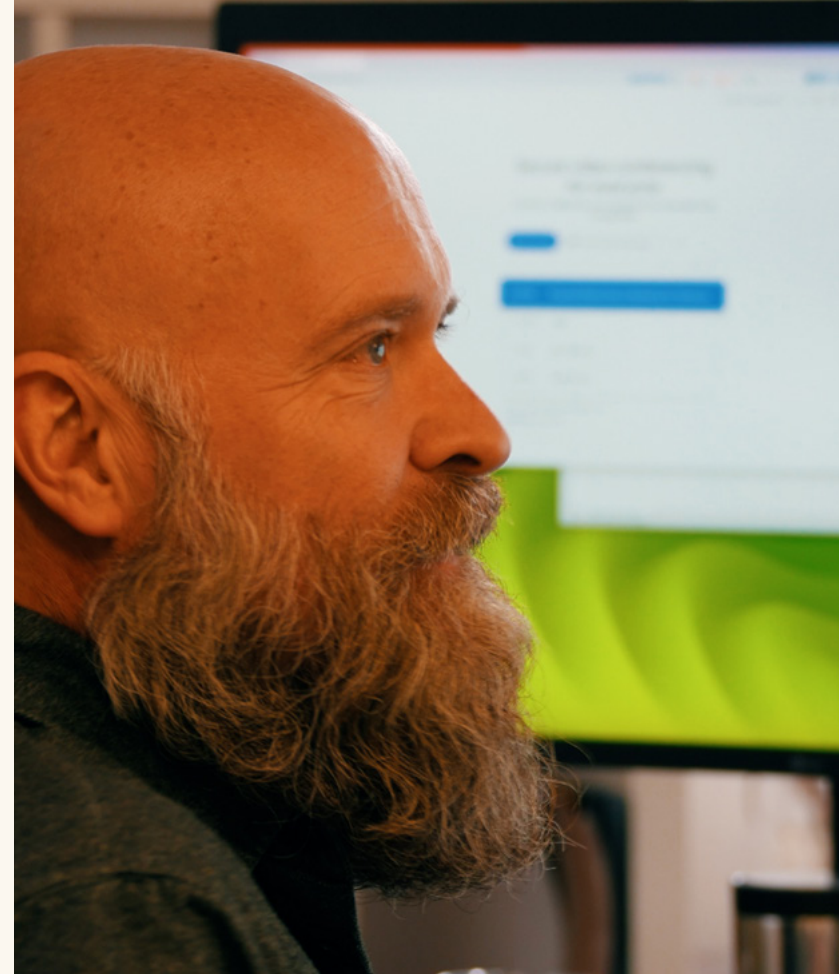
# Progress, Not Perfection

Implementing AI in a small business isn't about overnight transformation. It's about taking practical steps, learning quickly, and building confidence over time.

Flowmoco's case study shows a sensible way to approach it:

Focus on real business outcomes, start with small projects that remove repetitive work or unlock insight, and make sure the foundations (your data and processes) are ready to support what you want to achieve.

 [View the full case study online](#)



For Cornish SMEs,  
the opportunity is clear:

By taking affordable, achievable steps now, you can save time, improve service, and help your team focus on the work that really matters.

To explore further support, take a look at the Good Business Pathfinder resources and consider speaking to the [Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Growth Hub](#) for practical business advice and signposting to local support.

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