

Quantum**Colleagues.**

Adopting **AI**

first steps for SMEs

Empower your people and get more from what you've got – human and AI, working together.

WHO IT'S FOR

Owners & teams, 2–50

EDITION

June 2026 · v1.7

FROM

QuantumColleagues

quantumcolleagues.org · Buy AI for your business. Fund post-AI training for everyone.

01 – WHY NOW

Why now – and **why you**

For the first time, the kind of help that used to belong to big companies fits on your laptop and in your pocket. The only real gap left is between the businesses that have started and the ones that haven't.

54%

of UK SMEs now use AI – up from 35% a year before

British Chambers of Commerce, 2026

14%

of the smallest firms use AI, vs 36% of large companies

ONS-based analysis, 2026

5.6h

saved per person each week, on average, by AI users

Small Business AI Outlook, 2026

Notice the middle number. The big players aren't winning because they're cleverer – they're winning because they have whole teams to figure this out. You don't. But here's the quiet revolution: you no longer need one. The same tools sit waiting for you, at a price a small business can actually afford.

That's the opportunity – and it isn't about replacing your people. It's about getting more from everyone you've got, human and AI together. While adoption among small firms is still low, getting good at this is a genuine edge; in a year or two it'll simply be the cost of doing business. This guide is about using that window – calmly, and on your terms.

A NOTE, OWNER TO OWNER

"I run a small business too, so I'll skip the hype. AI won't replace you or your people, and it won't run itself. But used well, it hands back the one thing you never have enough of – time – and helps a small team punch miles above its weight. It should make your people bigger, not smaller. Start with one job that drives you mad. Then keep going."

Jonathan Clark – Founder, QuantumColleagues

You don't need to be a tech company. You just need to be a **curious** one.

02 – THE OPERATING MODEL

AI is **support and extra capacity** for your human team

The point of AI isn't to replace your people – it's to give them support and extra capacity. Think of it as an extra pair of hands for the team you already have: it takes on the grunt work, while your people bring the judgement, the relationships and the care no machine can.

We call this the **Human + AI operating model**, and it runs in three steps, in order. At every step a person stays firmly in charge – and each step doesn't shrink your team, it makes the team you have go further.

STEP ONE**Automate**

Hand the dull, repeatable jobs to AI – drafting, tidying notes, sorting the inbox – so your people spend their time on work that actually needs a human.

STEP TWO**Augment**

Give every person a tireless assistant: first drafts, research and a second pair of eyes – with human judgement still making the call.

STEP THREE**Amplify**

Help a small team punch far above its weight – offering more, to more people, without anyone burning out.

Start where it hurts

Don't try to "do AI" everywhere at once – that's how good intentions die in a busy week. Pick the single task that wastes the most of your time or energy, and point AI at that. One job, done well, builds the confidence (and the spare hours) to tackle the next.

THE PRINCIPLE

Keep a human in the loop. AI drafts and speeds things up; your people decide, judge and add the human touch a customer actually values. The aim is simple: **replace the drudgery, empower the person.**

03 – DOING MORE WITH WHAT YOU'VE GOT

Where it helps first: **do more** with the team you have

Before AI helps you sell anything new, it quietly hands back hours across the back office – the unglamorous work that fills every week – freeing you and your people for the work that genuinely needs a person. Start here: the wins are fast, the risk is low.

INBOX & DIARY

The daily grind

- Draft replies in your tone
- Summarise long threads
- Sort what actually needs you

Hours back every week

MEETINGS

Notes & follow-ups

- Capture notes & actions
- Draft the follow-up email
- Nothing slips the cracks

No more lost actions

MONEY

Finance admin

- Chase overdue invoices
- Categorise receipts
- Plain-English summaries

Calmer month-ends

CUSTOMERS

Replies & quotes

- Fast, consistent answers
- First-draft quotes
- FAQs handled for you

Faster response times

MARKETING

Content & posts

- Social posts & newsletters
- Repurpose what you have
- Never stare at a blank page

Show up consistently

KNOWLEDGE

Docs & know-how

- Find the right file fast
- Turn notes into procedures
- Onboard new staff quicker

Less stuck in your head

HOW TO CHOOSE

Glance at the six above and pick the **one** that made you nod hardest. That's your starting point – not all six. Master one, feel the time come back, then move along the row.

04 – OFFERING SOMETHING NEW

Where it gets exciting: **offer things** you couldn't before

This is the part most owners miss. AI isn't only about doing today's work faster — it lets a small business credibly offer services that used to need a department. New value, new lines, new revenue.

SPEED AS A PRODUCT

Faster turnaround

Offer a "next-day" or "same-day" tier on work that used to take a week. When drafting and admin shrink, speed becomes something customers will happily pay extra for.

ALWAYS ON

Round-the-clock responsiveness

Answer enquiries, qualify leads and book appointments at 9pm and on Sundays — without anyone sitting up. Being the one who replies first wins a surprising amount of work.

PERSONAL AT SCALE

Tailored service for everyone

Give every customer the kind of personalised attention you used to reserve for your biggest — personalised updates, recommendations and follow-ups, done for the whole list.

BOTTLE YOUR EXPERTISE

Productised know-how

Turn the advice in your head into a tool, audit, report or subscription customers can buy again and again — your expertise, working while you sleep.

What that looks like in real businesses

Consultancy: a paid "diagnostic" report drafted in hours, not days.

Care & support: warm, personalised family updates for every client.

Trades: instant, tidy quotes sent before a rival has replied.

Retail & e-commerce: product descriptions and recommendations at scale.

Professional services: a self-serve answer line for routine client questions.

Any business: a new productised service that didn't pay its way before.

THE MINDSET SHIFT

Stop asking only "how do I do my work faster?" and start asking "**what could I now offer that I never could before?**" That question is where the growth hides.

05 – GETTING CRACKING

Getting cracking: your **first 30 days**

Forget the giant transformation plan. Momentum comes from one small, finished win. Here's a calm, five-step path you can run in a month around the day job.

1 Pick one painful job – not ten

Choose the single task that wastes the most time or drains the most energy. Narrow beats broad every time.

2 Pick one tool and actually learn it

Don't collect apps. Choose one capable assistant, and spend a week genuinely getting to know how to brief it well.

3 Write down two simple rules

What's allowed, and what isn't (e.g. "never paste client details into public tools; a human checks anything before it's sent"). Two lines is plenty to start.

4 Measure the time you get back

Jot down hours saved and what improved. Proof beats opinion – it's what convinces you, your team and your customers.

5 Tell your team – then pick the next job

Share the win, hand the routine over for good, and move to the next task on the list. That's the whole flywheel.

THIS WEEK'S QUICK-START CHECKLIST

- Name the one job AI will take off your plate first
- Choose one tool and block 30 minutes to learn it
- Write your two ground rules and pin them up
- Run it for real on this week's actual work
- Note the time saved – and decide what's next

06 – DOING IT WELL

Guardrails that keep you **safe** (and trusted)

Being sensible with AI isn't about red tape — it's about keeping your customers' trust while you move quickly. A few good habits cover almost everything a small business needs.

DO

- ✓ Keep a human checking anything that goes to a customer
- ✓ Use business-grade tools that protect your data
- ✓ Be honest with customers about where AI helps
- ✓ Write down a few simple ground rules everyone follows
- ✓ Keep a record of what AI does — auditable by design

DON'T

- ✗ Paste client or staff details into free public tools
- ✗ Send AI's first draft without reading it
- ✗ Let it make final decisions about people or money
- ✗ Assume it's right — it's confident, not infallible
- ✗ Spread sensitive work across a dozen random apps

The short version

Treat AI like a brilliant, fast new assistant who's still learning your ways. You'd give clear instructions, keep client confidences off the open internet, and glance over the work before it went out. Do the same here and you get all of the speed with very little of the risk.

A WORD ON DATA

Your customers' information is your reputation. Keep it inside tools built for business — ones that don't train on your data and that leave a clear, checkable trail. "Move fast" and "stay trusted" only conflict if you let them.

07 – BEING HONEST

The gaps – where most owners **get stuck**

It would be lovely to say it's all plain sailing. It isn't. The good news: the sticking points are predictable, common, and entirely solvable. Knowing them in advance is half the battle.

GAP 01**Knowing where to start**

The single biggest barrier isn't cost – it's not knowing where to begin. More than 60% of firms say the same. That's exactly why a one-job, one-tool start works.

GAP 02**Joining the dots**

A clever chatbot here and a writing tool there is a fine start – but the real gains come when your tools, inbox, calendar and records actually talk to each other.

GAP 03**Keeping it consistent**

A one-off win is easy; doing it reliably, every day, to the same standard – even when you're busy – is the hard part. That's where most early enthusiasm quietly fizzles.

GAP 04**Security & compliance as you grow**

What's fine for one person gets risky across a team. Sooner or later you need proper controls, permissions and a record of what happened – without hiring an IT department.

THE PATTERN UNDERNEATH

Notice the common thread: it's the jump from **"a handy tool I use"** to **"work that reliably gets done."** Bridging that gap is the next real step for most small businesses – and the subject of the final page.

08 – WHAT GOOD LOOKS LIKE NEXT

From clever tools to a **dependable crew**

There's a real difference between dipping into AI here and there, and having a coordinated set of AI helpers that quietly run a whole function for you – to a standard you set, with everything checkable.

Most owners begin with a single helper for a single job – and they should. But the businesses pulling ahead are starting to think in terms of a back office that runs itself: admin, finance chasing, customer replies and compliance handled by a coordinated crew that works the way you do, hands the tricky calls back to a human, and keeps a clean record of everything it touches. Not one clever app – a reliable team you didn't have to recruit, and one that makes the people you already have more valuable, not less.

WHERE MOST START

One helper

A single tool taking one job off your plate. The right way to begin.

WHERE IT'S HEADING

A coordinated crew

Several AI helpers running a whole function together, consistently.

WHAT IT FREES

Your humans

People freed from the back office to do the work only people can.

That's the future we're building for small businesses at QuantumColleagues – and it's why we exist as a social enterprise, not just another software firm.

WHY WE DO THIS

Every pound a business spends with us funds **post-AI training for someone else** – in classrooms and community drop-ins. The same belief runs right through the products: technology that **empowers people**, never sidelines them. Buy AI for your business; help fund AI learning for everyone.

09 – YOUR MOVE

You've got everything you need. **Start.**

You don't need permission, a big budget, or a technical background. You need one painful job, one tool, and one quiet hour this week. That's genuinely the whole secret.

The small businesses that thrive in the next few years won't be the most technical – they'll be the ones that pair good people with good tools and simply begin. You already know which job is wasting your week. You already have more capability within reach than any small business in history. The only thing left is to use it. Not perfectly. Just start.

YOUR ONE-PAGE RECAP

- Pick one painful job – not ten
- Choose one tool and actually learn it
- Set two simple ground rules; keep a human in the loop
- Measure the time you get back
- Share the win, then pick the next job

WHEN YOU'RE READY FOR THE NEXT STEP

Let's talk

If you'd like a hand getting started – or want to see what a coordinated AI back office could look like for a business like yours – we'd genuinely love to hear from you.

quantumcolleagues.org · information@quantumcolleagues.org

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Figures cited: UK SME adoption and barriers – British Chambers of Commerce, 2026; business-size adoption gap – ONS-based analysis, 2026; average time saved – Small Business AI Outlook, 2026. Stats are indicative and rounded.