

Majority of Irish and UK SMEs Were Unprepared for AI Adoption, Training Provider Reports

ProfileTree analysis of 1,000 business AI training programmes reveals significant readiness gaps among small and medium enterprises across Ireland and the UK.

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- New analysis from one of Northern Ireland's leading digital agencies has revealed that the majority of small and medium-sized enterprises across Ireland and the United Kingdom were significantly unprepared for AI adoption when they first engaged with structured [AI training programmes](#).

Majority of Irish and UK SMEs were unprepared for AI adoption, training provider reports



New data from 1,000 AI training sessions reveals most Irish and UK SMEs had no AI strategy

ProfileTree, a Belfast-based digital marketing and training provider, has compiled findings from over 1,000 AI training sessions delivered to businesses across Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, and Great Britain over the past 18 months. The data paints a concerning picture of AI readiness among the SME sector, while also highlighting the rapid progress businesses can make once they engage with proper training and strategic guidance.

“Most SMEs come to us with enthusiasm about AI but no practical plan for safe, strategic implementation. The readiness gap is significant.”

Ciaran Connolly, ProfileTree Founder

smaller businesses.

Ciaran Connolly, founder of ProfileTree, said the findings underscore an urgent need for practical, implementation-focused AI education tailored specifically to the needs of

"What we've seen consistently across more than 1,000 training sessions is that most SMEs come to us with enthusiasm about AI but very little practical understanding of how to implement it safely and strategically," said Connolly. "They've heard about ChatGPT, they know their competitors are using AI tools, but they don't have a clear plan for how AI fits into their business operations, marketing, or customer service."

Key Findings from 1,000 AI Training Sessions

ProfileTree's analysis of its AI training programme participants revealed several consistent patterns among businesses across Belfast, Dublin, London, Manchester, and other major UK and Irish cities.

The majority of businesses attending AI training had no formal AI strategy or policy in place when they began. Most were using AI tools in an ad-hoc manner, with individual staff members experimenting with ChatGPT or similar tools without organisational oversight or guidelines.

A significant proportion of business owners expressed concerns about AI safety, data privacy, and the risk of AI-generated errors, but had not implemented any safeguards or review processes. Many businesses were unaware of the potential risks associated with inputting sensitive business or customer data into public AI tools.

Most SMEs had not considered how AI would affect their existing digital marketing, SEO, or content strategies. Businesses were largely unaware of concepts such as AI search optimisation or Generative Engine Optimisation, and had not assessed how AI-powered search platforms like ChatGPT, Perplexity, and Google AI Overviews might affect their online visibility.

The majority of training participants reported that they had struggled to find AI training resources that were practical, implementation-focused, and relevant to smaller businesses.

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Training Provider Reports



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AI training sessions reveals most Irish and UK SMEs had no AI strategy-ProfileTree

Many had encountered AI courses that were either too technical, too theoretical, or designed primarily for enterprise-level organisations with dedicated IT departments.

The AI Readiness Gap in Northern Ireland and Ireland

The findings suggest that businesses in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland face particular challenges in AI adoption, despite strong interest in the technology.

"Northern Ireland has a fantastic SME sector with innovative, adaptable businesses," Connolly observed. "But we're also seeing that many local businesses feel left behind by the AI conversation. The headlines are all about big tech companies and enterprise AI deployments. There's been much less focus on how a 10-person business in Belfast or Newry or Derry can actually use AI to improve their operations and serve customers better."

ProfileTree's training data indicates that businesses in professional services, retail, hospitality, manufacturing, and creative industries are all seeking AI guidance, but with varying levels of baseline understanding. Professional services firms, including accountants, solicitors, and consultants, have shown particularly strong demand for AI training, driven by client expectations and competitive pressure.

Retail and hospitality businesses across Northern Ireland have expressed interest in using AI for customer service, inventory management, and marketing automation, but often lack the technical confidence to implement these solutions without external support.

Manufacturing businesses, including those in the Belfast and greater County Antrim area, have shown interest in AI applications for quality control, supply chain optimisation, and predictive maintenance, though implementation remains limited among smaller operators.

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AI training sessions reveals most Irish and UK SMEs had no AI strategy-ProfileTree Belfast

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The Cost of AI Unpreparedness

According to Connolly, the cost of AI unpreparedness extends beyond missed efficiency gains. Businesses that fail to develop coherent AI strategies risk falling behind competitors, making costly mistakes with sensitive data, and losing visibility in an increasingly AI-mediated digital landscape.

"We've seen businesses come to us after making expensive mistakes," he said. "They've had staff members paste confidential client information into ChatGPT without understanding the privacy implications. They've published AI-generated content full of errors because they didn't have proper review processes. They've invested in AI tools that don't integrate with their existing systems because they didn't plan strategically."

The financial impact of such mistakes can be significant for smaller businesses operating with limited margins. Beyond direct costs, there are reputational risks associated with AI errors, particularly for businesses in regulated industries or those handling sensitive customer information.

ProfileTree's training programmes now include dedicated modules on AI governance, data privacy, and risk management, reflecting the growing awareness among business owners that AI adoption requires proper safeguards.

Bridging the AI Skills Gap

In response to the AI readiness gap identified through its training programmes, ProfileTree has developed a structured approach to AI education that prioritises practical implementation over theoretical knowledge.

The agency's AI training methodology focuses on four key areas: understanding AI capabilities and limitations, developing organisational AI policies and governance frameworks, implementing AI tools for specific business applications, and integrating AI with existing digital marketing and SEO strategies.

"Our approach is fundamentally practical," Connolly explained. "We're not trying to turn business owners into AI engineers. We're helping them understand what AI can and can't do, how to use it safely, and how to get real business value from it without taking unnecessary risks."

ProfileTree, which was recently [featured in the Belfast Newsletter](#) for making its comprehensive AI masterclass available free to Northern Ireland businesses, has delivered training to organisations ranging from sole traders to companies with over 100 employees. The agency's YouTube channel, which has accumulated over 250,000 subscribers, also provides free AI guidance and business education content.

Regional Variations in AI Adoption

ProfileTree's training data reveals interesting variations in AI readiness and adoption patterns across different regions of the UK and Ireland.

Businesses in Belfast and the greater Belfast area have shown strong engagement with AI training, reflecting the city's growing reputation as a technology and digital services hub. The presence of major technology employers in Belfast, including international firms with AI expertise, appears to have created a positive spillover effect, with local SMEs more aware of AI potential and more willing to invest in training.

Dublin-based businesses participating in ProfileTree's training programmes have demonstrated similar levels of AI awareness, though with particular focus on AI applications for financial services and professional services sectors that are well-represented in the Irish capital.

Businesses in regional towns across Northern Ireland, including Newry, Derry, Lisburn, Ballymena, and Coleraine, have shown strong interest in AI training but often face additional barriers including limited local access to AI expertise and smaller peer networks for sharing best practices.

English businesses participating in ProfileTree's training, particularly those in London, Manchester, Birmingham, and Leeds, have shown varying levels of AI maturity, with some ahead of their Northern Irish counterparts and others facing similar readiness challenges.

The Role of Free AI Education

ProfileTree has made a strategic commitment to providing free AI education resources alongside its paid training programmes, reflecting Connolly's belief that widespread AI literacy benefits the entire business community.

"When we made our AI masterclass available for free, the response was overwhelming," he recalled. "It confirmed what we suspected: there's massive demand for practical AI guidance, but many smaller businesses simply can't justify spending thousands on training programmes when they're not yet certain how AI fits into their business."

The agency's free AI course, delivered through its Future Business Academy platform, covers fundamental AI concepts, practical tool usage, and strategic implementation guidance. Businesses that complete the free programme can then access more advanced paid training for specific applications or deeper strategic work.

This approach has proven effective for reaching businesses that might otherwise delay AI adoption indefinitely. ProfileTree has found that businesses that engage with free AI education resources are significantly more likely to implement AI tools successfully and to seek additional training as their needs evolve.

Recommendations for UK and Irish SMEs

Based on its analysis of over 1,000 AI training sessions, ProfileTree has developed a set of recommendations for small and medium-sized enterprises across the UK and Ireland that are beginning their AI adoption journey.

First, businesses should start with a clear assessment of their current AI readiness. This includes evaluating existing staff AI knowledge, identifying current ad-hoc AI usage within the organisation, and assessing the business's data governance practices.

Second, businesses should develop a formal AI policy before expanding AI usage. This policy should cover acceptable use of AI tools, data privacy requirements, quality control processes for AI-generated content, and staff training requirements.

Third, businesses should prioritise AI applications that address specific business challenges rather than adopting AI for its own sake. The most successful AI implementations ProfileTree has observed are those targeted at solving particular problems, such as improving customer response times, streamlining content creation, or enhancing data analysis capabilities.

Fourth, businesses should invest in ongoing AI education rather than treating training as a one-time event. AI tools and best practices are evolving rapidly, and businesses that establish continuous learning practices are better positioned to adapt as the technology develops.

Fifth, businesses should consider how AI affects their broader digital strategy, including their website, SEO, and online visibility. AI-powered search platforms are changing how customers discover businesses, and organisations that fail to adapt their digital presence accordingly risk losing visibility to more AI-savvy competitors.

The Future of AI Training for SMEs

Looking ahead, Connolly predicts that demand for SME-focused AI training will continue to grow throughout 2025 and 2026, driven by accelerating AI capabilities and increasing competitive pressure.

"AI is not going away, and it's not slowing down," he said. "Every month, there are new tools, new capabilities, and new applications that businesses need to understand. The skills gap we're seeing today will only widen unless businesses commit to ongoing AI education."

ProfileTree plans to expand its AI training offerings in 2026, with new programmes focused on sector-specific AI applications, advanced AI strategy for growing businesses, and AI implementation support for businesses ready to move beyond training into active deployment.

The agency also intends to publish further research on AI adoption patterns among UK and Irish SMEs, providing ongoing insights into how the business community is adapting to the AI transformation.

About ProfileTree

ProfileTree is a digital marketing and creative media agency headquartered in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Founded in 2011 by Ciaran Connolly, the agency provides web design, SEO, content marketing, video production, and AI training services to businesses across Northern Ireland, Ireland, and the UK.

Over 14 years in operation, ProfileTree has accumulated more than 450 five-star client reviews and built a YouTube following of over 250,000 subscribers. The agency has delivered AI training to over 1,000 businesses and completed thousands of digital projects for clients ranging from local SMEs to major organisations including Tourism Northern Ireland, National Trust, and Derry Halloween.

ProfileTree has been featured in publications including the Belfast Newsletter and the Irish News for its work supporting local business growth and digital skills development.

For more information about AI training programmes, digital marketing services, or ProfileTree's research on AI adoption among SMEs, visit <https://www.profiletree.com> or contact the team directly.

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