

You know what's funny? in the fast-evolving world of artificial intelligence (ai), small and medium enterprises (smes) are increasingly experimenting with tools such as chatgpt and copilot to automate routine tasks, improve reporting, and enhance customer operations. However, widespread adoption brings a critical gap into focus: the difference between simply using AI and leading AI-driven process transformation.

This distinction was highlighted recently by SME News in a feature exploring how SMEs prepare for automation ownership amid rapid technological change. As the Southern Enterprise Awards 2026 approach, recognising innovation in business, understanding what separates an AI user from an AI project lead—and why both roles matter—is essential for <https://smenews.digital/why-uk-employers-are-training-existing-staff-to-lead-ai-and-automation-projects/> any enterprise aiming to remain competitive.



AI Users: Everyday Experimenters and Operational Improvers

Many SMEs have adopted tools like ChatGPT and Copilot as assistive solutions integrated into daily workflows. An **AI user** typically:

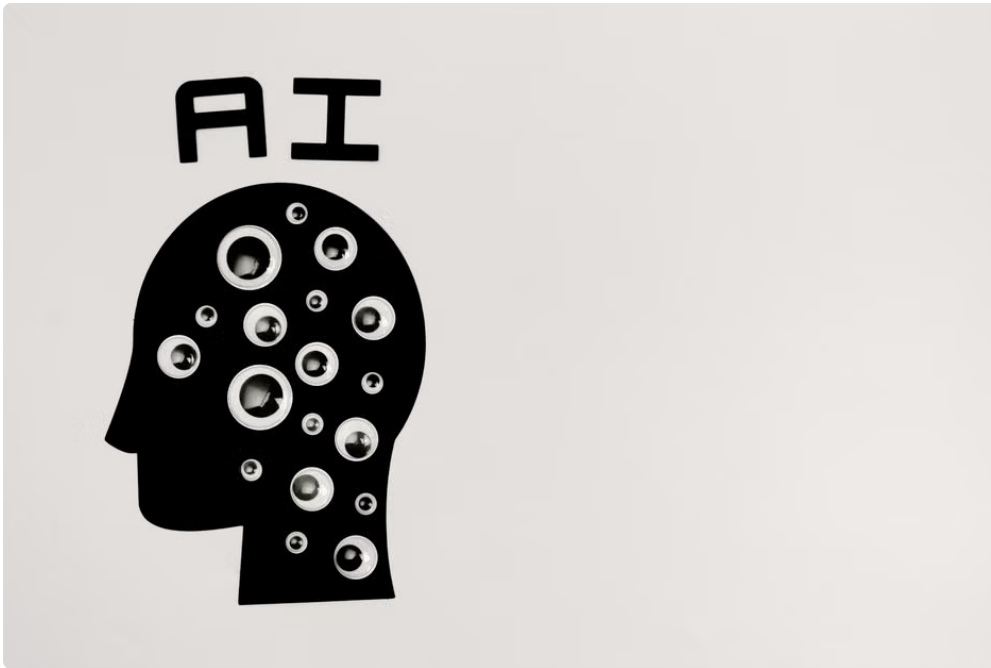
- Engages with AI for specific, often repetitive, tasks such as drafting emails, generating reports, or coding snippets
- Uses AI to enhance productivity without changing the underlying process
- Learns and adapts on the go, often with minimal formal training beyond tool onboarding
- Operates within existing workflows where AI is an aid, not a catalyst for deep transformation

For example, a customer support agent using ChatGPT to generate initial responses saves time but retains the same overall workflow: ticket intake → draft reply → manual review → send. The process remains unchanged; the task is just expedited.

Why AI Users Matter

On the ground, AI users act as first adopters who validate AI's benefits and surface real-world constraints. According to AI Global Media's recent coverage (imgcdn.aiglobalmedia.net), many SMEs find that staff using AI

tools can reduce time spent on routine tasks by 20-30% within months, freeing capacity for more value-added activities.



However, this incremental gain can mask a bigger challenge: relying on AI users without addressing the broader workflow often leads to inconsistent results and limited scalability.

AI Project Leads: The Drivers of Automation Ownership and Process Redesign

In contrast, the **AI project lead** role demands a broader, strategic scope focused on systemic change and sustainable innovation. An AI project lead typically:

1. Works across departments to map current workflows and identify opportunities for automation beyond surface-level tool adoption
2. Leads redesign of end-to-end processes that incorporate AI as a native element rather than an add-on
3. Owns the governance framework, ensuring data security, compliance, and ethical AI use
4. Coordinates training initiatives to upskill existing staff and defines criteria for when new AI specialists are needed
5. Balances technical feasibility with operational impact, managing stakeholders and project milestones

Consider a sales operations project lead implementing Copilot capabilities. Beyond enabling sales reps to auto-generate proposals, this lead examines:

- What parts of proposal generation can be automated versus personalised
- How approval chains and compliance checks integrate with AI outputs
- The training and change management required for reps, managers, and legal teams
- Long-term maintenance and version control of AI-generated content

This holistic stewardship is key to unlocking AI's full potential, something recognised repeatedly by SME News and lauded in innovation awards such as the Southern Enterprise Awards 2026.

The Workflow Gap: Why AI Usage Alone Isn't Enough

A recurring theme from the SME sector is a "workflow gap"—the difference between using AI tools and redesigning workflows to maximise automation benefits. This gap manifests when AI users increase output momentarily, but inefficiencies or handoffs remain unchanged.

Many SMEs, while excited by instant productivity improvements, neglect this question: *"What changed in the workflow?"* Without revisiting the entire process, basic manual tasks continue unnecessarily, sometimes even duplicated to verify AI accuracy.

Common Manual Tasks Still Done by Hand

Task	Reason AI User Approach Falls Short	How Project Leads Address It
Approvals & Signoffs	Still routed manually after AI drafting; creates delays and bottlenecks	Integrate automated workflows with conditional approvals and digital signatures
Data Consolidation for Reports	Users extract data manually, limiting AI's usefulness for dynamic reporting	Automate data pipelines; redesign reports for on-demand AI generation
Customer Follow-ups	Manual review required before AI-generated messages go out, leading to duplication	Define rules and exceptions where AI can act autonomously with monitoring
Template Updates	Users edit templates individually without central version control	Centralise template management integrated with AI content generation

Training Existing Staff vs Hiring New Specialists

Another critical dimension of AI project leadership lies in managing talent. SMEs often face a tension between upskilling their current workforce and recruiting specialised AI experts.

Training Existing Staff has the benefit of leveraging business domain knowledge, helping AI adoption become more embedded and contextually relevant. Change management by project leads ensures staff don't just learn tools, but understand new workflows and automation ownership responsibilities.

However, **hiring new AI specialists** brings in technical skills that may be lacking internally, offering deeper insights into AI capabilities and infrastructure. Yet specialists alone cannot drive organisation-wide change without cross-functional leadership.

Top-performing SMEs balance both approaches. For instance, as reported by AI Global Media, successful AI projects often feature a dedicated lead who coordinates a cross-functional team of AI specialists, process owners, and power users. The project lead facilitates knowledge transfer ensuring AI skills permeate the organisation sustainably.

Summary: Why Both Roles Are Vital

To recap:

- **AI users** accelerate task-level productivity gains with tools like ChatGPT and Copilot but mainly optimise existing workflows.
- **AI project leads** drive holistic process redesign, enforce governance, and steer the organisation towards automation ownership.
- Failing to close the workflow gap limits AI's potential and could result in duplicated effort and stagnation.
- Effective leadership carefully balances training existing staff with strategic hiring to build AI capabilities across the business.

As SMEs gear up for opportunities like the Southern Enterprise Awards 2026, recognising the distinction between using AI and owning its transformation will be a competitive advantage.

So, before declaring an AI strategy, ask: *What changed in the workflow?* And who is accountable for making sure it sticks?

This question separates the genuine AI project leads from everyday AI users, ensuring AI investment translates into meaningful, scalable outcomes.