

Authored by



The Impact of AI on SMBs:

**2025**

# How SMBs Are Adopting AI—and What Comes Next

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# // How SMBs Are Adopting AI—and What Comes Next

Artificial intelligence (AI) has shifted from hype to reality for many small and medium businesses (SMBs). Once considered out of reach for smaller companies, AI is now being embedded in business applications, offered through low-cost or free standalone tools, and applied to everything from marketing campaigns to financial planning. But how far along are SMBs in turning AI’s promise into practical results?

To answer that question, SMB Group conducted the **2025 Impact of AI on SMBs Survey** in June. This eBook dives into the data behind SMB adoption and plans. With responses from 650 decision-makers and influencers across industries and business sizes (3 to 2,500 employees), the study examines how SMBs are currently using AI and their plans for the future.

This eBook examines AI adoption across various business functions, including current and planned use cases, perceptions of AI value, and its impact on the workforce.

For SMBs just starting to experiment with AI or looking to expand their AI strategies, this research can help them make more informed decisions. For vendors and partners, it provides valuable insights into where SMBs are struggling, what support they need, and how to meet them where they are.

In this eBook, ***The Impact of AI on SMBs: How SMBs Are Adopting AI—and What Comes Next***, we explore AI adoption and impact across business functions, current and planned use cases, and workforce impacts. For the sake of brevity, we refer to the entire sample as “SMBs” throughout this eBook.

Our companion eBook, ***The Impact of AI on SMBs: 2025 Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities*** examines SMB sentiments, attitudes, and readiness for using AI in their businesses.



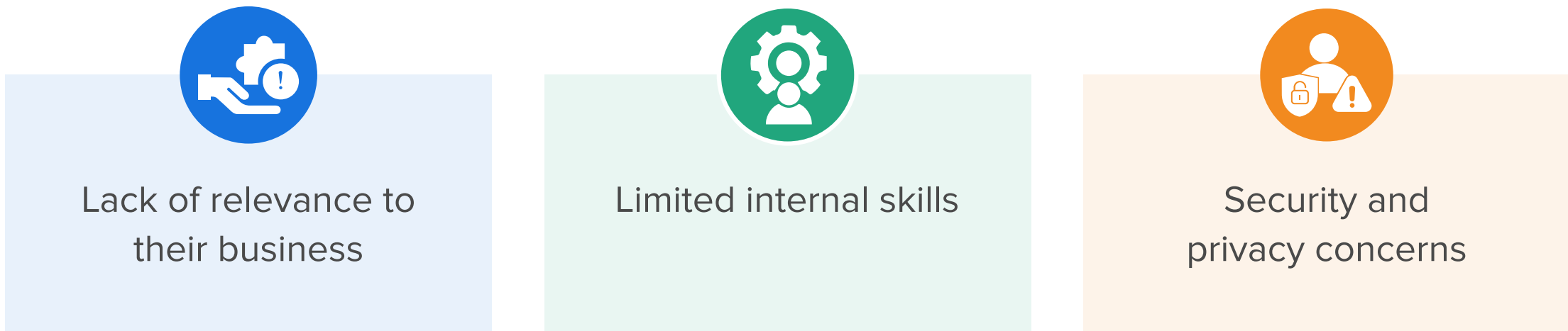
# Top Takeaways

- ➔ **AI use is expanding, but obstacles remain.** Most SMBs are already using or planning to use AI, yet nearly 1 in 5 have no plans. This is especially true in smaller firms. Barriers such as a lack of skills, relevance, or resources hold them back. Simple, low-risk starting points can help more SMBs get on board.
- ➔ **SMBs expect AI's value to grow over time.** SMBs expect AI's business impact to rise significantly in the next two years. Larger firms are seeing the biggest benefits to date, but all company sizes and industries anticipate future gains. SMBs should lay the groundwork now to scale AI more effectively as tools improve.
- ➔ **Both standalone and embedded AI capabilities have a role.** SMBs are using a mix of both standalone tools (like ChatGPT) and embedded AI within apps (like Salesforce or Zoho). Standalone tools are easy to try and great for creative tasks, while embedded tools offer more relevance, security, and automation for daily operations.
- ➔ **Free AI tools are more widely used, but the use of paid tools is rising.** SMBs are more likely to use free AI tools than paid ones, especially among smaller firms. That said, interest in paid tools is growing rapidly across all but the very smallest SMBs. Larger firms are more likely to pay for AI features that offer better performance, integration, or support.
- ➔ **SMBs are willing to pay a premium for AI capabilities in the apps they use—up to a point.** A large number of SMBs (81%) say they're willing to pay for AI in the business apps they already use, with most willing to spend up to 10% more. This shows growing awareness that integrated AI can boost productivity, insights, and outcomes—if the ROI is clear.
- ➔ **AI adoption varies by business function.** Sales, marketing, and customer service lead in AI adoption, while back-office areas like finance, HR, and IT lag. However, many SMBs plan to invest in these areas in the future.
- ➔ **SMBs believe that AI delivers business value.** The majority of SMBs using AI report high or transformational value across multiple functions. SMBs that are reluctant to explore how AI can help their businesses risk falling behind those that figure out how to use AI to their advantage.
- ➔ **AI's impact on jobs has been modest to date but is expected to jump.** To date, 16% of SMBs report they have replaced jobs due to AI, but this is forecast to rise to 25% within a year. SMBs should focus on evolving jobs and reskilling employees to keep teams engaged and productive.

# SMB AI Adoption Is Well Underway, But Some Remain Hesitant

**Adoption of AI by SMBs is growing: A large majority either already use AI or plan to do so.** However, 18% of respondents indicated they have no current plans to use AI. The smallest companies—those with fewer than 20 employees—are significantly more reluctant to use AI than their larger counterparts.

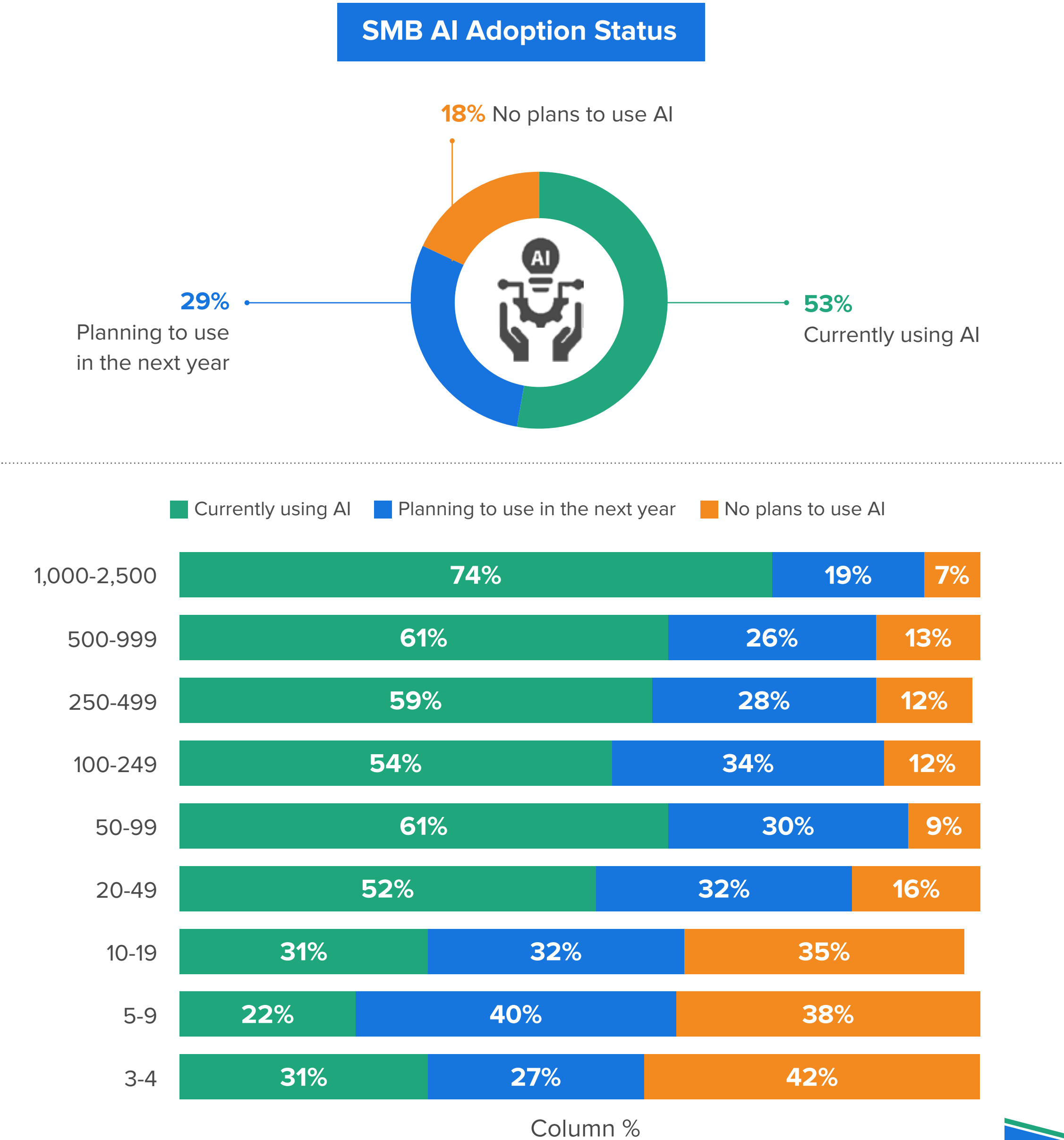
Among the SMBs that are not currently using or planning to use AI, the **top barriers include:**



Concerns are most prevalent among smaller firms, which are less likely to have dedicated IT resources or expertise with technology.


**These barriers point to a critical knowledge and skills gap.** Many SMBs with no plans to use AI may recognize AI as an emerging trend but aren’t yet clear on how to apply it to their specific business problems.


**Vendors can help close this knowledge and skills gap by offering simple, low-risk ways for SMBs to explore AI—such as free trials, guided demos, and educational content tailored to industry-specific use cases.** These efforts can help SMBs build confidence, understand the relevance of AI to their operations, and identify practical starting points.



# SMBs Expect the Impact of AI to Increase Substantially in the Next Two Years

Among SMBs using or planning to use AI, the perceived impact of AI is expected to rise sharply over the next two years. Larger and mid-sized SMBs are experiencing and expecting greater AI benefits than smaller ones:

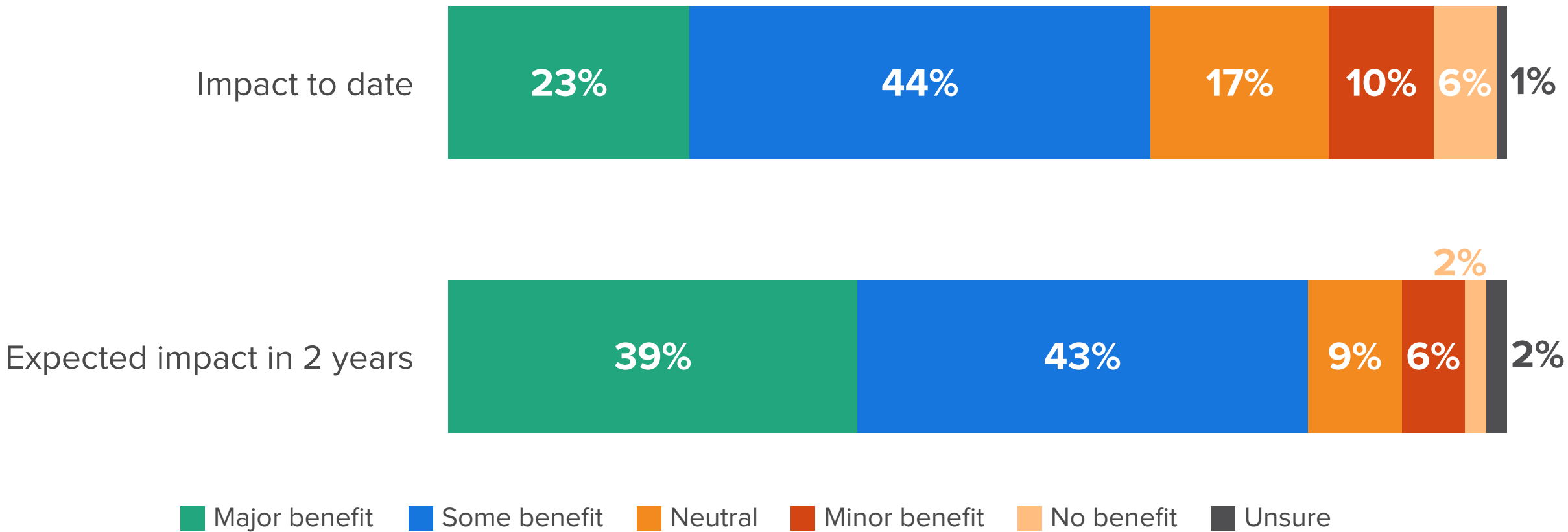
 **SMBs with 100–999 employees report the greatest current AI benefits (39–46%),** while those with 3–49 employees are least likely to report a major benefit (7–21%).

 **SMBs with 500–2,500 employees expect the strongest gains (46% expect a major benefit),** while among 3–49 employee firms, only 31–38% foresee a major benefit.

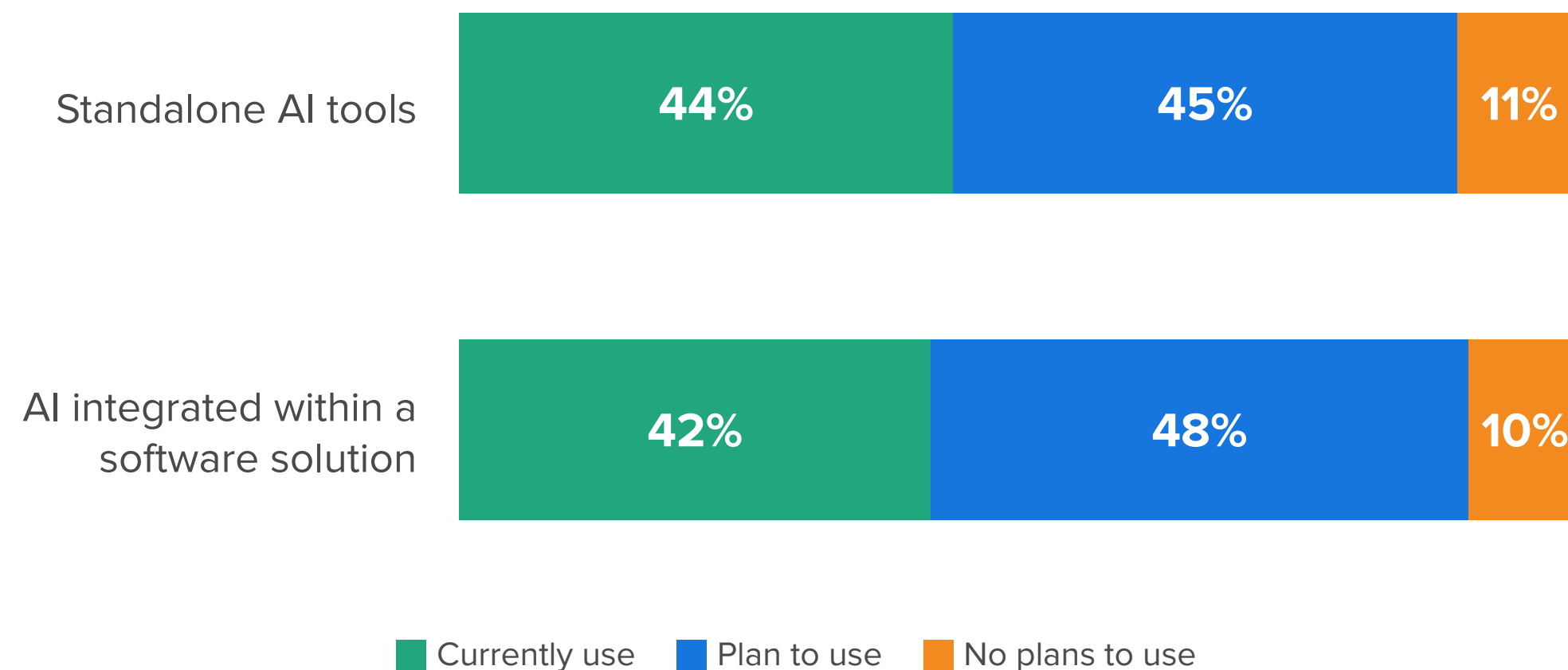
**Industries also show different levels of AI maturity.** IT services, hospitality, and financial services are seeing the strongest returns, while healthcare, education, and professional services trail. However, all industries anticipate greater benefits moving forward—with IT, healthcare, and wholesale/distribution leading in future growth expectations.

**These insights suggest that even if SMBs haven’t yet realized significant value from AI, as future expectations trend upward, they should prepare to scale its use.** Planning this now—through strategy development, training, or tool selection—can help maximize benefits as tools improve and use cases mature.

Vendors should continue to educate SMBs on future capabilities while demonstrating how current tools can deliver value today to help bridge the gap between expectations and reality.



# Most SMBs Use Both Standalone AI Tools and AI Integrated Within Software Applications



SMBs are using both standalone AI tools and AI integrated within business applications. Overall, **most SMBs not currently using one or both of these modes plan to use them in the future.**

**Larger firms are most likely to use integrated AI, while firms with fewer than 20 employees are least likely to do so:** 57% to 62% of SMBs with 500+ employees use AI tools within an application, while 21% of SMBs with fewer than 20 employees use them.

**Both options offer advantages. Standalone tools (for example, OpenAI's ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Anthropic's Claude, etc.) are often ideal for creative tasks,** such as brainstorming, content creation, or customer service scripts. They can be used across many use cases—writing, summarizing, coding. They require no integration with existing systems, allowing SMBs to begin using them instantly through a browser or mobile app. Many providers offer free/no-cost tiers, making it easy for SMBs with tight budgets to experiment.

**Most business applications vendors—from Adobe to Zoho—now embed AI capabilities within their solutions, making them the go-to to support more structured business processes and workflows.** With this approach, vendors integrate AI into their systems and workflows. No separate logins, APIs, or manual data entry are needed. They leverage company-specific data from CRM, ERP, or productivity tools (alone or in tandem with public LLMs) to provide more relevant and accurate results. Security and privacy risks are lower because data is kept within the existing platform's security and compliance framework. It's also easier to track AI-driven efficiency or cost savings within the context of business metrics and KPIs.

# SMBs Are More Likely to Use Free AI Tools But Interest in Paid Tools Is Growing

**Free AI tools are more widely used than paid ones—especially within smaller firms.** Free versions of tools like ChatGPT, Grammarly, and Google’s Gemini often offer SMBs easy access to experiment with and use AI.

However, **there is growing interest in paid AI tools across all but the smallest businesses.** While cost concerns and simplicity drive smaller firms to free tools, larger SMBs are more willing to pay for performance, accuracy, security, and scale. Among larger SMBs with 500+ employees, 46–50% currently use paid tools.

**Business solutions vendors—like CRM, ERP, and HR software providers—often embed both free-tier and premium capabilities into their solutions.** Again, SMBs can start with free tools and upgrade as needed. For example:



**CRM vendors** like Zoho and Salesforce offer AI assistants (Zia, Einstein) with basic features included in core plans, while advanced automation or forecasting tools require upgrades.



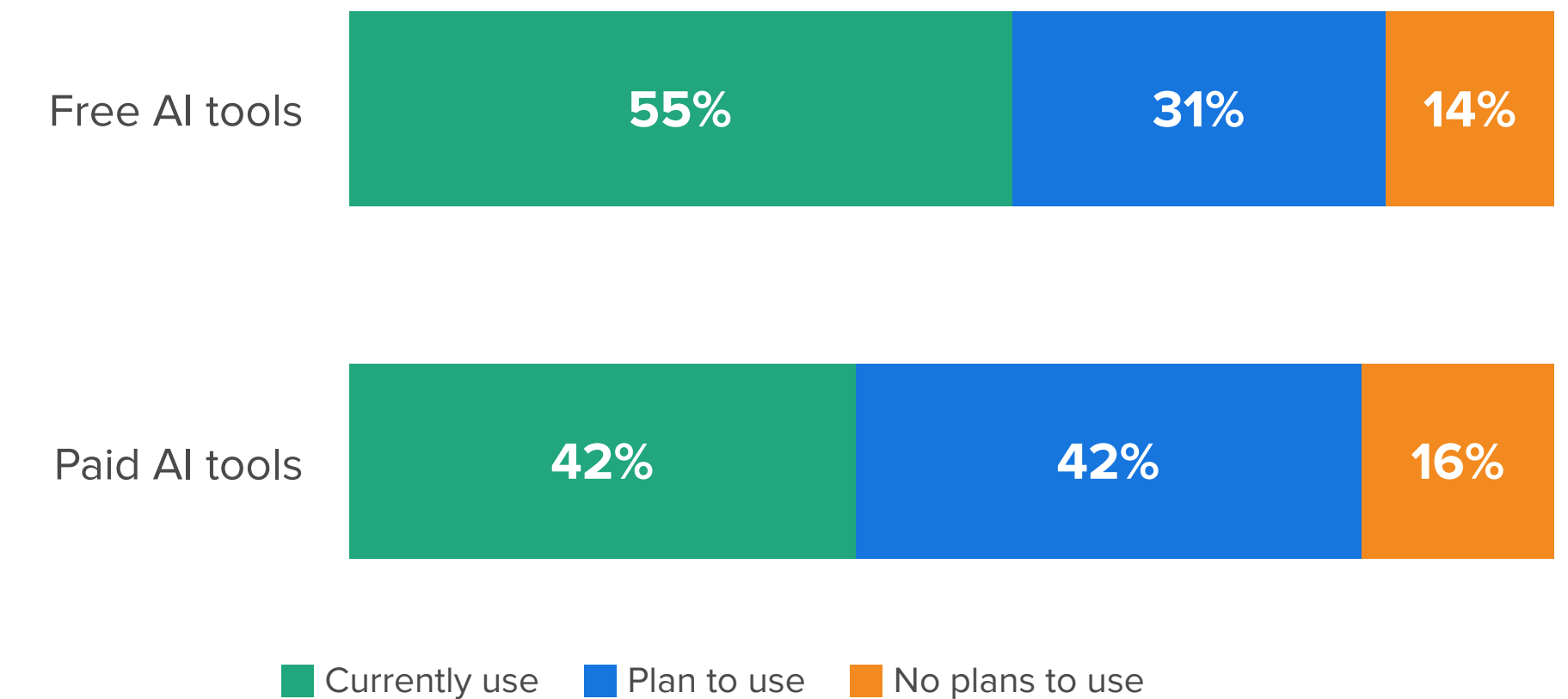
**ERP and financial systems** such as NetSuite and Workday provide predictive analytics, anomaly detection, and intelligent agents—sometimes bundled, other times as add-ons.



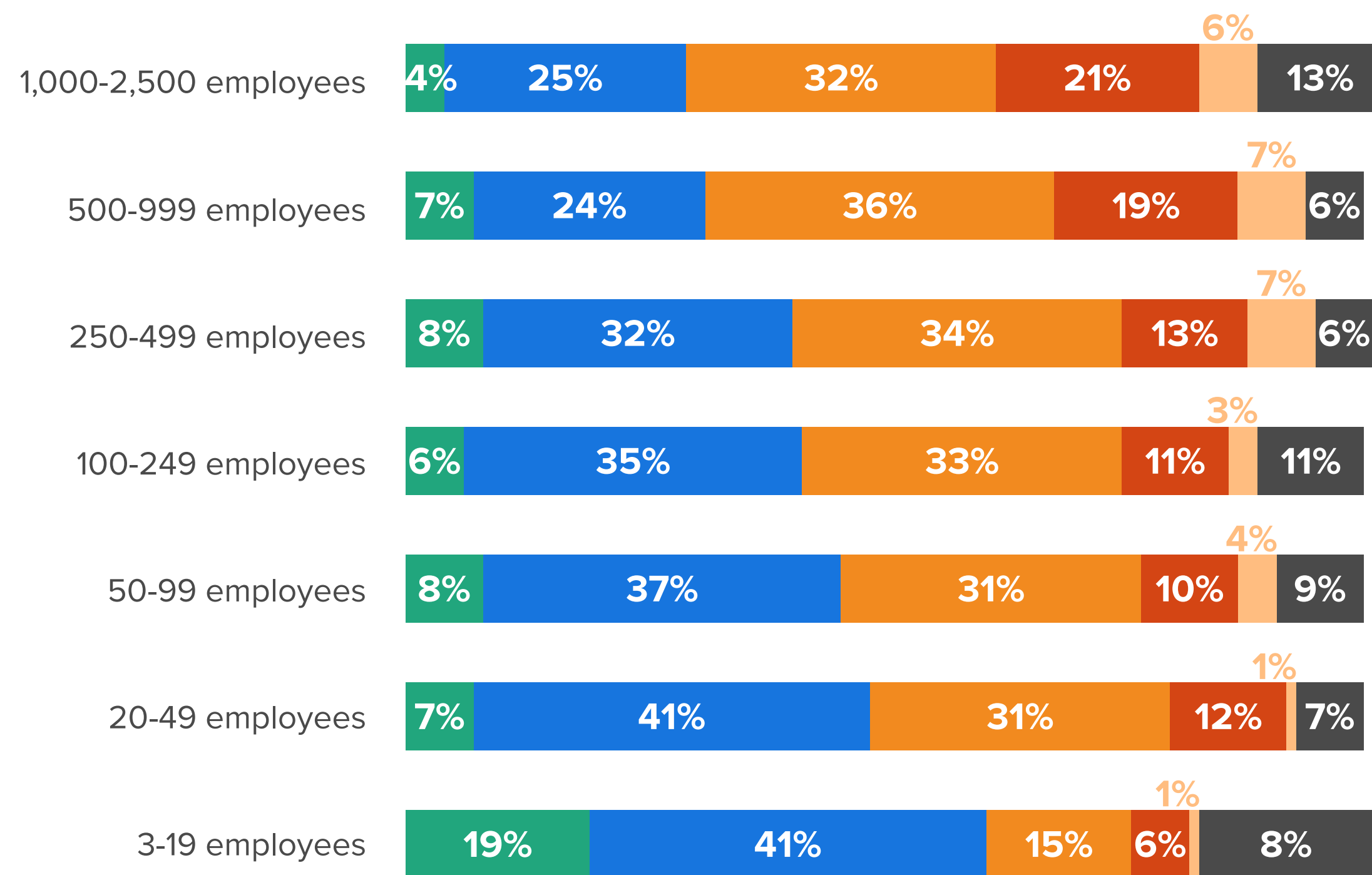
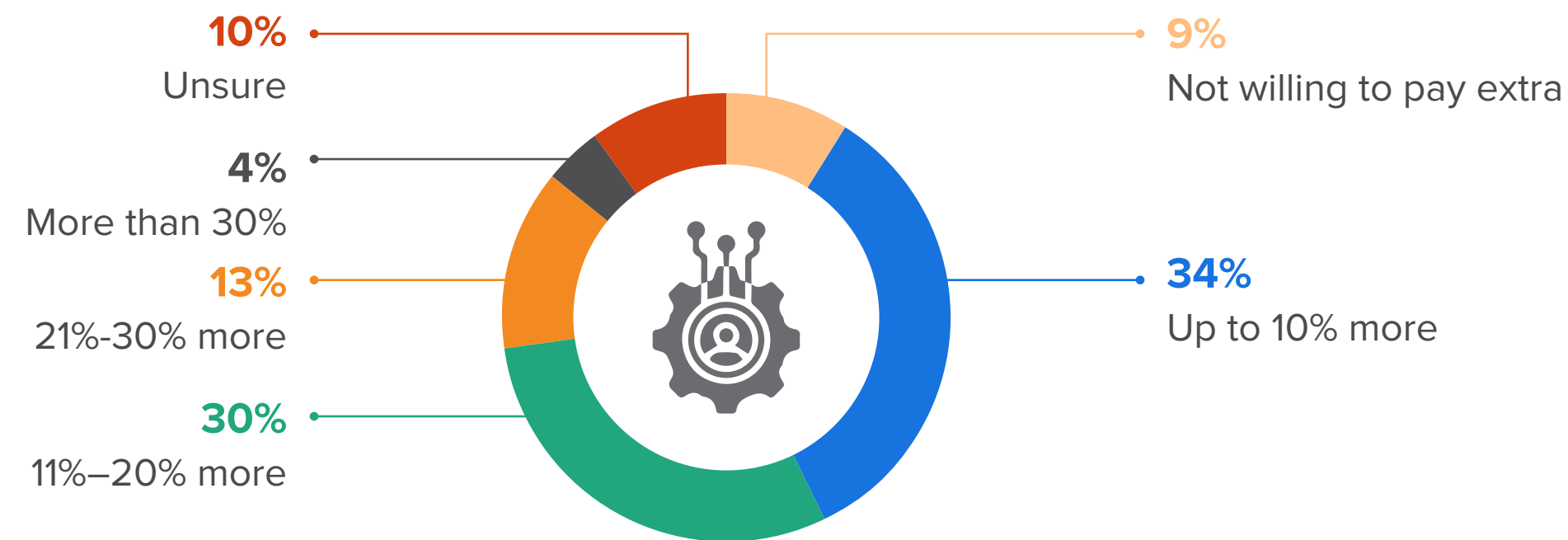
**HR platforms** (for example, BambooHR, Gusto, or Workday HCM) include AI-driven insights for recruiting, performance reviews, or workforce planning, with advanced capabilities reserved for higher-tier plans.

**SMBs should regularly evaluate whether their current AI tools** are delivering on business needs. As AI maturity grows, upgrading to premium solutions may offer clear business benefits.

**Vendors must provide clear guidance to help SMBs understand the value of upgrading.** Side-by-side comparisons, pilot programs, and bundled offerings can assist SMBs to make better decisions.



# 81% of SMBs Are Willing to Pay a Premium for AI Capabilities in Apps They Use



Not willing to pay extra Up to 10% more 11%–20% more 21%–30% more More than 30% Unsure

The vast majority of SMBs are willing to pay a premium for AI capabilities in the business applications they already use. Across all company sizes, the “sweet spot” lies in paying up to 10% more, followed by 11–20% more.

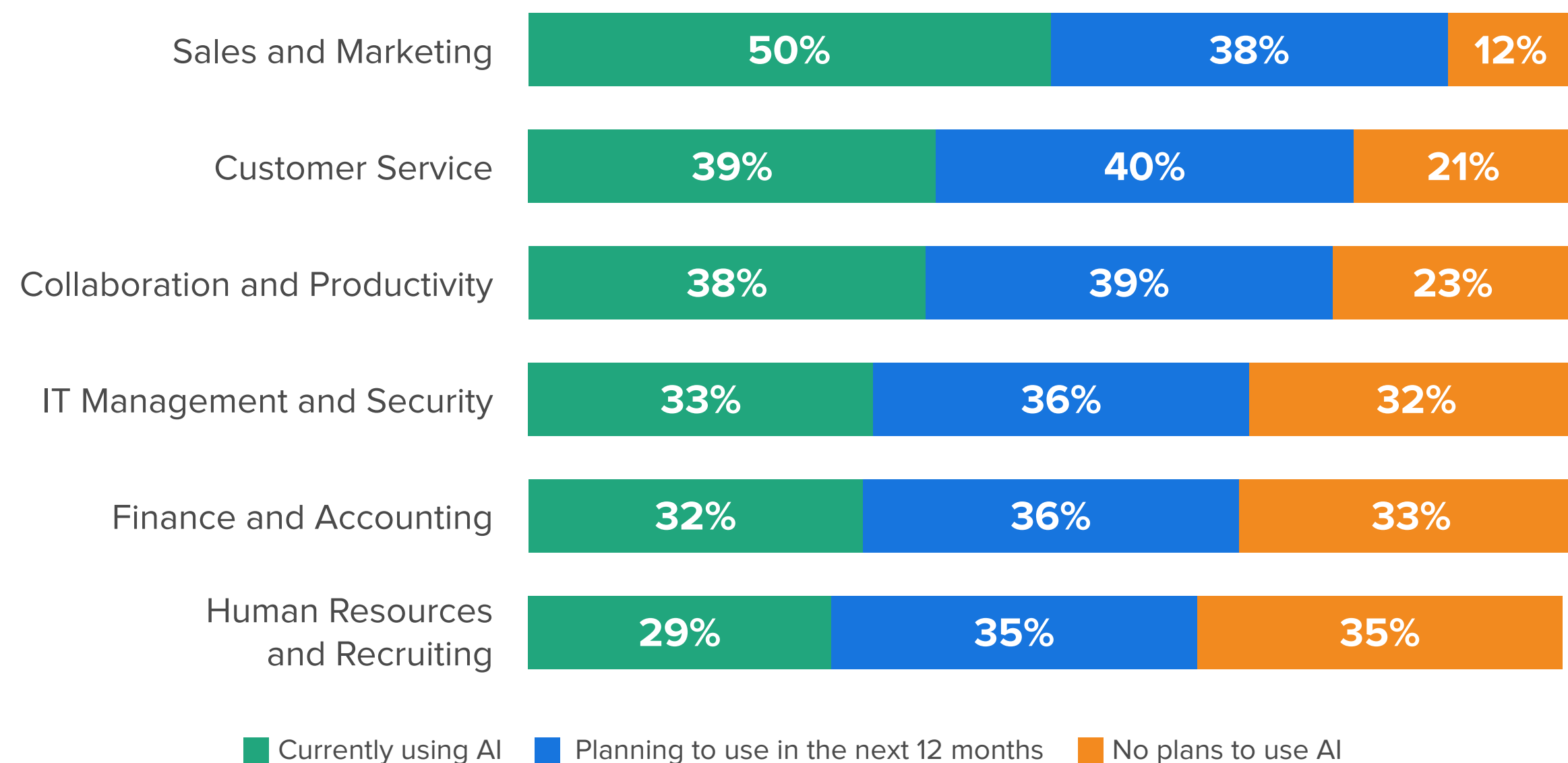
Larger SMBs are more open to paying a higher premium, but even many smaller firms show a strong willingness to invest.

This indicates a growing recognition among SMBs that AI adds value to existing workflows—and using AI capabilities in existing business solutions provides integration, security, and data advantages. If AI features solve real problems or create efficiencies, many SMBs are willing to pay extra.

Although vendors are still experimenting with AI pricing and bundling strategies, SMBs ought to factor AI into their application budgeting and vendor selection processes, and assess the value that AI features—free and paid--bring in terms of productivity, accuracy, or insight generation.

They should carefully evaluate AI features bundled into premium plans or sold as add-ons, and require vendors to be clear about how paid AI capabilities improve WWbusiness outcomes.

# Adoption and Plans for AI Are Strong Across Business Functions



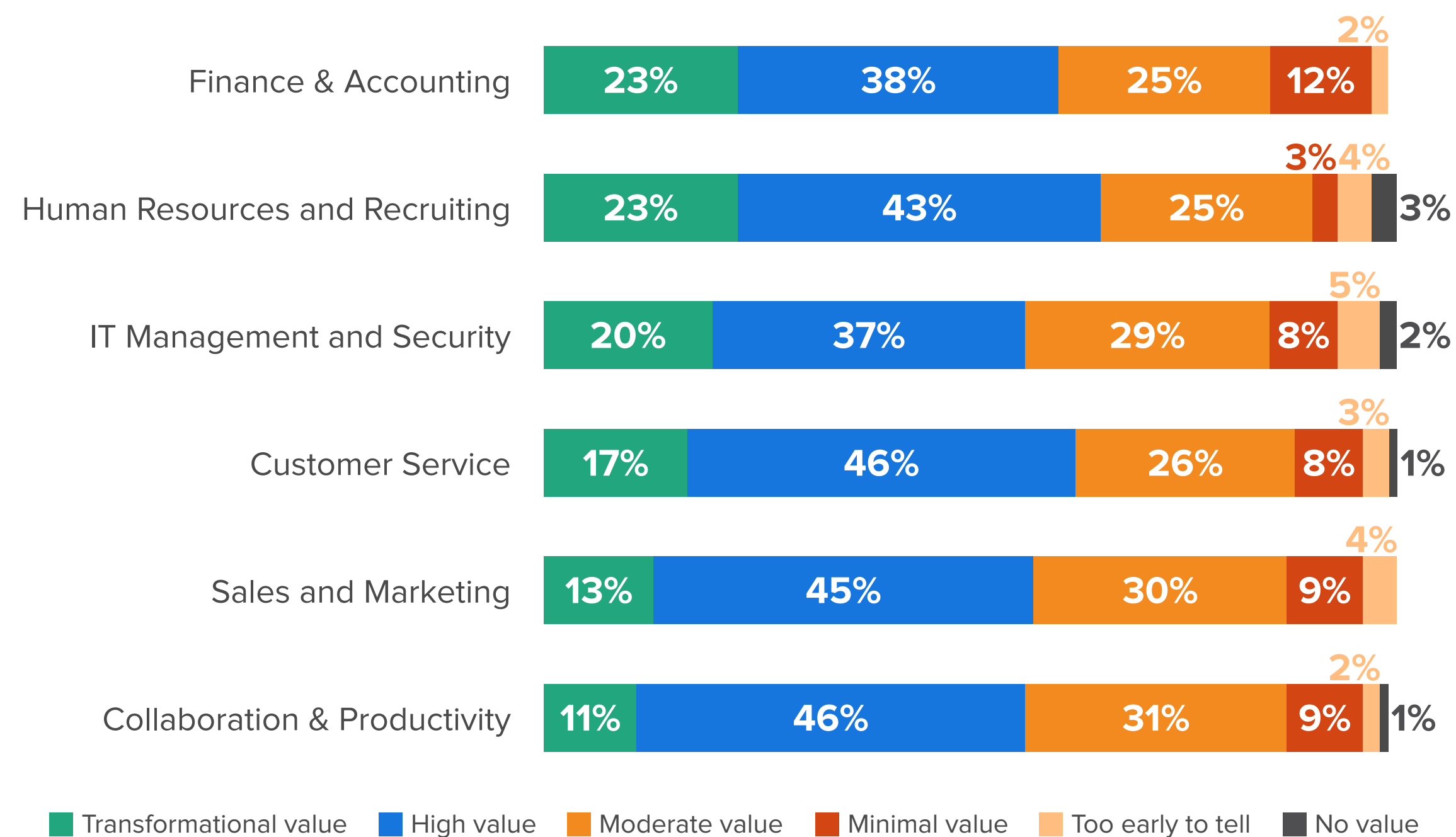
**Customer-facing and productivity-enhancing functions lead AI adoption. This reflects two top SMB priorities: growing the business and improving productivity.** Back-office functions like finance, HR, and IT show slower adoption, likely reflecting concerns about data integrity, governance, or integration challenges.

**Planned adoption is high across nearly all functions.** While finance, HR, and IT have lagged a bit, about one-third of SMBs plan to use AI in these areas.

**Across the business spectrum, AI can help automate essential manual tasks** that eat up time and drain energy, freeing employees to focus on more strategic and creative work. **AI can also surface patterns, insights, and recommendations** to help SMBs make smarter decisions, personalize customer experiences, and uncover new opportunities for growth.

**AI tools and use cases are evolving quickly.** Capabilities available now—especially in embedded AI features within business apps—will expand and become more powerful. As tools grow more capable and better integrated with your business systems, SMBs should think about finding the right fit for the business now, while keeping an eye on how they can use AI for more strategic initiatives over time.

# 50%+ of Current AI Users Say AI Provides Transformational or High Value Across All Business Functions\*



**More than half of SMBs using AI report that it delivers high or transformational value across major business functions.** They see AI providing the most transformational value for IT management and security (57%), finance and accounting (23%), and HR and recruiting (23%). SMBs are most likely to rate customer service (46%), collaboration/productivity (46%), and sales/marketing (45%) as providing high value.

This helps validate the business case for adopting AI for a wide spectrum of functions—not just customer-facing, but also operational and administrative. **AI's power to automate repetitive workflows, surface data-driven insights, and personalize interactions is especially valuable in areas where speed, scale, and precision are essential.** For example, in IT, AI helps prevent breaches through anomaly detection; in finance, it streamlines audits and forecasts; in HR, it accelerates candidate screening and improves workforce planning.

While it's common to begin AI adoption in sales, marketing, or customer support—where gains can be easier to demonstrate—the return may be even greater for back-office functions. These areas often have higher volumes of structured data, standardized processes, and compliance needs—all scenarios where AI thrives.

**To fully unlock this potential, SMBs need clear visibility into AI's return on investment.** Vendors that offer real-world performance benchmarks, before-and-after impact assessments, and ROI calculators can help SMBs better plan their AI investments.



# AI's Impact on Jobs Has Been Modest, But Is Expected to Jump

To date, only 16% of SMBs say AI has replaced jobs, but that figure is expected to rise to 25% within 12 months. This signals a growing awareness of AI's potential to automate repeatable, structured tasks as tools become more capable and affordable.

Among SMBs that have replaced jobs with AI, customer-facing roles are most apt to be impacted, including customer service (26%), marketing (26%), and sales (23%). This aligns with data that shows these functions lead AI adoption.

Looking ahead, SMBs expect the most job impact in: IT (55%), accounting/finance (49%), sales (48%), customer service (47%), and logistics/supply chain (47%).

Some of these areas often involve routine interactions that AI can handle via chatbots, automated emails, or generative tools. Others are typically structured and process-heavy, making them ideal for automation.

In contrast, functions with less near-term risk tend to require more nuanced human judgment: For instance, in HR, 20% of SMBs report current impact; 33% expect future changes.

AI adoption is rising, and its impact on jobs will accelerate. SMBs that plan ahead will be better positioned to adapt and thrive.

Has replaced employee jobs

16%

78%

6%

Is likely to replace employee jobs in the next 12 months

25%

61%

14%

Yes No Don't know



### Focus on job evolution, not just replacement:

Use AI to free up staff for more valuable work and reskill where needed.



### Communicate clearly:

Transparency about AI's role helps maintain employee trust and engagement.

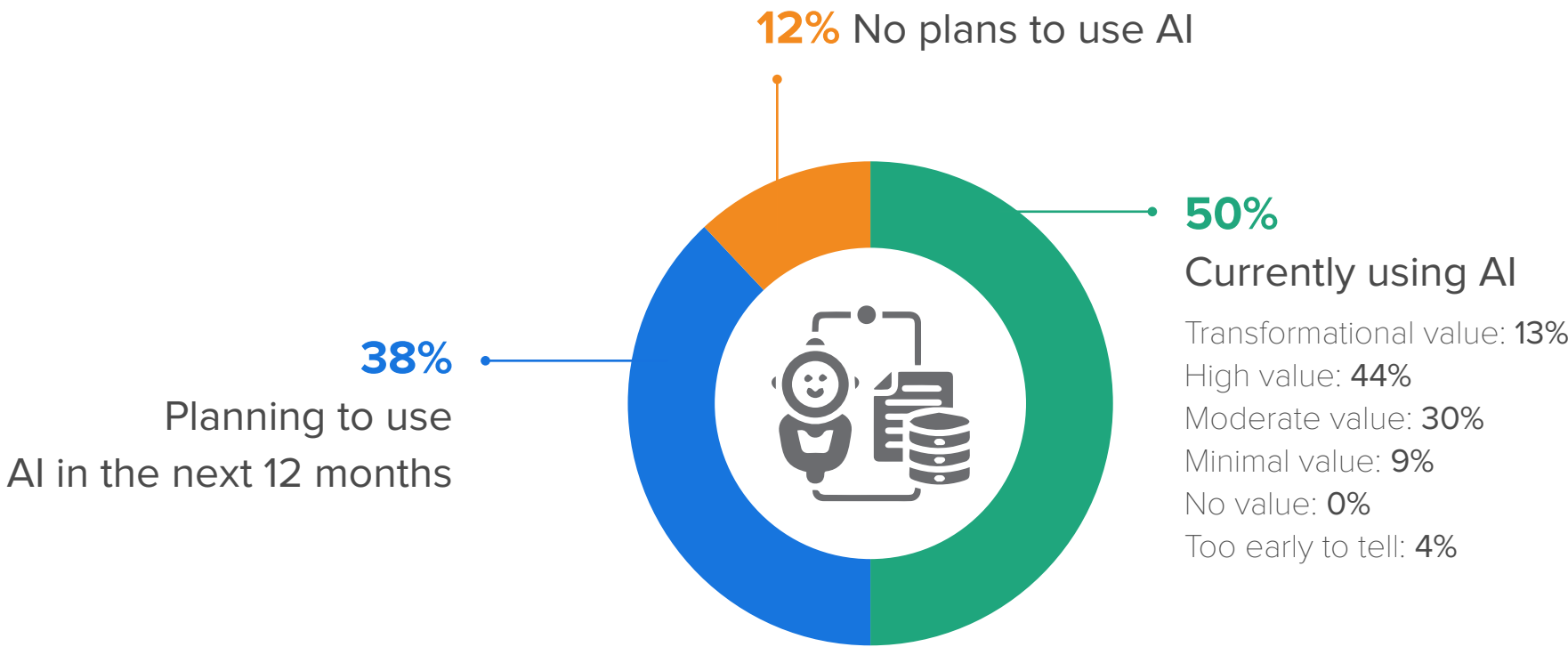


### Prepare now:

Invest in training and workflow changes in functions most likely to be affected.

# AI Trends in Sales and Marketing

## SMB Use and Plans for AI and Perceived Value Among Current Users



**AI is reshaping how SMBs approach sales and marketing, with strong adoption and growing evidence of value.** Half (50%) of SMBs are already using AI in these functions, and another 38% plan to do so in the next 12 months—leaving only 12% with no plans. Among current users, 44% report that AI delivers high value, 30% moderate value, and 13% transformational value. Only a small share (9%) see minimal value, while 4% say it’s too early to tell.

**Larger SMBs are leading both in adoption and perceived value.** 68% of companies with 500–999 employees and 61% of those with 1,000–2,500 employees report high value from AI in sales and marketing. Only 28% of SMBs with 3–19 employees currently use AI, and none report transformational value.

**The most common current use cases today** include chatbots and virtual assistants (49%), personalized email and ad targeting (48%), and content generation or copywriting (48%). These applications help streamline repetitive tasks, improve personalization, and boost campaign productivity.

**Looking ahead, SMBs are extending the focus to include AI tools that enhance strategy and revenue generation.** The top three planned use cases over the next year include dynamic pricing and quoting (44%), predictive analytics and segmentation (43%), and lead scoring (43%). This signals a move beyond automation to more advanced capabilities that drive customer insights and smarter decision-making.

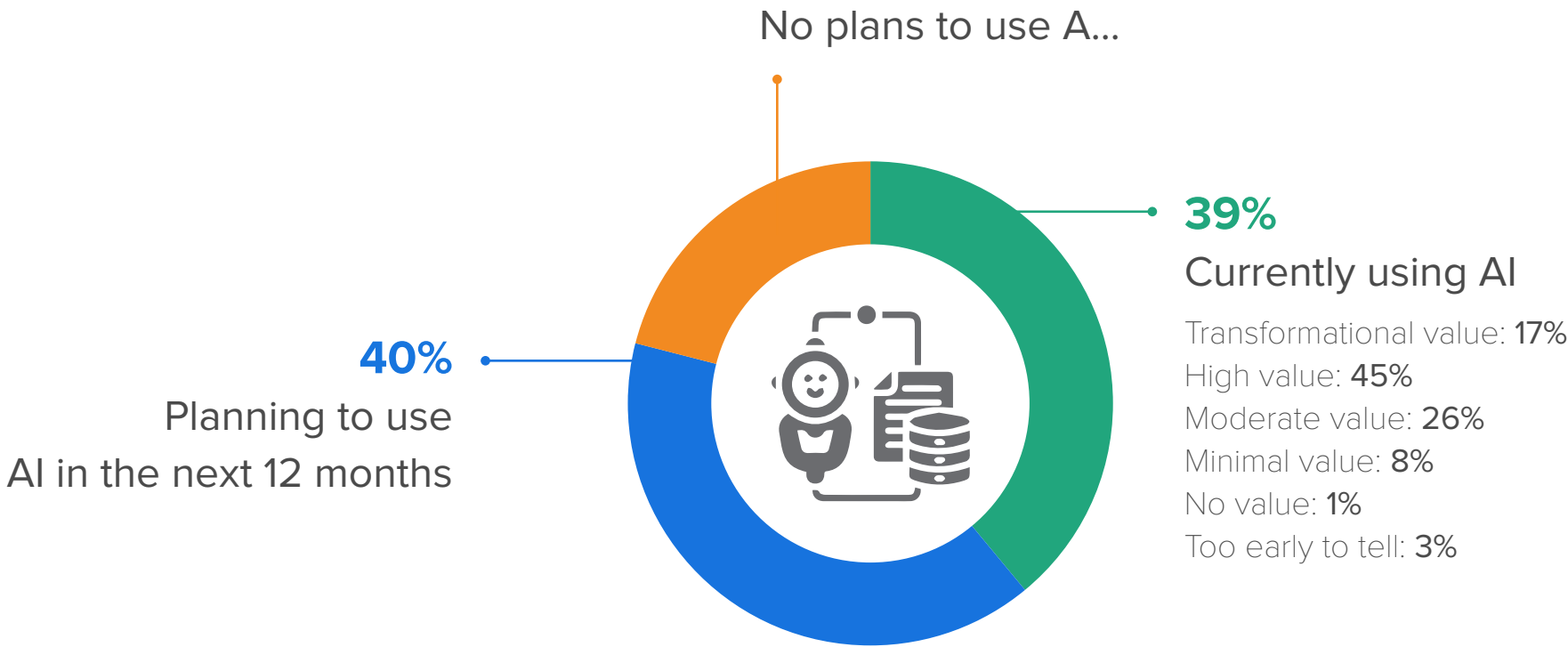
**The data shows that AI is becoming essential for competitive advantage.** Vendors can support this journey with tools that balance ease of use with measurable ROI and provide guidance in adding new capabilities as needed.

## Top 3 Current and Planned AI Apps: Sales and Marketing

Top 3 current AI apps	Top 3 planned AI apps
Chatbots and virtual assistants – <b>49%</b>	Dynamic pricing and quoting – <b>44%</b>
Personalized email/ad targeting – <b>48%</b>	Predictive analytics and segmentation – <b>43%</b>
Content generation and copywriting – <b>48%</b>	Lead scoring – <b>43%</b>

# AI Trends in Customer Service

## SMB Use and Plans for AI and Perceived Value Among Current Users



Just over two-thirds (39%) of SMBs report currently using AI in customer service, and an additional 40% plan to adopt it within the next year. Only 21% have no plans to use AI in this area.

Among current users, 45% say AI delivers high value, and 17% say it delivers transformational value. Only 9% report minimal or no value.

The most common current applications center on automating communication and content. These tools, which include chatbots and virtual assistants (51%), personalized email/ad targeting (51%), and content generation (47%), help SMBs handle high volumes of customer interactions more efficiently while maintaining personalization. **SMBs just starting out in this area are likely to benefit** from these types of low-friction tools, which deliver fast ROI and free up human agents for more complex tasks.

## Top 3 Current and Planned AI Apps: Customer Servic

Top 3 current AI apps	Top 3 planned AI apps
Chatbots and virtual assistants – 51%	Self-service knowledge bases – 49%
Personalized email/Ad targeting – 51%	Automated ticketing and case routing – 46%
Content generation and copywriting – 47%	Predictive analytics and segmentation – 45%

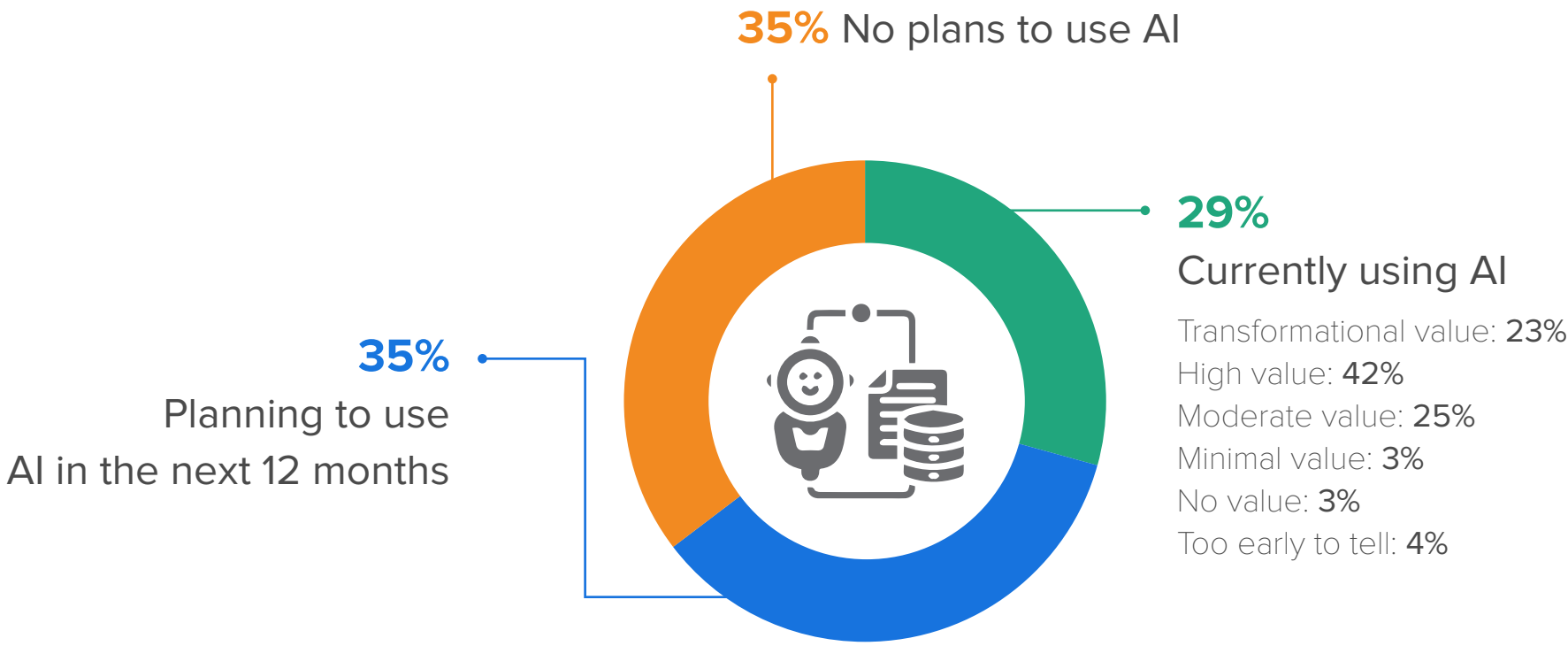
Planned investments show a shift toward more advanced capabilities to optimize internal processes and proactively identify customer needs. Top future use cases include self-service knowledge bases (49%), automated ticketing and case routing (46%), and predictive analytics and segmentation (45%). **Those already using AI can consider** adding these types of tools to help elevate service quality and reduce costs.

This indicates that **SMBs are starting to expand AI use in customer approach from a primarily reactive to a more proactive approach.** Early AI tools are reducing repetitive workloads and response time, while planned initiatives aim to deliver smarter, faster, and more scalable support.

Vendors can **support this journey with turnkey tools, success stories, and guided implementation paths.**

# AI Trends in Human Resources and Recruitment

## SMB Use and Plans for AI and Perceived Value Among Current Users\*



**Adoption of AI in human resources and recruitment is still emerging among SMBs.** 29% say they are currently using AI and another 35% are planning to adopt it in the next 12 months.

**About one-third (35%) of respondents report having no plans to use AI in HR, the highest percentage among functions surveyed.** Yet, among those using AI, **perceived value is strong:** 23% report transformational value, and 42% see high value.

**Early adoption focuses on improving hiring and employee development processes.** The most common current use cases include resume screening and candidate matching (52%), performance reviews (48%), and personalized learning and development (48%). These tools help streamline HR workflows, reduce bias, and personalize career growth opportunities.

**Looking ahead, planned investments suggest SMBs are planning to incorporate strategic workforce optimization capacities.** Top planned applications include predictive analytics for workforce planning (47%), optimizing compensation and benefits (47%), and analyzing employee feedback and sentiment (46%).

**The high percentage of SMBs not using AI in HR likely reflects the function’s historically manual nature and limited familiarity with advanced tools.** However, the strong perceived value among users indicates significant upside potential.

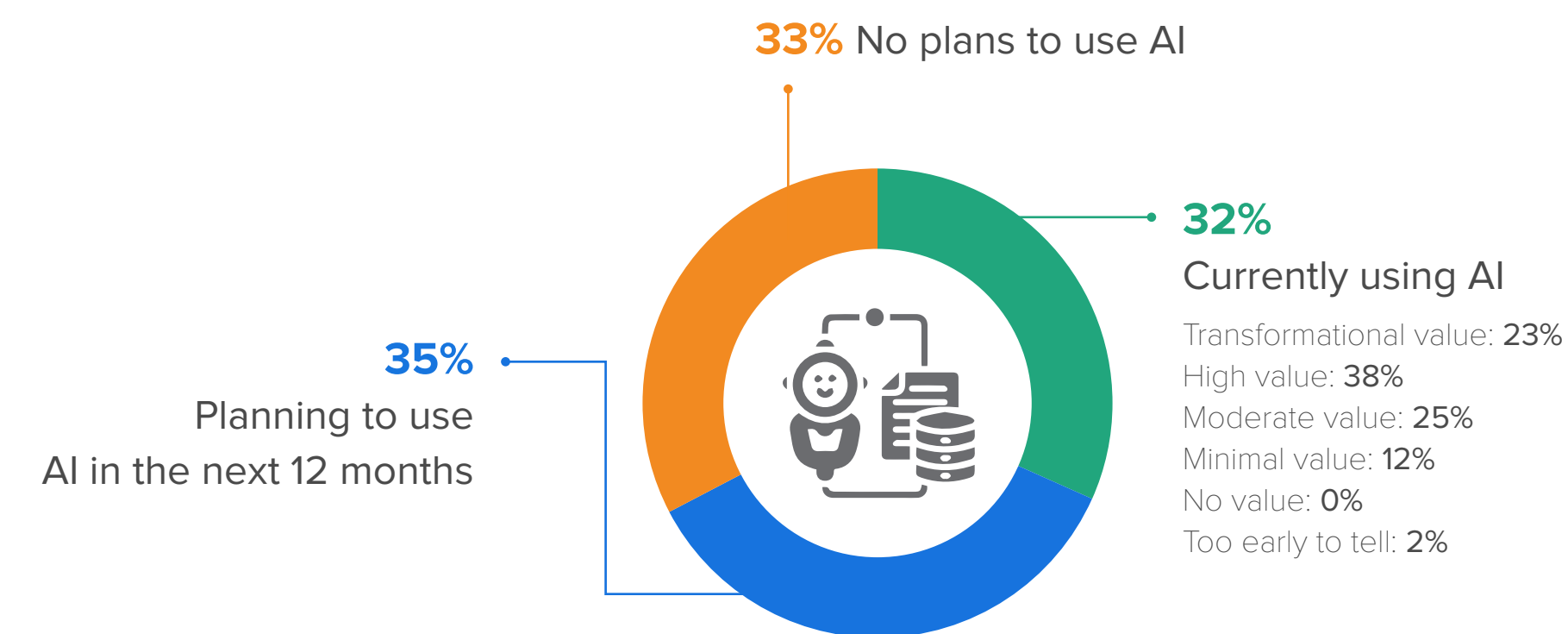
Vendors should **focus on demystifying AI’s role in HR through education, simple onboarding, and success stories.** Highlighting use cases that improve hiring quality, enhance employee experience, and inform strategic decisions can help SMBs see AI not just as a back-office tool but as a driver of workforce resilience and satisfaction.

## Top 3 Current and Planned AI Apps: Human Resources

Top 3 current AI apps	Top 3 planned AI apps
Resume screening/candidate matching – <b>52%</b>	Predictive analytics for workforce planning – <b>47%</b>
Performance reviews – <b>48%</b>	Optimizing compensation and benefits – <b>47%</b>
Personalized learning and development – <b>48%</b>	Employee feedback/sentiment analysis – <b>46%</b>

# AI Trends in Accounting and Financials

## SMB Use and Plans for AI and Perceived Value Among Current Users\*



**AI adoption in accounting and finance is growing steadily among SMBs.** As of now, 32% of SMBs are using AI in this area. Another 35% plan to adopt AI in the next year, leaving 33% with no current plans.

**About two-thirds of those currently using AI for these functions report high or transformational value**—with 23% citing transformational impact.

**SMBs currently using AI are primarily leveraging it for streamlining transactional tasks**, such as data entry and reconciliation (49%), invoice processing (47%), and regulatory/financial reporting (44%).

**Planned investments are broadening to include more planning capabilities**, including budgeting and forecasting (50%), predictive revenue/profitability analysis (49%), and cash flow optimization (47%).

**This reflects rising confidence in AI’s ability to deliver more strategic value**, moving it from an automation tool to a key enabler of financial insight and agility.

AI tools that automate repetitive tasks to quickly gain efficiencies are a natural starting point for most SMBs. As experience grows, they can add additional AI capabilities to assist with budgeting, planning, and forecasting.

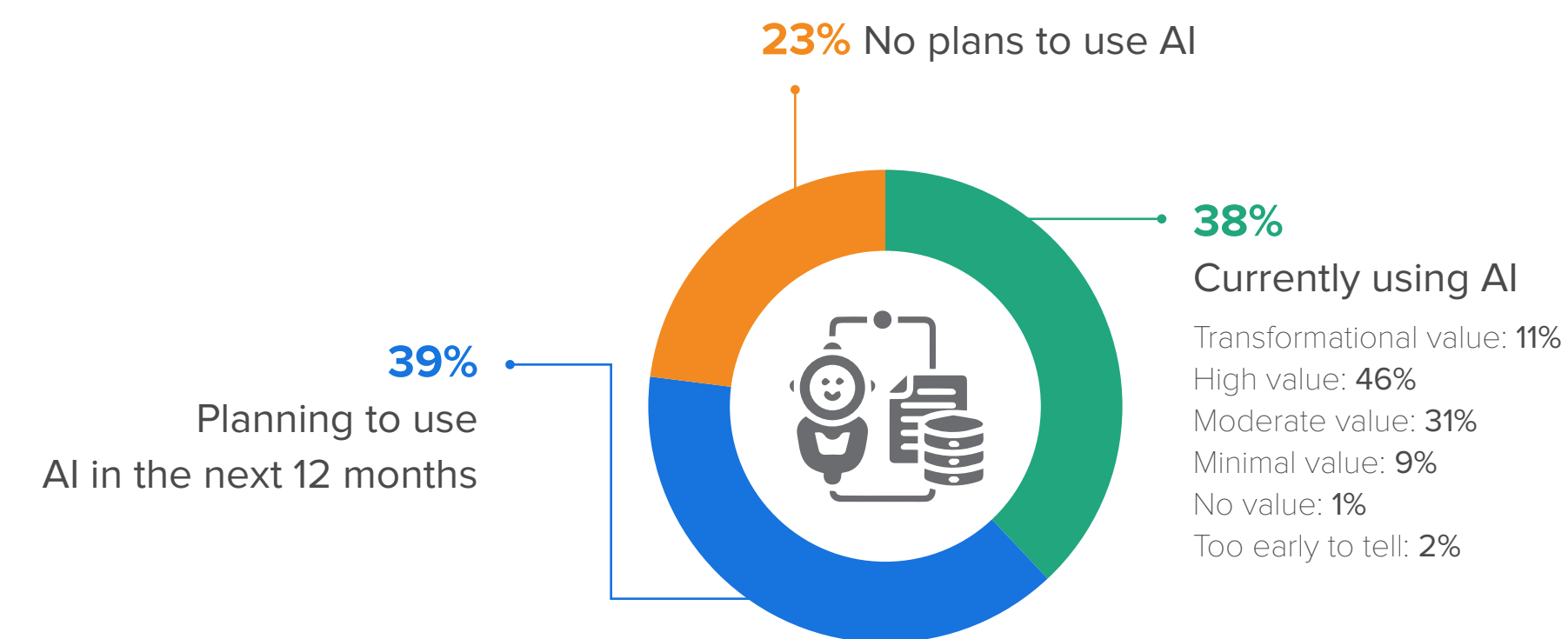
Vendors can help by **highlighting case studies that showcase pragmatic results for firms of all sizes and delivering pre-packaged solutions that address both transactional and predictive use cases**. Education and onboarding tools are required to help smaller firms overcome adoption and skills gaps.

## Top 3 Current and Planned AI Apps: Accounting and Financials

Top 3 current AI apps	Top 3 planned AI apps
Data entry and reconciliation – 49%	Budgeting and forecasting – 50%
Invoice processing – 47%	Predictive revenue and profitability analysis – 49%
Regulatory and financial reporting – 44%	Cash flow optimization – 47%

# AI Trends in Collaboration and Productivity

## SMB Use and Plans for AI and Perceived Value Among Current Users\*



Slightly more than one-third (**38%**) of SMBs are already using AI for collaboration and productivity tasks, while 39% plan to adopt within 12 months. Just 23% have no plans to use AI in this area.

Among current users, **77% report moderate to high value**, with **46% citing high value** and **11% noting transformational impact**.

The most common current uses focus on streamlining communication, such as **creating email content (51%)**, **summarizing messages (49%)**, and **smart replies/autocomplete (49%)**.

Future plans shift toward **proactive applications**, such as suggesting agendas (45%), automating meeting scheduling (43%), and analyzing sentiment (43%) to support engagement and morale.

## Top 3 Current and Planned AI Apps: Collaboration and Productivity

Top 3 current AI apps	Top 3 planned AI apps
Create email content – <b>51%</b>	Suggest agendas based on previous meetings – <b>45%</b>
Produce summaries/highlight action items from emails – <b>49%</b>	Automate meeting scheduling – <b>43%</b>
Respond to emails with smart replies and auto-complete – <b>49%</b>	Analyze sentiment to gauge morale and engagement – <b>43%</b>

SMBs are deriving tangible benefits from using AI to tackle repetitive and time-consuming collaboration tasks. Even basic tools can deliver value by saving time and improving focus.

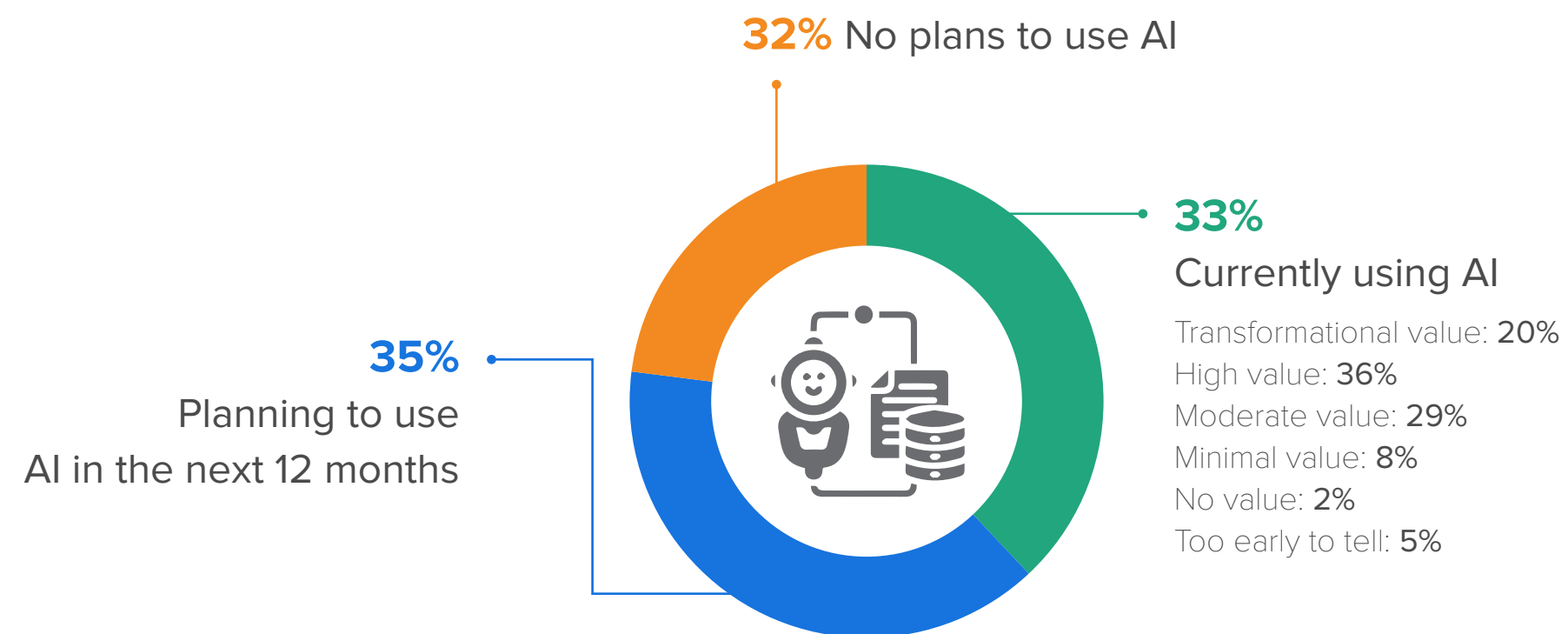
SMBs already using AI are poised to move beyond reactive automation to **more predictive and strategic applications** that support employee well-being and team effectiveness.

SMBs planning to use AI tools will start with **low-risk entry points** such as meeting summaries or smart replies to build familiarity and comfort with AI-aided workflows.

Vendors have a clear opportunity to **grow adoption among these SMBs by offering simplified onboarding, built-in education, and cost-effective AI tiers**.

# AI Trends in IT Management and Security

SMB Use and Plans for AI and Perceived Value Among Current Users\*



Top 3 Current and Planned AI Apps: IT Management and Security

Top 3 current AI apps	Top 3 planned AI apps
Chatbots for IT support and helpdesk automation – 49%	Network optimization – 49%
Automated IT monitoring and incident management – 47%	Compliance and risk management – 49%
AI for compliance reporting and audits – 46%	Cloud usage and cost management / self-healing IT systems – 48% (tied)

One-third (33%) of SMBs are currently using AI for IT management and security, while another 35% plan to adopt in the next 12 months.

About half (56%) of current users report high or transformational value—indicating strong ROI in this area.

Today’s focus is operational automation. IT support chatbots (49%), incident monitoring (47%), and compliance reporting (46%) lead in adoption.

Future plans include more strategic optimization in areas like network optimization and compliance/risk management (49% each), and cloud cost management and self-healing IT (48% each).

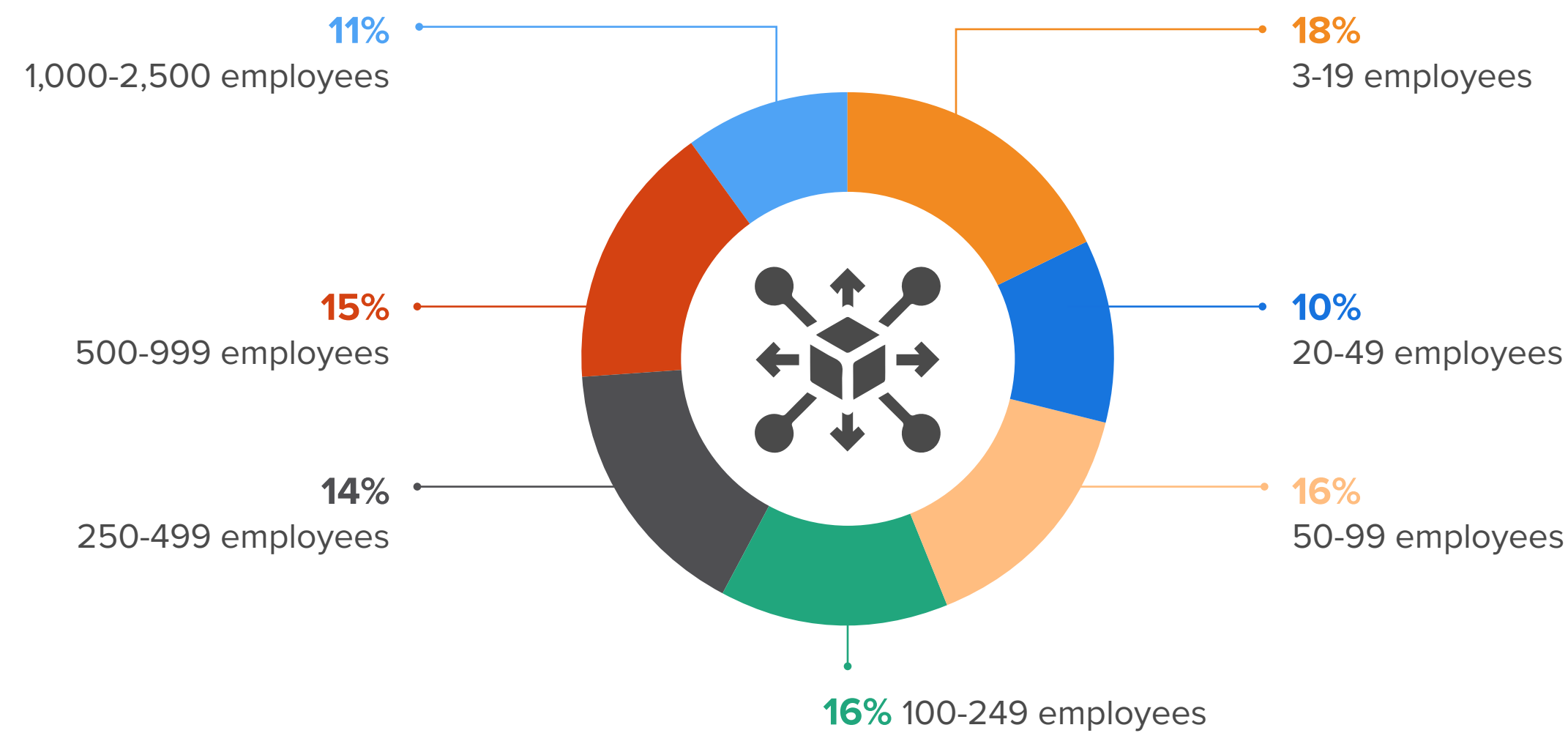
Many SMBs lack both AI maturity as well as IT management and security expertise. They need guidance about how AI can help minimize risk, streamline operations, and improve compliance. Guided onboarding, templates, and agent-based tools can lower the barrier to entry.

As they become more comfortable with using AI tools in this area, demand for future-facing capabilities, like predictive risk management and self-healing systems, will grow.

# About the Study

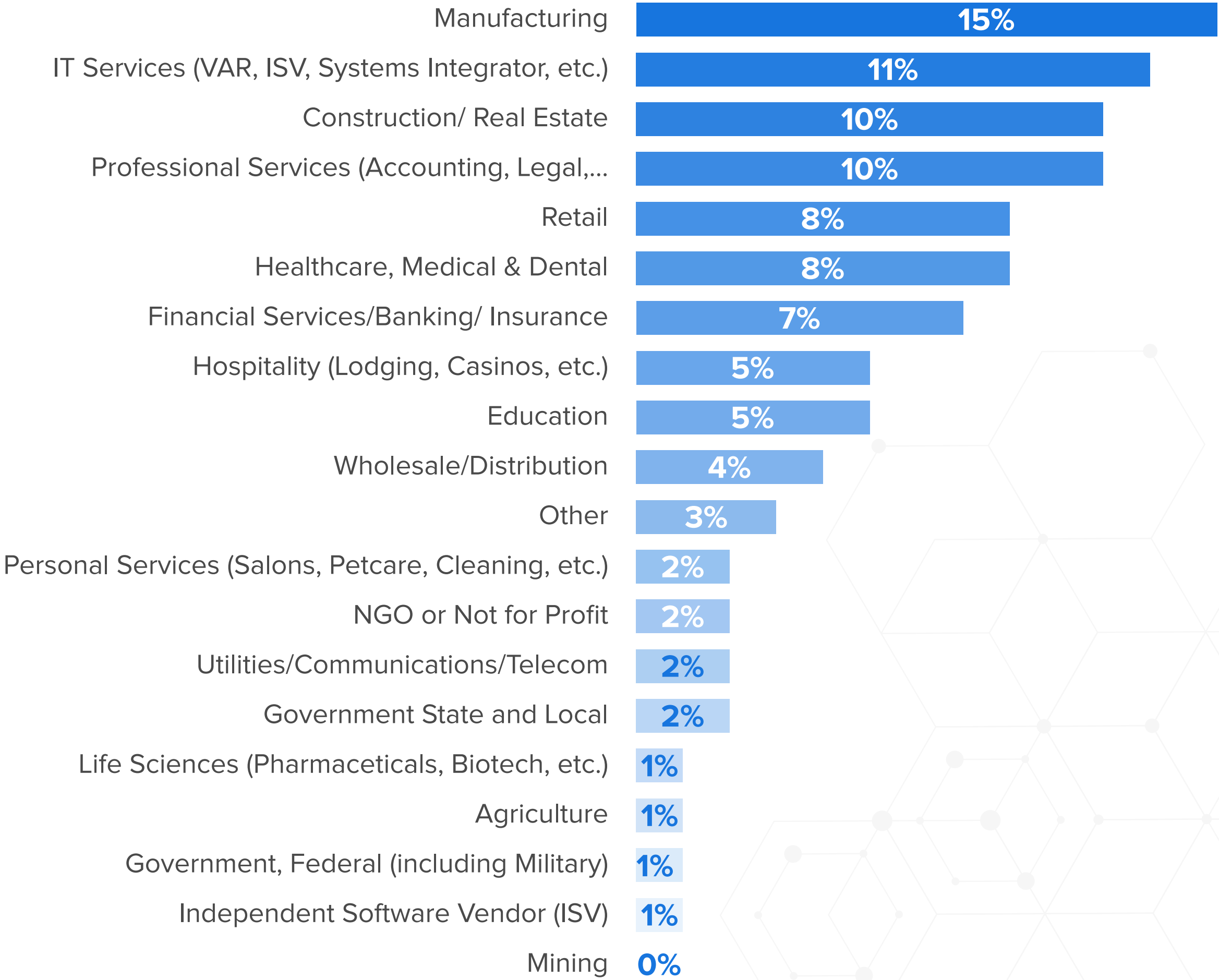
All data in this eBook is sourced from SMB Group’s survey. Data was collected in June 2025 via a web-based survey from a random sample of 650 complete survey respondents. (240 additional respondents who said they had no plans to use AI were terminated after question 6.)

Employee Size Distribution



*\*For brevity, we will refer to the entire 3 to 2,500 group as SMBs throughout this report.*

Industry Distribution





[SMB Group](#) is a research, analysis, and consulting firm focused on technology adoption and trends among small and medium (1-999 employee size) and mid-market (1,000-2,500 employee size) businesses. Founded in 2009, SMB Group helps clients to understand and segment the SMB market, identify and act on trends and opportunities, develop more compelling messaging, and effectively serve SMB customers.



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