HELIUM42 · ORIGINAL DATA SERIES · NOVEMBER 2026 EDITION

UK AI Adoption Tracker

Business use of artificial intelligence in the UK, from official ONS data. Latest data: BICS Wave 165, fielded 21 September to 4 October 2026, published 8 October 2026.

Correction, 1 November 2026. Earlier versions of this report and its web page, published between April and October 2026 under the title “AI Adoption Benchmark 2026”, included adoption, spend and return on investment figures that we could not verify against any primary source, among them an average annual AI spend of £15.94 million per organisation. That figure, and the others like it, should not have been published, and we have withdrawn them. This edition is built on official data from the Office for National Statistics. If you cited a figure from the earlier version, please refer to the figures in this edition instead. We apologise for the error.

Key findings

29.7%
of UK businesses use at least one AI technology (Sep 2026), up from 9.4% in Sep 2023. Base: all businesses.

22.2 pts
gap between 250+ employees (50.9%) and 0–9 employees (28.7%), up from 9.6 points. Helium42 analysis of ONS data.

14.1%
of construction businesses use AI; 81% do not. Information and communication: 60.0%.

15.1%
of businesses using AI (or unsure) use it extensively; 61.4% on a limited basis.

47.7%
of businesses using AI (or unsure) have trained no staff. At 10+ employees: 33.9%.

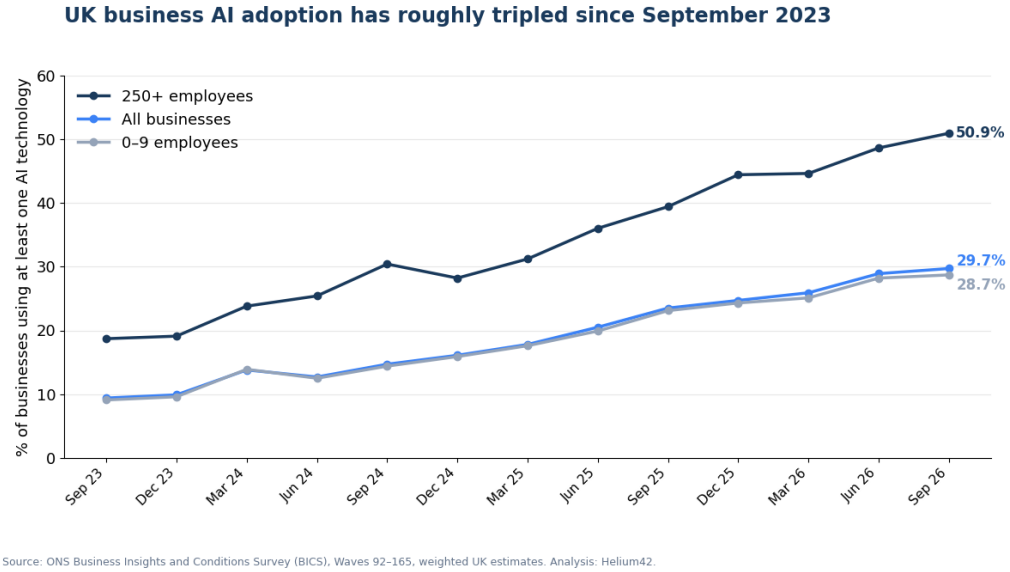
44.4%
of businesses using AI (or unsure) invested under £10,000 in 12 months; 32.7% invested nothing.

Bases differ. “All businesses” is every trading business in scope. “Using AI (or unsure)” is the group ONS asks its follow-up questions: businesses that use AI or are not sure whether they do. “10+” is businesses with ten or more employees.

The year-on-year rise in adoption (23.5% to 29.7%) is real. The latest quarter (28.9% in June to 29.7% in September 2026) is within the margin of error of ±2.8 points, so adoption was flat over that quarter. We do not describe it as accelerating.

1. Adoption has roughly tripled since 2023, but the latest quarter is flat

In September 2023, 9.4% of UK businesses used at least one AI technology. By September 2026 the figure was 29.7%, a little more than three times the starting level. 64.1% of businesses say they do not use AI at all, and the remaining non-adopters are not sure whether they do.



Source: ONS Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS), Waves 92–165, weighted UK estimates. Analysis: Helium42.

Year on year, adoption rose from 23.5% (September 2025) to 29.7% (September 2026), well outside the ±2.8-point margin. Quarter on quarter, June to September 2026 moved 0.8 points, inside the margin. The series has paused before, between March 2024 (13.8%) and June 2024 (12.7%), before resuming its climb.

Table 1. % using at least one AI technology, all 13 quarterly AI waves (weighted, UK)

Wave (fielded)	All businesses	0–9 employees	10+ employees	250+ employees
92 (Sep 2023)	9.4	9.1	11.9	18.7
98 (Dec 2023)	9.9	9.6	11.8	19.1
105 (Mar 2024)	13.8	13.9	13.8	23.8
111 (Jun 2024)	12.7	12.5	14.8	25.4
117 (Sep 2024)	14.7	14.4	17.8	30.4
123 (Dec 2024)	16.1	15.9	18.2	28.2
129 (Mar 2025)	17.8	17.6	20.6	31.2
135 (Jun 2025)	20.5	19.9	25.1	36.0
141 (Sep 2025)	23.5	23.1	27.2	39.4
147 (Dec 2025)	24.7	24.3	28.7	44.4
153 (Mar 2026)	25.9	25.1	32.1	44.6
159 (Jun 2026)	28.9	28.2	34.9	48.6
165 (Sep 2026)	29.7	28.7	38.1	50.9

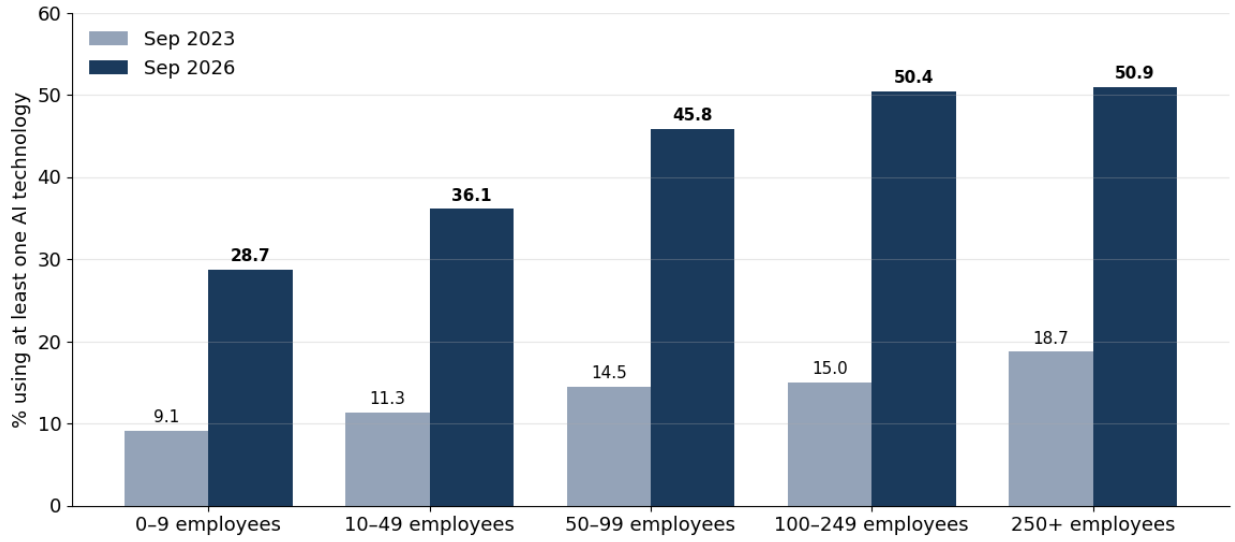
Source: ONS BICS Waves 92–165, OGL v3. “Using at least one AI technology” = 100% – “does not currently use” – “not sure” (Helium42 derivation; reproduces ONS published figures).

2. The gap between large and small businesses has more than doubled

Every size band has increased its use of AI since 2023, but larger businesses have moved further. Businesses with 250 or more employees went from 18.7% to 50.9%; businesses with fewer than ten employees from 9.1% to 28.7%. The gap widened from 9.6 points in September 2023 to 22.2 points in September 2026.

This size-gap measure is **Helium42's derived analysis of ONS data**, not an ONS headline figure. The 250+ band is a full census stratum with no sampling error, and the margin on the 0–9 band is ±3.1 points, far smaller than the 12.6-point widening.

The gap between the largest and smallest firms widened from 9.6 to 22.2 points

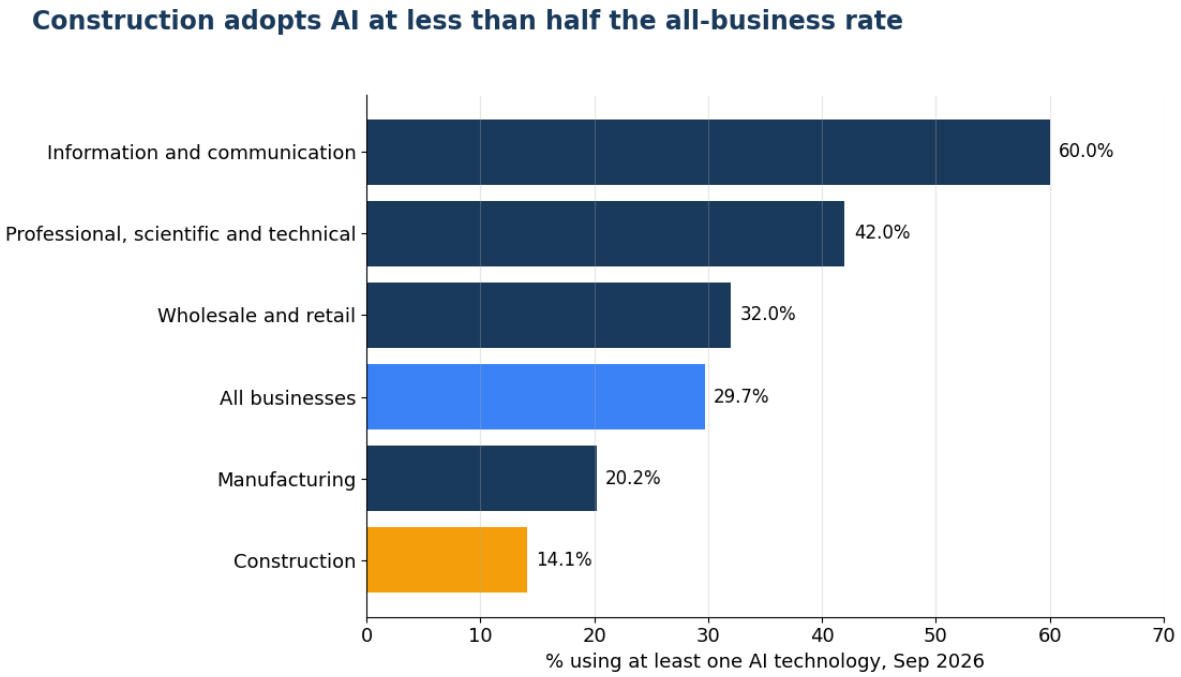


Source: ONS Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS), Waves 92–165, weighted UK estimates. Analysis: Helium42.

The middle of the market has changed most. Businesses with 100–249 employees rose from 15.0% to 50.4% and are now level with the largest firms. Businesses with 50–99 employees reached 45.8%, and 10–49 employees 36.1%. Across all businesses with ten or more employees, adoption is 38.1% (±2.0).

Note for anyone quoting the ONS bulletin: its text gives 51% both for 250+ employees and for 100 or more employees. The underlying data give 50.4% for 100–249 and 50.9% for 250+. We quote the data.

3. Industry: information and communication first, construction near the bottom



Source: ONS Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS), Waves 92–165, weighted UK estimates. Analysis: Helium42.

Industry (Sep 2026)	% using AI	Margin (± pts)	Sep 2023
Information and communication	60.0	9.3	32.0
Professional, scientific and technical	42.0	5.9	15.6
Wholesale and retail	32.0	6.6	6.7
All businesses	29.7	2.8	9.4
Manufacturing	20.2	8.1	6.7
Construction	14.1	5.9	1.9

Margins are confidence-interval half-widths on the “does not use” estimate, used as a proxy. Source: ONS BICS, OGL v3.

Construction rose from 1.9% to 14.1%, yet 81% of construction businesses do not use AI (confidence interval 75–87%). It is among the lowest-adopting industries. Health and social work (13.1%) and other service activities (10.9%) have lower point estimates but margins too wide to rank.

Professional, scientific and technical activities moved from 45.8% (June) to 42.0% (September 2026), within the ±5.9 margin: this is not a decline. Legal services sit inside this group and cannot be separated.

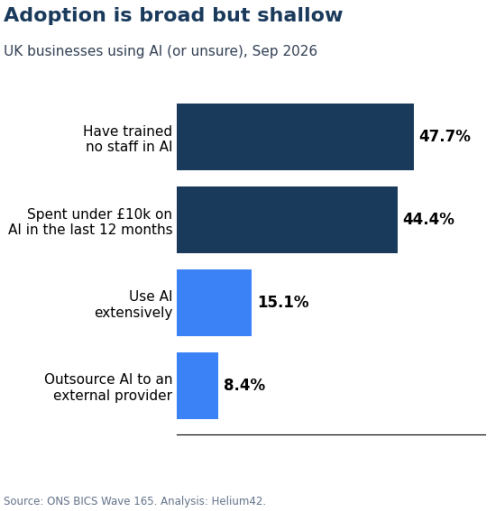
Single-wave values for education, health and real estate are omitted: small samples and private-sector-only coverage make them swing sharply from quarter to quarter.

4. How deeply businesses use AI, and what they invest

The questions below are asked of businesses that use AI or are not sure whether they do. Figures are for all such businesses unless marked 10+ (ten or more employees). Wave 165, September 2026.

Depth of use. 15.1% use AI extensively and 61.4% on a limited basis; 2.2% use it only for testing or pilots and 13.4% are not sure. The question was first asked in June 2026, so there are only two waves and no trend yet.

Training. 47.7% have trained no staff in AI. At 10+ employees the figure is 33.9%, and a further 22.3% are not sure.



Investment in adopting AI, last 12 months

Amount	All (using AI or unsure)	10+ employees
Nothing	32.7%	23.4%
Less than £10,000	44.4%	35.0%
£10,000 to £49,999	3.9%	7.8%
£50,000 to £99,999	suppressed	2.6%
£100,000 to £499,999	suppressed	2.0%
£500,000 or more	suppressed	1.1%
Not sure	17.6%	28.1%

ONS suppresses cells where counts are too small to publish.

How businesses adopted AI (more than one answer allowed)

Route	All (using AI or unsure)	10+ employees
Purchased ready-to-use software	45.3%	45.4%
Free-to-use software	41.2%	35.1%
Developed in-house	14.7%	18.5%
Outsourced to external providers	8.4%	14.6%

Only a minority of businesses buy external help with AI. We report that plainly, as an AI consultancy.

5. Barriers and workforce effects

Factors that prevented or delayed AI adoption in the last three months (all businesses)

Factor	All businesses	10+ employees
Level of AI expertise	9.3%	13.7%
Lack of trust in AI product safety or transparency	9.2%	9.8%
Cost	7.7%	11.5%
Security concerns	6.8%	8.2%
Difficulty identifying business use cases	6.2%	9.0%
Not prevented or delayed	49.0%	39.4%
Has not attempted to use AI	21.8%	18.2%

Earlier versions of this report claimed that more than 60% of businesses cite a skills gap as their primary barrier; nothing in the ONS data supports a figure of that size. Regulatory concerns are asked only of the small share of businesses delayed by regulation, so we do not headline them.

Workforce effects (10+ employees, using AI or unsure)

Administrative and clerical roles are the most affected (37.9%), followed by creative or design (24.1%) and data analysis roles (21.9%). 60.2% report no change in headcount because of AI and 5.8% report a reduction; ONS suppresses the share reporting an increase. AI is changing the content of jobs faster than the number of them.

Return on investment: outside the scope of the official data

BICS does not measure whether AI pays back. One commercial survey is useful if read with its scope: in a survey of 500 senior decision-makers in UK businesses, conducted by Censuswide and commissioned by Studio Graphene (reported by Consultancy.uk, 18 March 2026), 31% of businesses using AI said they had seen any positive return. It is vendor-commissioned and covers AI users only, so it is not a national rate and is not comparable with the ONS series.

6. What the data means for UK mid-market leaders

- **Benchmark against your size band.** The 29.7% headline is pulled down by micro-businesses. At 50–99 employees the comparison is 45.8%; at 100–249 it is 50.4%.
- **Treat depth, not access, as the gap.** 61.4% of users work with AI on a limited basis. Ask which processes AI has changed, and whether anyone measures the result.
- **Train before you scale.** 33.9% of businesses with ten or more employees that use AI (or are unsure) have trained no staff.
- **Size the first step to the evidence.** Most businesses spend under £10,000 a year on AI. Published UK market prices for discovery work run £1,000–£10,000 and for pilots £5,000–£35,000 (Helium42 UK AI Consultancy Price Index 2026). The two are consistent; we draw no causal link.
- **Address trust and security early**, with a short usage policy and clear data-handling rules.

7. Method and limitations

- **Source.** ONS Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS), official statistics in development, OGL v3. AI questions run quarterly (September, December, March, June waves); 13 AI waves since Wave 92 (September 2023). Weighted estimates.
- **Derived measure.** % using at least one AI technology = 100% – “does not currently use” – “not sure”. Reproduces ONS published figures exactly (29.7% all businesses, published as 30%; 50.9% for 250+, published as 51%; 60.0% information and communication, published as 60%).
- **Margins.** Confidence intervals on “does not use”, used as a proxy: all businesses ±2.8 pts; 10+ ±2.0; 0–9 ±3.1; construction ±5.9; information and communication ±9.3; professional services ±5.9. The 250+ band is a full census stratum (no sampling error).
- **Response.** Voluntary survey; response rate about 26%.
- **Coverage.** Private sector only. Excludes agriculture, finance and insurance, energy, public administration, and public education and health. Construction, retail and services cover Great Britain; production industries cover the UK.
- **Scope.** Measures use of at least one AI technology, not return; depth only since June 2026. Legal services are not separable from professional, scientific and technical activities.
- **Exclusions.** ONS regional AI tables (unweighted) and single-wave values for education, health and real estate (too noisy) are not used.

Next update. ONS fields its next AI wave in mid-December 2026, with publication expected around early January 2027. This tracker is refreshed after each AI wave: January, April, July and October. Online edition: helium42.com/blog/ai-adoption-uk-benchmark-2026

Source: Office for National Statistics, Business insights and impact on the UK economy, 8 October 2026, and the accompanying BICS dataset (Wave 165 and earlier waves). Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. The size-gap calculation, selection of findings and commentary are Helium42 analysis, not ONS statements.