

What to Ignore

From Making It Work: A Realistic AI Strategy for Small and Mid-Sized Businesses · Neil Addison · You & AI, 2026

Abridged. The full chapter also covers maturity models, comprehensive AI strategies, vendor comparisons and AI predictions.

Most of this book is about what to do. This chapter is about what not to do, and for many readers it may be the most useful one.

The AI conversation aimed at small business owners is overwhelmingly about action. Adopt this, try that, start here, move faster. The assumption behind it, rarely examined, is that the right response to AI is more: more tools, more experiments, more spending, more change. Businesses that do more will thrive; the rest will fall behind.

The evidence doesn't bear this out. The businesses that come through technology shifts well are rarely the ones that adopted everything. They are the ones that adopted the right things and left the rest alone. Being able to say "that isn't for us", and mean it, is a strategic skill in its own right, and almost nobody in the AI conversation has a reason to help you develop it.

So what follows is a list of what you can safely ignore, what you should avoid, and what exists mainly to make you anxious.

Ignore the urgency

This comes first because it drives everything else.

Act now. The window is closing. Your competitors are moving. The urgency isn't baseless, but it is calibrated to speed up buying decisions, not to reflect the pace at which a business like yours needs to move.

J.P. Morgan's research in early 2026 found that fewer than one firm in ten used AI regularly. Even in professional and technical services, the figure was only around one in five. Most businesses your size have made no significant AI investment, and the ones that have tend to be larger, better resourced and closer to the technology. You can't fall behind in a race that has barely started.

Everyone pushing the urgency has a reason to. Vendors want you to buy before the market consolidates and margins shrink. Consultancies want you to engage while the subject is new enough to command premium fees. Influencers want urgency because urgency drives engagement. Government programmes need visible uptake to satisfy their funding cycles. None of them gains from you taking your time and adopting only what your firm needs.

Delay isn't the danger. Premature adoption is: tools you don't need, money you can't spare, disruption to processes that already work. Move at the pace your business can absorb. The technology will still be there when you're ready.

Ignore the transformation narrative

"Transformation" may be the most overused word in the AI conversation. It describes something that isn't happening in most small businesses and doesn't need to.

The word implies wholesale change: a business rebuilt from the ground up around what AI can do. That is the language of enterprise strategy, where AI sits inside a wider programme of restructuring and process redesign. At that scale it is sometimes justified. At yours it rarely is, and it can do real harm.

Your business doesn't need transforming. It may need improving in particular places. Some processes might benefit from AI assistance; some tasks could be handled more efficiently; some gaps in your information might be worth closing. Those are improvements, made at a pace the business can absorb and judged on results.

The trouble with the transformation story is that it treats what you already do as a problem to be solved. It isn't one. Your business employs people, serves clients, earns revenue and works within constraints you understand better than anyone. It may well benefit from specific changes. It doesn't need reinventing.

Ignore competitor hype

"Our competitors are already using AI" deserves scepticism until someone shows you otherwise.

Some of your competitors may be experimenting. Very few will have changed their competitive position as a result. "We're using AI" can mean one person drafting emails in ChatGPT, which is a long way from AI having changed how a business runs, and what competitors claim usually runs well ahead of what they've done.

Much of the pressure you feel comes from marketing: competitors', vendors', and the general noise of a conversation that profits from everyone believing everyone else is ahead. For most small firms in most sectors, you and your competitors are in much the same position. You know AI matters, you're unsure what to do about it, and you're deciding with imperfect information.

If a competitor does build a real advantage from AI, in faster service, lower costs or better work, you'll see it in the market rather than in their marketing. Until you can see it, treat it as noise.

What's left

The list of things to ignore is long on purpose: urgency, maturity models, comprehensive AI strategies, vendor comparisons, predictions, the transformation narrative, competitor hype.

Strip those away and what remains is simpler and more useful. A clear picture of your business. A short list of problems worth solving. A plan for solving them, a team that is getting better at this, and the judgment to weigh whatever comes next.

It won't earn a standing ovation at a conference or make a vendor's case study. But it serves the person running the business, the one making the decisions and living with the consequences.