

HELP TO GROW.
MANAGEMENT COURSE

MENTORING MATTERS: FOUR YEARS ON

THE OPPORTUNITY IN BUSINESS MENTORING:
UNTAPPED DEMAND, STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS,
REACHING SMALLER BUSINESSES



Funded by
UK Government



Enterprise
Nation

Newable

abm



FOREWORD

OUR FIRST MENTORING MATTERS REPORT CAME OUT IN OCTOBER 2022, A MONTH BEFORE CHATGPT LAUNCHED. THE WORLD SMALL BUSINESSES WORK IN HAS CHANGED SHARPLY SINCE THEN.

Cost pressures have not gone away, and owners are running leaner, working longer and making more of the big calls alone.

AI has not displaced mentoring. Mentored owners use it at much the same rate as everyone else, but they are more likely to say they have technology they have not had time to use. They need time and the support, guidance, experience and perspective to put those tools to work through the challenges and opportunities their businesses face.

A business mentor provides that through lived business experience and the mentoring skills developed on the Course. Mentors motivate, build confidence, act as a sounding board and hold business owners to account. No machine offers any of that.

Since 2022, Enterprise Nation, Newable and the Association of Business Mentors (ABM) have recruited, trained and supported the volunteer business mentors on the government's Help to Grow: Management Course. Every participant is offered 10 hours of one-to-one mentoring over 12 weeks, given an hour at a time by experienced business people who have become mentors on the Course.

By March 2025 the course had run across 66 business schools, and 14,420 business leaders have enrolled since

it launched in 2021. Every mentor is trained to an ILM-assured professional standard.

The independent evaluation, by Ipsos with the Institute for Employment Studies, found mentoring was 'consistently the highest rated element of the programme'. Among those who finished the course and were matched with a mentor, 89% were satisfied, including 64% who were very satisfied. Almost all mentors (95%) said their expertise was well matched to their mentee, and 94% of participants who used mentoring to plan for growth felt well supported.

In 2022 we committed to recruiting more mentors over 50. Older mentors bring the length and breadth of business experience that mentees tell us they value most.

This report also looks beyond the Course to small businesses as a whole. The Enterprise Nation Small Business Barometer shows that 43% of small business owners have worked with a mentor. Nearly three in five never have, and that share has not fallen since 2023, so the gap will not close on its own.

Access depends on business size more than gender, age or geography, and the owners with least to fall back on are least likely to have a mentor. Just 37% of solo founders have had one, against 52% of businesses with employees. Closing that 15-point gap would mean around 660,000 more small businesses with an owner who has worked with a mentor.

A good mentoring relationship is worth far more than one that simply exists. Of owners who rated their mentoring highly, 65% are confident their business will survive; among those who rated it poorly the figure is

50%. The average rating owners give their mentoring is 6.8 out of 10, which is solid but short of where it could be.

Mentoring also goes hand in hand with growth. Mentored small business owners are more likely to plan to hire, to export and to seek outside finance. They are also more likely to be looking at equity investment.

Help to Grow: Management is for businesses with five or more employees. The first step for future business support programmes is a separate structured mentoring offer for the solo founders and smallest firms below that line, where the gap is widest. Any successor programme to Help to Grow: Management should then make mentoring a defined entitlement, with a guaranteed minimum number of hours with a trained, matched mentor.

Support for AI and technology adoption, within future programmes, should also include mentoring. The evidence in this report shows the two belong together.

We are proud to have delivered this with Newable and the ABM. We have achieved a great deal, learnt a great deal and have plenty to build on in the years ahead. Above all we thank the mentors, who give their time freely and make all of this possible.



Aaron Asadi
CEO, Enterprise Nation

INTRODUCTION

IN THE AUTUMN OF 2022 ENTERPRISE NATION ASKED A SIMPLE QUESTION: HOW DOES MENTORING MAKE A DIFFERENCE TO SMALL BUSINESSES? MENTORING MATTERS, PUBLISHED IN OCTOBER 2022, DREW ON A SURVEY OF OVER 800 BUSINESS OWNERS AND TWO FOCUS GROUPS.

It found that three-quarters of those who had been mentored believed it had been vital to their growth, and two-thirds that it had been crucial to their survival. It estimated that, if the appetite it uncovered were converted into real relationships, the UK could gain 118,000 new mentors and 284,000 more mentees.

The question then was: will enough people step forward to unlock this potential? That question has been answered. Enterprise Nation, Newable, and the Association of Business Mentors have spent four years recruiting, training and matching mentors for the UK Government's Help to Grow: Management Course. Every participant on the course is offered 10 hours of one-to-one mentoring, given an hour at a time by experienced business people who have trained to become business mentors.

The independent evaluation of the course published in June 2026 by the Department for Business and Trade (DBT, now the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade) found that mentoring was "consistently the highest rated element of the programme".

So this report asks a different question. Not whether mentoring works, but who is getting it within the small business community, what impact it has, and where it could reach further. It draws on two separate bodies of evidence:

- **The Enterprise Nation Small Business Barometer:** the aggregated responses across seven survey waves between spring 2023 and 2026, totalling 3,406 responses to the mentoring questions. This tells us about small business owners and their experiences of mentoring in general, most of whom have not participated in Help to Grow: Management. The methodology at the end of the report gives further detail on the Barometer and how it was used in this report.
- **The Help to Grow: Management Course:** the department's published enrolment figures and the independent evaluation by Ipsos and the Institute for Employment Studies. This tells us what the Course itself has delivered.

The two describe different populations and we draw on their data separately. Help to Grow: Management requires a business to have at least five employees, and participants choose to apply, so they are not representative of all small firms generally. The Barometer, meanwhile, is open to all small business types: it captures the impact of mentoring on small businesses; it does not measure a programme.

In this report, 'small business' means a business with fewer than 250 employees, the standard UK definition of a small and medium-sized enterprise. That covers micro businesses with fewer than 10 employees, small businesses with 10 to 49 and medium-sized businesses with 50 to 249.





WHAT THE HELP TO GROW: MANAGEMENT COURSE HAS DELIVERED

Progress against the 2022 commitments

The 2022 report closed with five commitments from Enterprise Nation, which the consortium signed up to. Four years on, this is where each stands:

- **Recruit more mentors for Help to Grow: Management.** By March 2025 the course had run across 66 business schools, according to the independent evaluation. By the end of March 2026, 14,420 people had enrolled and 11,915 had completed the course. Each participant is offered 10 hours of one-to-one mentoring with a volunteer mentor recruited and trained by the consortium. The independent evaluation found that 87% of those who completed the course were matched with a mentor.
- **Build an online mentor training hub with the Association of Business Mentors.** Every mentor on the course is trained to an ILM-assured professional standard, and the ABM offers mentors routes on to ILM Level 5 and Level 7 qualifications.
- **Share the experiences of mentors and mentees.** This report, the annual National Mentoring Matters awards and the case study programme are all part of it.
- **Use data to track the impact of the mentoring relationship.** Matching, engagement, hours and satisfaction are now tracked quarterly for Help to Grow: Management. What happens to a business after the relationship ends is captured for the broader SME population by Enterprise Nation's Small Business Barometer – the results of which are presented in this report.
- **Reach the over-50s through specific networks.** Older mentors bring the length and breadth of business experience that mentees say they value most.

Tracking future progress

The consortium is in the unusual position of already capturing most of what it needs to measure its own legacy. Publishing a short, consistent set of indicators every year, drawn from Course data and the broader Small Business Barometer, will allow for regular tracking:

- Cumulative mentoring hours delivered
- Mentors approved to mentor, and mentors retained from the previous year
- Share of participants matched to a mentor
- Average hours per completed mentoring relationship
- Mentor satisfaction
- The two Barometer mentoring questions: uptake, and the experience rating

In addition to these, collecting data on the location of mentors against the location of their mentees would lead to a better understanding of the impact of distance on mentoring outcomes.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT HELP TO GROW: MANAGEMENT MENTORING HAS DELIVERED

Through Help to Grow: Management, Enterprise Nation, Newable, and the Association of Business Mentors have recruited, trained and supported the course's volunteer business mentors. By March 2025 the course had run across 66 business schools. By the end of March 2026, 14,420 business leaders had enrolled and 11,915 had completed the course. The independent evaluation, carried out by Ipsos with the Institute for Employment Studies, found that 87% of course completers were matched with a mentor. It also found that mentoring was "consistently the highest rated element of the

programme": 89% of course completers matched to a mentor were satisfied with it, including 64% who were very satisfied. It also found that improved confidence was the single most commonly reported outcome of the course, cited by 92% of participants, and that nearly three-quarters said the course left them feeling less isolated. Almost all mentors (95%) agreed their knowledge, skills and expertise were well matched to their mentee, and over half of participants (52%) used their mentoring for topics the course did not cover.



WHAT THE BAROMETER TELLS US ABOUT SMALL BUSINESSES

Mentoring experience of small business owners

More than two in five small business owners (43%) have worked with a mentor at some point in their lifetime (evaluated over 2023-2026). The corollary is that nearly three in five small business owners have never worked with a mentor at all. Moreover, there is no meaningful difference in access to mentorship across the characteristics of gender and age, and little by geography. Where differences in mentoring access do exist, they occur in relation to business size (see Growing Pains, below).

It's lonely at the top

Those findings on confidence and isolation show up across the wider small business population too. Mentored founders look for help more often than their unmentored peers: 56% sought business support against 43% of those without a mentor. But of every business owner who went looking, a quarter found nothing that worked for them: this is the gap that the Business Growth Service, launched in 2025 to bring government advice and support for small businesses under one roof, exists to close. Mentored founders also work longer weeks, not shorter ones. Being mentored is not a way of doing less; it is often what people reach for when they are carrying the most.

Growing pains

Mentoring clusters around the transitions of the business lifecycle, and access rises as firms take on more employees: 37% of solo founders have worked with a mentor, compared to 48% of businesses with one to five employees and 58% of those with six to twenty. The same pattern runs through the other markers of growth. Mentored owners are more likely to be planning to hire, more likely to export, and more

likely to seek external finance. When they do, they are more likely to look for equity investment and less likely to rely on a start-up loan.

AI, tech and the future of mentoring

Mentored founders are not avoiding technology. Across the two waves in which the question was asked they use AI tools at much the same rate as everyone else, and in the most recent wave slightly more (68% against 60%). What distinguishes them is what happens after the purchase: 28% say they are sitting on technology they have not had time to use, against 19% of those without a mentor. That distance between buying and using is where the problem lies, and it is the same constraint that shows up everywhere else in this data: mentored owners work longer weeks, look for support more often, and are more likely to be hiring and exporting. They are not short of ambition or of tools. They are short of time and an objective, experienced outside perspective. That is where mentoring can lift productivity, by helping owners put the tools they already own to work. What mentees said they valued most in 2022 was life experience from their mentor, and that has not changed over the years: mentoring transmits contacts, capabilities and confidence, not only knowledge. Mentors are already doing this work: the independent evaluation found that 46% of Help to Grow: Management participants who used mentoring did so to identify tools that could improve their productivity. The independent evaluation of Help to Grow: Digital (RSM, September 2023) reached the same conclusion from the other direction, recommending that one-to-one advice on adopting technology "should form a core part of business support interventions".

The opportunity

The 2022 report asked how many more mentors the UK could find given the appetite for the value they bring. The 2026 question is a different one, and the opportunity now has three parts.

- **Demand:** nearly three in five small business owners have never worked with a mentor, and the share who have is not rising on its own.
- **Quality:** those who have been mentored rate the experience at 6.8 out of 10, and among them, those who rated the relationship highly are significantly more confident of survival (65%) and more likely to expect to expand (51%) than those who rated it poorly (50% and 39%).
- **Reach:** mentoring happens in every nation and region of the UK, but it thins out as businesses get smaller.

The prize is no longer only more mentoring for small businesses. It is better quality mentoring, reaching further down the size distribution, everywhere.

What we are asking government to do for future business support programmes

- **Make mentoring core to any programme funded to accelerate AI adoption.** Mentoring and AI adoption go together rather than competing, and both are routes to the productivity gains the course exists to deliver. The constraint is not access to tools but the help to put them to work, and the independent evaluation of Help to Grow: Digital reached the same conclusion.
- **Build mentoring into any successor to Help to Grow: Management as a defined entitlement.** A guaranteed minimum number of hours with a trained, matched mentor, rather than an add-on to the curriculum.
- **Create a structured mentoring offer for businesses below the five-employee threshold.** Help to Grow: Management is open only to businesses with five or more employees. The businesses least likely to have a mentor sit just below that line, and a separate offer is needed to reach them.



THE IMPACT OF MENTORING ON SMALL BUSINESSES IN 2026

ENTERPRISE NATION'S SMALL BUSINESS BAROMETER HAS ASKED SMALL BUSINESS OWNERS THE SAME TWO QUESTIONS SINCE SPRING 2023: WHETHER THEY HAVE EVER WORKED WITH A MENTOR, AND HOW THEY WOULD RATE THAT EXPERIENCE OUT OF 10.

Seven waves and 3,406 responses later, it gives us the first consistent picture of who in the small business population has access to a mentor, and who does not. Because the question asks about a lifetime rather than a period, it cannot be attributed to any particular programme. What the series does show, consistently, is the shape of the mentoring gap for small businesses.

- **Mentoring reaches more than two in five small business owners and nearly three in five have never had one:** 43% of survey respondents have worked with a mentor, and 57% have not.
- **Those who have a mentor rate the experience solidly but there is room for improvement:** the average rating is 6.8 out of 10, and the median rating is 7 out of 10 (these figures have remained consistent over each survey). Within Help to

Grow: Management, where relationships are matched, trained and supported, 89% of course completers were satisfied with their mentoring, including 64% who were very satisfied. The two populations are not comparable, but the contrast shows what is achievable at scale when quality support infrastructure is put around a mentoring relationship.

- **Business size is the strongest predictor of mentoring access:** 37% of solo founders have worked with a mentor, against 52% of businesses with employees. Mentoring access increases with business size up to 50 employees. Raising take up among solo founders to the employer rate would mean around 660,000 more small businesses would have an owner who has worked with a mentor.¹



PROPORTION WHO HAVE BEEN MENTORED, SPLIT BY BUSINESS SIZE



- **Mentoring is more common among respondents from ethnic minority backgrounds:** mentoring rates stood at 55% for Asian or Asian British respondents and 49% for Black or Black British respondents, compared to 41% for White or White British respondents.
- **Gender makes almost no difference:** 44% of male and 43% of female business owners have worked with a mentor. On this measure, at least, the playing field is level. Where there are male and female co-founders, however, only 33% had had a mentoring relationship.
- **Age matters less than it looks:** for founders aged 25 and over, 43% have had a mentoring relationship. This proportion remains relatively consistent across age brackets. The proportion of

under 25s with a mentoring relationship is lower at 28% but part of the gap with older founders is mechanical, since the older a person is the more years they have had to work with a mentor.²

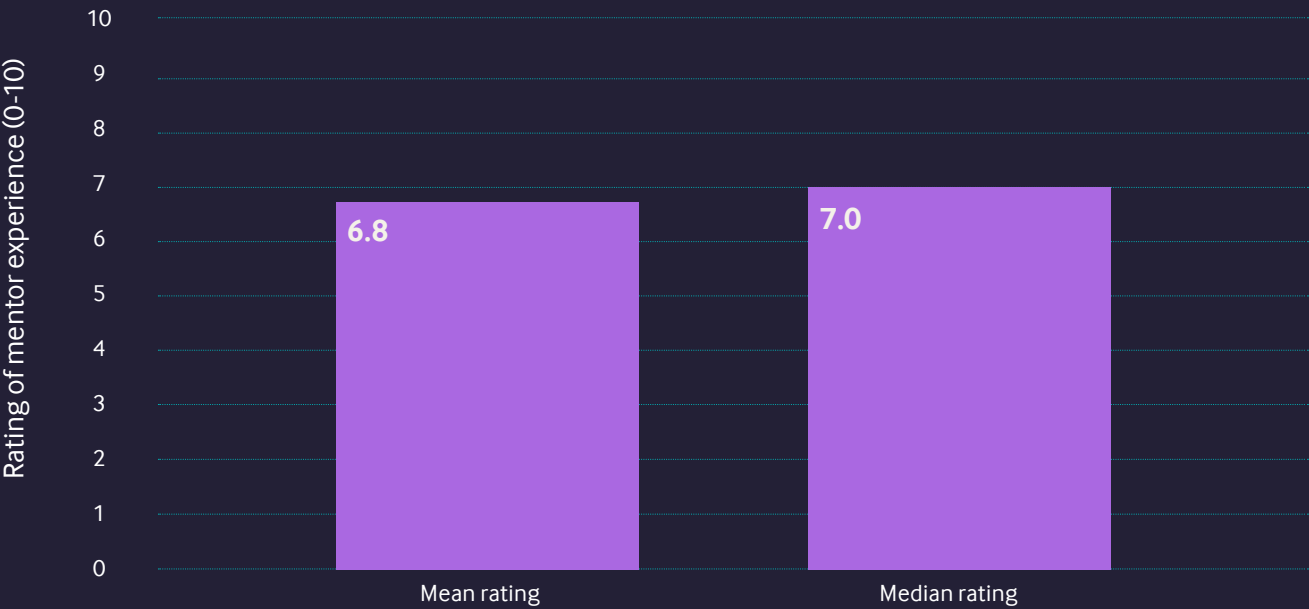
- **Mentoring happens everywhere, but not evenly:** in every nation and region of the UK, a substantial minority of business owners have worked with a mentor. The scope for expansion is biggest in Wales, at 32% the lowest overall survey result and below the series average in every wave. But differences in access are larger across business sizes than geography.

¹ Small Business Barometer, pooled across seven waves to 2026: the owners of 36.5% of businesses with no employees have worked with a mentor (n=1,994), against 52.0% of businesses with employees (n=1,412). That 15.5 percentage point difference, applied to the 4,272,535 UK private sector businesses with no employees (Department for Business and Trade, Business Population Estimates 2025), gives around 660,000. The figure counts businesses rather than individuals, since one person may own more than one. The Barometer is drawn from Enterprise Nation's membership so this is an illustration of the scale of the access gap rather than an estimate of unmet demand.

² Due to changes in survey design and sampling issues, age-based results cannot be pooled across the whole series: these figures pool the waves from spring 2023 to 2025, excluding Autumn 2023.



MEAN AND MEDIAN RATING OF MENTORING EXPERIENCE



CASE STUDY: SULIMAN RAZAQ - MENTEE

Suliman Razaq leads revenue growth at Esteiro Business Solutions, a Midlands CRM software company founded in 2001 with around 30 staff. He joined Help to Grow: Management at Cranfield School of Management and was matched with Mala Morris. She is a board adviser and mentor with more than 40 years' experience across technology, retail and consumer businesses in the UK and India.

"Mala helped me to adopt a different account management approach by interpreting my client data in the CRM through a different lens, enabling more effective prioritisation and strategic focus. This led to clearer decision making and faster achievement of KPIs."

He met his sales targets well ahead of the year end. He now plans to use AI to identify the accounts with the greatest growth potential, and to build that into the product his company sells. "Mala challenged

my thinking and encouraged reflection on my leadership approach, helping me build confidence in making strategic decisions and managing competing priorities."

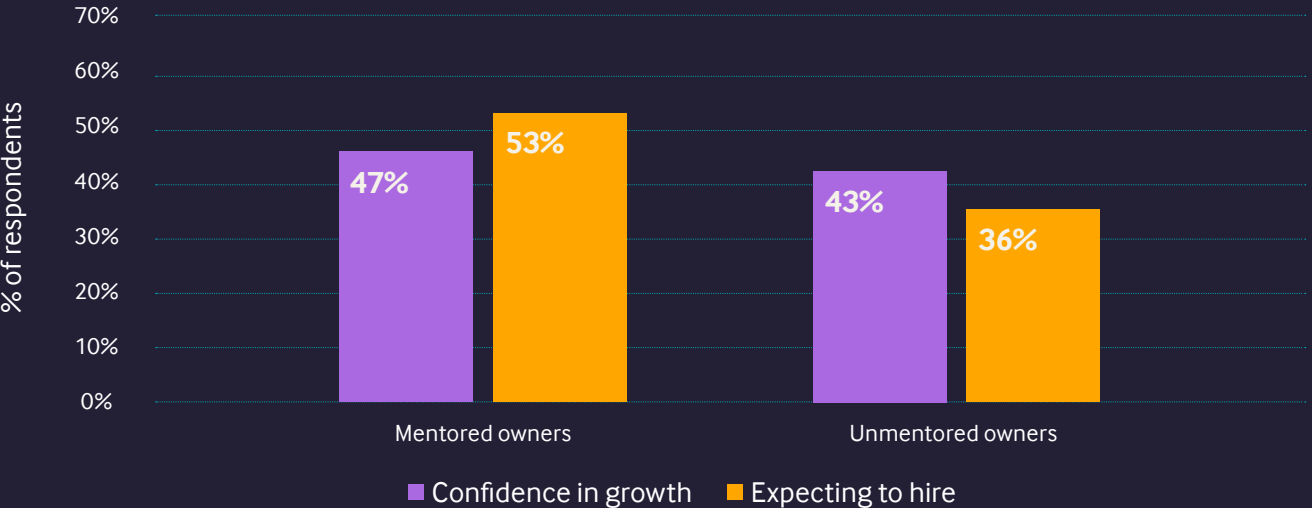


89%

**OF COURSE COMPLETERS
MATCHED TO A MENTOR WERE
SATISFIED WITH THEIR MENTORING**

Including 64% who were very satisfied. The independent evaluation found mentoring was "consistently the highest rated element of the programme".

CONFIDENCE IN FUTURE GROWTH AND EXPECTATIONS OF HIRING, SPLIT BY MENTORED OWNERS AND UNMENTORED OWNERS



IT'S LONELY AT THE TOP

RUNNING A SMALL BUSINESS IS A JOB WITH NOBODY ABOVE YOU TO ASK. THE INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF HELP TO GROW: MANAGEMENT FOUND THAT IMPROVED CONFIDENCE WAS THE SINGLE MOST COMMONLY REPORTED OUTCOME AMONG PARTICIPANTS, CITED BY 92%, AND THAT ONE-TO-ONE MENTORING OFFERED WHAT IT CALLED A "SAFE SPACE" TO BUILD THAT CONFIDENCE, PARTICULARLY VALUABLE TO LEADERS WHO REPORTED FEELING LONELY OR OVERWHELMED.

Nearly three-quarters of participants said the course left them feeling less isolated. The Barometer lets us see what that isolation looks like across the wider population of business owners, and what having a mentor changes about it.



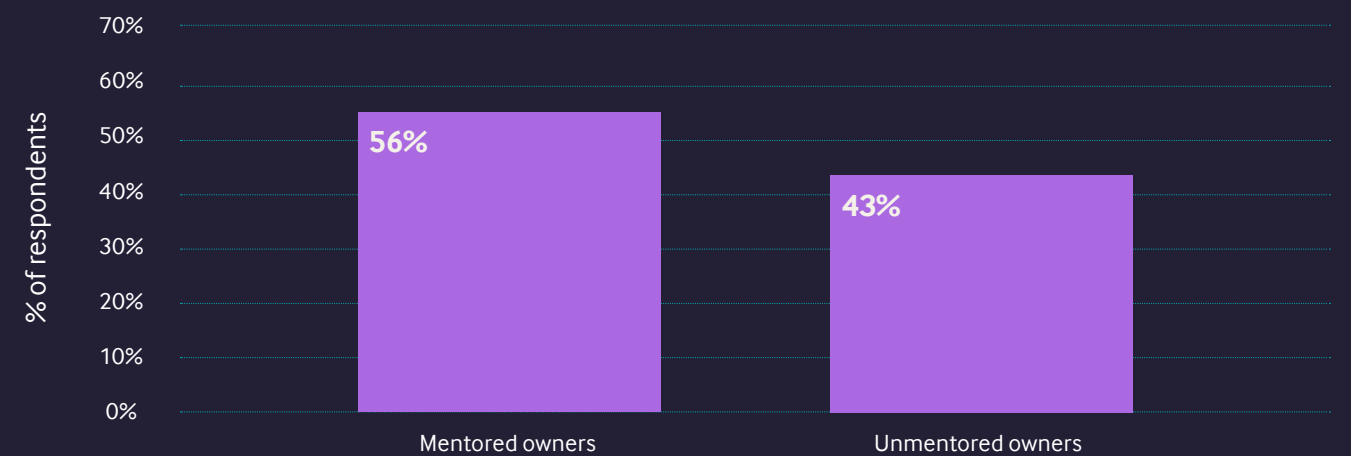
+3.6 HOURS

MENTORED BUSINESS OWNERS WORK AN AVERAGE OF 49.3 HOURS A WEEK, 3.6 HOURS MORE THAN THOSE WITHOUT.

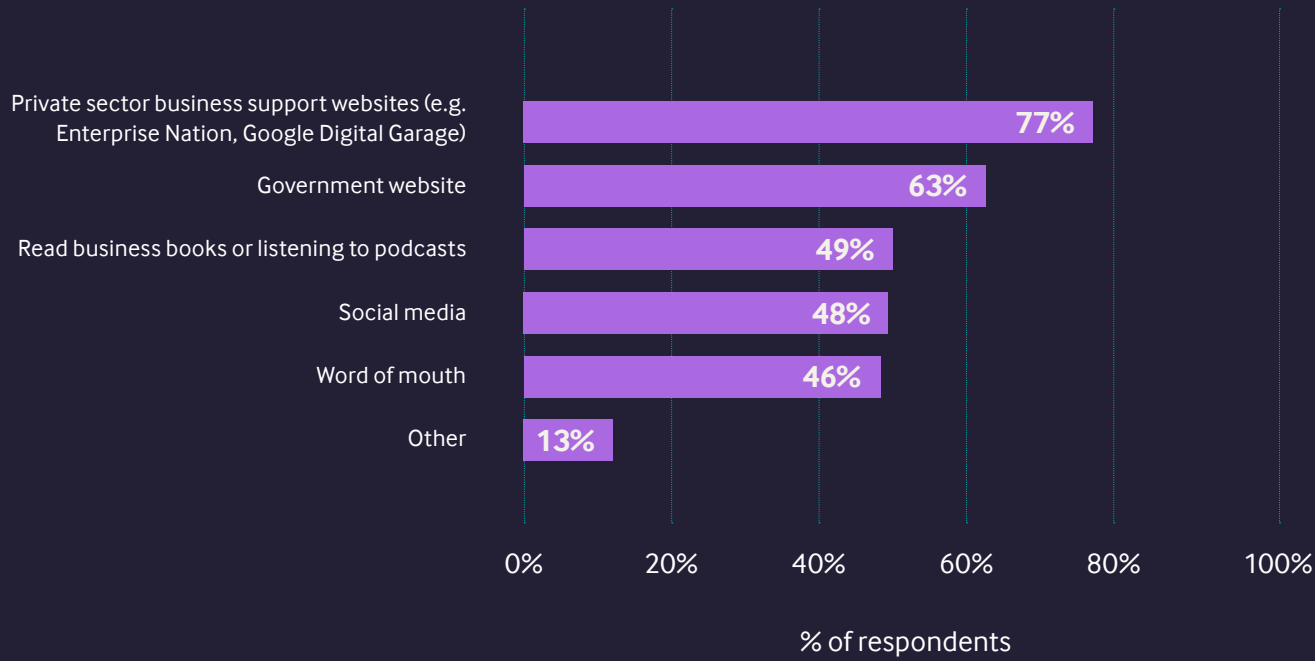
- **Mentored founders work longer:** business owners with a mentor work longer hours than those without - an average of 49.3 hours a week against 45.7 hours a week.
- **Being a mentee correlates with a broader willingness to look for help:** 56% of mentored owners had looked for business support in the past 12 months, against 43% of those without a mentor.
- **A quarter of those who look for support find nothing:** of everyone who went looking for business support, 24% said they could not find anything that worked for them. That is the gap that the Business Growth Service, launched in 2025 to bring government advice and support for small businesses under one roof, is designed to close, and it is where mentoring fits. Owners who cannot find what they need are rarely short of information. They are short of someone who can help them work out which of it applies to their business.
- **Most founders look for help online first:** 77% of business owners turned to private sector websites, 63% to government websites, 49% to reading business books or listening to podcasts, 48% to social media and 46% to word of mouth. These figures barely differ between mentored and unmentored populations.
- **Mentored owners are more likely to seek finance:** 56% of mentored owners had sought or planned to seek external funding, against 49% of those without a mentor.
- **But on confidence in survival the numbers are close:** mentored owners are marginally more confident of surviving the next twelve months (58% against 57%), a gap too small to be meaningful. Where confidence moves significantly is with the quality of the relationship, not its existence.



SHARE WHO LOOKED FOR BUSINESS SUPPORT IN THE PAST TWELVE MONTHS, BY MENTORING STATUS



WHERE BUSINESS OWNERS LOOKED FOR SUPPORT



CASE STUDY: CATHERINE ROYLANCE - MENTEE

Catherine Roylance is co-owner and artistic director of Genesis Publications, the Guildford limited-edition publisher her father founded in 1974, now run with her brother Nick. Two decades of running a successful business had left little room for strategic thinking. She enrolled on Help to Grow: Management at Kingston Business School and was matched with Simon Duffy, a music industry veteran turned consultant.

"I wanted someone who understood the industry and that was Simon's background. Simon showed me how we could look at book creation for our authors, and the events we create alongside those projects, as something we could develop into a menu of services alongside the core publishing."

"Really the [mentoring] is a massive bonus. You're able to go into things more in detail, share a bit more honestly, maybe about some issues than you would in a tutorial environment".

Ten hours of mentoring changed how she works. She now protects her Fridays, and she and Nick give Monday mornings to strategy. "Just to have someone to talk to, that is amazing. And to not feel so alone with it. I'm now wondering why I didn't do this years ago!"



GROWING PAINS

BUSINESSES GROW BY NAVIGATING A SERIES OF TRANSITIONS: THE FIRST EMPLOYEE, THE FIRST EXTERNAL FUNDING, THE FIRST EXPORT ORDER, THE FIRST TIME THE FOUNDER IS MANAGING RATHER THAN DOING, AND EACH ONE ASKS SOMETHING DIFFERENT OF THE PERSON IN CHARGE.

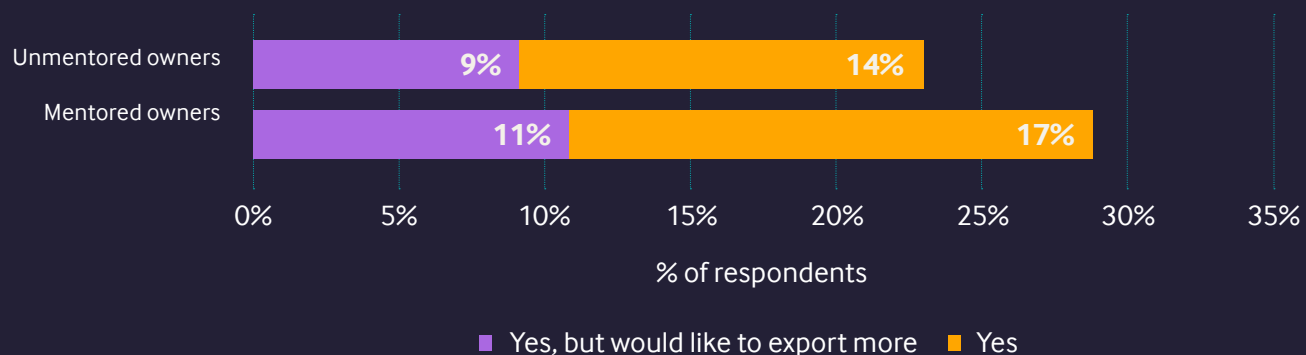
These are the moments when the way things have always been done may no longer be adequate. From the outside the business can look like a success while from the inside it feels precarious. They are also the moments when an experienced outside perspective is most valuable, and the part of the business life cycle that Help to Grow: Management is designed for. The independent evaluation of the course found that 94% of participants who used their mentoring to plan for growth felt well supported in doing so, and that participants used the relationship as much for problems the curriculum never covered (52%) as for those it did (55%). What the Barometer adds is where, across the wider population of small businesses, mentoring and these transitions coincide.

- **Businesses often start and grow alongside other work.** A large proportion of both mentored (44%) and unmentored (45%) owners started their business as a “side-hustle”. Around a third of both

mentored (33%) and unmentored (32%) owners report having full- or part-time employment in addition to running their business.

- **Mentored owners are more likely to be planning to grow:** 53% expect to take on staff in the year ahead against 36% of those without a mentor, 29% expect their staff numbers to grow against 23%, and 47% expect to expand against 43%.
- **Mentored owners seek external finance more often, and a different kind of it:** 56% had sought or planned to seek external funding, against 49% of those without a mentor. Among those who are looking, mentored owners are more likely to consider equity investment through SEIS or EIS (17% against 12%) and less likely to rely on a Start Up Loan (16% against 23%) or a credit card (4% against 6%).³

SHARE OF MENTORED AND UNMENTORED OWNERS WHO EXPORT



- **Exporters are better connected:** 49% of businesses that export, or that export and want to do more of it, have worked with a mentor, against 39% of those with no plans to export. 28% of all mentoring relationships are with exporters.
- **Mentored businesses lean more on contractors:** 46% of mentored owners used contractors rather than taking on employees, against 38% of those without a mentor.⁴

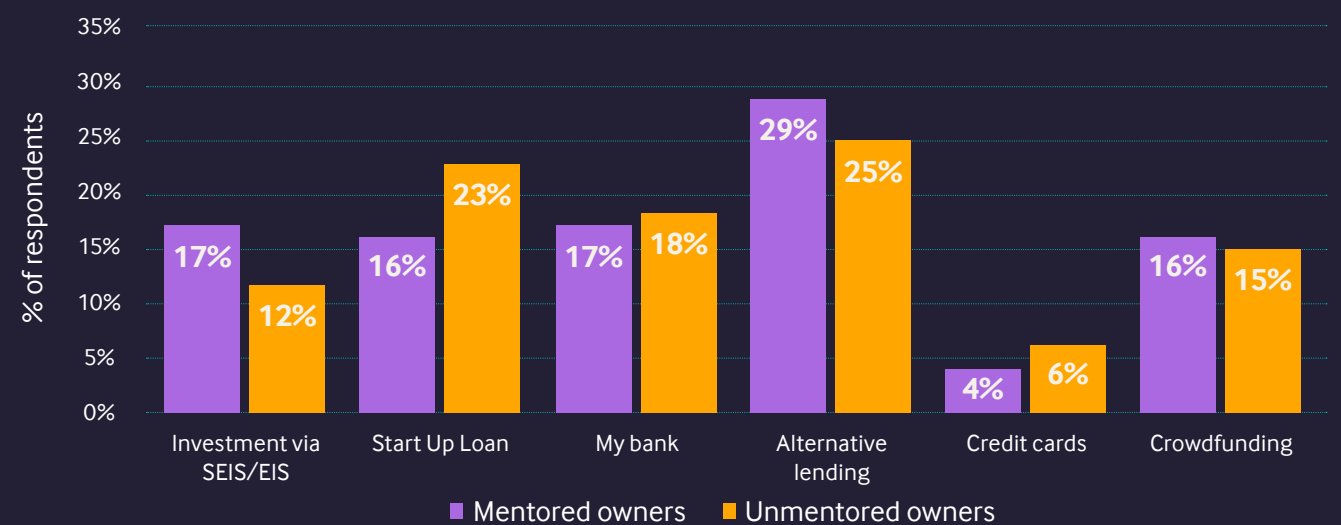
6%



MENTORED BUSINESS OWNERS ARE SIX PERCENTAGE POINTS MORE LIKELY TO GROW THEIR WORKFORCE IN THE YEAR AHEAD

(29% against 23%), and four points more likely to expect to expand (47% against 43%).

WHERE BUSINESS OWNERS SEEKING EXTERNAL FUNDING EXPECT THAT FUNDING TO COME FROM, MENTORED AGAINST UNMENTORED OWNERS



CASE STUDY: NICOLE OWEN - MENTEE

Nicole Owen is head of finance at Powersheds, a Bradford manufacturer that has grown from £1m turnover in its first year to a forecast £20m this year, and was ranked the fastest growing company in the Yorkshire Fastest 50. She enrolled on Help to Grow: Management at the University of Huddersfield in September 2024 on returning from maternity leave, and was matched with mentor Stephen Baxter.

“My role had evolved from pre-maternity leave to being head down in the transactional work to coming back

to a solid team who can manage on their own so that I can focus on the strategy and the business road map,” she says.

“The mentoring was the best thing about the course. After connecting with him on the Enterprise Nation platform, Stephen and I just clicked. His expertise is working with business leaders to improve their confidence and imposter syndrome to reach new levels. I have come on so much since working with him.”

³ The funding source question was introduced in Summer 2023, so those three figures pool the waves from then onwards.

⁴ Question only asked in the 2026 survey.

AI, TECH AND THE FUTURE OF MENTORING

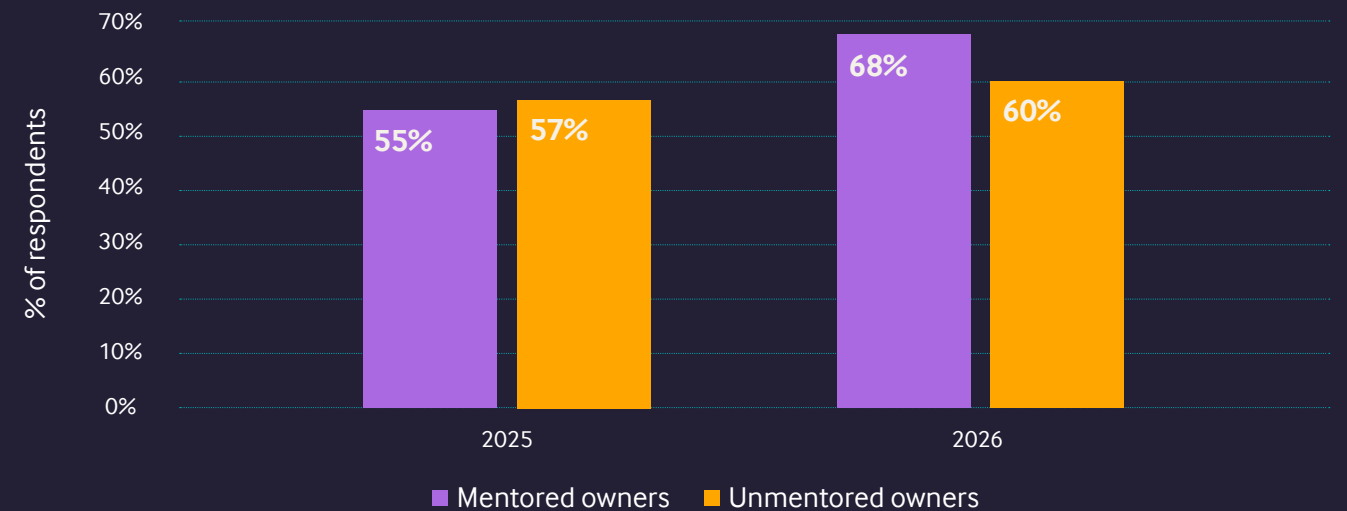
THE FIRST MENTORING MATTERS REPORT WAS PUBLISHED A MONTH BEFORE CHATGPT WAS LAUNCHED TO THE PUBLIC. SINCE THEN, AI HAS BECOME A STANDARD TOOL IN THE KIT OF BUSINESS LEADERS FOR RETRIEVING, ANALYSING, AND STRESS-TESTING INFORMATION AND IDEAS.

Small business owners now have, for the price of a monthly subscription, something that will answer any question at any hour without judgement. But how well can it provide against the range of benefits that mentees are seeking from mentors? Data from the Barometer suggests that the relationship between mentoring and technology is more interesting than replacement. Mentored founders use AI at much the same rate as their peers, but they are significantly more likely to have bought technology they have not got round to using. This has parallels with mentoring: the most common reason for non-completion of Help to Grow: Management is competing time commitments. In other words, both the adoption of technology and entering a mentoring relationship demonstrate a willingness to try new approaches, even if there can be challenges in seeing them through. None of this says that mentoring leads people to buy technology they do not need: the owners who seek out a mentor are the ones already trying more things, and the Barometer measures association, not cause.

- **Mentored founders are not avoiding AI, but nor are they far ahead on it:** across the two waves in which the question has been asked, mentored and unmentored owners use AI tools at much the same rate. In the 2026 wave mentored owners were ahead, 68% against 60%, though on a small base (n=65 and n=137).

- **The gap is between buying and using technology:** 28% of mentored business owners reported that they had invested in technology that they don't have time to use, compared to 19% of unmentored business owners. The Barometer does not measure how much technology anyone buys, so it cannot tell us whether mentored owners acquire more of it or are simply more alert to what is going unused: mentoring is, among other things, a process of stepping back and taking stock of the business. Either way, unused technology is productivity paid for and not realised.
- **Mentees value attributes in a mentor that AI alone cannot supply:** in 2022, the top three attributes sought in a mentor were life experience (61%), knowledge of the areas the business wanted to grow in (58%) and relevant sector experience (43%). Age, gender and location ranked far below.
- **For expansion and survival, quality of the mentoring relationship matters more than its existence:** among those who have been mentored, 65% of those who rated the experience highly are confident of survival, against 50% of those who rated it poorly. On expansion, the gap is 51% against 39%.
- **Mentors are already pointing people towards the tools:** the independent evaluation found that 46% of Help to Grow: Management participants who used mentoring did so to identify tools that could improve their productivity. The independent evaluation of Help to Grow: Digital reached the same conclusion from the other direction. It found that "one-to-one advice on how to identify business needs and implement appropriate digital technology is key to the success of new software within SMEs", and recommended that "such advice should form a core part of business support interventions" (RSM, September 2023).

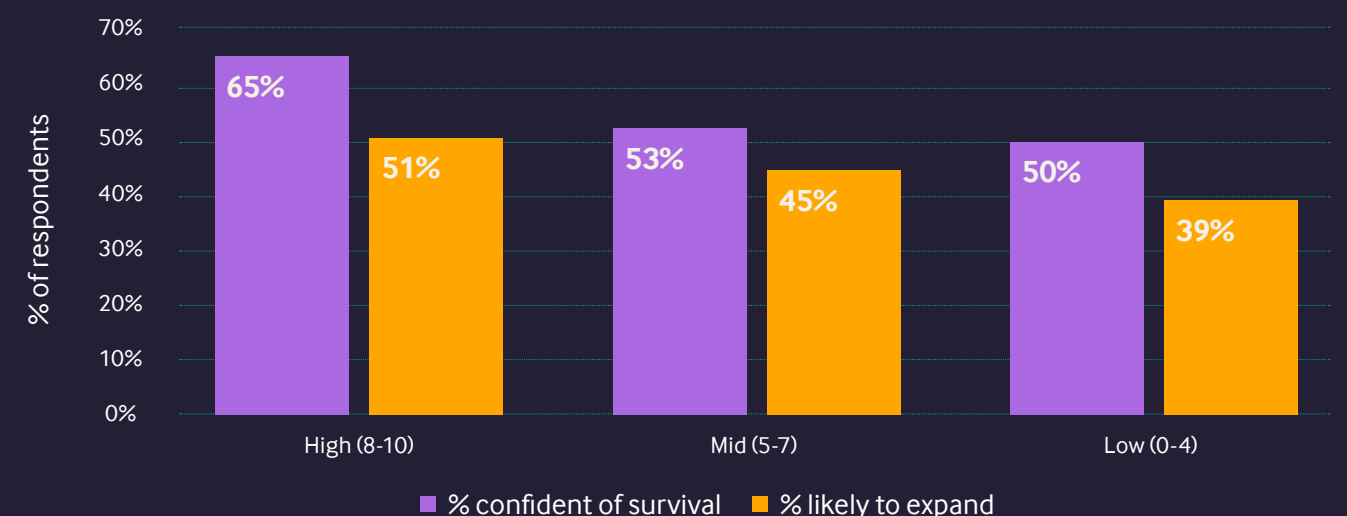
REGULAR USE OF AI TOOLS, MENTORED AGAINST NON-MENTORED OWNERS



61% WHAT MENTEES SAID THEY WANTED FROM A MENTOR IN 2022:

Life experience (61%), knowledge of the areas they wanted to grow in (58%), relevant sector experience (43%). Being the same age, the same gender or based nearby came a long way down the list.

CONFIDENCE IN SURVIVAL AND LIKELIHOOD OF EXPANSION, BY HOW THE MENTORING EXPERIENCE WAS RATED



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

IN 2022 THE QUESTION WAS WHETHER BUSINESS MENTORS WOULD COME FORWARD IN SUFFICIENT NUMBERS TO SUPPORT THE NEW, NATIONALLY-FUNDED HELP TO GROW: MANAGEMENT COURSE.

They did. The independent evaluation found mentoring was consistently the highest rated element of the Course among participants who used it. Only a third of all participants completed the full ten hours, so there is more to do. The question now is one of opportunity, and it has three parts: demand, quality and reach.



Demand

Around three in five small business owners have never worked with a mentor. This is not a market that will close its own gap. The largest single group in the data is the group with no access to a mentor at all, and it is where extra effort to extend mentoring would make the biggest difference.

Quality

Across the small business population, those who have worked with a mentor rate the experience at 6.8 out of 10. That is solid, but has room for improvement. Within Help to Grow: Management, where relationships are matched, trained, time-bounded and supported, 89% of course completers matched to a mentor were satisfied with their mentoring, including 64% who were very satisfied. The two figures are not like for like: Help to Grow: Management participants apply competitively and are, by definition, people already motivated to seek support, and the Barometer shows how closely

that willingness correlates with being mentored. But it does strongly suggest that when quality support infrastructure is put around a mentoring relationship, including training and support, high satisfaction is achievable at scale. This matters because quality is what carries the impact: among those who have been mentored, 65% of those who rated the relationship highly are confident of survival and 51% expect to expand, against 50% and 39% of those who rated it poorly.

Reach

Mentoring already happens in every nation and region of the UK, and it can be delivered remotely to firms wherever they are. For a government committed to growth in every part of the country, it is one of the few forms of business support that already reaches everywhere. What it does not do is reach evenly: access thins out sharply as businesses get smaller, and the owners with least to fall back on are the least likely to have anyone to turn to.



For small business owners

- **Find a mentor if you run your business alone:** solo founders are the group least likely to have a mentor and the most likely to benefit from one. 37% of solo founders have worked with a mentor, against 52% of businesses with any employees.
- **Agree what business challenges and opportunities the mentoring is for before you start:** people rate relationships highly when both sides know what they were for from the outset.
- **Become a mentor once you have been mentored:** mentees value experience above every other attribute. If you have been mentored, you already have it.

For future government programmes

- **Make mentoring core to any programme funded to accelerate AI adoption:** mentoring and AI adoption go together, and both are routes to the productivity gains the course exists to deliver; mentored owners use AI at much the same rate as everyone else but buy more technology than they manage to deploy. The constraint is not access to tools: it is the help to put them to work; 46% of Help to Grow: Management participants who used mentoring did so to identify tools that could improve their productivity (independent evaluation), and mentors bring with them knowledge of the tech frontier in their sector and experience of deploying it. The independent evaluation of Help to Grow: Digital recommended that one-to-one advice on adopting technology should form a core part of business support interventions.

- **Build mentoring into any successor programme as a defined entitlement:** the independent evaluation found mentoring was consistently the highest rated element of the Help to Grow: Management Course. A successor should carry it as a guaranteed minimum number of hours with a trained, matched mentor, rather than as an add-on to the curriculum.
- **Create a structured mentoring offer for businesses below the five-employee threshold:** Help to Grow: Management is open only to businesses with five or more employees. The businesses least likely to have a mentor sit just below that line: 37% of solo founders have been mentored, against 52% of businesses with employees. The step from no employees to the first employee is the one the growth agenda most needs to happen, and a separate offer for firms below the threshold would target mentoring where access is lowest.

For business schools and delivery partners

- **Match on experience and sector, not just location:** what mentees say they want is life experience and sector knowledge from their mentor. Being local ranks far below both for small businesses.
- **Vet and train every mentor to a minimum standard, and support them with continuing professional development:** the difference between a highly-rated and a poorly-rated mentoring relationship is worth 15 percentage points of confidence in survival.
- **Keep the training pathway visible:** every mentor on the Help to Grow: Management Course is trained to an ILM-assured professional standard, and routes on to ILM Level 5 and 7 qualifications are available. Not all mentors are aware that subsidised training exists.



How to get involved

Whether you are looking for a mentor or ready to become one, Enterprise Nation can help. To become a Help to Grow: Management mentor, sign up at enterprisenation.com/help-to-grow-mentor.

To find out about the course and its mentoring, visit enterprisenation.com/help-to-grow.

METHODOLOGY

The Enterprise Nation Small Business Barometer

- Seven waves between spring 2023 and 2026, with 3,406 responses to the mentoring questions across the series.
- Two source questions: whether the respondent has ever worked with a mentor, and a rating of that experience from 0 to 10, asked only of those who said yes.
- Base sizes fall across the series, from 669 in spring 2023 to 202 in 2026.
- Throughout this report, aggregated figures are reported across all seven waves from spring 2023 to 2026. Figures drawn from a single wave are identified as such, as are the small number of questions asked in only two waves, or introduced partway through the series.
- The 2026 reading on mentoring uptake, at 32%, is the lowest in the series and sits below the 38% to 43% range of five of the seven waves. Because uptake is a lifetime measure, a genuine fall is not possible in a stable population, and the most likely explanation is a change in the composition of respondents. The Autumn 2023 wave is included in the pooled figures. A data quality issue affecting a specific batch of 84 respondents aged 18 to 24 in that wave was removed before any of this analysis was run.
- Age: the question was reworded for 2026 with different bands, so age breakdowns pool the waves from spring 2023 to 2025 and exclude Autumn 2023, where the removal of the 18 to 24 batch leaves that band without a reading.
- The survival confidence question was reworded partway through the series, from a cost-of-living framing to a general twelve-month framing. Both use the same five-point scale and are combined here, but the shift should be borne in mind for any comparison spanning 2024 and 2025.
- Several questions were asked only in a subset of survey waves. AI tools, technology platform and fallen sales were asked in 2025 and 2026 only; use of contractors in 2026 only. Where this applies, only the waves with data are reported.
- The Barometer sample includes respondents in the Republic of Ireland, reflecting Enterprise Nation's membership. Nation and region breakdowns are reported only where the pooled base supports them; Northern Ireland is excluded on that basis.
- 'Small business' follows the standard UK definition of a small and medium-sized enterprise: fewer than 250 employees, as set out in the Introduction.



Help to Grow: Management Course data

- Programme figures are taken from published sources only: the department's enrolments and completions release and the independent evaluation.
- The enrolment figure of 14,420 covers 1 June 2021 to 31 March 2026 and is published by the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade on gov.uk, with data supplied by the Chartered Association of Business Schools. The completions figure of 11,915 comes from the same release. The count of 66 business schools is taken from the independent evaluation and runs to March 2025.
- Course data is used in this report for scale only. Participant-side outcome measures are not used: eligibility for the course requires at least five employees and participants self-select onto it, so that population is not representative of small businesses generally.

The independent evaluation

- Evaluation of Help to Grow: Management Phase 1 (2021 to 2025), Final Evaluation Report, published by the former Department for Business and Trade in June 2026, carried out by Ipsos in partnership with the Institute for Employment Studies.
- Findings quoted here relate to programme completers who engaged with mentoring. The evaluators note that their samples are not representative, that evidence is self-reported, and that statistical significance does not by itself establish attribution.

The 2022 comparison

- Mentoring Matters (October 2022) surveyed over 800 business owners, with fieldwork between 30 August and 2 October 2022, and ran two online focus groups on 22 September 2022.
- The 2022 survey and the Barometer ask different questions. Figures from 2022 are used in this report as context rather than as a direct before-and-after comparison.

Research and analysis by PolicyDepartment (www.policydepartment.com).



APPENDIX: SOURCES

1. Enterprise Nation Small Business Barometer, spring 2023 to 2026. Mentoring deep dive analysis, September 2026.
2. Mentoring Matters: the what, why and how of building a mentoring army to unlock growth. Enterprise Nation, October 2022. a.storyblok.com/f/102007/x/ead24d2fe4/mentoring-matters-report.pdf
3. Evaluation of Help to Grow: Management Phase 1 (2021-2025), Final Evaluation Report: process and impact evaluation. Department for Business and Trade, June 2026. www.gov.uk/government/publications/help-to-grow-management-annual-and-impact-reports. Full report: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6a297517d95ffddb05d4ae28/help-to-grow-management-phase-1-final-evaluation-report-process-and-impact-evaluation.pdf. Figures cited: 66 business schools (page 3); 89% and 64% satisfied, and 95% of mentors well matched (page 36); 87% matched and 94% well supported on growth (page 38); 52% and 46% (Figure 12, page 39); 92% more confident (page 42); feeling less isolated (page 47).
4. Association of Business Mentors, mentor training standards, October 2026. Mentor Roundtable Fact File, mentoring consortium, 2025.
5. Help to Grow: Management: enrolments and completions, May 2026. Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, transparency data, 29 May 2026. Data supplied by the Chartered Association of Business Schools. www.gov.uk/government/publications/help-to-grow-management-course-enrolments-and-participant-completions
6. Evaluation of Help to Grow: Digital, final evaluation report. RSM UK Consulting for the Department for Business and Trade, September 2023, published January 2024. www.gov.uk/government/publications/help-to-grow-digital-evaluation-report
7. Business population estimates for the UK and regions 2025. Department for Business and Trade, 2 October 2025. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/business-population-estimates-2025



HELP TO GROW.

MANAGEMENT COURSE



Funded by
UK Government



Enterprise
Nation

Newable

abm