Backing your business to grow: Getting more from digital tools and AI

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BUSINESS GROWTH SERVICE

In partnership with

Enterprise Nation

Contents

Introduction

What are digital tools?

Digital tools can remove a lot of the friction involved in running a small business. They can help you stay on top of cash flow, manage customer enquiries, market your business, keep records in order and lessen the time you dedicate to admin.

Many software packages now include artificial intelligence (AI) features as standard, which can help with tasks like drafting content, summarising notes, organising information and handling routine messages from customers. Used properly, this can save you time and allow you to work more consistently. There's also a wide range of specialised tools available, so it's often possible to find software that fits your business's specific pressures and day-to-day needs.

This guide is a practical starting point for choosing and adopting digital tools, including the ones that feature AI. It focuses on the everyday decisions that often get in the way: what problem you're trying to solve, how to avoid buying tools you won't use, how to set up a simple trial and how to keep cyber security in place as you go.

You'll also find signposting to support that can help you take action. That includes government-backed guidance such as the National Cyber Security Centre advice for small and medium-sized organisations and the general business guidance from the Business Growth Service. It also includes practical private-sector support, such as Enterprise Nation's Tech Hub, Grow with Google and Small Business Britain's AI support.

Who this guide is for

This guide is for UK-based small businesses, including sole traders, partnerships and limited companies. It's relevant if you're:

- trying to choose digital tools for the first time
- replacing spreadsheets and manual processes with something more reliable
- looking for practical ways to use AI without turning your business upside down
- unsure where to find trusted support, training or mentoring

What you'll find in the guide

This guide covers:

- where to start and how to choose tools that fit how you work
- sensible, low-risk ways to try AI and decide what's worth keeping
- public-sector and private-sector support you can use to build skills and get advice
- a checklist you can use to plan your next steps and avoid common mistakes

Where to start with digital tools

Most small businesses don't need a big digital overhaul. What tends to work is choosing one practical problem, improving it with the right tool and then building from there. This keeps the cost and effort manageable, and makes it easier for you and your team to stick with the change.

Start with the business problem

Before you begin comparing software or signing up for subscriptions, be clear about what you want to improve. Here are some common starting points:

- Spending too much time on admin and paperwork
- Struggling to keep track of customers and enquiries
- Inconsistent marketing and following-up with customers (such as replying late to enquiries or not keeping in touch after an initial conversation)
- Manual processes that lead to mistakes or cause you to miss deadlines
- Having an unclear idea of the money going in and out of the business

Write down what's happening now, what you'd like to be different and what "better" would look like in simple terms. That gives you something to test tools against.

Choose tools that fit how you work

Tools are easier to adopt when they match your day-to-day reality. In practice, that usually means:

- choosing one category of tool at a time, rather than trying to fix everything at once
- keeping the setting-up and training process easy to manage
- making sure the people who will use the tool are involved early
- setting a short trial period and reviewing whether the tool is helping

If you already have software in place, it's often worth checking whether it can do more, before you add something new.

AI in plain terms

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools can be useful in small, everyday ways. Many businesses start with tasks such as:

- drafting and refining text, such as emails, product descriptions, proposals or job adverts
- summarising meeting notes or long documents
- pulling out key actions from notes or messages
- creating first-draft outlines or checklists

You can also build AI tools into systems you already use, such as customer support tools or marketing platforms.

But there are limits. The output you get from AI tools can sometimes be wrong or incomplete, and it can sound confident even when it's mistaken. Treat the results as a starting point, not a final answer.

If you intend to enter business information into an AI tool, be cautious about what data you share, especially anything sensitive about customers, pricing, contracts, finances or staff.

Keep the basics of security in place

Adopting digital tools and technology works better when you handle security as part of the process, not as an afterthought. Government-backed guidance is available through the National Cyber Security Centre for SMEs, including practical steps on passwords, securing devices, backing up data and protecting against phishing.

Public-sector and publicly funded support
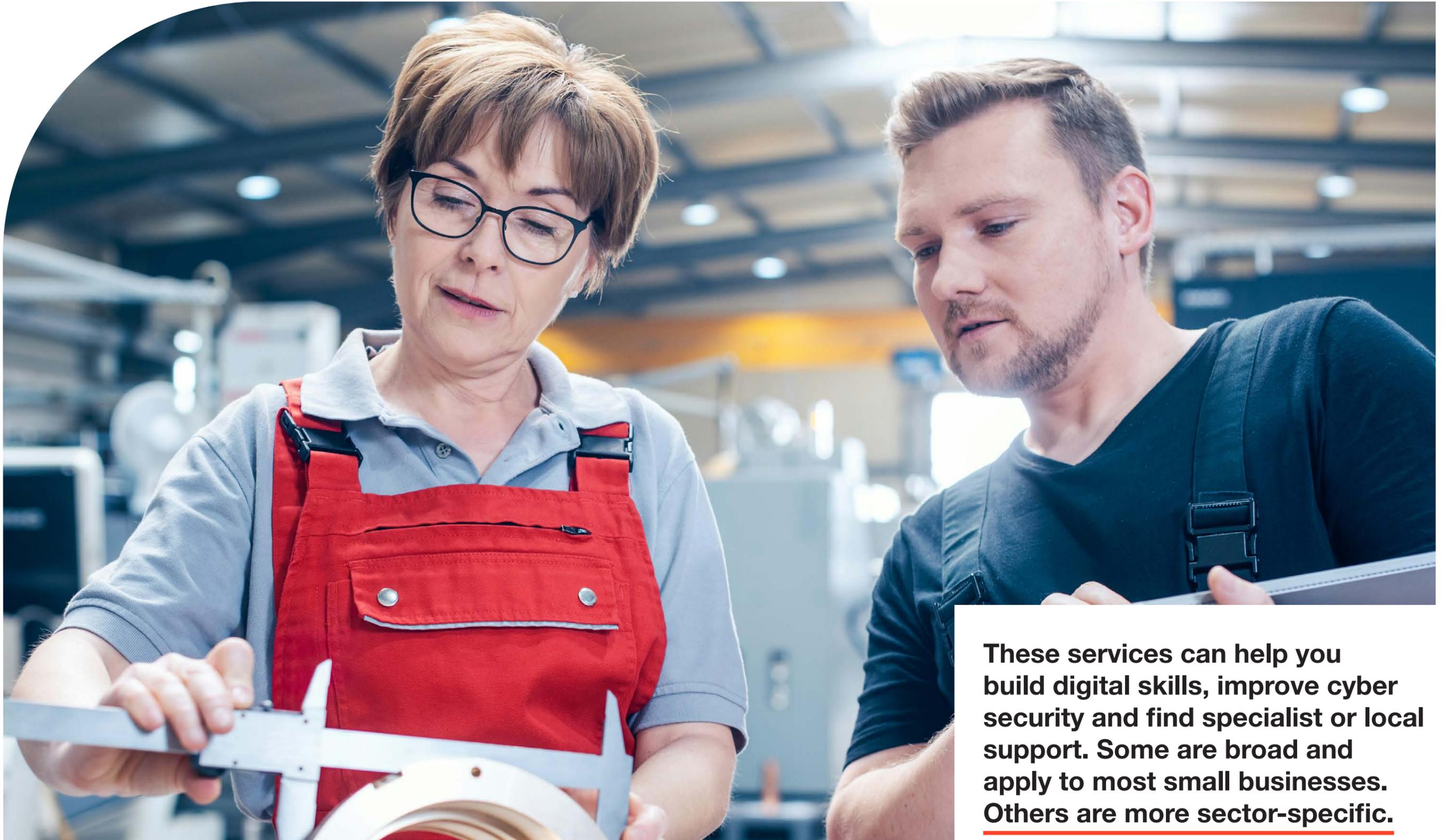
These services can help you build digital skills, improve cyber security and find specialist or local support. Some are broad and apply to most small businesses. Others are more sector-specific.

General support

Business & IP Centre (BIPC) network

- **What it is:** A national network based in the British Library and in public libraries across the UK. It offers free events, workshops and practical tools to help people start and grow a business, including support with digital topics and Intellectual Property.
- **How you can use it:** Use it for hands-on sessions and practical advice to build everyday business and digital skills, plus access to business information and market intelligence resources. It can be a good option if you want structured, in-person support without paying for a course led by staff and experts-in-residence with knowledge of your local area and business landscape.
- **Where to find it:** Start at the BIPC website and use the "Find your local BIPC" option.

Growth Hubs and local digital programmes

- **What they are:** Growth Hubs are local business support services across the UK. Many work with partners to provide practical digital skills support for small businesses, which can include workshops, webinars, one-to-one advice and signposting on topics such as social media marketing, productivity tools and data. Support varies by area.
- **How you can use them:** They're a good route if you want local, practical help to build digital skills or improve how your business uses technology, especially if you prefer supported learning rather than purely self-serve online resources.
- **Where to find them:** Find local support through the Business Growth Hub Finder website.

AI Skills Boost

- **What it is:** A selection of free, online foundational AI skills courses, built by leading industry partners and backed by Skills England and the Department for Science Innovation and Technology. It's open to all UK adults, and completing selected courses can earn a government-backed virtual AI foundations badge.
- **How you can use it:**A straightforward starting point if you want to build practical confidence using AI tools for everyday work tasks. It's designed to fit around working life with courses ranging from 20 minutes to a day.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the AI Skills Boost homepage.

AI skills tools package

- **What it is:** A set of tools for employers and training providers, including an AI Skills Framework plus an adoption pathway model and an employer checklist.
- **How you can use it:** If you are deciding what "AI skills" mean for your business, this helps you map the skills you need by job level and plan training that matches where you are in adoption, from early experimentation to wider rollout.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Innovate UK Business Connect website.

Digital apprenticeships

- **What they are:** Apprenticeships combine paid work with training and can help businesses bring in new digital capability or upskill existing staff, using approved training routes.
- **How you can use them:** If you need capacity in areas like software, data, digital marketing or cyber security, an apprenticeship can be a structured way to grow skills over time while the person works in your business. The set-up and funding route depends on where you are in the UK.
- **Where to find them:** Visit the Apprenticeships.gov.uk website.

Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) Hartree Centre

- **What it is:** A centre that helps UK businesses and public sector organisations explore and adopt supercomputing, data science, cloud, quantum and AI technologies.
- **How you can use it:** Relevant if you're working on data-heavy problems, advanced analytics or more technical AI adoption and you need access to expertise and capability beyond off-the-shelf tools.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Hartree Centre website.

Essential Digital Skills Framework

- **What it is:** A government framework that defines the essential digital skills adults need to participate safely and confidently in the digital world.
- **How you can use it:** Useful as a checklist to spot skills gaps in your team and to shape basic training plans, especially if you're bringing colleagues up to speed on day-to-day digital working before introducing new systems.
- **Where to find it:** Visit GOV.UK.

Cyber Essentials scheme

- **What it is:** No business is "too small" for cyber criminals to target. One in two small businesses in the UK suffered a cyber attack or breach last year. Secure your business with Cyber Essentials, the Government-backed certification scheme which meets the UK's minimum standard for cyber security.
- **How you can use it:** Cyber Essentials is highly effective. Ninety-two per cent fewer cyber insurance claims are made by organisations that have Cyber Essentials certification in place, and certification is mandatory for many public-sector and private-sector contracts.
- **Where to find it:** Get started for free. Find out if your business is ready for Cyber Essentials with the Readiness Tool, download the certification assessment questions or book 30 minutes free with a cyber adviser to discuss your path to certification. Visit the NCSC website.

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Growth Hubs are a good route if you want local, practical help to build digital skills or improve how your business uses technology.

Sector-specific support

Made Smarter Adoption programme

- What it is: Support for manufacturing SMEs to adopt industrial digital technology. The programme offers impartial expert advice, digital road mapping, intensive support, match-funded grants, leadership training and workforce development in digital adoption.
- **How you can use it:** If you manufacture in England, the programme can help you to adopt industrial digital technologies like robotics and autonomous systems, AI, 3D printing and data systems, to improve productivity and competitiveness.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Made Smarter website.

Digital Catapult

- **What it is:** A deep tech innovation organisation that supports businesses to apply advanced technologies, including AI, in practical settings.
- **How you can use it:** Useful if you want support to test, develop or prove AI use cases, or if you want to connect into programmes and networks in specific sectors. Digital Catapult's work commonly includes creative industries, energy and utilities, and transport and infrastructure, alongside work with government and public sector organisations.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Digital Catapult website.

Innovate UK BridgeAI

- **What it is:** A programme delivered by Innovate UK and partners to help businesses adopt trusted AI solutions. It focuses on sectors that have high growth potential but are less mature when it comes to using AI, such as agriculture and food processing, construction, creative industries and transport, and logistics and warehousing.
- **How you can use it:** If your business sits in one of the target sectors and you want to move from interest to implementation, BridgeAI can be a route to connect with expertise, find support opportunities and get practical help with adoption.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the BridgeAI programme page.

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Digital Catapults are useful if you want support to test, develop or prove AI use cases, or if you want to connect into programmes and networks in specific sectors.

Private-sector and industry support

These sources are useful for learning, mentoring and choosing tools. Many are free to access, with optional paid services if you decide to go further.

Grow with Google

- **What it is:** Free online courses, tools and sessions covering digital skills, including topics that touch on AI for marketing and productivity.
- **How you can use it:** Use it to build practical confidence in areas like online presence, marketing and everyday digital workflows. It's a good starting point if you want structured learning without committing budget to it.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Grow with Google website.

Meta Blueprint

- **What it is:** Free training on using Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp for business, including advertising and measuring your performance.
- **How you can use it:** Helpful if your sales rely on social channels and you want a clearer understanding of what works, how to set up campaigns and how to measure results before spending more.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Meta Blueprint website.

TikTok Academy

- **What it is:** Free learning and webinars focused on TikTok for Business, including ads and measurement.
- **How you can use it:** Useful if you sell consumer products or services and want to test whether TikTok can drive awareness or sales, with guidance on how the platform's ad tools work.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the TikTok Academy website.

LinkedIn Marketing Labs

- **What it is:** Free courses, workshops and certifications focused on LinkedIn advertising and B2B (business-to-business) marketing.
- **How you can use it:** A good option if you sell B2B and need help generating leads, building credibility or learning what LinkedIn ads can do before you commit budget.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the LinkedIn Marketing Labs website.

HubSpot Academy

- What it is: Free courses and certifications across marketing, sales and operations, including modules that cover using AI in marketing and prompting.
- How you can use it: Use it to strengthen the basics of lead generation, customer follow-ups and sales processes, especially if you're trying to make activity more consistent across a small team.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the HubSpot Academy website.

Shopify Academy

- **What it is:** Free education for building and running e-commerce (online selling), including setting up an online store.
- **How you can use it:** Useful if you're moving into e-commerce, improving an existing store or trying to connect your shop with fulfilment, marketing and customer service in a more joined-up way.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Shopify Academy website.

AWS Training and AWS Skill Builder

- **What it is:** A large library of cloud training, including learning paths that touch on AI and generative AI skills.
- **How you can use it:** Best if you have in-house technical capability or you work with developers and want a clearer grasp of cloud and AI basics to make better decisions and brief suppliers properly.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the AWS Training and AWS Skill Builder websites.

Barclays Eagle Labs

- **What it is:** A UK-wide network offering programmes, events and founder support through hubs and partners, often aimed at start-ups and scaling businesses.
- **How you can use it:** Useful if you want a community setting, specialist events and access to support that can help you move from interest in tech to practical implementation and growth.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Barclays Eagle Labs website.

NatWest Accelerator

- **What it is:** A network of support for entrepreneurs, including events and programmes that can help with planning and connecting to expertise.
- **How you can use it:** A good option if you want structured support and peer learning while you make changes to how you run the business, including adopting new tools.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the NatWest Accelerator website.

Vodafone V-Hub

- **What it is:** Free-to-access digital skills and business resources aimed at SMEs, covering topics like marketing, cyber security and hybrid working.
- **How you can use it:** Useful for bite-sized learning and practical guidance when you're trying to improve the basics, particularly around staying secure and building consistent digital habits.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Vodafone V-Hub website.

Enterprise Nation Tech Hub

- **What it is:** A curated hub of tech tools, offers and guidance aimed at helping small businesses choose and adopt digital tools.
- **How you can use it:** Useful when you want to compare tools, understand typical use cases and find practical support that helps you implement software rather than just browse features.
- **Where to find it:** Visit the Tech Hub website.

Case study

Hector Finch – from traditional craftsmanship to a more connected factory

Hector Finch is a decorative lighting designer and manufacturer, founded in the mid-1980s and still run by Hector and his wife Emma. Today, the business has around 40 staff based across its head office, warehouse and workshop in Leominster, Herefordshire, with a London showroom at the Design Centre Chelsea Harbour.

It serves an international customer base of interior designers, architects and private clients, and works with several showrooms in North America. The company conducts around 65% of its business in the US.

As the business grew, the team wanted better visibility over orders and stock, and a more efficient way to run warehouse and despatch. They were also looking to become less reliant on paper and introduce live data into their day-to-day operations.

Having systems that no longer do the job

Though Hector Finch had software in place to manage operations, over time that software became less productive. The business felt it needed a full review of what it required from a manufacturing planning and wider business system before making changes. At the same time, key processes were still paper-led, with no barcoding or scanning in warehouse and despatch.

The practical impact was familiar to many growing businesses. Information was harder to track, it took longer to find answers and it was difficult to see what was happening across different stages of work without chasing paperwork.

Choosing a direction

Rather than buying a new system quickly, the business focused on clarifying what it actually needed. The goal wasn't technology for its own sake, but a system that would improve how the business tracked orders, managed inventory and moved information between stock control, production and despatch.

A key part of this was improving the bill of materials so the business could see every component required to build each fixture, check what was already in stock, avoid over-ordering and shorten lead times.

Putting the new system in place

The business installed a material requirements planning (MRP) system called Access FactoryMaster to improve how information moves through the operation. The intent was to replace paper-heavy processes with live, shared data so teams could track orders as they move through production and better control stock levels.

Implementation was treated as a learning process. The system was new to the team, and the benefits were expected to build as staff familiarised themselves with it and it became embedded in day-to-day working.

As part of the change, the company provided staff training and introduced digital tablets on the production line, supporting the move away from paper and towards more consistent, visible information.

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Hector Finch's experience is a reminder that adopting digital technology often starts with a straightforward operational need.

What changed – the advantages

The immediate value was better visibility. With up-to-date information in one place, the business could track orders through production more clearly, manage stock more accurately and streamline processes that previously relied on manual checks.

The team also described how the new system helped during a particularly busy period. They were more confident they could process extra work and meet deadlines because they could work "smarter and quicker" with the tool in place.

Lessons for other small businesses

Hector Finch's experience is a reminder that adopting digital technology often starts with a straightforward operational need – better information, fewer manual steps and less reliance on paper. The company made its decision after closely considering what it needed and looking closely at how work actually flowed through the business.

It also shows that you don't stop adopting technology when you've installed a system. In fact, the impact builds through training, gradual process changes and consistent use, especially when a business is balancing change with the pressures of day-to-day delivery.

Digital adoption checklist and next steps

Adopting digital technology is easier when you keep it focused. We've designed this checklist to help you choose tools that fit your business, introduce them sensibly and avoid common problems that waste time and money.

Digital adoption checklist

Be clear about the outcome

☐ You can explain what you want to improve in one sentence.

☐ You know what "better" looks like for your business, such as fewer hours on admin, fewer errors, faster responses or clearer reporting.

Choose tools that match how you work

☐ You've picked one category of tool to focus on first, rather than changing everything at once.

☐ You've identified the minimum features you need and what you can live without.

☐ You've allowed time for setting up the tool and doing some basic training.

Plan a short trial

☐ You have a simple trial plan with a review point, such as after two to four weeks of use.

☐ You know what you'll measure, even if it's basic, such as time saved or fewer missed tasks.

Use AI carefully

☐ You're clear on which tasks you'll use AI for and what still needs human checking.

☐ You've decided what information you won't share with AI tools, especially sensitive customer, financial or contract data.

Build in cyber security

☐ You're following practical guidance on passwords, backups, updates and being aware of phishing.

☐ If needed, you've looked at recognised standards such as Cyber Essentials and the routes to trusted support.

Make adoption stick

☐ One person owns the setting up and day-to-day use.

☐ You have a simple way to capture feedback and make small changes to how you use the tool.

Next steps

1. Write down the basics

Choose the issue that wastes the most time or causes the most friction. Keep it specific.

2. Choose one route to support

If you need help deciding what to adopt, use a mentoring option. If you need skills, use a training option. If you need to strengthen security, start with the public cyber guidance. If you want to compare tools, use a tool hub. The earlier pages of this guide set out where to find each type of support.

3. Trial, review, then expand

Run a short trial, review what changed and decide whether to keep the tool. Once you have one area working well, move to the next priority.

This approach keeps change manageable and helps you build digital capability step by step, without taking on unnecessary cost or making things too complex.

Run a short trial, review what changed and decide whether to keep the tool.

Backing your business

Discover the guidance and funding your business needs.

Backing your business is a national campaign delivered by Enterprise Nation in partnership with the Department for Business and Trade (DBT). It's designed to help small businesses understand what government support is available and how to use it in practice.

The campaign focuses on four areas that are central to many businesses: exporting, access to finance, digital tools and high street resilience.

Through practical guides, webinars, newsletters and real business stories, **Backing your business** brings together support from across government, including DBT and other departments and agencies.

The aim is to make it easier for small businesses to find relevant help and apply it to real decisions they face as they start, grow or adapt.

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