
The State of AI in Knoxville Small Business

2026 Field Report

Most Knoxville owners we heard from already use AI, and many say it saves them time every week. Far fewer have a policy, an owner, or a repeatable process for it. This report covers what they told us and what to do about it.

THE SHORT VERSION

Knoxville is using AI. Most businesses haven't built a way to run it yet.

Owners report real time savings and some revenue gains. Policies, ownership, and documented processes trail well behind actual use, and that gap is where both the risk and the upside sit.

90%

USE AI OR ARE TRYING IT OUT

84%

SAY IT SAVES THEM TIME EACH WEEK

81%

HAVE NO FINISHED AI POLICY

61%

PLAN TO SPEND MORE ON AI NEXT YEAR

Where does AI fit in your business?

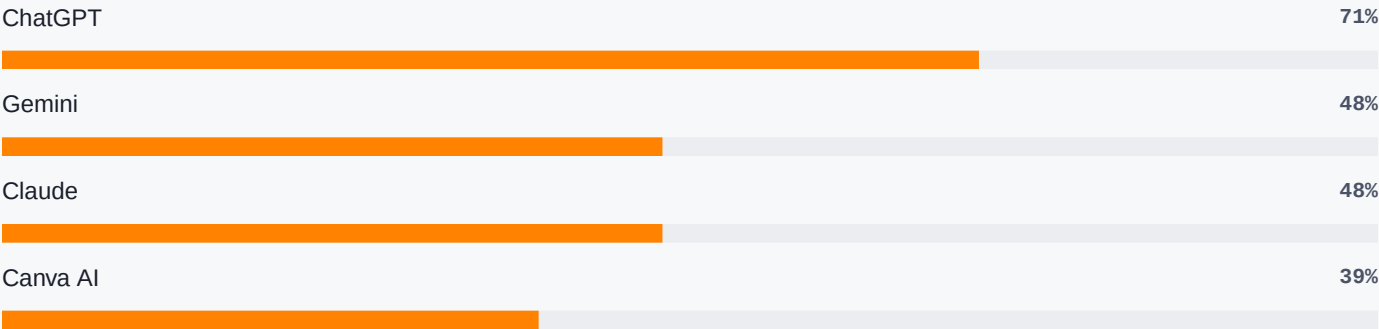
The useful question is which of your workflows AI can make faster or simpler. A complimentary session at beknowntoday.com/schedule is a quick way to find out.

01 · ADOPTION

AI is already part of the workday.

90% of respondents use AI in some form, and 74% use it at least once a day. For most, the open question is how to make it consistent.

Chat tools are how most people start, and marketing is the most common use. The larger gains tend to come later, when a prompt that worked once gets written down as a process the whole team can follow.



“The tedious website building and ad creation and running”

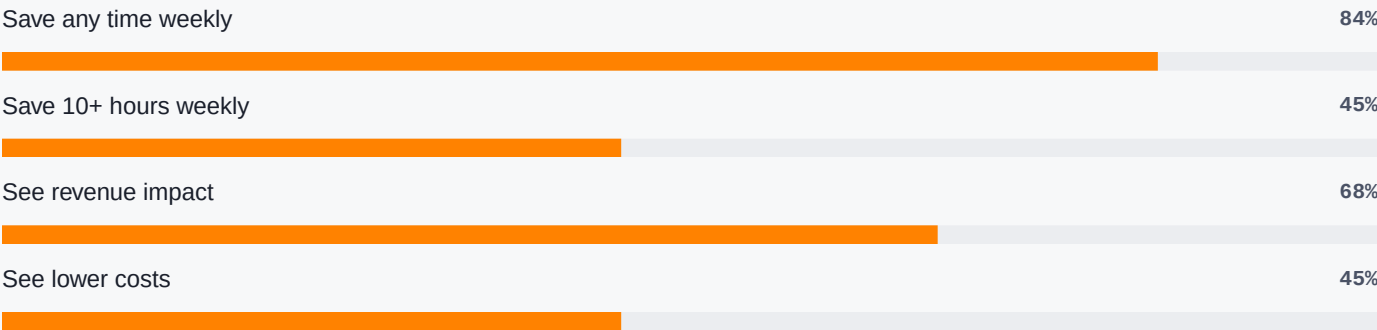
SURVEY RESPONDENT · PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

02 · VALUE

The first payoff is time. What you do with it decides the rest.

84% say AI saves their team time each week, and 45% save more than ten hours. 68% report at least some effect on revenue, and 45% report lower costs.

Respondents describe AI as giving them hours back more than cutting spending. Those hours only matter if they go somewhere useful, like faster follow-up, more time selling, or fewer delays.



“Manual data entry, lower time spent researching”

SURVEY RESPONDENT · HOSPITALITY

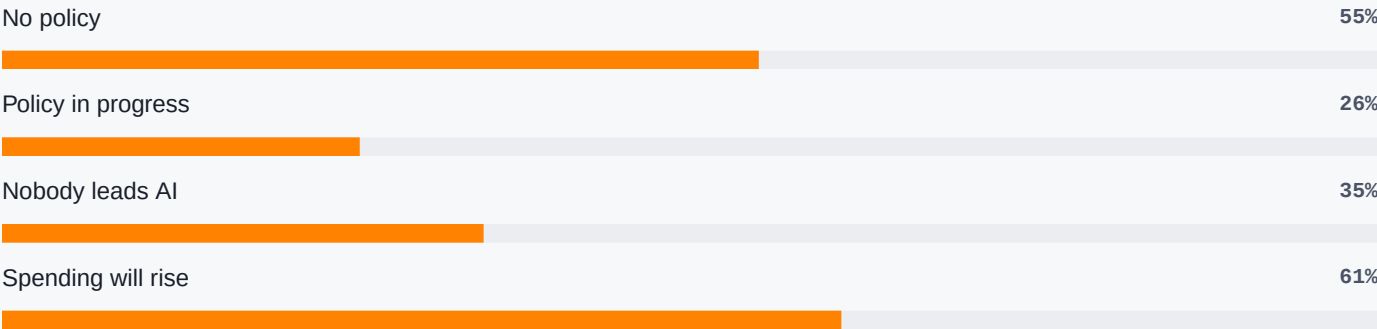
If AI saves a few minutes here and there but output hasn't changed, a new tool probably won't fix it. Redesigning the workflow usually will.

03 · READINESS

Use is growing faster than the rules around it.

81% have no finished AI policy, and 35% say nobody leads their AI efforts. Meanwhile 61% expect to spend more on it.

More spending without an owner tends to produce duplicate subscriptions, uneven quality, and customer data pasted into tools nobody approved. A one-page policy and a named owner fix most of that without adding red tape.



“Ongoing reporting with accurate data sent to client. Automate client personas and monthly workflows for delivery, approval and publishing.”

SURVEY RESPONDENT · HEALTHCARE

Start with one owner, a short policy, and the single workflow that causes the most friction.

04 • OBSTACLES

Know-how, not money, is the main thing holding owners back.

42% name lack of knowledge as an obstacle. 42% worry about data privacy or security. Cost comes up for 16%.

Most of these obstacles come down to missing information. Owners aren't sure which tasks suit AI or what is safe to put into it. That's good news, because training and clear rules are cheaper than software.

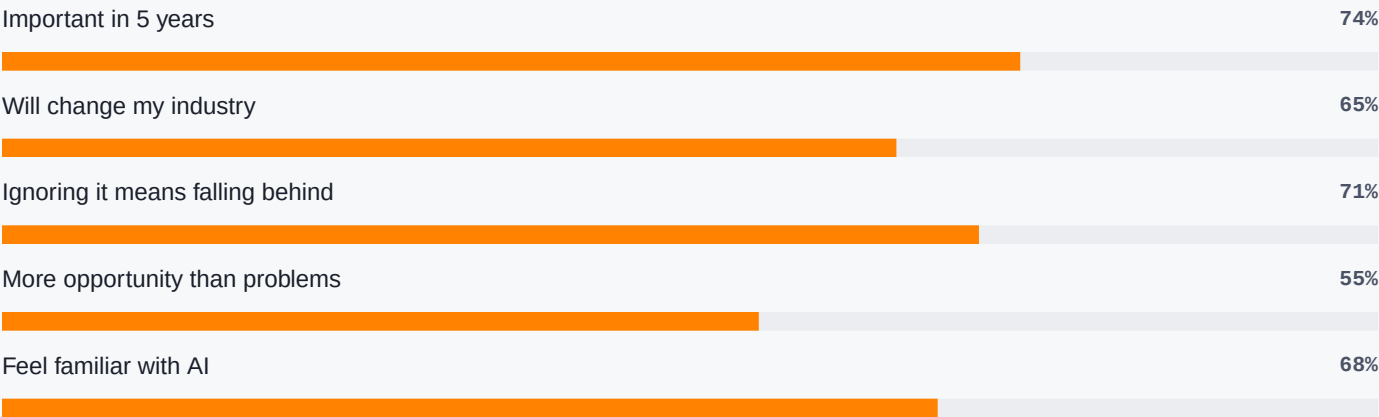


If your team is unsure, give them one approved tool, a list of what not to paste into it, and an hour of practice on a real task.

Owners expect AI to change their industry, and most see more upside than risk.

74% rate AI as important to their business over the next five years, while 68% rate their own familiarity that high. 65% expect it to change their industry.

People feel the pressure but are less sure of their own skill. 55% think AI brings more opportunities than problems, and 71% think companies that ignore it will fall behind.

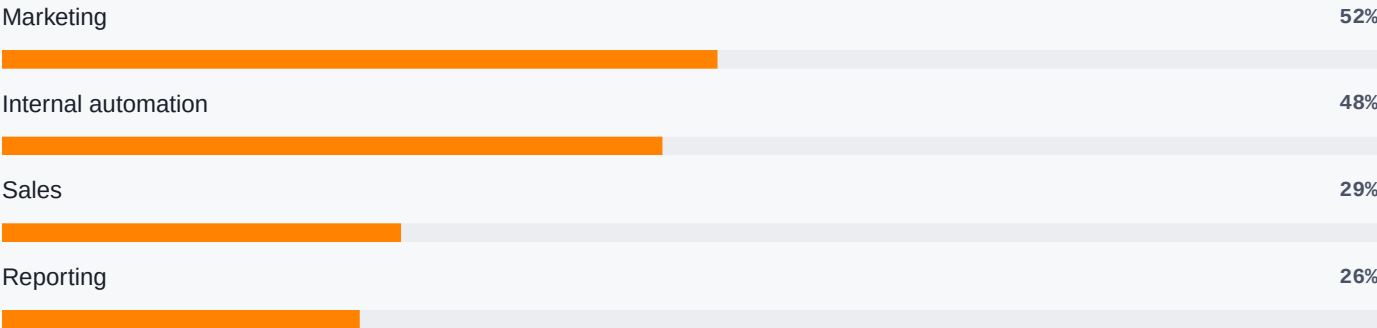


06 · PRIORITIES

Marketing and internal automation top next year's list.

Marketing and internal automation are the two most common priorities for the next twelve months, ahead of sales and reporting.

A sensible order is to free up internal time first, then spend it on visibility, response speed, and customer experience. Pick workflows because they fit how you work, not because a tool is new.



“Lead generation”

SURVEY RESPONDENT · PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

IN THEIR WORDS

Where owners said AI could help most

We asked each respondent to name the one task or bottleneck they most want AI to fix. Most answers fell into four groups. Shares are of all written answers, so they add up to less than 100%.

Manual data entry and repetitive tasks

39%

“Manual data entry, lower time spent researching”

“Repetitive”

First step: Pick the one task someone retypes every week. Map where the data comes from and where it ends up, then automate the copy step and keep a person on review.

Marketing and finding customers

17%

“Lead generation”

“Making adoption or foster fliers especially for dogs needing emergency care”

First step: Build a repeatable content process: one brief, a reusable prompt set, and a fixed approval step. Measure leads or inquiries, not posts published.

Reporting, research, and documents

17%

“Demographic analysis”

“Analyze reliable data”

First step: Standardize the inputs first. AI summarizes and drafts well when the source data arrives in the same shape every time.

Workflow, email, and project handoffs

13%

“project management but we are working actively on this”

“Quoting, work flow communication”

First step: Write down each handoff and who owns it. AI can draft replies, quotes, and status updates once the steps are clear.

A DECISION GUIDE

Buy, automate, configure, or build?

Choose the smallest safe layer that can solve the problem. Move up only when the work needs more coordination, special rules, or its own experience.

Buy

You need a stable system of record, mature permissions, payments, signatures, secure files, or another common function.

EXAMPLE

Your official customer, financial, project, or document system.

WATCH FOR

Check what your current software already does before buying another tool.

Automate

One clear trigger starts predictable work, and the output is a task, draft, notification, or field update.

EXAMPLE

Draft a follow-up after a form arrives, then send it to a person for review.

WATCH FOR

Name the reviewer and decide what happens when information is missing.

Configure

A team needs a shared queue, owners, statuses, approvals, corrections, reports, or escalation.

EXAMPLE

A shared view that shows every request, who owns it, and what happens next.

WATCH FOR

Agree on the process before putting it into a workspace.

Build

The work needs a dedicated experience, specialized rules, related data, role-based access, or audit history.

EXAMPLE

A customer or staff tool shaped around a workflow that makes the business distinct.

WATCH FOR

Prove the workflow first, and keep official records in established systems.

MATCH THE TOOL TO THE JOB

Start with the kind of work, not the brand name.

Writing and synthesis

Drafts, summaries, outlines, repurposing, and first-pass analysis.

FIRST MOVE

Give the tool source material, a clear audience, and a human reviewer.

Research and verification

Finding sources, comparing claims, and organizing what is known or uncertain.

FIRST MOVE

Require citations and verify important claims in the original source.

Workflow automation

Moving repeatable work between systems after a clear trigger.

FIRST MOVE

Map the trigger, inputs, output, owner, and exception path.

Purpose-built applications

Specialized work that needs its own interface, rules, permissions, or history.

FIRST MOVE

Test the process manually before deciding what the application must do.

WORKFLOW FIT CHECK

Five questions before you spend money or time.

If these answers are unclear, pause before choosing a tool.

- 01 What business result should improve?
- 02 Where does the official record belong?
- 03 Can software you already use handle enough of the job?
- 04 Is the smallest useful layer Buy, Automate, Configure, or Build?
- 05 Who reviews the result and owns exceptions?

Try the interactive workflow advisor

Get a practical Buy, Automate, Configure, or Build starting point, then ask a follow-up grounded in the report.

knoxvillesurvey.com/report#advisor

WHAT TO DO NEXT

Four steps to get more out of the AI you already use.

01

Choose the problem before the tool.

Name the delay, handoff, or repeated task you want gone. With a clear target, picking a tool is easier and you can tell whether it worked.

02

Write down what works.

Save the prompts, inputs, review steps, and owner, so a useful experiment doesn't disappear when one person gets busy.

03

Set basic rules now.

Decide what data stays out of AI tools, which tools are approved, and when a person reviews the output. Do it before use spreads further.

04

Track the hours you get back.

Measure time saved, turnaround, response speed, and revenue. How often someone opens a tool tells you very little.

TOOLS IN PRACTICE

Six examples of what the right-sized solution can look like.

These are Be Known systems, not Knoxville survey findings. Each started with a specific job rather than a request for “more AI.”

SALES

Sales admin dashboard

Scores recorded calls, flags coaching opportunities, and gives leaders a clearer view of rep performance.

CLIENT SERVICE

Multi-channel client portal

Keeps client work in one place while clients communicate by text, email, Slack, voice note, or the portal.

OPERATIONS

Work order tracking

Shows job status and workload in a system shaped around how the business actually operates.

DELIVERY

Client methodology platform

Turns a consultant's process into a guided client experience that can expand as the offer grows.

DISTRIBUTION

White-label platform

Packages an expert's system so it can be delivered to more people without adding a full sales team.

FOLLOW-UP

Business card scan app

Scans a card, creates the CRM contact, and sets a follow-up reminder in one short workflow.

BE KNOWN CLIENT EXAMPLES

Three real systems. Three different jobs.

These examples are separate from the Knoxville survey data. They show how the decision guide can translate into working systems.

AUTOMATE

AI sales coaching

A system scores recorded calls, flags coaching opportunities, and runs prospect simulations without requiring the founder to review every recording.

WHY IT MATTERS

Use AI where the inputs already exist and the same judgment has to be repeated often.

CONFIGURE

15–18 hours returned each week

A professional-services founder recaptured 15–18 hours a week after advertising, funnels, and CRM operations were brought into one managed system.

WHY IT MATTERS

The payoff often comes from removing coordination work, not adding another standalone AI tool.

BUILD

A follow-up workflow in one scan

A purpose-built app turns a business card into a CRM contact and a follow-up reminder in one short workflow.

WHY IT MATTERS

A narrow tool can be more useful than a large platform when the trigger and destination are clear.

Explore the examples: beknownonline.com/success-stories/

YOUR NEXT WORKFLOW

This report shows the pattern. A session shows where it applies to you.

Book a complimentary 1:1 AI consultation with Be Known, LLC. We'll find at least two ways AI could save you 5+ hours per week, then lay out the first step.

Zero pitch. We'll cover where AI fits, where it doesn't, and what to do first so your company can grow faster and run smoother.

Book your complimentary session

Bring one frustrating process, recurring bottleneck, or growth goal.

beknowntoday.com/schedule

Source: Knoxville Small Business AI Study, conducted by Be Known, LLC in September 2026. Statistics use completed responses; the bottleneck section also draws on written answers from partial responses. Participation was opt-in and answers are self-reported, so treat findings as directional rather than representative. Percentages are rounded, and multi-select questions can total more than 100%. Excerpts are attributed by industry only.