



Work Change Special Report

How Small Business Can Win in 2026

The Netherlands | December 2025

LinkedIn

Small businesses are navigating a defining era.

Technology is moving faster, attention is harder to earn, and trust and relationships matter more than ever. Against that backdrop, entrepreneurship is gathering pace: professionals say AI has made them more likely to start a business—LinkedIn members adding ‘founder’ to their profile jumped 85% year-over-year and almost tripled since July 2022. 20% of professionals say they want to work for themselves in the near future.

For those choosing to build, the question is how to navigate change effectively. Signals from 160 million professionals across 18+ million small businesses on LinkedIn reveal three clear paths forward. AI adoption gives you speed and scale. Brand credibility builds the visibility and trust that make people notice. Networks create the influence that turns attention into opportunity. Together, these three forces are emerging as the new growth engines for small businesses.

AI is the great equalizer.

The question for small businesses isn't whether to adopt AI, but how quickly they can move and what happens if they don't. Today, 85% of small businesses across global markets are using AI in some form.

The next step for small businesses is to move from experimentation to adoption. Many of the tools small businesses already rely on are strategically integrating AI to help save time, reduce costs, and unlock new opportunities. More than half (56%) of employees in the Netherlands say AI will improve their daily work life. Yet, usage is still low, with just a minority applying AI to advanced tasks and an even smaller share to everyday work.



of small business employees say, “The rise of AI has made me consider career paths—like entrepreneurship—that I hadn't thought about before.”

26% of small business employees report independent AI use for advanced tasks (complex strategy, data analysis, working with agents) and 18% for everyday tasks (writing emails, summarizing notes, search).



The opportunity for AI spans every aspect of small business operations. AI can automate routine tasks in customer service, generate marketing content, streamline the hiring process, and enhance decision-making with data insights previously only unlocked by enterprise clients. 66% of small business marketers in the Netherlands agree that AI will help smaller brands compete and punch above their weight.

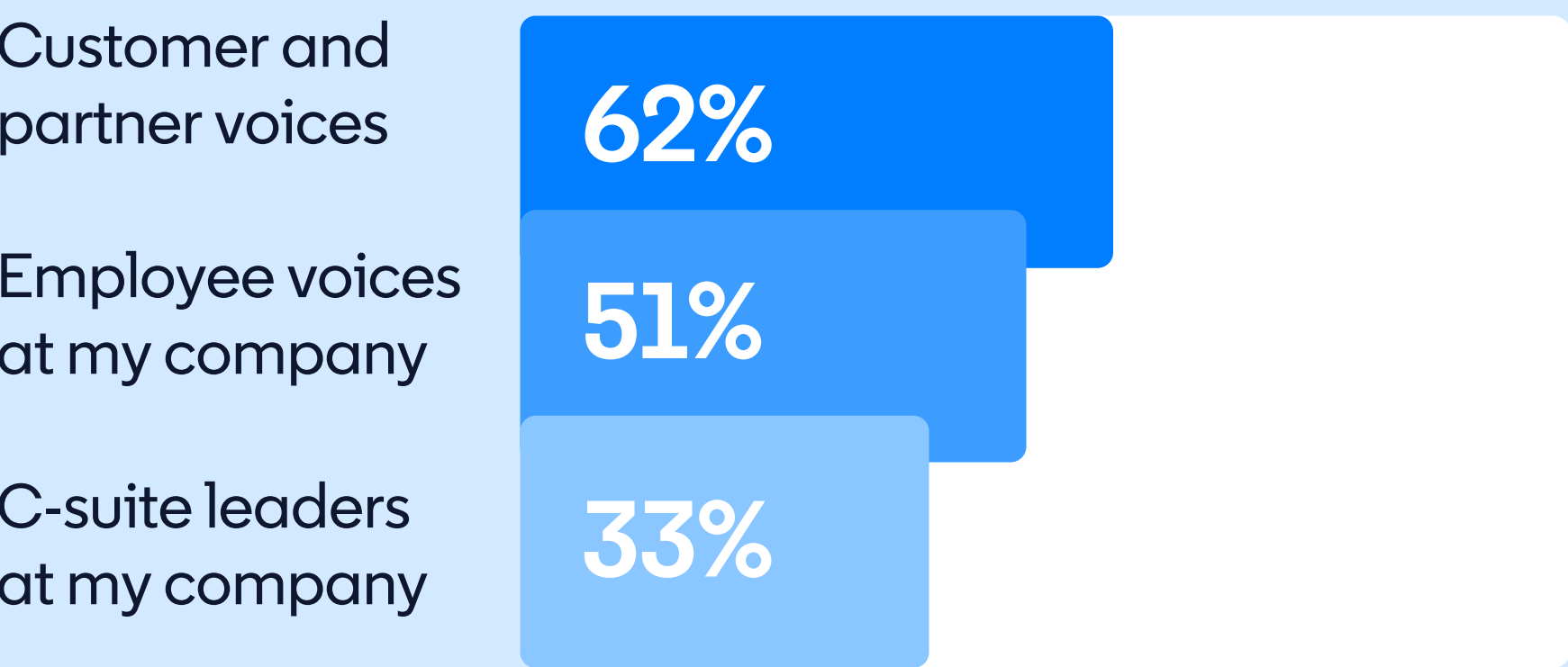
It’s not just adoption alone that matters; it’s capability. Globally, 54% of small business owners agree that their company is actively investing in AI tools and AI skills.

AI literacy skills (defined as having the ability to leverage AI tools for business purposes) has been on the rise. As of July 2025, companies in The Netherlands with 11-50 employees are seeing a 137% year-over-year increase in AI literacy skills, far more than companies with 1001+ employees (76%).

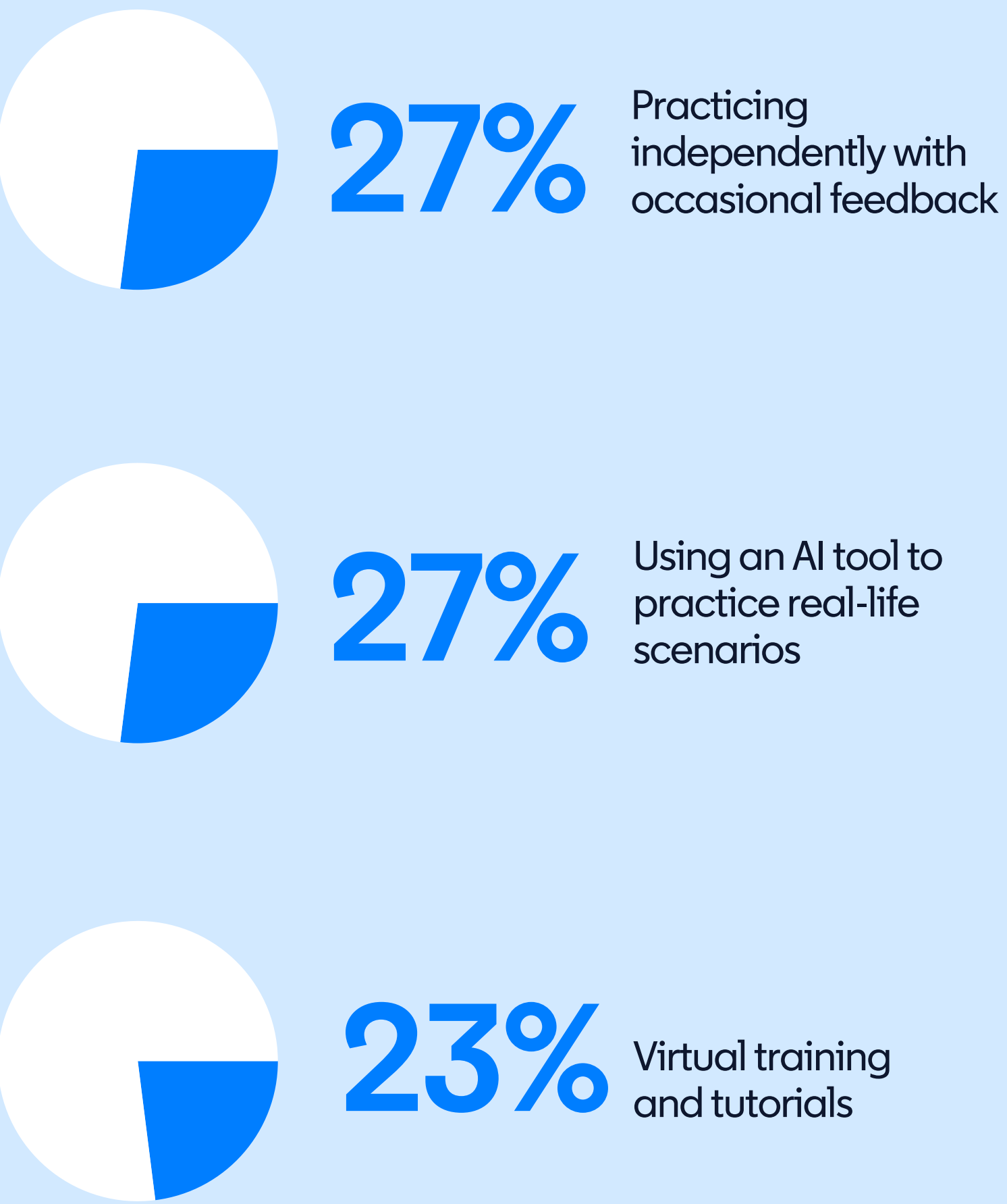
Standing out in the crowd is now table stakes.

65% agree that as AI floods the internet with content, it’s more important to lead with real human voices. When brands lead with human voices and perspectives, they build trust. 58% of small business marketers in the Netherlands say, “Audiences today don’t just take information at face value—they gut-check it with people they trust.”

Top three voices that small business marketers say fuel trust



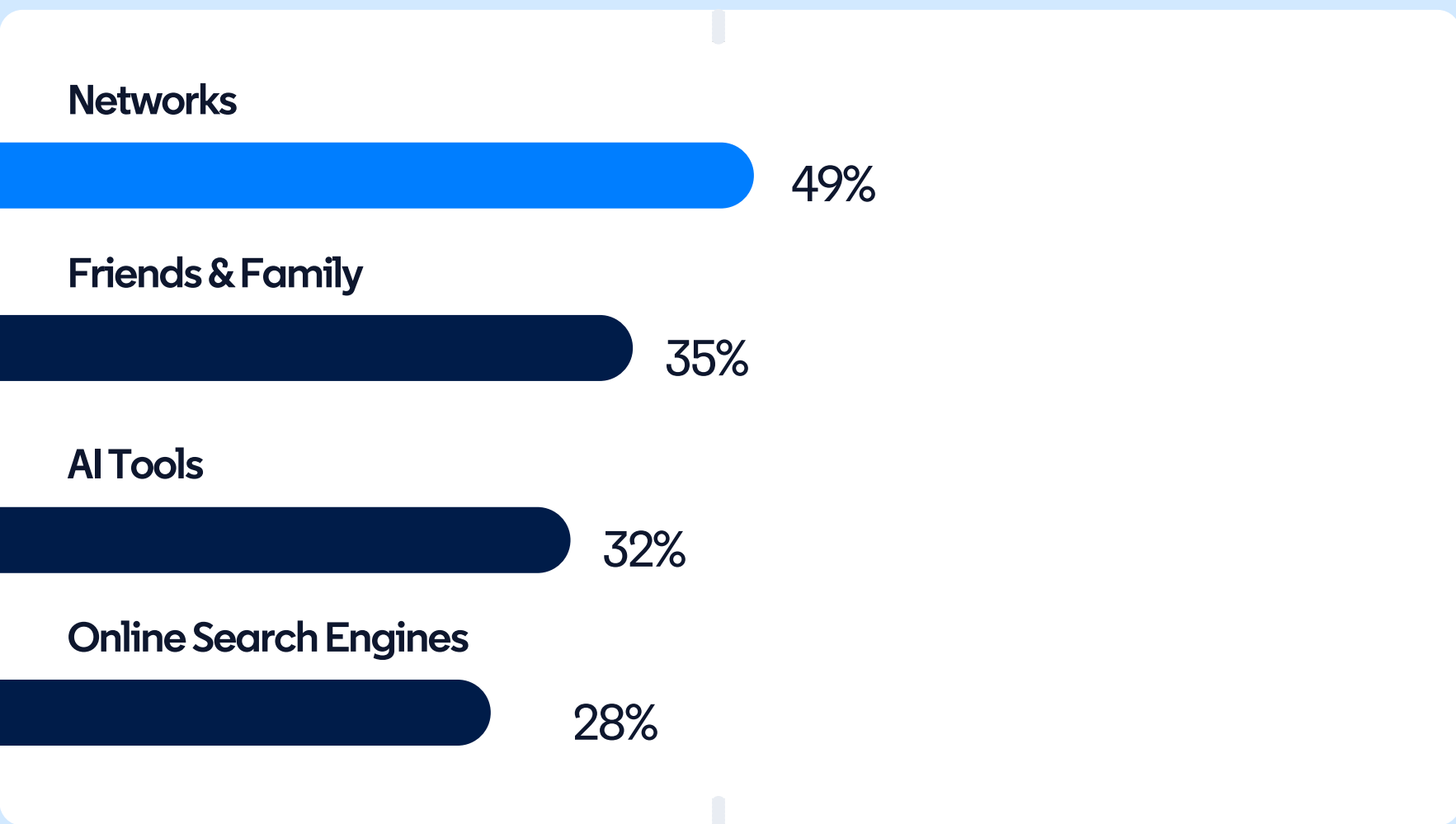
Top three ways employees at small businesses prefer to learn a new AI skill or tool



Networks are the new currency.

Human relationships have also become essential for small businesses. Networks fuel growth in tangible ways: connections can help generate leads, inform hiring decisions, and provide trusted guidance when it matters most.

Professionals in small businesses say the top sources for advice at work are



Small businesses are taking this to heart, growing their networks strategically and seeing real results. Professionals who work in small businesses with 50 employees or less in the Netherlands are growing their networks faster, 8% year-over-year, compared to 3% at large companies.

What does winning look like from here?

Invest in AI: Use tools that automate repetitive tasks and solve business problems like building a pipeline of qualified candidates, managing marketing campaigns, creating content or starting your first draft of an email. Empower your teams to use and upskill on AI while doubling down on communication, problem-solving, and adaptability.

Build your brand with authenticity and trust: Leveraging trusted voices and being authentic builds credibility, deepens community engagement, and drives long-term customer relationships.

Turn relationships into competitive advantages: Grow your network, follow a brand strategically, and use trusted connections for faster, better decisions. Stronger networks can drive stronger growth.

