



Work Change Special Report

How Small Businesses Can Win in 2026

United States | 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 69% year-over-year and more than tripled since 2022. And 40% of professionals in the US say they want to work for themselves in the near future.

For those choosing to start a business, 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, 79% of small businesses in the US 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. 57% of employees in the US say AI will improve their daily work life.



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

27% of small business employees in the US report independent AI use for advanced tasks (complex strategy, data analysis, working with agents) and 37% for everyday tasks (writing emails, summarizing notes, search).



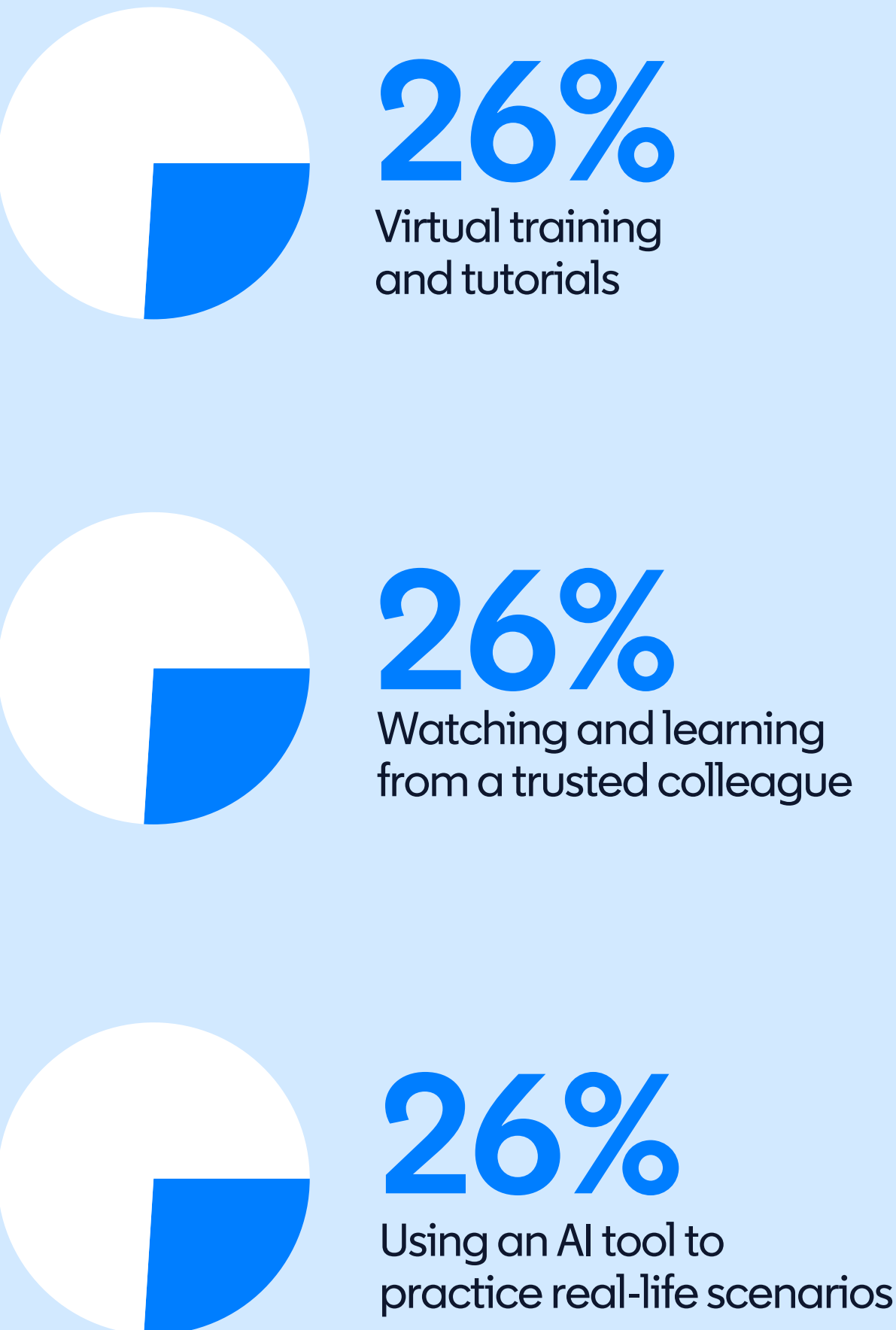
The opportunity for AI spans every aspect of small business operations. AI can automate routine tasks in customer service, generate marketing content, streamline the hiring process, and enhance decision-making with data insights previously only unlocked by enterprise clients. 76% of small business marketers in the US agree that AI will help smaller brands compete and punch above their weight.

It’s not just adoption alone that matters; it’s capability. In the US, 50% 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 US with 11-50 employees are seeing a 44% year-over-year increase in AI literacy skills, and 62% for companies with 51-200 employees.

More than half of employees in small businesses (51%) say they’re learning AI with employer-provided guidance/training, compared to 45% in larger organizations.

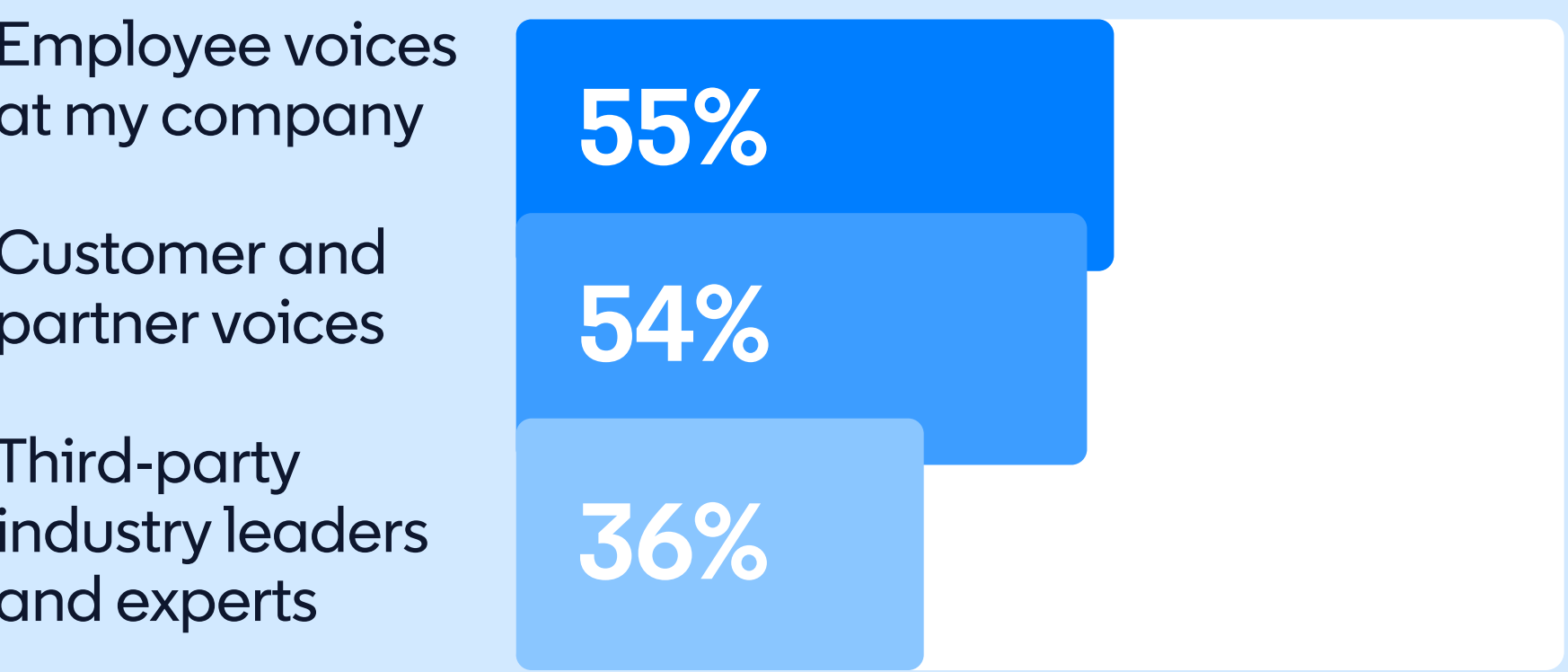
Top three ways employees at small businesses in the US prefer to learn a new AI skill or tool



Standing out in the crowd is now table stakes.

71% of US small businesses 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. 74% of small business marketers say, “Audiences today don’t just take information at face value—they gut-check it with people they trust.”

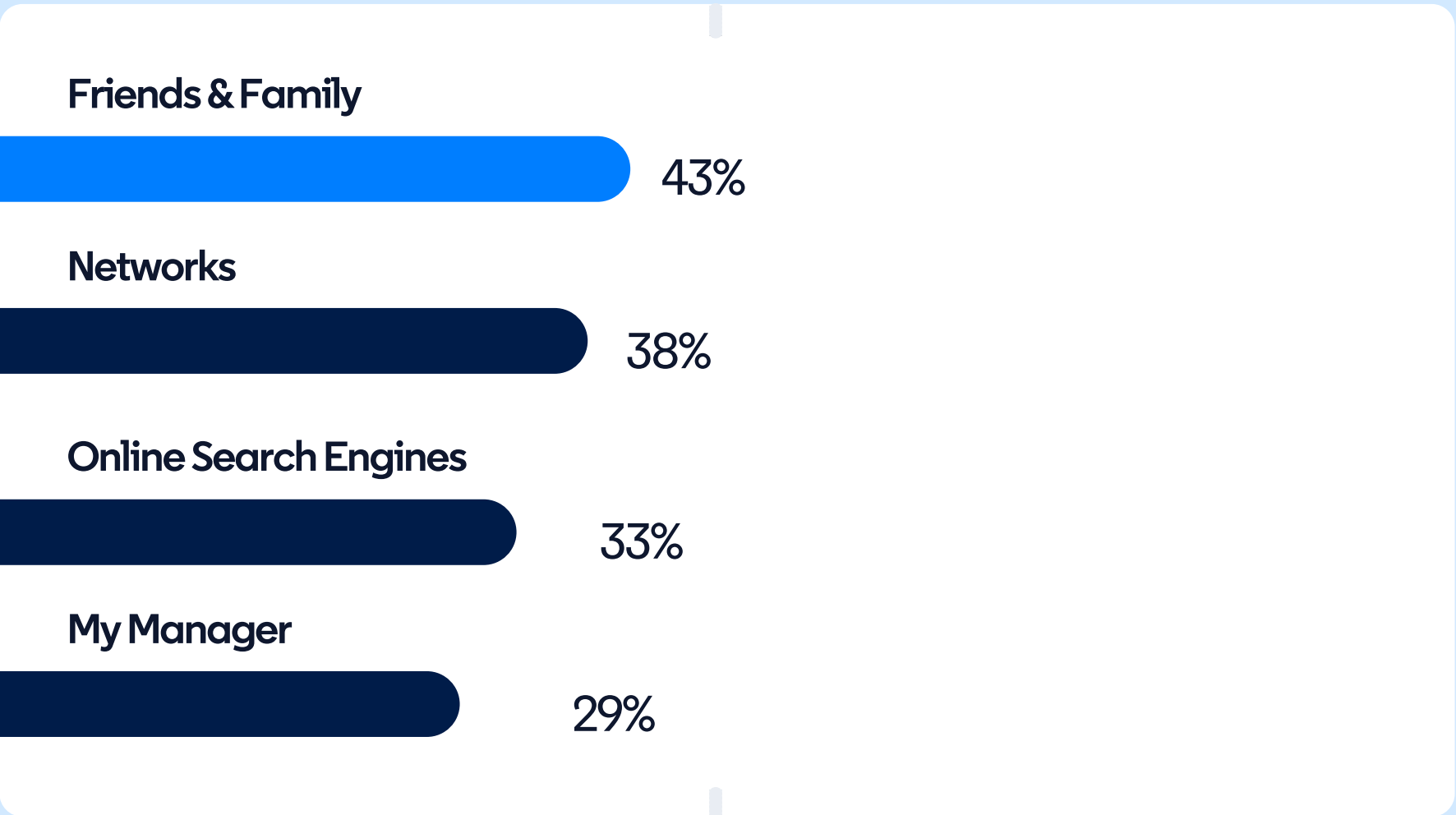
Top three voices US small business marketers say fuel trust



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 at US 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 US small businesses with 50 employees or less are growing their networks faster, 17% year-over-year, compared to 10% 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.

Authenticity and trust drive brand building: 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.

