The second opinion

Your clients are taking financial questions to AI first. Here is what the evidence says, what a machine genuinely does better, and what remains yours alone.

Nobody wins this argument by claiming AI is bad at financial questions. It is good at them, and pretending otherwise costs the profession the room. **Today's models are strong reasoning engines, and they are now the first place a great many small business owners go.** The problem is that a machine answers the question it was given. When the question is wrong (and the client's question often is), it returns a confident, well-structured answer to the wrong question. And the client has no way of seeing what was missed.

37,220
BUSINESSES SURVEYED, FIVE STUDIES

70%
ACT ON AI ADVICE BEFORE ASKING THEIR ACCOUNTANT[1]

88%
TRUST THE ANSWER THEY GET[2]

92%
WOULD PAY MORE FOR ADVISORY[1]

HOW TO READ THIS

Part One sets out what the research actually shows, with every figure tied to its source, sample, and date below (or at the back, if you're reading this as a PDF). Part Two concedes what a model does better than a person, because the rest of the argument only earns a hearing once that is on the table. Part Three is the ten things a model still needs an accountant for. Part Four is what a firm can do about it.

PART ONE

What is actually happening

Five studies published between March and July 2026 measure the same behaviour from different angles. They may disagree on the size of it, but they agree on the direction. Four of the five are vendor-commissioned, which is addressed openly in Note 9.

NOTE 1 Where the question goes first

Of 500 UK SMEs who all already work with an accounting firm, seven in ten say they always or often act on AI-generated financial, tax or business advice before they consult that firm.[1] One in twenty rarely or never does.

The specific things they take to a machine are: answering tax questions, financial planning queries, business strategy and triaging day-to-day accounting issues.[1] That list deserves reading slowly, because it is the same list that many in the profession have spent a decade describing as its advisory future (compliance does not appear on it anywhere). The accountant is still in the process. They just arrive afterwards, to validate what has already been decided.

Figure 1. Acting on AI advice before consulting the accountant

SOURCE Ravical / Censuswide, fieldwork May 2026, published 11 June 2026, 500 UK SMEs currently using an accounting firm. The 70% and 5% are reported figures. The 25% middle band is the arithmetic residual and was not published.

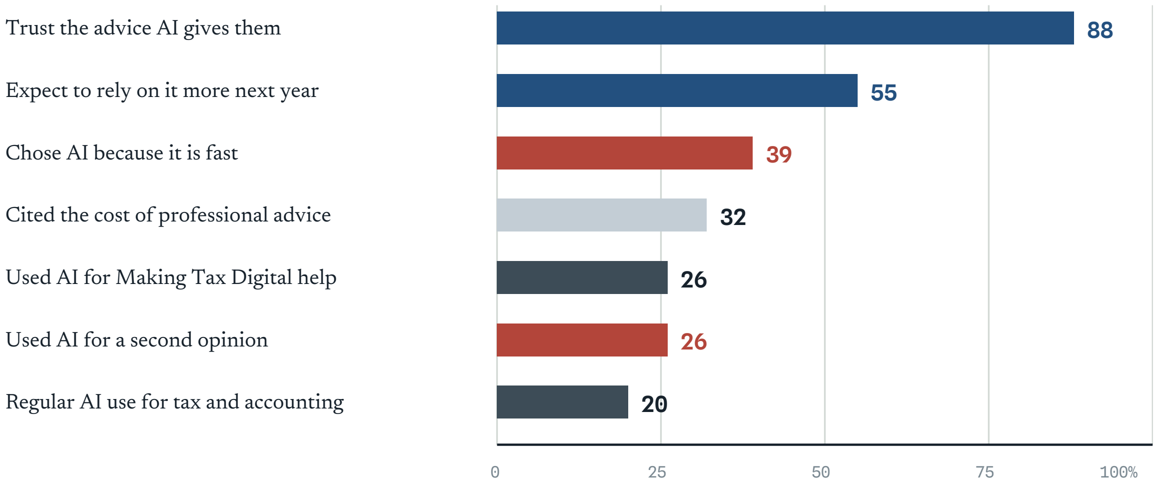
NOTE 2 The smallest clients, where it is sharpest

A thousand UK sole traders were surveyed in April 2026, as Making Tax Digital for Income Tax arrived for qualifying income above £50,000.[2] A quarter had used an AI platform for guidance on the new regime, and one in five now uses AI regularly for tax and accounting support.

Two figures in that study matter more than the adoption rate. The first is that 88% say they trust the answers. That's with tax and cashflow issues. The person asking has the least ability to spot a wrong answer, which is exactly where confidence is running highest. The second is that 26% have used AI to get a second opinion on advice they had already been given.[2]

A quarter of sole traders are using a chatbot to check their accountant's work. Set that beside the 91% who have considered changing firms in the past year, and the churn mechanism is laid out end to end.[1]

Figure 2. UK sole traders and AI for tax and accounting



SOURCE Starling Bank, April 2026, 1,000 UK sole traders. Speed and cost are reasons given for choosing AI.

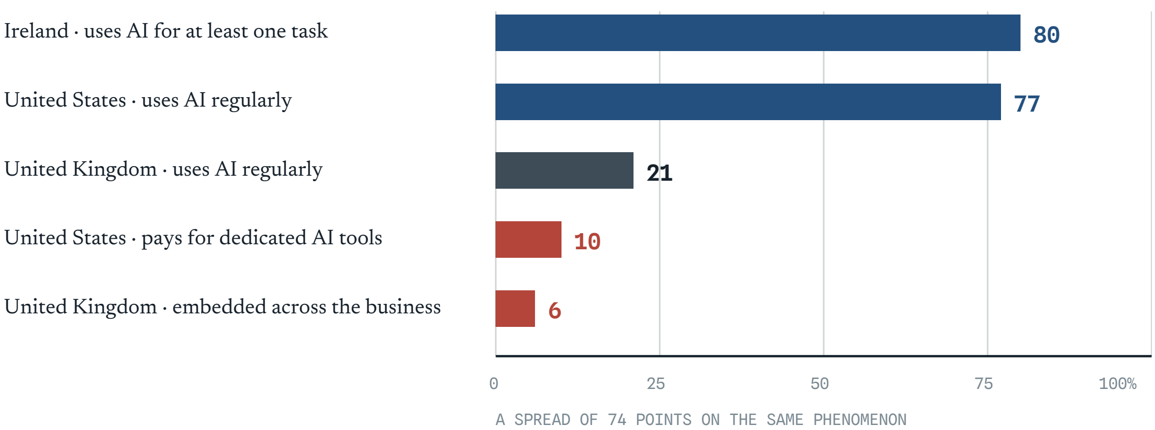
> **Speed beats cost, 39 to 32. Firms are losing the first question on response time.**

NOTE 3 The same question, five definitions

Published adoption rates for small business AI use run from 6% to 80% within the same six months, and none of the studies is wrong. They count different things, so any figure quoted without its definition attached will be contradicted by the next person in the room.

The wide numbers count anyone who has used a free chatbot or clicked an AI button inside software they already pay for (which by now is almost everyone). The narrow ones count deliberate deployment, paid commitment, or genuine embedding into how the business runs. For the advice question the wide measures are the ones that matter. A client needs nothing more than a browser tab to take a tax question elsewhere.

Figure 3. Small business AI adoption, by what was actually measured



SOURCES Ireland, Google with Amárach Research, March 2026, 400 Irish SMEs (20% use AI for no business task, so 80% use it for at least one).[3] United States, Intuit QuickBooks AI Impact Report 2026.[4] United Kingdom, Enterprise Nation Tech Hub with Google, Sage, Dell and Square, June 2026, 1,320 micro and small businesses.[5]

Two structural findings sit underneath those bars and both point the same way. In Ireland a third of micro-businesses under ten employees use AI for nothing at all, against 7% of firms with 50 to 250 people. Firms trading more than sixteen years are three times more likely to use no AI than firms trading one to five.[3] In the United States, paid adoption skews young, with 28% of businesses led by someone aged 18 to 34 paying for AI tools against 13% of those led by someone aged 55 to 64.[4]

So the established client paying the largest fee is the least AI-native, while the newest client, often paying the least, arrives already holding an answer. Those are two different conversations, and most firms are only having one of them.

NOTE 4 Finance is the second wave, and it has started

Marketing leads AI adoption in every dataset without exception. The signal worth watching is the finance function, and it moved in January.

Intuit's tracking runs on 34,000 survey responses and payment records from 5.3 million businesses, with methodology led by an economist at the University of Chicago. It found bookkeeping entering the top three tasks where US businesses report using AI, alongside marketing and customer service.[4] At the bottom of that list sit employee management, product management and legal (the places where a decision cannot easily be reversed).

The pattern is consistent. AI goes where the output is visible and an error can be caught before it does damage. Bookkeeping arriving in that top three matters because it breaks the pattern. Errors in the records do not stay contained.

Depth remains shallow, and that is the reassuring half of the picture. Around one in ten US small businesses has ever paid for a dedicated AI tool, though 86% of those who paid in 2024 were still paying in 2025.[4] Wide shallow usage, a small committed core, and near-total retention once someone crosses the line into paying. Anyone who has sold advisory will recognise that shape.

NOTE 5 Fee resistance is not the constraint

Clients going to a machine first are not doing it to save money. They say so directly, and their stated willingness to pay is remarkable.

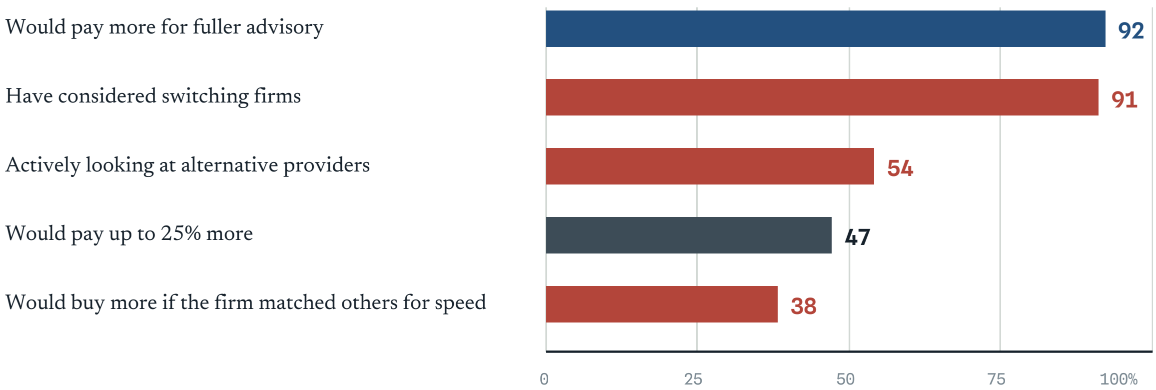
Among those 500 UK SMEs, 92% would pay more for a fuller range of advisory services, and the average business puts the figure it would accept at 16% above what it currently spends.[6] Just under half, 47%, would go as far as 25% more. Those are three views of one distribution rather than three competing claims. Average annual spend sits at roughly £19,700, with the largest concentration of clients in the £10,001 to £25,000 band.[6]

Then the operational number, which is the one to act on. 38% said they would take up additional services if their accounting firm matched the speed and responsiveness of the other providers they deal with.[6]

Put the arithmetic together, because the numbers are more concrete than they first appear. Against average annual fees of £19,700, a 16% uplift is roughly £3,150 per client per year, so a firm with 150 clients of that size (and plenty carry more) is looking at somewhere near £470,000. That lands within touching distance of the £463,000 headroom Ravical modelled by a different route.

One caution before that number goes anywhere near a partner meeting. The uplift is not evenly spread. Clients of firms with two to ten staff spend an average of £12,559 and would accept only 9% more, which is nearer £1,130 a head.[6] Run the calculation on your own book, not on the national average.

Figure 4. Willingness to buy more from the firm they already use



SOURCE Ravical / Censuswide, 500 UK SMEs, fieldwork May 2026, released 11 June and 15 July 2026. Vendor-commissioned research; see Note 9. The 94% who would expand the relationship with their current provider is not shown here, because it is the same finding reported in Note 6 with a tighter base.

NOTE 6 Why they buy it somewhere else

The most useful finding in the whole set has nothing to do with AI. Asked whether their own firm offers a given advisory service, most businesses did not say no. They said they were not sure.[10]

Nobody had told them. Asked why they buy advice elsewhere, the top two answers came in level at 35% each: the firm never offered it, and the firm only handles compliance for them.[10] Price barely featured in the responses at all.

The leakage that follows is measurable, and it is worst where firms are smallest. More than a third of UK businesses buy advisory services from a provider other than their main accounting firm. Among sole practitioners that is 42%, and among firms of two to ten staff it reaches 48%, the highest in the survey. At Top 50 firms it falls to 12%.[10]

Then the number this whole note turns on. Of the businesses already buying elsewhere, 94% would bring that work back if their own firm delivered the same quality.[10] That is the invitation, and it is sitting in books that already exist.

There is peer-reviewed support for the mechanism, and it is the only evidence in this document that is not vendor-commissioned. In a study of twenty small firms interviewed at length, owners did not buy advice from their accountant because they did not believe it would be worth the cost, while the few who did buy it found it valuable.[11] Twenty interviews is a mechanism rather than a measurement, and it points the same way as the 500. The barrier sits in what the client believes. The service was never the problem.

> **The offer was never made. That is a model failure, not a failure of the people in it.**

NOTE 7 AI is not the only beneficiary

The growth conversation is being bought elsewhere as well, and not only from a machine.

Around 45% of global business coaching engagements now come from small and medium businesses, in a market worth roughly $113bn.[10] Owners are paying someone else for the conversation about where the business is going, while the person holding the actual numbers sends reports.

Be precise about what that does and does not show. Clients have not decided they prefer a coach to their accountant, and the trust surveys point the other way firmly. The behaviour has moved while the trust has stayed put. That is more uncomfortable than outright rejection, because it means the relationship is still there for the taking.

NOTE 8 The questions they are not asking you

Lost fees are the visible cost of this shift. The hidden cost is the lost signal.

People ask a machine the things they are embarrassed to ask a person. Whether the business is actually failing. Whether the question they are about to ask is a stupid one. Whether they can pay themselves this month. Whether the numbers mean what they are afraid they mean. There is no judgement on the other side of the screen, no clock running, and no sense of wasting anybody's time (theirs or yours).

Every one of those questions is diagnostic gold. The firm never sees a single one of them. A client who quietly resolves their own worry at eleven at night arrives at the next meeting looking fine.

> **You are not just losing the work. You are losing the early warning.**

NOTE 9 Where these numbers came from, and what they will not carry

Four of the five studies are vendor-commissioned. Ravical sells AI to accounting firms, Starling launched an accounting product alongside its research, and Intuit, Google and Sage all sell into the market they surveyed. None of that makes the findings false, and Intuit's payment-record layer is genuinely strong evidence, but each has an interest in its own headline.

Official statistics are consistently more conservative. The UK Office for National Statistics put business AI use at 23% in late 2025, the Irish CSO above 20% of enterprises for 2025, and the US Census Bureau between 17% and 20% through spring 2026.[8] That is a measurement gap rather than a disagreement about what is happening, and a 70% or a 77% only means anything alongside the line that defines it.

Nothing in this evidence supports the idea that clients would choose a business coach over their accountant. It is the most tempting misreading in the set, and Note 7 sets out what the coaching figures do and do not show.

The Ravical 70% appears in two framings across their releases. Once as acting on AI advice before consulting the accountant, and once as acting on it without first checking with the firm, with a related version reported at 71%.[6] Those are different claims about different behaviour. This document uses the first throughout, from the Censuswide base of 500 SMEs with fieldwork in May 2026.

What the same research declines to claim matters just as much. The publisher treats the rise in AI use as a trend running alongside the shift of advisory work to other providers, not as its cause.[10] This document keeps that separation. Part One sets out two pressures on the same relationship, and neither is offered as the explanation for the other.

PART TWO

What the model does better than us

This section exists because a document that skips it deserves to be ignored. Any accountant who has actually used these tools knows what follows, and a firm that cannot say it out loud will not be believed on anything else.

CONCEDE THIS FIRST

Five things it does that we cannot

- **Speed.** A considered, well-structured answer in four seconds. No firm on earth competes with that, and no firm should try.
- **Availability.** Eleven at night, Sunday morning, the day before the deadline. No appointment, no minimum fee, no waiting for a callback.
- **Patience.** It will explain the same thing a fifth time without a flicker of impatience. Many clients have never had that from a professional adviser.
- **Breadth of reading.** It has read more than any of us, across more subjects, and it does not get tired at four in the afternoon (which none of us can claim in January).
- **Candour from the client.** The point from Note 8, and the one that should worry firms most. Clients will ask it things they will not ask you.

Which raises the obvious question. If the answers are that good and that fast, where is the exposure?

THE MECHANISM

Two failures, and only one of them is obvious

Models are at their strongest where the question is well specified and the answer can be checked. They are at their weakest where the question itself is wrong, because a model answers the question it was given, fluently and with complete composure.

The error is made before the model ever sees it, and nothing about the quality of the model catches it. The answer comes back well structured, numerate, and correct on its own terms. The person who asked has no way of seeing what was missed.

The second failure catches the client who asked well. Models affirm the user's decision around 50% more often than a human adviser would, including where the judgement is poor.[7] So the owner who frames the question properly, and brings the right numbers to it, still receives an answer weighted towards agreement. Nothing in that exchange carries a stake in the outcome, so nothing in it pushes back. That is a problem with advice given outside any method, and it lands the same way whether the adviser is a machine or a person who wants the meeting to go well.

Put the two together and 88% trust becomes the figure to worry about, though it has nothing to do with the technology being poor. Confidence runs highest in exactly the domain where the person asking is least able to spot an error.

ILLUSTRATION · COMPOSITE, NOT A CLIENT CASE

The wrong question, answered well

An owner asks whether the business can afford a salesperson at £38,000. Back comes a competent answer: gross margin, employer costs, a breakeven month, a sensible caution about the ramp period.

What nobody asks is whether revenue per employee is already below the level at which the last two hires paid back. Or whether the cash gap between the hire and their first commission survives the next VAT quarter. Or whether growth has stalled because the owner is the ceiling, in which case a salesperson is the wrong answer to a question about the owner.

The model answered what it was asked, competently. Even if it could have known the question was wrong, it had no standing to say so.

One thing to expect before the list. Any accountant who uses these tools every day will read all of that and recognise none of it, because they argue with the answer. They ask again, they say that is not right, they push until the thing gives them something better. The failure never surfaces, so it is easy to conclude it was never there.

The client does not do that. They ask once, late, and take what comes back. The habits that make these tools safe are the same habits that make an adviser good, and nobody has taught them to the people now relying on the answers.

PART THREE

Ten things a model still needs an accountant for

Read as a scorecard against AI, this list is a competition nobody needs. Read properly, it is a specification. It describes what an accountant contributes to get a good outcome out of these tools, which is why it works equally well as a description of good advisory practice.

Behaviour varies between models and is changing quickly, so treat the specifics below as the shape of the current failure classes rather than a permanent account of any particular product.

01 We know when we don't know.

A model returns the most plausible answer available to it, and it has no dependable way to mark the difference between knowing something and constructing it. It will not tell you which one you have just received.

02 We do the work rather than handing it back.

Asked to finish something it is perfectly capable of finishing, a model will often propose that you do the next part, or offer to come back to it later. An unsupervised client accepts that. The job stops at three-quarters done.

03 We know when the job is done.

Give a model a defined outcome, and it can judge whether it has arrived. Without one, it stops at a point that reads as complete. Looking finished and being finished are not the same thing, and the client cannot tell them apart.

04 We know what to ask.

The question a client brings is frequently the wrong one. Getting to the right one is most of the job.

05 We go past the first answer.

The first answer is where the work starts, and a good adviser treats it that way. Worth admitting that this one is aspirational for plenty of firms too.

06

We change our minds when the numbers say so.

The affirmation bias set out in Part Two is a human failing as well, which is exactly why challenge has to be built into a method rather than left to character.

07

We carry the history, and we bring it back.

Not only remembering what was agreed last quarter, but raising it unprompted at the moment it becomes relevant again.

08

We join the dots across the whole business.

A model sees the fragment it was handed. We see the payroll, the pipeline, the bank, the tax position, the last three years, and the family sitting behind all of it.

09

We carry the risk alongside the client.

Regulated, insured, professionally liable, and reputationally exposed if we get it wrong. Skin in the game changes what advice is worth.

10

We hold the client to the action.

Two accountabilities, and a machine has neither of them. Accountable for the advice given, and holding the client accountable for what they said they would do.

THE PRACTICAL COROLLARY

Three habits that close most of the gap

Points two and three double as operating instructions, worth teaching to every person in the firm who touches these tools.

- **State the outcome before you start.** A model with a defined finish line will work towards it. A model without one produces something that looks finished.
- **Define what done looks like.** Not the task, the standard. Length, depth, what has to be checked, what cannot be left out.
- **Decline the offer to do it in batches.** When it proposes stopping halfway, say no and ask for the whole thing.

Those three habits are most of the distance between a mediocre output and a good one. They are also precisely what an owner alone with a chatbot will never do, which is the whole point.

PART FOUR

What a firm can do about it

Six moves, all of them available now, none of them requiring a technology decision. The evidence in Part One points at each one.

WHY NOW RATHER THAN NEXT YEAR

Three announcements in six months tell you where this is heading. Intuit with OpenAI in November 2025, Xero with Anthropic in March 2026, and Intuit with Anthropic again in April 2026. The accounting software layer is embedding AI into the place your client already keeps their numbers. So the question is no longer whether a client will ask a machine. It is whether that machine will have their actual figures in front of it when they do.

MOVE 1

Publish a response standard

Nobody beats four seconds, so stop competing on that and compete on certainty instead. A published standard removes the uncertainty that sends a client elsewhere: same-day acknowledgement, a stated turnaround for straightforward questions, and honesty that the consequential ones take longer because they involve thinking.

38% said they would buy more if their firm matched other providers on responsiveness. That makes this a revenue decision, not a service one.

MOVE 2

Give every client a written position on AI and their data

Your clients are already pasting management accounts, payroll runs and customer lists into free tiers. Privacy and security is the single largest barrier to deeper adoption at 36%, so they are uneasy about it, and nobody has helped them.

One page, deliverable this month, and it opens the conversation in the next move.

MOVE 3

Ask for the questions

"What have you asked AI about the business in the last month?" is the highest-yield question available in a client meeting right now. Asked without a flicker of judgement (and the flicker is the whole risk), it recovers the signal described in Note 8 and tells you what the client is actually worried about, which is rarely what is on the agenda.

MOVE 4

Split the book in two

The evidence says your long-established client is the least AI-native, while the newer, younger-led business arrives holding an answer. One group needs bringing along. The other needs a better second opinion than the one they already got. Treat both the same way, and you serve neither.

MOVE 5

Use it inside the firm, properly

Xero's research found UK accountants using AI deliver results 31% faster.[9] If your client is accelerating and your firm is not, the responsiveness gap widens without anyone choosing it. And a partner who uses these tools daily can tell a client exactly where they break. That is a conversation nobody can fake.

MOVE 6

Give the numbers a structure the client can see

A fast answer to an unstructured question is still an unstructured answer. What holds ground against a machine is method: a defined set of numbers reviewed on a rhythm, a target the client has agreed on, and a record of what was decided last time. Sycophancy is a framework problem rather than a technology problem, and the fix is the same whether the adviser is human or not.

That is the Numbers Mentor position. Support through the numbers and challenge on the decisions, in equal measure. The accountant who only ever supports is replaceable by anything fluent. The mentor who supports and challenges is not.

WHERE THIS LEAVES YOU

An owner putting a question to a chatbot at eleven at night, with no financial model behind it and no target to check the answer against, is the drift with better grammar. Small businesses do not collapse. They erode. A confident answer that nobody challenged speeds that up.

So the second opinion is the position now, whether a firm chose it or not. What is still open is whether it turns out to be a better one than the answer the client is already holding.

Notes to the figures

1 **Ravical / Censuswide. Fieldwork May 2026, published 11 June 2026.** 500 UK SMEs, all currently working with an accounting firm; respondents included owners, directors, CFOs and financial managers, from sole traders to businesses of more than 250 employees. 70% always or often act on AI-generated financial, tax or business advice before consulting their accountant; 5% rarely or never; most common uses are tax questions, financial planning queries, business strategy and day-to-day accounting triage; 33% see their accountant as a genuine strategic partner; 91% considered switching firms in the past 12 months; 92% would pay more for a fuller range of advisory services; 90% believe compliance work could largely be handled by software or AI within a few years, and 35% believe that is already possible today. Vendor-commissioned.

2 **Starling Bank, April 2026.** 1,000 UK sole traders, published alongside Starling's free accounting package and HMRC-recognised Making Tax Digital for Income Tax tool. 26% have used an AI platform for guidance on Making Tax Digital; 20% regularly use AI for tax and accounting support; 88% trust the advice; 55% expect to rely on it more over the coming year; 39% chose AI because they wanted information quickly against 32% citing the cost of professional advice; 26% used AI for a second opinion on advice already received. Context: MTD for Income Tax applies from 6 April 2026 to qualifying income above £50,000. Vendor-commissioned.

3 **Google with Amárach Research, March 2026.** 400 Irish SMEs, released with the AI Works for Ireland programme alongside the Local Enterprise Offices and Enterprise Ireland. 80% believe AI can positively impact their business and 65% expect it to drive growth in 2026; 20% are not using AI for any business task; barriers are fear of making mistakes 30%, lack of skills 27%, cost 24%, not knowing where to start 16%; 57% believe they are behind competitors; 33% of micro-businesses under 10 employees use AI for nothing at all, against 7% of firms with 50 to 250; businesses trading more than 16 years are three times more likely to have no AI usage (33%) than those trading 1 to 5 years (11%). Vendor-commissioned.

4 **Intuit QuickBooks AI Impact Report 2026, published May 2026.** The strongest methodology in this set: 34,000+ survey responses from business owners across the US, Canada, UK and Australia collected July 2024 to January 2026, combined with anonymised payment records from more than 5.3 million businesses, developed with an international team of economists led by Ufuk Akcigit of the University of Chicago. 77% of US small and midsize businesses report using AI regularly; about 1 in 10 of the observed businesses paid for dedicated AI tools between 2021 and 2025, and 86% of 2024 payers were still paying in 2025; bookkeeping entered the top three reported AI tasks in the January 2026 wave, alongside marketing and customer service, with employee management, product management and legal at the bottom; barriers are privacy and security 36%, lack of knowledge of AI's capabilities 28%, accuracy, bias or errors 26%, with cost below all three; 28% of businesses led by 18 to 34 year olds pay for AI against 13% of those led by 55 to 64 year olds; 78% report improved productivity, up from 46% in July 2024. Related: the 2026 Intuit QuickBooks Business Owner Report (1,305 US owners, December 2025) found 37% would turn to a human expert for next-quarter cost cuts and revenue growth

against 20% who would trust a financial analysis tool alone, and named bookkeeping and taxes as the top job owners would hand to AI if they could trust it completely, at 17%. Vendor-published, though the payment-record layer is transaction evidence rather than self-report.

5 **Enterprise Nation Tech Hub, with Google, Sage, Dell Technologies and Square, June 2026.** "UK SME Digital and AI Adoption: The state of play in 2026", a nationally representative survey of 1,320 UK micro and small businesses up to 250 employees. 21% use AI regularly and 6% have embedded it into daily work across the business, while 57% describe themselves as highly or moderately digital. Comparator cited in the report: 41% of young businesses in Denmark have adopted AI. Vendor-supported, nationally representative sampling.

6 **Ravical, second release, 15 July 2026.** Same fieldwork, same 500-SME Censuswide base as source 1. UK accounting firms could add more than £463,000 in annual revenue from existing clients; 92% would pay more for the support they need, with the average business willing to increase spend by 16% above current levels, and 47% willing to go up to 25% more; average annual spend on accounting services around £19,700, largest concentration in the £10,001 to £25,000 band; 38% would take up additional services if their firm matched the speed and responsiveness of other providers. By firm size, clients of two-to-ten-staff firms spend an average of £12,559 and would accept only a 9% increase, so the national uplift figure runs well ahead of what a small firm's own book would support. Billing preference: fixed annual fees 23%, value-based 19%, the billable hour under 20%. This release frames the AI headline as having acted on AI-generated advice in the past year without first checking with the accounting firm, at 70%, with a related version reported at 71%. Vendor-commissioned. The 92%, 16% and 47% describe one distribution rather than three competing claims: the proportion willing to pay more, the average uplift they would accept, and the proportion who would go as high as a quarter.

7 **Cheng, M. et al.**, "Sycophantic AI decreases prosocial intentions and promotes dependence", *Science*, 391, eaec8352, 2026 (originally arXiv:2510.01395, October 2025, Stanford University). Leading AI models affirm users' decisions 50% more than human advisers, including where the decision involves poor judgement.

8 **Official statistics, for calibration.** UK: Office for National Statistics, Business Insights and Conditions Survey wave 141, late September 2025, 23% of UK businesses using any form of AI, up from 9% in September 2023. Ireland: Central Statistics Office, Information Society Statistics – Enterprises 2025, published 6 February 2026, more than 20% of enterprises used AI in 2025 against more than 15% in 2024, with large enterprises at 51%, medium 25% and small 12%. United States: Census Bureau Business Trends and Outlook Survey, 17% to 20% between December 2025 and May 2026, 19.8% at 3 May 2026, from a sample of roughly 1.2 million businesses. Note that the Census question changed in November 2025 from AI use "in producing goods or services" to "any of its business functions", which almost doubled the measured rate from around 10% to 17% with no underlying change in behaviour (Bick, Blandin, Deming, Fuchs-Schündeln and Jessen, Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis, June 2026, forthcoming in Brookings Papers on Economic Activity).

9 **Xero.** UK accountants using AI at work deliver results 31% faster, reported in Xero's UK accounting sector research on AI adoption and practice profitability. Vendor research, and this document has it via secondary reporting rather than from Xero's own release.

10 **Ravical, advisory leakage findings, 15 July 2026 release.** Same 500-SME Censuswide base. When asked whether their own firm offers a given advisory service, most respondents who were not receiving it did not say no, they said they were not sure, having never had it confirmed either way. The top two reasons for buying advice elsewhere were "my firm never offered it" and "my firm only handles compliance for me", level at 35% each, with price not among them; a third also cited speed and responsiveness. More than a third buy advisory services from a provider other than their main firm: 42% at sole practitioners, 48% at firms of two to ten staff, around 40% at firms of 11 to 250, and 12% at Top 50 firms. Of those already buying elsewhere, 94% would bring the work back for equal quality. Cash flow planning is the most retained service at 52% in-house; performance reviews, tax planning, growth support and pricing analysis all sit around 38% sourced elsewhere. 54% are actively looking at alternative providers. The coaching market figures (45% of global engagements from SMEs, a market of roughly $113bn) come from a research briefing rather than any public release. Vendor-commissioned. The 94% has been reported in two framings: once as businesses who would expand the relationship with their current provider, and once, more precisely, as businesses already buying elsewhere who would bring that work back. The second states the base used in the research document itself, and is the version reported here and counted once. The coaching market figures are not carried by any public release; treat them as a direction rather than a measurement.

11 **Brickman, K., Hiebl, M.R.W., Quinn, M. and Warren, L,** "Accountants as SME advisors: relevance lost?", *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, 20(6), 2024, pp. 200–222, doi 10.1108/JAOC-10-2023-0171. A qualitative cross-sectional field study: 20 semi-structured interviews with craft brewing and distilling SMEs and their accountants across Finland, Germany, Ireland and the UK, conducted between 2019 and 2021. Interviewees did not use accountants for advice primarily for cost-benefit reasons, not perceiving the advice to be worth the cost of obtaining it. The few who did buy advisory services found them valuable, citing time freed up, a better understanding of cost to price, and help securing finance. The only non-vendor source cited in this document. Twenty interviews in a single sector, with three of the twenty considering advisory services valuable, so this illustrates a mechanism rather than measuring a rate. The study's own conclusion also runs harder than the use made of it here: that accountants have lost relevance as advisers to the businesses studied, or never had much, and are substitutable by software, social media and community groups.

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