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Start Small, Start Slow: Practical AI for Small Business

Bruce Howatt of Thinking Big on what AI can do for Island businesses today, why the adoption statistics don't tell the whole story, and how to take a safe first step.

Bruce Howatt

Director of Business Development, Thinking Big

Adapted from an interview with Bruce Howatt, Director of Business Development at Thinking Big, by Bianca McGregor, CEO of the Greater Charlottetown Area Chamber of Commerce, at Speakers Corner at Confederation Court Mall on October 21, 2026.

What does Thinking Big build, and which AI solutions can help a small business?

In one sentence, we design and develop software that helps our clients with their business challenges and opportunities. Our developers use AI tools every day, and our engineers review and approve everything before it goes into production. That gives us a safe way to apply AI in the real world and to match it to the actual business problem.

What it means for small and medium-sized businesses on PEI is speed and cost. In the past, a custom AI or software solution was usually for big business only. It cost hundreds of thousands of dollars and took years. Today we can build it rapidly and affordably, from start to finish, so what was out of reach is now at your fingertips. We also publish a free AI guide on our website for anyone who wants to learn what AI is about.

I would love an assistant that reads my email and drafts replies, but giving it access scares me. Where do I start?

The headline stories about AI systems with too much access and not enough human intervention are a useful lesson for our industry. We want to be in control of that. So our philosophy is to start small and start slow.

Pick one task in your operation that keeps falling off your plate every month, or that everybody hates doing. Apply a business AI assistant to that one task and run it as a pilot for a month or so. Don't give it too many rules, don't give it too much access, and don't put private information into it at the start. Kick the tires. Then sit down with your team and ask what

worked, what didn't and whether to move forward. If it is a good idea, you can work with us or others on a quick discovery and a prototype. If it is not, you stop.

Only 19% of PEI businesses plan to use AI in the next year, versus 25% nationally. Why is adoption lower here?

The statistic doesn't tell the whole story. It comes from a survey asking businesses whether they use AI today, and a lot of creative and innovative use never shows up in it. Tourism, farming and fishing are all using AI and may not realize it. How many tractors are being steered by GPS and AI systems? How many times a day do you do a Google search? In some areas I think we are at par with the country or ahead, and in others we are not.

That is one reason we are hosting an AI Lab, bringing business leaders from across the province together to talk about how they use AI today, what the benefits are and what the risks are. And as a small province, we have a tremendous opportunity to get this right from the start. If we do, we can help the rest of the country.

The Atlantic Economic Panel wants 80% of businesses using AI by 2035. What support would actually help?

It is great that governments and funding agencies are putting money into adoption. But rather than strive for an arbitrary target like 80%, I would take a different approach: go slowly, go safely and make sure everybody benefits. We will work our way toward higher adoption over time. When you look at the headline stories, going too fast can expose too much.

Are the worries about job losses justified?

AI has changed the way we work and will keep changing it. It is here to stay and it is not a fad. Whether it costs jobs depends on the individual business. But PEI's three major sectors, tourism, farming and fisheries, all have labour shortages. There are job postings we cannot fill today. So there is an opportunity to use AI tools to help businesses grow without necessarily hiring more people, particularly because so much of our work remains seasonal.

Could AI help close PEI's productivity gap?

I think the productivity statistic is a bit misleading. Being below the national figure does not mean Islanders don't work hard. We work very hard. It has more to do with our structure: many seasonal businesses, no big plants and no big operations in major centres. For thirty years our number has been lower for that reason. The opportunity is to look at AI tools and ask whether they can make our seasonal operations more productive, one business at a time, safely and carefully.

What is the AI Lab, and what comes out of it?

This Friday we invited people from across the province, from government, private business, health care, education and technology firms, to say how they are using AI, what they see as the benefits and what they see as the risks. It is a brainstorming and information-gathering session about how we can collaborate. When it is finished we will publish the results so everyone can see what we found. I hope it is the first of many events where we work together on PEI.

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