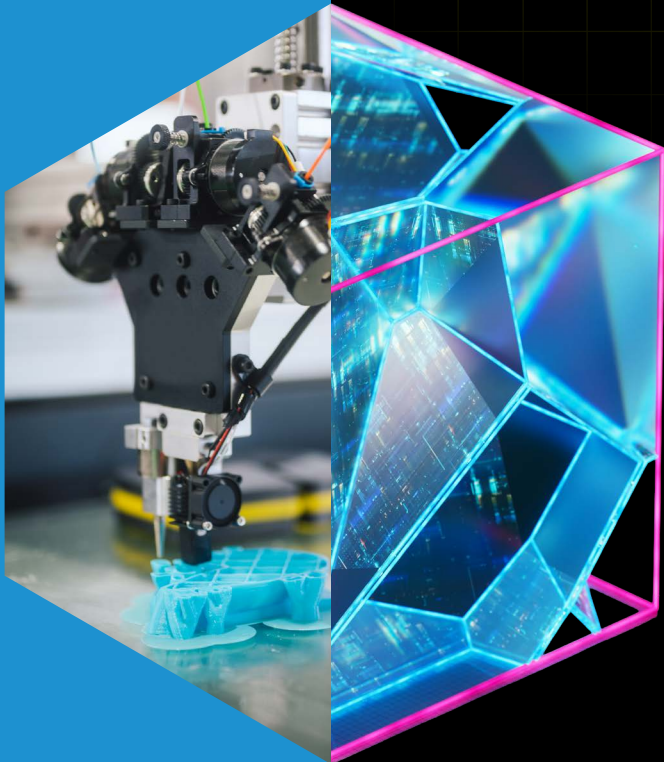




A 2027 State of **DESIGN&MAKE** breakout report

Small businesses



Small businesses are building for opportunity in a rapidly changing world

Running a small Design and Make business means making tradeoffs every day. Every hour spent learning a new tool is an hour not spent serving customers, delivering projects, or winning new work. With lean teams and limited resources, building for the future has to happen alongside running the business today.

Yet the data from the *2027 State of Design & Make* research points to an encouraging pattern: 45% of small Design and Make businesses report substantial progress or continued investment in digital transformation. Many are also

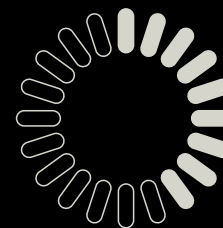
looking ahead to new services, new markets, and new ways of working. Their ambitions extend beyond simply keeping up: even with lean teams and limited resources, small businesses are continuing to build for future opportunities.

That combination of ambition and constraint shapes the small business experience in Design and Make. These companies aren't standing still, but neither can they follow an enterprise playbook. The opportunity is to make focused choices that improve today's work while building the capabilities and flexibility needed for whatever comes next.



About this briefing

This report focuses on small Design and Make businesses with one to 19 employees and explores how they balance today's operational demands with the capabilities needed for future opportunities.



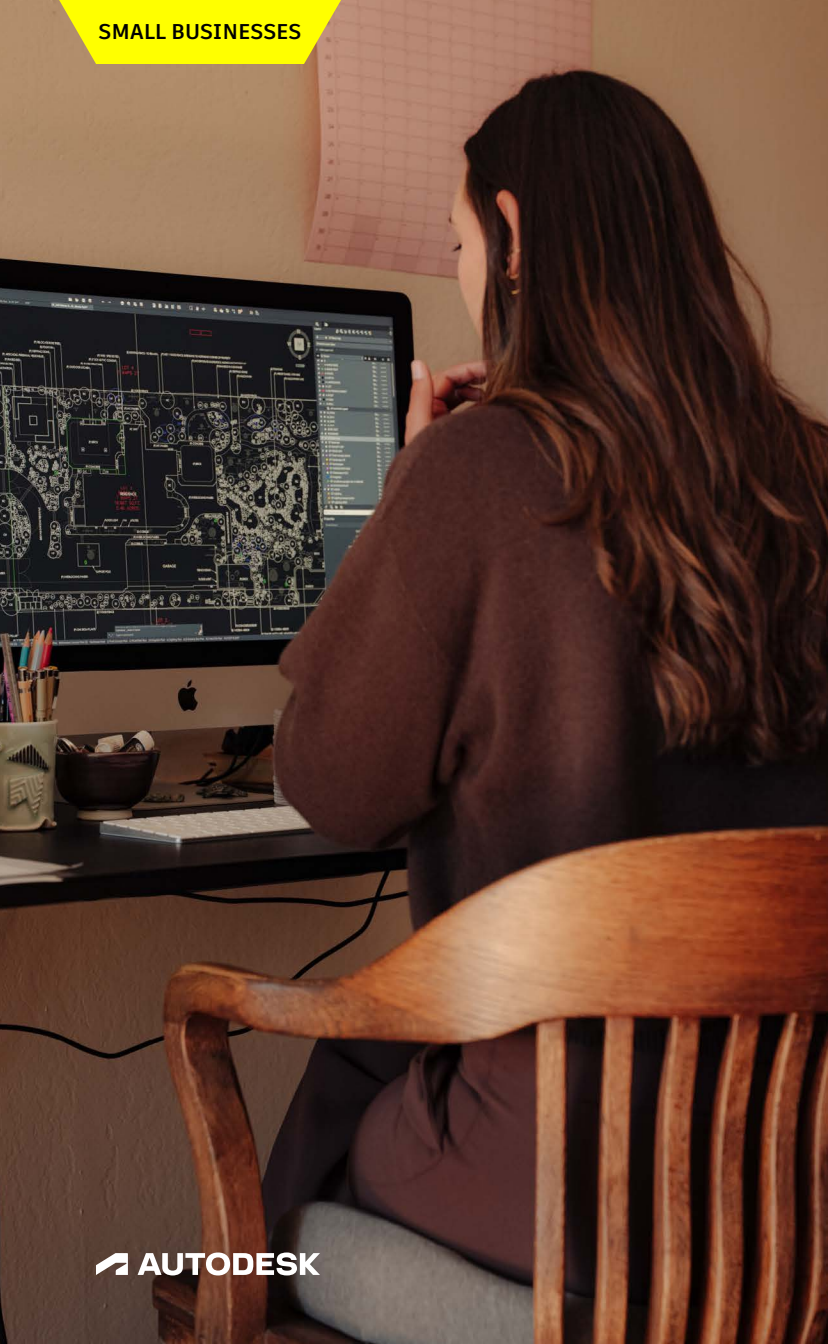
45%

of small Design and Make businesses report substantial progress or continued investment in digital transformation



28% vs. 53%

Small Design and Make businesses are less likely than large enterprises to consider themselves digitally mature



Digital transformation doesn't have to happen all at once

Small businesses don't need to follow the same transformation path as larger organizations. With less time, fewer people, and tighter budgets, the more practical approach is often to focus on digital improvements that address immediate business needs while making the next step easier.

The data shows both the progress and the gap. Thirty-nine percent of small businesses report substantial progress in digital transformation, while another 6% say they are investing

aggressively. Yet only 28% consider themselves digitally mature, compared with 53% of large enterprises. That difference doesn't mean small businesses need to replicate an enterprise transformation model. It highlights the importance of choosing where digital capabilities can have the greatest impact.

That matters even more in an uncertain environment. Sixty-four percent of small businesses say the global landscape feels more uncertain than it did three years ago, while only 38% say their

company is well prepared for future macroeconomic and geopolitical change. For lean teams, digital transformation can be about more than efficiency—it can also help build the flexibility and capacity to respond when conditions change.

THE TAKEAWAY

Transform strategically and selectively. Focus first on digital improvements that address today's priorities while making the business more adaptable for whatever comes next.

Cost control is the top challenge for small businesses

Technology ranks as a much lower concern than for larger organizations

● 1–19 employee businesses ● 20–499 employee businesses ● 500+ employee businesses

Technological **advancements, including AI**

Cost control and cost management

Data automation and digitization

Attracting, training, and retaining **talent**

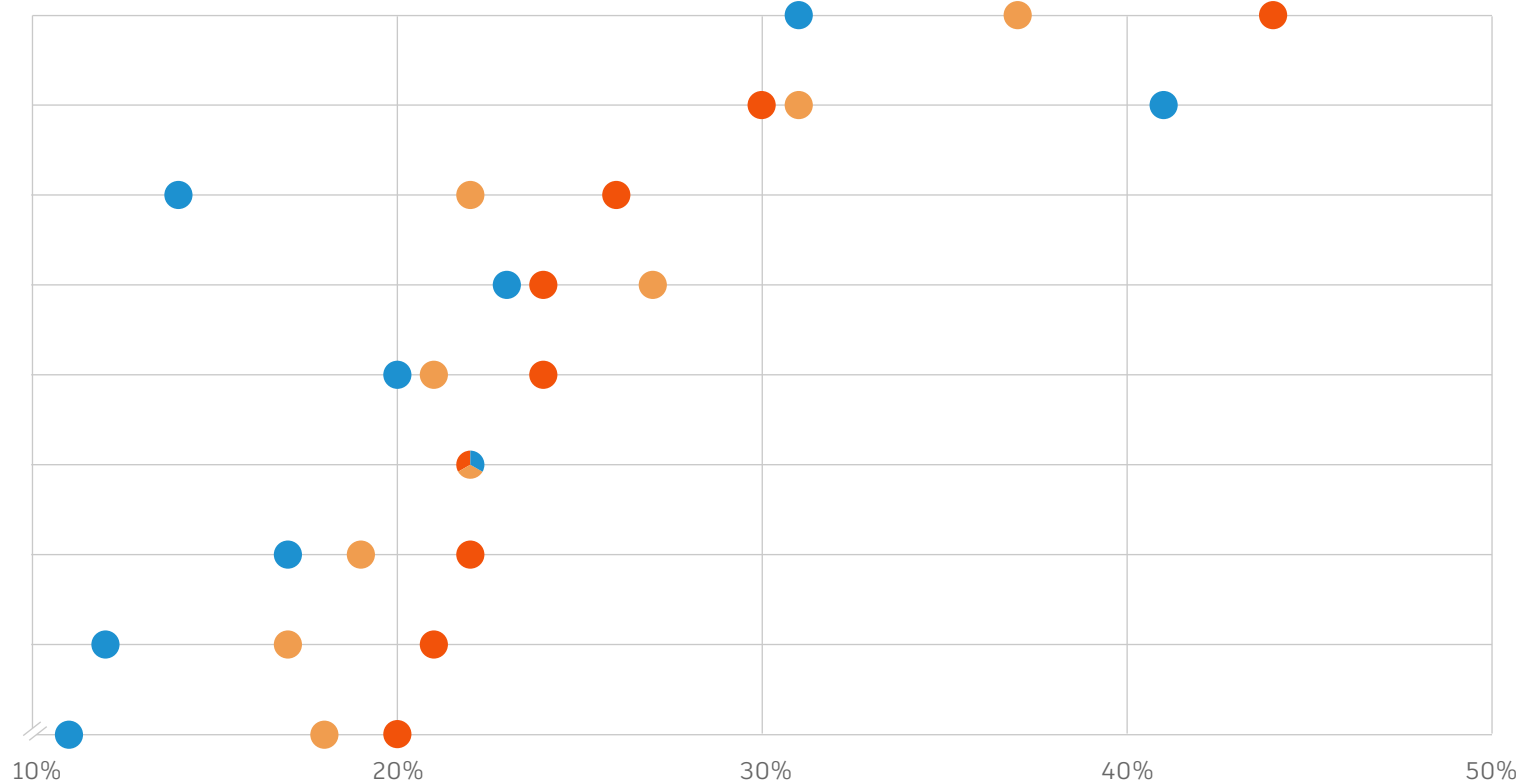
Global economy and events

Product or service **innovation**

Product or service **diversification**

Procuring and managing **digital solutions**

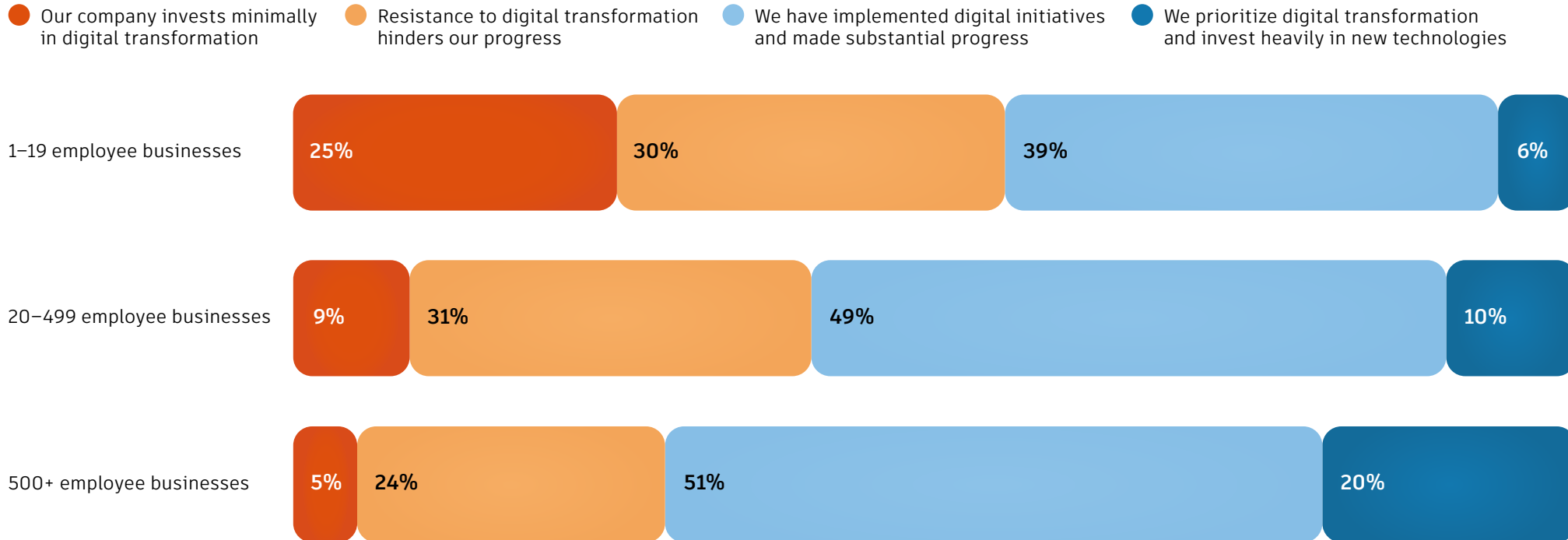
Environmental **sustainability**



Survey question: What are the top three challenges your company or organization faces today? Please select up to three. Percent selected. Note: Some answer options are shortened for better readability. "Other" and "none" are not shown.

Nearly half of small businesses have adopted or are implementing digital initiatives

But resistance to digital transformation continues to slow progress



Survey question: Which statement best describes your company or organization's level of digital transformation? 4-point scale, percent selected. Numbers do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Make AI part of the work you already do

Most small Design and Make businesses have already started their AI journey, taking practical first steps that fit the realities of running a lean business. Eighty-five percent have begun working toward their AI goals, with 67% describing themselves as being in the early or middle stages of adoption. Rather than pursuing AI everywhere at once, many are starting within familiar workflows.

That pattern is reflected in how small businesses are using AI today. Thirty-two percent are integrating AI into design workflows and 28% are investing in AI training,

while fewer are implementing AI-driven automation (18%) or partnering with AI technology providers (18%). These findings point to a focused approach centered on applications and skills that can be incorporated into existing work.

But investment intent is moving faster than trust and organizational readiness. Fifty-nine percent of small businesses expect AI investment to increase over the next three years, while only 43% say they trust AI technologies for their industry, compared with 77% of large enterprises. Small businesses

are also far less likely to have dedicated resources managing AI integration (36% vs. 76%). As adoption continues, building confidence, skills, and the organizational foundations to use AI effectively will be just as important as expanding where it is applied.

THE TAKEAWAY

Build trust as you build AI.
Start where results can be tested in familiar workflows, while strengthening the skills and foundations needed to expand AI with confidence.

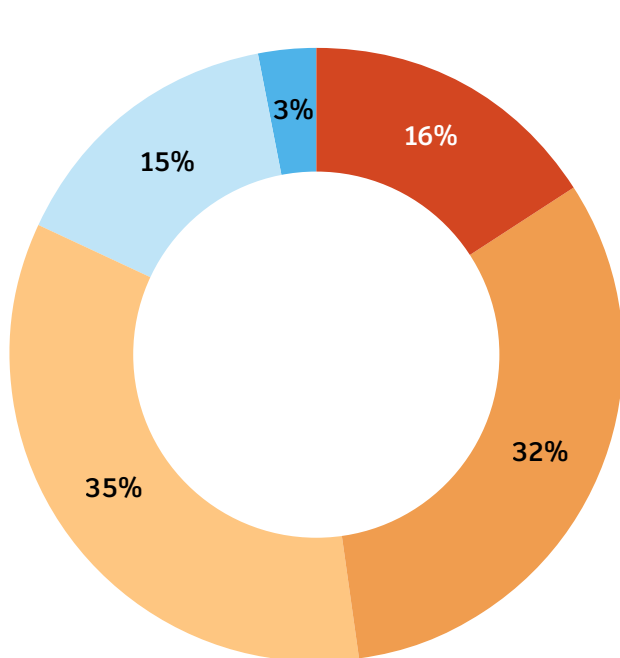


“AI won’t simply help small businesses catch up to larger companies—it will help them find the niches where they can win. When small firms are lean, agile, and data-driven, they can go after opportunities that bigger, more rigid companies can’t.”

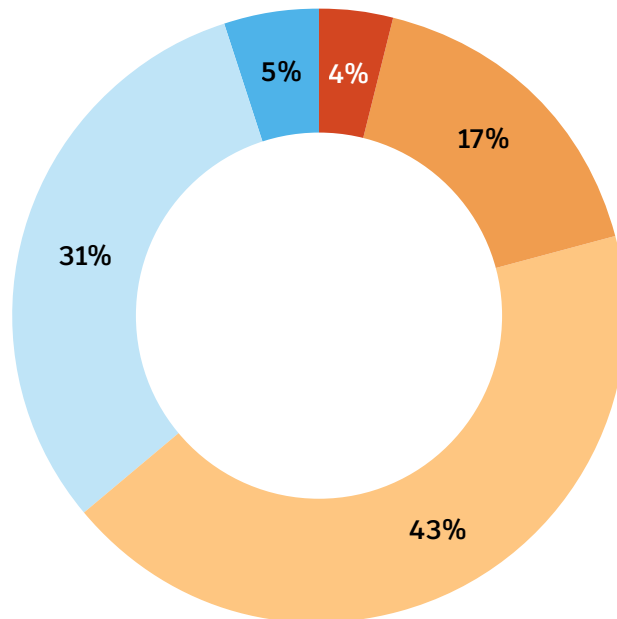
MARCUS O’BRIEN, Vice President, Product Development, Autodesk

85% of small businesses have started on their AI goals

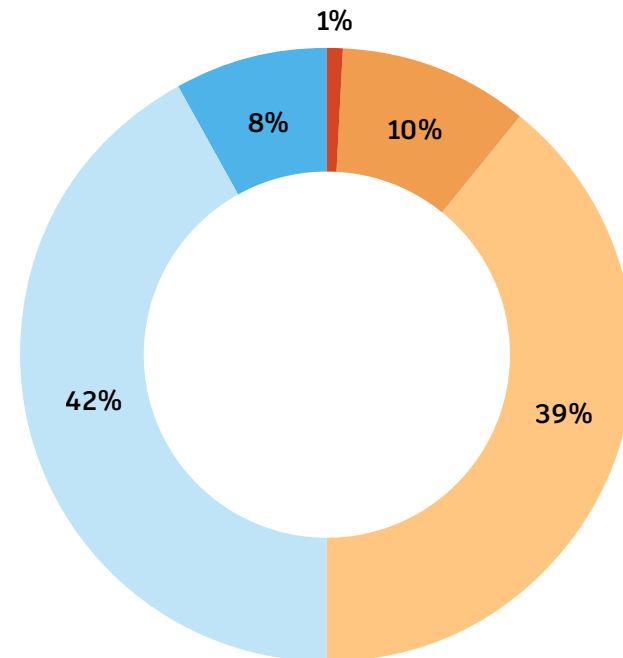
● Not started ● Early stage ● Right in the middle ● Approaching the goal ● Achieved the goal



1-19
employee businesses



20-499
employee businesses



500+
employee businesses

Survey question: Where is your company or organization in achieving its current artificial intelligence (AI) goals? 5-point scale, percent selected. Numbers do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Build the skills your business will need next

For small Design and Make businesses, building capability often starts with the people already doing the work. Seventy-two percent say employee upskilling is important, and 59% plan to increase investment in digital skills training over the next three years. As technologies and customer expectations evolve, strengthening existing skills can help lean teams take on new tools and new kinds of work without relying solely on outside hiring.

The challenge is turning that priority into an ongoing practice. Only 43% of small businesses report implementing continuous

learning programs, compared with 76% of large enterprises. That gap doesn't mean small firms need enterprise-scale training infrastructure. It highlights the importance of finding practical ways to make learning part of everyday work—through targeted training, hands-on experience, and skills development tied closely to business needs.

THE TAKEAWAY

Make learning part of the job. For lean teams, practical skill-building can expand what the business is able to take on without requiring a large formal training program.



59%

of small businesses plan to invest more in digital skills training over the next three years

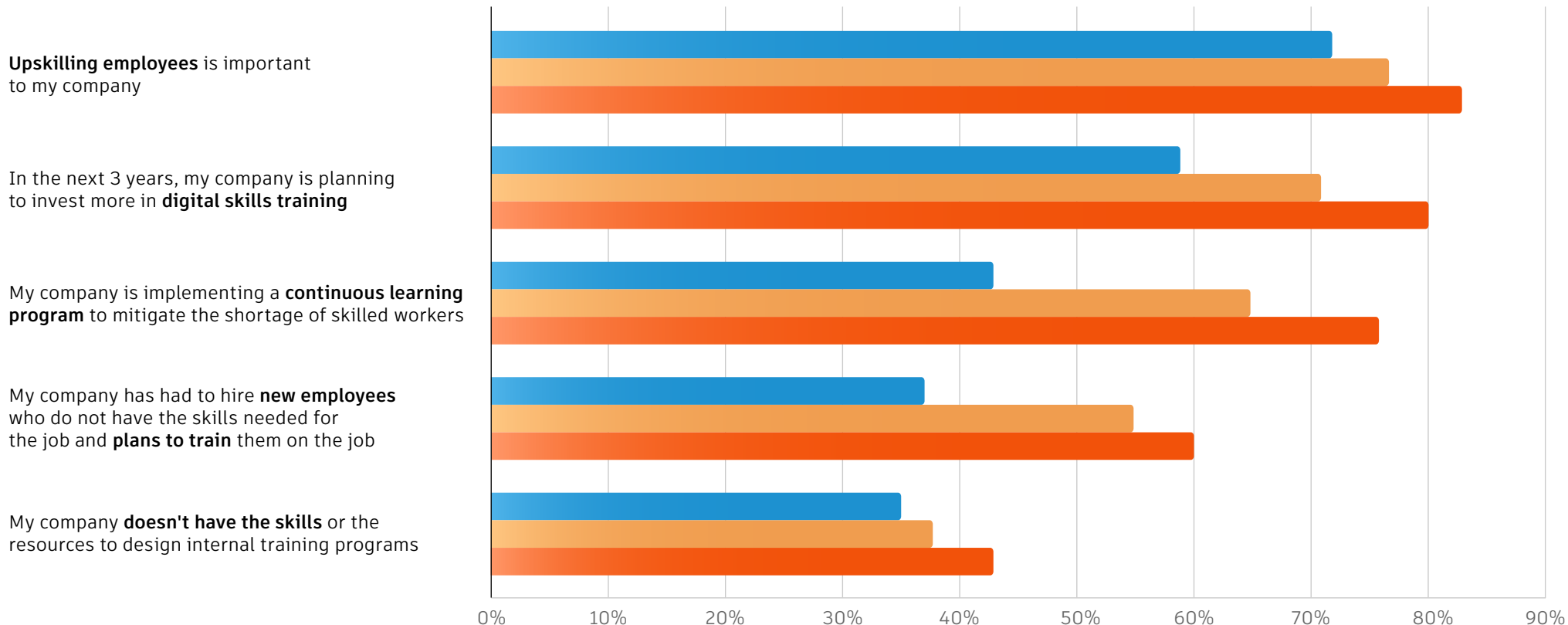
72%

of small businesses say employee upskilling is important

Small business leaders are prioritizing upskilling and skills training

Investment in continuous learning programs is lagging

● 1–19 employee businesses ● 20–499 employee businesses ● 500+ employee businesses



Survey question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 5-point scale. Top two: "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree."

Sustainability starts with stakeholders

Small Design and Make businesses see greater long-term than immediate value in sustainability. Sixty-seven percent believe focusing on sustainability will benefit their business over the long term, compared with 44% who see a short-term advantage. For businesses balancing immediate customer needs with longer-term priorities, that difference helps explain why sustainability may develop through practical steps rather than large-scale programs.

The strongest influences also come from close to the business. Customers are the leading influence on small-business sustainability goals (65%), followed by employees

(58%), and business partners (55%). Policymakers and investors rank lower.

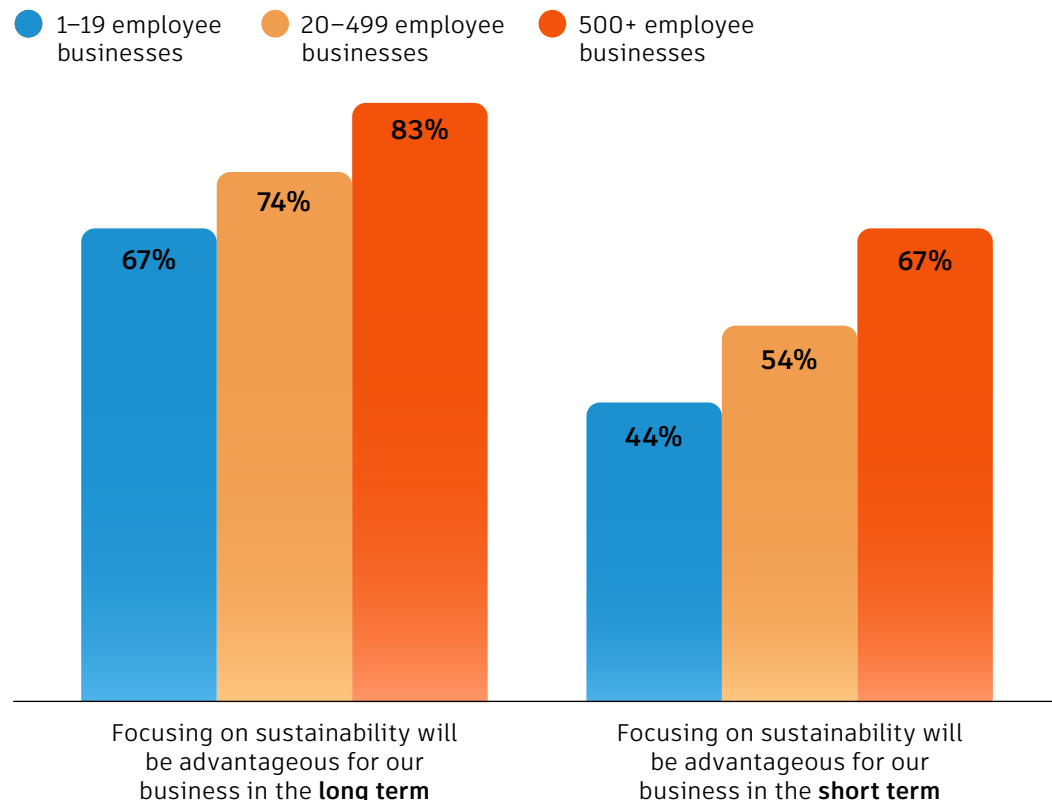
That suggests customer expectations—and the people and partners involved in delivering the work—can provide a practical starting point for deciding which sustainability priorities matter most.

THE TAKEAWAY

Start sustainability where customers see value. Focus on actions that respond to the expectations of customers and other stakeholders closest to the business, while building toward longer-term sustainability goals.

2/3 of small businesses see long-term potential in sustainability

Short-term advantage is still being explored



Survey question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? 5-point scale.
Top two: "somewhat agree" or "strongly agree."



Conclusion

Small Design and Make businesses are building new capabilities while adapting to a rapidly changing environment. Many are advancing digital transformation, exploring AI, developing workforce skills, and pursuing new opportunities—all while managing the day-to-day demands of running lean organizations.

The research also makes clear that small businesses

are starting from a different place than larger enterprises. They report lower digital maturity, less preparedness for disruption, and fewer dedicated resources for AI. But that doesn't mean they need to follow an enterprise playbook. Their advantage can come from focus: choosing technologies that address real business needs, building skills and trust alongside AI adoption, and strengthening flexibility to

respond as conditions change.

The opportunity is not to transform everything at once. It is to make deliberate choices that improve today's work while opening possibilities for tomorrow—whether that means serving customers more effectively, taking on new kinds of work, entering new markets, or finding niches where a lean, agile business can compete and win.

THE TAKEAWAY

***Build for growth—and for change.** For small businesses, the same capabilities that create new opportunities can also make the organization more adaptable when the unexpected happens.*

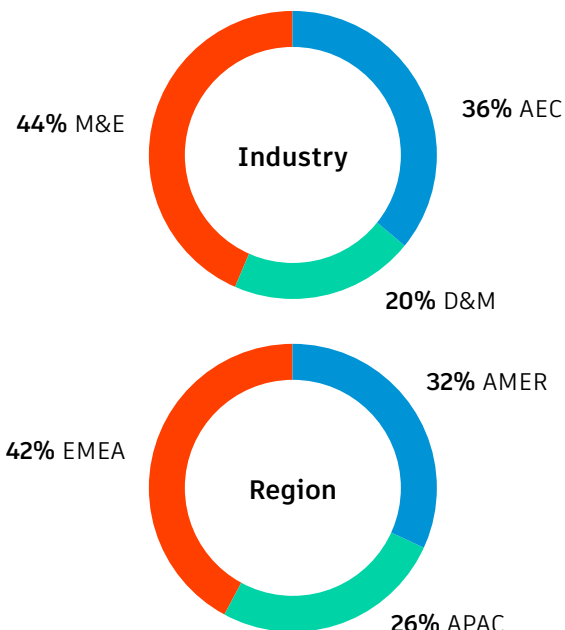
About this analysis

This small business briefing draws on Autodesk's 2027 *State of Design & Make* study, which surveyed 5,500 business leaders and experts across Design and Make industries worldwide. This analysis focuses on the 702 organizations with one to 19 employees within that global sample, examining how company size influences priorities around digital transformation, AI, sustainability, and workforce development. Throughout this briefing, these organizations are compared with larger businesses to highlight differences in priorities, investment patterns, and organizational capabilities.

Because of the smaller sample size, this briefing does not include comparisons between Pacesetters and mainstream businesses within the 1–19 employee segment. Definitions for Pacesetters, digital maturity, AI leaders, and sustainability leaders remain consistent with those used in the 2027 State of Design & Make report.

Small business respondents*

- 13% 1–19 employees
- 42% 20–499 employees
- 46% 500+ employees



*Numbers do not add up to 100% due to rounding.

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