

Global Economic Insight



How AI is reshaping who becomes an entrepreneur

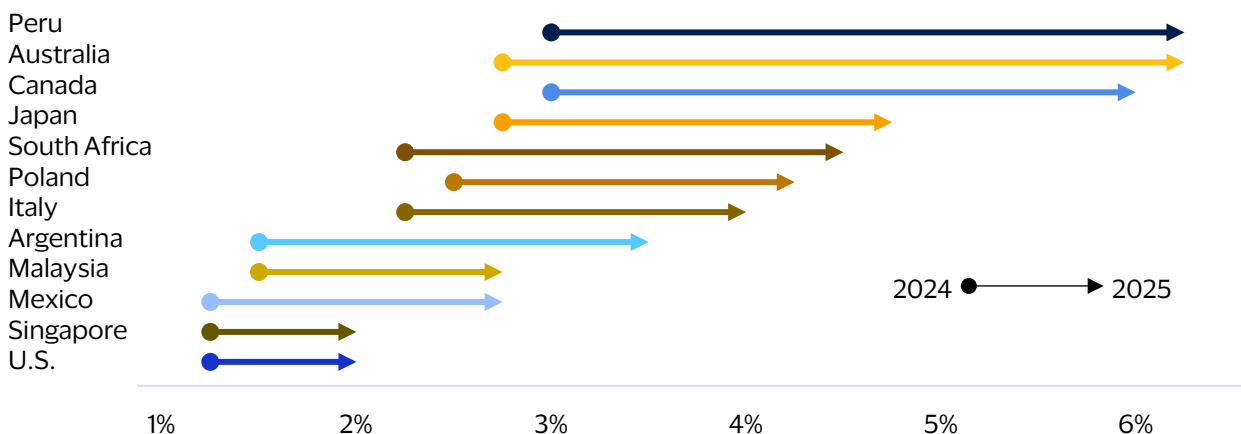
Remembering the “who” in the unfolding story of generative AI

Every major technology has reshaped the economy through the people and businesses that turn it into new products and markets, unlocking new waves of productivity gains, wealth accumulation and growth. Electricity and semiconductors followed this path. GenAI will be no different.

In fact, GenAI is arriving as broader societal changes are already changing how people think about work, careers and entrepreneurship. The “who” in the untold story of AI’s diffusion could be a different cast: millennials now moving through their 30s and 40s. Many have spent years building industry knowledge, professional networks, and a clear understanding of customer problems. That puts them at a natural point to turn what they know into a business.

Early evidence suggests this shift may already be underway. New business formation is rising in several countries, most notably the U.S., while VisaNet data show rapid growth in AI adoption among small businesses globally (Fig. 1). Early adopters also show stronger spending momentum and higher levels of digital and cross-border activity. This points to a larger economic change. AI may be reshaping who becomes an entrepreneur, what digital-first small business looks like and how financial institutions serve this new generation of small and medium-sized businesses (SMBs).

Fig. 1: AI adoption is spreading fast among small businesses globally
(Share of SMB credit cards subscribed to GenAI services,¹ percent of total active, 2025)



Sources: Visa Business and Economic Insights analysis of VisaNet data

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Key Points:

- Small business adoption of AI doubled in a year across the world
- Businesses that are early adopters of AI show stronger digital and cross-border activity
- Financial institutions need a new playbook for younger, asset-light, digitally native small businesses



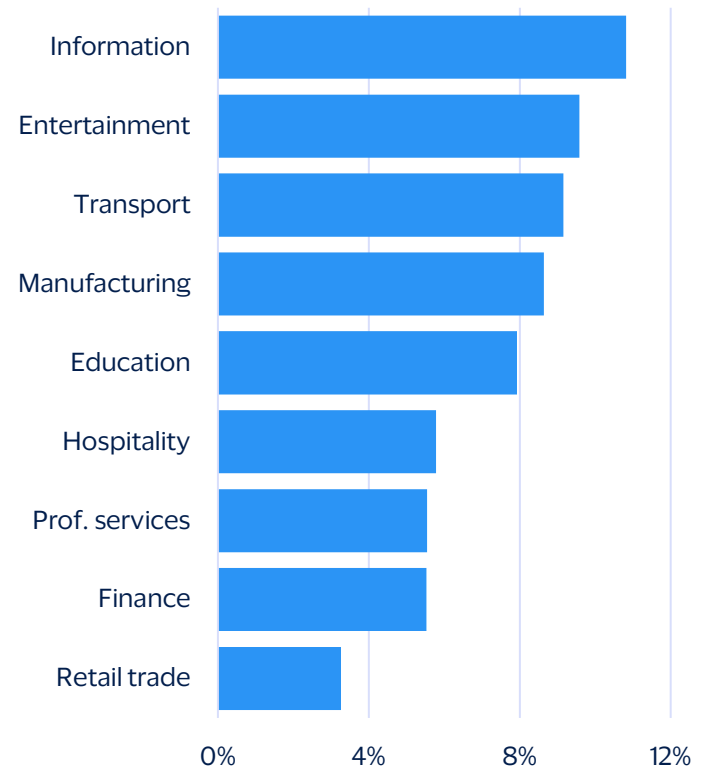
Millennials could drive a new wave of entrepreneurship

In the myths we tell ourselves about who builds the most successful businesses, we often latch onto the romance of young, innocent, clever founders who start their businesses in their 20s. In fact, the average founder age of the fastest-growing U.S. ventures is around 45, and relevant industry experience is strongly linked to success.² The interest is also already there: globally, 54 percent of millennials say they would love to start a business, 5 percentage points more than either Gen X or Gen Z.³

At the same time, broader forces are changing how people think about work. Careers are lasting longer, yet traditional employment feels less predictable. Alongside financial and family caregiving pressures, more people want greater flexibility and control over how they earn. Technology is helping unlock this latent entrepreneurship interest into action. Digital platforms, online payments, cloud services, and generative AI make it cheaper and easier to test an idea, reach customers, and run a business with a small team. The result could be a much broader founder base. Not just young technologists, but experienced professionals and industry experts ready to turn what they know into a business.

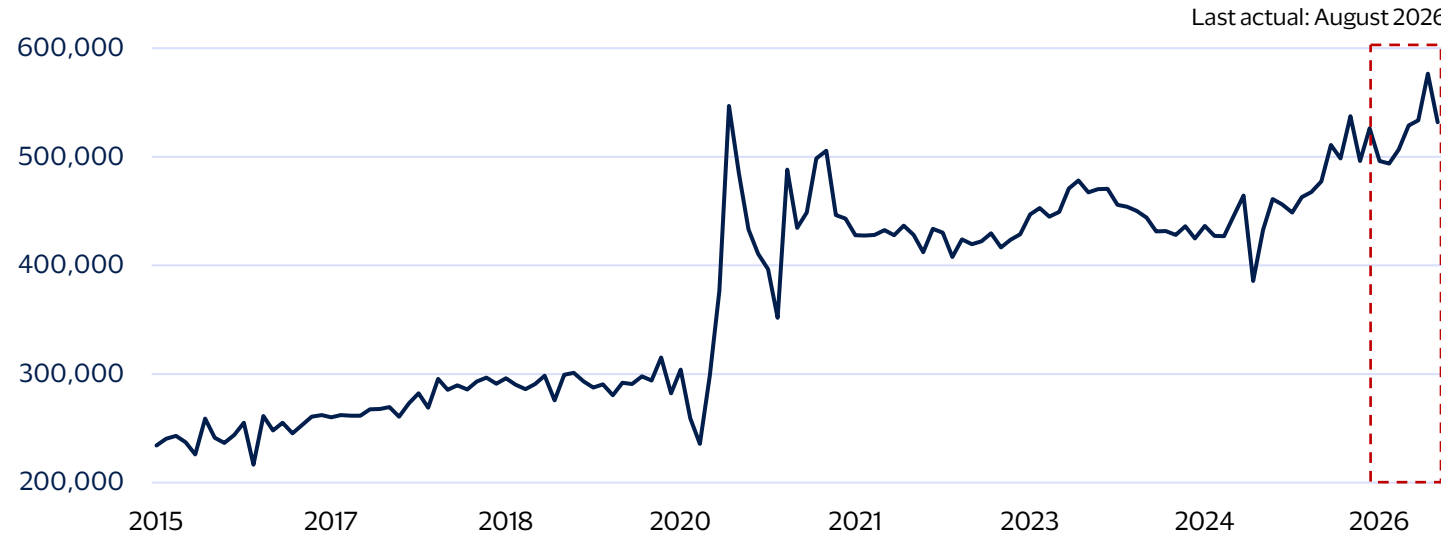
VisaNet data offer early signs of this shift. Since 2022, the share of new businesses has increased across nearly every major sector, with particularly strong gains in information and entertainment (Fig. 2), where AI can directly support software development, design, content and marketing. Further, more recent data points to the acceleration in U.S. business applications, with similarly strong gains in the information sector (Fig. 3).

Fig. 2: Information and entertainment economies are leading new business formation globally
(Change in share of new businesses in total active, ppts change between 2022–2023 and 2024–2025)⁴



Source: Visa Business and Economic Insights analysis of VisaNet data

Fig. 3: Monthly business formation surging higher, likely driven primarily by AI
(Number of U.S. business applications, seasonally adjusted)



Source: Visa Business and Economic Insights analysis of Haver Analytics data

These AI-enabled small businesses are pulling ahead

In the mainstream AI discourse, the big companies are often cast as the inevitable winners. But AI may also be giving small businesses access to capabilities that once required large teams and deep pockets. Early evidence based on VisaNet data suggests that SMBs putting AI tools to work are already beginning to stand apart. Firms in the highest spending decile are roughly three times more likely to subscribe to generative AI services than firms in the lowest spending decile (Fig. 4), highlighting a strong link between AI adoption and business success. Early adopters also stand out in other ways, exhibiting higher levels of digital engagement, cross-border activity, and technology-related spending (Fig. 5), suggesting that AI is becoming part of a broader strategy to improve efficiency and expand growth opportunities.

Importantly, the advantage is not limited to already successful firms. Across every spending segment, businesses that adopt AI subsequently increase their card spending faster than comparable non-adopters (Fig. 6). The pattern is remarkably consistent, whether comparing small or large businesses, indicating that AI adoption is associated with stronger business momentum regardless of starting scale. While no single dataset can definitively prove cause and effect, the breadth and persistence of the growth gap suggest that AI is doing more than simply attracting successful firms. Increasingly, it appears to be helping create them. According to a recent Statistics Canada study,⁵ for instance, firms incorporating AI into their business processes were found to be up to 17 percent more productive than non-adopters.

Taken together, the findings point to a powerful dual role for AI: helping level the playing field by broadening access to advanced capabilities, while simultaneously creating a new source of competitive advantage for businesses that move early and integrate the technology effectively into their operations.

Fig. 4: High-spender firms are more likely to be early adopters of AI
(Share of SMB credit cards subscribed to GenAI services in 2025, by spend decile in the prior year)

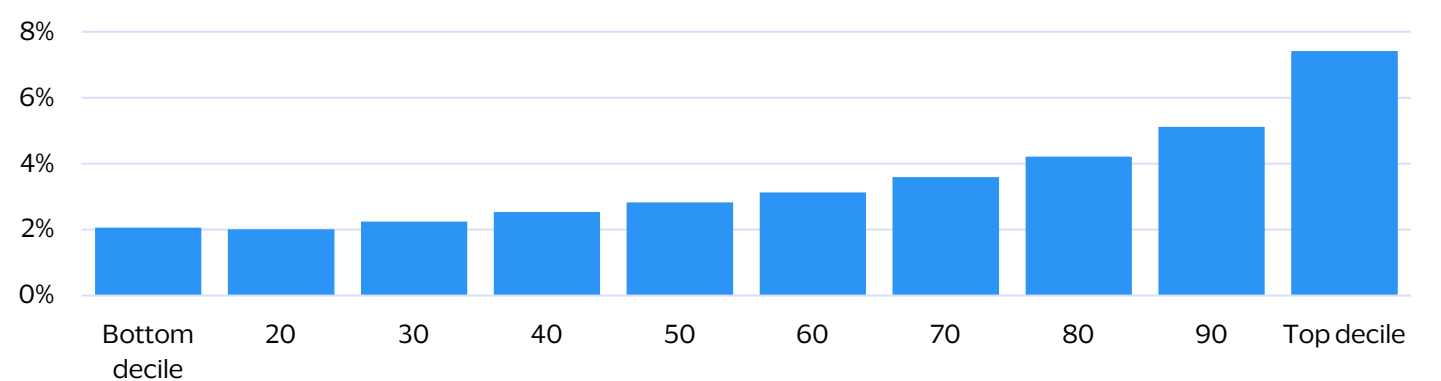
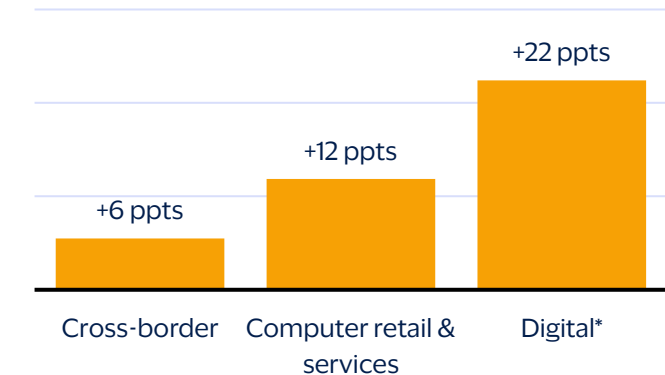
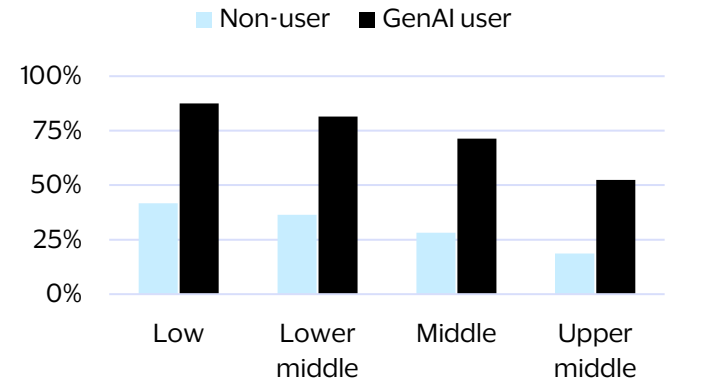


Fig. 5: Early adopter businesses are more digital and cross-border savvy
Difference between early adopters and non-adopter business cards (gap in transaction share, ppts)



* Digital is card-not-present share of total transactions.
Source: Visa Business and Economic Insights analysis of VisaNet data

Fig. 6: Business users of AI start utilizing their cards much more intensively at every spend level
Probability a business card rises in spend band rank between 2024 and 2025 (percent)



Financial services need a new playbook to serve this new generation of SMBs

As we picture a small business, we often imagine a physical storefront, a team of employees and years of financial history. But broader societal and economic shifts, accelerated by AI, are producing a new generation of SMBs: younger businesses, founded by experienced professionals, that are leaner, more digital and global from the outset. Accordingly, financial institutions may need to rethink products and underwriting models built around traditional SMBs with employees, payrolls, and established credit histories.

Data, not collateral, becomes the differentiator. Many AI-enabled businesses are young, asset-light, and difficult to assess using conventional credit metrics. Recent work by Visa Consulting and Analytics⁶ highlights fragmented data as a key barrier to serving SMBs effectively. Payments data can help close that gap by providing a real-time view of business activity, cash flows, and growth trajectories.

AI adoption may emerge as a valuable signal of business momentum. Businesses using AI tools exhibit stronger spending growth and greater digital engagement than non-adopters. Combined with payments activity, these behaviors could help financial institutions deliver more targeted financing and service offerings to businesses.

The next generation of SMBs will be digital, global, and liquidity-focused. AI-enabled businesses are often born online, operate across borders, and generate less predictable revenue streams than traditional firms. This may increase demand for real-time cash flow visibility, working-capital solutions, cross-border payments, and integrated financial management tools. For financial institutions, the opportunity is not simply to serve more small businesses, but to serve a fundamentally different kind of small business.



Footnotes

1. Based on anonymized and depersonalized count of small business Visa cards registering subscription payments to global and regional generative AI platforms.
2. Azoulay, Pierre, Benjamin F. Jones, J. Daniel Kim, and Javier Miranda. 2020. "Age and High-Growth Entrepreneurship." *American Economic Review: Insights* 2 (1): 65–82.
3. YouGov Global Profiles, August 2026.
4. Based on anonymized and depersonalized sales transaction data across ~20M merchants from a globally representative sample of 50 markets. A merchant is classified a small and medium sized business (SMB) if its annual sales were within the bottom 75 percent of all businesses active in the same market and merchant category. A merchant is classified active if it had at least one sales transaction per month in both the current and previous years. A merchant is classified new if it was not active during the previous calendar year and became active in the current year. Chart shows percentage-point change in the average share of new merchants in total active by industry in the last two years (2024-2025) relative to 2022-2023 normal.
5. Statistics Canada: "Artificial intelligence adoption and productivity in Canadian firms," Economic and Social Report, vol 6., no. 4.
6. Visa Consulting and Analytics: [Reinventing SMB banking with AI, stablecoins and smarter underwriting](#).

Accessibility Notes

Fig. 1: A horizontal arrow chart compares the share of SMB credit cards subscribed to GenAI services in 2024 and 2025 across 12 countries, measured as percent of total active cards. The x-axis runs from 1 percent to 6 percent, and each country has two points, one for 2024 and one for 2025, and connected by an arrow. Peru, Australia, Canada are highest at about 6 percent in 2025, followed by Japan at 5 percent. Every country registered an increase in share in 2025, compared to 2024.

Fig. 2: A horizontal bar chart shows the percentage-point change in the share of new businesses in total active businesses between 2022 to 2023 and 2024 to 2025 across nine sectors. The x-axis is labeled from 0 percent to 12 percent. Information has the largest increase at about 12 percentage points (ppts), followed by entertainment at roughly 10 ppts, transport and manufacturing around 9 ppts, education roughly 8 ppts, and retail trade the smallest at about 3 ppts.

Fig. 3: A line chart displays the number of U.S. business applications, seasonally adjusted, from 2015 to August 2026. The y-axis ranges from 200,000 to 600,000 applications, and the x-axis marks the period from August 2015 – August 2026. The line starts a little above 200,000 in August 2015, rises gradually through the late 2010s, jumps sharply around mid-2020 to above 500,000, remains elevated with some fluctuation, and ends slightly above 500,000 in August 2026.

Fig. 4: A vertical bar chart shows the share of SMB credit cards subscribed to GenAI services in 2025 by prior-year spend decile. The x-axis runs from the bottom decile through deciles labeled 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90 to the top decile, and the y-axis runs from 0 percent to 8 percent. The bars increase steadily from left to right, starting near 1 percent for the bottom decile, rising through roughly 2 to 5 percent across the middle deciles, and reaching about 7 to 8 percent for the top decile.

Fig. 5: A horizontal bar chart compares the gap in transaction share, measured in percentage points (ppts), between early adopters and non-adopter business cards across three categories. The three labeled categories are cross-border, computer retail and services purchases, and digital. The bars are annotated as +6 ppts for cross-border, +12 ppts for computer retail and services purchases, and +22 ppts for digital. Digital is the largest gap and cross-border is the smallest.

Fig. 6: A clustered vertical bar chart shows the probability that a business card rises in spend band rank between 2024 and 2025, measured in percent, for non-user and GenAI user cards across four spend levels: low, lower middle, middle, and upper middle. The y-axis runs from 0 percent to 100 percent. In each spend level, the GenAI user bar is higher than the non-user bar. Low is highest for both groups, at roughly 88 percent for GenAI users versus about 42 percent for non-users; lower middle is around 82 percent versus about 36 percent; middle is around 71 percent versus about 28 percent; and upper middle is the lowest, at roughly 52 percent for GenAI users versus about 5 to 15 percent for non-users.

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