



Find out how to
future proof
your business



Upskilling your team

A small business guide to training options

face2faceHR

Small businesses face the same challenge as large corporations: keeping their teams skilled, engaged, and ready for the future. Whether it's adapting to new technologies, complying with regulatory requirements, or meeting evolving customer expectations, the need to continually invest in your employees has never been greater.

But as a small business owner, you're probably working with limited time, resources, and budgets. The good news is that upskilling your team doesn't have to mean expensive courses or weeks away from the workplace. There are plenty of cost-effective, flexible training options designed to help small businesses thrive.

This guide walks you through why upskilling matters, the different training routes available, and practical tips to make learning a seamless part of your business culture.



Why upskilling matters for small businesses



Investing in your team's development brings measurable benefits:

- **Improved productivity:** Employees gain the confidence and skills to work smarter, not harder.
- **Stronger retention:** Offering training shows staff you're committed to their growth, making them more likely to stay.
- **Competitive advantage:** A highly skilled workforce helps you respond quickly to industry changes and customer demands.
- **Future-proofing:** As automation and AI reshape industries, continuous learning ensures your business stays relevant.
- **Boosted morale:** Employees feel more valued and engaged when they see opportunities for personal and professional growth.

In short, upskilling isn't just an employee perk - it's a strategic investment in your business's long-term success.



Training options for small businesses

Small businesses don't need to mirror big corporate training programmes to see results. Instead, you can mix and match options depending on your budget, business goals, and team preferences. Here are some practical avenues to explore:

1. On-the-job training

Best for: Practical skills, role-specific development, new starters.

Cost: Minimal - mainly time and planning.

On-the-job training (OJT) involves teaching employees while they work. It's one of the most effective approaches because learning happens in real-world situations.

Examples include:

- Shadowing experienced colleagues.
- Hands-on demonstrations.
- Rotating roles within the team to build broader skills.

Tips for success:

- Pair less experienced employees with mentors.
- Set clear objectives for what the learner should achieve.
- Provide feedback regularly to reinforce progress.



2. Workshops and short courses

Best for: Specific skills, compliance training, or quick upskilling.

Cost: Varies - many affordable options available online and locally.

Workshops and short courses are ideal when you want focused learning on a particular topic, such as digital marketing, customer service, or health and safety compliance.

Options include:

- Local colleges and training centres.
- Sector-specific bodies offering accredited courses.
- Online providers.

Pro tip: Keep an eye on government-funded programmes - initiatives like the government's Skills Bootcamps offer free or subsidised courses in areas such as digital skills, leadership, and green energy.



3. Apprenticeships

Best for: Developing long-term skills and bringing in new talent.

Cost: Often heavily subsidised through government schemes.

Apprenticeships aren't just for school leavers - they're now available at all levels, including advanced and even degree-level programmes. Employees earn while they learn, combining practical experience with structured training.

Why consider apprenticeships:

- Employers may get funding to cover most, if not all, training costs.
- Flexible delivery - training often happens alongside work.
- A great way to future-proof your workforce by building the skills you need in-house.

Visit [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk) to explore apprenticeship options for your sector.



4. Online learning platforms

Best for: Self-paced learning, flexible upskilling, remote teams.

Cost: Ranges from free to subscription-based.

E-learning has transformed training for small businesses. Platforms offer thousands of courses across nearly every industry.

Benefits include:

- Employees can learn at their own pace.
- Easy to fit into busy schedules.
- Access to expert-led training without leaving the office.

Tip: To keep learners motivated, set milestones and discuss progress during team catch-ups.



5. Coaching and mentoring

Best for: Leadership development, personal growth, and internal knowledge sharing.

Cost: Free if done internally; external coaches can be an investment.

Coaching focuses on unlocking an employee's potential, while mentoring involves sharing wisdom and experience. Both approaches can be invaluable for developing soft skills, such as communication, decision-making, and leadership.

Ideas to try:

- Pair junior team members with senior colleagues for informal mentoring.
- Bring in an external coach to work with your leadership team.
- Create peer-support groups where employees can share challenges and solutions.

6. Government-funded initiatives

The UK offers several schemes designed to help small businesses upskill their workforce at little or no cost. Examples include:

- Skills Bootcamps – Free, flexible courses in priority areas like IT, digital marketing, and construction.
- Multiply Programme – Free maths courses for adults to boost numeracy skills.
- Adult Education Budget – Local authorities often provide funded courses through colleges and training providers.

Check your local council or the National Careers Service for current funding opportunities.



7. Industry associations and trade bodies

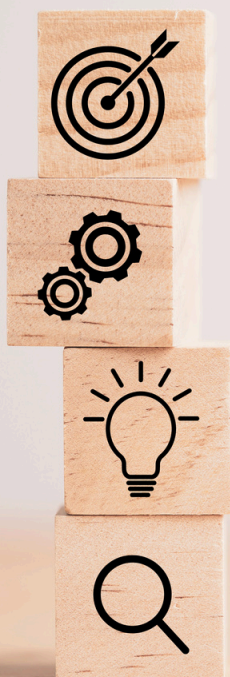
If your business operates in a specialist sector, look to your trade body or professional association for training resources. Many offer discounted or even free courses for members, as well as sector-specific qualifications recognised across the industry.

How to build a training strategy that works

Step 1: Identify skills gaps

Start by assessing where your team's skills are today versus where your business wants to be.

- Speak with employees about areas they'd like to improve.
- Review customer feedback to identify service gaps.
- Consider future needs - will you need digital skills, compliance training, or leadership development?





Step 2: Set clear objectives

Be specific about what you want to achieve. Examples might include:

- Improving customer satisfaction scores by 10%.
- Increasing social media engagement.
- Training one team member to take on supervisory responsibilities.

Step 3: Choose the right training options

Match your objectives with the training approaches that make the most sense for your business. For example:

- Use Skills Bootcamps for digital marketing know-how.
- Offer mentoring for leadership growth.
- Invest in accredited compliance courses for regulated industries.

Step 4: Make learning part of the culture

Employees are more likely to engage with training when it's embedded in the business culture:

- Allocate regular time for development.
- Recognise and reward employees who complete training.
- Encourage team members to share what they've learned with colleagues.

Step 5: Measure and review

Finally, evaluate the impact of training:

- Are employees applying their new skills effectively?
- Has productivity or customer satisfaction improved?
- Do you need to adjust your approach for better results?

Regular reviews help ensure your investment in upskilling pays off.



Balancing training with business demands

For small businesses, one of the biggest challenges is freeing up time for training while keeping operations running smoothly. Here are some practical tips:

- Start small: Focus on one or two key areas rather than trying to tackle everything at once.
- Use microlearning: Bite-sized lessons are easier to slot into busy schedules.
- Stagger training: Avoid taking too many people off the floor at the same time.
- Leverage quiet periods: Use naturally slower seasons to prioritise development.



Final thoughts

Upskilling your team is one of the most powerful ways to future-proof your small business. It builds confidence, boosts performance, and helps you attract and retain great people - all while staying competitive in a fast-changing world.

With so many affordable and flexible options available, from online learning platforms to government-funded programmes, investing in your team's development doesn't have to break the bank. Start by identifying your priorities, choose the right mix of training methods, and create a culture where learning is part of everyday business life.

Your employees will feel valued, your customers will notice the difference, and your business will be better prepared to tackle whatever comes next.



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