

# Practical AI Tools Small Teams Can Use Today

PROJECT COMPASS ADVISORY — RESEARCH INSIGHTS

In the contemporary landscape of Irish SMEs and the third sector, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is frequently discussed through the lens of enterprise-level transformation. However, for the majority of small project teams, the true value of AI lies not in grand architectural overhauls, but in the incremental reduction of administrative friction. At Project Compass Advisory, we observe that for many organisations, project success is often won or lost in the details of daily coordination. AI is now providing the "digital hands" necessary to manage those details without the capital intensity traditionally associated with high-end project management software.

For a small team—whether a non-profit managing community healthcare initiatives or a specialist SME delivering engineering consultancy—AI offers a mechanism to bridge the gap between limited human resources and increasingly complex delivery expectations.

## Why AI Matters for Small Project Teams

Traditionally, small teams have been at a structural disadvantage. Without a dedicated Project Management Office (PMO) or a fleet of coordinators, the burden of "running the project" often eclipses the actual "work of the project." Administrative overhead—the manual tracking of tasks, the synthesis of meeting notes, and the collation of status reports—consumes a disproportionate amount of a small team's capacity.

*Recent research by the Project Management Institute (2023) highlights that project professionals expect the proportion of their projects using AI to jump from 36% to 57% by 2026.*

This shift is driven by the reality that AI allows professionals to pivot away from routine manual tasks toward "power skills" such as leadership, stakeholder engagement, and strategic problem-solving (PMI 2023). For small businesses in Ireland, this transition is not merely a matter of efficiency; it is a matter of sustainability.

# Common Project Challenges AI Can Help Solve

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Small teams often face a predictable set of bottlenecks that erode project margins. According to research from McKinsey & Company (2023), the capacity for generative AI to understand and summarise complex information means that it is uniquely positioned to address several chronic pain points:

- **Administrative Saturation:** The volume of data entry required to keep project boards updated often leads to "tool fatigue."
- **Coordination Gaps:** In hybrid environments, keeping everyone aligned on a "single source of truth" is difficult without constant, time-consuming meetings.
- **Opaque Risk Profiles:** Risks are often managed informally, leading to reactive "firefighting" rather than proactive mitigation.
- **Reporting Lag:** Manually compiled reports are often out of date by the time they reach a board or client.

## Practical AI Tools Small Teams Can Use Today

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The current generation of AI tools is designed to be "plug-and-play," integrating directly into existing workflows.

### 1. Workflow Intelligence: Trello and Asana Automation

Platforms like Trello and Asana have integrated AI (such as Asana Intelligence and Trello's Butler) to handle routine coordination. A small marketing agency, for example, can set rules where the completion of a design task automatically triggers client notifications and recalculates deadlines. This ensures momentum is maintained without the manager acting as a human "switchboard."

### 2. Narrative Record Keeping: Microsoft Copilot and Otter.ai

Meeting management is perhaps the single largest time-sink for charities. Microsoft (2024) reports that 71% of AI users say it helps them focus on more important work by reducing the "digital debt" of meetings. Tools like Microsoft Copilot or Otter.ai provide real-time summaries and clear action-item lists, providing a credible audit trail for governance with minimal manual effort.

### 3. AI-Assisted Risk Tracking

Risk management is frequently seen as a large-project discipline, but Large Language Models (LLMs) can assist small teams in identifying non-obvious risks (Nieto-Rodriguez and Vargas 2023). By prompting a secure AI environment with a project scope, managers can receive a "second opinion" on potential roadblocks, such as user adoption hurdles or supply chain vulnerabilities.

#### CASE ILLUSTRATION: THE COMMUNITY HERITAGE PROJECT

A small heritage charity in Leinster was managing a site restoration involving five contractors and three government funding bodies. By implementing a simple AI stack—using Otter.ai for site meetings and Trello automation for contractor updates—the charity reduced their weekly coordination time by four hours. They used the saved time to apply for secondary funding, citing the high-quality, data-driven progress reports they were now able to generate automatically.

## Risks and Good Practice

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While the advantages are significant, we advise a "Human-in-the-Loop" (HITL) philosophy. AI can "hallucinate" or provide incorrect data; every generated report must be reviewed by a human professional (Nieto-Rodriguez and Vargas 2023). Furthermore, data privacy is critical. Never input personally identifiable information (PII) into public, free versions of AI tools.

## Five Practical Steps to Start Small

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- **Identify One "Time-Sink":** Pick one repetitive task (e.g., weekly status emails).
- **Audit Existing Tools:** Check for integrated AI features in your current Microsoft 365 or Asana subscription.
- **Run a Controlled Pilot:** Use an AI note-taker for one specific workstream for four weeks.
- **Create a Simple AI Policy:** Draft a one-page guide outlining what data can be put into AI tools.
- **Focus on "Power Skills":** Use saved time for high-quality 1-on-1s with team members or stakeholders (PMI 2023).

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## References

- McKinsey & Company (2023) *The economic potential of generative AI: The next productivity frontier*. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com> (Accessed: 22 May 2024).
- Microsoft (2023) *Will AI Fix Work? 2023 Work Trend Index Annual Report*. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.
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- Nieto-Rodriguez, A. and Vargas, R. V. (2023) 'How AI Will Transform Project Management', *Harvard Business Review*, 2 February.
- Project Management Institute (2023) *Shaping the Future of Project Management with AI*. Newtown Square, PA: Project Management Institute.
- Vartiainen, T. and Teirikangas, H. (2024) 'Artificial Intelligence in Project Management: A Systematic Literature Review', *Project Management Journal*, 55(2), pp. 145-162.

### Further Reading for Website Visitors

- The PMI AI Resource Centre: Whitepapers on "power skills" in the age of AI.
- Microsoft's Work Trend Index: Annual data on how AI is changing daily work.
- Project Compass Advisory's Guide to Digital Transformation: A roadmap for Irish SMEs.