

European SMEs at risk as they build AI strategies on shaky digital foundations, latest Qonto survey finds

Paris, 8th October 2025 - Qonto, Europe's leading business finance management solution for SMEs and freelancers, today publishes its comprehensive analysis of digital transformation across European small and medium businesses. The report, created in collaboration with Appinio, surveyed 1,600 senior decision makers across France, Germany, Italy, and Spain in August 2025.

As European businesses race to remain competitive in an increasingly digital economy, the study uncovers a striking paradox that could threaten the future of Europe's economic backbone: while 46% of European SMEs have embraced AI tools like ChatGPT, fundamental business systems remain dramatically underadopted, with only 24% using digital accounting and 22% implementing video-conferencing such as Zoom. This reveals nearly half of Europe's 25 million SMEs are prioritising experimental AI over crucial digital foundations, potentially leaving them vulnerable as competitors with stronger digital infrastructure gain decisive market advantages.

European SMEs recognise AI importance but lack strategic urgency

While 92% of the European SMEs surveyed acknowledge digitalisation and AI as relevant, only 62% treat it as "absolutely crucial" - creating a dangerous complacency gap. A third of businesses (38%) view digital transformation as merely "somewhat important," representing approximately 9.5 million European SMEs that could be vulnerable to competitive displacement. Spain leads European digital conviction with 69% rating digitalisation as crucial, while France shows the largest commitment deficit at just 52% - a 17-point gap that could prove economically costly as digital-first competitors gain market share.

Businesses feel unprepared for digital disruption

Despite widespread recognition of digital transformation's importance, only 60% of European SMEs responded feeling well prepared for the challenge ahead. The remaining 40% - representing 10 million European businesses employing millions of workers - feel only partially or completely unprepared, leaving them at immediate risk of digital obsolescence.

Germany emerges as Europe's digital fortress with 76% reporting feeling well prepared and only 6% unprepared, positioning German SMEs for competitive advantage. Meanwhile, France faces the most severe vulnerability with 48% saying they feel inadequately prepared - more than double Germany's rate - potentially threatening its economic position in key European markets.

AI adoption paradox: Advanced tools, missing foundations

The survey reveals a dangerous implementation pattern that could undermine business stability: 46% respondents use AI tools while critical business systems lag far behind. Only 29% have digital document management, 27% use data analytics, and just 22% have video-conferencing - technologies that became essential during the pandemic and remain crucial for operational efficiency.

France epitomises this contradiction, leading AI adoption at 47% while underperforming in digital accounting (19% vs 24% EU average), suggesting businesses are pursuing flashy

innovations while neglecting operational necessities. Germany demonstrates the most mature approach, with systematic digitisation across operational tools rather than trend-chasing, positioning German SMEs for sustainable competitive advantages.

Automation delivers half a working week in productivity gains

The European SMEs surveyed are unlocking significant competitive advantages through automation, with 12% achieving transformational time savings of 20+ hours weekly - equivalent to freeing up more than half a working week for strategic activities that drive growth and innovation. Overall, 53% save at least 10 hours per week through automation, representing millions of working hours redirected from administrative tasks to value-creating activities.

What this means for European competitiveness

These findings highlight a critical moment for European economic competitiveness. While European SMEs form the backbone of the European economy, employing millions and generating significant economic value, the digital divide threatens to create winners and losers within the single market. Countries and businesses that build comprehensive digital foundations while adopting AI strategically will gain decisive advantages, while those chasing trends without solid infrastructure risk being left behind.

The survey suggests policy interventions could unlock significant economic value: reducing regulatory burdens in Germany, addressing skills gaps in Spain, overcoming cultural resistance in France, and bridging Italy's digital polarisation between advanced adopters and stragglers could collectively boost European SME competitiveness against global rivals.

*"Our latest survey reveals a pattern in how European SMEs approach digitization that has to be addressed: while 92% consider digitization and AI important for their business, only 19% currently have a clear digitization strategy and sufficient resources," says **Alexandre Prot, Co-Founder and CEO at Qonto**. "This gap is even more obvious when we look at the digital tools they're adopting: nearly 50% of European SMEs use GenAI tools like ChatGPT daily, while 24% have digitized their accounting systems and 22% use video-conferencing tools. In today's unstable market environment, we see digitization as a significant competitive advantage. While AI offers exciting opportunities, we believe European businesses will have to build strong digital foundations that can support their long-term growth and innovation goals."*

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About the survey

Qonto launched an online, multi-market, quantitative survey carried out by Appinio, amongst 1,600 senior decision makers across France, Germany, Italy, and Spain from companies with fewer than 250 employees. The survey responses were gathered in August 2025.

About Qonto

Qonto is Europe's leading business finance management solution serving over 600,000 SMEs and freelancers across 8 countries. Launched in 2017 by Alexandre Prot and Steve Anavi, Qonto combines business banking with powerful financial tools, including invoicing, bookkeeping, and spend management - all in one seamless solution. Backed by €600+ million

in funding and powered by a team of 1,600+ people, Qonto is transforming how European businesses manage their finances with innovative products, transparent pricing, and 24/7 customer support.

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