

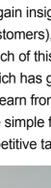


**Business rewired**

# Tools to succeed: small business owners reveal the tech they rely on

You don't have to be a giant of Silicon Valley to take advantage of AI. From automated systems that monitor cashflow, to software that sends out emails, there's a plethora of online tools available to help small firms grow

Main image: (From left to right) Dale Gibson; Sidonie Warren; Richard Fishenden. Photograph: Alun Callender, Max Miechowski/Guardian

Paid for by 

   38

Self-driving cars, surgery carried out by robots, facial recognition software – the transformative potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and its implications for the world of work have rarely been out of the headlines in recent years. “Everything we assume about work, jobs, training and education – and being human – is being challenged by artificial intelligence and technological progress,” futurist author Gerd Leonhard says. “Humanity will change more in the next 20 years than in the previous 300.”

Considering the magnitude and scale of this fourth industrial revolution, it's understandable that many small business owners feel left behind. Few will have the teams of data scientists, money and know-how to create their own bespoke solutions, unless they're operating in the AI sector themselves. Yet many will be using platforms and tools that already incorporate AI – anyone doing a Google search, for example, is experiencing it in action. “You can be sure there isn't a human sitting in a cubicle, sifting by hand through the entire internet to decide which search result to serve you,” says Cassie Kozyrkov, chief decision scientist at Google.

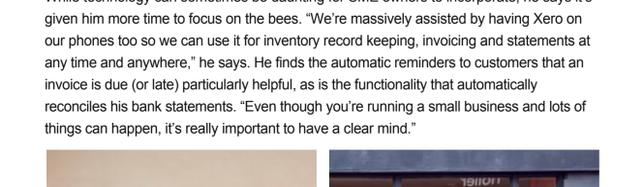
This technology is most often used by businesses in three different ways: automating processes (such as timed newsletter sends, or bank account reconciliation), data analysis to gain insights (and then performing tasks such as recommending products to customers), and engaging with the public (via customer service chatbots, for example). Much of this has been made possible by cloud computing (a way of storing data remotely), which has given smart platforms powered by the cloud millions of unoptimised users' data to learn from and adapt accordingly. It's rapidly accelerated the development of tools that are simple for small business owners to use but highly effective in terms of eliminating repetitive tasks, streamlining operations, and enabling sustainable growth.



Dale Gibson of Bermondsey Street Bees

### 'It's important to have a clear mind'

“What beekeepers really like is the 88-million-year-old technology that bees use to do all sorts of smart things, like organise their hives, and produce wax and royal jelly from their bodies,” Dale Gibson, co-founder of [Bermondsey Street Bees](#), says about introducing the art of beekeeping to technology. “The last real technological discovery in beekeeping was in America in 1852.”



While respecting that heritage, Gibson has been able to incorporate technological development into his business in a number of ways, since installing his first hives on his London roof in 2007. “I do start off with a proper, gummed up, sticky with honey notebook, where the data is gathered in the field,” he says. “But when I come home, I enter that information into a system on the cloud where my associate beekeeper can look it up.” He's also working on a pilot programme with the [World Bee Project](#) to test remote monitors that track the health of hives, such as their weight. That data is then fed back into a central system, shared by 32,000 beekeepers across more than 150 countries. The project hopes this information will help to create more sustainable ecosystems and improve global food security.

Gibson is also exploring the potential of tracking his honey via a blockchain system, first trialled by the technology company Oracle at the [2019 OpenWorld show in Dubai](#). “Anything that can help us distinguish between real, raw local honey and the manufactured commodity that's come from halfway around the world and been blended, heated and mashed up, then that's a good thing,” says Gibson, adding that honey is the third most tampered with product in the world, after milk and olive oil.

While technology can sometimes be daunting for SME owners to incorporate, he says it's given him more time to focus on the bees. “We're massively assisted by having Xero on our phones too so we can use it for inventory record keeping, invoicing and statements at any time and anywhere,” he says. He finds the automatic reminders to customers that an invoice is due (or late) particularly helpful, as is the functionality that automatically reconciles his bank statements. “Even though you're running a small business and lots of things can happen, it's really important to have a clear mind.”

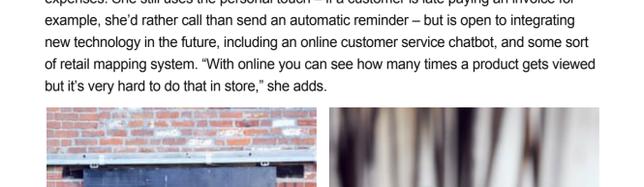


Sidonie Warren of Papersmiths



### 'We're trying very hard to make online successful'

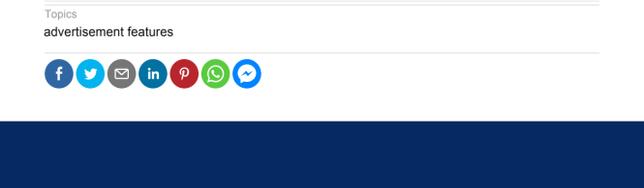
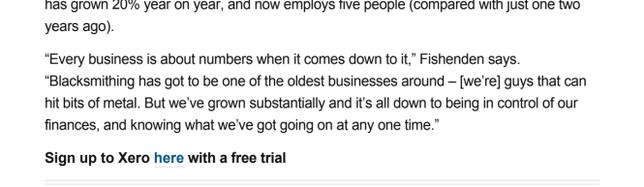
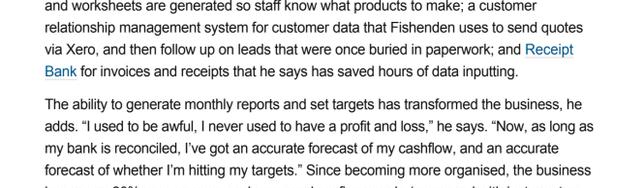
Since starting in 2011, [Papersmiths](#) has grown from a two-employee interior design studio in Bridport, to launching an additional chain of five stationary shops. The company now employs 25 staff and has a presence in some of the UK's most desirable retail locations (including Bristol, Brighton, and Chelsea in London).



Smart technology has played a clear role in the business's growth, co-founder Sidonie Warren says. The majority of their data is tracked using point-of-sale software Vend, which integrates with Xero. “That's excellent because it allows us to track what we're selling, right down to a specific product or colour,” says Warren. “When we open a new store we use that data to figure out what it is we need to buy, and also planning the fit out of the store.” Shop managers also use it to identify that week's top five products, and arrange displays accordingly.

Building the e-commerce arm of the business has been a key focus for Warren recently. “Our challenge is translating that thing of testing a pen or feeling the paper of a notebook into the digital realm,” she says. Automating email sends via [Mailchimp](#) has enabled her to engage new customers via discount codes, and she can target people known to be top spenders at certain times of the year using sales data from [Shopify](#).

She uses Xero weekly to plan cashflow, as well as process payroll and track all of her staff expenses. She still uses the personal touch – if a customer is late paying an invoice for example, she'd rather call than send an automatic reminder – but is open to integrating new technology in the future, including an online customer service chatbot, and some sort of retail mapping system. “With online you can see how many times a product gets viewed but it's very hard to do that in store,” she adds.



Fishenden says he used to be “archaic with technology”, but has managed to automate processes in various areas. “Xero seems to be the central part of the spider's web that everything else feeds from,” he says. That includes an order system, where delivery notes and worksheets are generated so staff know what products to make; a customer relationship management system for customer data that Fishenden uses to send quotes via Xero, and then follow up on leads that were once buried in paperwork; and [Receipt Bank](#) for invoices and receipts that he says has saved hours of data inputting.

The ability to generate monthly reports and set targets has transformed the business, he adds. “I used to be awful, I never used to have a profit and loss,” he says. “Now, as long as my bank is reconciled, I've got an accurate forecast of my cashflow, and an accurate forecast of whether I'm hitting my targets.” Since becoming more organised, the business has grown 20% year on year, and now employs five people (compared with just one two years ago).

“Every business is about numbers when it comes down to it,” Fishenden says. “Blacksmithing has got to be one of the oldest businesses around – [we're] guys that can hit bits of metal. But we've grown substantially and it's all down to being in control of our finances, and knowing what we've got going on at any one time.”

**Sign up to Xero [here](#) with a free trial**

Topics: advertisement features