



TESTIMONY

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Small Business AI on Main Street: How AI is Shaping the Future of Small Business

Submitted by Anthony Qaiyum
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Chairman Williams, Ranking Member Velázquez, and Members of the House Small Business Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about how artificial intelligence is helping small businesses like mine compete, grow, and create jobs.

My name is Anthony Qaiyum, and I am the owner of Merz Apothecary, a 151-year-old family-owned business in Chicago. We sell natural health, personal care, beauty, and fragrance products through our historic retail store, our website, and online marketplaces like Amazon. Altogether, we employ more than 60 people.

When I started, I believed technology could help our unique neighborhood store reach people across the country and around the world. We launched our first e-commerce website in 1997 and became one of Amazon's earliest small-business sellers in 2004. Looking back, those decisions changed the trajectory of our business.

Today, I believe artificial intelligence represents the next major leap forward for small businesses.

AI gives businesses like ours affordable access to capabilities that were once available only to large corporations with multi-million-dollar budgets.

Many of these tools offer free versions or are integrated into existing platforms we use. For example, Shopify's native AI can produce on-demand sales reports in just minutes that used to take hours to build. Over the years, we've accumulated decades of emails, spreadsheets, sales records, and operating documents in Google Workspace. We can now simply ask Gemini where

something is stored and what it says, turning our historical, institutional knowledge into something we can find and use instantly.

In addition, AI helps us streamline repetitive administrative work so our employees can spend more time serving customers. Right now we're building an AI agent to handle routine accounts payable work that takes one employee more than 20 hours a week — hours we'd rather have her helping with strategic problems to grow the business.

Like many small businesses, we don't have the budget to hire a full-time Chief Financial Officer. But today I can securely upload our financial statements into AI tools like Claude or Gemini and receive a thorough analysis of cash flow, inventory investments, operating expenses, payroll trends, and potential financial risks.

Lastly, and perhaps my favorite example of how AI is helping us: We recently hired a National Sales Manager for KOBO, our small home fragrance manufacturing business. I knew what I wanted her to learn during her first few months, but I didn't have the time to organize everything into a structured onboarding program. Using AI voice transcription and writing tools, I talked through my ideas, and the AI turned them into a comprehensive knowledge guide along with a detailed 30-60-90-day onboarding plan. She later told me it was the clearest roadmap she'd ever received when starting a new job.

All these examples illustrate the larger impact AI has had on our business. It has helped us make better use of our employees' time, strengthen our operations, and grow. Since we started using AI, our headcount has increased by about 20%, from just over 50 employees to more than 60, and we are still hiring.

As Congress considers AI policy, I urge you to focus on measures that help small businesses adopt and benefit from AI-powered tools.

First, we need a clear, balanced national framework rather than a burdensome patchwork of conflicting state AI and privacy laws. Navigating different rules across all 50 states is difficult at best and expensive or impossible at worst.

Second, AI-powered tools are just becoming affordable and accessible for businesses like mine — from features built into platforms like Shopify to standalone tools like Claude and Codex. If new rules make these tools more expensive or harder to use, it could push AI-powered technology out of reach, once again making these capabilities available only to the largest companies.

Lastly, Congress should invest in AI literacy. SBA programs, tax incentives, or workforce training initiatives could help small business owners and their employees learn how to use these tools effectively. Every employee who becomes proficient with AI becomes more valuable, more productive, and better equipped for the jobs of the future. Even in our business, which is embracing AI, many of our employees lack formal training on how to maximize its potential. With the right support, more small businesses could help their workers use AI confidently.

For 151 years, Merz Apothecary has adapted to changing technologies and markets. AI is the newest chapter in that story. It is helping us compete, innovate, hire, and better serve our customers. I hope Congress will pursue policies that keep AI tools accessible for American small businesses and make it easier for millions more to adopt them.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.