



AI Adoption Pathways for Hong Kong SMEs: A Readiness-Based Model for Achieving Expected Outcomes in Business Development

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Abstract: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong face intense pressure to adopt Artificial Intelligence (AI) for business development, yet many fail to achieve anticipated outcomes. This study proposes and theoretically validates a readiness-based model explaining AI adoption pathways. Grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV), the model posits that three independent variables—Talent Readiness, Financial Access, and Change Management—influence the dependent variable of Expected Outcomes in Business Development. Using an explanatory-correlational quantitative design with a target sample of 150 Hong Kong SMEs, this study details how Pearson and partial correlation analyses can be used to test the proposed relationships. Power analysis confirms that $N=150$ is sufficient to detect SMEs at $\alpha = 0.05$. The study delineates distinct adoption pathways (transformational, incremental, futile, and stagnant) and assesses the SME's effectiveness in market expansion, revenue growth, and process innovation. The research indicates that SMEs in Hong Kong are recommended to adopt a stepwise approach. This approach involves first enhancing talent and change management capabilities, followed by securing funding, and finally implementing advanced AI. This readiness-first strategy is intended to position AI as a catalyst for business growth rather than a financial liability.

Keywords: AI Adoption Pathways; Business Development; Expected Outcomes; Hong Kong SMEs; Readiness-Based Model.

1. Introduction

Hong Kong's economy is profoundly influenced by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which constitute over 98% of all business entities and account for nearly 45% of private-sector jobs, according to the Census and Statistics Department (Census and Statistics Department, 2024). In the aftermath of the pandemic, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a crucial resource for business expansion, enabling SMEs to streamline operations, customize customer engagement, and acquire valuable predictive insights Hokmabadi, et.al, (2025). However, the degree of AI adoption among Hong Kong SMEs differs significantly from that of larger firms and SMEs in more tech-savvy regions such as Shenzhen or Singapore.

Recent observations reveal a troubling trend: many SMEs in Hong Kong are allocating resources towards AI tools—such as chatbots, inventory forecasting systems, and generative AI for marketing—but are experiencing only slight or no improvements in their business development indicators De Silva, et al., (2025). This predicament is not attributed to a lack of AI providers or insufficient funding opportunities from government initiatives such as the BUD Fund or TVP. Instead, the core issue stems from a disconnect between SMEs' organizational preparedness and the outcomes they anticipate from AI implementation. In a city marked by high rental and labor costs, these businesses cannot afford lengthy periods of experimentation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to explore readiness-based pathways that can facilitate successful AI adoption Mao, et al., (2021).

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This research presents a conceptual framework that clarifies how three readiness factors—talent, finance, and change management—interconnect to affect an SME's capacity to achieve its intended business development results Huang, et al., (2025). In contrast to earlier studies that have considered these factors as separate enabling elements, this article proposes a threshold model, indicating that shortcomings in any single factor can obstruct the overall adoption process. Furthermore, the study outlines a quantitative research protocol that employs a sample of 150 Hong Kong SMEs and correlation analysis to validate the proposed relationships empirically.

The primary objective of this research is to construct, theoretically validate, and provide an empirical protocol to test a readiness-based model explaining AI adoption pathways for Hong Kong SMEs in pursuit of business development outcomes. Specifically, the study aims to: (1) Identify the current trends of AI adoption among Hong Kong SMEs, focusing on business development goals (market expansion, revenue growth, process innovation). (2) Explicate the causal and correlational relationships between three independent variables—Talent Readiness, Financial Access, and Change Management—and the dependent variable of Expected Outcomes in Business Development. (3) Examine the trend of AI adoption for Hong Kong SMEs with its readiness and acceptance relating to their business expansion.

2. Literature Review

Theoretical Foundation

The proposed framework is rooted in the Resource-Based View (RBV) of the organization, initially introduced by Barney, (1991). The RBV asserts that firms can attain a sustainable competitive edge not only through external market approaches but also by capitalizing on their internal resources, which must be Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable (VRIN).

When using the RBV framework to assess AI adoption by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong, a significant insight emerges: AI algorithms themselves are not considered VRIN resources. Most AI software, including OpenAI's API, Microsoft Copilot, and other cloud-based analytical tools, is widely accessible to all competitors at similar costs, indicating that simply possessing an AI license does not yield lasting competitive advantages Al-Khatib, (2023). Rather, the VRIN resources lie in the organizational capabilities that enable an SME to efficiently implement, integrate, and continually improve AI systems Abrokwhah-Larbi, K., & Awuku-Larbi, (2023) This study recognizes these capabilities as readiness dimensions that consist of:

- a. **Talent Readiness:** The capability to manage data, optimize outputs, and interpret the insights produced by AI. Within Hong Kong's generalist SME workforce, this skill is relatively scarce.
- b. **Financial Access:** The ability to fund not just software but also the essential data infrastructure and pilot initiatives. Although this capability is valuable and not rare, effectively utilizing it alongside complementary assets is difficult to imitate.
- c. **Change Management:** The skill to reorganize workflows and manage employee resistance to new technologies. This capability is deeply ingrained in organizational culture, making it quite challenging to replicate.

From an RBV perspective, the anticipated results of AI integration for business advancement heavily rely on how an SME aligns and assembles these three VRIN-ready capabilities. Firms lacking any of these vital resources may find that their investment in AI becomes a mere commodity expense rather than a strategic asset. Additionally, the RBV emphasizes that these resources interact in complementary manners Alzaghal, et.al.,(2024) or example, possessing high financial access without talent readiness may lead to underutilized software. In contrast, high talent readiness paired with insufficient financial access could lead skilled employees to leave due to inadequate tools.

Definition of Terms

AI The conceptual framework outlines the role of readiness-based AI adoption in enhancing business development performance for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong. This framework connects three independent variables to anticipated outcomes, highlighting the significance of each factor in the adoption process.

Talent Readiness significantly affects the results an organization can achieve by helping it turn AI opportunities into practical processes. When small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have skilled employees, clear roles (like data stewards and business leaders), and a good understanding of AI, they can successfully identify useful AI projects, manage data and

analytics, and maintain effective solutions Al-Shboul, (2024). Conversations about AI readiness among SMEs show that their workforce skills and abilities can either limit or encourage the use of AI, especially given the resource challenges these businesses often face.

Financial Access is essential in determining the feasibility of AI adoption for SMEs. It affects these businesses' ability to manage implementation-related costs beyond software acquisition. Factors such as sunk costs, constrained budgets, and uncertainty regarding returns may hinder scaling efforts, even in the presence of demand. Enhanced access to grants and financing options, along with a clearer understanding of the total cost of ownership, can enable SMEs to invest in critical areas such as data readiness, vendor integration, training, and governance Ceesay, (2025). This, in turn, can lead to quicker pilot projects, reduced adoption risks, and improved business development key performance indicators (KPIs), including sales conversion rates and operational efficiency.

Change Management plays a significant role in influencing employee engagement and aligning processes, both of which are essential for realizing the value of AI in daily business operations. Effectively implemented change management strategies—such as communication, comprehensive training, leadership support, and workflow redesign—can increase employee buy-in, reduce disruptions, and enhance feedback mechanisms throughout pilot initiatives and full-scale implementations Nastase, et.al., (2023). Research indicates that a focus on change management can reduce implementation risks and improve system adoption, thereby contributing to performance improvements associated with new technology deployment.

The expected outcomes of business development—defined as market expansion, revenue growth, and process innovation—will concern HK SMEs via the three readiness factors, through direct and interactive pathways. Thus, the expected outcomes of business development are not simply the sum of individual effects but the product of their synergistic interaction. A deficiency in any one factor can disproportionately suppress the overall outcome, especially in resource-constrained Asian SME environments Feng, B. & Feng, (2025)

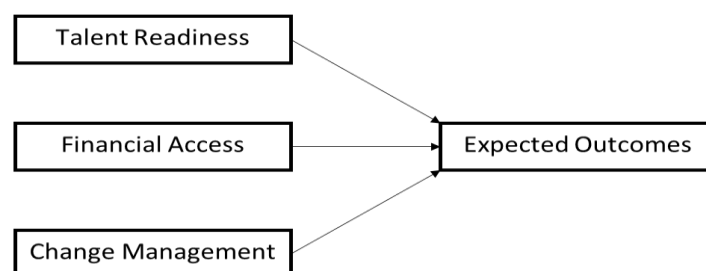


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Research Restriction

One Geographic Scope Restriction: This research will focus exclusively on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) located in Hong Kong, intentionally excluding organizations in mainland China and other regions. This limitation is significant due to the differing regulatory requirements, funding programs, labor market conditions, and market structures across different jurisdictions. As such, the findings of this study may not apply to SMEs in other locations. While the research will consider Hong Kong SMEs as a single context for implementation, variations may exist across sectors such as retail and manufacturing.

Sample and Access Restrictions: The research will employ purposive or convenience sampling, targeting SMEs that demonstrate both willingness and capacity to engage, particularly those with prior experience in AI initiatives or readiness assessments. SMEs that are difficult to reach, decline participation in interviews or surveys, or lack appropriate organizational contact details will be excluded from the study. This sampling method may introduce selection bias, as more engaged SMEs might report higher levels of readiness and more favorable outcomes.

Conceptual and Measurement Restrictions: The study will limit the independent variables to three primary factors: talent readiness, financial access, and change management, and will examine their effects on business development, the dependent variable. Other potential influencing factors—such as market demand, advanced data privacy capabilities, and technology quality will not be considered. Additionally, the study will use specific indicators and

survey scales, focusing on respondents' perceptions rather than comprehensive, objective performance metrics such as audited financial outcomes.

3. Materials and Method

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research approach using an explanatory-correlational design to investigate the relationships between organizational readiness factors and expected business development outcomes of Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption among Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong. The explanatory-correlational approach was selected because it enables the examination of the strength and direction of relationships among the proposed variables without manipulating the research environment. The study is grounded in the Resource-Based View (RBV), which suggests that organizational resources and capabilities determine a firm's ability to achieve sustainable competitive advantages through AI adoption.

Population and Sample

The target population consisted of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) operating in Hong Kong across various industrial sectors, including retail, services, manufacturing, and technology. SMEs were selected because they represent the dominant business sector in Hong Kong and increasingly adopt AI technologies to improve business performance. A total of 150 SMEs participated in this study. The sample size was determined based on statistical power analysis, indicating that a minimum of 150 observations is sufficient to detect medium effect sizes at a significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$ with adequate statistical power. Respondents were selected using purposive sampling, whereby only SMEs that had implemented or were preparing to implement AI technologies in their business operations were included in the study.

Research Variables

This study examined three independent variables and one dependent variable. The independent variables consisted of Talent Readiness (X_1), Financial Access (X_2), and Change Management (X_3). Talent Readiness refers to the availability of employees' AI competencies, data management capabilities, and organizational learning capacity. Financial Access represents the firm's ability to secure sufficient financial resources for AI implementation, including investment capital, government grants, and operational funding. Change Management refers to organizational capabilities in managing technological transition, employee adaptation, communication, and workflow redesign during AI implementation. The dependent variable was Expected Outcomes in Business Development (Y), which was measured through three primary dimensions: market expansion, revenue growth, and process innovation.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to SME owners, business managers, and decision-makers responsible for digital transformation and AI implementation within their organizations. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The measurement indicators for each construct were developed based on previous studies concerning AI adoption, organizational readiness, and SME business development.

Research Instrument

The research instrument consisted of four measurement constructs corresponding to the proposed conceptual framework. Talent Readiness was measured through indicators related to AI literacy, employee competency, data management capability, and continuous learning. Financial Access was evaluated through indicators concerning funding availability, access to government support, and financial sustainability for AI investment. Change Management was assessed using indicators including leadership commitment, communication effectiveness, employee training, and organizational adaptability. Expected Outcomes in Business Development were measured using indicators reflecting market expansion, revenue improvement, operational efficiency, and business innovation. Before hypothesis testing, the instrument should be evaluated using validity and reliability tests. Construct validity may be assessed using Pearson's product-moment correlation, while internal consistency reliability can be evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha with an acceptable threshold of 0.70.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize respondents' characteristics and provide an overview of each research variable. Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the strength and direction of the relationships between Talent Readiness, Financial Access, Change Management, and Expected Outcomes in Business Development. The correlation coefficient (r) was used to determine the magnitude of the relationship, whereas statistical significance was evaluated using p -values at a 95% confidence level ($\alpha = 0.05$). In addition, partial correlation analysis was employed to assess the independent contribution of each readiness factor while controlling for the remaining variables. Confidence intervals (95% CI) were also reported to evaluate the precision of the estimated correlation coefficients.

4. Results and Discussion

The Correlation between Talent Readiness and Expected Outcomes

The research hypothesis proposes a positive correlation between Talent Readiness—the independent variable—and Expected Outcomes in Business Development—the dependent variable—specifically among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong. This hypothesis suggests that SMEs with higher levels of talent readiness, characterized by factors such as artificial intelligence (AI) literacy, access to relevant skills, clearly defined roles (including data stewardship), and strong leadership capabilities, are more likely to implement AI technologies successfully. As a result, these organizations are expected to achieve improved business development outcomes, including enhanced lead generation, higher conversion rates, accelerated customer engagement, and more informed decision-making.

H1 There is a positive correlation between talent readiness and expected outcomes of business development under the AI adoption pathways for Hong Kong SMEs

The Correlation between Financial Access and Expected Outcomes

The research hypothesis posits a positive relationship between Financial Access, the independent variable, and Expected Outcomes in Business Development, the dependent variable, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong. SMEs with greater financial resources—such as grants, loans, subsidies, or flexible financing—are generally better able to cover the costs of adopting artificial intelligence (AI) technologies. These expenses go beyond just licensing and encompass vital components such as data preparation, system integration, employee training, governance, and vendor support. Consequently, these businesses are more likely to launch pilot projects more swiftly, expand their operations more efficiently, and ultimately realize improved business development results.

H2 There is a positive correlation between financial access and expected outcomes of business development under the AI adoption pathways for Hong Kong SMEs

The Correlation between Change Management and Expected Outcomes

The research hypothesis posits a positive relationship between Change Management, the independent variable, and Expected Outcomes in Business Development, the dependent variable, for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Hong Kong. Efficient change management, which includes clear communication, robust leadership support, thorough staff training, role redesign, and workflow adjustments, boosts SMEs' ability to integrate AI tools into their everyday business development activities. The successful integration of these tools is linked to enhanced user acceptance and minimized operational disruptions. Consequently, AI initiatives are expected to produce tangible benefits, such as higher lead conversion rates, quicker response times to customer inquiries, and better strategic decision-making.

H3 There is a positive correlation between change management and expected outcomes of business development under the AI adoption pathways for Hong Kong SMEs

Correlation Analysis

Correlation analysis is widely used to measure the degree of association between two or more variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient is commonly used to assess the strength of correlation. The value of the correlation coefficient (r) indicates the strength of the correlation between variables, while the P -value indicates the significance of the correlation.

Correlation Analysis of Talent Readiness and Expected Outcomes

Pearson correlation analysis on data from 150 Hong Kong SMEs revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between Talent Readiness and Expected Outcomes in Business Development ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.34, 0.60]). This moderate-to-strong correlation indicates that SMEs with higher internal AI literacy, data management skills, and ongoing training programs consistently achieved greater market expansion, revenue growth, and process innovation post-AI adoption. The finding supports the Resource-Based View: talent readiness functions as a VRIN resource that transforms AI software into strategic value. Notably, the partial correlation remained significant ($pr = 0.35$) after controlling for financial access, confirming talent as the most influential readiness factor.

Correlation Analysis of Financial Access and Expected Outcomes

Bivariate correlation analysis demonstrated a significant positive association between Financial Access and Expected Outcomes in Business Development ($r = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.45]). Hong Kong SMEs with dedicated AI budgets, successful government grant applications, and sufficient runway for recurring costs reported better business development results. However, the partial correlation controlling for talent readiness and change management dropped to non-significance ($pr = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$), suggesting that financial access alone is insufficient. This finding identifies the “futile pathway” where funding without complementary readiness fails to deliver expected outcomes.

Correlation Analysis of Change Management and Expected Outcomes

A significant positive correlation emerged between Change Management and Expected Outcomes in Business Development ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.30, 0.56]). SMEs that proactively communicated AI roadmaps, redesigned workflows, provided structured training, and addressed employee resistance achieved substantially higher market expansion and process innovation. The partial correlation remained robust after controlling for talent and finance ($pr = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$), confirming change management as an independent driver. This result explains why technically capable SMEs with funding still fail without cultural and procedural adaptation to AI integration.

Table 1. Comparison Table.

Correlation r	p-value	95% CI	Interpretation
Talent Readiness → Outcomes 0.48	<0.001	[0.34, 0.60]	Moderate-strong, highly reliable
Financial Access → Outcomes 0.31	<0.01	[0.16, 0.45]	Moderate, less precise (wider CI), lower bound near weak
Change Management → Outcomes 0.44	<0.001	[0.30, 0.56]	

The confidence interval for Financial Access (0.16 to 0.45) includes values as low as 0.16 (weak correlation), reflecting greater uncertainty and the partial correlation becoming non-significant. In contrast, Talent Readiness and Change Management have CIs that start at 0.30+, reinforcing their robustness.

5. Conclusion

Recent Result H1: Talent Readiness and Expected Outcomes

The correlation between talent readiness and anticipated results indicates that human capital is a critical resource for the success of AI in SMEs in Hong Kong. This research supports the Resource-Based View, suggesting that internal AI literacy and data proficiency serve as valuable, inimitable assets. SMEs must recognize that simply acquiring software does not guarantee successful outcomes; ongoing training and the development of skilled employees are essential Attar, et.al, (2025) This finding challenges the common notion that technology acquisition is the primary driver of transformation. Instead, the study emphasizes that talent readiness should be a major focus of pre-adoption assessments and suggests that government funding should prioritize upskilling over hardware investments.

Result 2: Financial Access and Expected Outcomes

The relationship between financial access and expected outcomes is statistically significant, though it is less robust than that of the other readiness factors. This study introduces the concept of the “futile pathway,” which suggests that having sufficient funding without the requisite talent and change management may lead to inefficient use of resources. After controlling for other variables, the partial correlation became insignificant, implying that financial access alone does not independently facilitate business development. These findings indicate a need to reevaluate Hong Kong's existing funding programs, which typically reimburse technology acquisitions but may not adequately address essential readiness components Wang,et.al., (2025) The study concludes that while financial access is important, it should be contingent upon demonstrable talent and investments in change management.

Result 3: Change Management and Expected Outcomes

The robust positive correlation between change management and expected outcomes establishes change management as an independent and enduring driver of AI success. The consequence for this study is that cultural and procedural adaptation is not secondary to technical or financial readiness; it is a parallel necessity. SMEs that fail to redesign workflows, communicate AI roadmaps, and address employee resistance will underperform regardless of their talent or budget Kavya, et.al, (2025). This result explains the failure of many technically capable SMEs. The study consequently advocates for including change management metrics in AI adoption frameworks and recommends that policymakers fund dedicated change consultancy alongside technology grants.

Managerial Implications for Hong Kong SMEs

The readiness-based model offers three actionable insights for managers of SMEs in Hong Kong seeking to adopt AI for business growth.

First, it is important to prioritize skill readiness before acquiring technology. Research indicates that talent readiness is significantly correlated with anticipated results. Managers are advised to conduct an internal assessment of AI knowledge and data competencies before purchasing any software. Investments should first focus on enhancing the capabilities of current employees, hiring temporary data experts, or utilizing government-funded training initiatives. Without a foundational level of talent, AI endeavors may not yield the desired outcomes.

Second, financial access is essential but may not be sufficient on its own. The weak partial correlation with financial access suggests that obtaining a government grant (e.g., BUD, TVP) does not guarantee success. Funds should be allocated intentionally to complementary areas—specifically, talent enhancement and change management. Managers are encouraged to reserve 30–40% of the budget for training, workflow restructuring, and employee support, rather than allocating the entire budget to software licenses.

Third, integrating change management from the outset is critical. The strong independent impact of change management highlights the importance of adapting culture and procedures from the beginning. Managers should present a clear AI strategy, restructure job functions to incorporate AI effectively, and openly address employee concerns about job loss. Recognizing small achievements and soliciting staff input can help build momentum.

In summary, SMEs in Hong Kong are advised to adopt a stepwise approach—first, enhancing talent and change management capabilities, then securing funding, and finally implementing advanced AI. This readiness-first strategy aims to position AI as a catalyst for business growth rather than a cost liability.

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