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Northern Ireland's AI Reality

Usage, attitudes and changing behaviour in 2026

Market intelligence on how people are using AI, what they trust and what organisations need to understand.

July and August 2026

www.fnresearch.co.uk

Executive summary

AI is advancing rapidly, but it also brings challenges and concerns.

People across Northern Ireland were already using AI to search, write, learn, plan and create. They valued its speed and convenience. Their support became more cautious when AI affected jobs, personal data, important decisions or human contact.

Practical value drove adoption

The clearest benefits involved saving time, improving written work and making information easier to understand. People responded best when AI had a defined role and solved a recognisable problem.

Employment and misinformation carried the greatest concern

88% believed AI could threaten jobs and 87% were concerned that it could spread misinformation or disinformation. Only 10% found companies that used AI more appealing.

Usage had moved into ordinary routines

30% said they used AI tools often but 16% said they never used them. Many used AI through familiar activities such as Google searches, email writing, study support, health questions, meal planning and image creation. Some interaction happened automatically through phones and search engines.

Use did not equal trust

People checked answers, compared tools and limited usage when accuracy mattered. Trust depended on the task, the possible consequences and whether a person remained responsible.

Responsible adoption will shape reputation

Customers may judge the purpose behind AI use, how it affects employees, what happens to their data and whether they can still reach a person. Clear explanations and visible human oversight will help organisations build confidence.

Priority for leaders

Start with a real customer or employee need. Explain the benefit in plain language. Keep people responsible for sensitive decisions and show how information and outputs are checked.

What businesses could easily get wrong about AI

Assumption	What the research found	Decision this changes
People who use AI are comfortable with it	People used AI while remaining concerned about accuracy, jobs and control	Do not treat usage as evidence of trust
Using AI makes a company appear progressive	Only 10% found companies using AI more appealing	Lead with the customer benefit rather than the technology
Efficiency will persuade people	Employment and misinformation created much stronger reactions	Explain the human impact and safeguards
AI adoption is always deliberate	Some people encountered AI automatically through phones and search results	Distinguish active adoption from passive exposure
Giving people access will encourage use	Some people lacked confidence or could not see a relevant use	Demonstrate specific tasks and provide practical training

Introduction

Why Northern Ireland evidence matters

AI is developing quickly, but decisions still need to reflect how people here actually think, feel and behave.

This white paper provides market intelligence and consumer insight into how people in Northern Ireland use AI in everyday life. It examines current usage, perceived benefits, trust, concerns and the emotions shaping acceptance.

Much of the current available discussion about AI draws on UK-wide or international evidence. Local findings can be difficult to identify. Therefore, FN Research conducted primary research with Northern Ireland consumers to provide a clearer view of what was happening locally during summer 2026.

The findings matter to retailers, brands, employers, marketers and public bodies. They show where AI already adds value, where resistance may emerge and what organisations can do to introduce it responsibly.

Why insight matters

Usage figures show how often people use AI. Direct research explains why they use it, what makes them uncomfortable and what could build confidence. Those answers are essential when decisions affect customers, employees or public trust.

The evidence

How this insight was grounded

The paper combines primary research from 2026 with contextual evidence from 2025.

Primary research conducted by FN Research (Fieldwork took place during July and August 2026)

130

Northern Ireland adults completed an online/face to face survey

The online survey explored usage and attitudes

12

Consumers took part in one-to-one in depth interviews

The in-depth interviews examined the reasoning, concerns and emotions behind those answers.

Evidence note: All findings, figures, quotations and policy context in this paper were drawn from the source material supplied for the report. Participant quotations retain the wording provided. Percentages may not total 100 because only selected response categories are shown.

Context from 2025

Secondary evidence referenced in the supplied material included Ulster University, UK Government trackers and Talkmobile. It provided background on awareness, usage and public concern during 2025.

How to read the findings

The survey gives a snapshot of the participating sample. The interviews add depth and explanation. Together they identify patterns that organisations can test, monitor and use to guide more informed decisions.

Looking back

What the 2025 evidence told us

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Awareness was already widespread, while active use and confidence remained uneven.

83%

were somewhat or very aware of AI

28%

had used AI for content creation

46%

were concerned about the impact on jobs

Awareness had not translated into regular use

Half of respondents in Belfast said they had never used AI, while 6% claimed to use it daily. This indicated a sizeable gap between knowing about AI and choosing to use it regularly in 2025.

People could see benefits in public services

There was cautious optimism about specific applications. 55% believed AI could benefit education and learning, while 64% saw potential benefits in healthcare.

Trust was weak

Only 12% trusted AI to provide accurate information and 7% trusted it to be used ethically. Concerns included misinformation, unauthorised data sharing, surveillance and automated decisions.

94%

wanted a strong ethical framework and greater regulation

12%

trusted AI to give accurate information

7%

trusted AI to be used ethically

Many people were using AI without describing it that way

Common uses included predictive text, autocorrect, smart replies, virtual assistants and recommendation systems for shopping, streaming and social media. AI was already embedded in familiar services before generative tools became a deliberate choice.

Current usage

How people currently use AI

By summer 2026, we found through our own FN Research survey, use was broader and more practical. People often reached for AI to save time or get a useful starting point.

30%

said they used AI tools often

16%

said they never used AI tools (from 50% in 2025)

Uses identified in the open responses

1. Finding information and answering questions
2. Work productivity and written communication
3. Creative work, design and visualisation
4. Education and learning
5. Health, fitness and food
6. Planning, ideas and organisation
7. Social media and entertainment
8. Shopping and product comparison

Information search and work support dominated. People used AI to draft or reword emails, summarise documents, research topics and explain unfamiliar subjects. Creative uses included image generation, photo editing, posters, interior design and home renovation ideas.

AI also supported university and school work, holiday planning, recipes, fitness, health questions and product comparisons. These uses show how quickly the technology had spread across work and home life.

Market intelligence implication: AI adoption is being shaped by small moments of usefulness. Organisations can learn more by understanding the task people want to complete, the risk they associate with it and the reassurance they need.

Behavioural insight

1. Convenience drove usage

People mainly used AI to save time, simplify a task or get a quick starting point. Adoption grew when the benefit was immediate and easy to understand.

2. AI remained an assistant

Some respondents checked answers, compared different tools or limited their use. They valued help while retaining responsibility for the final judgement.

3. Some exposure was passive

People mentioned AI appearing automatically in Google results or being built into their phones. Measured interaction may therefore be higher than deliberate, willing use.

"Editing what I have written. English is my second language, therefore it helps to get it checked"

"Ai is on my phone and I cannot get it off . I didn't ask for it"

"Google searches and work use. Don't trust it entirely so minimal use of possible."

Attitudes

Usage does not mean confidence or approval

The quantitative findings in 2026 showed clear recognition of AI's value alongside strong concern about its consequences.

71%

thought AI was a useful tool for learning

52%

felt it was useful in the media

28%

disagreed that it was useful in the media

88%

believed AI could threaten jobs

87%

were concerned about misinformation or disinformation

45%

thought AI threatened the environment

The figures point to selective acceptance. Learning attracted strong support. Business use did not automatically make a company more attractive, and employment and misinformation created much stronger reactions.

What this means

A company may see AI as an efficiency tool while customers see a decision about jobs, fairness, privacy or human contact. Communication needs to address the consequence people care about, rather than simply promoting the technology.

In their own words

Acceptance had not caught up with inevitability

Interview participants expected AI to become more important. Their feelings ranged from curiosity and excitement to nervousness, fear and reluctant acceptance.

People felt pressure to learn because they did not want to be left behind. This did not always signal enthusiasm. Some felt society and workplaces were pulling them towards AI whether they wanted it or not.

> *"Yes definitely you don't get left behind and can use it properly as it isn't going anywhere so people need to know how to use it."*

> *"AI can be really helpful, but I think it's best used as a tool rather than something you rely on for everything."*

> *“Excited and apprehensive. Excited by the potential but also apprehensive about where and how it can be used. It is developing so fast that it is hard to take a step back and look at what it has become already."*

Implication for leaders

Familiarity should not be mistaken for enthusiasm. Customers and employees may use AI while retaining serious concerns about where it is heading and how organisations will apply it.

Value and risk

Four tensions shaping acceptance

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1. Saving time was the clearest benefit

People were most comfortable when AI had a defined role in routine work.

Examples included drafting emails, creating social media content, researching ideas, explaining difficult subjects and organising information. AI attracted more support when it freed time for work requiring judgement or personal input.

> *"Overall yes, if you used as a way of automating mundane tasks and freeing up time to concentrate on higher value tasks, productivity, etc"*

> *"I use AI when I am really busy. I would talk to it and get it to write emails for me when I am trying to cook."*

People feared losing the ability to think and learn independently

Concern went beyond academic cheating. Participants worried that easy answers could reduce effort, weaken understanding and encourage people to accept information without questioning how it had been produced.

> *"Learning should be a step by step process each lesson building on the last, AI lets you by-pass to the last lesson without understanding how you got there."*

> *"As a student, AI helps me understand difficult topics, get ideas and save time. However, it can make me too dependent on it and I might learn less if I use it to do my work instead of thinking for myself."*

Implication for employers and educators

Training should teach people how to question, check and improve AI outputs. It should also make clear where independent judgement and subject knowledge remain essential.

2. Employment

Job losses carried an emotional and ethical charge

People considered the way an organisation treats its employees when judging its use of AI.

Participants mentioned administrative work, customer service, telesales, data analysis, software development, research, law and medicine as areas that could be affected. Concern covered personal employment prospects and the wider treatment of staff.

> *"I would probably stop using a company if they started to lay people off to replace them with AI."*

> *"All new development is important but not at the detriment of actual people."*

> *"Yes, I am a little concerned about AI replacing some jobs, especially jobs involving repetitive tasks. I think customer service, data entry and some administrative jobs could be affected the most."*

Reputational implication

The purpose and manner of adoption matter. Customers may react negatively if AI removes valued human contact or appears to replace people primarily to reduce costs.

3. Trust

Trust depended on the task and the consequences

People were more willing to use AI for low-risk activities. Caution increased when decisions had personal, financial or employment consequences.

Accuracy, transparency, data security and safeguards all affected trust. Participants also considered who owned the technology and whether bias could influence its outputs.

> *"I trust AI to a certain extent, but I know it can make mistakes. With that in mind, I'm more cautious about companies that rely heavily on AI and prefer companies that are transparent and still have human oversight"*

> *"I think AI will become more intelligent as more data is created and fed in, but that doesn't mean in itself it will be more trustworthy, it just means you will trust the output more than you currently do."*

What builds confidence

Explain where AI is used, what information it accesses, how outputs are checked and when a person remains responsible. Human accountability is especially important in customer service, healthcare, finance and other high-consequence settings.

4. Adoption

Some people still needed a reason to use AI

Access alone did not create adoption. People needed to see a useful role and understand how to begin.

Some participants had already identified helpful applications. Others could not see a meaningful place for AI in their work or everyday lives. Suggested supports included short demonstration videos, wider access to paid features and secure workplace systems.

> *"I don't have any issues using AI but not sure how to get started."*

> *"If there were more videos on how to use it"*

> *"Bar helping me to write emails when I am busy, I do not see a need for AI in my life."*

Adoption lesson

Give people a relevant example, show the task step by step and explain the safeguards. Broad encouragement to 'use AI' is unlikely to build confidence on its own.

Implications

Six practical priorities for organisations

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The findings point to six priorities for brands, employers, marketers and public bodies.

1	**Start with a real problem** Use AI where the customer or employee benefit can be clearly explained. Saving time, simplifying information and supporting routine tasks were the strongest points of acceptance.
2	**Define the human role** Keep visible human judgement for sensitive, complex or high-consequence decisions. Make routes to a person easy to find.
3	**Explain AI use clearly** Tell people what the system does, what data it accesses, how outputs are checked and who is accountable when something goes wrong.
4	**Address employment openly** Show how AI will affect roles, workload and development. Avoid vague reassurance. Customers may judge organisations by how they treat employees during adoption.
5	**Build practical confidence** Provide short demonstrations linked to real tasks. Teach employees how to question answers, check evidence and recognise when AI is unsuitable.
6	**Test customer response before scaling** Research reactions to the proposed use, language and safeguards. Different applications will create different levels of concern, even among the same audience.

Opportunities

Where insight can guide better decisions

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Audience	Immediate implication
Retailers and brands	Lead with usefulness and convenience. Explain when personal data or automated recommendations are involved.
Employers	Show how AI supports staff and how roles may change. Provide training and human oversight.
Marketers	Test whether AI-created content affects trust, authenticity and brand appeal.
Government	Make accountability, transparency and routes to a person visible.
Educators	Balance learning support with independent thinking and verification skills.

How this connects with the draft NI AI Strategy

The August 2026 consultation focused on governance, data, skills, public services and trust. Its eight principles were human oversight; accountability and redress; data governance; technical safety and security; fairness and transparency; sustainability; societal benefit; and training and AI literacy. The consumer evidence supports that direction, while showing that the principles must be visible in real experiences.

What organisations still need to understand

- Which customer groups actively welcome AI?
- Which applications trigger the greatest resistance?
- What level of disclosure do people expect?
- When does human contact become essential?
- Which safeguards genuinely improve confidence?
- Does an organisation's use of AI affect consideration, trust or purchasing behaviour?

Conclusion

Confidence will shape AI adoption

AI is already part of everyday life in Northern Ireland, but adoption is not the same as confidence. People recognise practical value, especially in learning, information, writing and time-saving. They also bring strong concerns about employment, misinformation, accuracy and the loss of human control.

That creates a clear challenge for organisations. The strongest AI strategies will not begin with what the technology can do. They will begin with the problem people need solved, the consequences they care about and the conditions under which they are willing to participate.

Trust will be earned through useful design, honest explanation, visible human oversight and credible safeguards.

Final thoughts

The strongest opportunity lies in useful AI with visible human responsibility. Organisations that listen before they act will make better decisions, communicate more clearly and reduce the risk of losing confidence.

About FN Research

FN Research is a leading market intelligence and strategic insights consultancy dedicated to helping businesses understand their customers, markets, and competitive landscapes across Northern Ireland, UK and Ireland.

We empower organisations across all sectors to make data-driven decisions that foster growth, enhance customer experience, and build sustainable competitive advantage. Our expertise transforms complex data into clear, actionable strategies.

We give you behavioural foresight, not lagging sales data, so you can act before your competitors do.

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