

Artificial intelligence, inclusion, and the future of work at European SMEs

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Case summary

Consulting4Future, an Austrian consulting firm led by Chief Executive Officer Barbara Sabitzer, is reassessing its service portfolio aimed at supporting small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Europe with technological solutions and training for the effective use of artificial intelligence (AI) in the workplace. Drawing on customer feedback, the company has identified that differences in employees' vocational backgrounds, academic qualifications, and non-linear career paths often complicate communication, onboarding, and skill development when AI-enabled tools are introduced in SMEs. At the same time, the adoption of AI-driven solutions has raised ethical concerns related to employee profiling, bias, and fairness. While Consulting4Future initially concentrated on delivering technical AI solutions, the firm is now increasingly integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) considerations into its approach, particularly with respect to multilingualism and neurodiversity in everyday work practices. The case invites learners to critically examine how AI can simultaneously promote and undermine inclusion in SMEs.

1. Making artificial intelligence understandable and useful for all

In the mid-2020s, the rapid rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI) reshaped debates about the future of work (Salari et al., 2025; Storey et al., 2025). Scholars and policymakers suggested that AI would no longer remain in a back-end technical function, but become embedded into communication, decision-making, and workplace collaboration (Acemoglu

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and Johnson, 2023; Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2023; Suleyman, 2023). For small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), this shift was especially significant. With fewer resources and leaner teams, they often lacked specialised Human Resource (HR) or training departments; hence, AI was perceived as a scalable support in managing upskilling and organisational complexity (Oldemeyer et al., 2025).

Considering these ongoing changes, Barbara Sabitzer, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Consulting4Future, an Austrian consulting firm, looked through the window of her office. It was raining quietly, but her mind was busy with numerous thoughts. Consulting4Future, a company she had founded, aimed to make AI understandable and useful for all. Her vision was to provide SMEs with cost-effective, tailored toolkits that would help them use AI not only efficiently, but also ethically and inclusively. Thus, the company initially focused on providing training related to technical solutions.

However, Barbara soon realised that technical solutions-oriented training did not fully deliver expected outcomes. It was evident that diverse employee backgrounds complicated upskilling and AI utilisation within SMEs. Thus, she was pondering: How could she develop Consulting4Future offerings to meet their vision of AI understandable and beneficial for all?

2. Developing skills and employee potential in SMEs with AI

When working with clients and providing services that help the adoption and effective application of existing AI-enabled technologies, such as digital coaching, virtual collaboration technologies, and digital visualisation techniques, Barbara and her team expected technical questions about algorithms or data pipelines from their clients. Instead, most concerns centred on people using the technology rather than the technology itself. Clients were often anxious about how AI might affect communication in diverse workplaces comprising different educational backgrounds, multilingual teams, or neurodiverse groups.

For example, one client worried that introducing AI could create fear and uncertainty among staff. Another described a young coder with exceptional technical skills and strong logical thinking, but whose autism made communication challenging. The sales and marketing team

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struggled to explain tasks to this coder, since vague instructions such as ‘*be creative*’ were unclear. They wondered if AI could help bridge this gap. A third client asked how AI might support inclusion in their company, where employees speak six different languages. Specifically, they wanted to know whether AI could help accurately translate policies to make them accessible to everyone.

These requests unsettled Barbara. They revealed a strong need: organisations were struggling to bridge gaps created by educational, linguistic, and cognitive diversity. These were the gaps that could not be easily addressed with conventional training sessions or management workshops. After a brief research, Barbara also understood the reasons for these needs. The future of work was marked by increasingly heterogeneous teams consisting of employees with diverse academic, vocational, and professional training pathways, alongside neurodiverse workers and multilingual staff (Patricio and Franco, 2022; Rollnik-Sadowska and Grabińska, 2024; Tuor Sartore and Backes-Gellner, 2020).

While this diversity enriched organisations with complementary skills and perspectives, it also complicated everyday collaboration. Studies showed that people with different educational backgrounds often communicated knowledge in divergent ways, used different problem-solving strategies, and valued different forms of evidence and authority (Rafaqat et al., 2022). Such differences easily created misunderstandings or reinforced power imbalances in mixed teams (Valls et al., 2016).

AI emerged as a dynamic and real-time tool for adaptation that could rephrase instructions, detect ambiguities, or translate text into multiple languages instantly, but it also carried risks. For example, AI-based communication might have oversimplified complex tasks or omitted and disregarded contextual nuances, particularly when translating abstract managerial expectations into standardised prompts, potentially leading to misinterpretation rather than clarity (Van Quaquebeke and Gerpott, 2024). Furthermore, the increasing use of AI as an intermediary in everyday collaboration raised concerns about deskilling and dependency, where employees and managers might have been gradually losing the capacity to negotiate meaning, give constructive feedback, or engage in a reflective dialogue without the support of AI tools (Granulo et al., 2024). Also, the recent studies showed that individuals tended to devalue messages when they were aware that AI was involved in the production (Yin et al., 2024). This was partly explained by lower trust in AI-generated or AI-supported content compared to human-generated communication

(Tong et al., 2021). However, a number of emerging studies indicated a growing acceptance of AI use in human communication when AI involvement was transparently reported (Purcell et al., 2024; Turel and Kalhan, 2023).

There was an additional challenge that Barbara had envisioned. She believed that her clients would soon ask for AI tools capable of predicting employee potential. Across Europe, schools and universities were experimenting with AI-driven personalised education. Students were no longer assessed solely by grades, but also by learning speed, retention, and behavioural patterns (Vincent-Lancrin and van der Vlies, 2020). Employers began to speculate that soon job applicants would not just bring diplomas. They would also be expected to show their adaptive profiles that demonstrate how they learned, how fast they improved, and what styles suited them best.

The implications were twofold. On the one hand, such profiling could have helped match people from diverse educational and vocational backgrounds to tasks that fitted their strengths and potentially unlocked hidden talent. On the other hand, researchers warned of potential risks. Algorithmic profiling might have stigmatised slower learners, misinterpreted non-linear development paths, or reinforced biases against workers with vocational training or neurodiverse profiles (Baker and Hawn, 2022; Cachat-Rosset and Klarfeld, 2023; Pelletier, 2024).

3. The blurred line between inclusion and negative impact on employees: fork in the road

Barbara's list of problems became clear. She questioned:

How should we design upskilling and enhance the work environment with technology that AI tools would be useful for everyone? Are we being asked to use AI to solve organisational or human challenges? Moreover, if we offer innovative services, such as tools predicting employee potential, would our customers understand the ethical risks involved? Could an AI-generated profile limit someone's future simply because their educational journey was longer or fell below the average? Could a tool designed to include everyone evolve into one that silently excludes those who did not fit the algorithmic norms? Is our role to address ethics and responsibility in technological solutions, or should we rely on customers addressing these concerns as they use technology?

Barbara gathered her team.

‘What’s our responsibility here?’ she asked. ‘Are we building tools that help people or tools that label them?’

No one had an easy answer. The team researched possible AI-driven assistants that might help SMEs break down vague tasks into concrete instructions, translate workplace communication, and provide structured templates for neurodiverse employees, but they could not answer how to debate ethical dilemmas of turning AI into a positive mediator of human diversity.

Questions for reflection

1. What social and technological trends were shaping Consulting4Future customer needs?
2. What specific challenges arise when employees with diverse educational backgrounds (e.g., vocational training, academic degrees, or non-linear learning paths) work together in SMEs, and why might AI be better suited than traditional solutions to address them?
3. What ethical risks should SMEs consider when using AI to interpret employee behaviour, communication patterns, or learning styles? Could such profiling unintentionally reinforce exclusion instead of fostering inclusion?
4. What are the potential benefits and risks of using AI to support employee learning and development in resource-constrained SMEs? How can managers balance efficiency gains with ethical concerns?
5. Based on the trends observed in the case, what future risks and opportunities might arise from AI profiling in hiring and learning within SMEs in Europe? How should the case company strategically respond to ensure inclusion and fairness?
6. How could Barbara develop Consulting4Future offerings to meet their vision of AI understandable and beneficial for all, balancing social and technological trends with ethical responsibilities?
7. Evaluate the implications of EU regulations and policy frameworks (e.g., the AI Act, GDPR, European Skills Agenda) on the ethical and inclusive adoption of AI in SMEs. What specifically should Barbara consider from these regulatory and policy frameworks when updating the company’s service offerings?

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