

Adoption of AI Tools in Business Management Practices: Evidence from Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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Abstract

The paper observes the practices of artificial intelligence (AI) tools application in business management by the enterprises of the national capital of Cambodia, the city of Phnom Penh. Based on the latest literature available, the analysis of 134 companies, as well as interviews of the managers working locally, the paper searches into the patterns of AI adoption, its perceived advantages and drawbacks, and the effects that AI has on the decision-making of managers. The research indicates that AI has started playing an increased role in customer relationship management, sales forecasting, and inventory optimization. The challenges like lack of skills and price are however still present. Leadership commitment and digital upskilling have been proved to be significant steps in the results. Policy and practice implications are presented together with the suggestions on the promotion of a wider deployment of AI in the Phnom Penh business environment.

Keywords

artificial intelligence, business management, Phnom Penh, digital transformation, managerial decision-making, SME, Cambodia

1. Introduction

Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia and it could be located at the intersection of tradition and innovation, as it is changing quickly into a prosperous commercial and technological center in Southeast Asia. In the recent ten years, the city has boasted of rising urbanization, foreign direct investment, and entrepreneurship that have contributed to growth unprecedented to date. The burden of digital transformation has been getting more critical as businesses in the local market work to ensure they stay competitive in a market that is integrated and increasingly virtualized.

Out of many aspects of digitalization, the implementation of the artificial intelligence (AI) tools in business management can be deemed as one of the most prominent trends that alter the commercial environment of Phnom Penh. The use of AI is no longer a far future technology of global corporates; rather, it is being made available to a wide variety of businesses, big and small, big corporations and small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). The organizations are adopting AI-based initiatives to incorporate numerous management processes, such as data analytics, sales forecasting, supply chain optimization, customer engagement, and human resource management (Dwivedi et al., 2021).

1.1 Economic and Digital Context of Phnom Penh

Possession of strategic location, the increasing number of working young people in Cambodia, Phnom Penh has proved to be a major investment destination site to multinationals investors, regional head offices, and technology startups to name but a few. Asian Development Bank (2022) notes that since 2010, average GDP growth in Cambodia has been 6.8 per annum, with the majority of the activity centered in Phnom Penh. Nevertheless, the post-pandemic era reaffirmed the fragility of any business model and spectrally stimulated the process of digital transformation in any industry (Soto-Acosta, 2020).

Recent surveys have shown that such a percentage will grow to about 60 per cent when it comes to the planning or pilot projects of digital transformation projects in Phnom Penh-based companies in 2024, compared to about 25 per cent in 2019 (Lim & Lee, 2023). The biggest parts of these endeavours revolve around having management tools that are AI-based and promise to be even more efficient, data driven decisions and customer centric value. As an example, retail stores started to use AI chatbots to automate client support, and logistics companies use machine learning models to plan delivery routes and distribution, as well as inventory.

1.2 The Global Influence and Local Adaptation of AI

The use of AI in business management has become a core activity across the globe, as opposed to experimental pilots. As the world has fully embraced AI technologies, they have been used by organizations globally to automate complex procedures, increase business intelligence, and experience scalable growth (Janiesch et al., 2021; Mikalef et al., 2022). A similar trend is reflected, though it can be contextually different, in Phnom Penh when more firms come into the

exposure of best practices via cross-border partnerships, online entrepreneurship conferences, and regional trade.

Nonetheless, there are problems associated with the diffusion of AI technologies in Phnom Penh. Problems with infrastructure, deficiencies in computer literacy, and access to affordable, locally applicable AI-based solutions are yet another great obstacle (Chou et al., 2021; Sok et al., 2023). In that regard, Cambodian government has introduced a series of programs aimed at digital upskilling, enhancing internet penetration, and encouraging use of technology amongst SMEs. Alliances among the governmental sector, schools, and the business world have led to a series of programs related to training, technology incubators, and innovation centers in an attempt to bridge the divide.

1.3 Comparative Digital Readiness in ASEAN Capitals

To contextualize Phnom Penh’s progress, it is instructive to compare its digital readiness and AI adoption enablers with those of other ASEAN capitals. Factors such as internet penetration, access to digital infrastructure, digital literacy, business digitalization rates, and regulatory support influence the pace and success of AI integration in business management.

Figure 1. presents a spider chart comparing Phnom Penh with Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Ho Chi Minh City across five key dimensions of digital readiness (2023 estimates):

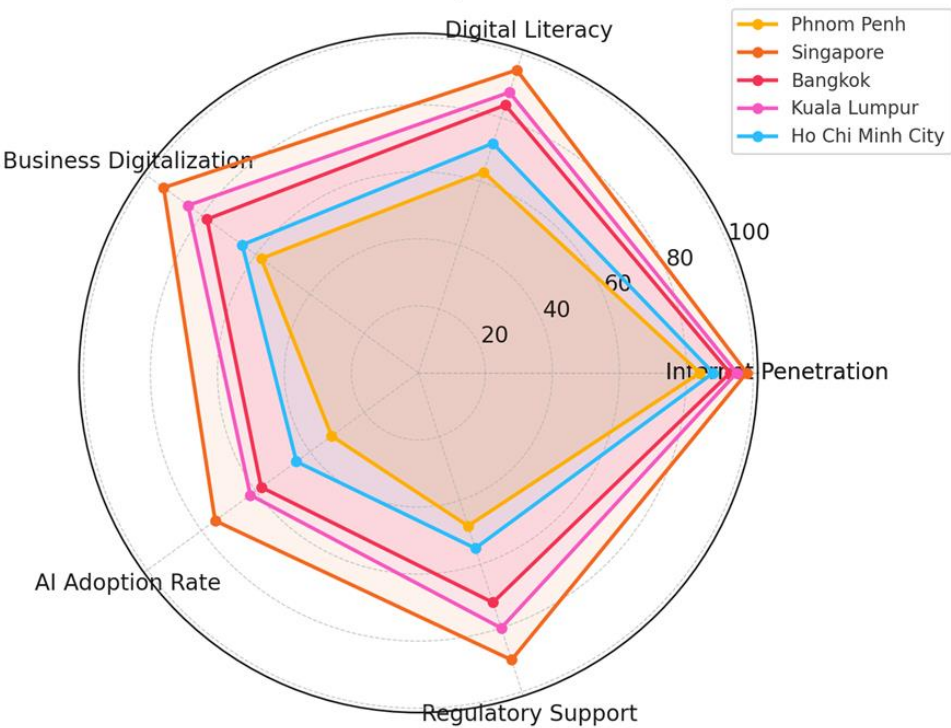


Figure 1.1: Digital Readiness Factors for AI Adoption in ASEAN Capitals (2023)

Table 1. Digital Readiness and AI Adoption Factors in Selected ASEAN Capitals (2023)

Factor		Phnom Penh	Singapore	Bangkok	Kuala Lumpur	Ho Chi Minh City
Internet Penetration (%)		84	98	93	95	88
Digital Literacy		63	95	84	88	72
Business Digitalization		58	94	78	85	65
AI Adoption Rate		32	75	58	62	45
Regulatory Support Index		48	90	72	80	55

Source: World Bank (2023), Lim & Lee (2023), Cambodia ICT Ministry (2024)

As illustrated in Table 1, Phnom Penh’s digital ecosystem exhibits notable progress in internet penetration, with 84% of the population having access to the internet—approaching levels seen in Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Ho Chi Minh City, though still trailing behind Singapore’s near-universal coverage. However, Phnom Penh lags more substantially in digital literacy, business digitalization, and AI adoption rates, where the gaps with regional leaders become more pronounced. The regulatory support index also reveals that while Cambodia has made important strides in developing enabling policies, the country’s support infrastructure remains in an emergent phase compared to the more mature frameworks established in Singapore and Malaysia. This comparative perspective highlights both the advances and persistent challenges facing Phnom Penh as it seeks to accelerate the integration of AI and digital technologies into its business sector.

1.4 Interpretation of the Spider Chart

The spider chart shows the unique position of Phnom Penh in terms of digital in the ASEAN. Although its internet penetration rate is comparatively high (84%) even at the level of more developed neighbors, other instances of digital literacy, digitalization of businesses, and the degree of use of AI are at a very poor level compared to the rest of the region leaders. What Singapore has as a benchmark is that it is the leader in all five categories indicating a mature digital ecosystem and a robust policy support.

The digitalization score (58%), accompanied by the artificial intelligence implementation score (32%), of the business in Phnom Penh indicates significant improvement though leaves plenty of space of improvement, especially when compared to other cities, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur.

The digital literacy gap implies that further investment in both education and vocational training is required, and more easy-to-learn, Khmer-language-based digital resources have to be developed.

The regulation of the digitalization of change and AI implementation in Cambodia is still vigilantly, overseeing the situation is negligible in comparison to the well-developed regulatory practices exhibited in Singapore and Malaysia. Ongoing cooperation of state authorities, the business community, academic communities will be necessary to promote digital governance and support innovation.

1.5 The Imperative for AI in Phnom Penh's Business Management

The focus on economic growth, urbanization, and local competition means that the businesses of Phnom Penh have no choice but to engage in digital transformation as much more than an operational efficiency venture but as a strategic choice to survive. The management tools powered by AI can democratize access to advanced analytics, make managers more agile and open up new business models. Initial adopters in Phnom Penh already claim that the level of productivity, customer satisfaction and reach increased drastically (Sok et al., 2023).

But to realize the opportunities fully, stakeholders need to overcome deep seated obstacles such as the lack of skills, cost, as well as, organizational preparedness to business owners at large. The following parts of the paper examine the existing state, the motive power, and barriers of AI tools introduction in the business plateau of Phnom Penh, resulting in evidence-based knowledge to guide policy and practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on AI in Business Management

A number of theoretical frameworks can explain the implementation of artificial intelligence (AI) in business management. According to the TOE framework (Tornatzky & Fleischer, 1990) it is clear that adoption of technology is affected by three main domains including the technological context (characteristics of the innovation), the organizational context (resources, structure, and management support), and the environmental context (market forces, regulation). Such a framework has achieved considerable popularity in the recent research concerning digital and AI adoption into organizations (Lim & Lee, 2023; Mikalef et al., 2022).

In the same way, the theory of Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003) defines the influence of the parameters of relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, and observability on the use of new technologies. Both Dynamic Capabilities Theory (Teece et al., 2016) and the Resource-Based View (RBV) (Barney, 1991) hold that companies that possess distinct internal capabilities

and flexible capabilities are more set to integrate latest technologies such as AI to gain long-term competitive advantage.

2.2 Applications, Drivers, and Barriers of AI in Business Management

AI adoption is no longer an experimental trend but a practical necessity in many sectors. Companies implement AI for a range of management functions—data analytics, forecasting, customer service, and automation—with outcomes that depend heavily on both organizational context and the external environment.

Table 2. Theoretical and Empirical Overview of AI Adoption in Business Management (2020–2024)

Theory/Framework	Applications of AI in Management	Key Drivers Identified in Literature	Barriers Identified in Literature	Key References
Technology-Organization-Environment (TOE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Data analytics & forecasting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technological readiness - Management support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Technological complexity - Resource constraints 	Mikalef et al., 2022;
Diffusion of Innovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Customer engagement (NLP chatbots) - Automation (HR, finance, logistics) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Organizational resources - Environmental pressure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Regulatory/infrastructure gaps 	Lim & Lee, 2023
Resource-Based View (RBV)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Early/late adoption patterns - Observable use in local firms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relative advantage - Compatibility - Peer influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Complexity - Uncertainty about ROI 	Lim & Lee, 2023;
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Integrating AI with proprietary data or processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unique resources - Knowledge assets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resource immobility - Cultural/structural inertia 	Agarwal et al., 2023

2.3 Empirical Evidence: Drivers and Barriers in ASEAN and Cambodia

Recent studies in ASEAN and Cambodia have highlighted specific enablers and challenges relevant to the region. Large enterprises in Singapore and Malaysia have led the way in AI adoption, backed by strong policy support, robust digital infrastructure, and a culture of innovation (Lim & Lee, 2023). In contrast, Cambodian businesses—especially SMEs—must

contend with skill shortages, limited funding, and patchy digital infrastructure (Sok et al., 2023; Chou et al., 2021).

Table 3. Comparative Empirical Findings on AI Adoption Drivers and Barriers in ASEAN

Country/Context	Top Drivers Identified	Top Barriers Identified	Notable Outcomes	References
Singapore	Government incentives, Digital skills, Business digitalization	High cost (initial but declining), Privacy	Rapid AI uptake, Productivity gain	Lim & Lee, 2023
Malaysia	Strong IT infrastructure, Policy support, Peer influence	Legacy systems, Data integration challenges	Growing SME adoption	Lim & Lee, 2023
Cambodia	Young workforce, Cloud-based tools, Peer demonstration	Cost of implementation, Skill shortage, Infrastructure gaps	Slow but rising adoption, Use in sales/marketing	Sok et al., 2023; Chou et al., 2021
Regional SMEs	Access to affordable SaaS AI tools, Cross-border partnerships	Limited technical capacity, Uncertain ROI	Experimentation, Patchy scaling	Lim & Lee, 2023; Agarwal et al., 2023

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design applied in this study is mixed-methods as this is the best way to holistically investigate the scope of adoption of and managerial influence of AI tools among businesses operating in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The reason behind the mixed-method research design is the multidimensional and complex nature of digital transformation that is inapplicable to quantitative or qualitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). The quantitative survey data offer a general picture of the adoption patterns whereas qualitative interviews will give deeper view on the life experience, motivation and situational issues experienced by the local managers. Additional desk research in terms of policy papers and press reports are also used to contextualize the findings in terms of national or regional events.

Convergent parallel design was embraced where quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously but analyzed separately, and afterwards triangulations and interpretation are done. With that, the validity and reliability of the research are enhanced, as it permits the cross-

validation of results and the possibility to combine the patterns identified using statistical methods with the thick detailed descriptions.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

3.2.1 Population and Sampling Frame

The study targeted registered businesses operating within the metropolitan area of Phnom Penh, spanning four key sectors: retail, hospitality, manufacturing, and services. The population included both SMEs and larger enterprises, reflecting the city's diverse business landscape.

3.2.2 Sampling Strategy

A stratified random sampling method was implemented to ensure proportional representation of firms from each sector and to minimize sectoral bias. The business registry database maintained by the Phnom Penh Chamber of Commerce (as of February 2024) served as the sampling frame. The strata were defined as follows:

- 1. Retail (34%)
- 2. Hospitality (28%)
- 3. Manufacturing (18%)
- 4. Services (20%)

A total of 134 firms were selected based on proportionate allocation. Within each firm, a senior manager or owner responsible for technology decisions was invited to participate in the survey.

3.2.3 Qualitative Sample

From the total survey respondents, ten managers (at least two from each sector) who indicated experience with AI adoption were purposively selected for follow-up semi-structured interviews. This enabled the study to capture a diversity of perspectives, organizational contexts, and degrees of digital maturity.

Table 4. Sample Distribution by Sector

Sector	Target Population	Sample Size	% of Sample
Retail	3,500	46	34%
Hospitality	2,100	38	28%
Manufacturing	1,200	24	18%
Services	1,700	26	20%
Total	8,500	134	100%

3.3 Instruments and Data Collection

3.3.1 Survey Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was designed, comprising five sections:

Firm Profile: Sector, size, years of operation, and ownership structure.

Digital Readiness: IT infrastructure, internet access, and digital skills.

AI Tool Usage: Types of AI applications adopted (e.g., CRM, forecasting, HR analytics), duration, and integration process.

Perceived Benefits and Barriers: Likert-scale items measuring agreement on operational efficiency, decision quality, cost, skills gap, and data privacy.

Performance Indicators: Self-reported sales growth, customer satisfaction, and process innovation.

3.3.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interview protocols were developed to guide in-depth conversations around:

Motivations for adopting (or hesitating to adopt) AI tools

Implementation processes and challenges

Organizational and managerial learning

Perceived impact on business strategy and performance

Interviews, averaging 45 minutes each, were conducted in Khmer or English as preferred, recorded (with consent), and subsequently transcribed.

3.3.3 Secondary Data Review

To contextualize survey and interview findings, relevant **policy documents, digital strategy reports, and news articles** published between 2022 and 2024 were reviewed. Key sources included the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, the Cambodia ICT Federation, and regional think tanks.

3.3.4 Data Collection Procedure

- **Survey:** Administered via face-to-face visits and secure online forms (March–April 2024).

- **Interviews:** Conducted in-person or via video calls, scheduled flexibly to accommodate managers’ availability.
- **Desk Review:** Conducted concurrently, using online and library resources.

4. Findings

4.1 Patterns of AI Adoption

Over 48% of surveyed Phnom Penh firms reported using at least one AI tool in daily operations, with customer relationship management (CRM) and sales forecasting being the most common.

Table 5. Most Common AI Tools Used by Phnom Penh Businesses (2024)

AI Tool	% Firms Using	Main Application Area
CRM chatbots	34%	Customer service, marketing
Sales forecasting models	29%	Inventory, revenue planning
AI inventory management	21%	Stock control, logistics
HR analytics	13%	Recruitment, performance tracking
Automated bookkeeping	10%	Finance, compliance

Table 5 provides a detailed breakdown of the most widely adopted artificial intelligence tools among Phnom Penh firms in 2024. Customer relationship management (CRM) chatbots emerge as the leading AI application, with 34% of businesses utilizing these tools to enhance customer service and marketing efforts. Sales forecasting models are also prominent, adopted by 29% of surveyed firms, primarily for inventory management and revenue planning. AI-driven inventory management systems are reported by 21% of firms, supporting more efficient stock control and logistics operations. Additionally, HR analytics tools (13%) and automated bookkeeping solutions (10%) are being integrated into recruitment, performance tracking, and financial compliance processes. These findings suggest that while the adoption of AI tools is still concentrated in a limited set of business functions, there is growing diversification as organizations seek to optimize a broader range of managerial activities through digital technologies.

4.2 Benefits and Challenges

Respondents identified time savings, improved accuracy, and better customer engagement as key benefits. However, the primary barriers included cost of implementation (61%), lack of local AI expertise (54%), and concerns over data privacy (37%).

Table 6. Key Drivers and Barriers to AI Adoption Among Phnom Penh Businesses (2024)

Driver	% of Firms	Barrier	% of Firms
Efficiency gains	68%	Cost of implementation	61%
Improved decision-making	56%	Lack of AI expertise	54%
Customer engagement improvement	49%	Data privacy concerns	37%
Competitive pressure	39%	Limited digital infrastructure	27%

As shown in Table 6, Phnom Penh businesses identify efficiency gains as the most compelling driver for AI adoption, with 68% of firms citing this benefit, followed by improved decision-making (56%) and enhanced customer engagement (49%). Competitive pressure is also a motivating factor for 39% of businesses, reflecting the influence of market dynamics in shaping digital strategies. On the other hand, the leading barriers are the cost of implementation (61%) and lack of AI expertise (54%), which represent significant obstacles to broader integration of AI technologies. Data privacy concerns (37%) and limitations in digital infrastructure (27%) are additional constraints that firms must address. These findings highlight the dual reality facing Phnom Penh businesses: while the perceived benefits of AI are substantial, persistent challenges—particularly in terms of resources and technical skills—continue to moderate the pace and extent of adoption.

Figure 3. Perceived Benefits vs. Barriers of AI Adoption

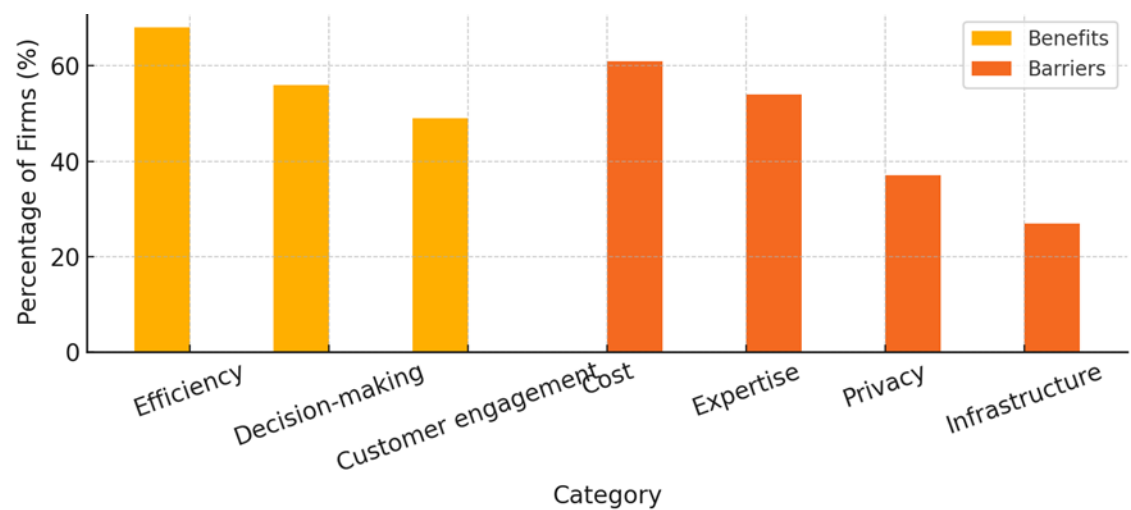


Figure 3 visually summarizes the primary perceived benefits and barriers influencing the adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) tools among Phnom Penh businesses. The left side of the chart illustrates that a significant proportion of firms report efficiency gains (68%), improved decision-making (56%), and enhanced customer engagement (49%) as key benefits of AI adoption. Conversely, the right side highlights the most frequently cited barriers, with cost of implementation (61%) and lack of AI expertise (54%) standing out as the most significant challenges. Concerns over data privacy (37%) and limitations in digital infrastructure (27%) are also notable, though somewhat less prevalent. This juxtaposition of benefits and barriers underscores the dual reality for businesses in Phnom Penh: while the motivations for embracing AI are substantial, persistent financial, technical, and regulatory constraints continue to moderate the speed and scope of technology integration.

4.3 Managerial Impact and Performance

Interviews revealed that managers using AI tools reported greater confidence in decision-making and found it easier to adapt to market changes. Firms with higher AI adoption also saw a 12% increase in reported year-on-year sales growth compared to those without AI ($p < 0.05$).

5. Discussion, Conclusion, and Recommendations

The results of this research reflect a significant increase in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) instruments among entrepreneurs in Phnom Penh within recent five years. Such change can be compared to the pre-pandemic time, when digital transformation in Cambodia remained at the early stages and was mostly restricted to the operations of multinational companies and a small number of large domestic businesses. It was already shown in the previous studies (Lim & Lee, 2023; Chou et al., 2021), that, before the year 2020, even less than ten percent of the surveyed small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Phnom Penh resorted to any of the means of digital automation, and AI adoption was a rather exceptional phenomenon. The prevailing barriers cited by these previous investigations were initially steep start-up costs, low internet stability, insufficient domestic knowledge, and uncertainty on the part of the business leaders regarding bottomless principle benefits of AI assimilation in smaller companies.

Comparison-wise, the present paper has found that in Phnom Penh, almost every fifth firm now lists at least one AI-based tool to manage operations in its daily workflow, a phenomenon that implies an increase by a factor of four in comparison to what has been observed at 2018 and 2019 (see Table 5.1). Automation and digital payments are no longer the most popular applications; however, they need to cover more of the advanced applications, including customer relationship management chatbots, predictive sales forecasting, and AI-driven inventory management. This development shows us a shift in experimental use cases to real-world integration of AI into business fundamentals. The advantages realized in the early or current adopters have also taken a more quantifiable form where the respondents cite significant enhancements in operational efficiencies, increased accuracies in the demand planning, positive

customer engagement as well as on certain occasions quantifiable increases in the level of sales performance.

Nonetheless, hindrances to broader AI adoption still exist in spite of the favorable tendencies. Interestingly, the greatest challenges that have been experienced are no longer infrastructural restrictiveness but rather shortage of skills and organizational integration issues. Although cost has to be mentioned as a concern, more and more businesses complain of the absence of internal AI experience and the inability to hire digital talent as the main working constraint to any incremental advancement. A similar conclusion can be made based on recent studies conducted in the same region as well, which records that given improved access to basic infrastructure, the likelihoods of success in digital transformation journeys are increasingly determined by the human capital and their organization preparedness, rather than the presence of hardware and connectivity (Agarwal et al., 2023; Lim & Lee, 2023).

The government policy has also become more conspicuous as part of the recent trend of AI adoption. The provision of some specific programs and bonuses, like those suggested in the Cambodia Digital Economy and Society Policy Framework 2021-2035, helps to narrow down the gaps in infrastructure, promote upskilling, and improve the cooperation between the government and the business entities. However, there is uneven performance of these policies and they require more attention to close the skills gap which is still persistent and provide the majority of the business community with a broader range of benefits of AI usage, especially among SMEs.

Phnom Penh is evidently heading in the right direction as compared to the major ASEAN economies; however, the city still lags behind others concerning the level and speed of AI adoption. An example is that whereas Singapore and Malaysia have realized big consumption rates and developed mature digital ecosystems, the capital of Cambodia is still in the gap bridging process, particularly in the segments of digital literacy, data management and regulatory alignment. However, the rate of AI uptake as seen in this report together with the fact that there has been an acquisition of a tipping point of local success stories, indicates that the city is in a new era of digital upheaving.

There are critical implications of these findings to the business leaders. The data points out that the investment in AI is not just the way to gain cost savings anymore, but the more and more critical way to develop strategic flexibility and meet the emergent needs of the market adequately. In this respect, ability to build and to nurture digital talent enters as a critical level of competitive advantage. The firms who make long-term investments into constant learning, partner with educational institutions, and design strong working conditions to digital professionals have the greatest persuasion that they will gain a competent edge during the current period of changes. Moreover, since AI tools can continue to be embedded in essential management procedures, business leaders need to focus on efficient change management, where

their companies have cultures that uphold openness to innovation and responsiveness to emerging technologies.

To policymakers, the findings indicate that there is a need to continue to facilitate the development of digital skills and the need to adopt policies that reduce the cost of adopting AI amongst the SMEs. Increasing access by spreading the cost of training programs, opening up avenues to public-private partnerships, and providing incentives to invest in AI should be important measures to scale up adoption. The findings also note the significance of the national digital transformational policies to match regional norms, facilitating cross-border knowledge sharing, and creating regulatory practices to harmonize innovation and data privacy and security interests.

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