Exploring AI Adoption for Manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0

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This article explores AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0. The authors present an interdisciplinary approach to AI adoption grounded in literature from information systems, organization research, and industry research. The aim of the article is to identify characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0. In information systems, researchers claim that the rise of AI technologies is prompting growing calls to rethink the theoretical foundations of adoption in IS research. The research approach was inspired by interpretive field studies and was conducted within the ongoing project, HUMAI. The article's contribution is a set of characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0. Three characteristics were identified: 1) The AI adoption should support a manufacturing SME's sustainability work, 2) A Socio-technical and human-centric perspective should be applied throughout the AI adoption process, and 3) Competence development and learning should be addressed throughout the AI adoption process.

Keywords:
AI adoption,
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1 Introduction

In the contemporary business landscape, the strategic integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a critical determinant of competitive advantage and long-term sustainability. For Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), which form the backbone of most global economies. Within the EU (European Union), only 12.6% of SMEs are using AI (European Commission 2025). European SMEs, which represent over 90% of European enterprises, are facing challenges in adopting AI. One of the critical sectors highlighted by the EU is the European manufacturing sector, which comprises 2.2 million enterprises, mostly SMEs. For manufacturing industries in Europe, the EU policy Industry 5.0 (European Commission 2022) is of great importance. The vision of Industry 5.0 rests on three pillars: resilience, sustainability, and human-centricity. Resilience addresses agility and flexibility with adaptable technologies (Such as AI). Sustainability - leads action on sustainability and respects planetary boundaries, and human-centric - promotes talent, diversity, and empowerment. It is through human-centric approaches combined with digital devices that the goals of Industry 5.0 can be achieved.

Research in organizational science has shown that SMEs differ. SMEs are typically characterized by flat and informal structures and weakly formalized procedures (Torrès and Julien 2005). Roles often overlap, and coordination relies heavily on direct communication rather than standardized processes. In other words, a small-sized firm does not necessarily have to adhere to the classical management method. The management process in small firms is unique and cannot be considered to be the same as professional management in larger organizations, practiced on a reduced scale (Jennings and Beaver 1997). SME strategy is often emergent rather than deliberate, embedded in day-to-day operations rather than articulated in formal plans (Mintzberg and Waters 1985).

Information systems (IS) research has long examined how IT/IS innovations are adopted (Akhlaghpour, Karahanna et al. 2025). The rise of AI technologies introduces new adoption logics and patterns of use. These developments have prompted growing calls to rethink the theoretical foundations of adoption in IS research. Moreover, research indicates that a significant majority of SMEs are still in the early stages of their AI journey, underscoring a widespread need for foundational guidance and support (Khan, Kauttonen et al. 2025). Organizational AI research does not yet reflect organizational adoption and the impact that current-generation AI technologies will have (Nguyen, Sidorova et al. 2022). Hence, the article aims to identify characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0. The research question is: What are the characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0?

2 AI adoption, Industry 5.0, and SMEs

The adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a critical determinant of competitive advantage for SMEs in the business landscape. For Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), AI represents a transformative opportunity to enhance efficiency and unlock new value. However, the path to AI adoption is fraught with unique challenges that often hinder SMEs from realizing their full potential. By examining current research on AI adoption, studies on SMEs, and EU policy documents, an AI adoption framework for SMEs in Industry 5.0 will be developed.

2.1 SMEs and AI adoption

Research on SMEs clearly shows that they are different. SMEs are directly mentioned in (European Commission, 2025) Apply AI strategy (Fig. 1). Torrès and Julien (2005) state that SMEs need not adhere to the classical management method. SMEs are typically characterized by flat and informal structures, limited specialization, and weakly formalized procedures (Torrès and Julien 2005). And as such, the management process in small firms is unique (Jennings and Beaver 1997). Moreover, roles in the SME often overlap, and coordination relies heavily on direct communication rather than standardized processes. SMEs also face resource constraints in terms of capital, competence (Fig. 1), and time, which shape their organizational behavior (Barney 1991). A limitation on resources is that SMEs lack the competence, time, and finances to undertake complex, often costly AI projects (Knoblach, Vogl et al. 2025). A frequently cited obstacle is the shortage of technical knowledge (Fig. 1) and the absence of in-house expertise required to develop, implement, and maintain AI systems (Khan, Kauttonen et al. 2025, Knoblach, Vogl et al. 2025). SMEs are also structurally more fragile, with high dependence on key individuals, customers, or technologies. Learning in SMEs is predominantly informal, experiential, and embedded in work practices rather than organized through formal training systems (Billett 2001).

One of the findings from Khan, Kauttonen et al. (2025) is that a significant majority of SMEs are still in the preliminary stages of their AI journey, indicating a widespread need for foundational guidance and support. From a technical perspective, there are two challenges for SMEs: data management and incompatibility. Many SMEs struggle with data availability, poor data quality, and the lack of a coherent strategy for data collection and management (Fig. 1), which are foundational prerequisites for most AI applications (Khan, Kauttonen et al. 2025, Knoblach, Vogl et al. 2025). AI solutions are often incompatible with the existing devices, software, and legacy systems prevalent in many SMEs, creating a significant integration barrier (Knoblach, Vogl et al. 2025). Further on, Nguyen, Sidorova et al. (2022) claim that organizational AI research does not yet reflect organizational adoption and the impact that current-generation AI technologies will have (Fig. 1).

Information systems (IS) research has long examined how IT/IS innovations are adopted (Akhlaghpour, Karahanna et al. 2025). TAM (Technology Acceptance Model (Davis 1989)), TOE (Technology-Organization-Environment (Tornatzky, Fleischer et al. 1990)), and UTAUT (Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (Venkatesh, Morris et al. 2003)) are all examples of frameworks used to understand IT adoption. The rise of AI technologies introduces new adoption logics and patterns of use. Developments in AI have prompted growing calls to rethink the theoretical foundations of adoption in IS research (Fig. 1). Moreover, AI adoption has been framed as a fundamentally socio-technical challenge that demands attention to emotions, values, and lived experience that complement human cognition and emotion, rather than inadvertently undermining them. A well-known socio-technical framework (Task, Technology, People, and Structure) for organizational change is Leavitt (1965). This framework has been modified by Grant and Mergen (1996) to include communication as an important aspect. In Yu, Xu et al. (2023), a socio-technical perspective is presented to understand AI adoption. In the article, three research agendas are proposed: 1) AI and training, performance, feedback, and employee experience, 2)AI and organizational design, and 3) AI and employment. Moreover, a socio-technical system is presented that comprises three subsystems: the personnel subsystem, the technical subsystem, and the organizational structure/work/job design subsystem.

2.2 Industry 5.0

The vision of Industry 5.0 rests on three pillars (European Commission 2022): resilience, sustainability, and human-centricity. Resilience addresses agility and flexibility with adaptable technologies (Such as AI). Sustainability (Fig. 1) - leads action on sustainability in line with the Agenda 2030 (United Nations 2015) and respects planetary boundaries; human-centric - promotes talent, diversity, and empowerment. It is through human-centric approaches combined with digital devices that the goals of Industry 5.0 (Fig. 1) can be achieved. In Agenda 2030, one of the goals is to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (goal 12). The 17 goals of Agenda 2030 are also related to the three overlapping categories of sustainability proposed by Brundtland (1987): ecological, economic, and social.

In the vision of Industry 5.0, humans are positioned at the center of production and service systems (European Commission 2022). European industry is expected to thrive through the integration of human-centric approaches and digital technologies. This paradigm emphasizes the empowerment of individuals and highlights the importance of research to understand the complex interplay between humans and technology—particularly Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Even though human-centered design has been a subject of research for over five decades, the transition to Industry 5.0 presents new challenges. These include the need for a highly skilled workforce capable of engaging with advanced technologies (George and George 2023) and the imperative to ensure positive and meaningful human–technology interactions (Ferreira and Serpa 2018). In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence (HCAI). One researcher argues that "the success of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-powered services relies on human-centered design" (Wärnestål 2022).

The vision of human-centricity within Industry 5.0 can be examined on two interrelated levels: the technical and the organizational (European Commission 2024). On a technical level, human-centricity implies that the implementation of digital technologies—such as AI—should not only fulfill functional and operational requirements but also enhance human well-being, capabilities, skills, and working conditions. This perspective seeks to optimize the interaction between humans and machines by reinforcing the human role through technological integration. It underscores the importance of maintaining individual autonomy and control while upholding core human values. At the organizational level, the human-centric approach prioritizes worker well-being and satisfaction by considering employees' unique needs, competencies, and viewpoints. This perspective fosters a culture of collaboration and inclusivity, promoting continuous learning and skill development. Such efforts are crucial to ensure that employees remain adaptable and equipped to navigate rapidly evolving technological landscapes.

2.3 Summary

The literature review has been summarized in Figure 1. In the model, three tentative characteristics have been identified: 1) the importance of government policies for AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs; 2) the differences and importance of SMEs; and 3) the need to rethink the socio-technical perspective on AI adoption for SMEs in Industry 5.0. In the intersection between SMEs and government policies, Industry 5.0 and Agenda 2030 have been identified.

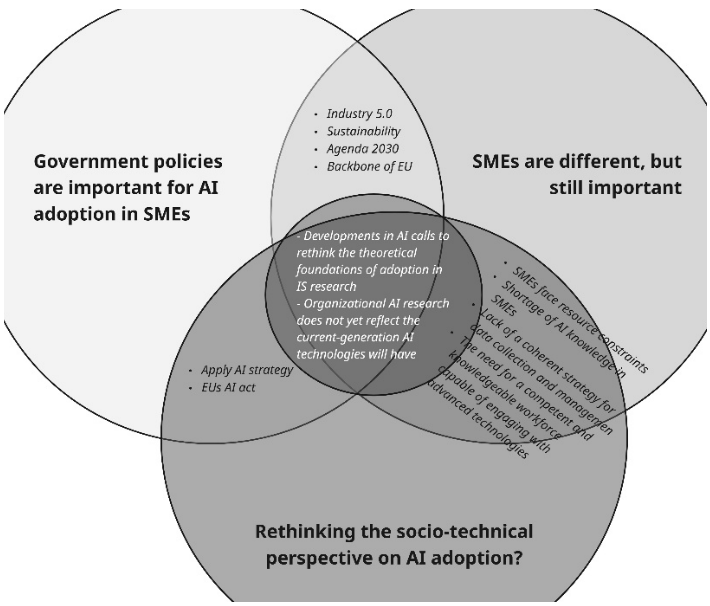

Figure 1: Summary of literature

3 Research approach

The research approach was inspired by interpretive field studies (Walsham 2006) and was conducted within the ongoing project, HUMAI. HUMAI is an acronym for "test and demonstration of HUMan-centered AI". The project involves five partners: Halmstad University, RISE (Research Institutes of Sweden), National Gummi (NG), HMS, and Connectitude. The manufacturing partner, NG, mostly produces rubber products primarily based on fossil raw materials, with a focus on rubber sealing strips used in automobiles and other applications. The goal of the project is to develop an AI demonstrator that supports process operators during production and supports production managers in their decision-making.

Figure 2 illustrates the layout of the production line, which spans approximately 60 meters from the extruder to the packing station. The goal of HUMAI is to develop a human-centered technical solution, grounded in artificial intelligence, to support and enhance production at NG. The four non-manufacturing partners collaborate on developing this solution.

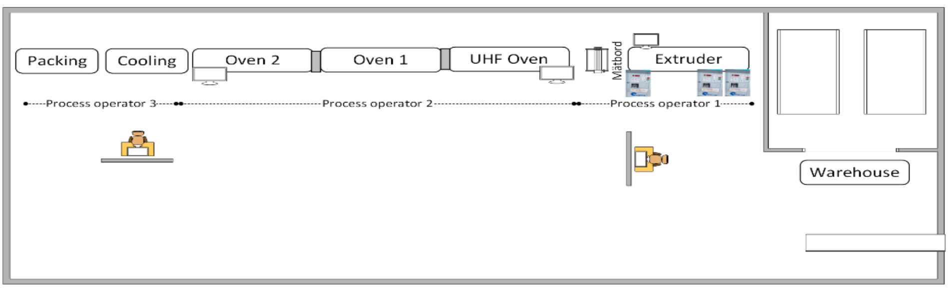

Figure 2: Production Line layout

3.1 Data Collection

In HUMAI, three different data collection techniques were used: field visits, stimulated recall interviews (SRI), and workshops. The research team has conducted five field visits to NG. After each field visit, the researchers have gained a broader understanding of the production. Each visit included meetings and walkthroughs of the production line, during which researchers documented the environment through photography (see Figure 3).

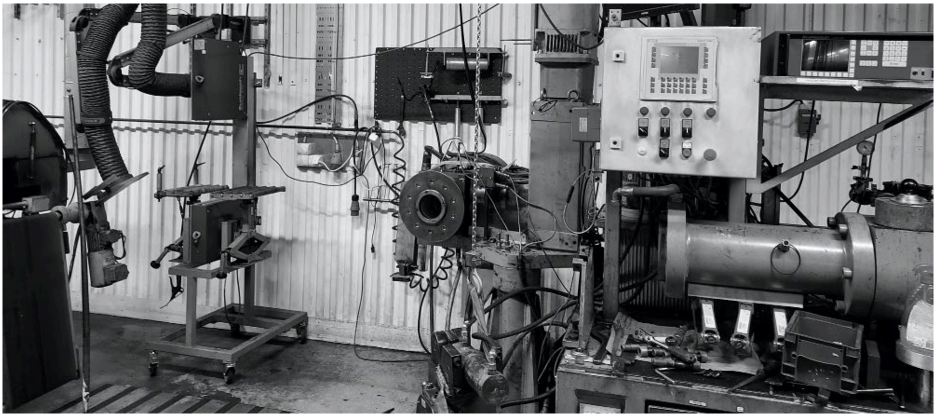

Figure 3: Photo of the extruder

Stimulated Recall Interviews (SRI) are a qualitative data collection method in which the interviewer uses visual, audio, or video stimuli to prompt participants to recall and reflect upon social interactions (Dempsey 2010). In HUMAI, SRI is employed to understand operators' actions and thought processes in situ. The method has been described as both a focused approach (Messmer 2015) and a technique for investigating how individuals navigate interactions. It is an introspective procedure that enables researchers to explore human reasoning and behavior by inviting participants to revisit moments captured via images (Lyle 2003). Although widely used in ethnography, pedagogy, and didactics, SRI remains relatively uncommon within information systems and engineering research. Approximately thirty photos were taken to capture the entire production process. In collaboration with NG's production managers, these images were sequenced to reflect the actual manufacturing flow. This sequence was later developed into a presentation, which also incorporated the production line map (Figure 1). A total of five SRI sessions were conducted with operators. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. To create a comfortable interview environment, sessions began with an informal conversation about names, roles, family, and background. Four of the participants had more than three years of experience at NG, while the fifth had worked at the company for six months. The third data collection technique used in HUMAI is workshops. On four separate occasions, the researchers have had workshops with the production managers at NG. Each workshop had a specific task, such as describing the production process or managing data and parameters that affect the production.

3.2 Analysis

The analysis has also been inspired by Walsham (2006). The article recommends developing a coherent, interesting story for the reader. Which is not the easiest task! In HUMAI we have used two analysis techniques: thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) and process analysis (Langley 1999, Langley, Smallman et al. 2013). During the literature review, five themes were identified using the Braun and Clarke (2006) framework. In analyzing the empirical data, the researchers used a mix of thematic and process analysis to develop episodes grounded in everyday practice at NG. Two scenarios will be presented in the results section.

4 Results

Episode 1 – Searching for collaborators

Early on in HUMAI, the researchers visited NG and the production managers. At the meeting, there was a discussion about why and how the idea of adopting AI started at NG. According to one of the managers, it all started with the idea of digitalizing support processes for process operators during production. The background story at NG was that the management group was inspired by EU Industry 5.0 documents, especially the idea of being human-centric. The next step taken by NG was to contact organizations with which they had been collaborating before: TEK (https://www.tek.se/), HMS (https://www.hms-networks.com), and High5 (https://highfive.se/). After some time, HMS responded, one of the first things we need to do is to find ways to extract data from the extruder (Figure 2) and from the ovens (Figure 1). In any digital solution, data is the raw material. NG also contacted organizations knowledgeable about AI and the manufacturing industry: RI.SE (https://www.ri.se/en), Connectitude (https://connectitude.com/), and AI Sweden (https://www.ai.se/).

In parallel with the work done by HMS, the managers at NG started a project, project process management. In that project, the production process was described from the start of production through delivery to customers. The organization wanted to know more about how the operators worked, their competence, and to identify other sources of data that could affect the quality of the rubber. One major finding was that data from intermediate storage were not used to adjust the extrusion parameters. Extrusion is one of the key stages in production, where the effects of material quality, mixing, and environmental conditions during intermediate storage (e.g., humidity, temperature, and storage duration) become apparent. In the worst cases, entire batches must be discarded due to quality issues. Throughout production, operators must make numerous individual adjustments, each of which can significantly impact the final product. Inefficient or incorrect parameter settings can lead to significant waste.

Episode 2 - Why did the production go wrong?

The manufacturing partner, NG, mostly produces rubber products primarily based on fossil raw materials, with a focus on rubber sealing strips used in automobiles and other applications. The rubber manufacturing process at NG is complex, as the quality and properties of the end products are influenced by numerous parameters that are difficult to control. One of the production managers said, When things go *wrong, we usually have no idea why the production went wrong.* He continued to describe various parameters that affect the production, including temperature, humidity, time spent in the warehouse, pressure, and belt speed. After a while, he also said, then we also have the human factors, the teams of operators. It is crucial to involve the process operators from the start, so that they know about the adoption process and that we are interested in their opinion.

A team of three operators runs the production line (Figure 1). They are responsible for managing a 60-meter stretch of the production process. To ensure efficiency and product quality, it is crucial that at least two of the three operators have more than two years of experience. Sometimes the team includes one or more operators contracted through staffing agencies. These individuals may have no prior experience at NG. As a result, permanent staff must continuously monitor and support the temporary workers. Moreover, staff absences (e.g., due to illness) are common and can lead to ad hoc team formations, exacerbating production challenges. One of the operators is responsible for setting the correct parameters on the extruder and the ovens. The parameter settings are described in the manufacturing specification ("tissen") for a specific order.

Based on the stimulated recall interviews with the operators, they did, to an extent, agree with the production manager's statement, "*We usually have no idea why the production went wrong«*. The operators mentioned one example: if the production goes wrong in the ovens, we usually fix the problem by adjusting the temperature or the belt speed. The operators also mentioned that fixing problems in the ovens is time-critical. Another common problem is the vulcanization of the rubber sealing strips. Vulcanization is measured at the end of the production line, meaning that if the rubber does not meet the vulcanization quality criteria, at least 60 meters of it must be discarded. This not only results in additional costs for the organization but also has environmental consequences. The underlying causes of problems with vulcanization are the settings of the extruder and oven parameters. The more experienced the operators are, the easier it is to adjust the parameters to achieve greater accuracy.

5 Deriving characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs

Based on the episodes presented in the previous section, we have identified challenges faced by manufacturing SMEs that hinder AI adoption. In this section, we will discuss the challenges presented in relation to the tentative themes of characteristics outlined in the literature section: *government policies are important for AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs; SMEs are different but still important; and Rethinking the socio-technical perspective on AI adoption for SMEs in Industry 5.0.* The reported episodes demonstrate the complexity of the rubber production process, which is crucial to understand if the goal is to adopt an AI solution to support operators. It also demonstrates the search for collaboration to address challenges during the AI adoption process.

5.1 The AI adoption should support the sustainability work of manufacturing SMEs

In the described episodes, rubber waste is a problem for NG. It not only results in additional costs for the organization but also has environmental consequences. Every year, NG publishes a sustainability report in accordance with the United Nations Agenda 2030 (United Nations 2015) and Swedish regulations. Government policies are important for manufacturing SMEs in Europe. The sustainability awareness among operators and managers is high. In Industry 5.0, sustainability is linked to planetary boundaries (European Commission 2022), as outlined in Agenda 2030. NG shares characteristics with other SMEs, such as flat and informal structures (Torrès and Julien 2005), and strategy is often emergent rather than deliberate and articulated in formal plans (Mintzberg and Waters 1985).

5.2 A Socio-technical and human-centric perspective should be applied throughout the AI adoption process

NG is a manufacturing SME industry, and as such, it relates to human-centricity in Industry 5.0 (European Commission 2022). In the vision of Industry 5.0, humans are positioned at the center of production. Furthermore, it also emphasizes the empowerment of individuals and highlights the importance of research to understand the complex interplay between humans and technology. NG wanted the process operators to be involved throughout the HUMAI project. The developments in AI have prompted growing calls to rethink the theoretical foundations of adoption in IS research (Akhlaghpour, Karahanna et al. 2025), and organizational AI research does not yet reflect organizational adoption and the impact that current-generation AI technologies will have (Nguyen, Sidorova et al. 2022). Parameters and parameter settings are frequently mentioned in the episodes. Parameters are examples of data that the organization must manage and that managers and operators use. NG had problems with data management; some data (humidity, temperature, and storage duration) were not digitized. SMEs are known to lack a coherent strategy for data collection and management (Khan, Kauttonen et al. 2025, Knoblach, Vogl et al. 2025)

5.3 Competence development and learning should be addressed throughout the AI adoption process

In the first episode, "Searching for collaborators," it is clear that NG cannot run the AI adoption process on its own. Generally speaking, SMEs face resource constraints in terms of competence (Barney 1991). At NG, there is a shortage of AI knowledge, a common issue among SMEs (Khan, Kauttonen et al. 2025; Knoblach, Vogl et al. 2025). Competence among process operators is important; sometimes the team includes one or more operators contracted through staffing agencies. These individuals may have no prior experience at NG. As a result, permanent staff must continuously monitor and support the temporary workers. In a sense, the more experienced staff conduct informal learning with the rental staff to develop their competence. There is a need for a competent and knowledgeable workforce capable of engaging with advanced technologies (George and George 2023) for example, in SMEs.

6 Conclusion

As outlined in the introduction, the aim was to identify characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0. Hence, the research question is: What are the characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0?

In this study, we began exploring empirical findings from HUMAI to gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0. In conclusion, we have derived three characteristics of AI adoption in SMEs: 1) The AI adoption should support a manufacturing SMEs sustainability work, 2) A Socio-technical and human-centric perspective should be applied throughout the AI adoption process, and 3) Competence development and learning should be addressed throughout the AI adoption process

The article proposes three characteristics of AI adoption in manufacturing SMEs in Industry 5.0 for information systems researchers interested in AI adoption. This list is not exhaustive; instead, the characteristics have emerged through the HUMAI project. The proposed characteristics have not yet been tested or evaluated in any AI adoption project, underscoring the need to assess them in practice during adoption research to generate insights for the AI adoption researcher.

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About the author

My main research interest is digital service innovation from a learning perspective. Research has identified collaboration between heterogeneous actors with different knowledge and backgrounds as problematic in digital service innovation. There is a consensus in the literature that we must find ways to relate, share, translate, and exchange knowledge in order to succeed with innovation activities. In other words, it is important to understand and describe the learning processes that take place during and between innovation activities. Teaching takes place in various courses within Informatics. In recent years, I have been involved in the research program LeaDS (Learning in a digitalized Society). From autumn 2024, my teaching will be in the Digital Business Development and Digital Learning programs.

I am also appointed an excellent teacher in Information Systems.