Small Business Champions 2026

Supporting Small Businesses to Use AI for International Trade

The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC), the International Trade Centre (ITC) and the World Trade Organization's Informal Working Group on Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (WTO MSME Group) in partnership with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), invite candidates to share innovative solutions and initiatives that help micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) leverage artificial intelligence (AI) for international trade.

Artificial intelligence is reshaping global trade in profound ways, offering MSMEs powerful new ways to optimize supply chains, reduce costs, and overcome longstanding trade barriers. AI-driven tools now provide real-time analytics, track shipments, anticipate disruptions and enhance compliance capabilities to meet international trade regulations. This transformation is especially important for smaller businesses to navigate complex and constantly changing market dynamics.

Recent developments have also ushered in a new era of purpose-built AI systems. Unlike traditional AI assistants that execute discrete tasks, new AI systems can exhibit autonomous decision-making capabilities that drive end-to-end workflows, making them ideal for addressing the intricate needs of global sourcing, logistics, and financial operations.

Recognizing these opportunities, international organizations and industry leaders alike are mobilizing efforts to integrate AI into technical assistance and capacity-building initiatives. From the ITU's "AI for Good" to the ICC's recommendations for inclusive AI, projects and reports are underway to democratize access to AI and drive its adoption in critical trade processes. The 2026 Small Business Champions Competition is looking to shine a light on solutions and initiatives that leverage these breakthrough AI applications and empower SMEs.

This year's competition seeks projects that not only harness AI to streamline supply chains and reduce transaction costs but also empower small businesses to compete more effectively on the global stage. Proposals should build upon proven models and emerging AI technologies, ensuring that MSMEs worldwide can fully benefit from this digital revolution in trade.

Goals of the Initiative

- Raise awareness among businesses and policymakers of the diversity and opportunities for AI tools to support MSME international trade.
- Showcase new approaches and solutions that help MSMEs adopt AI for global commerce.
- Promote inclusive participation of small businesses in international markets through accessible and effective AI-enabled trade support

Small Business Champions 2026 - Apply now

The ICC, ITC, and WTO MSME Group in partnership with the ITU, are calling for applications for initiatives that help MSMEs harness the power of AI for trade or for small businesses that are actively using AI to enhance their operations and global competitiveness.

Who Can Apply?

- Small businesses developing innovative AI solutions designed to help MSMEs unlock the full potential of AI technologies.
- Industry associations, chambers of commerce, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or similar entities providing training, capacity building, or support services to MSMEs in AI and international trade.
- Partnerships involving any of the above.

What are we looking for?

- AI-powered solutions that facilitate international trade for MSMEs

- Training programs, workshops, or campaigns that teach MSMEs how to use AI to enhance their capability to trade internationally.

- Other proposals with a clear link to small businesses, international trade and artificial intelligence.

For examples from past competition winners, please see the MSME Group Small Business Champions website.

How to apply

Submit your proposal online via:

Link to application form

Deadline to apply

Proposals must be submitted before 16 March 2026.

Selection process

The selection of proposals will be carried out by the ICC, ITC, ITU and WTO MSME Group representatives.

Winners will be announced at the WTO in Geneva on MSME Day, 29 June 2026.

Award

The main award for the winning proposal will be an invitation from the ITU to participate in the AI for Good Global Summit on 8 July 2026. The winner will join a fireside chat with competition organizers to discuss the use of AI to support international trade. This also includes a Speaker Summit pass, providing the opportunity to attend all sessions, network with global AI and trade experts, and showcase the winning initiative on an international stage.

Training and mentoring opportunities will be discussed with each winner according to their needs, while winning submissions will be promoted by the ICC, ITC, ITU and the WTO MSME Group through their communication channels.

Frequently asked questions

1. How ambitious are applications expected to be?

   Please propose initiatives within the realistic capacity of your organization or partnership.

   No funding will be provided by the organizers.

2. Can the same organization submit more than one proposal?

   No. One organization may submit only one application.

3. Can I submit an application if I am a private company?

   Yes, small businesses are invited to submit applications.

4. Can I submit an application if I am a government organization?

   Government organizations can submit proposals only if partnered with an industry associations, chamber of commerce, or NGO with a MSME focus.

5. What is the deadline?

   All proposals must be submitted online by 16 March 2026.

6. What prize can I win in the competition?

Winners will receive <u>non-monetary support</u> including a presentation session and speaker summit pass for the ITU's AI for Good global summit, publicity, training, or other relevant "gifts-in-kind", tailored to their needs.

7. For any additional questions, please reach out to smallbusinesschampions@wto.org.