

# Why IBM i Modernization Narratives Keep Missing SMBs

IBM i modernization is talked about constantly. Yet for many small and mid-sized organizations, it still feels distant, unrealistic, or irrelevant.

That disconnect isn't because SMBs don't care about modernization. It's because most modernization narratives are written **for someone else**.

## The Unspoken Assumptions Behind Most Modernization Advice

Spend enough time reading modernization guidance and a pattern emerges. Much of it quietly assumes:

- Dedicated development teams
- Time set aside for refactoring
- Budget for new tools or consultants
- Freedom to pause work that already pays the bills

Those assumptions may hold up in large enterprises. They rarely hold up in SMB IBM i shops. When modernization advice starts from conditions that don't exist, the result isn't progress, it's disengagement.

## SMBs Are Not Behind. They Are Busy.

One of the most damaging ideas in IBM i discourse is that organizations running older releases are negligent or "stuck."

In reality, many SMB teams are doing exactly what they were hired to do:

- Keep order processing running
- Keep payroll accurate
- Keep customers satisfied
- Keep regulators happy

They're not avoiding modernization. They're **absorbing risk so the business can function**. Modernization narratives that ignore this reality may sound aspirational, but they land as tone-deaf.

## Tool-First Modernization Misses the Point

Another common pattern is tool-first modernization:

- New IDEs
- DevOps pipelines
- Cloud services
- AI readiness

None of these are wrong. But they're rarely first.

For SMBs, modernization usually starts with:

- Understanding existing code
- Cleaning up data structures
- Making systems safer to change
- Reducing fear of breaking what works

When narratives jump straight to tooling, they skip the work SMBs actually need help with.

## “Rewrite or Replace” Is Not a Strategy

Some modernization messaging still treats replacement as the goal:

- Rewrite in a new language
- Migrate off the platform
- Start fresh

For SMBs, this isn't modernization, it's an **existential risk**.

IBM i systems exist because they are stable, predictable, and deeply aligned with the business. Narratives that frame replacement as progress unintentionally tell SMBs their survival strategy is wrong.

That's not a message that builds trust.

## Modernization Is About Reducing Cognitive Load

What SMB teams need most isn't speed. It's **confidence**.

Confidence that:

- They understand their own systems
- Changes can be made safely
- Knowledge can be transferred
- Modern practices are achievable incrementally

Modernization narratives that emphasize velocity over clarity miss this entirely. Progress happens when systems become easier to reason with and not when they become trendier.

## Inclusion Is the Missing Ingredient

The most consistent failure in IBM i modernization messaging is this: **It talks about SMBs, not with them.**

When modernization is presented as:

- A verdict on past decisions
- A list of things teams should have already done
- A race they're already losing

SMBs opt out not because they disagree, but because the conversation doesn't include them.

## A Better Way Forward

Modernization narratives that resonate with SMBs tend to share a few traits:

- Respect operational reality
- Emphasize learning through involvement
- Start with code and data, not tools
- Allow incremental progress without shame
- Treat modernization as stewardship, not as disruption

They don't promise overnight transformation. They promise something far more valuable: **A path forward that doesn't require abandoning what already works.**

## The Takeaway

IBM i modernization isn't failing because the platform is old. It struggles when we aim our messaging at the wrong audience. SMBs don't need louder narratives. They need **truer ones.**

Modernization succeeds when it feels possible, not when it feels inevitable.