

Eight IBM i Modernization Moves That SMBs Can Start This Year

IBM i modernization conversations often assume conditions that don't exist in many SMB environments:

- Dedicated development teams
- Modernization budgets
- Time set aside for major refactoring
- The ability to pause operational work

Most SMB IBM i teams operate differently. They are often responsible for everything from operations and security to development and vendor coordination.

That means modernization has to happen **inside normal operations**, not alongside them.

Fortunately, some of the most valuable modernization work does not require major projects. It requires **clarity, safety, and incremental improvement**.

Here are several modernization moves SMB teams can begin with immediately.

1. Document the System While You Operate It

In many SMB environments, the biggest modernization barrier isn't technology.

It's knowledge concentration.

Business rules, data relationships, and operational procedures often exist primarily in the heads of one or two experienced staff members.

Start small:

- Document key applications and their purpose
- Capture business rules embedded in code
- Map critical data flows
- Record operational runbooks

Documentation is not busy work. It is **modernization infrastructure**.

2. Introduce Version Control

Many SMB IBM i shops still rely on manual change tracking or ad-hoc source management.

Version control dramatically reduces risk by allowing teams to:

- Track changes over time
- Recover from mistakes quickly
- Share knowledge across team members
- Support safer experimentation

Even a basic version control workflow can transform how teams approach change.

3. Clean Up Dead Code and Unused Objects

Long-running IBM i systems accumulate artifacts over time:

- Obsolete programs
- Unused files
- Legacy libraries
- Old test objects

This clutter makes systems harder to understand and increases the perceived risk of change.

Cleaning up unused objects can:

- Reduce system complexity
- Reveal hidden dependencies
- Improve maintainability

Sometimes modernization starts by **removing what no longer matters**.

4. Make the System Easier for the Next Person

SMB teams often depend on a small number of experienced operators or developers.

Modernization should aim to reduce this fragility.

Ask simple questions:

- Would a new developer understand this program?
- Are file relationships obvious?
- Are business rules discoverable?

Modernization succeeds when systems become easier for the next person to understand.

5. Improve Visibility Into the System

Many SMB teams operate highly capable systems with limited visibility into how components interact.

Improving visibility can include:

- Application dependency analysis
- Data flow mapping
- Program relationship diagrams
- Operational dashboards

Better visibility reduces the fear of change and enables more confident improvements.

6. Strengthen Operational Safety Before Accelerating Change

Before introducing new tools or development practices, it helps to ensure the system is safe to modify.

That may include:

- Reliable backups and restore testing
- Clear rollback procedures
- Test environments where possible
- Change documentation

When teams trust that they can recover from mistakes, modernization moves faster.

7. Modernize Interfaces Incrementally

Modernization doesn't always require rewriting applications.

Many SMB organizations begin by improving how systems interact with users and other systems:

- Web-enabled interfaces
- APIs for integration
- Improved reporting access
- Data export capabilities

These changes extend the value of existing systems while preserving core logic.

8. Treat Modernization as Stewardship, Not Replacement

One of the most common misconceptions about modernization is that it requires abandoning existing systems.

For SMB organizations, IBM i systems often represent decades of business knowledge encoded in software.

Modernization in these environments is usually about **evolution**, not replacement.

The goal is to ensure that systems:

- Remain understandable
- Remain maintainable
- Remain adaptable

Stewardship of working systems is a modernization strategy.

The Larger Picture

In SMB environments, modernization rarely happens through dramatic transformation projects.

It happens through **consistent, incremental improvements** that reduce complexity, improve clarity, and build confidence.

Over time, those improvements compound.

And when they do, modernization stops feeling like a disruptive initiative and starts feeling like responsible system management.