SMART, GREEN, AND COMPETITIVE

AI-HUB EAST NETHERLANDS AT THE HEART OF INDUSTRIAL AI

AI HUB East Netherlands

Europe's industry stands at a crossroads. Confronted with the twin transitions of Green and Digital, the continent is being called to reinvent itself. These transitions are not just policy ambitions, they are the backbone of the European Commission's long-term strategy for global competitiveness and sustainability. This urgency was emphasized in the 2023 Draghi Report by the former Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi at the request of the European Commission.

The report, officially titled "Report on the Future of European Competitiveness", warns that Europe cannot afford to wait. If Europe are to close the productivity gap and secure our economic future, we must invest boldly in innovation. And in no area is that investment more urgent than artificial intelligence (AI).

For the East Netherlands region, known for its dynamic high-tech and manufacturing industry, the rise of AI is both a challenge and an opportunity. The deployment of AI promises smarter production, more efficient resource use, and stronger international positioning. But it also requires organizational readiness, digital infrastructure, and bold strategic choices. The time to act is now.

Laying the Foundation: Why Data Readiness is the Real Starting Point for Industrial AI

"Without structured data, AI has nothing to build on," says Frank Dikker, founder of TransAI, a platform that enables manufacturers to deploy AI securely on-site.

"Digitalization is not just a first step — it's the foundation."

TransAI's hybrid solution connects machines, systems, and operators, allowing data to be collected and processed without leaving the factory. This approach ensures compliance and control — two factors that remain critical in the manufacturing sector.

Peter Nales of Smart4Factories underscores the same principle from an organizational perspective:

> *"Without a solid digital foundation, AI remains a promise without results."*

His company works with SMEs to build this foundation step-by-step, connecting digital ambitions to operational reality.

> *"First organize, then digitalize,"*

is the mantra.

That view is echoed by Jeroen Linssen, professor at Saxion University of Applied Sciences.

> *"What you see in AI applications is just the tip of the iceberg. Before you can operationalize AI, your processes must be made truly data-driven,"*

he explains. That transformation requires more than software — it demands technical infrastructure, governance, and cultural change.

The urgency is clear. As Erik Fledderus from Windsheim puts it,

> *"Without data readiness, there is no business case for AI."*

In East Netherlands, this insight is increasingly taking root — not just in the labs, but on the shop floor, where AI's true potential begins with the basics.

From Potential to Practice: Where AI is Already Delivering in Industry

In East Netherlands, AI is no longer a future promise but it already delivering results today. While much of the global AI spotlight shines on consumer tech, some of the most impactful advances are happening on the factory floor.

"The first AI applications we see in industry are focused on efficiency," says Michiel Verheij of digital agency TRIMM. "Predictive maintenance, real-time forecasting, and yield optimization are no longer reserved for the big players — SMEs can now tap into them as well."

These are not abstract ambitions. At Smart4Factories, engineers are co-developing an AI agent that assists production planners by learning from high-quality process data. "It's like having a digital co-worker," says Peter Nales. Meanwhile, Saxion is applying large language models to make technical manuals more usable for maintenance personnel — an innovation with direct impact on uptime and safety.

But the real value of AI isn't only in doing things faster or cheaper. "AI enables new business models," says Verheij. "The challenge is not just in efficiency, but in imagining new forms of value creation."

For smaller manufacturers, this journey requires support and pragmatism. As Erwin Folmer of HAN notes, most SMEs will do not have dedicated AI departments or in-house expertise. They depend heavily on accessible tooling and foundational knowledge — and organizations like HAN are helping them build precisely that.

From predictive algorithms to cobots and intelligent quality control, East Netherlands is becoming a testbed for industrial AI — and the momentum is just beginning.

Beyond the Tool: Organizational Strategy and Business Modeling in the Age of AI

Implementing AI in industry is not just a technical upgrade — it's a strategic transformation. As Michiel Verheij of TRIMM puts it bluntly: "A fool with a tool is still a fool." Providing employees access to AI tools isn't enough. The real challenge lies in aligning AI adoption with organizational vision, culture, and leadership.

AI is a system technology — one that cuts across departments, workflows, and even entire business models. "Ownership must lie with top management," Verheij insists. "You can't delegate AI strategy to middle management or IT alone. It affects how value is created, who makes decisions, and how people work."

For many SMEs, this transformation can be overwhelming. Many lack in-house expertise or fear uncertain returns. That's why institutions like Windesheim, Saxion and HAN are stepping in with hands-on support: training programs, applied research, and access to shared high-tech facilities. Their aim is to turn AI from an abstract concept into a concrete capability — something that drives strategy, not just operations.

Peter Nales of Smart4Factories describes digital transformation as "a continuous learning process," rather than a one-off project. Vision, structure, and collaboration are key. In that light, AI isn't simply about automation or cost-cutting — it's a chance to rethink the business itself. From data-driven services to AI-powered customization, companies are beginning to explore new revenue streams and operating models.

In East Netherlands, AI is not an add-on. It is becoming the lens through which strategy and innovation are reimagined.

Connecting the Dots: The Role of AI-hub East Netherlands

The AI-hub East Netherlands plays a pivotal role in helping the region's industry seize the opportunities of artificial intelligence. By connecting

"From predictive algorithms to cobots and intelligent quality control, East Netherlands is becoming a testbed for industrial AI — and the momentum is just beginning."

entrepreneurs with researchers, funding programs, and practical examples, the hub makes AI tangible and attainable, especially for SMEs.

Its approach is practical and hands-on: from showcasing success stories to supporting test environments and co-funded pilot projects. The goal is clear — lower the barriers to adoption and accelerate AI maturity across sectors. Or as the hub puts it ‘Make AI Work’.

More than a regional enabler, the hub also serves as a gateway to national and European initiatives, linking local innovators with networks like EDIH BOOST Robotics, the Vanguard Initiative and the AI Redgio project.

With strong roots in East Netherlands’ innovation ecosystem, the AI-hub ensures that companies have access to the knowledge, tools, and partnerships needed to move from ambition to action — and from potential to competitive advantage. ■

> **The AI-hub East Netherlands plays a pivotal role in helping the region’s industry seize the opportunities of artificial intelligence.**

Want to start with AI?
Check the webpage www.aihub-oost.nl