Party Conference Briefing

A digitally capable workforce is the foundation for an AI-ready UK

This messaging has been prepared to help FutureDotNow partner organisations bring the essential digital skills narrative into their activity during party conference season.

It sets out why essential digital skills are critical to AI adoption, the scale of the current skills gap, evidence of what works, and practical actions for government and industry leaders. It can be used to inform:

- Panel contributions and speeches
- Media and stakeholder conversations
- Partner announcements and blogs
- Policy and industry engagement



The UK must build the world's most digitally and AI confident workforce. Delivering growth in every postcode depends on it.

The digital and AI skills gap in working age adults is one of the UK's most important and most overlooked economic challenges. Core digital capability and confidence is the foundation for successful AI adoption. Building a digitally capable workforce supports growth, productivity, employability and resilience. Progress will depend on coordinated effort from government, employers, local leaders, educators and civil society.

Less than half of working age adults can do the essential digital tasks that modern work requires[1]. The UK's ambitions for growth in every postcode, AI adoption and good jobs for all will not succeed at scale unless government urgently tackles this foundation issue, which is in all sectors, regions and age groups, often hidden in plain sight. See the below heatmaps for more data on the regional and sector positions.

The economic opportunity is substantial. Closing this largely hidden skills gap could generate £23.1 billion in annual productivity gains, £10.3 billion in additional workforce earnings and £8.5 billion in increased profits for UK businesses[2].

AI raises the stakes. The UK's AI ambitions depend on people being able to use digital tools confidently, adapt to new technologies and work effectively alongside AI systems. Every worker needs a baseline level of digital and AI capability. AI increases the urgent need to raise the digital skills floor for all workers, rather than reducing it.

A digitally capable workforce can access good jobs. Stronger digital capability improves employability, supports career progression and helps people remain economically active throughout longer working lives.

Beyond economics, digital capability creates wider social value. Digital confidence improves resilience, strengthens communities, enhances financial wellbeing, supports public service reform and helps people participate more fully in society, supporting good growth for every postcode[3].

1. Lloyds Bank Essential Digital Skills Report 2025.
2. The Economic Impact of Closing the Work Digital Skills Gap, FutureDotNow and Cebr, 2025.
3. The Ripple Effect, FutureDotNow and Sonnet Impact and Insight, 2025.

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FutureDotNow's Five Policy Priorities. By the end of this parliament, we would like the Government to:

1. Make building digital and AI capability across all working-age adults a national and local economic priority

Digital capability is economic infrastructure. The UK cannot achieve its growth ambitions, compete globally or deliver growth in every postcode unless it has a clear plan to digitally upskill, reskill and continuously reskill the working-age population.

2. Create local digital capability plans to deliver growth in every postcode

Every part of the UK should have a plan to build essential digital and AI capability in all parts of the workforce linked to economic growth priorities (e.g. as part of Local Growth and Skills Improvement Plans).

3. Make essential digital skills the foundation for AI readiness

A digitally capable workforce is the foundation for an AI-ready UK. We must raise the digital floor to raise the AI ceiling. The Government should:

- Ensure an updated Essential Digital Skills Framework has the required competencies and detail to act as an effective baseline for workforce AI adoption.
- Put young people and workforce transition at the centre of AI policy. Every young person should leave education and enter work with the digital and AI confidence needed to thrive.

4. Implement both a national framework and measure for workforce digital and AI capability

A robust Essential Digital Skills Framework and associated measure is vital to consistent delivery of digital skills across the system and for assessing national progress. The Government should:

- Ensure an updated Essential Digital Skills Framework provides sufficient clarity and detail to enable consistent assessment and measurement of workforce digital skills.
- Create and publish a national measure of workforce AI and digital capability.
- Create a common approach to recognising workforce digital and AI capability, enabling skills, achievements and experience to be evidenced, recognised and built upon across jobs, employers and learning pathways.

5. Embed digital capability building into employment, skills and procurement systems

Don't build new programmes. Embed digital and AI capability into existing systems. For example:

- employability programmes
- apprenticeships
- adult skills provision
- procurement guidelines
- social value measures
- Local Skills Improvement Plans

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Conference Messaging

Five key messages

1. A digitally capable workforce is the foundation for an AI-ready UK.
2. Workforce digital skills are the hidden barrier to productivity.
3. Essential digital skills are foundational workforce skills, not specialist technology skills.
4. Raising the digital floor is as important as extending the tech ceiling.
5. Progress requires coordination, collaboration and collective action.

Five soundbites

- *"The UK's AI ambitions depend on digital foundations."*
- *"Between digital exclusion and advanced tech skills there is a hidden middle – a workforce digital skills gap affecting more than half of working-age adults"*
- *"Technology delivers value when people have the capability to use it."*
- *"Essential digital skills are the baseline for AI readiness."*
- *"The task now is coordination and scale, not more pilots."*

Answers to common questions

1. **Why focus on workforce digital skills rather than advanced tech skills?**
   Advanced skills matter, but every worker needs digital basics. Essential digital skills are now as fundamental to modern work as literacy and numeracy and underpin successful adoption of more advanced technologies.
2. **Is this an employer responsibility or government responsibility?**
   Both. Employers, government, local leaders, educators and civil society each have a role. Progress depends on coordinated action around a shared agenda.
3. **How does AI change the picture?**
   AI accelerates the need for workforce capability. Workers require the baseline digital confidence to understand, assess and use AI effectively and responsibly. AI readiness starts with digital readiness.
4. **Why focus on working-age adults?**
   The backbone of society and the economy and represent the UK's largest opportunity for impact. They are employees and employers. They are parents, teachers, and carers. They influence families, workplaces, communities and public services.
5. **What practical action should organisations take?**
   Baseline capability, use the Essential Digital Skills Framework, create targeted interventions, measure progress and adopt evidence-based approaches that build confidence and motivation alongside capability. FutureDotNow's Learning that clicks report can help.

About FutureDotNow

FutureDotNow is a UK charity leading a coordinated, evidence-based mission to close the workforce essential digital skills gap. It's bringing together businesses, government and industry to drive systemic change and build a digitally confident workforce.

Our insight and expertise draw on national workforce digital skills data, economic analysis, employer insight and evidence from practical delivery programmes.

For more information visit www.futuredotnow.uk. If you'd like to discuss how you could get more involved in our work, contact our Chief Executive Liz WIlliams MBE at ceo@futuredotnow.uk.

1. Lloyds Bank Essential Digital Skills Report 2025.
2. The Economic Impact of Closing the Work Digital Skills Gap, FutureDotNow and Cebr, 2025.
3. The Ripple Effect, FutureDotNow and Sonnet Impact and Insight, 2025.
4. Embedding AI in the the Essential Digital Skills Framework, FutureDotNow 2025.

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Sector heatmap

This Sector heatmap shows the essential digital skills position for each UK industry sector.

Each is experiencing the digital skills gap. In most sectors, fewer than half of workers have the full suite of digital essentials for work.

How to read the heatmap

The heatmap shows:

- Percentage of workers in each sector that can do all 20 Work tasks[1] in the Essential Digital Skills Framework.
- The comparative data point from 2024[2]
- Whether the trend is improving or worsening

The heatmap also indicates if the sector is working with FutureDotNow to mobilise action and has a sector leadership team in place. We ended 2025 with four sectors mobilised, with ambition to scale in 2026.

It also shows the number of Workforce Digital Skills Charter signatories for each sector[3]. This will continue to be a key measure of business engagement levels (figures accurate as of March 2026).

FutureDotNow's work to mobilise UK industry sectors is sponsored by

1. Lloyds Banking Group Essential Digital Skills Report 2025.
2. Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index 2024.
3. A small number of Charter signatories did not align themselves with one of the sectors used in the Lloyds Banking Group data so are not reflected on the heatmap.

Essential Digital Skills for Work: Sector heatmap

Sector	Can do all 20 tasks	Leadership team in place	Charter signatories
Construction	2025: 42% ↑ / 2024: 35%	Yes	5
Medical	2025: 43% ↑ / 2024: 42%	Yes	20
Education	2025: 47% ↓ / 2024: 54%	Yes	66
Government	2025: 51% ↓ / 2024: 54%	Yes	7
Retail	2025: 37% ↓ / 2024: 41%	No	1
Public Service	2025: 41% ↓ / 2024: 46%	No	9
Engineering	2025: 51% ↑ / 2024: 47%	No	1
Service Industry	2025: 47% ↓ / 2024: 49%	No	9
Manufacturing & Automotive	2025: 48% ↑ / 2024: 44%	No	0
Not for Profit	2025: 50% ↓ / 2024: 59%	No	48
Financial Services	2025: 62% ↑ / 2024: 59%	No	6
Technology	2025: 73% ↓ / 2024: 80%	No	46
Media & Advertising	2025: 77% ↑ / 2024: 63%	No	6

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For more information on FutureDotNow's work, visit our website at futuredotnow.uk, or email our CEO Liz Williams at ceo@futuredotnow.uk.

Place heatmap

This Place heatmap shows the essential digital skills position by region and nation.

Every part of the UK is experiencing the digital skills gap – no region has more than half its working population with the full suite of essential digital skills for work.

How to read the heatmap

The heatmap shows:

- The percentage of workers in each region or nation that can do all 20 Work tasks[1] in the Essential Digital Skills Framework.
- The comparative data point from 2024[2]
- Whether the trend is improving or worsening

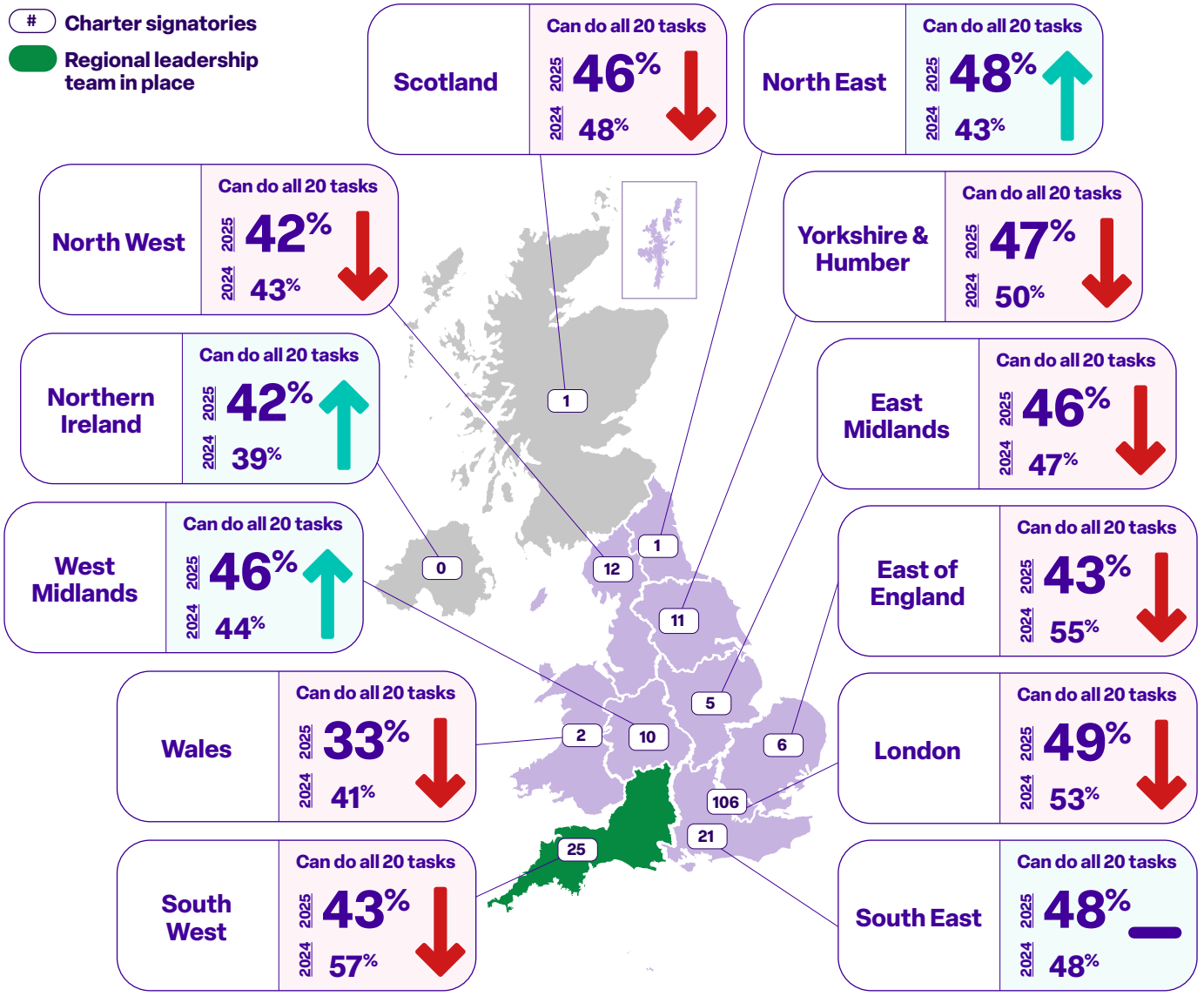
The heatmap also indicates the number of Workforce Digital Skills Charter signatories in each region and if leaders in the region are working with FutureDotNow to mobilise action (i.e. there is a leadership team in place).

Digital skills agency, Cosmic UK, has led activity in the South-West, working alongside local government. As of the end of 2025, no other part of the UK has this type of active community focused on the essential digital skills of the workforce.

1. Lloyds Banking Group 2025 Essential Digital Skills Report.
2. Lloyds Bank Consumer Digital Index 2024.

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Essential Digital Skills for Work: Place heatmap



NB. London Charter numbers are naturally skewed by the high population of organisations headquartered in the capital, many of which will have a national footprint. The heatmap does not show the 30 signatories which have not declared the location of their headquarters. Figures accurate as of 16 March 2026. As a charity, FutureDotNow operates in England and Wales and will prioritise action in these nations.

For more information on FutureDotNow's work, visit our website at www.futuredotnow.uk, or email our CEO Liz Williams at ceo@futuredotnow.uk.

The Essential Digital Skills Framework

Across 5 skills areas in the Essential Digital Skills Framework, 20 tasks are considered essential for a modern workplace. Explore the full framework at **www.futuredotnow.uk/framework.**

Handling information and content

1. Follow my organisation's IT policies when sharing information internally and externally (e.g. classifying emails/documents, encrypting sensitive information, sharing appropriate information on social media)
2. Securely access, synchronise and share information at work across different devices (e.g. manage email, calendar or appointment system via different devices)

Communicating

3. Communicate in the workplace digitally using messaging applications (e.g. Email, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Slack, internal intranet, WhatsApp)
4. Use workplace digital tools to create, share and collaborate with colleagues (e.g. Microsoft Teams, OneDrive, G-Suite, Office 365, WeTransfer, DropBox, WebEx, Slack)
5. Set up and manage an account on a professional online network/ community/job site (e.g. LinkedIn, Total Jobs, Indeed)

Transacting

6. Complete digital records on behalf of, or within my organisation (e.g. absence management, holidays, timesheets, expenses, tax returns)
7. Access salary and tax information digitally (e.g. password protected payslips, P60, P45)

Problem solving

8. Find information online that helps me solve work related problems (e.g. search engines, IT helpdesk, software providers, peer networks)
9. Improve my skills and ability to do new things at work using online tutorials, learning platforms and how-to guides (e.g. LinkedIn Learning, YouTube, iDEA, Skillsoft, internal learning platforms)
10. Use appropriate software that is required of my day-to-day job (e.g. spreadsheets, online booking systems, HR management, workflow or sales management)

Being safe and legal online

12. Act with caution online and understand that there are risks and threats involved in carrying out activities online (e.g. use anti-virus software, classify and share information securely or avoid certain types of websites such as piracy websites)
13. Follow data protection guidelines online (e.g. following data storage and retention guidelines, not sharing or using other people's data or media such as movies or music without their consent)
14. Recognise suspicious links and know that clicking on these links or downloading unfamiliar attachments is a risk (e.g. spam/ phishing emails, texts, pop ups)
15. Be careful with what I share online as I know hat online activity produces a permanent record that can be accessed by others (e.g. publicly shared photos, forums, personal information or opinions)
16. Respond to requests for authentication for online accounts (e.g. resetting my password when I've forgotten it, two factor authentication, using a remote access key or an authenticator app)
17. Identify secure websites (e.g. by looking for the padlock and https in the address bar)
18. Identify secure Wi-Fi networks to connect to (e.g. Wi-Fi networks where a unique password is required, trusted source or padlock next to Wi-Fi network)
19. Update my device software/operating systems when necessary to prevent viruses and other risks (e.g. enabling automatic updates, or installing when prompted to do so)
20 Set privacy and marketing settings for websites and my accounts (e.g. managing social media privacy settings, managing cookie settings, updating contact preferences)



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AI-Embedded Essential Digital Skills Framework

FutureDotNow worked with expert partners to examine the Essential Digital Skills Framework, making recommendations for updates in the light of an AI-enabled world of work.

There are five recommended additional tasks.

Transacting

1. You can complete online financial transactions while understanding how AI systems support these processes, and can identify potential risks such as AI-generated scams or deceptive interfaces designed to manipulate your purchasing decisions.

Problem solving

2 You can develop effective prompts for AI systems to solve specific workplace problems while understanding AI's role as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for human judgement.

Being safe and legal online

3 You can understand the basic principles of AI, including how it works, its limitations, and when it is appropriate to use (e.g. understanding AI training, data requirements, and evaluating when
AI tools are suitable for specific tasks).

4. 24. You can recognise the ethical implications of AI use and its societal impact (e.g. understanding AI biases, human oversight requirements, environmental impact and potential effects on privacy, fairness, and human rights).
5. 25. You can understand and manage AI risks in your job (e.g. keeping up with new AI technology, understanding how it affects data privacy, and following AI guidelines for your industry).

Our recommendations also include updates to serveral existing tasks to better reflect the widespread use of AI.

Explore our evidence-based recommendations at **www.futuredotnow.uk/ai-framework.**