

# FutureDotNow policy briefing: The Essential Digital Skills Standards

**The Essential Digital Skills Standards** are owned by the Department for Education (DfE) and underpin essential digital skills qualifications (EDSQs) and guide learning programmes delivered by colleges, training providers, employers, community organisations and digital inclusion charities. In July 2026, DfE updated the standards in response to technological change, including artificial intelligence (AI), to ensure they remain relevant to the digital skills adults need today. This briefing note explains what the updated standards mean for workforce essential digital skills, how they reflect FutureDotNow's recommendations on AI, and where further action is needed to keep the system relevant and future-focused.

## Background

The Essential Digital Skills Standards translate the [Essential Digital Skills Framework](#) into a structured set of learning outcomes across five different levels of proficiency, from Entry Level 1 through to Level 2. Used to design and deliver digital skills provision, the standards are a practical implementation of the framework and are designed to help educators and employers build digital confidence and capability for modern life and work.

In simple terms:

- The Essential Digital Skills Framework (now under Department for Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT) stewardship) defines what skills people need.
- The Essential Digital Skills Standards (owned by DfE) define how those skills are taught, assessed and developed.

## FutureDotNow's view of the update

The updated Essential Digital Skills Standards are a welcome and important development. They recognise that the digital skills people need for work and life are evolving rapidly, and they take a significant step towards reflecting the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI) in everyday tasks, learning and employment.

Most importantly, the updated standards do not treat AI as a separate set of specialist skills. Instead, AI capabilities are integrated throughout the standards, reflecting what employers consistently tell us: AI is becoming part of everyday digital activity rather than a standalone competency.

The standards have now also been expanded to include Level 2 content to enhance focus on employment and workplace digital skills – a crucial step as essential digital skills have long been necessary in almost all job roles and AI is an increasing element of this requirement.

The revised standards incorporate many of the recommendations FutureDotNow made in our 2025 report '[Embedding AI into the Essential Digital Skills Framework](#)'. In particular, they:

- embed AI across multiple skill areas rather than creating a separate AI competency

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- introduce critical evaluation of AI-generated information and content
- recognise the importance of identifying misleading, manipulated and AI-generated content
- encourage the responsible use of AI-supported tools
- integrate AI-assisted learning, communication and problem-solving into everyday activities
- strengthen awareness of privacy, online safety and cybersecurity in the context of AI.

These changes reflect the reality of today's workplace, where AI is increasingly embedded within the tools people already use rather than being confined to specialist technical roles.

### Requirements and opportunities for the future

While the updated standards represent strong progress, they should not be viewed as the end of the process. AI technologies are evolving rapidly, and employer expectations are changing with them.

FutureDotNow's research identified four AI capabilities that are becoming increasingly important for workers across all sectors: AI literacy and understanding; effective communication with AI systems; critical evaluation of AI outputs; and responsible and ethical use of AI.

Although the new standards address several of these areas, future updates could go further by strengthening:

- AI literacy, including understanding how AI systems work, their capabilities and limitations
- AI tool selection, helping workers choose appropriate tools for different tasks
- Prompt development and interaction skills, enabling people to communicate effectively with AI systems
- AI risk awareness and management, particularly around privacy, security and workplace use.

FutureDotNow also supports the principle that the Essential Digital Skills Standards and Framework should be reviewed regularly to ensure they keep pace with technological change. The review cycles for the Framework and Standards should be aligned, with timeframes clearly communicated, and strong coordination between DfE and DSIT (as stewards of the Framework).

### Conclusion

FutureDotNow welcomes the 2026 updates to the Essential Digital Skills Standards as a positive and pragmatic update that reflects many of our recommendations on embedding AI into essential digital skills. They reinforce the principle that AI should be part of everyday digital capability rather than a separate technical specialism.

However, the digital baseline will continue to evolve. As AI becomes increasingly embedded in workplaces and society, government, employers and educators must continue working together to ensure the UK's essential digital skills system remains relevant, practical and future-focused. The updated standards are an important milestone, but they should also be the foundation for the next phase of development.

### About FutureDotNow

FutureDotNow is a UK charity leading a coordinated, evidence-based mission to close the workforce essential digital skills gap, bringing together businesses, government and industry to drive systemic change and build a digitally confident workforce. Find out more at [www.futuredotnow.uk](https://www.futuredotnow.uk).

# Essential Digital Skills Framework - the 20 tasks for work

Set out in the Essential Digital Skills Framework, there are 20 digital tasks that government and industry agree are essential for work. These are broken down across five skill areas:



| Communicating                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Handling information and content                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Transacting                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Problem solving                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Being safe and legal online                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
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| <p>1. You can communicate in the workplace digitally using messaging applications (e.g. Email, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Slack, internal Intranet, WhatsApp)</p> <p>2. You can use workplace digital tools to create, share and collaborate with colleagues (e.g. Microsoft Teams, OneDrive, G-Suite, Office 365, WeTransfer, DropBox, WebEx, Slack)</p> <p>3. You can set up and manage an account on a professional online network/ community/ job site (e.g. LinkedIn, Total Jobs, Indeed)</p> | <p>4. You can follow your organisation's IT policies when sharing information internally and externally (e.g. classifying emails/documents, encrypting sensitive information, sharing appropriate information on social media)</p> <p>5. You can securely access, synchronise and share information at work across different devices (e.g. manage email, calendar or appointment system via different devices)</p> | <p>6. You can complete digital records on behalf of, or within your organisation (e.g. absence management, holidays, timesheets, expenses, tax returns)</p> <p>7. You can access salary and tax information digitally (e.g. password protected payslips, P60, P45)</p> | <p>8. You can find information online that helps you solve work related problems (e.g. search engines, IT helpdesk, software providers, peer networks)</p> <p>9. You can use appropriate software that is required of your day-to-day job (e.g. spreadsheets, online booking systems, HR management, workflow or sales management)</p> <p>10. You can improve your skills and ability to do new things at work using online tutorials, learning platforms and how-to guides (e.g. LinkedIn Learning, YouTube, iDEA, Skillssoft, internal learning platforms)</p> <p>11. You can improve your own and/or the organisation's productivity using digital tools (e.g. Trello, Microsoft Projects and Planner, Slack)</p> | <p>12. You can 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)</p> <p>13. You can set privacy and marketing settings for websites and your accounts (e.g. managing social media privacy settings, managing cookie settings, updating contact preferences)</p> <p>14. You can follow data protection guidelines online (e.g. follow data storage and retention guidelines, not sharing or using other people's data or media such as movies or music without their consent)</p> <p>15. You can respond to requests for authentication for online accounts (e.g. resetting forgotten passwords, two factor authentication, using a remote access key or authenticator app)</p> <p>16. You can identify secure websites (e.g. by looking for the padlock and 'https' in the address bar)</p> <p>17. You can 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)</p> <p>18. You can update your device software/ operating systems when necessary to prevent viruses and other risks (e.g. enabling automatic updates, or installing when prompted to do so)</p> <p>19. You can 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)</p> <p>20. You can be careful with what you share online as you know that online activity produces a permanent record that can be accessed by others (e.g. publicly shared photos, forums, personal information or opinions)</p> |

Find out more about the  
Essential Digital Skills Framework at  
[www.futuredotnow.uk/framework](http://www.futuredotnow.uk/framework)



# The AI-embedded Essential Digital Skills Framework

The AI-embedded Essential Digital Skills Framework sets out the digital skills and tasks all workers need to be able to carry out in an AI-driven world of work.

The wider Essential Digital Skills Framework also includes Skills for Life and the Foundation Skills that enable an individual to access technology at the most basic level (e.g., turning on a device, using a mouse).

FutureDotNow, in partnership with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, conducted a review of the Work element of the Essential Digital Skills Framework and made specific recommendations to ensure it reflects how AI, automation, and emerging technologies are reshaping the world of work. These recommendations are reflected in the AI-embedded Essential Digital Skills Framework.

For more information about the Framework and our work to ensure it keeps pace with evolving technology, visit [www.futuredotnow.uk/framework](http://www.futuredotnow.uk/framework).

## 25 tasks for work

### Handling information and content

1. **You can follow your organisation's IT policies when sharing information internally and externally** (e.g. classifying emails/documents, encrypting sensitive information, sharing appropriate information on social media, avoiding sharing sensitive data with unauthorised generative AI tools).
2. **You can securely access, synchronise and share information at work across different devices** (e.g. manage email, calendar or appointment system via different devices).

### Communicating

3. **You can communicate in the workplace digitally using messaging applications** (e.g. Email, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Slack, internal Intranet, WhatsApp).
4. **You can use workplace digital tools to appropriately create, share and collaborate with colleagues** (e.g. Microsoft Teams, OneDrive, G-Suite including Gemini, Office 365 including Copilot, WeTransfer, DropBox, WebEx, Slack, ChatGPT).
5. **You can set up and manage an account on a professional online network/community/job site** (e.g. LinkedIn, Total Jobs, Indeed).

### Transacting

6. **You can complete digital records on behalf of, or within my organisation** (e.g. absence management, holidays, timesheets, expenses, tax returns)
7. **You can access salary and tax information digitally** (e.g. password protected payslips, P60, P45)
8. **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

9. **You can find information online and use appropriate digital tools that help you solve work-related problems** (e.g. search engines, IT helpdesk, AI assistants, software providers, peer networks, authorised generative AI).
10. **You can improve your skills and ability to do new things at work using online tutorials, learning platforms, AI-assisted tools and how-to guides** (e.g. LinkedIn Learning, YouTube, AI learning assistants, internal learning platforms).

### Problem solving (cont.)

11. **You can use appropriate software that is required of your day-to-day job** (e.g. spreadsheets, online booking systems, HR management, workflow or sales management, AI-powered analytics, automated scheduling, intelligent document processing).
12. **You can improve your own and/or the organisation's productivity using digital tools and appropriate AI solutions** (e.g. *project management tools, collaboration platforms, AI-assisted task automation, meeting transcription tools*).
13. **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.**

### Staying safe, legal and responsible online

14. **You can act with caution online and understand that there are risks and threats involved in carrying out activities online, including when using AI tools** (e.g. use anti-virus software, classify and share information securely, follow data handling policies for AI systems, or avoid certain types of websites such as piracy websites, unauthorised AI services, deepfakes and AI powered scams).
15. **You can 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, understanding consent for AI training data, avoiding sharing copyrighted content with AI systems).
16. **You can recognise suspicious links and content, whether human or AI-generated, and know that clicking on these links or downloading unfamiliar attachments is a risk** (e.g. spam/phishing emails, AI-enhanced scams, deceptive texts, pop ups).
17. **You can be careful with what you share online as you know that online activity produces a permanent record that can be accessed by others, and may be used to train AI systems or influence algorithmic decisions about you** (e.g. publicly shared photos, forums, personal information or opinions, understanding how shared content may be used by AI systems).

### Staying safe, legal and responsible online (cont.)

18. **You can respond to requests for authentication for online accounts (e.g. resetting your password when you've forgotten it, two factor authentication, using a remote access key or an authenticator app).**
19. **You can identify secure websites (e.g. by looking for the padlock and 'https' in the address bar).**
20. **You can 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).
21. **You can update your device software/operating systems when necessary to prevent viruses and other risks (e.g. enabling automatic updates, or installing when prompted to do so).**
22. **You can set privacy and marketing settings for websites and your accounts** (e.g. managing social media privacy settings, managing cookie settings, updating contact preferences, opting out of AI-powered personalisation where appropriate)
23. **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).
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).
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).

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