



2026 Workforce Digital Skills Summit

Building a future-fit workforce

Supported by



EVENT SUMMARY AND KEY INSIGHTS

Summit overview

On Wednesday 22 April 2026, the third annual Workforce Digital Skills Summit brought together business leaders, policy-makers, delivery partners and sector experts to confront an urgent truth: **the UK will not unlock the benefits of AI, automation or digital transformation unless it first fixes its essential digital skills foundations.**

Opening the day, Baroness Lloyd, Minister for the Digital Economy, set out the national policy context for digital capability and AI adoption, underlining the central role of essential digital skills in productivity, inclusion and economic growth. From there, the Summit explored the reality facing employers and workers today – from the hidden middle of the workforce lacking essential skills, to the very real risks of cyber insecurity, weak digital confidence and uneven AI readiness.

Across the day, speakers moved from evidence to action: showcasing proof points that digital and AI skills improve employability outcomes, examining what AI means for the future of work, and sharing practical examples of what organisations can do now – regardless of sector, size or starting point.

One message came through loud and clear: this is an urgent challenge and bigger than any one organisation. If we want a step change in the nation's digital foundations, we must act now, and together.

The state of the nation: where we are now

Despite years of digital transformation and accelerating AI adoption, less than half of working-age adults in the UK have all the essential digital skills for work. These basic competencies like communication, handling information and staying safe online remain barriers to productivity, progression and inclusion.

Too many organisations are underestimating the scale of skills gaps inside their own workforces and these weak digital foundations risk making AI a divider rather than a multiplier.

As **Liz Williams MBE, Chief Executive of FutureDotNow**, put it in her opening remarks: ***“This is a 20-million-person challenge. It isn’t a niche problem, but it’s hidden in plain sight – in every sector, every region, and every age group. If we don’t address the basics, we will not realise the promise of AI at scale.”***

Throughout the day, five key themes emerged:

1. Essential digital skills are the bedrock of a future-fit workforce
2. Digital confidence directly affects employability and economic outcomes
3. AI will widen the divide unless foundations are fixed first
4. Both a learning challenge and a leadership challenge
5. Solutions exist, collaboration makes them scalable



1. Essential digital skills are the foundation of a future-fit workforce

Speakers repeatedly stressed that essential digital skills – now including AI essentials – are no longer optional, but underpin productivity, resilience and employability across every role, not just specialist or technical jobs.

Sir Peter Estlin, Chair of FutureDotNow, reflected on the coalition's long-term mission: *“We founded FutureDotNow to address the digital skills gap and what we’ve learned is that collective action is the only way to do this at scale. The hidden middle of the workforce can’t be left to fall behind as technology accelerates.”*

From frontline workers to senior leaders, lacking basic digital confidence quietly erodes effectiveness, slows work and increases reliance on informal workarounds.

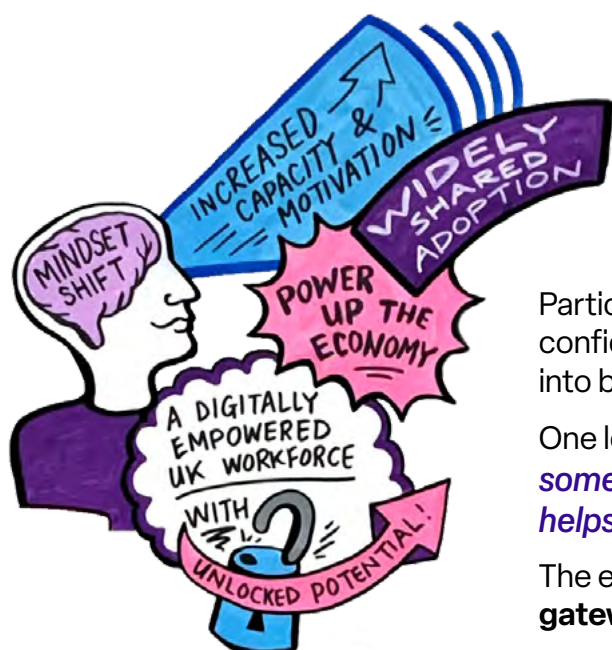
As **Kerry Harrison, Lancashire Digital Skills Partnership**, observed: *“Not knowing how to do simple digital tasks doesn’t just slow individuals down – it slows down everyone around them. Those tiny interruptions quietly eat away at productivity and confidence.”*

And AI only compounds the risk that training misses the mark and people are left further behind. Kerry continued: *“We are not going to maximize the use of AI if the essentials are not in place – doing training for AI without those foundations will be a waste of time. And for the 5% who have no essential digital skills, AI might as well be magic.”*



2. Digital confidence directly affects employability and economic outcomes

One of the strongest moments of the day came from the South-West employability proof-of-concept which has shown that embedding essential digital and AI skills into employability support dramatically improves job outcomes.



Julie Hawker MBE, Chief Executive of Cosmic, shared headline findings: *“Learners who were helped to build essential digital and AI skills were twice as likely to secure a job compared to the control group. Confidence came first, then capability, and then employment followed.”*

Participants didn’t just gain technical skills. They developed confidence, curiosity and a sense of belonging, which translated into better interviews, faster job starts and improved progression.

One learner summed up the mindset shift simply: *“Digital was something to overcome, not a goal. Now it’s something that helps me move forward.”*

The evidence was clear: **essential digital and AI skills are a gateway to work, not an add-on.**

3. AI will widen the divide unless foundations are fixed first future now

AI featured heavily throughout the Summit. Not as hype, but as a real and immediate accelerant of inequality if digital confidence is uneven.

Baroness Lloyd, Minister for the Digital Economy was explicit: *“Britain will not build an AI-ready workforce if too many people lack the basic digital foundations modern work requires. Essential digital skills are central to ensuring AI adoption delivers opportunity rather than exclusion.”*

For **AI implementation expert Danilo McGarry**, greater engagement with AI is urgently needed at every level of every business: *“You have to have a strategy when it comes to AI. No strategy*

is riskier than having the wrong strategy that you can adjust later... If you're not at C-suite level, you should be hassling them for an AI strategy that sets real objectives, guidelines and goals. And if you manage anybody, I would (immediately) set annual objectives that all members of your team should be doing something with AI.”

From cyber security to responsible AI use, speakers highlighted how human factors, not technology failures are the biggest risks. Without strong digital literacy, AI tools become harder to use safely, ethically and effectively, increasing risks for organisations and individuals alike.

In a stark session on cyber resilience, **Edyta Prazuch, Workforce Transformation Lead at Mercer** warned: *“Between 80 and 95 per cent of cyber breaches involve human factors. Cyber security is no longer an IT issue, it's an everyday skill for every worker.”*

4. Both a learning challenge and a leadership challenge

A recurring insight was that, when it comes to digital capability, leadership and organisational design matter as much as skills.

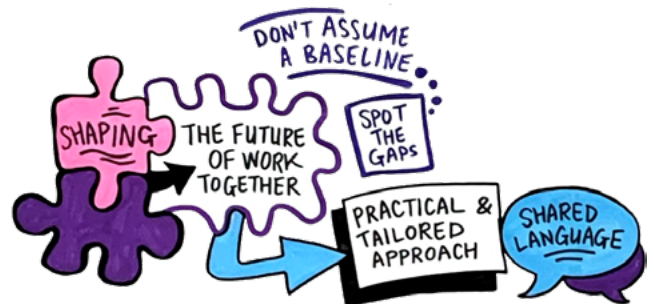
From construction to professional services, panellists stressed that organisations cannot rely on the workforce building skills from personal curiosity and experimentation, nor on the implementation of mandatory skills programmes. The most successful strategies are both top-down and bottom-up.

Andy Richards, Chief Digital & Information Officer, Amey, reflected: *“This has become a board-level issue. If leaders don't understand where their workforce really is today, digital transformation will stall – no matter how good the technology.”*

Similarly, **Adam Markson, Senior Managing Director at Accenture** observed: *“We're seeing individual productivity gains from AI, but not organisational productivity gains – because skills, change and operating models aren't moving together.”*

Examples of programmes that successfully boosted digital capability included those where:

- Skills were treated as a core business capability
- Leaders modelled learning and curiosity
- Upskilling was embedded into everyday tasks rather than standalone training sessions
- Peer support was made available
- Time and permission were given for learning and practice



5. Solutions exist, collaboration makes them scalable

The most hopeful theme of the day was that this is a solvable problem. Across the Summit, organisations shared examples of practical, replicable interventions for improving engagement in building workforce digital skills. These included:

- Skills baselining using the Essential Digital Skills Framework
- Confidence-led self-assessments
- Digital Champions and peer learning
- Bite-sized, in-the-flow learning
- Reframing “digital” around everyday frustrations
- Use existing tools, rather than building or buying new ones



As **Phil Smith CBE, Chair of Skills England**, noted: *“We have to simplify access to digital skills and collaborate. This only works if we do it together, across businesses, sectors and government.”*

The value of FutureDotNow’s role as a convener, coordinator and catalyst was repeatedly highlighted for bringing businesses together as collaborators, not competitors.

FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION: MAINTAINING MOMENTUM

The Summit closed with a clear challenge to everyone in the room: **do one thing, but do something.**

As **Caroline Haines from the City of London** summed it up at the start of the day:

“Today is about turning understanding into action, building confidence, capability and opportunity, and ensuring no one is left behind in our digitally powered economy.”



And **Liz Williams** closed the day by reminding delegates: *“If everyone here takes one action, the collective impact is enormous. This isn’t about boiling the ocean, it’s about deliberate, joined-up progress.”*



When it comes to making progress and truly taking the action needed to build a workforce with the core digital capability to thrive, **Kerry Harrison** may have put it most succinctly: *“Changes start with one person doing something. Will you be that person?”*



Whatever stage your organisation is at, here are some actions you can take to maintain momentum from the Summit and help to build a digitally capable, future-fit workforce.

1. Get a clear baseline

Knowing that hidden gaps are the norm, use the Essential Digital Skills Framework (including AI essentials) to understand where your people really are.

The AI-embedded Essential Digital Skills Framework

[Download here](#)

Colleague Self-Assessment Guide

[Download here](#)



2. Understand your opportunity, build the business case

- Use data and benchmarking to quantify the productivity, transformation and inclusion gains from digital upskilling
- Understand how you perform against the skills gap across your sector and region

The Economic Impact of Closing the Work Digital Skills Gap

[Download here](#)

'The Ripple Effect' social value report

[Download here](#)

The Sector and Place Essential Digital Skills Heatmaps

[Download here](#)



3. Take targeted action

- Focus on building the essential digital and AI skills as a prerequisite to more advanced tools
- Build confidence, safety and curiosity
- Encourage peer support and organic in-work learning opportunities



Learning that clicks:

Evidence-based actions to help employers design training that boosts workforce digital skills

[Download here](#)



Become a FutureDotNow member

Gain access to exclusive resources and events to help improve the digital skills of the workforce.

[Find out more](#)

4. Be part of the national movement

Join a national community of cross-sector employers working together to close the UK's workforce essential digital skills gap.



[Sign the Workforce Digital Skills Charter](#)

[Find out more](#)



[Join FutureDotNow's delivery plan teams](#)

Help us tackle today's most pressing challenges

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THANK YOU



We'd like to thank our hosts, the City of London Corporation, for providing our spectacular venue and making the Workforce Digital Skills Summit possible.

Thanks too, to the organisations and individuals who supported the summit, including all our speakers and panellists.



Final thanks go to our amazing live event illustrator Jenny Leonard for capturing the spirit and key messages of the day so beautifully, and to our friends at Accenture who made Jenny's attendance possible.

You can see extracts from the final illustration throughout this document and [download the full image here](#).

See you next year!



[VIEW AND DOWNLOAD THE EVENT PHOTOS](#)