



T Level Thursday

Help us transform the tech
talent pipeline in Birmingham



In association with

mazars

Department for Education
and Nash Squared

8 February 2024

Nash Squared and the Department for Education, in association with Mazars, were delighted to host an event as part of National Apprenticeship Week, to discuss the UK tech talent pipeline and showcase T Levels – the technical qualification providing a wider entry route into technology for 16–19-year-olds.

Speakers:

Jim Dolan, Partner, Technology and Digital Consulting Practice, Mazars

Robert Grimsey, Group Marketing Director, Nash Squared

Andy Heyes, Managing Director UK & Central Europe, Harvey Nash

Phil Callow, Managing Director, Ark ICT Solutions Ltd

Andrea Kay, Head of T Level Industry Placements Policy, Department for Education

Jenny Docherty, Apprenticeship & Funding Lead, Housing 21

Nayan Patel, Associate IT Service Engineer and former T Level student, Housing 21

Key takeaways from the event

- Technical education is the future and T Levels form part of the answer to the UK's lagging productivity and skills shortage.
- T Levels can assist with the government's levelling up agenda by anchoring regional tech clusters, and they enable business to attract and retain employees without having to pivot to London for talent.
- T Levels can broaden diversity in tech by offering an entry route for students from backgrounds not traditionally associated with the sector.
- Skills shortages in the technology sector are a perennial concern voiced by industry decision-makers. T Levels will help the country equip young people with work-ready, practically-focused skills and attributes that will keep the wheels of the economy turning.



What are T Levels?

First introduced in 2020, T Levels are a further education route that allows young people to specialise in skills such as cyber security and software design through a combination of both classroom teaching and an industry placement of at least 315 hours – approximately 45 days.

The placement is at the heart of each T Level course. It allows students to experience life in the workplace and utilise the skills they have developed at school or college. For employers, hosting placements offer early access to the brightest young tech talent, helping to fill skills shortages and inspire the next generation to pursue a career in tech, especially those students for whom a career in tech is not an obvious choice.

There are currently over 250 colleges and providers offering T Levels, with 18 qualifications now available and three more to come in the summer. Andrea Kay from the Department for Education reported that over 16,000 students are studying T Levels on pathways designed in alignment with industry needs.

Cyber Security T Level

Nash Squared, along with other technology businesses, worked with the Department for Education to develop a curriculum for a new cyber security T Level pathway, which launched in September 2023. Nash Squared have since partnered with DfE to increase the number of employers offering T Level placements in England. The event in Birmingham was a key part of this activity, bringing together employers, students and educational providers to raise awareness of the qualification and the wider importance of technical education.

Digital Support Services T Level

The 2023 Digital Leadership Report – an annual survey of senior decision-makers by Nash Squared – found that cybersecurity remains a top priority, with 25% of digital leaders still struggling to find the right skills, at a time when over 70% of organisations are concerned about organised cybercrime and 45% are worried about cyberattacks from foreign powers.

This is where the T Level in Digital Support Services has a role to play. This qualification gives students a grounding in all aspects of digital, including software design and virtual/cloud environments, and covers the key areas of cyber security, privacy and confidentiality. With the government reporting an acute cyber skills shortage of 11,200 last July, T Levels can ease pressure on the sector and ensure a pipeline of talent moving forward.

Tech talent pipeline

In order to remain a global technology leader, the UK needs to have a broad range of world-leading technical expertise that can be adaptable to an ever-changing technological landscape. The tech sector – like many other industries – struggles to meet its entry level talent needs and build a sustainable pipeline of future employees. Skills shortages and gaps remain a perennial issue for the tech sector and many of the speakers in Birmingham echoed this point: Andy Heyes, Managing Director of Harvey Nash UK & Central Europe, referenced their 2023 Digital Leadership Report which found that 54% of business leaders experienced a shortage of technology talent. He remarked during the event that the “biggest skills in demand remain cyber, expertise in machine learning, data science and software engineering”. This is where T Levels can play such a crucial role in bridging the gap between classroom learning and the workplace and provide a route to the well-paid, skilled jobs of the future, because many employers retain students on completion of their course.

When asked whether bringing new talent into a company fosters greater enthusiasm and innovation, Phil Callow, Managing Director of Ark ICT Solutions, responded emphatically that ‘young people generally bring in a real amount of enthusiasm and a thirst for knowledge that is rare in senior recruitment’. As an employer who has taken on numerous T Level students and offered 50 work experience placements last year, Mr Callow has all but given up on traditional routes to recruit tech talent. In the past he found that the quality of the talent coming through these routes and, to a large extent, their salary expectations were out of kilter.

He found a solution by working in close partnership with a local college: Ark uses work placements to ‘cherry pick students before they get released to the wider job market’ and essentially acts as Boston College’s nominated technology work experience provider.

“It is a phenomenal route of getting talent into your company if you spend the time to enable that upskilling”, he added.



Diversity matters

'It is not just a question of attracting talent into the sector; there is also an issue with the make-up of that talent', according to Andy Heyes of Harvey Nash.

"Progress on gender representation in the sector has been glacial".

The 2023 Digital Leadership Report found that only 23% of technology professionals are women, and this reduces to 14% when you look at leadership positions. Companies are increasingly keen to make sure that the people developing influential technology are truly reflective of the needs of their customers.

Traditional routes into tech tend to be dominated by students from certain demographic backgrounds. That is why in recent years alternative pathways including apprenticeships and placement schemes have attracted increasing attention and investment. Traditional pathways, such as A Levels and university, are not suited to everyone and may result in some young people being denied the opportunity to develop to their full potential. Building a wider pipeline of talent at entry level helps address skills shortages and increases diversity, enabling businesses to better reflect the communities in which they operate. T Levels act as a vehicle for social mobility for those students who feel the more academic route is not for them but now have a direct route into the technology sector.

West Midlands tech sector

The importance of the West Midlands as a centre for economic growth and innovation cannot be understated, and this was reflected in the wide variety of organisations represented at the event in Birmingham. The tech sector is often criticised as being too London-centric and this is not a baseless charge; however, Birmingham it is not only the second largest metropolitan area, it also hosts the number one regional tech cluster, with over 65,000 people employed by 12,500 businesses.

T Levels can help level up regional economies by diversifying the talent pipeline: if tech companies can look to local schools and colleges for entry level talent through a T Levels pathway, they do not need to compete with other sectors for graduates, many of whom gravitate to London and the South East for employment, meaning that regions across the UK benefit from innovative local economies and well-paid, secure employment.

About Nash Squared

With over 3,300 employees in 48 locations across the UK, USA, Europe and Asia-Pacific, Nash Squared is a leading global provider of talent and technology solutions. They have helped many of the world's organisations recruit highly skilled technology talent, including Meta and leading banks, supporting the British workforce into high-skilled and long-lasting jobs. Their mission is for Nash Squared to tackle the technology skills deficit within the United Kingdom by empowering employees to long-lasting careers.

Call for action

Get in touch with Nash Squared if you would like to learn about T Levels or meet a T Level provider in your constituency via: [**nashsquared@connectpa.co.uk**](mailto:nashsquared@connectpa.co.uk)

To support employers, the Department for Education have a dedicated T Level employer website where you will find practical resources including case studies, [connect with T Level providers](#) and free to attend webinars to help you plan and host T Level industry placements.

The Department has also partnered with the Strategic Development Network to offer a comprehensive support package that includes 1:1 support for employers who are thinking about hosting an industry placement. If you would value a call with an industry placement specialist to help you decide, plan or prepare to host placements, you can request this through the [T Level employer website](#).

Photos from the event can be accessed [here](#)