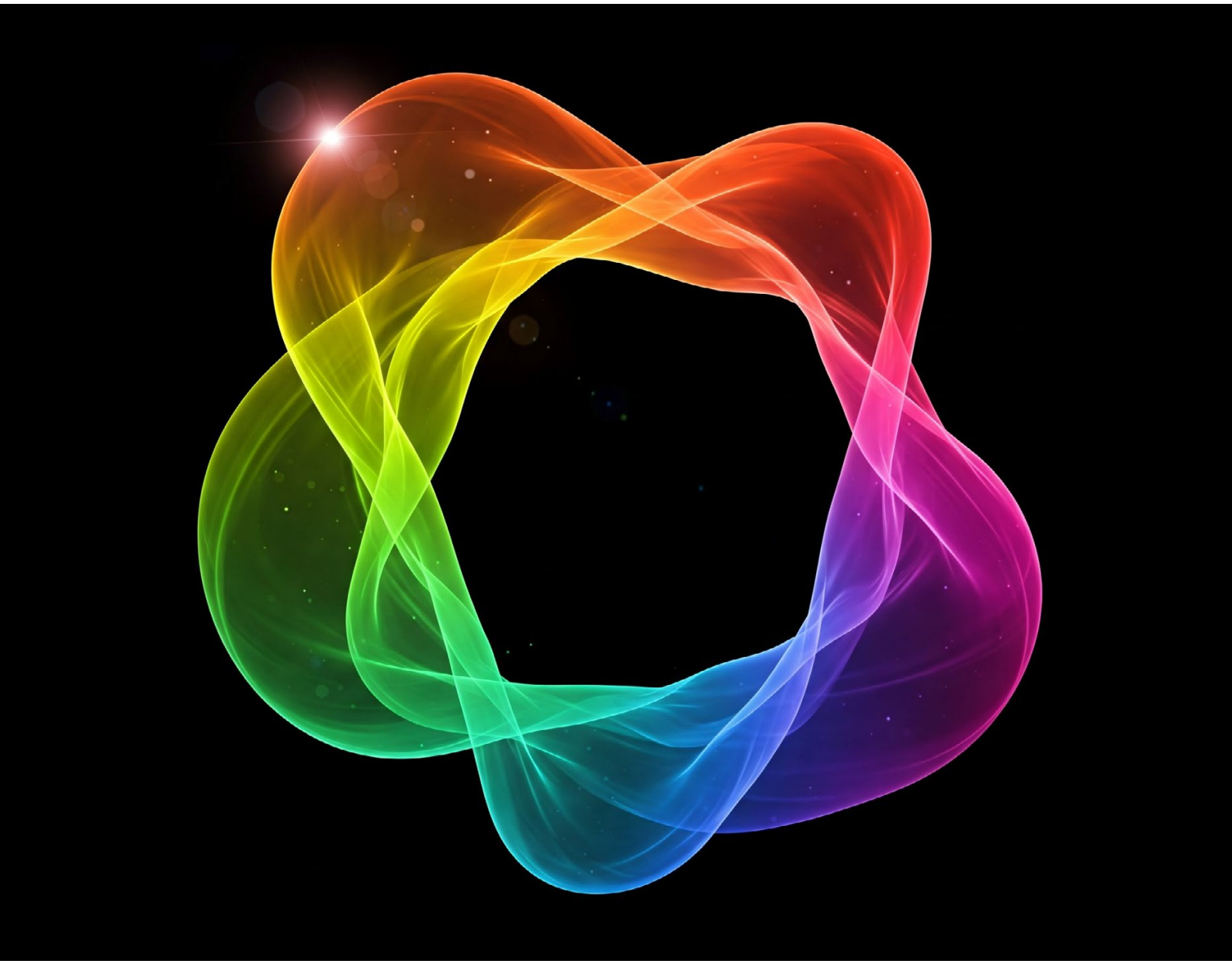
Skills Builder PARTNERSHIP

ESSENTIAL SKILLS TRACKER

Driving social mobility and growth through the AI transition



EDGE FOUNDATION

2025

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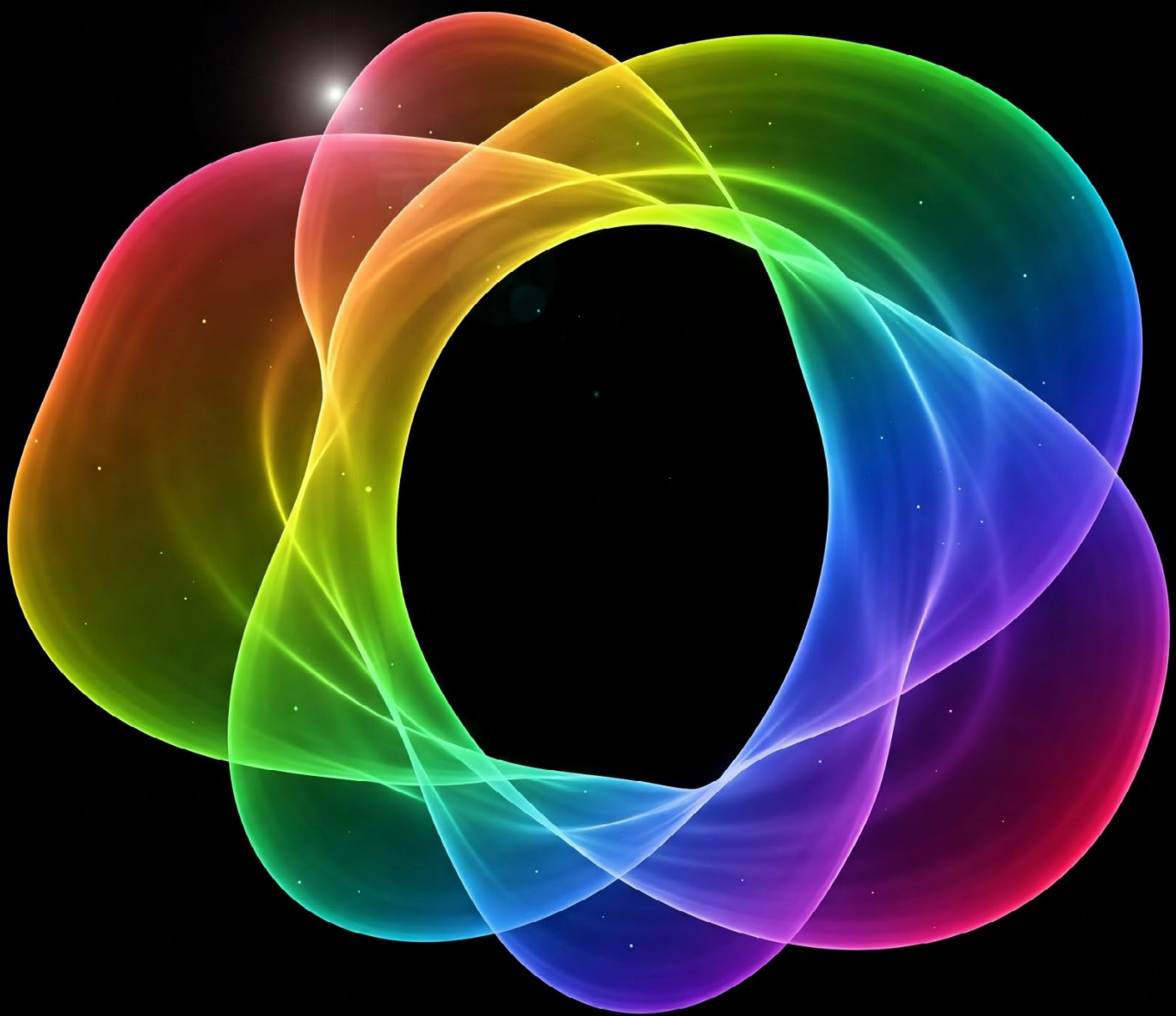


Summary

You don't have to attend many roundtables, or scroll very far on Linkedin, before encountering the question: which skills do we need for an AI-enabled future? This paper finds that essential skills - the highly transferrable skills defined by the Universal Framework - are a core part of the skillset required.

We do not seek to make predictions about the trajectory of AI and its impact on jobs. Instead, this paper focuses on what is happening right now and locates that within the existing literature.

This research finds higher levels of essential skills are crucial for individuals and the economy to successfully navigate the AI transition: driving AI adoption, boosting productivity and wages, and mitigating negative impacts on social mobility. Failure to invest in these skills risks exacerbating inequalities.

UK workers value opportunities to build essential skills almost as much as pay, and want to see their employers using the Universal Framework to inform staff development.

The job market is changing, and most workers are concerned about the future. Essential skills emerge as vital not just for society today, but to help us adapt to new technologies and ways of working.

Findings

Essential skills enable AI adoption.

- The workers who have been first to adopt AI in its different forms tend to have higher levels of essential skills.
- Moving from the lower to upper quartile skill score is associated with a 30% relative increase in AI usage at work.
- Creativity skills are the more pronounced predictor of AI adoption: those who frequently use AI have an average skill score 21% higher than those who don't.
- Mastering the highest skill steps has the biggest impact on AI adoption. For example, workers that use AI score 35% higher for Step 14 of Planning (Project Planning: I use planning tools to organise complex projects). This suggests that the ability to deploy essential skills in more complex, strategic, and innovative ways is driving early and frequent AI adoption.

Essential skills and AI drive higher wages

- Moving from the lower to upper quartile essential skill score is associated with a wage premium of between 8.9% and 14.6%. In 2025 this equates to a premium of £3,700 to £6,100.
- Those who report regular usage of AI earn £8,300 more per year than peers. Given those with higher essential skills are more likely to use AI, there is a meaningful risk of exacerbating inequalities in the UK.

AI deepening the skills trap and inequality

- Previous research found that individuals from less advantaged backgrounds have fewer opportunities to build essential skills, go on to have lower levels of essential skills and value them less, go into lower paid, lower skills jobs, which in turn provide fewer opportunities to build essential skills and ultimately enjoy lower job and life satisfaction.
- What emerges from this data is a picture of AI exacerbating the skills trap: fewer opportunities to build essential skills results in lower essential skills, which in turn results in lower pay and lower (or slower) use of AI, which leads to a further reduction in pay. Without addressing this spiral, barriers to social mobility may increase.

Anxiety, AI and the essential skills counterbalance

- Individuals required to use AI daily by their employer report 43% higher than average anxiety.
- Moving from the lower quartile to upper quartile adapting score is associated with a 9% predicted decrease in anxiety. For speaking and teamwork this correlates to a 7% decrease in anxiety. This suggests that building essential skills can help workers to embrace AI adoption.

Essential skills can ease the job transition

- A majority (55%) of UK workers reported the increased need to learn how to use new technologies in order to do their job.
- There's consensus among a large majority that essential skills will help with adapting to using new technology, with 82% agreeing.
- Those who both frequently use AI and have a higher skill score have a more positive view on the future than their peers, who otherwise feel uncertain.
- Only 19% of workers think AI will replace their job, 72% think it will take other people's. This could hamper adoption, meaning essential skills could play an important role preparing people for a transition they don't yet expect.

Workers call for opportunities to build essential skills

- 82% of UK working adults agree that essential skills will help them adapt to using new technology.
- Three-quarters of workers want employers to use the Universal Framework as part of professional development, and 67% within performance appraisals.
- For those who are planning to change jobs in the next 12 months, 80% would be influenced by opportunities to build essential skills. This is just behind higher pay (89%) and flexible working (83%).

Implications in education and impact

For a government targeting inclusive productivity growth, the evidence is clear that essential skills are core to harnessing the AI revolution. As technology changes rapidly, the skills that underpin rapid learning and effective application of ever-evolving technical skills must form a core part of the skills landscape.

AI looks likely to continue to be contained within products and tools (as the adage goes, AI is whatever doesn't work yet). So its use follows that of any other technical tool or skill: to be rapidly adopted and made fully effective, individuals require essential skills.

By the time children who are in primary school now enter the workforce, AI tools and products are likely to be unrecognisable from their current instantiation. So while just "teaching AI" might be an instinctive reaction to technological change, the research suggests that building learners' essential skills should form a core part of a complete education. This way, learners will have the skills not only to adopt the AI of today, but also fully realise the benefits of the tools of tomorrow.

Implications for employers

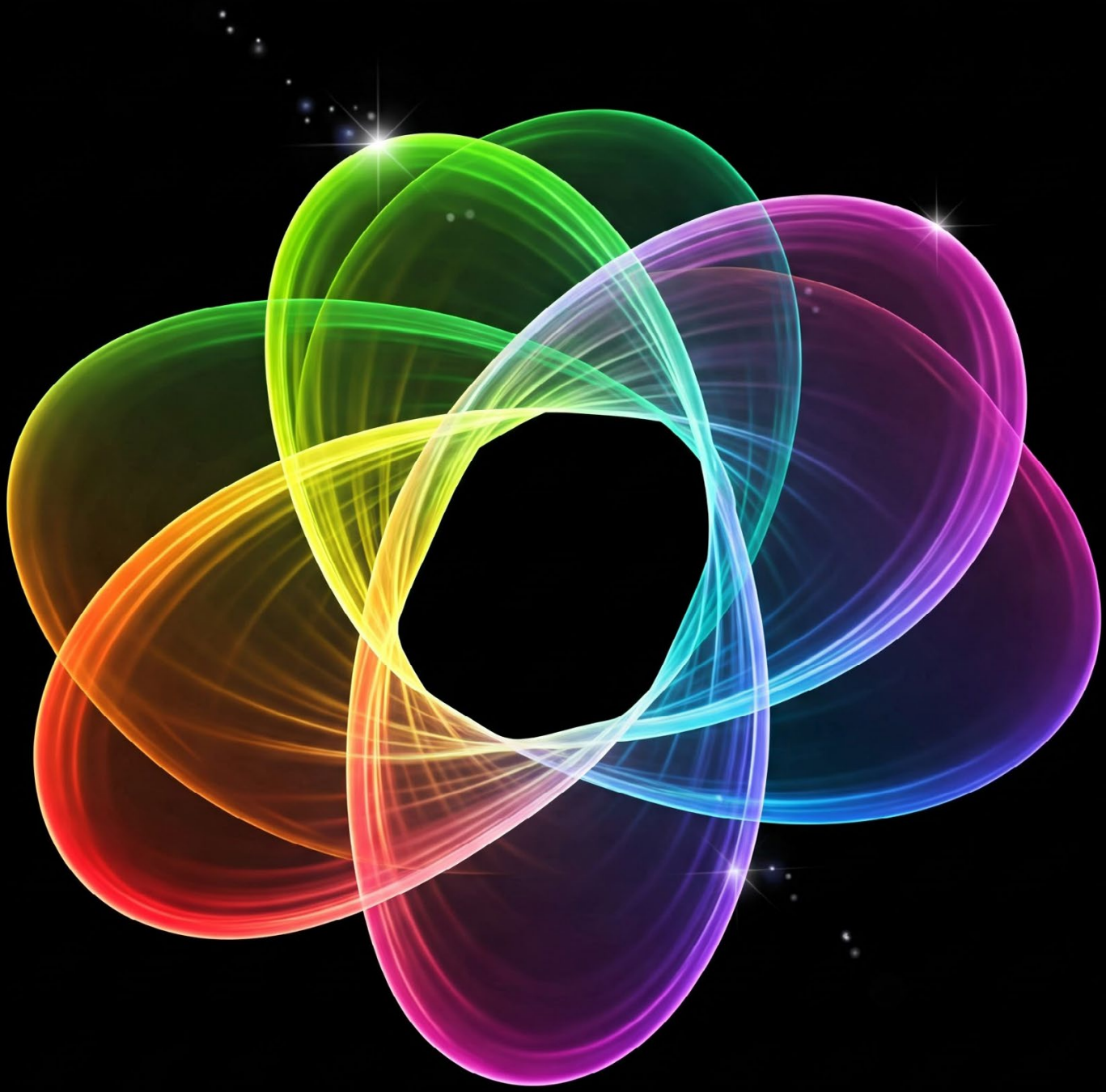
Workers are calling out for more high-quality opportunities to build essential skills. Three-quarters think their employers should use the Universal Framework as part of professional development and two-thirds think it should form part of performance appraisals.

In the workforce, anxiety and concern for the future are high. But not in individuals who have higher levels of essential skills. Creating opportunities for building these highly transferable skills is a way for employers to help workers embrace inevitable technological change.

This upskilling is likely to improve worker retention and attraction - particularly for higher skilled and higher paid employees. Opportunities to build essential skills are in the top three considerations for employees looking to move jobs.

As well as keeping workers happy, building essential skills is likely to have two waves of positive outcomes on productivity: firstly through the direct benefits of higher essential skill levels and secondly through effective adoption of AI.

0. Introduction



0. Introduction

This is the third paper within the Essential Skills Tracker series to assess the essential skills of the nation via a nationally representative sample of the working age UK population. We are able to build upon previous research to compare how the skills of the nation are changing.

Since Essential Skills Tracker 2023, advancements and accessibility of AI has increased and, with this, the labour market and workforce have adapted too.[1] This paper is the first in the Tracker series to focus on AI usage, its impact on UK working adults, and how this relates to essential skills and social mobility.

Context

There is a well-established relationship between higher levels of essential skills and life outcomes.[2, 3] There is also some emerging evidence - alongside broad opinion - that essential skills are likely to grow in importance as AI becomes both more prevalent and more powerful in the workplace.

The increase in adoption, usage and abilities of AI have been changing the workplace at an accelerating rate, with OpenAI's release of ChatGPT in 2021 being considered a significant driving force in this.[4, 5] Large Language Models ("LLM"s) garner a lot of attention, but other areas of AI such as computer vision and predictive machine learning are also being applied increasingly commonly in both existing and new businesses and products.[6] Systemic changes due to AI are predicted to have a significant impact on the future job market, with estimates that up to 800 million full time workers could be displaced by 2030.

In addition to job displacement, up to 375 million workers may need to transition into entirely new occupations, and learn new skills to do so.[7, 8] The potential economic transformation is significant, with projections suggesting AI "could raise UK national income by between 5 per cent and 14 per cent by 2050. equivalent to more than £300 billion a year in today's terms" under favourable adoption scenarios.[9] Google estimates this number to be as high as £400bn.[10]

1. See, for example, Resolution Foundation (2025). *Yanked Away*
2. Seymour, W & Craig, R (2023). *Essential Skills Tracker 2023*
3. Bocock, L., Del Pozo, J. and Hillary, J. (2024). *Rethinking skills gaps and solutions. Working Paper 4 of The Skills Imperative 2035: Essential skills for tomorrow's workforce.* Slough: NFER.
4. Bernard Marr (2023). *A Short History Of ChatGPT: How We Got To Where We Are Today.* Forbes.
5. Ibid
6. McKinsey (2023). *The state of AI in 2023: Generative AI's breakout year.*
7. McKinsey (2024). *Jobs lost, jobs gained: What the future of work will mean for jobs, skills, and wages*
8. Ibid
9. Tony Blair Institute (2024). *The Impact of AI on the Labour Market*
10. Google (2023). *Google's Economic Impact in the UK 2023*

You therefore don't have to look far to find someone asking the question: what are the skills that our societies and workforces require to thrive in the AI-transition? The UK government, for example, has set out an AI Opportunities Action Plan, while TBI state, "The UK's labour-market infrastructure will therefore need to be upgraded to be able to deal with this change, and workers will need transferable skills or to be retrained in new skills to take advantage of the new opportunities on offer."[11, 12]

The impact these changes are having on the labour market is emerging in employer data and employer views. In 2025, upskilling employees - previously the fifth most urgent concern in 2024 - replaced wellbeing as the top HR challenge for employers in the UK .[13]

In education, a recent literature review found that "All articles underscore the importance of a diverse set of competencies for students to succeed in a future influenced by AI and emerging technologies to ensure that the students are well-rounded and adaptable, including soft skills..."[14]

This paper therefore sets out to understand what role essential skills are already playing in AI adoption, and how they can play a key role in successful labour market transitions.

What are essential skills?

Essential skills are those highly transferable skills that everyone needs to do almost any job, which make specific knowledge and technical skills fully productive. These are therefore distinct from basic skills (literacy, numeracy and digital skills) and technical skills (specific to a particular sector or role, sometimes drawing off a particular body of knowledge). In the research literature, they are sometimes referred to as (inter alia) "transversal", "higher order cognitive", "soft" and "life" skills.

This is the first paper in the tracker series to utilise the updated Universal Framework. Launched in January 2025, the Universal Framework 2.0 was developed after a rigorous review of the previous version of the Framework. Combining expert input, consultation and user testing alongside data analysis of real-life usage and semantic analysis of other leading skills frameworks, this review ensured the Universal Framework 2.0 is the world's leading way of building and measuring essential skills as measured by useability, completeness and relevance.[15]

11. Secretary of State Science, Innovation and Technology (2025). *AI Opportunities Action Plan*
12. Ibid
13. SD Worx (2025). *UK Employers Rank Reskilling as Top HR Challenge for 2025*
14. Babashahi, Leili & Barbosa, Carlos Eduardo & Lima, Yuri & Lyra, Alan & Santos, Herbert & Argôlo, Matheus & de Almeida, Marcos & Souza, Jano. (2024). *AI in the Workplace: A Systematic Review of Skill Transformation in the Industry.* Administrative Sciences. 14. 127. 10.3390/admsci14060127.
15. Ravenscroft, Craig, Stewart (2025). *Universal Framework Review 2025: Final Report*

What is a “skill score”?

The Universal Framework breaks the 8 essential skills down into a sequence of 16 steps, going from absolute beginner through to mastery. Assessment against the framework, as was undertaken for this research, uses a likert scale of application. “Never” using a skill step returns 0, while “almost always” using the step when appropriate returns 1. This provides a skill score between 0 and 16 for each of the 8 skills. This skill score is averaged across the 8 skills and often presented in this way in our research.

1. Essential Skills enable AI adoption

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The increase in AI capabilities and accessibility is resulting in many rapid changes to work and daily life.[16] Given the pace and unpredictability of these changes, having a workforce that is able to adapt and thrive is vital. However, this leads to the question of how best to prepare the workforce to ensure future success in work and life.

To understand what is happening already, we gathered data on UK working adults' use of AI, both in and outside of work. We then categorised individuals into three categories based on AI usage: those who never use AI, those who sometimes use AI, and those who frequently use AI.

At a national level, only 26% of workers report already using AI at work, and 32% using it outside of work.[17] This is similar to recent findings from Google, that 34% are using AI at work. This was further broken down into those who are required to use it by their employers compared to those that do so freely.

	Never	Less than once a month	Monthly	Weekly	Daily
Generative AI: At work, as required by my employer	73%	8%	8%	7%	3%
Generative AI: At work, but not required by my employer	62%	11%	13%	6%	7%
Generative AI: Outside of work	50%	19%	14%	8%	9%
Other AI: At work, as required by my employer	81%	4%	7%	5%	3%
Other AI: At work, but not required by my employer	80%	5%	7%	4%	5%
Other AI: Outside of Work	68%	12%	9%	6%	6%

Fig 1: breakdown of reported AI usage for working age UK adults

Modelling essential skill levels by age and AI usage shows that those who frequently use AI have an average skill score around 6% higher than those who do not use AI, controlling for education, region and job type. This is statistically significant at a 0.00 level. Looking at it from the other direction, moving from the lower to upper quartile skill score is associated with a 30% relative increase in AI usage at work.

16. Babashahi, Leili & Barbosa, Carlos Eduardo & Lima, Yuri & Lyra, Alan & Santos, Herbert & Argôlo, Matheus & de Almeida, Marcos & Souza, Jano. (2024). *AI in the Workplace: A Systematic Review of Skill Transformation in the Industry.* Administrative Sciences. 14. 127. 10.3390/admsci14060127.
17. Google (2025). *AI Works*

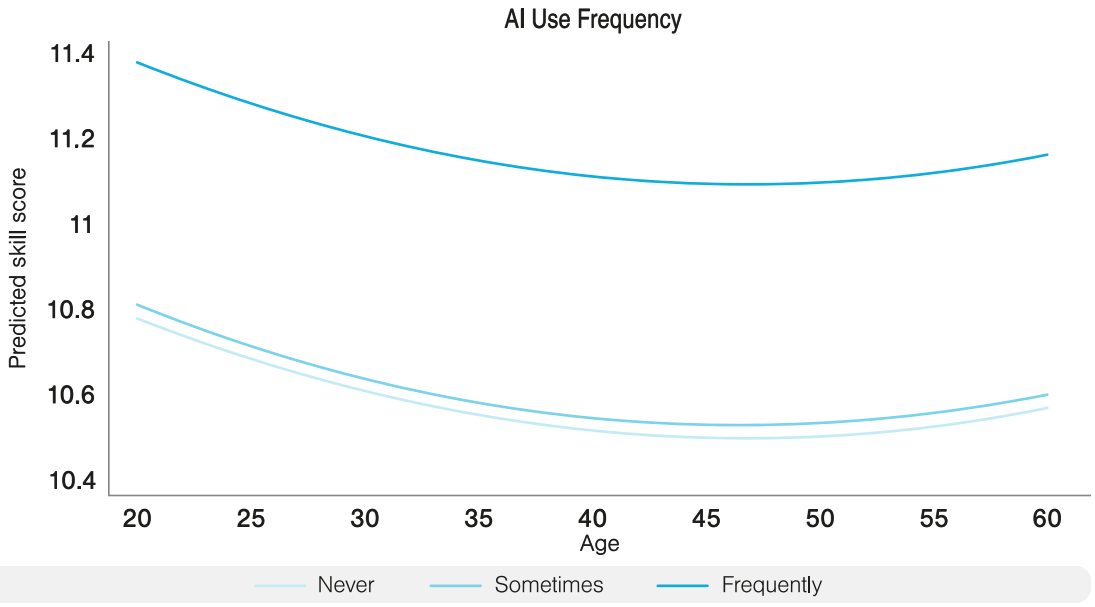

Fig 2: Predicted Essential Skill Score at each age based on frequency of AI usage.

Looking at individual skills, the skill differing the most by AI usage is Creativity; those who frequently use AI have an average skill score 21% higher than those who don't. The differences in scores suggests that having higher levels of creativity skills makes it easier and more likely for an individual to use AI.

Skill	Increase (%) in average skill score for individuals who use AI regularly relative to those that don't
Listening	4%
Speaking	13%
Problem Solving	14%
Creativity	21%
Planning	12%
Adapting	10%
Teamwork	10%
Leadership	14%

Fig 3: Average skill score differences by skill for people depending on their AI usage

For many skills, the later steps are where the greater disparities exist between those who use AI, and those who do not.

Looking at Speaking, for example, the initial skill step 'Sharing clearly: I communicate clearly with someone I know' has a similar average response from those who do use AI frequently and those who never use AI. Although the disparities are not linear, for step 10 'Communicating sensitively: I talk about difficult or sensitive topics effectively' those who frequently use AI have an average score 11% higher than those who don't. Step 15 'Presenting: I present to an audience when required' is where the difference in average score peaks for Speaking; those who frequently use AI have an average score 42% higher than those who never use AI.

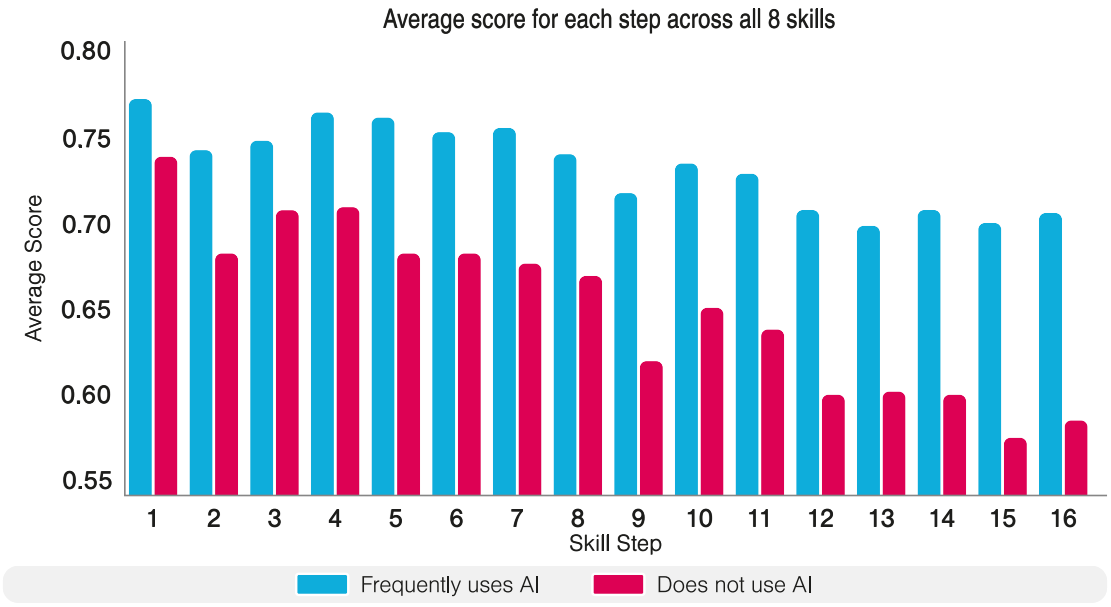

Fig 4: Average score for each skill step based on AI usage shows big differences for higher skill steps

The ten steps with the greatest difference between those who use AI and those who don't are:

Universal Framework skill and step	Difference (percent)
Speaking 15 - Presenting: I present to an audience when required	41.79
Planning 14 - Project Planning: I use planning tools to organise complex projects	34.68
Speaking 9 - Sharing Visuals: I use images, charts or diagrams when it helps my communication	29.25
Leadership 9 - Allocating Roles: I allocate roles based on strengths and weaknesses	28.79
Planning 15 - Adaptive Planning: I use data to evaluate progress and make adaptations	26.36
Creativity 12 - Prototyping: I create quick tests of an idea	33.64
Creativity 16 - Championing Creativity: I nurture cultures of creativity and innovation	27.17
Adapting 16 - Being Enterprising: I capitalise on opportunities	26.22
Creativity 15 - Facilitating Creativity: I share creative tools for collective innovation	30.45
Teamwork 16 - Improving Culture: I improve the team culture	22.55
Problem Solving 15 - Evaluating Approaches: I evaluate the success of strategic plans	23.19

Essential skill levels and distributions in the population are relatively stable. In contrast, AI is a new technology, which has only been adopted at scale in the last few years. Workers' essential skills predated their adoption of AI. There is therefore a clear directionality: people with higher levels of essential skills have been the first to adopt AI.

It's predicted that job displacement and changes due to AI will require individuals to learn more skills - including using AI itself.[18, 19] If this plays out, those who frequently use AI will be at an advantage when this occurs. Their higher levels of essential skills, which are highly transferable, will make transitions into new roles easier. It's therefore possible that the AI wage premium will grow further and those with lower essential skills, who use AI less, could be at a significant disadvantage.

18. McKinsey. (2024). *Jobs lost, jobs gained: What the future of work will mean for jobs, skills, and wages*
19. Ibid

2. Essential skills and AI drive higher income

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Essential skills wage premium

Research has shown that there is a link between higher essential skills and an increased wage. In 2023 it was found that moving from the lower quartile essential skill score to the upper quartile essential skill score was associated with a wage premium of between 9.4% and 12.0%. This equated to an extra £3,600 to £4,600 each year for each average UK full time worker.

These findings were further validated by recent research from NFER, which - using a novel approach - also found a wage premium for higher levels of essential skills.[20]

The latest UK data - using the Universal Framework 2.0 - reveals the essential skills wage premium continues to be a very significant variable in productivity. Moving from the lower quartile essential skill score to the upper quartile essential skill score is associated with a wage premium of between 8.9% and 14.6%. In 2025 terms this equates to a premium of £3,700 to £6,100 each year for each average UK full time worker.

In addition to earning more when in work, having a higher skill score reduces the likelihood of being unemployed or out of work. Moving from the lower to upper quartile skill score reduces the likelihood of being unemployed by 44%, and the likelihood of being out of work or education by 38%.

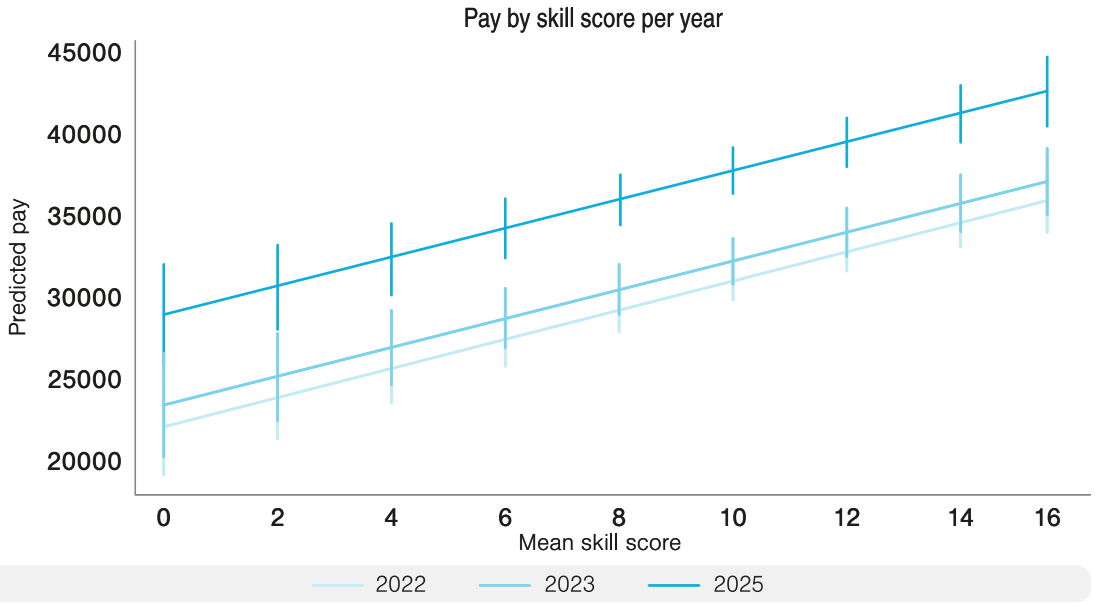

Fig 5: Graph of pay by skill score for 2022, 2023 and 2025 AI wage premium

20. Bocock, L., Del Pozo, J. and Hillary, J. (2024). *Rethinking skills gaps and solutions. Technical Supplement Part A to Working Paper 4 of The Skills Imperative 2035: Essential skills for tomorrow's workforce.* Slough: NFER.

AI wage premium

Frequency of AI usage by UK workers also predicts wages. Our dataset covers usage of generative AI and other types, both in and outside of work. Those who report regular usage of AI earn £8,300 more per year than those with the same skill score who never use AI, when controlling for other variables. This is comparable to a 14% wage premium found previously for those with "AI capital".[21]

In calculating the AI usage wage premium, all individuals included were able to correctly identify the definition of AI, and so this gap is not explained by basic understanding or knowledge of AI.

Industry and education levels were not predictors of AI usage, and controlling for these did not alter the significance of AI usage on the wage premium. There are two obvious compelling hypotheses to explain this:

1. The most productive employees, who earn more, have been the first to adopt AI irrespective of their job or industry;
2. The most productive companies pay more than comparators in their industry, and are the earliest adopters of new technologies.

In either case, AI adoption appears to be a proxy for productivity. As we have seen, essential skills predict AI adoption. And so a more nuanced picture emerges: essential skills boost productivity through a number of mechanisms, one of which is now AI adoption.

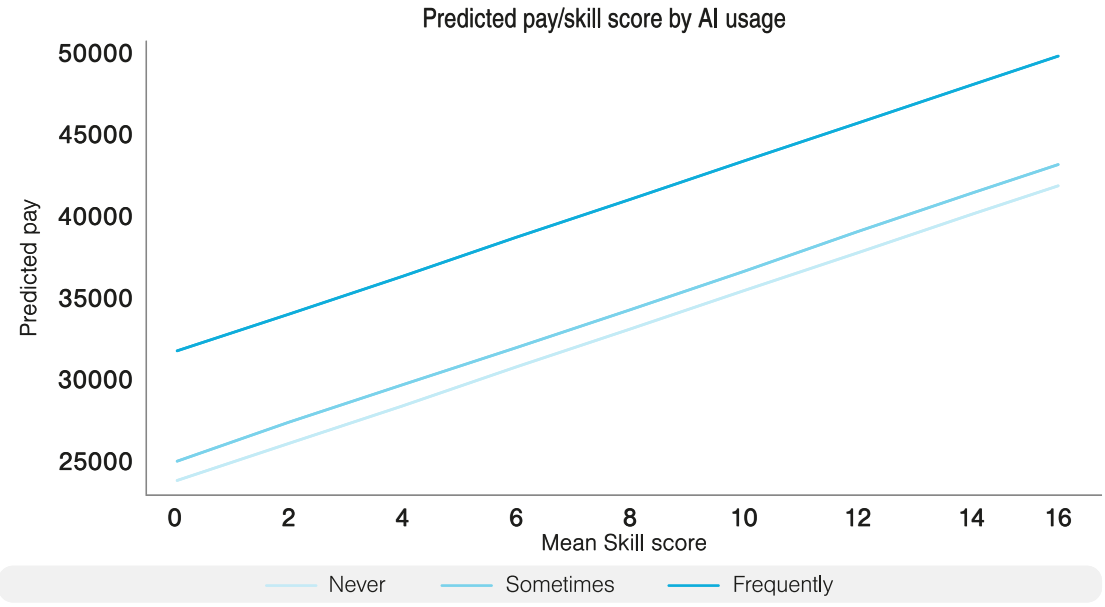

Fig 6: Income increases with AI usage and essential skill level

21. Drydakis, N. (2024). *Artificial Intelligence capital and employment prospects,* Oxford Economic Papers 76:4: 901- 919.

The AI advantage gap

In 2024, young adults from higher professional-class backgrounds were found to be more than 4 times more likely to be in higher professional occupations than those from lower working-class backgrounds.[22]

In previous research, we found evidence of how essential skills - when combined with basic skills - are associated with increased social mobility and escaping the Skills Trap.[23] The relationships found in this paper between AI usage, skill score, and pay raise questions of whether a relationship is already emerging between AI usage and prior social advantage.

Controlling for multiple factors relating to increased skill score and pay, such as age, job type and education levels, our analysis indicates that parental education and involvement correlate with AI usage. UK working adults from households where both parents attended university use AI more frequently, and in more scenarios, than those from households where neither parent attended university. For example, 40% of those from households where both parents attended university use generative AI daily or weekly outside of work, compared to 16% of those from households where neither parent attended university. We see a similar relationship when modelling the impact of parental involvement in education.

What emerges is a picture of AI exacerbating the skills trap: fewer opportunities to build essential skills results in lower essential skills, which in turn results in lower pay and lower (or slower) use of AI, which leads to a further reduction in pay. Without addressing this spiral, barriers to social mobility may increase.

Essential skills and AI clusters

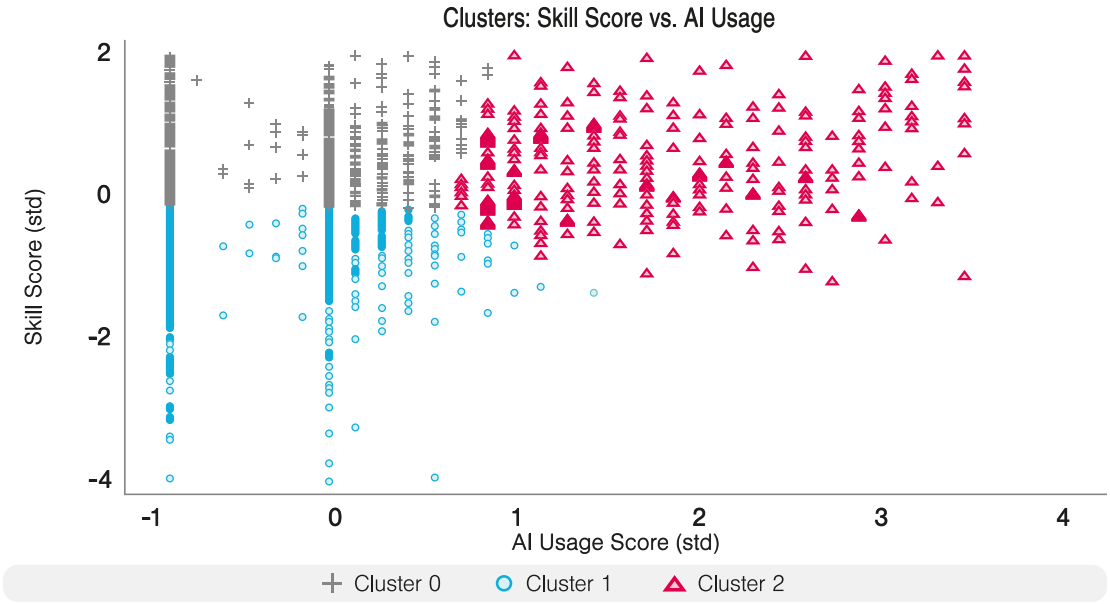

Fig 7: Cluster analysis of essential skills, income, and AI usage, controlling for job type, education levels and age, represented on a 2 dimensional chart by AI usage and skill score

22. Social Mobility Commission (2024). *State of the Nation 2024: Local to National, Mapping Opportunities for All*
23. Seymour, W & Craig, R (2023). *Essential Skills Tracker 2023*

Cluster	Mean Pay (lower bound)	Mean Skill Score
0	£23,325.12	8.84
1	£28,668.44	11.90
2	£43,902.88	11.45

Fig 8: Mean pay and skill score for each of the three clusters

Cluster analysis reveals three clusters around essential skills, AI usage and pay. The third cluster of UK workers, who tend to both use AI and have higher levels of essential skills, have mean income at least 53% higher than the other two clusters. This hints at the potential productivity gains in a labour market where individuals have built high levels of essential skills and adopted AI.

3. Impact on jobs

3. Impact on jobs

Jobs are changing

With AI adoption predicted to displace up to 800 million full time workers and require as many as 375 million workers to transition into entirely new occupations and learn new skills by 2030, changes in jobs and roles are expected to be happening rapidly.[24]

To understand the impact AI is already having on the current job market and link it to sentiment, we asked UK working adults how their job has changed in the last 12 months, how they believe their job will change in the near future, and how others' jobs will change in the future.

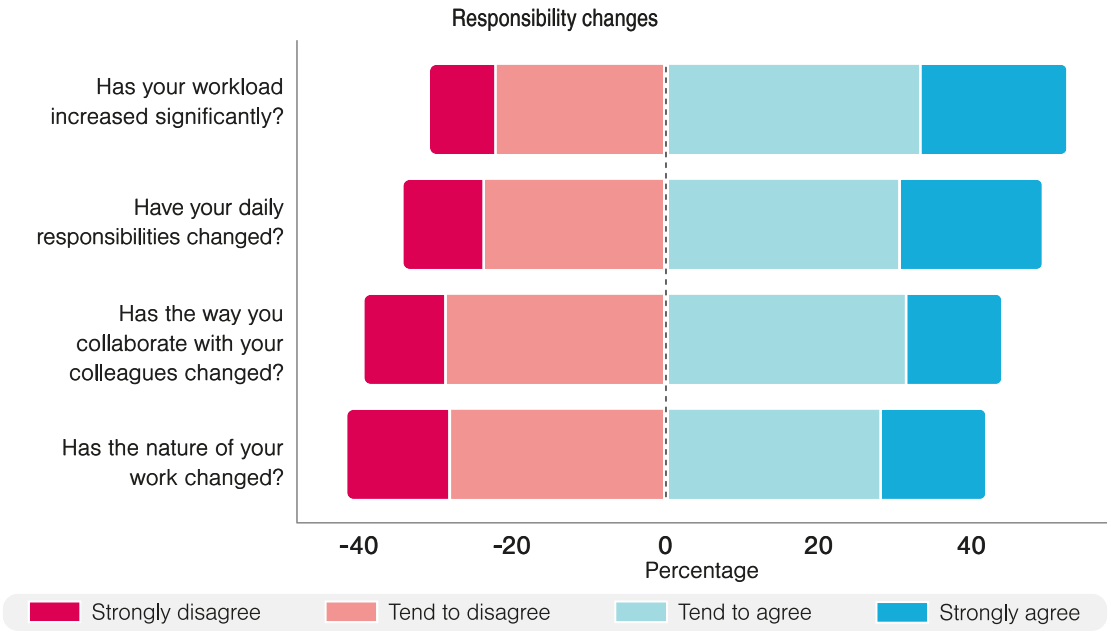

Fig 9: Respondents' views on changes to their role over the last 12 months

Changes over the last 12 months show trends of increased workload and the need to use new technology and tools for work. A majority (53%) of respondents reported a significant increase in workload, and 75% of these stated they would be influenced to change jobs if the new job offered a reduction in workload.

24. Ibid

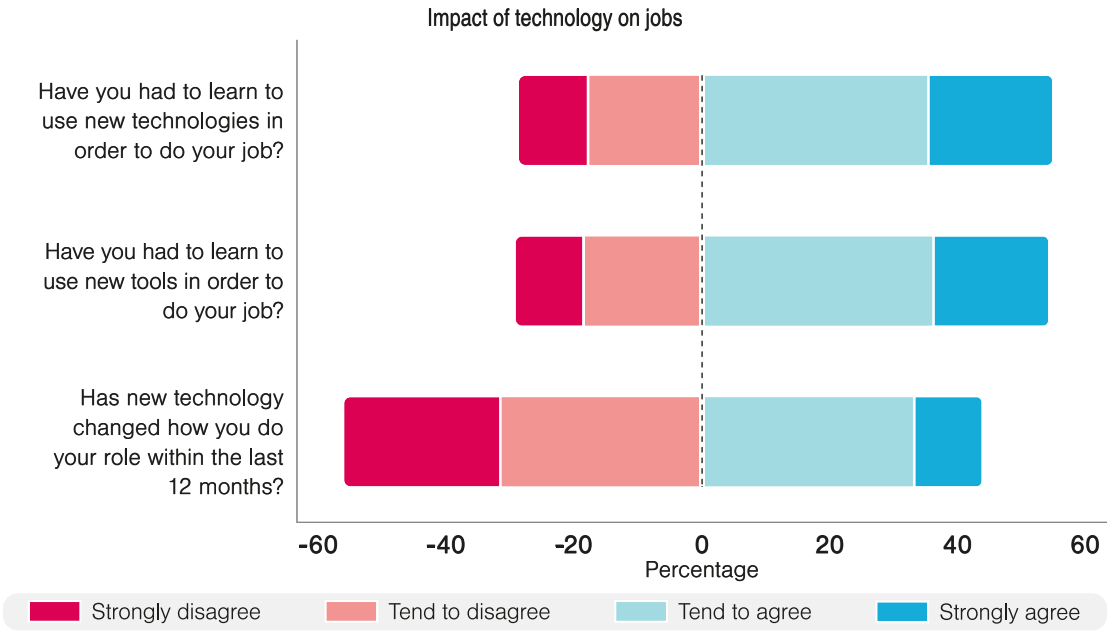

Fig 10: Respondents' views on the impact technology has had on their jobs over the last 12 months

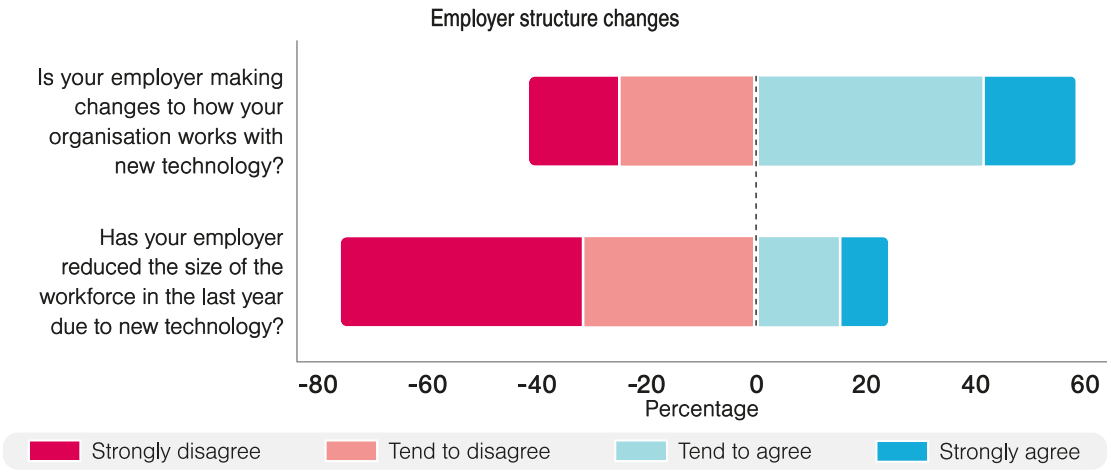

Fig 11: Respondents views of structural changes their employer has made over the last 12 months

A similar majority (55%) reported the increased need to learn how to use new technologies in order to do their job. Although only half of UK working adults have needed to learn new technology in the last 12 months for work, there's consensus from almost all individuals that essential skills will help with adapting to using new technology, with 82% agreeing. This further enhances the shift that is happening in terms of skills development, where individuals are now focused on highly transferable skills, rather than specific technical skills.

Looking more broadly at just whether daily responsibilities have changed, almost half (49%) of individuals agree that their daily responsibilities have changed over the last 12 months. There is a significant relationship between changing responsibilities and AI usage: those who agree that their responsibilities have changed are more likely to frequently use AI than those who disagree. These individuals also tend to have a slightly higher skill score than their peers.

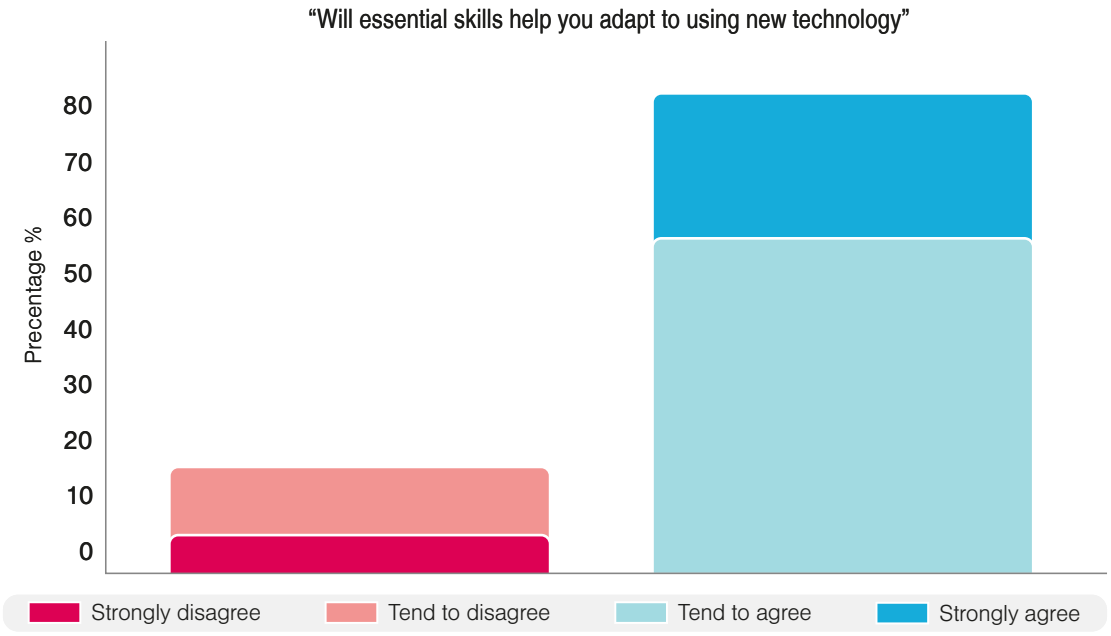

Fig 12: Responses to 'Will essential skills help you adapt to using new technology?'

UK workers intuit this relationship between essential skills and adapting. 82% believe that essential skills will help them adapt to using new technology. This is in line with previous research on the importance of essential skills in acquiring technical skills and making them fully useful. It also highlights that while - as we will see later in this paper - AI is related to anxiety and concern for the future, there is big support for essential skills as a route to adoption.

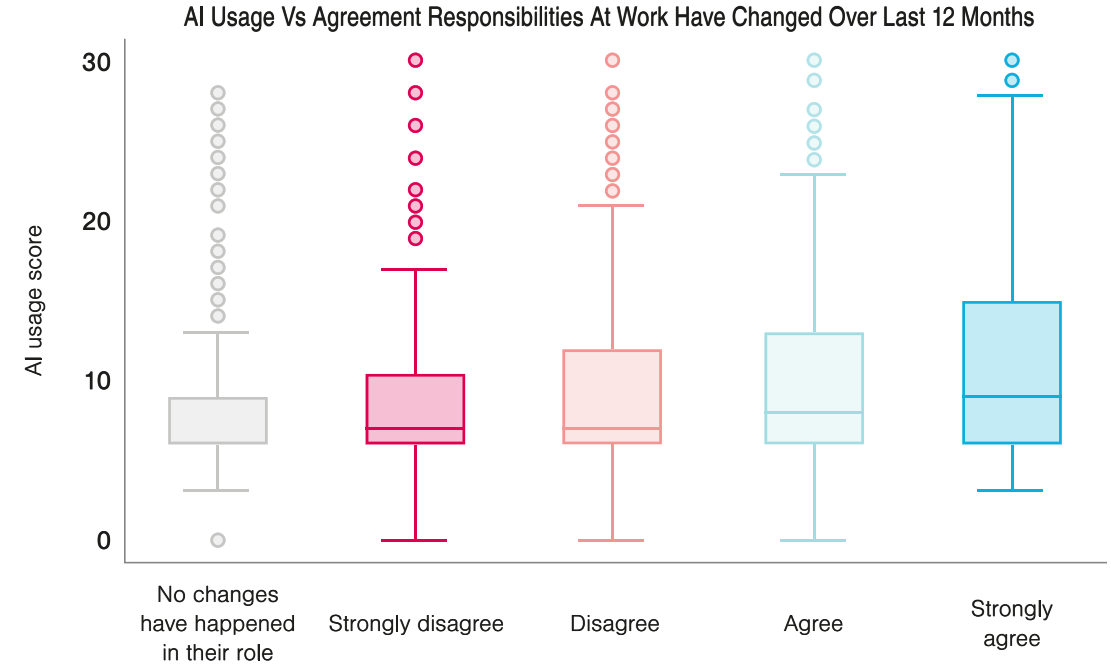

Fig 13: Workers whose responsibilities have changed most over the last 12 months have been the first to adopt AI

It is likely that these individuals - who report changing responsibilities, frequently use AI and have higher levels of essential skills - are higher performers or more productive, taking on more responsibilities and adopting AI.

Job displacement and uncertainty

When asked about the risk of displacement due to AI, a majority of individuals believe that their own job is less at risk of being replaced by AI than others' jobs, with only 5% believing their own job is more at risk. Although a majority feel secure in their jobs, only 20% of UK working adults believe that their job will be improved by AI more than others' jobs. Half believe everyone will benefit from AI equally.

Beliefs about the impact of AI on jobs	Agreement amongst UK workers (%)
Believe own job will be replaced due to AI	19%
Believe lots of peoples' jobs will be replaced due to AI	72%
Believe own job will be improved by AI	35%
Believe lots of peoples' jobs will be improved by AI	39%
Believe own job will exist but be worse due to AI	18%
Believe lots of peoples' jobs will exist but be worse due to AI	35%

Fig 14: Most workers believe that their jobs will be less affected by AI than other people's jobs.

It's evident that there is awareness that AI and technological changes will create systemic change in the workplace. The Tony Blair Institute suggests that while new roles will emerge, 'in all our scenarios we expect unemployment to rise initially as some firms choose to bank the time savings from AI and reduce the size of their workforce'.[25] However, the data clearly reveals that UK workers don't share this assessment: most people think that their jobs are safe, while others' will be disrupted.

This discrepancy hints that there may be some asymmetry of information. Either researchers and individuals are wrong about what is likely to happen to most people's jobs, or individuals are wrong about the likely impact on their job. If the latter is true, then these beliefs may be hindering adoption of AI and dragging on productivity gains. Essential skills could play an enabling role here, preparing people for change in a way they are more open to.

Even with this bias towards one's own job safety, 65% of individuals state that they feel fairly or very unsure about the future based on the times we are living in now.

Just using AI more is not enough to feel more certain about the future. In fact, the opposite relationship appears: frequent AI usage is associated with feeling less sure about the future. However, essential skills appear to be a key modulator. Those who both frequently use AI and have a higher skill score have a more positive view on the future than their peers. This is statistically significant at the 0.009 level when controlling for pay, education levels and age.

25. Tony Blair Institute (2024). *The Impact of AI on the Labour Market*

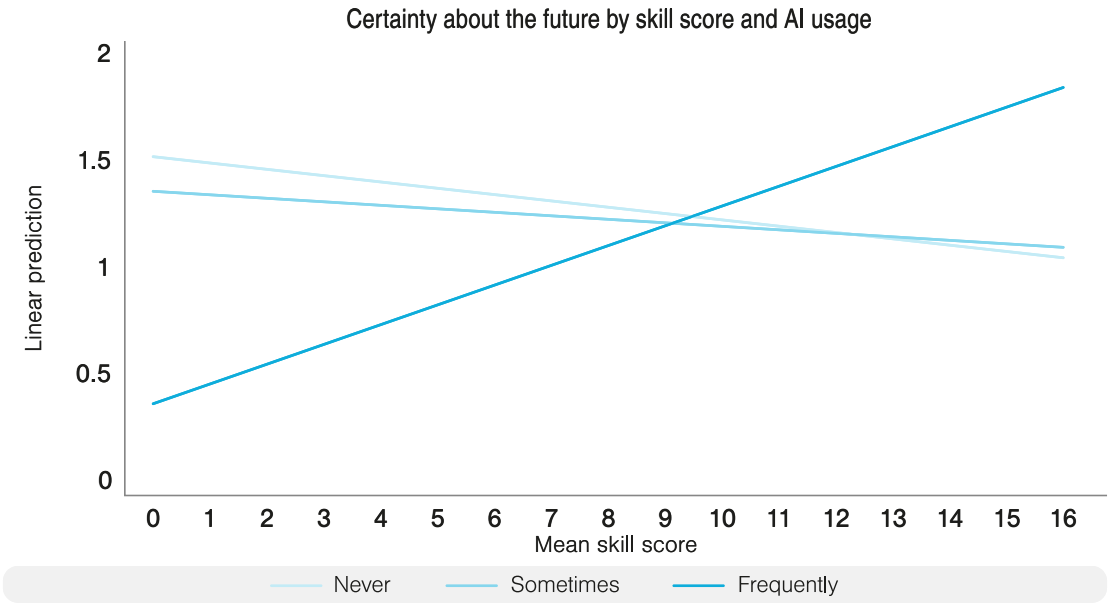

Fig 15: Impact of increased AI usage and Skill Score on certainty about the future

Uncertainty about the future and worker unawareness of potential job changes may be connected. Since higher levels of essential skills are related to reduced uncertainty about the future and higher productivity, providing opportunities to build the skills could prepare individuals for future role adjustments that they cannot currently anticipate.

Higher wellbeing with higher essential skills

In line with ONS personal wellbeing questions, we asked individuals to rate their life satisfaction, worthwhile, happiness and anxiety. We validated our data against ONS findings, with both datasets revealing a drop in feeling as though things in life are worthwhile since 2022.[26]

This latest data further validates previous findings in the Essential Skills Tracker series, with a strong relationship between wellbeing and levels of essential skills. Those with a higher skill score are happier, have higher job and life satisfaction, and feel as though the things they do are worthwhile.

Job satisfaction

The latest data reveals a one standard deviation in skill score is associated with a 0.16 standard deviation increase in job satisfaction. Putting this into real terms, a 2.3 step increase in skill score is associated with a 3% increase in job satisfaction, on a scale of 0 to 10. This is in line with previous findings in the Essential Skills Tracker series that people with higher levels of essential skills enjoy improved job satisfaction.

26. ONS (2023). *Personal well-being in the UK: April 2022 to March 2023*

Fig 16: Job satisfaction increases with higher levels of essential skills

Anxiety, AI and the essential skills counterbalance

Similar to previous years, no relationship has been found between anxiety and overall skill score. However, there is evidence of a positive relationship between certain AI usage and anxiety, as well as a negative relationship between anxiety and specific skills.

UK working adults who are required by their employer to use generative AI monthly or daily at work have anxiety levels 15% higher than their peers who are never required to do so. This model controls for pay, skill score, gender and age.

Looking at the averages, which are not controlling for various factors, those who are never required to use generative AI at work have average anxiety levels of 4 (on a scale of 0 to 10), which is in line with the 2025 ONS average of 3.9.[27] Individuals who are required to use AI daily by their employer, report significantly higher anxiety, with an average score of 5.6.

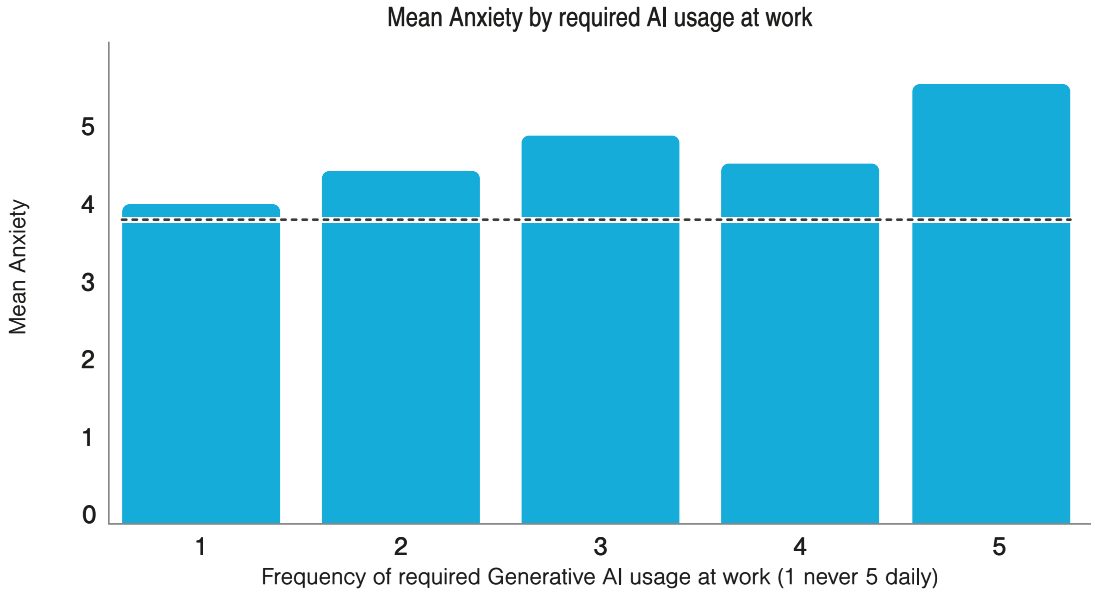

Fig 17: Anxiety by regularity of required AI usage at work, with ONS reported anxiety average

27. ONS (2025). *Public opinions and social trends*

The relationship between usage at work and anxiety does not exist for those who choose to use AI at work, suggesting that the lack of choice in using AI is the cause of increased anxiety. Although identifying the factors behind the increased anxiety is outside the scope of this study, there could be a sense of unease from workers about using AI if they do not feel fully confident with such tools (a theory supported by recent research from Google).[28]

Increases in particular essential skills are related to reductions in anxiety. Specifically, higher levels of speaking, adapting and teamwork skills correlate to decreased reported anxiety.

Moving from the lower quartile to upper quartile adapting score is associated with a 9% predicted decrease in anxiety. For speaking and teamwork this correlates to a 7% decrease in anxiety. This model controls for pay, age, education levels and job type.

For employers concerned about the wellbeing of their workforce and embracing technological change, essential skills appear as a modulator. By building workers' essential skills, employers can reduce their uncertainty about the future and support them to thrive in an AI-enabled world.

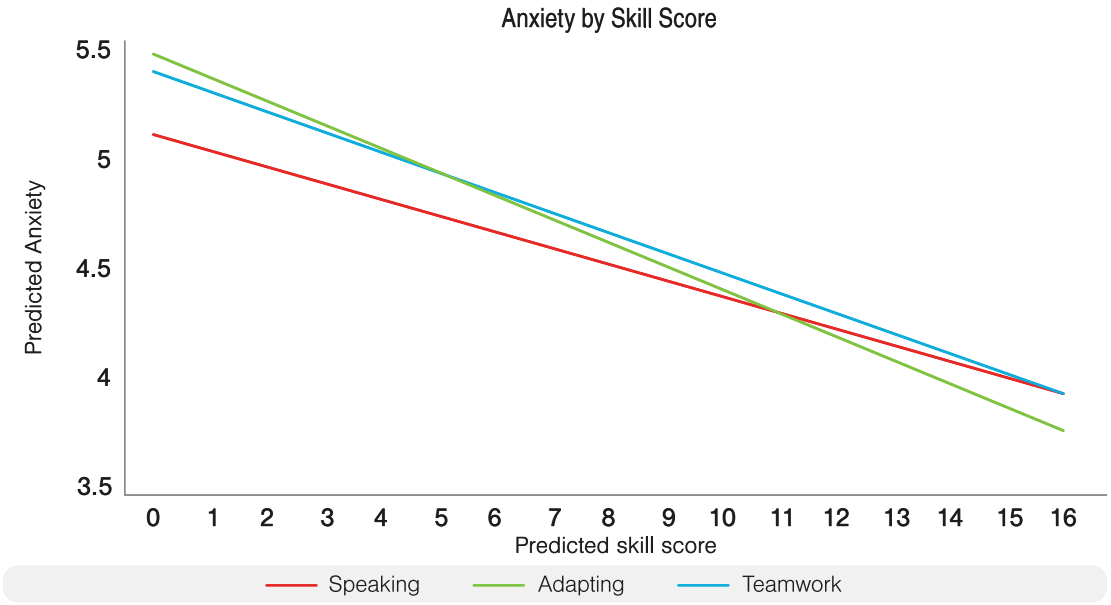

Fig 18: Anxiety changes by Speaking, Adapting and Teamwork skill scores

High demand for building essential skills

There is strong support for integrating the Universal Framework into education and work. Previous research found that only a minority of teachers believe that the current education system prepares learners for life (37%) and work (41%). The majority (92%) of teachers view explicitly teaching essential skills important in preparing learners for life and work, and a majority of teachers also support their inclusion within the national curriculum.[29]

This research shows it's not just teachers who think essential skills should form a core part of education. A significant majority (85%) of UK adults believe that the Universal Framework should be used in schools and colleges to ensure essential skills are taught with rigour. Workers with higher essential skills support this even more (89% for those in the top quartile of skill score).

28. Google (2025). *AI Works*
29. Ravenscroft, Craig, Stewart (2025). *Universal Framework Review 2025: Final Report*

A similar majority (82%) agree the Universal Framework should be used within the national curriculum to underpin teaching essential skills. Having such opportunities to build essential skills in education increases an individuals' skill score and reduces the impact of skill decay with age.[30] By embedding essential skills within the curriculum, the future workforce will be able to adapt more effectively to any changes in jobs and life.

People believe that essential skills have value beyond the classroom; 82% of UK working adults agree that essential skills will help them adapt to using new technology. To accompany this, there's strong support (75%) from employees for their employers to use the Universal Framework as part of professional development, including within performance appraisals (67%).

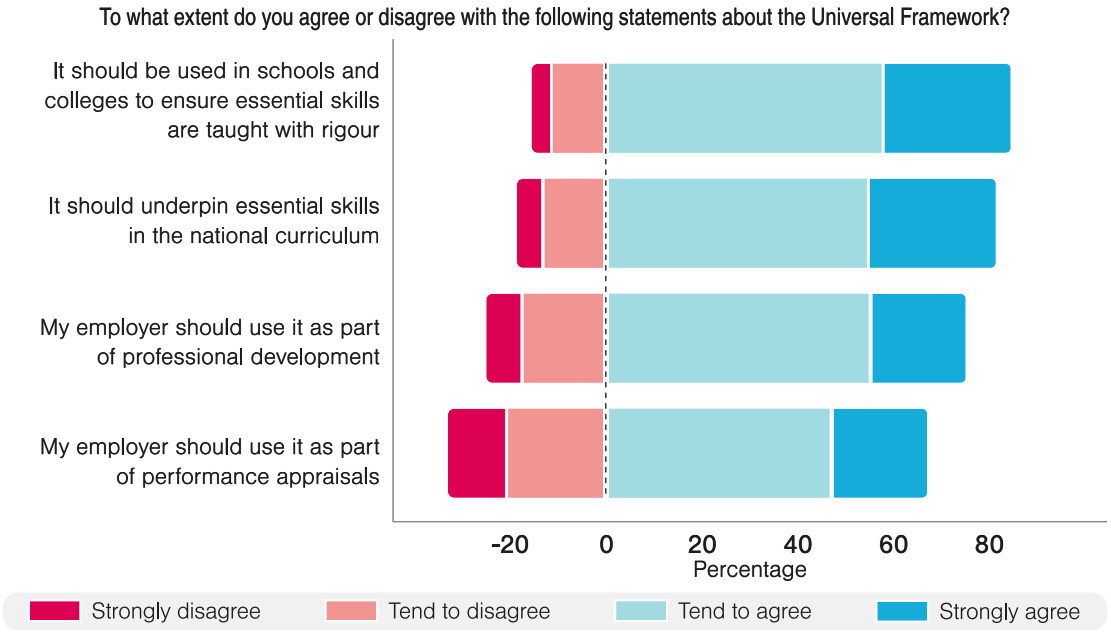

Fig 19: UK workers believe the Universal Framework should be used in education and employment

The extent to which employees value essential skills becomes even more evident when looking at influential factors in changing jobs. For those who are planning to change jobs in the next 12 months, perhaps unsurprisingly, the most influential factor in changing jobs is an increase in pay, with 89% agreeing. But workers care about personal development: the ability to build essential skills in the new job is the third most influential factor, with 80% agreeing that they would be either fairly or very influenced by this.

30. Seymour, W & Craig, R (2023). *Essential Skills Tracker 2023*

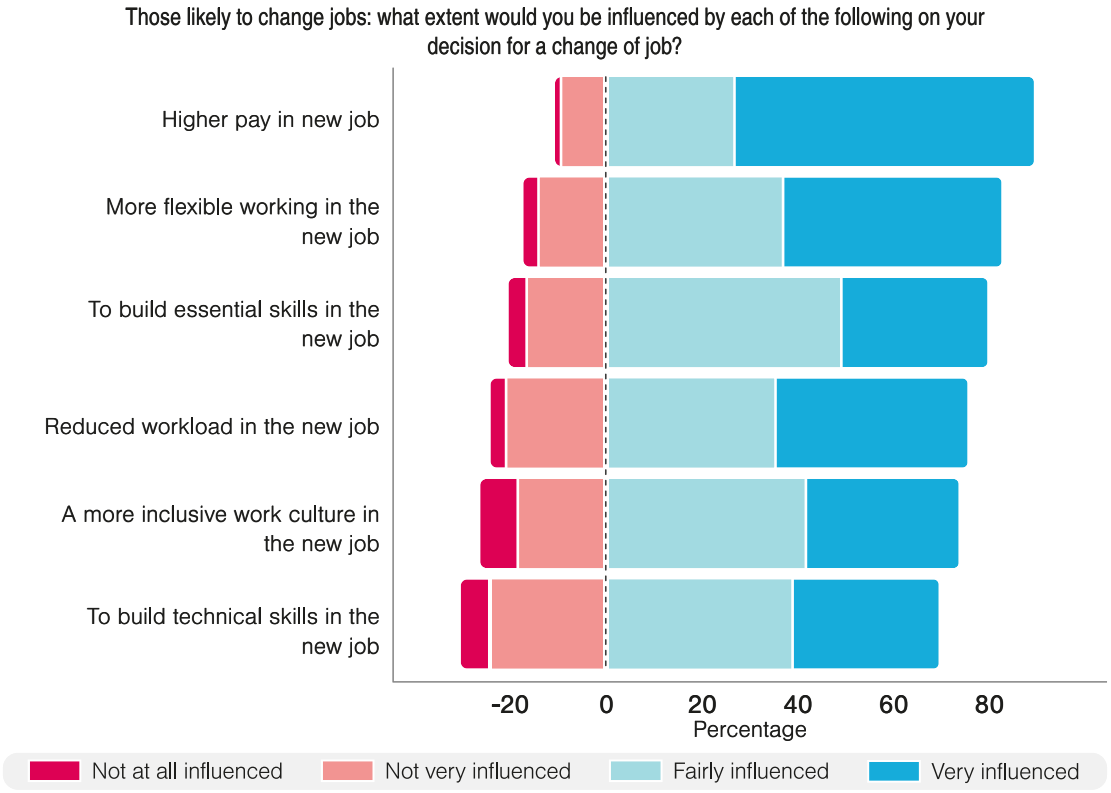

Fig 20: Workers looking to move jobs in the next 12 months are influenced by a number of factors, with building essential skills in the top 3 reasons

However, a more nuanced picture emerges of influencing factors when analysing those with higher and lower pay. For those earning less, pay is a bigger consideration. Not a single respondent in the lower pay quartile said that pay wouldn't influence their decision to move job at all, compared to 15% for the upper quartile. And while this lower paid cohort would still be significantly influenced by essential skills, it was 5% less than those in the upper income quartile. So conversely, higher earners are less motivated by pay and more motivated by opportunities to build essential skills.

Giving employees the opportunity to build essential skills at work could not only increase retention but also simultaneously prepare the workforce for the upcoming systemic changes due to technology and AI.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

Data

We used an online survey, distributed via YouGov Plc to target a nationally representative sample of UK working adults aged 18-65. The total sample size of the 2025 dataset was 2114 adults and fieldwork was undertaken by YouGov Plc between 9th - 10th January 2025. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults.

This is the first installment in the Essential Skills Tracker series to utilise the Universal Framework 2.0. Although the framework has changed from previous Essential Skills Tracker papers, a validation of the framework was completed and results were found to be comparable.[31]

Skill Score Calculation

Respondents were required to self-assess their essential skills using the Skills Builder Universal Framework 2.0. The 128 skill questions were presented in a random order and responses for each question were given as a 5 point scale, from 'Almost never' to 'Almost always'.

Using Universal Framework 2.0, skill scores range from 0 to 16 and are calculated both on a skill-level and as a total skill score. On a skill level, the scores are calculated by summing the response to each question within that skill. The total skill score is calculated as an average score across all 8 Essential Skills.

When combining datasets, the skill scores of previous years have been recalculated to follow the 0 to 16 range, rather than the -1 to 15 range used previously.

Wellbeing

As with previous years, respondents were asked a series of wellbeing questions which followed the 11-point system used by ONS to establish workforce wellbeing across the UK:[32]

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- Overall, how satisfied are you with your job nowadays?
- Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
- Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
- Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

By using the same questions and metrics as the ONS, we are able to validate and compare responses of our sample population with the ONS statistics.

31. Ravenscroft, Craig, Stewart (2025): *Universal Framework Review 2025: Final Report*
32. ONS (2025), *Public opinions and social trends, Great Britain*

APPENDIX 2: MODELS

This section contains details of some of the main models used within this analysis.

Income and AI

Variable	Coefficient
AI Usage	
Sometimes	281.34
Frequently	8308.57**
Education Level	
Entry Level (e.g. entry level award/ certificate/ diploma etc.)	2589.26
Level 1 GCSEs	4858.17
Level 2 GCSEs	6049.57
Scottish ordinary/ lower certificate	6790.23
Level 3	5281.76
Scottish Higher certificate	7479.10
Level 4-5	6282.24
Level 4-6 Higher education undergraduate degree	12232.14*
Level 6 and above	19456.42**
Mean Skill Score	1004.67**
age	1548.53*
c.age#c.age	-15.51*
Region	
North West	4615.16
Yorkshire and the Humber	8579.12**
East Midlands	5117.59
West Midlands	7628.19**
East of England	9017.82**
London	12950.14**
South East	5575.35
South West	5241.28
Wales	8699.79
Scotland	3412.79
Northern Ireland	3144.74

Variable	Coefficient
Work Type	
Aerospace	13179.67
Agriculture/Chemicals/Forest Products	15984.67
Automotive	3468.25
Computers/Electronics	5380.93
Construction	-3366.78
Consumer Goods	-13029.71
Education	-12474.61
Energy/Mining	15194.35
Finance/Insurance/Real Estate	351.65
Government/Military/Public Service	-5875.74
Hospitality/Recreation	-11304.30
Media/Publishing/Entertainment	-14489.17
Medical/Health Services	-8102.85
Pharmaceuticals	-10210.19
Retail	-16341.45
Service	-5848.13
Telecommunications/Networking	10057.35
Travel/Transportation	-5150.32
Other	-7283.17
_cons	-15597.23

*** p <0.01 *p ≤0.05*

Certainty about the times we are living in now

Variable	Coefficient
Mean Skill Score	-0.02889
AI Usage	
Sometimes	-0.15894
Frequently	-1.14810**
AI Usage##Mean Skill Score	
Often	0.01287
Frequently	0.12108*
Pay	0.00001*
Education Level	
Entry Level (e.g. entry level award/ certificate/ diploma etc.)	-0.66620*
Level 1 GCSEs	-0.29875
Level 2 GCSEs	0.06738
Scottish ordinary/ lower certificate	0.22064
Level 3	-0.03481
Scottish Higher certificate	-0.34612
Level 4-5	-0.04811
Level 4-6 Higher education undergraduate degree	-0.01436
Level 6 and above	-0.11191
age	-0.03802
c.age#c.age	0.00029
_cons	2.34824

*** p <0.01 *p ≤0.05*

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