

Business in the Parliament Conference 2025 - Workforce for the Future

Panel 2 note – AI and a workforce for the future

Working Group Hosts: Prosper

Chair: Gareth Williams, Prosper

Panellists:

- Lynne Robson, Head of Evidence and Impact, Skills Development Scotland
- Graham Ross, CEO, Austin-Smith:Lord

Scottish Government contribution: Carlyne Thomson, AI Policy, Data Division

Final reflections: Lorna Slater MSP, Member of the Economy & Fair Work Committee

Summary

The panel session explored how artificial intelligence (AI) is changing businesses and reshaping the skills Scotland needs. Participants shared their experiences of how AI was being used in workplaces, views on the potential applications, and thoughts on the skills needed to harness the opportunities. Participants also shared their concerns and challenges around AI.

The Chair, **Gareth Williams from Prosper**, welcomed participants and thanked them for their interest. He referred to the morning plenary session which touched on opportunities for AI and skills, and invited the audience to share their experiences of using AI.

In her presentation, **Lynne Robson from Skills Development Scotland (SDS)** presented research findings on AI's influence on Scotland today and the future direction of travel for skills. Given the pace of change, it's challenging to measure the impact of AI. Engagement with the Scottish AI Alliance and Scottish Government colleagues on this research has been important in bringing a Scottish lens to the needs, opportunities and challenges.

The findings from stakeholders insights include :

- **AI's influence today** – all occupations in Scotland are subject to some change due to automation with some roles affected more than others due to the make up of tasks within them.
- **Shaping forces** – there will be significant benefits, primarily in productivity but also for wellbeing, where technology can take on more repetitive tasks to free up time. However, barriers remain including cost, lack of knowledge and trust. Ensuring employees are part of the journey will be vital. The risks and mitigations must be clearly articulated for AI to be ethical, accessible and inclusive.
- **Future horizons** – widespread job transformation is likely and new AI skills are required. The majority of employees will not need technical AI skills but must be able to apply AI in their roles. Digital literacy will be a crucial foundation for effective AI training. Human skills that are adaptable and flexible are important as AI is embedded.

Providing an SME perspective, **Graham Ross of Austin-Smith:Lord** echoed many of the messages from the SDS research. As a design professional, he has more curiosity than fear around the use of AI. There are opportunities to upskill and adapt to become an AI-enabled workforce.

Urgency is required to get to the stage where AI is seen as a tool we can work with rather than something that will displace roles. In the past there's been a tendency to overestimate the impact of technological changes in the short term and underestimate the impact in the long term. Current AI deployment tends to be more led by individual employees than strategic.

In the construction sector, which is amongst the least digitised, there are opportunities for AI to support compliance, safety, environmental and other requirements. AI also has a role enabling the circular economy by helping firms manage data.

Upskilling for digital literacy will provide some support, but efforts so far are piecemeal. It's vital to bring everyone along to avoid sharpening inequalities. Meta-skills are essential so that critical thinking, sense-making and human intelligence are used alongside AI tools.

Discussion

The Chair provided the following prompts and invited the audience to share their experience of how AI was currently being used in workplaces and to consider what needs to happen to enable the workforce to use AI.

Prompt questions:

- How is AI being adopted in your business/sector? What is the impact on people strategies?
- From whom are businesses accessing support on AI adoption? What support is most needed?
- What are your thoughts on how AI may impact skills demand/the labour market in Scotland?
- How must the skills/education system change to respond to AI's impact on skills and careers?
- How do we ensure that AI deployments benefit workers and do not exacerbate inequalities?
- What would be your one big skills intervention to unlock the potential of AI in Scotland?

Main themes:

- **Responsible and ethical use of AI** – AI must be applied ethically with accountability and fairness, considering good outcomes for customers and building trust.
- **AI as augmentation, not just automation** - AI should enhance human roles rather than replace them. Human skills are a vital part of using AI effectively and leadership driven by emotional intelligence is critical.
- **Digital literacy for all** – basic IT and digital literacy skills are essential. There's less need for in-depth technical skills but the workforce needs to be able to use AI tools effectively and customers need to understand their use.

- **Inequality and access** – access to technology across society and targeted upskilling initiatives are needed to prevent widening inequalities.
- **Practical AI adoption in businesses** – working in partnership across sectors to share realistic use cases will help drive adoption. Examples included coding support, design, fraud detection, contract management and bid writing.
- **Regulation and guidance** – clarity and guidance from regulators and professional institutes is important so that the benefits of AI can be realised without compromising on standards or ethics.
- **Skills development and lifelong learning** – consider whether current pathways are suitable for future needs. In college courses, apprenticeships and on-the-job training can offer benefits to employers (and for employees) so typical school-university-job pathways are not the only route.
- **Collaboration** – more discussion across sectors and communities is needed to share learning and resources
- **Urgency and strategic national response** – Scotland must act urgently to stay competitive. A more proactive strategy, informed by other countries, like Estonia, will help ensure digital success.

Scottish Government perspective

Carolyn Thomson, Senior AI Policy Officer with the Scottish Government

reflected that a lot of what's happening already with the Scottish AI Alliance and the Data Lab could help businesses, but this needs to be promoted more widely. When initially drafted, the Scottish AI Strategy aimed to provide reassurance, but more recent outputs have taken a business lens. For example, the Scottish AI Playbook is a growing resource to support businesses.

Asks of the Scottish Government

1. **Promote digital and AI literacy** - not just prompt engineering but ability to interpret what AI gives back.
2. **Provide practical guidance, resources, and case studies** – to help people get started and find out where they can get support. Ensure we collaborate around this work.
3. **Provide clear leadership and ownership** - of guidance, standards, regulation and setting ethical expectations. Taking responsibility for ethical practices and leading by example
4. **Recognise AI as an economic opportunity** – shift the tone of the conversation and use of language to focus on the opportunities for workers, citizens and the wider economy, not just the challenges.
5. **Instil urgency at a national level** – on education and skills reforms, digital inclusion etc.
6. **Facilitate cross sector collaboration and partnership working.**

Final reflections

Lorna Slater MSP – it can be difficult to align the current college and university systems with the skills required for future jobs. Scotland is behind the curve on workplace learning. There are different models from different countries that we can work from, but we need to speed this up. One of the big challenges is changing how we think about energy demand from data and AI.