



**Greater  
Birmingham**  
Chambers  
of Commerce

# MASTERING THE FUTURE WITH DIGITAL SKILLS

In partnership with:



**netcom**  
training

# FOREWORD AND INTRODUCTION



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**Equipping the workforce with digital skills is essential to drive productivity, innovation, and growth. Businesses that embrace technology – from data analytics and AI to digital marketing and cybersecurity – can adapt faster, boost productivity and compete globally, securing the region’s position as a hub of enterprise and innovation.**

Through this research, we have built on existing work to develop our understanding of where West Midlands employers are in their digital journeys, and how we can collaboratively overcome barriers to adoption of new technologies.

We are extremely grateful to the employers whose expertise has informed this research. Your insights are helping to ensure that digital skills investment meets the needs of business.

And we are proud to be continuing our work with Netcom Training to deliver on some of the recommendations made in this report, helping to equip business leaders in the West Midlands with the capabilities required to seize new opportunities and sustain the region’s economic success in a rapidly evolving digital world.



**KEVIN  
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MANAGING DIRECTOR

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**Technology is moving faster than ever, and while it brings about huge opportunities, it also creates a real challenge: the digital skills gap. According to government statistics, approximately 18% of UK adults – that’s 7.5 million people – lack the essential digital skills needed for the workplace.**

Too many people and businesses risk being left behind as new tools like Artificial Intelligence (AI) become the norm. This gap doesn’t just hold back individuals, but entire communities and local economies.

For small and medium-sized businesses, this issue is even more pressing. Unlike large corporations with big budgets for training and technology, smaller organisations often struggle to keep up with the rate of change. Yet they are the lifeblood of our communities. If we don’t support them now, there’s a risk they’ll fall behind and miss out on the benefits that digital transformation can bring, whether that’s reaching new customers, working more efficiently, or staying competitive in their industries.

At Netcom Training, we believe that by helping people build the right digital skills, we can give businesses the confidence and capability they need to grow and succeed. Closing the digital skills gap is more than just the technology. It is about building a future where no one is left behind.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce for their continued support in helping us drive this mission forward.

# ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

**Mastering the Future with Digital Skills builds on existing work, including that of the Business Commission West Midlands and the West Midlands and Warwickshire Local Skills Improvement Plan in seeking to understand where businesses are in their digitisation journey, the capabilities and skills required to facilitate further digitisation, and how we can collaboratively overcome barriers to further digitisation in the region.**

Surveying for this research was conducted between 10th February and 7th March 2025, through additional questions in the existing Quarterly Business Report survey and Quarterly Economic Surveys of the Greater Birmingham, Coventry and Warwickshire and Black Country Chambers of Commerce. These were disseminated to local businesses within and beyond the Chambers’ membership, through a wide range of communications channels, including email newsletters, direct emails, social media, and in-person events.

There are approximately 91,940 enterprises in the WMCA area (2024; Inter Departmental Business Register (ONS), via Nomis) and in total, this surveying received 558 responses, from employers operating across this geographical area. A survey sample of 558 offers a confidence interval of +/- 4.14% at a confidence level of 95%.

Further, through a series of employer focus groups, the Chambers of Commerce and Netcom Training have gathered qualitative insights on where businesses across the WMCA area are in their digitisation journey, the capabilities and skills required to facilitate further digitisation, and how we can collaboratively overcome barriers to further digitisation in the region.

The Mastering the Future with Digital Skills focus groups were conducted in-person between 18th March – 1st April 2025, with one focus group in each of the three Chamber areas. Each Chamber recruited participants from their membership, and participants represented a wide range of employers, from various business sizes and sectors.

These focus groups each followed a script designed by the Chambers, with the support of Netcom Training. Focus groups took place under Chatham House rules.

In total, 27 employer representatives participated in these focus groups and/or one on one calls following the same script.

In analysing and collating this data, we have identified a series of key findings and presented recommendations which offer opportunities to build workforces now and for the future which are better enabled to meet the evolving digital needs of firms across the region.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Despite widespread interest in adoption of new technologies, many businesses – particularly SMEs – felt they lacked a requisite understanding of new technologies (including AI) and as such were not ready to recruit digitally enabled staff or upskill existing employees.
- Only 22% of firms in the WMCA area are ‘very confident’ that they have the skills to realise the productivity and competitiveness advantages of digital technology.
- The cost of training and development, a lack of time to commission and manage training and uncertainty about what training is needed were the most frequently identified barriers to securing the necessary digital skills for businesses operating in the region.
- A majority of firms surveyed identified digital marketing and/or artificial intelligence as important for their business in the 25/26 financial year. Data analytics, cyber security and back-office functions were also frequently identified as important to businesses in the WMCA area.
- Though artificial intelligence is front of mind for firms across the WMCA area, many are concerned about not having the digital infrastructure or basic digital skills within their existing workforce to maximise opportunities presented by AI tools.
- Whilst businesses are frequently aware of apprenticeships as a means to addressing digital skills gaps, a majority of firms were unaware of Government funded short digital courses.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

- Support education and training providers across the region to collaboratively increase business awareness of funded digital skills training opportunities.
- Support employer forums sharing peer to peer best practice in identified areas of focus such as digital marketing, artificial intelligence, data analytics, cyber security and back-office functions.
- Develop and deliver new short courses for business leaders to understand what is available and possible with new technologies – including AI tools – and how to successfully deliver digital transformation projects, to unlock opportunities associated with adoption of new technologies.
- Establish a clear, high-level roadmap of support for West Midlands firms seeking to embed and integrate AI tools into existing systems.
- Unlock business investment for advanced digitalisation and establish a competitive advantage for the region by providing initial funding for foundational digital capabilities and infrastructure.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Despite widespread interest in adoption of new technologies, many businesses – particularly SMEs – felt they lacked a requisite understanding of new technologies (including AI) and as such were not ready to recruit digitally enabled staff or upskill existing employees.**

During focus groups, many businesses – particularly SMEs – expressed concerns that they lacked understanding of new technologies, including AI tools. Business leaders stated that they were uncertain about where to access tailored information on ‘the art of the possible,’ and which tools might be right for their needs. They felt they needed to identify a strategic ‘digital roadmap’ for the business before recruiting digitally enabled staff or upskilling existing employees. However, there was a frequent lack of confidence and understanding among business leaders of where to start in leading digital transformation within their organisations.

**Only 22% of firms in the WMCA area are ‘very confident’ that they have the skills to realise the productivity and competitiveness advantages of digital technology.**

In surveying over 550 businesses in the WMCA area, it was found that only 22% of firms are ‘very confident’ that they have the skills to realise the productivity and competitiveness advantages of digital technology.

A third (33%) of survey respondents reported that they were “quite confident” that they have the skills to enable their businesses to realise the productivity and competitiveness advantages of digital technology. A further 31% identified themselves as “somewhat confident”, while 8% were “not very confident” and 1% “not at all confident.”

Notably, respondents from smaller businesses were less confident than those from larger firms. Those in the manufacturing sector appeared to also be slightly less confident than those in the services sector in their ability to make the most of digital technologies.

During focus groups, participants raised concerns about various levels of digital capabilities within their existing staff. Many participants referenced inadequate foundational skills in digital tools like Excel and use of CRMs amongst employees. In regard to more advanced digital skills, ongoing shortages of skilled developers and business analysts were cited as a challenge by some focus group participants in Greater Birmingham in particular, and some firms across the region also cited a lack of data visualisation skills. More broadly, several focus group participants also raised concerns about a lack of awareness among staff in relation to ethical use of AI and data security.

Further, several firms stated that there is a need to better develop soft skills such as communication and resilience within education, to support the acquisition of critical digital skills.

**The cost of training and development, a lack of time to commission and manage training and uncertainty about what training is needed were the most frequently identified barriers to securing the necessary digital skills for businesses operating in the region.**

The cost of training and development was the most frequently identified barrier to securing the necessary digital skills for businesses operating in the region (reported by 30% of survey respondents), followed by a lack of time to commission and manage training (reported by 20%) and uncertainty about what training is needed (18%). Just 11% of respondents reported that their business had not faced any of the listed barriers to securing the digital skills they need.

Interestingly, where businesses had previously addressed digital skills gaps, this was most frequently through online training platforms such as LinkedIn learning, Google certifications and/or Coursera (identified by 45% of respondents). The second most frequent approach among respondents was through partnerships with independent training providers (21%), followed by external recruitment (20%). Respondents least frequently reported enrolling existing staff on apprenticeship programmes to meet their digital skills needs, but 13% had recruited new apprentices.

**A majority of firms surveyed identified digital marketing (59%) and/or artificial intelligence (52%) as important for their business in the 25/26 financial year. Data analytics, cyber security and back-office functions were also frequently identified as important to businesses in the WMCA area.**

A majority of firms surveyed identified digital marketing (59%) and/or artificial intelligence (52%) as important for their business in the 25/26 financial year. Data/data analytics was an important technology skill area for 40% of respondents’ businesses, while security/cyber security and back office functions (financials, HR, procurement, supply chain management) were each important to around a third of all firms (35% and 32% respectively).

In focus groups, many business leaders stated that they were interested in using new technologies to unlock new business insights from existing data, and in automating administrative (often back-office) processes to maximise the value of staff time.

**Though Artificial Intelligence is front of mind for firms across the WMCA area, many are concerned about not having the digital infrastructure or basic digital skills within their existing workforce to maximise opportunities presented by AI tools.**

During focus groups with businesses across Greater Birmingham, Coventry and Warwickshire and the Black Country, AI was of particular interest to participants – reflecting that a majority of firms surveyed identified artificial intelligence (52%) as important for their business in the 25/26 financial year.

Nevertheless, those present identified that whilst they may be using basic AI tools in some areas (in particular, some highlighted having identified ‘early adopters’ within their businesses to champion use of such tools), they frequently felt they didn’t have enough of an understanding of AI tools in the business, the right existing digital infrastructure or the ‘foundational’ digital skills in their workforce to inform investment in more advanced AI tools.

**Whilst businesses are frequently aware of apprenticeships as a means to addressing digital skills gaps, a majority of firms were unaware of Government funded short digital courses.**

More than two thirds of survey respondents (67%) were aware of apprenticeships as a means to addressing digital skills gaps in their organisation, however less than a third were aware of government funded digital short courses (32%) – in fact, a majority (53%) were unaware of the latter.

In particular, manufacturers were less frequently aware of government funded digital short courses as a programme to help address their digital skills gaps than their services sector counterparts, with 60% of manufacturers unaware compared to 52% of services sector businesses.

These findings were reflected in focus group discussions, in which many participants stated that they were (prior to the focus groups) unaware of government funded training that they could potentially take advantage of.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REGIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

## **Support education and training providers across the region to collaboratively increase business awareness of funded digital skills training opportunities.**

During both survey feedback and focus group discussions businesses were frequently unaware of the funded digital skills training already available to them. This lack of awareness mirrors wider findings – including those of the West Midlands and Warwickshire Local Skills Improvement Plan – that employers find the skills system complex and difficult to navigate. As a result, opportunities to address pressing digital skills gaps are being missed.

Collaborative initiatives are already underway in the region to simplify access, promote provision, and engage employers more effectively in technical education and training. However, to maximise their impact, these initiatives require sustained and coordinated support. Ensuring alignment of messaging and approach across providers will reduce confusion for businesses, build trust, and ultimately increase uptake of digital skills training that meets employers' needs.

## **Support employer forums sharing peer to peer best practice in identified areas of focus such as digital marketing, artificial intelligence, data analytics, cyber security and back-office functions.**

Several focus group participants reported that participation in the focus groups were of benefit in and of themselves, offering a rare opportunity to exchange practical insights and best practice with peers who share an interest in digitalisation. This underlines the wider need for structured spaces where employers can learn directly from one another's experiences.

Building on these foundations, dedicated employer forums would provide an ongoing platform for peer-to-peer knowledge sharing in this fast-moving field. Such forums would strengthen firm-level understanding to support investment in digitalisation, while simultaneously generating real-time intelligence to ensure regional skills strategies remain agile and closely aligned with business needs.

Based on the priorities identified during surveying and feedback in focus groups, focussing these forums around digital marketing, artificial intelligence, data analytics, cyber security and back-office functions would help to maximise their impact.

## **Develop and deliver new short courses for business leaders to understand what is available and possible with new technologies – including AI tools – and how to successfully deliver digital transformation projects, to unlock opportunities associated with adoption of new technologies.**

To unlock firm-level investment in digitalisation, and as a result, employment opportunities for digitally enabled talent and the upskilling of existing workforces, leaders of West Midlands SMEs require support to develop a deeper understanding of new technologies.

Feedback from focus group participants was clear that providing education and guidance on not just the capabilities of new technologies, but also how to embark on successful business transformation initiatives must be embedded in education and signposting.

Participants also highlighted the importance of continuing funding and delivery of courses provided by organisations such as Innovate UK to help business leaders understand new technologies.

To address the identified need for digital leadership training in the region, Netcom training and the Greater Birmingham Chambers of Commerce are currently trailing delivery of a bespoke training course, AI for business leaders, aiming to provide participants with the confidence and clarity to lead with impact.

## **Establish a clear, high-level roadmap of support for West Midlands firms seeking to embed and integrate AI tools into existing systems.**

Businesses across the region frequently expressed strong interest in adopting AI, yet highlighted uncertainty around how to integrate these tools effectively within their existing operations. To bridge this gap, a structured roadmap of support is required to guide firms through the process of AI adoption.

Such a roadmap should combine practical signposting to advice and guidance with support for wider organisational change. This includes fostering a 'digital mindset' across workforces through training, continuous professional development (CPD), and embedding digitalisation within organisational values – ensuring AI adoption leads to genuine transformation rather than isolated experimentation.

SMEs in focus groups also emphasised the need for affordable access to expert consultancy. A staged approach could prove effective: enabling firms to follow an accredited roadmap for 'basic' AI integration, followed by access to funded AI audits and tailored expert guidance to support more advanced digitalisation. This would ensure that businesses at all stages of their AI journey have the right support to unlock productivity gains and competitive advantage.

## **Unlock business investment for advanced digitalisation and establish a competitive advantage for the region by providing initial funding for foundational digital capabilities and infrastructure.**

Amid challenging economic conditions, the cost of training and development remains a critical barrier to businesses across the region investing in workforce digital skills.

Whilst national policy makers emphasise the critical importance of harnessing opportunities associated with AI, West Midlands businesses first need the foundational digital capabilities and firm-level infrastructure to maximise its full potential.

Feedback from focus groups suggests that providing initial funding for development of these digital capabilities and necessary digital infrastructure has the potential to unlock initial productivity gains for local businesses, increasing capacity for future business investment.

By doing so, the West Midlands has an opportunity to lay bold foundations and establish a competitive advantage for regional businesses in AI adoption and integration.

# ABOUT THE GREATER BIRMINGHAM CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

We're here to unleash the potential of Greater Birmingham's businesses.

Whether it's connections with our extensive network, inspiring events that spark new ideas, expert led services, regional insight, or opportunities to build and raise your profile, we're here to give your business the tools to reach your full potential.

We are unwavering champions and the leading voice for Greater Birmingham's businesses. We're in it for the long haul – we've been putting the us in business since 1813.

At every stage of your business' journey, we're here for you. Our dedicated team specialise in empowering businesses to build their networks, access opportunities and learn from best practice locally, and trade internationally. We love local, and we go global.

Join the GBCC today to become part of a vibrant community of forward-thinking organisations, that are proud to be shaping the future of Greater Birmingham – together.

Find out more at [www.greaterbirminghamchambers.com](http://www.greaterbirminghamchambers.com)

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## ABOUT NETCOM TRAINING

Netcom Training is a leading UK training provider dedicated to transforming lives and businesses through government funded digital and technology courses. With over a decade of experience, Netcom has helped thousands of learners build in-demand skills across IT, digital marketing, data, cyber security, AI, social media, video production and more. All programmes are delivered by expert tutors who combine technical expertise with industry insight to prepare learners for the modern workplace.

In addition to training, Netcom provides employers with a free recruitment service, connecting organisations to a graduate talent pool of pre-qualified and pre-assessed candidates. From full-time hires to flexible contracts, Netcom ensures businesses can access skilled professionals trained in high-demand areas.

As the trusted tech training partner of the West Midlands Combined Authority, Netcom Training works with jobseekers, career changers and employers to close digital skills gaps, drive innovation and build a confident, future-ready workforce.

Find out more at [www.netcomtraining.co.uk](http://www.netcomtraining.co.uk)



[www.greaterbirminghamchambers.com](http://www.greaterbirminghamchambers.com)

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