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Ireland's Next Competitive Advantage Will Be Human

Ireland enters the age of AI with enviable strengths. The question now is whether organisations and workers can combine technology with the adaptability, judgement and confidence required to turn rapid innovation into lasting economic and business value.

Ireland begins its AI journey with powerful advantages: a highly educated workforce, strong digital capability and an economy with a proven ability to adapt to technological change.



The country ranks second in the EU for basic digital skills.

Research from Eurostat shows

83% 

of people aged 16–74 in Ireland had at least this basic level of competence in 2025, compared with an EU average of

60%



Ireland also has a strong pipeline of science and technology graduates.

Yet this strong starting point can create false comfort. Basic digital literacy is not AI fluency. Fluency means understanding a tool's strengths and limitations, applying it appropriately in a role and judging its outputs critically.

As AI capability advances, competitive advantage will depend as much on human judgement and adaptability as on technical proficiency.

Government policy is seeking to turn the country's strong foundations into broad-based capability.

The 2026 National Digital and AI Strategy, Digital Ireland – Connecting our People, Securing our Future, sets out a vision to position Ireland as a leading digital nation by 2030, harnessing digital technologies and supporting the responsible adoption of AI to drive innovation, strengthen competitiveness and improve public services.

Between national ambition and economic value lies a bridge that technology cannot build alone: talent and skills.

The Government's strategy includes a Roadmap for Technology Skills of the Future, a National Skills Observatory, an online AI Skilling Platform and a nationwide Digital and AI skilling campaign. AIReady.ie aims to provide training opportunities to one million people, while businesses can access a growing range of digital and skills supports across the enterprise system.

Much of the national infrastructure is being put in place. The decisive chapter will now be written inside organisations: in the choices leaders make, the confidence employees build and the work teams redesign.

For leadership teams, the task is to decide what AI means for their organisation, the skills their people will need and how work itself must change. This requires an approach to skills that can keep pace with the technology.



From awareness to AI fluency

The journey to AI fluency looks different in every workforce. One employee may still be wondering what AI means for their job. Another may already be testing new applications each week. Many are in the middle: curious, occasionally using AI, but not yet confident enough to make it part of how they work.

The organisational challenge is to give each employee the capability needed to use AI effectively and responsibly in their role.

A strong AI fluency programme goes beyond training people to use particular tools. It should build understanding of what AI can do, where it creates value, how to use it safely and how to adapt as its capabilities evolve.

Nor is fluency built through a single training intervention. New capabilities are emerging too quickly. People need permission to learn through experience, room to experiment and practical ways to share what works with colleagues.

Deloitte's 2026 Global Human Capital Trends research highlights the scale of the task.



Based on research with more than 9,000 business and HR leaders across 89 countries, it found that

85%



while only
7%

of leaders consider it critical to build the ability of organisations and their workforces to adapt at the speed now required

say they are leading in helping their workforce continuously grow and adapt.



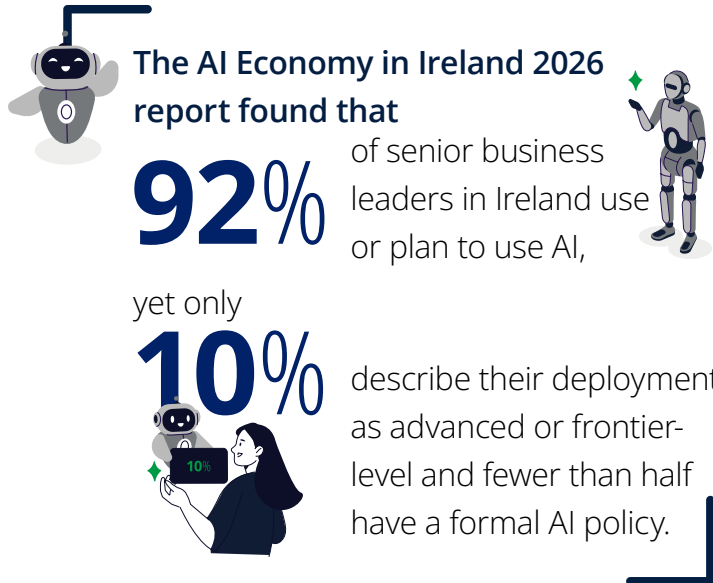
Fluency gives people the capacity to adopt AI. But capacity alone does not create value. That depends on the choices an organisation makes about strategy, governance and the design of work.



From experiments to enterprise value

The first wave of AI adoption was defined by experimentation: individuals trying tools, teams launching pilots and leaders searching for credible use cases. The next wave is harder. It requires organisations to turn scattered activity into a governed, scalable source of value.

Research by Trinity College Dublin's Centre for Digital Business and Analytics, conducted in collaboration with Microsoft Ireland, illustrates the gap between adoption and capability.



Some organisations have developed clear strategies, established governance and understand what AI means for their workforce. They have identified where the technology can create value and are connecting investment in AI to wider business objectives. Elsewhere, the story is more fragmented: a promising pilot in one team, an enthusiastic user in another, but no organisation-wide strategy and no clear route from success to scale. Sometimes employees are moving faster than the organisation itself, adopting readily available tools without formal guidance or a shared understanding of the risks.

Clear guardrails are therefore essential. Teams need clarity on which systems may be used, for what purposes, with what data and where human review remains mandatory. Done well, governance is not a brake on adoption; it is what makes adoption possible at pace. Clear rules, reliable systems and visible assurance give employees the confidence to act while keeping accountability firmly in view.

Even as the technology continues to develop, there are steps organisations can take with confidence. Building AI fluency across the workforce and establishing a clear strategic direction provide a foundation from which they can learn, adapt and build on what works.



Where the human advantage grows

As AI becomes more capable, the value of people does not diminish; it shifts. When routine work recedes, analytical and creative thinking, problem-solving, communication and professional judgement move closer to the centre of performance.

The World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report 2025 showed analytical thinking was the most sought-after core skill among employers, while creative thinking was among the skills expected to rise in importance through 2030.

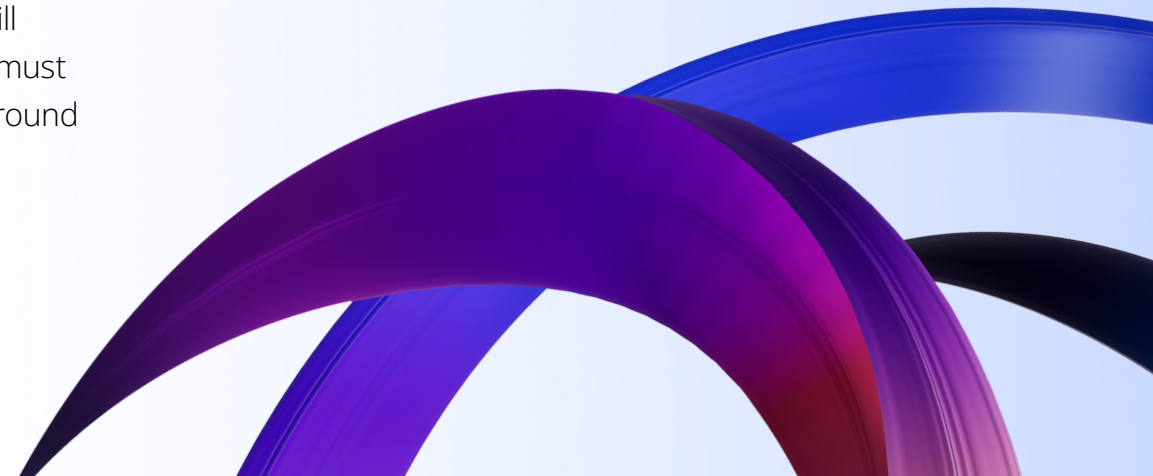
AI output still requires validation. People must identify errors and gaps, recognise hallucinations, know when experience should override the model and remain accountable for consequential decisions.

Curiosity and adaptability are equally important. The pace of development means that the capabilities required within individual roles can change much faster than workers and organisations have experienced with previous waves of technology. Workers therefore need to be comfortable experimenting with new tools and adjusting as their roles evolve, while organisations need to create opportunities for people to learn through their work and ensure skills development keeps pace.

This is the opportunity beneath the efficiency story. Capacity released by AI can be reinvested in understanding customers, strengthening relationships, solving complex problems, innovating and growing. But that value will not appear automatically. Organisations must redesign roles, workflows and services around what people and AI each do best.

CEOs need a clear view of what they want AI to achieve and how that connects to the wider strategy of the business. That means considering how work changes, which capabilities people need and how roles should develop as AI becomes more capable.

Leaders also need to be clear with employees about what the organisation is trying to achieve, what it could mean for their roles and how they are expected to develop alongside it.



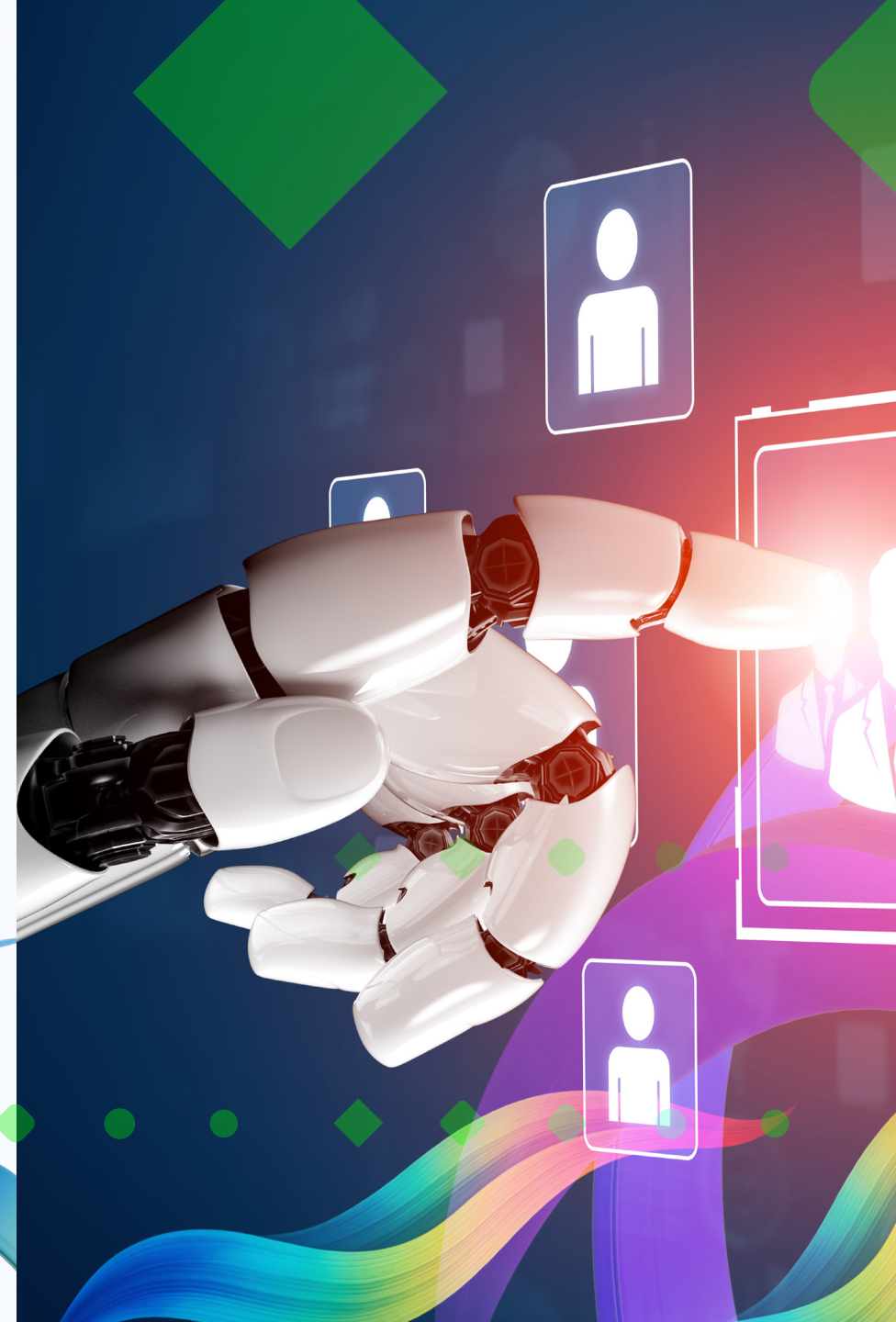
Rebuilding the career ladder

One of AI's most important consequences may also be one of its least visible: what happens to the pathways through which people become experts?

Research, analysis, administration and first drafts have long been part of early-career work. They have also served as an apprenticeship, building pattern recognition and judgement through repetition. As AI increasingly performs these tasks, organisations risk removing the work through which future experts learn.

The answer cannot be passive erosion. It must be deliberate redesign, giving people earlier exposure to complex work, strengthening mentoring and observation, and making the development of judgement an explicit organisational responsibility.

That makes continued graduate recruitment more important, not less. The people entering organisations today include the specialists, managers and leaders they will depend on in the decades ahead. The real test of Ireland's AI ambition, therefore, is not simply how quickly organisations adopt the technology. It is whether they use this moment to build the human capability that will sustain advantage long after today's tools have changed.



Contact



Lynn Guilbaud

Partner

Technology & Transformation
(AI & Workforce Transformation)

lguilbaud@deloitte.ie

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