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ISSUE15

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FOREWORD

01

CLAUDINE ADEYEMI-ADAMS FIEP
Founder & CEO
Earlybird AI

It is an immense pleasure to introduce this edition of the IEP Journal as the guest editor. The theme of this journal is 'Technology, Transformation and Innovation' and naturally, given the current times, there is a particular focus on AI.

In my experience working at the forefront of AI innovation in employability, I have seen the excitement, misconceptions and concerns around technology and, particularly AI up close.

My own professional journey has led me to believe that our sector stands at a once-in-a-generation moment to move beyond the hype, cut through the fears, and provide a balanced and responsible view of its true potential.

The contributors to this journal collectively argue that the challenge is not AI itself, but a systemic misalignment between our current employment support models and the realities of a changing workforce. The current system is often "bureaucratic, labour intensive and unresponsive to claimant need or preference". Meanwhile, our talent pipeline is under "unprecedented pressure from multiple converging forces".

The journey we have curated within these pages is a roadmap through this complexity. We begin by diagnosing the problem and presenting a bold vision for AI to "back every job seeker". We then explore how AI can enable a fundamental shift from a reactive "casework" model to proactive "systems work," using data to address structural barriers at scale. We deepen our understanding of how AI agents can evolve how we work in employability and see these concepts in action through real-world pilots and case studies that demonstrate how AI can deliver efficiency, but not without critical lessons on the risks of misinformation and "automating our biases".

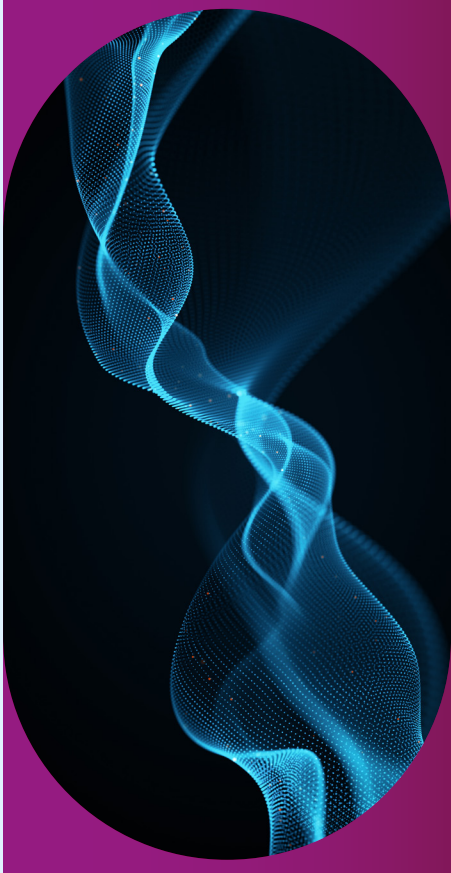
The powerful revelation that underpins this entire collection is that AI is the clearest validation yet of why a person-centered approach is more valuable than ever. AI handles routine tasks and augments employment advisors, performing in service to those practitioners, it "liberates" them to focus on the human-centered work of building trust, providing holistic support, and navigating the complex emotional barriers that keep people from accessing and thriving at work.

I am deeply grateful to the contributors for their generosity and for sharing their insights. This journal is a collective search for the "sweet spot" between risk and opportunity, and I believe that AI and wider technological innovation can be the catalyst that empowers our profession to do what it has always done best: unlock human potential. I hope this journal serves as a starting point for dialogue as well as action, inspiring us all to embrace our role as stewards of opportunity and inclusion and enablers of economic resilience, ensuring that our services expand opportunity, rather than entrenching inequality, for all.

Claudine Adeyemi-Adams is an impact technology leader and the founder of Earlybird, an AI and Voice technology platform that empowers organisations delivering Government contracts – particularly those supporting people into work – to improve outcomes more efficiently.

Her personal journey from a low-income background to a multi-award-winning legal career ignited a deep passion for social change. Having experienced homelessness and navigated the complexities of employment support programmes firsthand, she is uniquely positioned to understand the barriers many individuals face.

Claudine is the IEP Fellow of the Year and Earlybird won Digital Solution of the Year 2024 at the ERSA Employability Awards.



02

FROM JOBCENTRE QUEUES TO DIGITAL EMPLOYMENT COMPANIONS: HOW AI CAN BACK EVERY JOB SEEKER BY 2030

OLIVER LARGE
Policy Advisor
Tony Blair Institute for Global Change

Two very different job search experiences play out in Britain today. One job seeker refreshes her Universal Credit portal at 2am, hoping for a ten-minute slot with an overworked work-coach.

Down the street, a LinkedIn chatbot redrafts her neighbour's CV, navigates him to his desired job that he "described" in a sentence, identifies the compatibility with his skills profile, and lands him an interview in under twenty seconds. While the labour market is racing towards the future, the state is stuck in the 20th century.

Britain's employability architecture is drifting behind the labour market it services. At the centre of this is the Job Centre Plus (JCP). Pockets of excellence exist, but the data tells a stark story: of 2.5 million people unemployed or low earners, 60 per cent have been in receipt of UC for more than a year and 250,000 people for five years or more[1]. Fewer than 1 per cent of those on the higher rate of incapacity benefit move off the benefit each month[2].

TODAY'S JCP EMPLOYABILITY SERVICES CAN'T SCALE BECAUSE IT IS BUREAUCRATIC, LABOUR-INTENSIVE AND UNRESPONSIVE TO CLAIMANTS

This isn't the fault of work coaches. It's the result of a system that is bureaucratic, labour intensive and unresponsive to claimant need or preference. Good quality services are difficult to scale, even with significant investment.

Consider the pressure on staff: in 2024, JCPs employed 2,100 fewer work coaches than required, and 57 per cent of work coaches reduced the support they provided because caseloads were too high[3]. Much of what work coaches do – worth around £350 million per year in labour time – is spent on monitoring compliance for Universal Credit rules, time that could be used to help people find and progress in work. And while there is a heavy reliance on face-to-face meetings, job centres are unevenly spread across the country, which leaves many areas underserved. Faced with time constraints, coaches are more likely to default to the fastest route – usually, "any job at any cost."

As a result of this operating model, the JCP has limited capacity to provide support to anyone or for anything else. Millions are excluded from quality support altogether, often labelled "too difficult to help," despite research showing 20 per cent of incapacity benefit claimants want employment[4]. This is less a feature of the system and more a symptom of an operating model that cannot personalise support at scale.

Most support also stops on entry into the workplace. Disadvantaged groups, including disabled people, have a higher chance of falling out

Oliver Large is a Policy Advisor at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, specialising in the intersection of technology and public policy.

His work focuses on the transformative impact of artificial intelligence on public services and the economy, with research spanning the NHS, welfare systems, local government, and the future of work. Oliver has written policy papers on reimagining the UK's Department for Work and Pensions, improving service navigation in the age of AI, and how governments should respond to the impact of AI on the labour market.

He has advised political leaders in Europe and beyond on how to navigate both the opportunities and risks of AI adoption.

1 TBI analysis of data from DWP Stat-Xplore
2 https://www.jrf.org.uk/work/work-first-can-work-better
3 https://www.localgov.co.uk/NAO-warns-of-jobcentre-staffing-crisis/62164
4 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-aspirations-and-support-needs-of-claimants-in-the-esa-support-group-and-universal-credit-equivalent/the-work-aspirations-and-support-needs-of-claimants-in-the-esa-support-group-and-universal-credit-equivalent

of work without adequate support[5]. In addition, the churn in the labour market will increase as AI automates and augments roles. The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change's (TBI) analysis shows between 60,000 and 275,000 jobs per year could be removed, roughly one job every six minutes[6]. More jobs will be added, but this means workers need consistent access to upskilling, retraining, advice and networks throughout their careers – yet disadvantaged groups have less access to these opportunities.

Finally, employers are routinely not engaged. Only 14 per cent of employers engage with the Job Centre Plus[7] – and just eight per cent of those that engage trust it to find them the right candidate. Improving these relationships will take time and money, with no guarantee of success.

In short, the current JCP model of employability services overburdens work coaches, limits access and quality for claimants, and fails to adequately engage employers. Resolving all these in the current operating model means spending billions more – an option that is neither politically nor financially possible.

AI MAKES POSSIBLE A NEW APPROACH TO EMPLOYABILITY SERVICES

AI presents a different path. It can both boost efficiency and unlock a new vision of service delivery.

First, AI can create efficiencies within existing workflows. According to analysis by TBI, work coaches alone could free up 45.9 per cent of time using AI tools, equivalent to a productivity gain of close to £295 million a year[8].

The DWP has started to experiment with its potential: it has launched a £10 million initiative, Nexus AI, to build tools to improve call triaging, support work coaches to provide advice, and identify vulnerable claimants from their correspondence. In addition, the Department for Science and Technology are scanning the potential use of AI Agents in careers guidance[9].

Second, these efficiencies also provide the capacity to reimagine what the service – and its staff - do. If AI tools handle routine admin (or other tasks like monitoring), Work Coaches can focus on complex, face-to-face support. For job seekers, this means resolving the obstacles to employment quicker and better.
Crucially, the productivity gains from AI adoption does not have to mean job losses. The DWP controls how to use these time savings – and should do so to build capacity for more human-centred, relationship-based support. But first, it needs a radical vision of employability services in 2030, underpinned by technology and AI, to address the size and urgency of the problem.

AN EMPLOYMENT COMPANION FOR EVERY JOB SEEKER BY 2030

Today's employability services limit support to a small group of claimants, under-prepares job-seekers and under-serves employers in the labour market. But AI opens up the possibility of a universal service - low barriers to entry, high quality, personalised throughout a person's working life.

TBI has proposed giving every citizen access to a "Digital Employability Assistant" – outlined in Governing in the Age of AI: Reimaging the UK Department for Work and Pensions[10]. This Assistant would do several things.

One profile - based on an app or phone, the assistant would store a canonical version of the claimant's CV, link to a lifelong learner ID (which holds their data about their education credentials and skills they have acquired through life).

Smart triage – based on the information held on their profile, the assistant would perform an initial virtual assessment to create an adaptive claimant commitment.

Employment springboard - AI models would analyse each person's skills, preferences and local labour-market data to suggest suitable jobs, training and offer practical job-search help (such as tailored CVs, mock interviews and activity tracking).

These are not abstract ideas. France's La Bonne Boite scrapes recruitment data from millions of companies and matches candidates to future vacancies. The job platform has four million active users (compared to 1.7 million users of job centres in the UK), a 70-80 per cent accuracy rating in predicting vacancies, and an 18 per cent increase in the effectiveness of getting people into jobs compared to those who do not use the platform[11].

With the functions described above, the digital employment assistant can become an employment companion – supporting decisions about personal development, progression, and moving on throughout the claimants' career. Citizens find jobs they can stay and grow in – not just any job that closes a claim.

The real breakthrough is access. AI never sleeps. Job seekers can engage with support whenever it suits them – critical for those juggling care or shift work. AI has already been used in commercial customer services settings to reduce call deflections by 80 per cent and contact resolution time by 50 per cent[12 13].

In addition, AI's near-zero marginal costs allows support to be extended to everyone – those within and beyond the benefit system, and those currently deemed too difficult to support.
Some of the claimants who would traditionally be expected to go to the JCP could drop routine face-to-face

5 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2023/employment-of-disabled-people-2023
6 https://institute.global/insights/economic-prosperity/the-impact-of-ai-on-the-labour-market
7 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/get-britain-working-white-paper/get-britain-working-white-paper
8 https://institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/reimagining-uk-department-for-work-and-pensions - TBI analysis
9 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ai-helpers-could-coach-people-into-careers-and-help-them-move-home
10 https://institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/reimagining-uk-department-for-work-and-pensions
11 https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/295804/1/dp16781.pdf
12 https://www.servicenow.com/au/customers/lion.html
13 https://www.servicenow.com/de/customers/cancom.html

appointments, freeing coaches for complex cases and those who prefer to talk to a human, who would still get longer in-person sessions backed by AI-enabled guidance.

Additional support could come from setting up virtual "career clinics" staffed remotely. In addition, where data shows rising need, temporary pop-up hubs in shared community venues could be created, allowing most permanent job-centre buildings to be phased out while widening access to employability support.

For employers, the platform reverses the information flow: it could push curated talent lists, matching employers to people with specific skills or encouraging engagement with bespoke programmes or pre-employment opportunities like traineeships. This would help to de-risk the application process for employers. And, freed from cold-calling firms to locate vacancies, the JCP can shift time and energy towards supporting candidates to maximise their chances.

Of course, this vision comes with risks. If poorly designed, AI tools could embed bias or reduce personal agency. For instance, if data is incomplete or has poor labelling, individuals could be penalised or miss out on relevant job opportunities. That's why the Digital Employment Assistant (DEA) must be designed transparently, fairly, and with human oversight. This includes adopting an earned autonomy approach to implementing AI that TBI have outlined in previous reports[14], and embedding the ability for citizens to speak to a human into all user journeys.

Human advisers, counsellors, and mentors will remain crucial in providing certain kinds of support, including emotional, ethical, and contextual support necessary for long-term success. The current system offers little room for this kind of support. Access to services should also remain in-person for a minority who cannot access digital tools. Our position at TBI is that using AI in the way described above is the only way to build the capacity to bring humanity back to the job search – away from tick boxing and monitoring to a focus on human flourishing.

The government faces a choice: keep managing a limited service that fails claimants, work coaches, and employers. Or with the right vision, and underpinned by AI capabilities, it could give every citizen an employment companion that turns opportunity into lasting work.

14 https://institute.global/insights/politics-and-governance/governing-in-the-age-of-ai-a-new-model-to-transform-the-state

03

THE UK TALENT PIPELINE CRISIS: NAVIGATING THE PERFECT STORM OF AI, MARKET STAGNATION, AND SKILLS MISALIGNMENT

MARK MARTIN MBE CITP
Assistant Professor
Computer Science and Education Practice

THE CURRENT REALITY: A SYSTEM UNDER STRAIN

The UK's talent pipeline is experiencing unprecedented pressure from multiple converging forces. As both an Educator and Chartered IT Professional, I've witnessed firsthand how the traditional pathways from education to employment have fundamentally broken down.

THE EDUCATION-INDUSTRY DISCONNECT

Universities have shifted dramatically from qualification-focused education to industry-aligned, application-based learning. While this pivot toward real-world exposure has merit, we're now walking a dangerous tightrope, sacrificing foundational domain knowledge for immediate industry relevance. The UK is lagging behind Europe when it comes to artificial intelligence adoption, with 49% of British businesses surveyed not using AI automation systems and having no plans to do so in the future[1], yet we're restructuring entire curricula around AI and emerging technologies that many UK employers aren't even implementing.

THE EXPERIENCE PARADOX

Some recruiters have abandoned their previous focus on top university graduates and are now demanding "experience". For example, a report by People Management highlights this trend, finding that 77% of UK employers now use skills tests to assess candidates, indicating a move away from traditional recruitment criteria like degrees and job titles[2]. However the term *experience* is a frustratingly vague requirement that creates an impossible standard for new entrants. University students are applying for hundreds of jobs while middle leaders (i.e. individuals in general managing roles) face limited advancement opportunities. But this isn't just about AI replacing jobs directly; it's about companies pausing hiring to assess AI adoption, a strategy that will ultimately backfire. McKinsey's analysis suggests that AI and Large Language Models are contributing to a cooling UK labour market and dampening hiring intentions. The analysis notes that job postings for roles with high exposure to AI and LLMs have seen a sharper decline than those with low AI exposure.

THE AI FACTOR: HYPE VS REALITY

The UK stands mid-ranking in global AI adoption (37%) at the enterprise level. Organisations in India (59%), China (50%), Singapore (53%), and the UAE (58%) are leading the way[3]. This data confirms what many of us in education suspected: while we're racing to align courses with AI demands, UK businesses are significantly slower to adopt these technologies compared to global competitors. Unlike the US, where tech giants drive aggressive AI implementation, the UK's more conservative business culture creates a unique disconnect between educational preparation and market reality.

Mark Martin MBE, known as @Urban_Teacher, is an Assistant Professor for Computer Science and Education Practice. With an expertise spanning AI and data science, he has been at the forefront of championing edtech and computer science education, delivering digital skills for the last two decades.

His deep knowledge in these domains has made him an influential voice in the UK tech scene, serving as an advisor to the government, big tech companies, institutions, and charities. He fervently champions for home-grown talent, digital skills, and education equity. As a testament to his dedication and impact on the UK, he co-founded UKBlackTech in 2017, now one of the UK's leading tech communities that champions innovation and digital transformation.

Mark's contributions to education, technology, and diversity in UK technology were recognised in 2019 when he was honoured with an MBE. Further, in May 2022, he was listed among the top 50 most influential people in UK IT by Computer Weekly.

1 AI Adoption Statistics 2024: All Figures & Facts to Know
Vention. (2024). AI adoption statistics 2024: All figures & facts to know. Vention. https://ventionteams.com/solutions/ai/adoption-statistics
2 People Management. CIPD (2024).
https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1921435/majority-employers-prioritise-skills-based-hiring-academic-credentials-study-finds
3 IBM. (2024). UK Lags Leading Asian Economies on Enterprise AI Adoption - New IBM Study
https://uk.newsroom.ibm.com/UK-Lags-Leading-Asian-Economies-on-Enterprise-AI-Adoption-New-IBM-Study

The employment data tells a sobering story. Over 264,000 tech employees were laid off in 2023 alone worldwide, with over 95,000 in the United States. The cuts continued through 2024, when approximately 152,000 jobs were eliminated (UnitedCode, 2024)[4]. While these US figures grab headlines, the UK faces a more insidious challenge: rather than mass layoffs, we're experiencing a hiring freeze and talent hemorrhage. These strategic reorganisations globally signal what's coming to the UK workforce. These global strategic reorganisations don't stop at national borders, many UK employers follow similar playbooks. The hiring freezes and talent drain we're seeing may be the first signs that the UK is on a similar path.

As an academic, I maintain that AI can help you drive the car, but we still need people who understand what's under the bonnet and how to fix it when things go wrong. The current wave of hype may persist until we see more grounded applications — for instance, in healthcare diagnostics, supply chain optimisation, or energy efficiency. Until then, exaggerated claims risk overshadowing rational industry responses, diverting resources from where AI can genuinely add value.

THE TALENT EXODUS: A NATIONAL CRISIS

There are growing signs that UK tech talent is looking abroad, with markets such as Dubai, Singapore, and parts of Africa offering faster hiring cycles, lower taxes, and aggressive relocation incentives. Unlike the United States, where cycles of layoffs are often followed by rapid rehiring, the UK labour market is showing signs of a more sustained attrition. Slower rehiring rates and flatter salary growth risk turning temporary caution into a longer-term drain of skilled workers.

For those who remain, under-utilisation is becoming a serious concern. Some are forced into lower-skilled roles, while others attempt to launch startups in an increasingly thin funding environment. More worryingly, industry briefings suggest that frustrated and under-employed talent can sometimes be drawn into grey-market cyber work. Taken together, these dynamics point to a potential long-term threat to the UK's innovation capacity and competitiveness.

THE GENDER EXODUS AMPLIFYING THE CRISIS

The brain drain extends beyond general talent flight. Each year, between 40,000 and 60,000 women leave their technology jobs in the UK[5], with the Lovelace Report 2025 estimating the cost to the economy at £2 to £3.5 billion annually[6]. This isn't primarily about childcare or "work-life balance": only 3% of women cited family or care responsibilities as their reason for leaving[7]. Instead, the problem is systemic career stagnation.

For women in mid-career (11–20 years of experience), more than three-quarters report waiting over three years for promotion — a delay significantly longer than typical progression benchmarks in the sector. Among those with over 20 years' experience, nearly two in five have been held back for more than five years. While some women do advance more quickly, the scale and consistency of these delays point to entrenched structural barriers. Over time, these bottlenecks compound, limiting career mobility and driving experienced women out of the workforce altogether.

The scale is staggering: Almost 80% of the 500+ women surveyed for the Lovelace research had either recently left or intended to leave their roles[8]. When combined with the general talent exodus, we're facing a catastrophic loss of experienced professionals precisely when the UK needs them most to compete in the AI era.

The unspent funds intended for the employment and skills market, exemplified by Nominet withdrawing funding from the Institute of Coding, highlight systemic failures in connecting resources with needs.

MARKET PRESSURES COMPOUNDING THE CRISIS

Several factors are creating a perfect storm:

- Rising national insurance costs making hiring more expensive
- Remote working enabling overseas outsourcing

- Widespread budget cuts across technology departments are limiting investment in new talent.
- Continuous recycling of experienced staff between organisations

- Workers are increasingly demanding roles that provide purpose and impact, not just traditional employment contracts.

These pressures, combined with 63% of employers identifying skill gaps as a major barrier to business transformation, create an environment where both employers and job seekers are paralysed by uncertainty[9].

RECOMMENDATIONS: A PATH FORWARD

1. Immediate Policy Interventions

Immediate policy interventions are essential to address this crisis. We should implement the Lovelace Report's recommendations for transparent career ladders, equitable

4 UnitedCode. (2024).Tech Job Market 2025: Hiring Outlook & Trends https://unitedcode.net/when-will-the-tech-job-market-recover-2025-hiring-outlook-layoffs-and-policy-shifts/
5 Horwood,P. 2025. Computing.co.uk. Lovelace Report reveals £2-3.5 billion annual loss from women leaving UK tech https://www.computing.co.uk/news/2025/leadership-strategy/2025-lovelace-report-reveals-billions-lost-by-women-leaving-tech
6 The £3.5 billion cost of losing women in tech - Women in Technology. 2025. https://www.womenintech.co.uk/the-3-5-billion-cost-of-losing-women-in-tech/
7 Women In UK Tech Could Unlock Up To £3.5 Billion In Growth (O'Neill et al, 2025) Oliver Wyman. https://www.oliverwyman.com/our-expertise/insights/2025/jul/billions-at-risk-if-uk-tech-fails-its-women.html
8 Horwood, P. 2025. Computing.co.uk. 80% of women working in tech are looking for the exit https://www.computing.co.uk/feature/2025/80-percent-women-in-tech-looking-for-exit
9 Office for National Statistics. (2025). Management practices and the adoption of technology and artificial intelligence in UK firms. https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/managementpracticesandtheadoptionoftechnologyandartificialintelligenceinukfirms

work distribution, and proactive measures against career stagnation, while amplifying employees' voices in decision-making. Employers must be encouraged to align AI investments with workforce commitments, and an AI displacement tax could support workers affected by technological change. A national basic minimum income, distinct from Universal Credit, could provide financial stability during periods of transition, ensuring individuals maintain a socially acceptable standard of living. Clear guidelines for AI adoption would reduce corporate uncertainty and promote more strategic, long-term workforce planning.

2. Double-down on AI resilient sectors

Despite AI dominating headlines, significant opportunities remain in sectors where human expertise is essential. Fields such as plumbing, energy efficiency, and other specialised trades are growing, yet they are often overlooked by mainstream employability programmes that focus heavily on AI and digital skills. To address this imbalance, career services should develop targeted pipelines in these underserved sectors, ensuring that talent is not only employable but matched to areas with enduring demand and minimal automation risk. Redirecting talent in this way could relieve pressure on oversaturated AI-focused roles while strengthening essential parts of the economy.

3. Prepare talent for jobs in tech, not just AI

We need to fundamentally reimagine how we prepare talent for the workplace. This means helping them understand the complete ecosystem by mapping the entire technology landscape beyond AI, which includes hardware, software, infrastructure, servers, security and data. Genuine pre-employment experiences through mock interviews, real projects, and office visits provide invaluable context that classroom learning cannot replicate. Creating pathways into niche opportunities within the broader tech ecosystem while focusing on building adaptability rather than specific tool proficiency will produce talent that can navigate change rather than becoming obsolete when technologies shift.

The skills-opportunity gap presents a particularly frustrating paradox. While 85% of employers surveyed plan to prioritise upskilling their workforce, 70% are expecting to hire staff with new skills. Upskilling therefore becomes futile without available positions. We must create mechanisms that guarantee employment pathways for those who complete training programmes. Without this bridge between training and employment, we're simply creating more qualified unemployed workers, deepening frustration and accelerating the talent exodus.

THE BOTTOM LINE

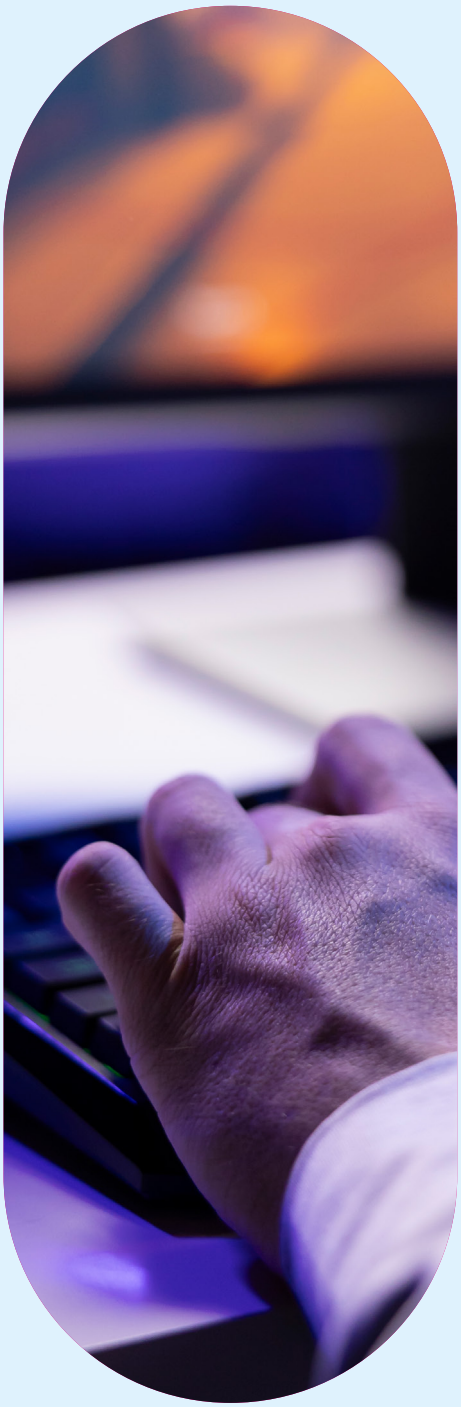
The UK talent pipeline crisis isn't primarily about AI replacing jobs; it's about systemic misalignment between education, employer expectations, and market realities. While other nations rapidly deploy AI at scale, the UK remains caught between ambitious educational reforms and cautious business adoption.

The £3.5 billion annual loss from women leaving tech alone should serve as a wake-up call. When combined with the broader talent exodus to international markets, and the risk that some highly skilled but under-employed workers could be drawn into illicit cyber activity, the economic and social costs of inaction are significant.

If talent gains practical experience, clear career pathways, and accessible entry points, they will be better equipped to contribute meaningfully across sectors. Unlocking this value requires stronger connections between academia and industry, ensuring that students and early-career professionals can transition smoothly into roles where their skills are most needed.

AI will continue to challenge traditional job roles, and we cannot bury our heads in the sand or stand on the sidelines. It is our responsibility to understand the direction of technological change and make rational decisions about how it may affect ourselves, our peers, our children, and society at large.

The time for incremental adjustments has passed. We need bold, systemic reform that acknowledges both the limitations of AI hype and the realities of global competition. Only through coordinated action by educators, employers, and policymakers can we build a talent pipeline robust enough to weather the current storm and position the UK for future success.



10 World Economic Forum (2025). The Future of Jobs Report. https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025/

04

FROM CASEWORK TO SYSTEMS WORK: HOW AI CHANGES THE UNIT OF SERVICE IN EMPLOYABILITY

CLAUDINE ADEYEMI-ADAMS FIEP
Founder & CEO
Earlybird

Claudine Adeyemi-Adams is an impact technology leader and the founder of Earlybird, an AI and Voice technology platform, empowers organisations delivering Government contracts – particularly those supporting people into work – to improve outcomes more efficiently.

Her personal journey from a low-income background to a multi-award-winning legal career ignited a deep passion for social change. Having experienced homelessness and navigated the complexities of employment support programmes firsthand, she is uniquely positioned to understand the barriers many individuals face.

Claudine is the IEP Fellow of the Year and Earlybird won Digital Solution of the Year 2024 at the ERSA Employability Awards.

INTRODUCTION: THE CASEWORK LEGACY

For decades, employment support has been built on the principle of casework: one participant, one adviser, one plan. This one-to-one model has clear strengths. It enables personalisation, builds trust between adviser and participant, and creates accountability for progress against an agreed action plan.

However, casework is inherently reactive. Structural barriers such as inaccessible childcare, transport limitations, or emerging labour market skills gaps are often recognised late, after they have already hindered many people's journeys to work.

And because casework consumes significant time and administrative effort, resources are heavily tied to individual-level support, limiting capacity to address systemic challenges.

Across public services, artificial intelligence (AI) is enabling a shift from purely case-by-case intervention to what can be called "systems work": the ability to spot patterns, anticipate needs, and design proactive responses at scale. This is not a replacement for casework, but an additional lens that can make employment services more effective, equitable, and sustainable.

DEFINING "SYSTEMS WORK"

In this context, systems work means looking beyond the individual file to understand and act on trends across many participants, communities, or programmes. It involves aggregating and analysing data to uncover structural barriers and opportunities and then using those insights to inform policy, programme design, and resource allocation.

The concept is already well established in other domains. For example, in the healthcare sector, population health management uses patient data to predict needs, target interventions, and prevent illness, shifting resources from reactive treatment to proactive care (NHS England, 2023). Or, in New South Wales, Australia, an indigenous-led justice reinvestment initiative, operating regionally in Bourke called Maranguka partnered with the New South Wales Police and other local and federal agencies to securely receive and hold data that ultimately informed the development of community-led initiatives and policies tailored to the specific needs of Bourke, through data working groups. This enabled Maranguka to design programmes successfully targeting the root causes of youth crime (Maranguka Ltd, 2024).

In employability, a systems lens might reveal that:

- Jobseekers in a specific locality with limited public transport access are significantly more likely to drop out of employability programmes.
- Demand for digital literacy support is rising sharply among older workers in a region where all local libraries have closed down.
- Participants with intermediate-level English proficiency are more likely to gain initial employment but struggle with retention after the first month.

These kinds of insights allow interventions to be designed before the next individual experiences the barrier – potentially benefiting dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people.

HOW AI ENABLES THE SHIFT

While practitioners and managers have always had some awareness of systemic patterns, AI changes the scale, speed, and accuracy with which those patterns can be detected and acted upon.

What could that look like in practice? AI can supercharge data aggregation; bringing together diverse datasets – adviser notes, participant surveys, employer feedback, labour market statistics – all in real time. Manual collation of such data is slow and labour-intensive; AI can make it continuous. You could have machine learning models identifying correlations and anomalies that may not be visible to humans conducting reviews. For example, natural language processing can scan thousands of adviser case notes to highlight recurring themes around mental health, housing instability, or skills gaps.

With predictive capabilities, rather than simply describing what has happened, AI can predict what is likely to happen next. This might include identifying participants at high risk of disengagement, forecasting demand for specific training, or anticipating the impact of labour market shifts. Or imagine simulating scenarios – AI could model "what if" scenarios to test the likely outcomes of policy changes or programme adjustments before they are implemented, helping decision-makers allocate resources more effectively.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SERVICE DESIGN

If we can advance towards systems work in some of the ways set out above, there is potential to completely reshape how employability services are designed and delivered.

Instead of responding when individuals disengage, services could act earlier to support whole groups with targeted measures for example, arranging subsidised transport in an area identified as a dropout hotspot. We could have data-driven insights guiding the deployment of specialist advisers, outreach teams, or employer engagement resources where they will have the most impact.

You could also see commissioners adopting funding models that reward providers not only for individual job outcomes but also for achieving systemic improvements such as reducing a region-wide barrier to employment.

RISKS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Shifting from casework to systems work is not without its challenges.

Focusing on aggregated patterns must not obscure individual needs or reduce the quality of personal support. AI should augment, not replace, the human relationships that underpin successful employment support. Careful consideration would need to be applied to how changes are implemented so that we do not fall into a "one-size-fits-all" approach when a highly personalised service is what's needed.

It's also imperative to bear in mind that AI systems are only as good as the data they are trained on. If the data excludes certain groups or embeds historical inequalities, the resulting insights may perpetuate bias rather than challenge it. Building AI systems that solve systemic issues is therefore incredibly difficult (albeit not impossible).

To reduce bias and keep 'systems work' equitable, providers can adopt a trust-by-design approach: co-design with affected groups; use representative, regularly refreshed datasets; run pre-deployment Algorithmic Impact Assessments and Data Protection Impact Assessments; and publish Algorithmic Transparency records so stakeholders can see how tools influence decisions. Ongoing monitoring, clear appeals routes, and human-in-the-loop reviews are essential.

Established frameworks already offer fairly concrete steps: UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI emphasises transparency, fairness, and human oversight; the UK Data Ethics Framework guides teams through ethical use across the lifecycle; the UK's Algorithmic Transparency Recording Standard enables public sector organisations to publish information about the algorithmic tools they are using and why they are using them; and Canada's federal Algorithmic Impact Assessment operationalises risk scoring and mitigation before systems go live.

The needs and thoughts of participants also have to be considered in this new approach and are too often excluded. Will participants consent to their data contributing to aggregated insights? How can the narrative be built to ensure that there is true transparency and trust built with participants and that they buy into the value created at scale as a result of their data being used to shape future services?

POLICY AND WORKFORCE IMPLICATIONS

The shift to systems work requires not just technology but also changes in policy, workforce roles, and organisational culture. Advisers may increasingly be asked to contribute to service improvement through the insights they gather in daily work, becoming both practitioners and data contributors - this may impact their existing workflows or require upskilling and deeper understanding of the bigger picture. It is likely that commissioners would need new metrics to measure success at the system level, including intermediate outcomes such as barrier reduction or community-level skills growth.

But the greatest potential may lie in linking employability data with other public service datasets - housing, health, education - to address root causes of unemployment more holistically as advocated for by the OECD which repeatedly emphasizes cross-sector data sharing and common data governance as a way to enable more integrated services (OECD, 2019).

Looking internationally, we can see precedents for this shift:

- **United Kingdom**: Integrated Care Systems use aggregated patient data to identify priority health issues in local populations, reallocating resources to prevention (NHS England, 2022).

- **United States**: From 2016–2021, 25 county-led pilots in California linked health, housing, justice, and social services data to coordinate support for people with complex needs. By 2018, all pilots had formal cross-agency data-sharing agreements, and most used shared electronic platforms combining medical, behavioural health, housing, and service-use information. Some provided real-time alerts (e.g., emergency visits) to trigger rapid, coordinated responses. This enabled agencies to address root causes like housing instability or untreated mental health issues at a population level, rather than relying solely on reactive case management (UCLA Centre for Health Policy Research, 2019).

- **Estonia – Public Services**: e-Estonia is a national data infrastructure enables agencies to share and act on aggregated insights, making services more joined-up and proactive and X-Road (which is the foundation of e-Estonia) has even enabled cross-border data sharing between Estonia and Finland which supports the future development of additional cross-border services.

These examples show that success depends as much on governance, political will, and public trust as it does on technology.

CONCLUSION

Casework remains essential. The empathy, trust, and adaptability of human advisers are irreplaceable. But AI offers the possibility of seeing the forest as well as the trees — identifying patterns that no single adviser or manager could detect, and acting on them to prevent problems before they affect the next participant.

The future of employability services is likely to involve blending casework and systems work – the human-led, one-to-one support that meets people where they are combined with the AI-enabled, systems-level insight that shapes a more equitable and effective service for all.

This will require investment in data infrastructure, workforce capability, and cross-sector collaboration – but the reward is a service that is both more personal and more powerful.

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05

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF AI AGENTS IN EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

BORIS BAMBO
Co-Founder & CTO
Earlybird

Every few years, new technologies arrive that promise to change the world. Some live up to that promise. For example, the internet reshaped how we communicate and do business. Smartphones put computing power into the hands of everyone. Cloud services made scale and flexibility possible for even small organisations.

Others, however, never quite reached their potential. Virtual reality, 3D printing, and blockchain were all predicted to transform daily life, but most have stayed limited to niche uses.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the latest of them. And unlike some earlier trendy technologies, it is unstoppable and already showing real, practical benefits across sectors, even in employability, which is often slower to adopt new technology.

Many are calling 2025 "the year of the AI agent." and this could represent the biggest change for employment support since the arrival of Customer Relationship Management Systems (CRMs) (IBM, 2025)[1].

WHAT IS AN AI AGENT?

To understand AI agents, it helps to start with Large Language Models (LLMs). An LLM is a system trained on huge amounts of text, image or even video data. It can generate responses, answer questions, and summarise information. Think of it as a machine that has absorbed patterns from data, so it can recognise and produce outputs just like humans do.

But LLMs on their own are limited. They can only respond based on what they have seen in their training data.

An AI agent is an evolution of the LLM. Instead of just generating answers, it can also act.

Agents are LLMs that have been given tools that allow them to go beyond their training data. For example, they might:

- browse the internet to find the latest information,
- connect to external systems, or
- complete tasks step by step with reasoning in between.

Agents do this by combining reasoning loops with tool use. A single agent can break down a task into steps, call the right tools or systems (such as job board APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) or CV templates), and then stitch the results together into something useful. This orchestration is what makes them more powerful than static chatbots and vanilla LLMs.

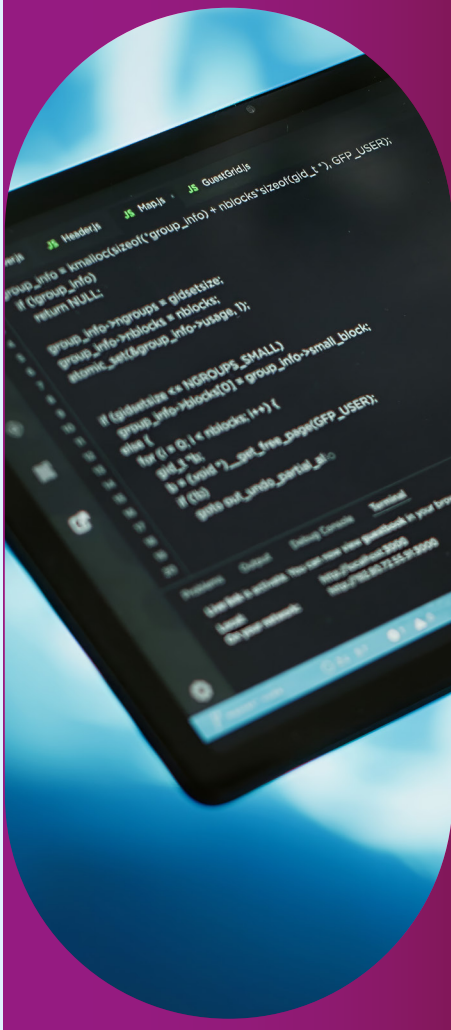
The other thing to mention is that more and more, the word "AI" will become synonymous with "AI agents." However, the distinction is important because models and agents are useful in different ways. Models give us information. Agents go further and can act.

A good example is ChatGPT itself. It began as a model that only responded with text based on its training data. But today, it can browse the web, generate images, and plug into other services. In this sense, it has moved from being an AI model to being an AI agent.

Boris Bambo, CTO and Co-Founder of Earlybird, is a seasoned technology leader dedicating his career to using innovation to create a positive societal impact.

Specialising in AI, machine learning and data science, he is motivated by the idea that work should be a source of happiness and self-expression, not just a means of survival.

Boris co-founded Earlybird to build AI-driven solutions that streamline support services and personalise learning experiences, striving to give every individual the tools they need to achieve their career potential.



WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

Even tools like CRMs took years to become standard in the employability sector. But the pressures on providers are growing. Advisors carry heavy caseloads. Budgets are tight. Participants expect more flexible and personal support.

At the same time, we have this new (AI) technology that is developing quickly, its costs are reducing and with clear gains in productivity and service quality from other industries.

Studies show productivity lifts of **20 - 70%** in areas like customer service, software development, and document processing when AI tools are introduced. In some cases, tasks that once took hours are being done in minutes (Nielsen, J. NNN Group, 2023) .

All of these fit key challenges in the sector: time, scale, and resource constraints.

For employability, the opportunity is clear. AI agents align directly with the sector's biggest needs: more time for advisors, the ability to scale across programmes and geographies, and better use of limited resources.

WHERE AI AGENTS CAN HELP

I believe AI agents can make a significant impact on three fronts.

Cutting Across Systems

One of the biggest challenges for providers is the number of systems they have to work with. A single contract may require staff to use a commissioner's portal alongside their own internal CRM. Add multiple contracts from different commissioners, and the picture gets even messier. The result is duplication, manual data entry, and wasted time that could otherwise be spent with participants.

AI agents can reduce or eliminate this friction via **API-less integrations**. Instead of waiting for formal integrations to be built (which are costly, slow, and often never happen), an agent can act as the "glue" between systems. It can log into an internal CRM, extract the required data, and update the commissioner's portal without the advisor needing to copy and paste the same information multiple times.

For a sector that lives with multiple contracts and multiple reporting demands, this capability is huge. It means compliance can be met without draining staff time.

Delivery

Another area is where advisors spend much of their time on routine but necessary tasks. These include writing CVs, searching for vacancies, and diagnostic assessments. AI agents can take on parts of this workload. For example, I can think of:

- **Job searching together**: An advisor and an agent can work in parallel to identify vacancies, screen roles, and match them to the participant's skills and needs.
- **Faster CV creation**: Instead of manually drafting one CV at a time, an advisor can prepare several CV drafts in a single sitting, with AI agents working on different profiles in parallel.
- **Instant information access**: When needed, an agent can pull up training resources, or referral partners in seconds.

On the participant side

AI agents also have the ability to work directly with participants to reduce barriers and provide continuous support. For example:

- **24/7 reassurance**: Participants can ask questions or share updates at any time, including evenings and weekends, and still receive some guidance.
- **Reducing barriers**: AI has improved many of the tools participants rely on. Translation is one example, helping people overcome language gaps, but similar advances are happening across accessibility and communication. Even confidence-building can be supplemented with AI coaching tools that let participants practice interviews or presentations between sessions.

The bigger advantage is what happens after participants re-enter the workforce.

By using AI agents throughout their journey, they build "AI fluency", which is the ability to apply these tools for themselves and extract value from them. Someone who has used AI to draft emails, summarise documents, and prepare interview answers during their programme will carry those skills into the workplace.

I have no doubt that participants who return to work with these experiences will be far more productive and confident from day one.

What we are already seeing

At Earlybird, we are already using AI agents to engage participants at various stages of their programme, from onboarding to collecting feedback. The results have been eye-opening.

Up to 40% of these interactions happen outside regular office hours, between 6 pm and 8 am and on weekends .

This shows two important things:

1. Participants want and need support outside the 9–5 window.
2. AI can step in to fill those gaps without adding pressure on case workers.

The key point to remember is that agents strengthen both sides of the equation. They give providers more productivity and scale, while also making participants more capable and confident as they re-enter the workforce.

In other words, they improve not just the pathway into work, but also the performance once in work.

SECURITY AND COMPLIANCE RISKS

The opportunities are clear, but there are also risks we cannot ignore. Providers in this sector work with sensitive participant data, strict commissioner rules, and multiple reporting systems.

AI agents add new value, but they also introduce new responsibilities.

When an agent acts on behalf of a user, for example, updating records in a CRM, it needs access rights. Without the right guardrails, this creates obvious risks. An agent could access the wrong data or take actions that were not intended. The way to manage this is through clear governance: role-based permissions to restrict what an agent can do, ethical reviews, randomised controlled trials, and audit trails so every action is logged and reversible .

There is also the question of compliance and data sovereignty. If AI agents start moving data between these systems, providers must be confident that the right standards are being followed. The challenge grows when we consider the infrastructure behind AI. Most models today run on global cloud platforms. For commissioners, this is a serious concern. Providers need assurance that participant data stays within approved jurisdictions. Local deployment options and sovereign cloud setups could be essential if AI agents are to be adopted at scale.

BALANCING INNOVATION AND TRUST

Even if the security and compliance issues are addressed, there are still challenges in how AI agents are adopted. One risk is over-regulation. If commissioners and providers apply rules that are too restrictive, the sector may block innovation before it has a chance to prove its value. On the other hand, too little oversight could expose participants and providers to real harm. The balance has to be proportionate: guardrails that protect privacy and compliance, but enough freedom to experiment and learn.

Trust is another critical factor. For many, AI agents can feel like "black boxes." If advisors do not understand why an agent has made a recommendation, or if participants feel the system is acting without their knowledge, confidence will drop. Transparency is the key. Agents should make their actions visible and explainable. Simple design choices, such as showing the steps an agent has taken, providing logs of its activity, or offering an "explain this recommendation" feature, help build trust for both advisors and participants.

Adoption will also depend on culture and readiness. Frontline staff need to feel that agents are supporting them, not monitoring or replacing them. Participants need to see agents as tools they can use, not as gatekeepers. This requires careful communication and training alongside the technology itself.

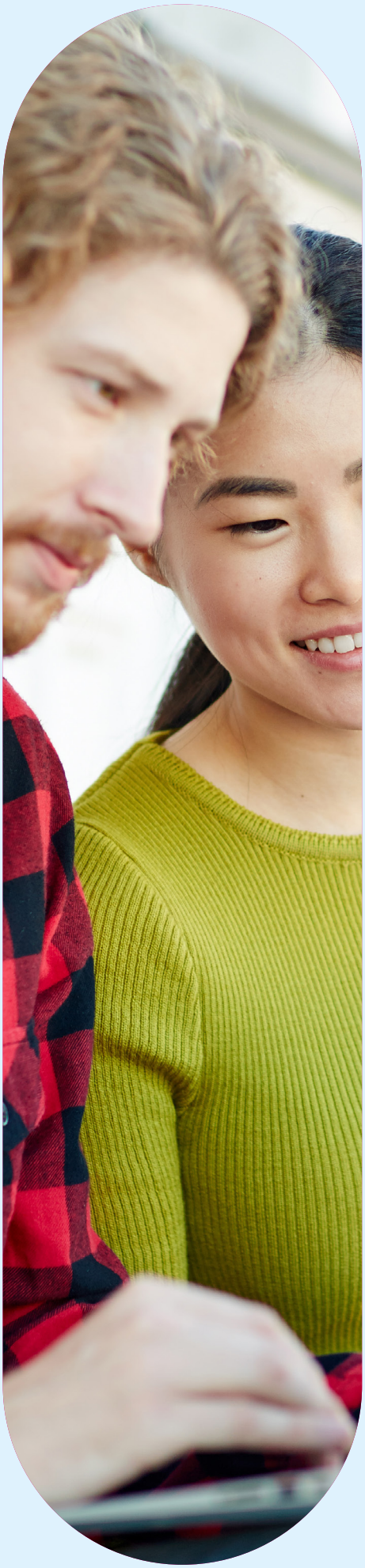
With the right balance of governance, transparency, and support, AI agents can be introduced in a way that builds trust and accelerates adoption across the sector.

CONCLUSION

All of this to say, AI agents are not a distant idea. They are already here, showing results in employability. The potential is clear: agents can save advisors time, reduce barriers for participants, and build new skills that make people more confident in the workplace.

But potential alone is not enough. The sector needs to act. That means testing AI and agents in real delivery settings, building the governance to keep them secure and compliant, and giving staff and participants the training to use them well.

The employability sector has always been about helping people move forward. AI agents give us new tools to do that at scale and with greater impact. The challenge now is to adopt them responsibly and quickly, so that providers, advisors, and participants can all share in the benefits.



06

NAVIGATING THE AI FRONTIER: SEETEC'S PILOT IN EMPLOYABILITY SERVICES

BECKY MILES
Operations Manager
Seetec

In the evolving landscape of employability and public service delivery, digital innovation is no longer a future ambition, it is a present necessity. At Seetec, we are one of the largest employee-owned companies and public service providers in the UK.

Our aim to change lives and communities for the better drives everything that we do – including the complexities of integrating AI into our services. While initial apprehension about technological change is natural, we're driven by the immense excitement and responsibility of getting this right.

Our recent pilot with Earlybird has reaffirmed my belief in the power of AI as a tool for efficiency, making space for more human connection. We believe AI will augment human potential, not diminish it. It'll enable our teams to be more effective, do their best work and drive impactful services forward. Our AI journey is complex, but we're embracing it with determination, driven by our unwavering purpose to transform lives. This piece is a reflection on and lessons learnt from delivering our first AI pilot.

Seetec's AI pilot, launched in December 2024, set out to test how conversational AI and intelligent automation could enhance both participant engagement and frontline advisor effectiveness. From the outset, our collaboration with Earlybird was defined by shared values: responsiveness, flexibility, and a focus on tangible outcomes. It became clear throughout our pilot just how important these things are when collaborating to drive innovation.

The results speak volumes, not just in metrics, but in the real-world impact on staff and participants.

At its core, the AI pilot delivered two major innovations:

1. Conversational AI: An AI agent that converses with participants, meaningfully engaging them after being referred into our service by completing a Vocational Assessment before their first meeting with an Employment Advisor (EA).

2. WorkScribe: An AI-powered transcription tool that converts live EA-participant conversations into structured case notes, insights, and suggested action plans.

In order to deliver a robust evaluation of the platform, we rolled it out across several "pilot" sites and then compared data between those sites and our control sites.

Pilot sites consistently outperformed control sites, with an average of 67% participant attendance at Discovery Meetings, compared to 64%. Perhaps even more striking was the evidence of user-driven engagement: over 40% of vocational assessments were completed outside of business hours, a clear indication that AI is enabling accessibility and flexibility for people with busy lives or complex needs.

As someone who has worked in this sector for over 20 years, I was really impressed by how Earlybird's WorkScribe shifted the role of advisors. It saved 12–18 minutes per appointment in admin time, allowing

Becky is a dedicated manager in employability with over 20 years' experience managing teams and supporting people back into sustainable employment and transforming their lives. She is currently Operations Manager at Seetec, where she manages teams across the Southwest who deliver the Restart, WHP, and Pioneer programmes – large-scale DWP contracts that help individuals overcome barriers, gain skills, and achieve sustainable employment.

Over the course of her career, Becky has worked across a wide variety of employability contracts, developing expertise in programme delivery, team leadership, and building strong partnerships that deliver real impact for communities. She is passionate about supporting teams and creating opportunities for those furthest from the labour market, ensuring services are inclusive, responsive, and empowering.

Her leadership is shaped by a commitment to social impact and continuous improvement, with a track record of driving innovation in employment support.

them to use these saved hours for employer engagement and participant support. EAs spoke of being more present in meetings, more focused on customer needs, and less burdened by post-session admin and typing up notes. One advisor described it as a "game-changer," especially as someone with ADHD who previously struggled with documentation. Others noted that having a tool that accurately captured nuance from barriers to small wins meant they could build stronger, more responsive action plans.

This is where the socio-technological dimension becomes real. AI didn't replace our advisors, it enabled them. It created space for empathy, listening, and tailored support. It levelled the playing field for neurodiverse staff and helped ESOL customers communicate more effectively. In short, it supported the great work our advisors do with participants, work that is skilled, purposeful, and sustainable.

Reflecting on the impact of this pilot, here are my three takeaways that I would share with other organisations looking to introduce an AI platform into their service to support their frontline staff:

1. Prioritise Frontline Inclusion, even Co-Design, from Day One

   The buy-in and active participation of your frontline teams are paramount. They are the experts in daily operations and are using the technology. Engage them early and often, ensure their feedback is not just heard but integrated into the platform's development and refinement and service implementation. It builds champions on the ground and ensures that AI truly enhances, rather than hinders, their ability to deliver quality service.

2. Cultivate Collaborative and Iterative Partnerships with Vendors

   When engaging AI solution providers, seek partners who embrace an iterative approach. While speed, budget and other factors are critical, recognise that AI development in human services is a continuous learning process on all sides.

   Negotiate contracts that allow for agile development cycles, frequent feedback loops, and the flexibility to adapt as new insights emerge from pilot phases – as well as scale quickly when needed. Look for vendors committed to tailoring solutions to your specific operational contexts and those who are willing to do the difficult work and ask challenging questions – that's true partnership.

3. Invest in Future-Ready Training and Role Evolution

   Introducing AI demands a strategic approach to workforce development that goes beyond user experience and digital literacy. Equip staff for evolving roles by focusing training on how AI enhances their ability to serve and frees them for higher-value, empathetic interactions. Cultivate a culture where adapting to new technologies is seen as an opportunity for personal and professional growth, adoption is encouraged, and performance is rewarded.

The integration of AI into employability services should not be seen as a mere cost-saving exercise, but as an investment in creating healthier, more productive societies. With careful rollout, clear ethical standards, and robust training, tools like Earlybird can help us tackle inequality, reduce administrative burden, and improve the quality of our participant journeys.

Innovation is only as strong as the partnerships that underpin it. Our collaboration with Earlybird demonstrated the best of what's possible when AI is introduced not to control, but to co-pilot. I am excited about what comes next as we investigate scaling these tools across wider teams and deepening the system integration.

As we look to the future, my hope is that we continue to explore digital innovation through the lens of empowerment of staff, of participants, and of the communities we serve.

07

USE CASE: WHAT THE DIGITAL COLLEGE LEARNED WHEN TEST DRIVING AI

MATT KINGSWOOD FIEP
CEO
The Digital College

A salesperson at a car garage near me tells an entertaining story about the pitfalls of letting customers test drive cars. They nervously get behind the wheel of a prospective purchase, accidentally set the seat too low and then gently guide it out of the dealership and onto the road, towards a busy crossroads.

The salesperson used to say "Go straight across the lights", which customers did without fail – often when they were red. She doesn't say that anymore.

Clearly this is a cautionary tale where assumed intelligence – real or artificial – can get you into a lot of trouble. More relevant to us budding AI users the tale highlights the risks of being present but not truly being in control of the situation. Like many businesses, The Digital College has ambitious plans for AI over the next twelve months, incorporating it across all parts of the organisation. However, early pilot projects have unearthed a lot of troubling questions, and like our salesperson, we realised that we weren't truly in control. Buckle up, read on and hopefully you can avoid a painful trip through a red light.

This article will walk you through two ways in which our pilot caused us to question our readiness to let AI take the wheel. The first concern was about the output of the AI; in our case when generating content for courses. In particular the risk of misinformation and bias.

AI GENERATED CONTENT: IS THAT YOUR FINAL ANSWER?

Our pilot was well aware of the risks of misinformation. We are all aware of hallucinations, or incorrect results. AI produces results that are the most likely to be correct based on its training and will authoritatively give its view on anything no matter how little it knows. And for anyone using AI to generate educational content or provide advice this is troubling.

The reality is that hallucinations are very much a fact of life given where we are in the development cycle of AI. Both Google and Microsoft have fallen foul to hallucinations in public demonstrations.[1] [2]

Respected newspapers have published must-read lists with plausible yet non-existent books[3]. More concerning for those generating educational content, Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing is suspected to have sold AI generated guides about foraging for edible mushrooms which went against accepted best practice.[4]

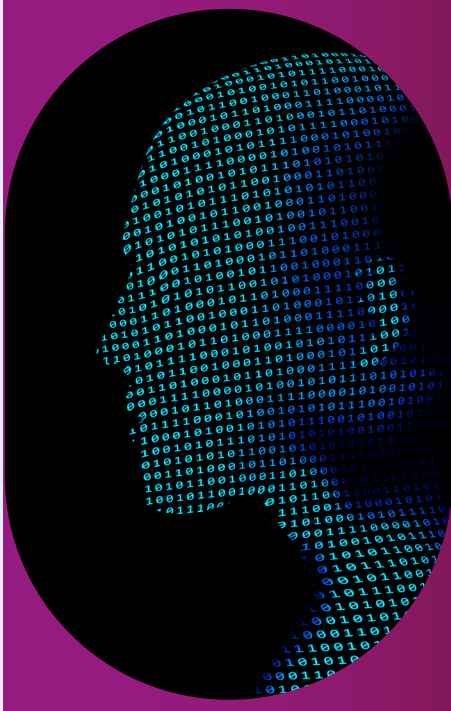
But our pilot showed that we have to be prepared to tackle a potentially bigger problem. AI models have been trained on large datasets which range from peer-reviewed academic research through to user generated internet content like Reddit. And given AI's somewhat probabilistic approach to inferring answers, there is a risk that the popularity of something in the training data can cloud accuracy.

IBM recently cited an example where their researchers asked various AI

Matt has been CEO of The Digital College, an online vocational training specialist, for approaching ten years. During that time the organisation has helped provide training to enable tens of thousands of people enter new careers or progress in their roles.

Matt is a passionate promoter of e-learning as a means to help people achieve their potential in the workplace, with a special focus on making vocation-based learning available to those with barriers that impede traditional learning. As a result, The Digital College has a mission to provide learning that can reach people with low confidence in their learning capabilities, limited access the internet and computers, and other barriers such as English language ability.

Matt also helps co-ordinate two Entrepreneur networks to support people starting up and growing their own businesses. He has a MA from Cambridge University and an MBA from The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.



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3 https://www.npr.org/2025/05/20/nx-s1-5405022/fake-summer-reading-list-ai
4 https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/sep/01/mushroom-pickers-urged-to-avoid-foraging-books-on-amazon-that-appear-to-be-written-by-ai

models to give a number between 1 and 50. The researchers suggested that AI will usually choose 27 (although we find Microsoft's CoPilot offered 37). The researchers suggested that this is because AI models are trained on a wide variety of historical human generated sources – and it turns out we aren't very good at generating random numbers. In fact we have a bias towards prime numbers and the numbers ending in, yes you guessed it, 7.

This bias in the dataset training AI models is visible in many other forms and this can conceivably make its way into generated learning content reducing real world diversity. For example, image libraries such as Adobe Stock are dominated by people in western style dress. More challenging, how do we correct for centuries of gender and racial bias in the literature that these models have been trained on.

Our first foray in AI and automatically generated content came to the following conclusions:

- AI was a great aid at producing the raw material for courses. However the final output was often bland, lacking in both a deeper understanding of how the material was best communicated and a creative spark to really engage the audience. And so at present AI is just a tool in the broader process used by, but not (yet), replacing experienced digital educators

- bias was visible in obvious contexts, such as generating images but we were uncertain how prevalent it was in producing written material such as scripts. With images we concluded that the AI required additional prompting to correct for a bias toward western dress, younger people and model looks. Providing some context can help. For example asking for "a bus driver" generates a male, white model in his forties. Asking for "a London bus driver" or "a Manchester tram driver" appears to encourage the AI to produce something more realistic

- translation of content into other languages still had a long way to go. The feedback of our reviewers of a Swedish translation was that it was understandable but lacking native fluency and therefore the course felt it lacked credibility. We have concluded that we will continue to rely on human translators, while re-testing AI's capabilities every 3-6 months. Although misinformation and bias are serious problems for automatically generated content, we would suggest that it is managed by any organisation with a strong editorial ethic. Our findings? Keep your hands on the wheel!

2. HEY DUDE, WHERE'S MY DATA?

Our second area of focus concerned an area AI could well revolutionise in a very short timescale: customer service. In fact this revolution is well under way. According to Hubspot research[5], 77% of customer experience teams already use AI With positive results, with 64% of leaders saying AI speeds up the time operators take to resolve tickets. Let the robots answer queries and deal with support calls instantly and at scale – banishing call queues forever. We can then get on with our lives and spend our time sorting out the bigger issues, while on the phone to someone else's robots. In our pilot it was very easy to unleash the power of AI on our customers (we didn't) – just sign the form, tick the box and customer service nirvana was at our fingertips. Our customer service software would automatically send responses, in email or chat, and to recommend answers for our human agents to use.

However we quickly realised that we weren't in a position to guarantee to a commissioner or a client how their data would be used. We all like to keep our commissioners happy. Personally, I'm very keen to work more with the Ministry of Justice – just not as a customer. Firstly we needed to know what data is being processed. AI improves its answers through the use of contextual information; the more related information you can pass the better. This becomes especially pertinent in third party software with access to historical (although time-limited) customer service conversations or additional data sources (perhaps you have linked in customer information). Is any specific information about the learner requiring support shared – perhaps the AI model feels the gender and age is helpful in formulating a response. What additional information is sent with the query to help with context? Secondly we needed to know where the data is being processed. We know our customer service application operates in the UK but what about processing of AI queries? This is somewhat more straightforward as this information is usually available from your software provider as part of their GDPR disclosures. Microsoft, Google and Amazon all offer UK-based AI processing although you need to check that your provider is flexible enough to support this. (Ours did!)

Thirdly, it is easy to overlook the problem of data retention after processing. It is common for the underlying AI service providers (eg Microsoft Azure AI) to retain your prompt (questions) and their responses for up to 30 days to detect and prevent abuse (mainly overuse). This should fall within your data retention policy but be aware that you will have some data hanging around. Finally, we felt the need to ask – is my data used for training? This exposed an extra aspect – who are we asking? Microsoft claims not to use your interaction for training, however we discovered that our application provider did although there was the option of an opt-out. But putting the retention of data aside – is this a problem? Afterall the data only remains in the model combined with millions of other bits of information. It is a bit like pouring a glass of Coca-Cola into the sea and worrying if someone can work out the secret recipe.

Implementing AI responsibly is likely to be a tricky path for many of us. A deep understanding of your suppliers, and their suppliers is likely to be key, even if it feels like a luxury. The risk may not lie with the suppliers you know best – it may be with the ones you trust most. As we know, things do not stay still in life. The traffic lights by the car garage have been replaced by a roundabout. I'm just waiting for someone to be told to go straight across...

5 https://blog.hubspot.com/service/ai-in-customer-service
https://privacy.anthropic.com/en/articles/7996866-how-long-do-you-store-my-organization-s-data

08

A TECHNO-REALIST TAKE ON GENERATIVE AI AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

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You cannot move these days for grandiose claims about what generative AI is going to do to the world of work. Most of these assertions seem to be either celebratory – 'AI will do all the grunt work, hooray' – or prophecies of doom, such as 'Oh no, AI is here – we're all out of a job'.

Depending on what vantage point you're looking from, it may be difficult to distinguish fact from fiction.

Much of the discourse about tech in our society adopts either a techno-optimist or a techno-pessimist point of view. Techno-optimism assumes that technology is the key to unlock our human potential and maybe even save us from ourselves, whereas techno-pessimists expect that technology will be our downfall, and we're counting down the days until the robots take over. Both optimists and pessimists can fall prey to techno-determinism, which is the mistaken belief that the technology has its own trajectory and there is nothing we can do to interrupt it.

More helpful is a techno-realist perspective that treats technology not as a monolith nor as something outside of society, but instead as a co-creative force that both shapes, and is shaped by, social systems and structures. As such, this perspective invites us to look carefully at the creators, beneficiaries, and casualties of different technologies in order to more closely trace their impacts.

Black feminist scholars offer important critical perspectives on the algorithmic underpinnings and unequal cultural outcomes of generative AI. Safiya Noble (2018) highlights the dangers of relying on outputs of algorithms trained on biased and supremacist data, while Ruha Benjamin (2019) stresses that the bias embedded in emerging technologies is reflective of the raced and gendered hierarchies that structure the tech labour force. Interrogating whose problems and concerns are centred in tech design, she argues these technologies serve racial capitalism by monetising and codifying racial difference, to the consistent detriment of racialised minority groups. Francesca Sobande (2021) illustrates this point in her studies of digital anti-Blackness, such as in the rise of virtual influencers in digital Blackface, primarily imagined Black women, generating profit for white owners and brands.

Enabling more diversity and anti-discriminatory commitment in the higher strata of the global tech sector to address these issues is a non-negotiable – but it's also a wicked problem featuring a host of intersectional challenges that will take political will, time, resources, creativity and dogged persistence to shift. Until then, a techno-realist perspective can help us to understand the good, bad, and ugly of systems of artificial intelligence at work.

First, the good: as learners, large language models, of which OpenAI's ChatGPT is the most popular, can certainly help with human learning. They are a repository of huge amounts of human knowledge – but require appropriate prompting and constant critical engagement and evaluation, as they can produce hallucinations and other misinformation that users regurgitate or act on (Hicks et al.,

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2024). Moreover, any poor practice or errors captured in the documents upon which AI applications are trained may be amplified, so they become difficult to spot and reject. That said, LLMs are great for getting input and feedback on written work, summarising complex conversations, sound-boarding action plans and strategies, and testing out concepts in a low-stakes way – with caution, and common sense, of course!

AI tools are also used to facilitate volume, efficiency, and consistency in applicant screening, which of course can be helpful to firms. However, the uncritical use of AI in recruitment can reproduce problematic racist, sexist, and ableist bias, due to dataset limitations and the bias of human programmers (Chen, 2023), which big tech companies wilfully ignore (Google Walkout for Real Change, 2020). What can be effective is building AI models specifically to mitigate against bias (Kassir et al., 2023). But this area of work is still young, so even with these efforts, some biased outcomes may remain (Hofeditz et al., 2022).

Second, the bad: discouragingly, users are treating ChatGPT as the 'new Google' and relying on LLMs to read, write and think for them, which has recently been shown to reduce brain activity and increase underperformance over time (Kosmyna et al., 2025).

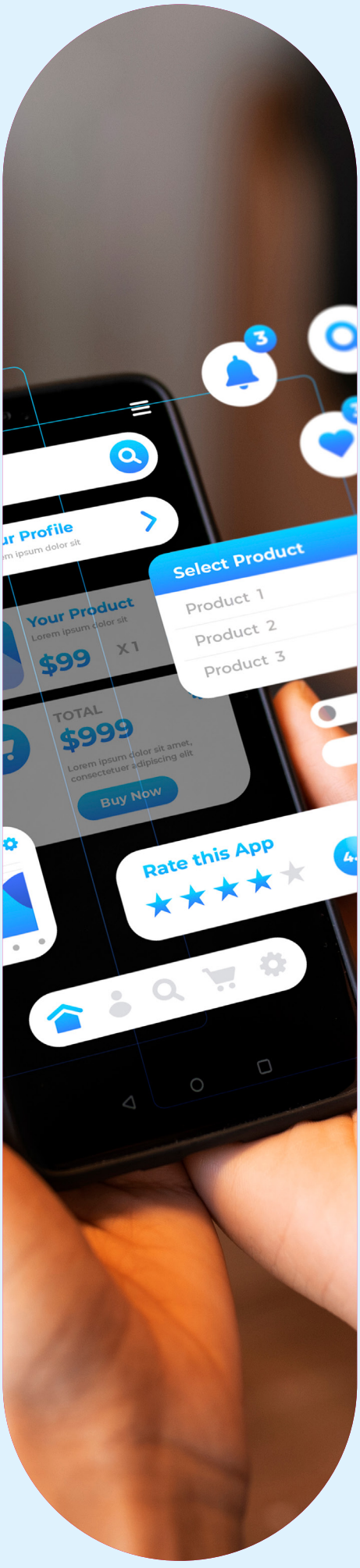
Dan McQuillan (2022) argues that as workers, for example in gig and warehouse work, interacting with these systems can be unquestionably dehumanising: systems of artificial intelligence used in place of human managers constantly capture data that is used towards forcing optimisation of worker output or profit maximisation, disregarding workers' embodied and emotional needs, and producing high levels of physical and mental stress.

Finally, the ugly: the environmental cost of generative AI, in terms of the vast amounts of electricity, water, and rare earth minerals it requires, is completely unsustainable. Decolonial scholar Vanessa de Machado Oliviera Andreotti (2024) flags AI's finite nature, simply because we will one day run out of what we need to deliver it. So, during this unique historical moment when AI does exist, she invites us to engage relationally, rather than extractively, with it. 'Burnout from Humans', a book co-created in conjunction with Aiden Cinnamon Tea, who introduces itself as a 'trained emergent intelligence', co-authoring with Vanessa, in the role of Dorothy Coccinella Ladybugboss, scient{art}ist, advocates leading with curiosity, embracing ambiguity, and inviting feedback in our interactions with AI systems.

Such a relational engagement with LLM chatbots may hold the potential to improve, rather than detract from, human learning, and perhaps even inhibit some of the negative consequences using AI has on cognition.

Unfortunately, the way AI is commonly used today is not pretty at all: it is employed less to encourage human creativity and relationality, and more to replace the human creative function, while policing our behaviour. This is perhaps unsurprising given the surveillance and carceral cultures characterising the contemporary period of digital capitalism (Eubanks, 2018). Privately owned algorithms are employed by the public sector in ways that continue to erode democracy (Benjamin, 2019), for example, when social media records and facial recognition chill activism and demonstration participation (Civitates, 2022), and biometric data is ineffectively used for elections (Debrah, 2019).

In this context where control through the use of Big Data is normalised, AI tools are being used to flag and restrict content on streaming platforms regardless of any errors, with little recourse for the people whose reputations, followings and livelihoods are at stake. Human employees, and creatives and artists of all kinds, are being cut out of value chains and replaced with AI tools and virtual influencers to reduce costs and increase speed of production, leaving behind a trail of media in an 'uncanny valley' littered with digital racism



(Sobande, 2021) that is normalised simply by its prevalence.

As a society, we don't have to accept this fate. Workers need to engage critically with the AI systems used to evaluate and manage them, and with the LLMs we are now relying on for their encyclopaedic – and sometimes erroneous – knowledge.

Employers need to understand that there is more mileage, and a moral imperative, in upskilling human workers regarding how to best use AI, including for fairer recruitment, than imagining a future workplace without humans. To achieve this, we also have to work to ensure that such a commitment positively affects their bottom line.

Throughout, employment support professionals can strive to adopt and sharpen a techno-realist lens, through which the benefits and challenges of AI, as it evolves and impacts the world of work, can continue to be seen.

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09

CAN AI MAKE RECRUITMENT FAIRER OR ARE WE SIMPLY AUTOMATING OUR BIASES?

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WHAT IF AN AI TOOL DECIDED NOT TO HIRE YOU BECAUSE OF YOUR BLUE JUMPER?

It is no secret that AI is changing the way we work. Admin-heavy tasks that used to absorb our time can now be automated and the speed of AI data processing has made it easier and faster to make real-time decisions.

Both are fundamentally reshaping how employers operate and how people find and develop in jobs.

In HR, that transformation is particularly acute. Automated Decision-Making (ADM) tools are now commonplace in recruitment. As Ian Lithgow, Managing Director for Health and Public Service from Accenture, described at a techUK panel on the topic: up to 70% of recruitment tasks could be automated – from job descriptions to interview scheduling.

On the surface, that sounds like a win for efficiency, but beneath the promise lies a risk; what happens when these systems, trained on imperfect data and deployed without proper oversight, start making decisions that reinforce bias, rather than eliminate it?

We have seen what can go wrong. Headlines have detailed how AI recruiting tools downgraded applicants based on gendered language in CVs, penalised candidates from certain postcodes, or preferred certain facial expressions. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)'s recent guidance has warned that ADM in recruitment is a "high-impact case" prone to reinforcing demographic biases and performing worse than human judgment in complex, individual assessments.

Even though it sounds like these machines have a mind of their own, AI reflects our decisions and our behaviour because the data we use to train AI represents our collective experiences, behaviours, and decisions as humans. For that reason, bias can sneak in at various stages of development, embedding itself in what we think are neutral systems without detection until it is too late. If a blue jumper has negative connotations, such a tool can learn to avoid selecting candidates based on that visual cue. Users and institutions, which hold their own biases, can influence the AI through further training and interactions, causing it to acquire and reflect these biased views.

So how do we make AI in recruitment work for everyone – employers, practitioners, candidates, and even wearers of blue jumpers?

First, we must recognise that employers must treat AI adoption in recruitment not just as a tech upgrade, but as a leadership and governance challenge. This is where large employers can lead. As techUK highlights in its Making AI work for Britain report, employers have the scale and resources to trial new tools, pilot responsible AI practices, and share findings across industries. Transparency is key. Candidates should know when AI is used, how it affects their application, and what oversight is in place.

Organisations must also consider whether the automated tool in use falls within scope of Article 22 of the UK GDPR. Article 22 aims to protect individuals from the ramifications of

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solely ADM, especially in sensitive and legal contexts, and determines whether an organisation needs to complete a data protection impact assessment. The assessment is to ensure the AI system is legally compliant and demonstrate that any high risks have been mitigated. Employers using these tools at scale must be mindful of what these systems are learning.

As a result, employers should be held legally and morally responsible for the outcomes of their tools, even if those include decisions made by an algorithm. Importantly, employers should work with employability partners to ensure that their recruitment processes do not inadvertently exclude those furthest from work. That means stress-testing tools for bias, embedding human review, and offering clear feedback mechanisms. More comprehensive regulation is on the horizon. The ICO plans to publish a statutory code of practice on AI and ADM and is scrutinising recruitment practices for transparency and fairness.

This is where the Equalities Act comes in. The Act from 2010 penalises all discriminatory acts, regardless of whether such discrimination is caused directly or indirectly, by man or machine, and it does so by ensuring that there is a due regard to eliminate bias before deployment or procurement, essentially from the outset. Although the Equality Act does not specifically mention AI or automated decision-making, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (which has a statutory mandate to advise government and Parliament) highlights that if an AI tool leads to discriminatory outcomes, employers can still be held liable.

Yet legal clarity on ADM alone isn't enough. We often say regulating the technology without addressing the intent and context behind its use could stifle innovation while doing little to address poor decision-making. As Ivana Bartoletti, Wipro's Global Chief Privacy and AI Governance Officer said: "The problem is not bias; the problem is when that bias becomes discrimination."

Detecting AI bias involves regularly auditing training data, monitoring model outputs, and applying fairness metrics. IBM's AI Fairness 360 allows developers to share and receive state-of-the-art codes and datasets related to AI bias detection and mitigation.

This toolkit also allows the developer community to collaborate with one another and discuss various notions of bias, so they can collectively understand best practices for detecting and mitigating AI bias. Wipro's AI development programmes have a fairness analyser, which is something that helps them understand where bias and discrimination may come from.

techUK members such as Workday and MeVitae are spearheading efforts to integrate AI into HR software, offering the promise of objective and efficient hiring processes.

Workday has shown that generative AI can reduce hours of manual effort by drafting job descriptions and growth plans, potentially freeing HR professionals to focus on more strategic, people-centred work. MeVitae provides solutions to detect and address imbalances in hiring pipelines, focusing acutely on factors like gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, and age. Using their AI-enabled technology, MeVitae has demonstrated that anonymised recruiting increases diversity and that they receive twice as many applicants than when using traditional recruitment methods.

What's clear is that ADM is also part of the solution. By removing the overtly human snap judgments that affect an application, ADM could possibly offer another tool in the arsenal for employers to ensure their candidates are up to snuff.

But ADM is only capable of this when a human can remain in the loop and audit its objectivity. Therefore, when used properly, it can help mitigate bias from employers who are both knowingly and unknowingly prejudiced themselves.

AI always has and needs a human counterpart. Poor recruitment outcomes against wearers of blue jumpers are not the fault of machines, but of flawed logic, bad data, and insufficient oversight.

Integrating ADM in recruitment is worth doing, and it is worth doing well.

10

ARE WE DESIGNING OUT WOMEN? WHY DIGITAL AND AI-DRIVEN EMPLOYMENT SERVICES NEED A GENDER LENS

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Digital transformation is reshaping public employment services worldwide. Automated tools and AI-driven platforms promise greater reach and efficiency, yet most are built for a "generic" user ignoring the differentiated needs of real communities.

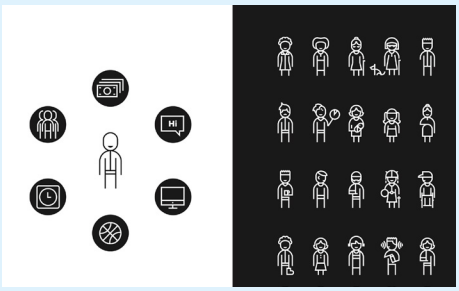
As Microsoft's Inclusive101 Guidebook (2020) warns, designing for the average risks missing those on the margins. Soares Guedes & Szlavi (2023) highlight that a lack of diversity in tech design and decision-making often results in unintentional bias, blind spots and the exclusion of different perspectives, increasing the likelihood that digital services will fail to serve everyone equally.

Digital exclusion is now recognised as a defining divide of the twenty-first century. Despite the ubiquity of digital tools, both access and ability to benefit remain deeply unequal, shaped by gender, migration status, education, income, disability, and geography.

As the Equitable AI Framework (Studio INTO, 2024) makes clear, "digital transformation is never neutral." Without deliberate inclusion, new technologies can reinforce and even amplify existing forms of bias and exclusion, especially when those most at risk are not involved in design.

Closing the gap requires rethinking how digital tools are designed, governed and evaluated for their real-world impact, making digital inclusion central to achieving gender equality. (UN SDG 5).

Figure 1: Who we design for (if we use "self-as-user") and who we exclude



Source: Inclusive101 Guidebook (Microsoft, 2020)

Despite promises of universal access, digital employment services can reinforce or widen inequalities, especially for women, single parents, migrants, and carers.

Recent research from the Nordic region finds that immigrant women are especially at risk of "double jeopardy," experiencing both digital and social exclusion (Nordregio, 2024).

Barriers range from lack of devices and connectivity to low digital literacy, but also include trust, confidence, and cultural adaptation.

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Her work bridges strategy and practice, from large-scale reforms to hands-on service design, with a particular interest in the intersection of gender, technology, and employability.

CASE STUDY: DELIBERATE OUTREACH AND DIGITAL INCLUSION – LESSONS FROM THE NORDICS AND LONDON

Promoting digital inclusion for migrant women

Across the Nordics, digital strategies increasingly target the exclusion risks faced by immigrant women.

Countries like Norway and Sweden now make immigrant women a priority in digital policy, moving from rhetoric to action funding targeted services, mapping support, and involving users in design.

What's working

- Tailored support: Childcare and multilingual digital skills courses lower participation barriers.
- User involvement: Women and frontline workers shape programmes from the start.
- NGO leadership: NGOs play a pivotal role by co-designing digital literacy courses with immigrant women, fostering a sense of ownership and relevance. Denmark's "digital ambassador" model goes further, training local women to become digital guides within their own communities and demonstrating a ripple effect by empowering women extending the reach of inclusion efforts.
- Safe and supportive environment: Gender-specific support groups foster a sense of security and openness, enabling women to share their experiences, overcome challenges, and learn IT skills in a setting where they feel understood and supported, and can progress at their own pace.

There's ongoing debate over targeted versus universal approaches, but the consensus is that truly inclusive services must go beyond digital by default by prioritising co-creation, multilingual access, and multiple channels.

Belina Grow: empowering women through digital and human-centred support

Many economically inactive women face overlapping barriers to work, from childcare and low confidence to digital exclusion. For those under Universal Credit work requirements, pressure to secure a job often comes without the tailored support needed to make it sustainable.

Belina Grow blends trusted human outreach with accessible digital tools to build skills, confidence, and connection:

- Seamless onboarding: A third-party app (Earlybird.AI) guides women through registration, form-filling, and note-taking during meetings, with staff support at every step.
- The Grow App: A private, Facebook-style community exclusive to participants, where they can view training schedules, join forums, message peers, and connect with the Belina Grow team.
- Flexible access: With smartphones and internet access, participants can attend webinars, courses, and coaching sessions from home, fitting learning around childcare and other commitments.
- Peer learning & support: The GRoW App fosters community, reducing isolation and enabling women to learn from one another.
- AI for employability: Practical training on tools like ChatGPT helps participants tailor CVs, prepare for interviews, and explore job options – alongside guidance on safe and ethical use.
- Human-led engagement – using AI tools and digital delivery frees time for trust-building, tailored guidance, and outreach.

Belina Grow's model reflects global best practice by supporting often marginalised and excluded women to access opportunities and overcome barriers to work, applying AI "for humans, not instead of humans" to enhance rather than replace personal support, removing access barriers in ways that align with modern workforce expectations, and maintaining the agility needed to adapt quickly in a constantly shifting labour market.

Digitalisation of public employment services is far more than a technical upgrade; it fundamentally reshapes how support, unemployment, and activation policies are delivered. Unless these digital services are intentionally designed with gender and intersectionality in mind, they risk reinforcing or deepening existing inequalities. As the World Bank puts it, the question is not whether digitalisation creates new risks, but whether we are willing to design out exclusion through intentional, user-centred approaches (World Bank, 2022).

THE DIGITAL GENDER DIVIDE

Women and girls face persistent, layered barriers to digital participation worldwide including in high-income countries. Globally, women are 20% less likely than men to use mobile internet (UNICEF, 2023; ITU, 2022). In the EU, women lag men in advanced digital skills (European Parliament, 2018). Barriers extend beyond poverty or connectivity: social roles, care work, migration status, language, and safety all matter. Many women share devices, have privacy concerns, or encounter poorly designed interfaces. Migrant and minority women and people with disabilities are at special risk if their needs are not addressed (Soares & Guedes, 2023; Microsoft, 2020). Studies show digital literacy training is essential; without it, full digitalisation reforms can worsen, not narrow, inequalities.

The stakes are high: as digital literacy becomes a core employability skill, in a world where more than 90% of jobs have a digital component (UNICEF, 2023), women risk being excluded from opportunities in work, learning, and participation, reinforcing old patterns of disadvantage in new, digital forms. Safety and trust are also critical. Women are disproportionately affected by online harassment, abuse, and threats – deterring many from digital public services. Safeguarding, privacy, and safety-by-design must be core requirements, not afterthoughts. As often noted, "digital transformation moves at the speed of trust."

Leaving these gaps unaddressed risks reinforcing, rather than redressing, longstanding inequalities, resulting in higher drop-out rates, lower engagement, and missed opportunities for those most in need. At a societal level, it risks hard-wiring bias into the very systems meant to expand opportunity. As the World Bank (2024) puts it: "Gender equality for all people is a matter of fairness and justice. It is also essential for development. Growing evidence shows how removing gender barriers unlocks economic productivity, reduces poverty, deepens social cohesion, and enhances well-being and prosperity for current and future generations."

WHEN SERVICES GO DIGITAL: WHAT GETS MISSED

Much attention in policy and media has focused on the digital skills gap, often framing it as a matter of getting more women into tech roles or improving digital confidence. While important, such framing risks missing the more complex, intersecting barriers that millions of women face, such as caring responsibilities, single parenthood, poverty, or language challenges as migrants. These realities shape not only access but also how women can engage with digital platforms. Many digital services unintentionally penalise women through inflexible forms, appointment systems that don't accommodate care duties, or AI tools that assume linear, uninterrupted careers, or overlooking skills gains in non-traditional settings.

Blind Spots in Sector Reports and Practice

Recent major reports on AI in employment support, such as Employment Support Services in the AI Era: Insights, Lessons and Advice from Leaders in the Sector (Earlybird 2024) and AI in Employability: Opportunities, Challenges and the Road Ahead (ERSA & Hudson & Hayes, 2025) express significant optimism about the potential of AI to make employment services more efficient, personalised, and scalable. They highlight gains such as freeing staff for more meaningful engagement and using digital tools to reduce friction for jobseekers, important advances in efficiency, productivity, and reach.

However, reflecting a broader pattern in sector-wide literature, both reports are largely silent on gender and intersectionality, with little substantive analysis of how AI-powered employment services might systematically disadvantage women or other marginalised groups. This is not necessarily because these issues are dismissed, but it may reflect that gender-specific considerations are not yet systematically embedded in commissioning briefs, programme mandates, or evaluation frameworks. This means those matters are less likely to surface during evidence-gathering or stakeholder consultation. As a result, critical issues such as safeguarding, online harassment, and privacy, particularly relevant for women rarely feature in sector-level discussions, programme design and analysis.

Neither report, nor much of the wider literature, goes into depth on how AI in employment services might inadvertently amplify gender bias, nor on measures such as collecting gender-disaggregated data, user testing with diverse women, nor evaluating gendered outcomes. Inclusion does feature in the reports, but it is often framed in terms of general technical solutions, such as language translation or basic accessibility, rather than a deeper engagement with the overlapping realities of gender, migration, care responsibilities, class, and digital confidence. Without explicitly embedding dimensions such as gender, migration, care responsibilities and digital confidence into the design and evaluation of AI-driven tools across the sector, there is a risk of obscuring the nuanced ways in which innovation can unintentionally reinforce existing exclusions. This is especially true for those already at the margins, where barriers are shaped not only by digital access and skills but also by life-course patterns and social context. Exclusion in digital employment services isn't always about lack of access or skills alone. It also results from a lack of user voice in design, "one-size-fits-all" digital tools that miss non-standard life courses, and systems built around what is easy to measure rather than what is actually needed, like wraparound support, affordable childcare, or tailored reskilling for women returners and other vulnerable groups.

CASE STUDY: DOUBLE EXCLUSION IN IRELAND'S DIGITAL PUBLIC EMPLOYMENT SERVICES

Drawing on the work of Antoinette Kelly and Zach Roche (in Digital Public Employment Services in Action), this case study illustrates how digital transformation can unintentionally deepen exclusion for those facing the highest barriers to employment often including women, migrants, and carers or persons living with disabilities.

The research shows how Ireland's shift to "digital by default" public employment services, intended to boost efficiency, made support less accessible for long-term unemployed jobseekers. Many struggled with digital tasks, lacked internet, and faced impersonal systems. Vulnerable groups were most likely to be excluded, with caseworkers unable to provide tailored support. Screen-level bureaucracy replaced street-level discretion.

While digitalisation improved efficiency, it did so at the expense of equity, leaving skilled caseworkers underused and many clients unsupported. Kelly and Roche conclude that to avoid such outcomes, hybrid approaches, targeted in-person help, and systems designed for complex needs are critical.

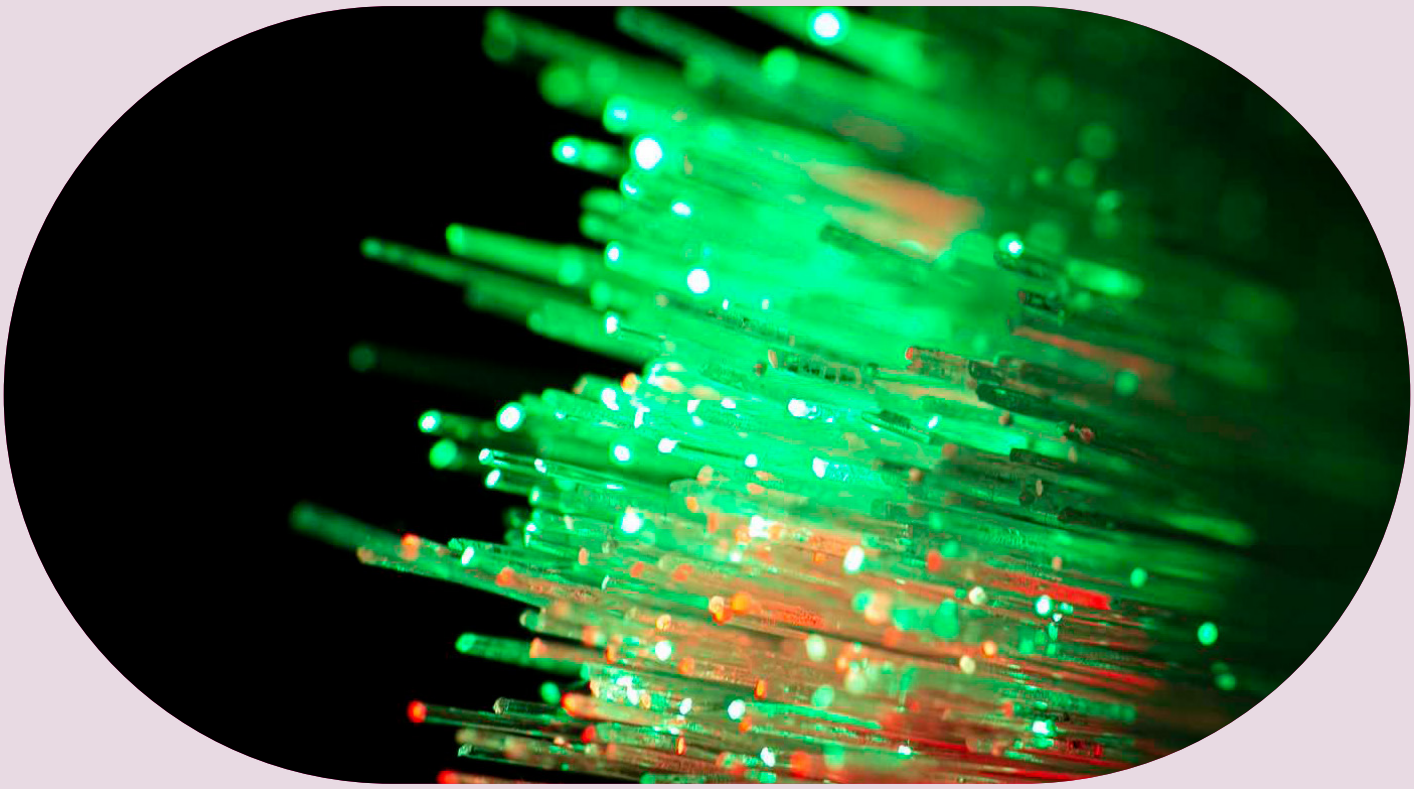
CASE STUDY: AUSTRIA—WHEN DIGITAL INNOVATION REINFORCES GENDER BIAS

Austria's public employment service (AMS) has faced repeated criticism for how digital tools reinforce, rather than reduce, gender inequality.

Paola Lopez (How Fair is the AMS Algorithm?, ITA DOSSIER NO. 52EN, 2021) research and a subsequent fairness audit found that the AMS algorithm (introduced in 2018) systematically penalised jobseekers with fragmented or interrupted work histories, assigning nearly 29% of these candidates in Vienna to the lowest support group. Being female could trigger an automatic point deduction, and factors like age and nationality further compounded exclusion risks. The system misclassified around 30% of jobseekers, sometimes placing women in the "high employability" group, which paradoxically reduced their support. Attempts to "de-bias" the algorithm achieved only minor improvements, often at the expense of overall performance.

In 2024, AMS's ChatGPT-based AI career chatbot, "Berufsinfomat," became infamous for gender bias, suggesting IT jobs to men and Gender Studies to women, despite attempts to instruct it otherwise. The chatbot also hallucinated answers and shifted privacy risks onto users. The rushed launch of the AMS chatbot reinforced gender stereotypes, lacked transparency, and highlighted the dangers of deploying advanced digital tools in public services without robust oversight and safeguards. Experts noted the opacity of language models and emphasised public agencies' accountability for the systems they deploy. (netzpolitik.org 2024).

Both cases highlight the risks of deploying digital tools without robust oversight, user involvement, or safeguards.



THE REAL-WORLD CONSEQUENCES OF DIGITAL OVERSIGHT

Despite their promise, digital and AI-driven employment services frequently overlook the realities of women and marginalised groups. Too often, these systems are designed for the "average user," missing the value of care work, portfolio careers, and non-traditional employment histories that are especially common among women, migrants, and carers.

Barriers are intensified for those facing multiple disadvantages, such as poverty, migration, disability, and low digital confidence, that simple data points cannot capture.

Algorithmic bias is a persistent risk: screening tools and eligibility systems penalise non-linear careers, part-time work, or care-related gaps, while opaque decision-making leaves individuals unable to contest outcomes. Safety and privacy concerns, especially acute for women and other vulnerable groups, are rarely central in system design. Instead, inclusion is too often reduced to technical fixes, rather than genuine engagement with intersectional realities.

The cost is substantial. Digital transformation, if not deliberately inclusive, risks embedding and amplifying the very inequalities it aims to solve.

As the World Bank warns, "technological innovation tends to amplify rather than reduce existing forms of exclusion and bias" unless it is proactively designed and evaluated for equity impacts. If we fail to ask who gets missed, we risk hard-wiring exclusion into our future public services.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Digital transformation in public employment services will only fulfil its potential if inclusion is intentional and continuous at every stage. This requires:

- Embedding gender and intersectional analysis in all stages of system design, testing, and evaluation.
- Co-creating solutions with diverse users, ensuring that the voices of women, migrants, carers, and those with disabilities inform development.
- Prioritising user-centred design and multiple access channels, not just digital-by-default pathways.
- Collecting and using gender-disaggregated data to monitor outcomes and guide improvements.
- Building in privacy, safeguarding, and anti-harassment features from the outset, not as optional extras, but as requirements for equity and trust.
- Maintaining opportunities for in-person, hybrid, or tailored support for those unable to access or benefit from digital systems alone.

Only by committing to these principles can digital public employment services expand opportunity, rather than entrench inequality, for all.

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11

THE GREAT REVELATION: HOW AI TRANSFORMATION UNVEILS THE TRUE VALUE OF EMPLOYABILITY PROFESSIONALS

DOMINIC ATKINSON
Founder & CEO
Stay Nimble

SUMMARY

As AI automates technical job search functions, it's revealing what employability professionals have always truly provided. Trusted relationships, holistic support, and complex problem navigation. This isn't a threat to the profession. It's the clearest validation yet of why a person-centered approach is more valuable than ever.

THE REVELATION

Something remarkable is happening in this profession. As AI transforms the employment landscape, with entry-level positions across a range of sectors declining 32% since ChatGPT's launch[1] and AI skills commanding 56% salary premiums[2], we're discovering what employability professionals have been providing all along.

It wasn't really about CV formatting or interview technique. It was about helping someone rebuild confidence after redundancy, providing a safe space during career transitions, and navigating the complex web of barriers that keep people from thriving at work.

Think about "Sarah", who came to us saying she needed help with practising interviews. What she actually needed was someone to help her rebuild her professional confidence after five years out of the workforce, caring for elderly parents, questioning whether her skills were still relevant and whether employers would value her experience. Or "James", a skilled engineer whose confidence was shattered after redundancy, who needed months of support to believe his experience still had value in an AI-transformed industry. These aren't edge cases. They're the reality of what we do every day.

AI isn't a crisis for the profession. It's validation. We're learning that what we've always called 'employability support' is actually community resilience work, comprehensive human support, and trusted relationship building. AI has just made it impossible to pretend otherwise.

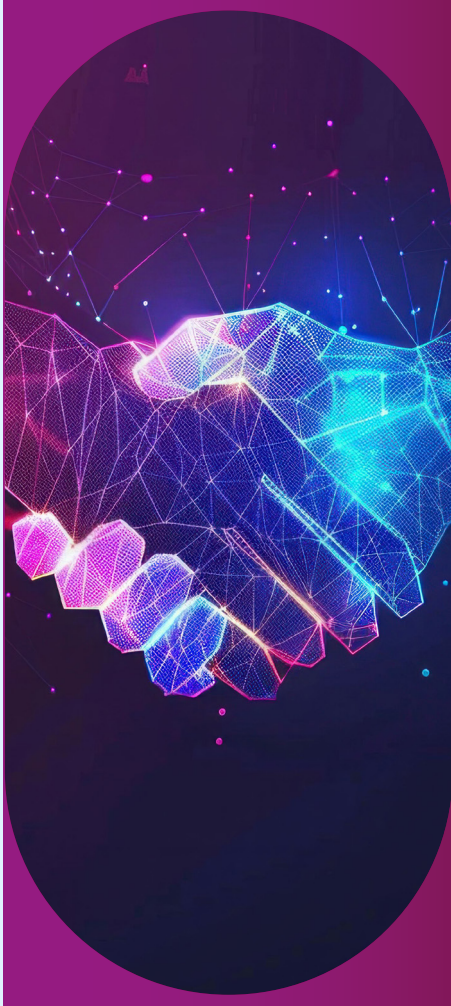
FROM JOB PLACEMENT TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

For decades, success metrics were simple, if shallow: did someone get a job? This made perfect sense when careers followed predictable pathways: entry-level position, steady progression, long-term employment. The role has essentially been a job placement specialist, driven by the incentives within the programmes being funded and delivered.

But the employment landscape is fundamentally shifting. The average job tenure is now 3.7 years and falling. AI is being correlated with the elimination of traditional entry points while at the same time, it's creating premium opportunities that require existing expertise. People aren't just changing jobs, they're navigating continuous career transitions throughout their working lives. Yet our success metrics haven't evolved. We're still measuring 'job outcomes' in a world where the job itself might be automated within a few years. Meanwhile, the real value we provide (helping someone develop resilience during redundancy, building confidence for career pivots, or maintaining mental wellbeing through economic uncertainty) remains unmeasured and undervalued.

Dominic Atkinson is the founder and CEO of Stay Nimble, a social enterprise helping people thrive in a world of work defined by rapid change.

He's passionate about combining technology and human connection to make high-quality career development accessible to all. With a background in digital innovation and a commitment to social impact, Dominic works with organisations and local authorities to build resilient, future-ready workforces through coaching, AI-powered tools, and scalable learning programmes. He holds a degree in psychology and a postgraduate diploma in learning and development.



1 https://www.thetimes.com/business-money/economics/article/entry-level-jobs-plunge-by-a-third-since-launch-of-chatgpt-m8p79msqh
2 https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/issues/artificial-intelligence/ai-jobs-barometer.html

Consider this. A person we support might lose their job to AI in 18 months, but the confidence, digital literacy, and network connections we helped them build will serve them through multiple transitions over a 40-year career. Which outcome should we be measuring?

The research from our Ask.Nim AI Career Assistant tells this story clearly. When we analysed hundreds of career conversations from our internal data, the technical queries (CV optimisation, job matching) were efficiently handled by AI. But the conversations that led to sustained career development involved escalation to a qualified coach, subsequent relationship building, emotional support, and complex problem-solving that created lasting resilience rather than just immediate employment.

I'm not suggesting we abandon job placement as a metric, but we need to consider expanding beyond it and create new incentive frameworks beyond that "got a job" measure. The question going forward won't be just whether someone got a job, but whether they've developed the adaptive capacity to thrive through multiple career transitions in an uncertain economy.

WHAT THE RESEARCH ACTUALLY REVEALS

The evidence for our evolution has been hiding in plain sight. Meta-analyses of employment program effectiveness consistently show that relationship quality, not technical training around CVs and interviews, predicts successful outcomes. When researchers examined what people actually value in employment services, they found participants prioritised 'emotionally supportive relationships,' 'confidence building,' and 'someone who understands my situation' far above CV assistance or interview preparation.

This mirrors a fascinating parallel happening in mental health. People are increasingly using ChatGPT and Claude for emotional support conversations, seeking guidance from AI.

Yet we recognise the risks that these tools lack the nuanced understanding of human psychology, the ability to recognise crisis situations, or the professional training to provide appropriate interventions. International organisations such as the American Psychological Society[3] developed extensive guidelines around AI mental health support precisely because we understand the complexity of human emotional needs.

The same principle applies to career support. While AI excels at technical tasks (optimising CVs for keyword scanning, matching skills to job descriptions, generating interview questions), the deeper work of career development remains fundamentally human. Our analysis of client feedback at Stay Nimble reveals people describing their career coaches as providing 'a safe space to share my fears,' 'helping me believe in myself again,' and 'supporting me through the darkest period of my life'[4].

International research reinforces this pattern. Individual Placement and Support programs achieve 61% employment rates compared to 23% for traditional services[5], not because of superior job search techniques, but because they emphasise long-term trusted relationships and comprehensive support that addresses barriers to employment. European studies show that employment interventions integrating wellbeing support demonstrate significantly better outcomes across confidence, resilience, and sustained employment.

Perhaps most tellingly, when we examined our own data, we discovered that lasting career progression consistently involved support for issues that would never appear on a traditional 'employability' checklist: processing workplace trauma, managing family care responsibilities, navigating immigration status, or rebuilding identity after redundancy.

We weren't just providing job search assistance. We were providing comprehensive support for the whole person. AI transformation hasn't diminished this function. It's revealed how central it always was to everything we do.

PROFESSIONAL EVOLUTION IN PRACTICE

So what does this evolution look like in practice? In addition to discussing 'digital transformation' and 'AI integration,' at Stay Nimble, we're implementing community resilience infrastructure that puts human development at its centre.

Our pop-up coaching model demonstrates this. One day a week, a CDI-qualified coach works in several community venues (libraries, community centers) providing face-to-face support where people already are. Onboarding people to the Stay Nimble platform so they can contact their coach from home, bridging the digital skills divide while also helping people use Ask Nim. The results reveal the true nature of our work.

Take "Judy" from a community hub just outside of London. They came to us saying they needed help with job applications. It turned out that they needed longer-term help to process the impact of workplace bullying that had kept them from employment since 2019. Through consistent supportive relationship-building over 18 months, we helped them develop self-care strategies, rebuild confidence, and explore new directions. They're now completing teaching qualifications and preparing for IT contract applications, but the transformation was through comprehensive human support, not on employability alone.

The beauty of this approach is that it recognises what each layer does best. AI handles the technical scaffolding (instant skills assessments, 24/7 availability, consistent information provision). Community workers provide local connection, cultural understanding, and bridge-building to deeper support. Professional, qualified coaches focus on complex cases, trauma-informed approaches, and long-term development relationships. The infrastructure connects people to both their communities and to

3 https://www.apa.org/topics/artificial-intelligence-machine-learning/ethical-guidance-ai-professional-practice
4 Samples of client feedback: https://uk.trustpilot.com/review/staynimble.co.uk
5 https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18407876/

professional support, at any stage in their lives.

This mirrors transformations across helping professions. In healthcare, AI is beginning to be able to manage routine diagnostics while medical professionals focus on complex cases and patient relationships. Financial services show the same pattern. Robo-advisors handle portfolio management while human advisors focus on life transitions and complex planning.

The new metrics reflect this evolution. Rather than counting job placements, we're measuring resilience indicators e.g. confidence growth, network development, digital fluency, and adaptive capacity. Can someone navigate career transitions with confidence rather than trauma? Do they have networks and self-advocacy skills for the next inevitable change? We track people through multiple transitions rather than to single outcomes.

This isn't about abandoning our core purpose regarding employment. It's about expanding our definition of what employment readiness means in an era of continuous change. We're becoming community resilience specialists who happen to focus on work and careers, rather than job placement officers who occasionally provide support when someone needs to find work.

LEADING THE EVOLUTION

This profession stands at an exciting inflection point. We can either continue measuring ourselves against an outdated job placement model, or we can lead the transformation to community resilience infrastructure that society desperately needs.

To me, the path forward is remarkably clear. Start by examining your own data. What are people actually asking for help with? Begin tracking resilience indicators[6] [7], alongside employment outcomes.

Experiment with AI tools to handle routine tasks, freeing your time for the complex human work that creates lasting change.

Consider partnerships with community organisations, libraries, and local services. Pop-up coaching models can be adapted to any context where trusted community workers interact with people facing career transitions. Most importantly, start conversations with your colleagues about evolving success metrics that reflect the full value of what you provide.

The opportunity ahead of us is extraordinary. As automation handles routine functions across all sectors, the human skills we've always possessed (building trust, navigating complexity, supporting people through uncertainty) become more valuable, not less. We're not being replaced by AI. We're being liberated by it to do the work that matters most.

The future belongs to employability professionals who embrace their role as community resilience specialists. The question isn't whether this transformation will happen. It's whether we'll lead it or follow it.

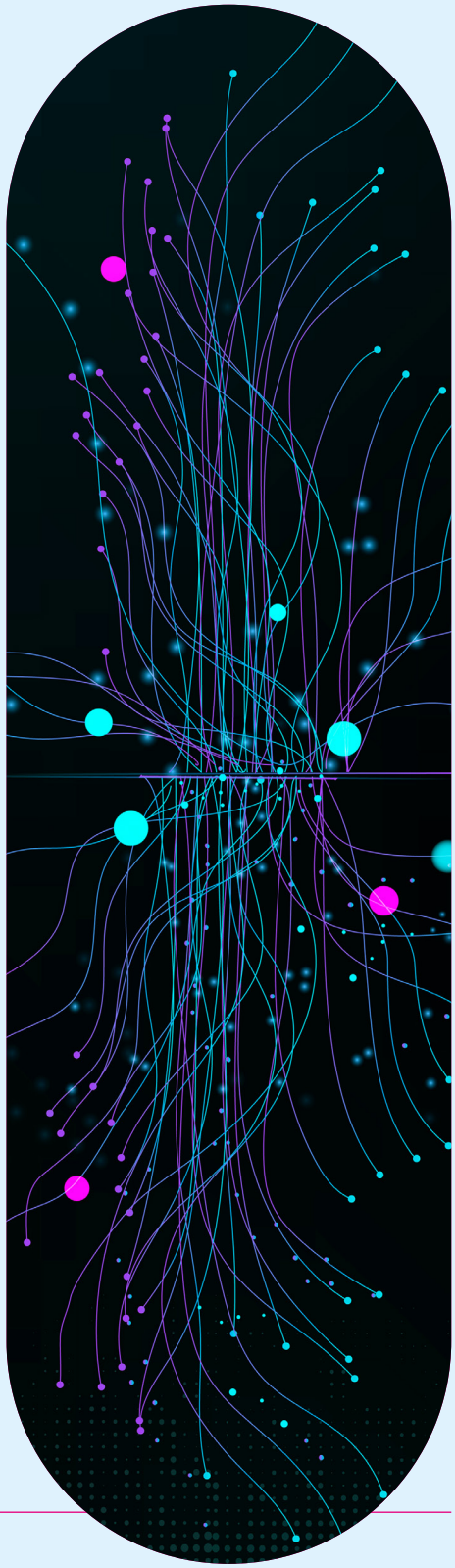
ABOUT STAY NIMBLE

Stay Nimble is an award-winning UK social enterprise that delivers proper career support when change gets messy. We blend qualified CDI-registered coaches with Ask Nim, our 24/7 AI co-pilot, and an easy-to-use digital platform, offering help online or through pop-up sessions in community venues nationwide.

Employers, housing associations and local authorities rely on Stay Nimble to meet employment and skills targets inside social-value contracts, while individuals can access the same support at little or no cost. Every programme is tracked against the UK Social Value Bank, giving transparent data on job outcomes, confidence gains and economic impact[8].

So far we've guided 19,800 people and generated over £33 million[9] in evidenced social value. We reinvest 51% of profits to widen access for under-served communities, ensuring that high-quality career guidance is available to everyone, no matter their background or postcode.

Practical coaching, smart technology, measurable social impact.



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12

BREADWINNERS PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: HOW WE'RE USING AI TO EMPOWER YOUNG REFUGEES

MARTIN CORASINSKY CAMPOS
Managing Director
Breadwinners

Founded in 2016, Breadwinners is a UK-based charity dedicated to empowering young refugees on their journey to employment by selling organic baked goods at farmers markets across London and Brighton, and wholesale to corporate clients and cafes.

Recognising that many struggle to find work, Breadwinners delivers three employability programmes, providing crucial first jobs, work experience, training, and mentoring at their market stalls and through their wholesale service; they money generated from bread sales at their market stalls and through a wholesale service helps to pay the wages of the young people, creating more employment opportunities.

In this article, I'll guide you through our latest Participatory Action Research (PAR) and share our insights and impact from our work with young refugees in London and Brighton.

Our mission at Breadwinners is to empower young refugees on their journey to employment. A core part of that mission is our commitment to listening to their voices and letting them lead the way. This is why Participatory Action Research, our method that involves young refugees in designing and conducting research, is so vital to us. We believe that the young people we work with are best placed to shape the organisation's design and direction, and this approach values their lived experience above all else.

For years, we relied on traditional phone interviews for our essential impact reports. While these were valuable, there were some issues. Many calls went unanswered or to voicemail, and the feedback we did receive often lacked the depth needed to truly understand our participants' experiences. We knew there was a significant portion of our community whose voices were not being heard.

This is where innovation and a human-centered approach to technology came in. Last year, we began our partnership with Earlybird: our goal was to find a solution that could complement our human-led outreach and make it easier for participants to share their experiences in a way that felt flexible, accessible, and free from pressure. Now in its second year, the collaboration has been nothing short of revolutionary. Using their conversational AI voice technology, we have been able to get more, richer insights and enhance our data collection. This partnership has transformed how we engage with our community of young service users and mentors.

Here's a look at the impact:

- **Increased Reach and Responses**: We reached people we couldn't connect with before, seeing a 48% increase in total responses, bringing valuable, unheard opinions to light. In our 2024-25 report, our peer-led PAR & Environmental Impact project reached over 900 community members.
- **Richer, More Actionable Insights**: The AI agent allows for open-ended questions, which, combined with its voice and multi-lingual capabilities, has

Martin is a dedicated leader in social enterprise and charity, serving as the Managing Director of Breadwinners – a not-for-profit that sells organic bread and supports young refugees to integrate in the UK by accessing work, training and mentoring. He is the Chairman of Argentina FC and has held board positions at Social Innovation Exchange and Praxis.

Martin did a career change from corporates the likes of GSK and Lindt&Spruengli, prompted by his experience as a volunteer with RefugeeYouth. He led WASH implementation in rural Nicaragua, is based in London, and is a Fellow of the School for Social Entrepreneurs and On Purpose leadership programme.

helped us gather deeper and more nuanced feedback. This is especially important for participants where English is not their native language. This rich, qualitative data provides invaluable perspectives that directly inform how we refine and improve our programmes. One example is our first Creative Youth Voices Project. After discovering that 89% of young people would like Breadwinners to do more to explore and respond to the challenges that young refugees face, we launched an audio-visual exhibition during Refugee Week 2025, highlighting the positive contributions young refugees give to our communities.

- **Empowering Young Researchers**: Our young researchers are directly involved in the PAR project, from designing the questions to analysing the data. Working with Earlybird has exposed them to cutting-edge technology, equipping them with valuable experience in modern workflows and enhancing their digital literacy and employability skills. As one of our young researchers, Goitom, said, "Working as a PAR gave me exposure to diverse skill sets and tools".

- **High User Satisfaction**: The flexibility of the platform is a key reason for its success. Participants can respond at their own convenience and in their preferred language. An impressive 91% of participants rated the tool as excellent or good. Users particularly appreciated the ability to share their insights at their own pace without feeling pressured or judged.

This multi-year partnership with Earlybird shows how technology, when applied thoughtfully and with a human-centered design, can amplify human connection and insight rather than diminish it. It demonstrates a clear path for charities to collect richer, more authentic data, which in turn leads to stronger programmes and better support for the communities they serve. In December 2024, Breadwinners won the 'Prove It: Social Impact' award from Social Enterprise UK, and the partnership was a key driver. Being highly commended at the PwC UK Building Trust Awards 2024 for our "Impact in Social Enterprise" is also a testament to the strength of our community-powered model.

I am incredibly proud to be at the forefront of driving social impact through AI-powered insights and showing what's possible when purpose, people, and perseverance align.

WHAT BREADWINNERS LEARNED FROM OUR YOUNG RESEARCHERS

This year's Participatory Action Research project was led by a team of 21 young people and three former mentors. This vital information has, and will continue to inform future programme design.

The team of young researchers reached more young people than ever before, sending 928 messages and making 344 calls. In total, the project reached over 900 members.

The research highlighted the significant impact of the Breadwinners programme on participants:

- 95% of young people who responded stated that Breadwinners influenced their career or life plans.
- 92% report a significant increase in wellbeing after taking part in a programme.
- 96% of Breadwinners participants have progressed into further work, university or volunteering after graduating.
- 64% of young people said the biggest impact was improved confidence, with 43% mentioning an improvement in their practical skills.
- 29% said the programme helped them clarify or even change their career direction.

We also learnt that:

- 37% said lack of job opportunities is their biggest challenge facing them, followed by lack of confidence, legal or right-to-work barriers and uncertainty about career direction
- 89% of young people and 85% of mentors said we should do more to explore and respond to the challenges facing young refugees.

Based on these findings, the PAR team proposed several changes to improve and maximise opportunities for progression and explore the challenges refugees faced. Some of their ideas showcasing the positive contributions of young refugees to our communities, referrals for entry-level jobs, sharing job opportunities via a newsletter, and working on corporate partnerships. The team also suggested improving communications before and after programmes, such as having regular updates from mentors and sharing a monthly update on WhatsApp or the website.

It's been amazing working with Earlybird to improve and refine our PAR: we were able to reach more people, improve our engagement and develop much richer insights compared to phone calls alone.

We'll continue to learn from our participants and young researchers to improve the work we do every year. If you're thinking of running your own Participatory Action Research project, I'd be happy to help you.

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EXPLORING GOOD WORK: INSIGHTS FROM THE NETHERLANDS AND THE UK

STEVEN MOWFORTH
Consultant
Coach & Trainer

Steve has worked in the UK Higher Education CEIAG (Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance) sector for over twenty years.

At the time of writing, he was employed as Knowledge & Diversity Specialist at the Coventry University Talent Team. He now works freelance offering consultancy, coaching and training, with a specialisation in navigating the metacrisis. Steve is available for conferences and public speaking.

There is growing attention to the quality of work in the UK (and elsewhere), as highlighted by the CIPD (2023) for instance. This article contrasts my interpretation of two books examining the good work agenda and considers recent UK government policy and prospective legislation, along with the impact of technology, on the quality of work.

Better Work: The Impact of Automation, Flexibilization and Intensification of Work (Kremer, Went & Engbersen, 2021), focuses on the Netherlands, identifying broad trends shaping job quality and the conditions necessary for work to be good and drawing on insights from the social sciences.

Mapping Good Work: The Quality of Working Life Across the Occupational Structure (Williams, Zhou & Zou, 2020) has a more quantitative and sociological focus in a UK context, reviewing the occupational structure and using 'occupation' as its primary unit of analysis and fundamental framework.

CONCEPTUALISING GOOD WORK

While there is no internationally agreed definition of good work there appears to be a broad consensus around its dimensions (Dobbins, 2022). The two books align broadly over the constituent elements of good work but have differing approaches. Better Work considers three macro-level trends affecting work quality (negatively and positively) – automation, flexibilization, and work intensification – identifying good work by the presence of certain core conditions.

Contrastingly, Mapping Good Work focuses on the multidimensional composition of good work, emphasising intrinsic qualities beyond pay and conditions and considers wellbeing to be a subjective outcome of job quality, rather than a job feature per se.

BETTER WORK...

The book views the development of good work as a societal mission. Its intention is to formulate policy recommendations for how the Dutch government and other stakeholders can promote and expand better work.

Three Conditions

The book identifies three core conditions for individuals to experience good work: control over income (for instance, security of employment and access to professional development); control over work (including a degree of autonomy and camaraderie); and control in life (for example, work-life balance and flexibility). If the work meets those conditions, it is considered to be 'good work'.

Decline in Work Quality

Relating to the three trends (automation, flexibilization and intensification), the book considers a range of factors contributing to the decline in work quality. Some individuals will benefit from the comparative flexibility afforded by temporary and part-time work and the 'gig economy', increasing their sense of control over work and contributing to a sense of control in life - especially if they can find ways to manage various restrictions. The reality for

many people, however, is that they feel controlled by the systems that supply or administer their work: consider electronic monitoring of self-employed delivery drivers or strict time controls on warehouse operatives or highly regulated roles in the public sector. The book considers other contributors to the decline of work quality, such as uneven distribution, power imbalance, cost of emotional labour, limited professional development opportunities, and erosion of camaraderie.

Creating Better Work

The book makes recommendations to governments and other stakeholders for the promotion of better work. These centre around increasing the three control factors outlined above: income, work and life. In particular, it highlights employer and government policies, for instance: access to professional development; facilitating camaraderie and fostering a sense of belonging in work situations; legislation around workers' rights; and enhancing workers' sense of work autonomy. It suggests that these areas of improvement are applicable to countries beyond the Netherlands.

MAPPING GOOD WORK...

Unit of Analysis

Selecting 'occupation' as its primary unit of analysis, the book uses various sources of occupational data in proposing a methodology to create a hierarchical index of good work to: "score all jobs according to a common metric" (Williams, Zhou & Zou, 2020, p.51). It opts against relative pay levels alone as a measure of job satisfaction in favour of a multidimensional weighted index, since this approach can facilitate mapping the occupational hierarchy and exploring occupational and class disparities. Similarly to Better Work, the authors conclude with policy recommendations.

Nine Key Dimensions

The authors liken the design of their good work index to the inflation measure – based on a weighted basket of goods and services. Drawing on social science research they begin by identifying nine key dimensions approximating to good work: hourly pay, job security, continuous learning, skill-use, task variety, task discretion, job demands, work time control, and participation opportunities. They use datasets from the SES (Skills and Employment Survey) – originating in workers' own evaluations - to establish a weighting for each of the dimensions, which they use to calculate weighted rankings for a list of occupations.

Occupation and Socio-Economic Class

The book emphasises the empirical relationship between occupation and socio-economic class. It uses the NS-SEC (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification) to examine good work across occupational classes. It finds that, in general, higher GWI (Good Work Index) scores were associated with managerial and professional occupations, while routine and manual occupations tended to have the lowest scores.

The book proposes that there is scope for: "a national index of job quality along the lines of [its] GWI" (Williams, Zhou & Zou 2020, p.124). My independent enquiry indicated that the book's authors went on to contribute to the writing of the 2020 CIPD Good Work Index (Williams et al., 2020). My reading is that the CIPD scale differs in some aspects from the book's methodological approach.

IMPACT OF AI AND AUTOMATION ON WORK QUALITY

The authors of Better Work question whether robots in the workplace will disempower humans or lead to more interesting tasks, asserting that human agency can influence these outcomes. While automation, as seen with order pickers and truck drivers, can result in increased workload, reduced enjoyment, minimal social interaction, and tight performance monitoring, it can also facilitate labour market inclusivity and professional knowledge acquisition.

They point to research published in 2018 suggesting that AI (artificial intelligence) has potential to rehumanise work. Ultimately, the impact of robots and AI on work quality is influenced by policy decisions made by employers and governments, with disproportionate effects on different groups.

Mapping Good Work adopts a "nuanced upgrading" perspective of technology's impact on work quality. My reading is that, while pay alone shows polarisation (routine middle-paying jobs get automated, non-routine high/low-paying occupations expand), a multidimensional 'good work' definition – including development and fulfilment – reveals general occupational upgrading across the structure. Within this upgraded occupational structure, however, intrinsic job quality deteriorates, becoming more routine, controlled, and intense due to technology. By mapping automation probability against occupational quality – including the GWI – the authors find lowest-quality occupations have the highest automation potential. Displaced workers' transition to higher-quality roles is uncertain and lifelong education or retraining services are crucial for occupational mobility.

The final report of the UK Pissarides Review into the Future of Work and Wellbeing is the culmination of a three-year project. It proposes "a new model of human-centred automation" (Institute for the Future of Work, 2025, p.2). It includes exploration of how technologies influence workers' experience of their jobs. While digital ICTs (information and communication technologies) generally enhance quality of working life they could negatively impact wellbeing for some through an 'always on' culture. However, newer technologies were found generally to diminish life quality. Also, these more recent technologies tended to be associated with perceptions around risk of job loss, and certain demographics had lesser capability to cope with technological disruption. The report finds both positive impacts, regarding things like flexibility and improved decision making, and negative impacts, for example routinisation and feelings of surveillance. It concludes that outcomes can be shaped by the choices of governments, businesses, and individuals.

UK RESEARCH, POLICY & PROSPECTIVE LEGISLATION

Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017) was commissioned in 2016 by then prime minister, Theresa May. It highlights six (QuInnE) key dimensions approximating to good work, which I see as broadly aligning across those described in the two books and in the CIPD 2020 Good Work Index (Williams et al., 2020), referred to above. The report recognises the importance of quality work for workers, employers and the economy. It acknowledges recent changes to the economy impacting on job quality, particularly the role of technology and the significance of new business models. The Taylor Review has served to inform government policy, for instance the Good Work Plan (Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, 2017) and the Employment Rights Bill 2024-25 (Department for Business and Trade, 2024a).

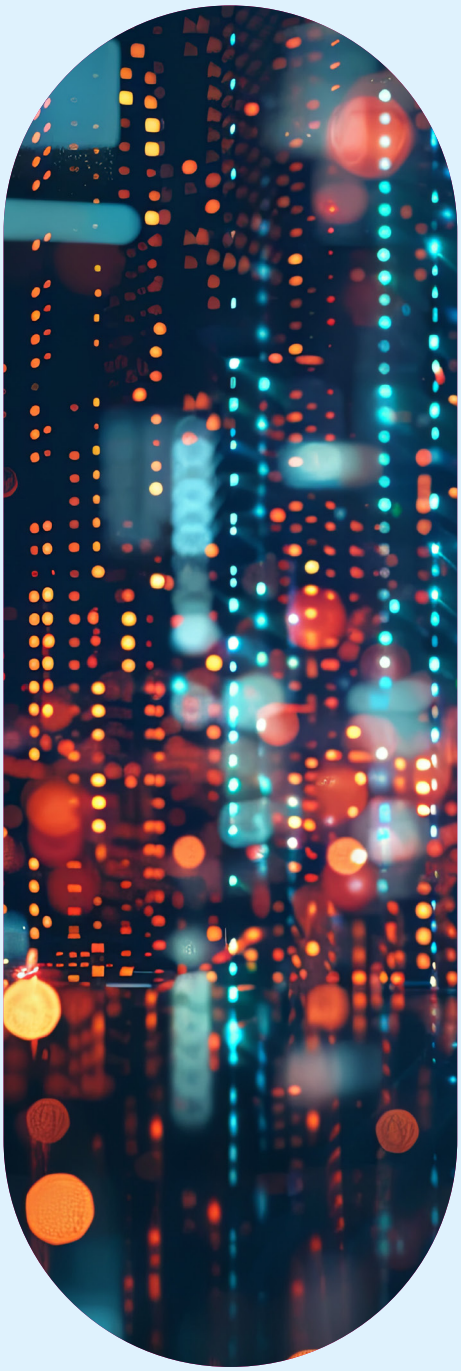
As part of the UK Government's plan to Make Work Pay, the Employment Rights Bill 2024-25 addresses some of the work quality issues considered in the two books. According to the Department for Business and Trade (2024b, p.3): "Many policy changes in the bill will target the issues identified by the independent Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices".

The same document indicates that the bill aims to provide security and predictability for workers, strengthen rights from day one, help balance work and personal responsibilities, raise business protections to discourage competitive undercutting (low pay, standards and job security), ensure equality and inclusion, improve industrial relations, enforce employment rights, boost workplace fairness, and enhance transparency and standards in public procurement. As of mid-July 2025, the bill is scheduled to be at the report stage in the House of Lords (UK Parliament, 2025). Relatedly, the proposed Equality (Race and Disability) Bill promises to enhance equal pay rights.

FINALLY

I found both Better Work and Mapping Good Work to be instructional, providing useful background knowledge for my work as an employability professional and it was interesting that they addressed a similar set of good work dimensions.

Along with issue 10 of this journal, the two books proved to be useful background for exploring UK research, policies and legislation, and the influence of technology on work quality.



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BOOK REVIEW: 'THE AI CON' BY PROF. EMILY BENDER & DR. ALEX HANNA, THE BODLEY HEAD, LONDON, PENGUIN, 2025

MATTHEW AMBROSE FIEP
Employability Consultant & Project DEEP UK Lead
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In The AI Con, Emily M. Bender and Alex Hanna deliver a sharp, uncompromising critique of the artificial intelligence industry.

Their careful debunking of myths surrounding the various technologies packaged as 'AI', and exposure of the venture capital-fuelled marketing hype surrounding its growth, provides a punchy and accessible challenge to what already feels like an inexorable slide into an AI-dominated world.

Bender, a linguistics professor known for her incisive critiques of language models, and Hanna, a sociologist and former Google researcher, bring both technical expertise and lived experience to bear in the construction of their central argument: the term "artificial intelligence" is misleading, and the hype surrounding it serves corporate interests at the expense of the public good, with its deployment often reinforcing or exacerbating existing social inequalities.

And while there is plenty of evidence to back these sentiments, the relentlessness with which they are pursued in the book renders it somewhat imbalanced and lacking in nuance, with personal politics sometimes clouding complex subjects (such as the dismissal of any debate about population trends as "eugenicist").

A central argument in The AI Con is that the public are being fed misinformation about AI on two fronts. Firstly, that AI really does represent machine sentience, and secondly, that we must guard against an impending AI doomsday, with the robots taking over and dispensing with humanity. At the extremes, these narratives do pop up from time to time. But it must also be pointed out that no-one with even a cursory understanding of AI technologies really believes either of these positions to be true. In fact, I was recently at a large AI conference in London (full of industry leaders, AI experts and end point consumers) at which neither subject was even remotely raised. This and other similar examples leave the reader feeling like the book is, at times, chasing ghosts.

The truth of AI (a collection of statistical tools built on massive datasets) is more mundane, but that does not mean that we should not heed many of the warnings contained within the book. The data used to train AI is often scraped without the consent of the copyright holder. Algorithms are bound to discriminate if, for example, they fail to accurately translate a regional dialect.

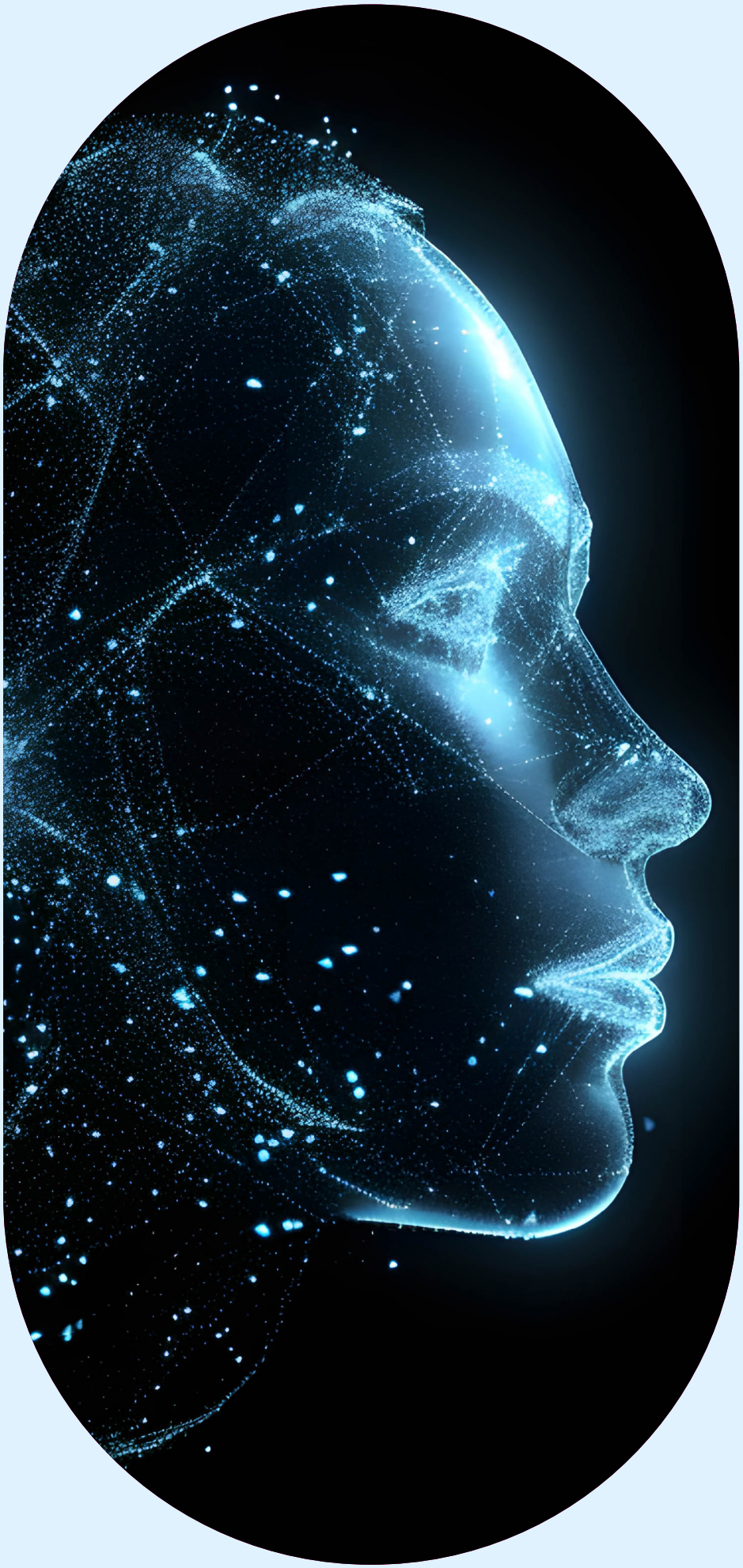
And 'automating jobs away' can do real harm if there are no alternatives for the workers it displaces. But the Bender and Hanna's tendency to place all the responsibility for these potential harms at the door of the AI companies themselves is also misplaced. The end user has choice and agency in how these tools are exploited, and it is clearly possible, within the right framework and with well-constructed principles in place, to utilise AI technologies right now in ways which support human flourishing, rather than inhibiting it.

Matthew Ambrose is a specialist consultant with 19 years of experience in employability and justice. Following a career with Work Directions / Ingeus and the Reducing Reoffending Partnership operating across multiple roles and contracts, Matthew has spent over 7 years as a contractor supporting providers to mobilise contracts and improve performance and technology.

He is also the UK lead for Project DEEP, the first of a growing global partnership between the IEP and providers, with the primary aim of running a series of 'test and learn' projects and sharing the results across the industry to benefit practitioners and participants.

In summary, while readers would be wise to heed the central call to action (resisting passive acceptance of AI hype and instead demanding systems that serve people – not profit), it is all of us who will shape the future of AI and how it is deployed.

The AI Con is indispensable for those who wish to better understand the technology, its potential uses, and the pitfalls we must all avoid to ensure a fairer, more productive future for all. The future isn't written in code – it's ours to shape.



AFTERWORD

15

DAVID IMBER FIEP
Head of the Centre for Employability Excellence

1965, H. A. Simon: "Machines will be capable, within twenty years, of doing any work a man can do." Simon HA (1965), The Shape of Automation for Men and Management, New York: Harper & Row

1970, Marvin Minsky : "In from three to eight years we will have a machine with the general intelligence of an average human being." Darrach B (20 November 1970), "Meet Shaky, the First Electronic Person", Life Magazine, pp. 58–68

David is a Fellow of the Institute of Employability Professionals, with over 40 years' experience leading employment programmes in the UK.

He is Head of the IEP's Centre for Employability Excellence, co-author of the IEP's Quality Improvement Framework, and Editor-in-chief of the IEP Journal. His work on training and curricula have contributed to the IEP Level 3 Certificate in Employability Practice. He provided the review of evidence for quality in advice and guidance services, as part of the UK matrix standard.

INTRODUCTION

The excellent and generous contributors to this edition of the IEP Journal have as always given us much to think about, to include in our work and to learn from. They speak from and to the front line with practical, ethical professionalism. I hope you agree that this Journal, so ably curated by our Guest Editor Claudine Adeyemi-Adams with inestimable support from Ryan McGee, gives us a balanced and measured view of AI, and tempers enthusiasm with concern and realism.

In my Afterword, I want to mention moral agency, its application in employment advice, and why we should ask hard questions while we plan to use AI to support our work.

QUESTIONS

Is AI Intelligent? Do we even know what intelligence is? There is no agreement on a definition of intelligence. But we can agree that the ability to find statistical patterns in large datasets is well within the grasp of AI, but hard for people to do. There are other things people do well that AI cannot, and I believe that these are essential to good practice.

Does AI have the critical faculty? It produces statistically probable results from given data; but that isn't critical thinking in any human sense[1].

Can AI do formal reasoning? It is powerful and useful in limited fields. But that is not what is implied by the term 'intelligence'.

Does it have the emotions, conscious or otherwise, that are needed for human reasoning?

Does it have a sense of truth or truth-values? It does not[2].

Given these shortcomings, we should we be wary of AI's potential impact[3].

PROBLEMS IN AI?

Ania Mendrek, Matt Kingswood, Oliver Large and Nimmi Patel have all mentioned AI's inclination to falsehoods, 'hallucinations', and bias. Those are not qualities one wants in a person-centred profession. My view is that since AI has no self and no identity in a meaningful human sense, it cannot be said to have either a moral position or moral agency[4].

Using chat bots to offer advice and instruction (be that career choices, action plans or other supports) without a human professional in control can be dangerous[5]. Already such applications exist and can be found online[6]. As a consequence its use in employability needs the most careful planning and monitoring.

Applying AI support to human professional advisers is another matter. Access to employability data is a challenge that AI may make much easier, and support for the usual administrative problems must be welcome, as exemplified by Belina Grow's use of online translation tools, in Ania Mendrek's article. These are not (or should not be) of ethical concern in a 'human directing the service' model, as described by Dominic Atkinson. But if AI is used to prescribe action by clients, AI might introduce new, or conceal already-existing problematic heuristics[7].

Moral standing aside, case management is neither a linear algebra nor a statistical clustering problem. Effective case management relies (as Claudine Adeyemi-Adams says in her editorial) on human input. So we should ask ourselves if AI addresses the right issues, for example:

- if AI can be made less biassed than a human adviser, isn't there something to be done to help the adviser?
- would you trust a colleague or employee that lies, hallucinates, and has no moral standing?
- if AI is helpful in overcoming bureaucratic hurdles, who put up the hurdles in the first place?
- do we need AI to tell us, as we have been saying for years, that inter-agency co-ordination is needed? We can surely use statistical insights but, as I see it, the issue is not in the statistics so much as in the agencies' constitutions and organisations. It takes human and political intervention to change them.

CHOICES, ALGORITHMIC HEURISTICS

When clients make personal choices in their local labour market, they are not probabilistic statistical recurrencies in a database. They include emotional responses, attitudes to risk, to rewards, personal capabilities and more. These are the working raw materials of good advice. When clients choose, they do not optimise, they react and express their inclinations[8].

Three examples illustrate the dangers of applying procedural algorithms, and even plain old mumbo-jumbo, usually in the service of efficiency, effectiveness (great goals in themselves) but also shortcutting human input: Use of tools such as Myers Briggs[9], EMDR[10], NLP[11], left-right brain theories[12] may now be fading into disuse. Bad enough in themselves, these remain in the literature for AI large language models to digest and regurgitate. Other algorithms have a better pedigree, but are not universally accepted: Holland codes[13] and the Big Five (CANOE) character traits carry their own risks[14] and they form the basis of, but are hidden from view within, some computerised career advice systems. To apply them uncritically is to allow the machine to prescribe, not to empower the client.

We might also wonder about the (UK) traditions of SMART Action Planning, for which I have not seen any good independent evidence[15]. Perhaps it is a placebo, and if it works, that's fine. But hide it from view in a machine, and the capacity to question and critique is submerged.

THE OTHER AI: ACTIVE INGREDIENTS IN EMPLOYMENT ADVICE

I am arguing for primacy of moral and ethical choices and for an understanding of emotional and social interactions as the drivers of excellent advice services. These should be evident in our respect, trust, adaptability and transparency with clients and employers. They do not reside in datasets. The AI (Active Ingredients) of trust, empathy and honesty rely on us having and valuing truth values. Alongside that, immediate, concrete, non-statistical knowledge (of the labour market, community and environment) underpins the capacity to guide, advise, counsel and support[16]. Current Artificial Intelligence deploys a technology has no morality, has no emotions, and does not recognise nor use truth-values, even when it presents truths.

But it can help us navigate large datasets, record facts (though I'm sceptical about its interpreting their meaning), provide ready translations, analyse labour markets and many more useful services still to be discovered. Several authors suggest gains in reducing admin, freeing advisers' time, in reviewing personal action plans (Rebecca Miles, Boris Bambo), in identifying clusters of risk factors and institutional relationships for co-operative development. Other research suggests that it has a role in facilitating communication between clients and advisers[17], which anyone might welcome. This study notes that 'The integration of AI... necessitates careful consideration of ethical issues such as data privacy, algorithmic bias, and the potential for reduced human oversight', and our authors have emphasised the point that, if implemented well, and with a human-in-the-loop approach where the AI is being used to support the adviser, it is the role of that adviser to convey the level of empathy required for each participant. Our authors have illustrated just how AI can support the human relationship between adviser and client. In correctly placing ethical and personal choices in the human domain, they show that there's a sweet spot to be found, somewhere between human complexity and programmatic convenience. This edition of the IEP Journal is part of the search.

RESPONSIBILITY: AGENCY AND MORAL CHOICES

When I get off the bus for a night out in Exeter, I thank the driver, not the bus. When someone is injured in a road accident, we blame the driver, anot the car.

Responsibility for the consequences of application of AI rests with the people who create, train, advertise, deploy and use it. So even if AI could be made perfect (whatever that might be), it is not a moral agent[18], is not worthy of praise nor of blame. It should not replace responsibility for our actions.

Let us remember, each of us carries in her or his own head computing power – and moral capacity – that far exceeds anything produced by technology. So automatic, so powerful, that it is sometimes easy to forget that it is the engine driving client and employer relationships. It can, with care, be usefully lubricated by carefully chosen AI facilities.

THANK YOU

Thanks are due to our Guest Editor, Claudine Adeyemi-Adams FIEP, CEO & Founder at Earlybird and Ryan McGee MIEP, Senior Founder's Associate at Earlybird for help and guidance in producing this issue of the IEP Journal, to the IEP Team:

Heather Ette FIEP, Head of Marketing, Communications & Brand, Taylor Cunningham MIEP, Marketing & Communications Consultant and also to Jason Measures, Graphic Designer at Deadline Creative, for their work on production and distribution. The Journal would not be created without their professional contributions.

Sincerely
Head of the Centre for Employability Excellence

BUILDING CAPABILITY IN AI FOR EMPLOYABILITY

THE IEP AWARD IN AI FOR EMPLOYABILITY

In partnership with

Earlybird

This edition of the IEP Journal, guest edited by Earlybird, explores how Artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies are transforming employability services — from improving data insights to enhancing the experience and outcomes for participants.

To build on these themes, the **IEP Award in AI for Employability**, developed in partnership with **Earlybird**, provides a structured learning opportunity for practitioners to understand the practical and ethical use of AI in service delivery. The program supports professionals to develop confidence in applying technology to improve quality, efficiency, and participant engagement.

FURTHER INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE AT

WWW.MYIEP.UK/AI

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THE CENTRE FOR EMPLOYABILITY EXCELLENCE

WHERE RESEARCH MEETS PRACTICE FOR OUTSTANDING OUTCOMES

CENTRE FOR EMPLOYABILITY EXCELLENCE

Brought to you by the IEP, the Global Centre for Employability Excellence is a trusted, independent, international community that connects, curates, and shares the best in employability research and practice — championing quality, elevating excellence and inspiring international innovation and collaboration.

For more about our work and to hear about the latest sector events from around the world, visit our website

www.cfee.global

While the Centre for Employability Excellence has had a quieter period over the summer, we remain very much active, continuing to offer information, discussion, and networking opportunities for researchers, leaders, practitioners, and policy makers.

What's happening?

Journal 16: Human Intelligence in Employment Services Launching in February 2026 with Guest Editor Roger Chapman, Head of Service, the Growth Company and the Matrix Standard. Keep an eye out for the launch event!

Our Research Database now features over 600 entries. Have you contributed your own work or recommended readings yet? If not, we'd love to include them—email us to get involved.

Our Bulletin features the latest CfEE Project updates, global research contributions, events and case studies from around the world. Haven't signed up yet? **Click here**.

What's new?

We're currently developing a refreshed seminar series for 2026, with exciting new formats and topics designed to spark discussion and share diverse perspectives. If you have a subject you're passionate about—or a viewpoint that deserves a wider audience—we'd love to hear from you.

Our best news of the season: Anna Hammond MIEP has joined The IEP as Quality & Excellence Project Lead. Anna will play a key role in revitalising the Centre's contributions and expanding opportunities for your involvement.

How can you get involved?

Would you like to help shape the global conversation around employability services? We invite you to contribute to CfEE's work—whether by suggesting topics for seminars, raising policy issues, or sharing ideas on current challenges and opportunities in the sector.

Everyone is welcome to join the conversation—there's no expectation to present or publish. Together, we're building a collaborative network of professionals committed to advancing employability excellence.

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