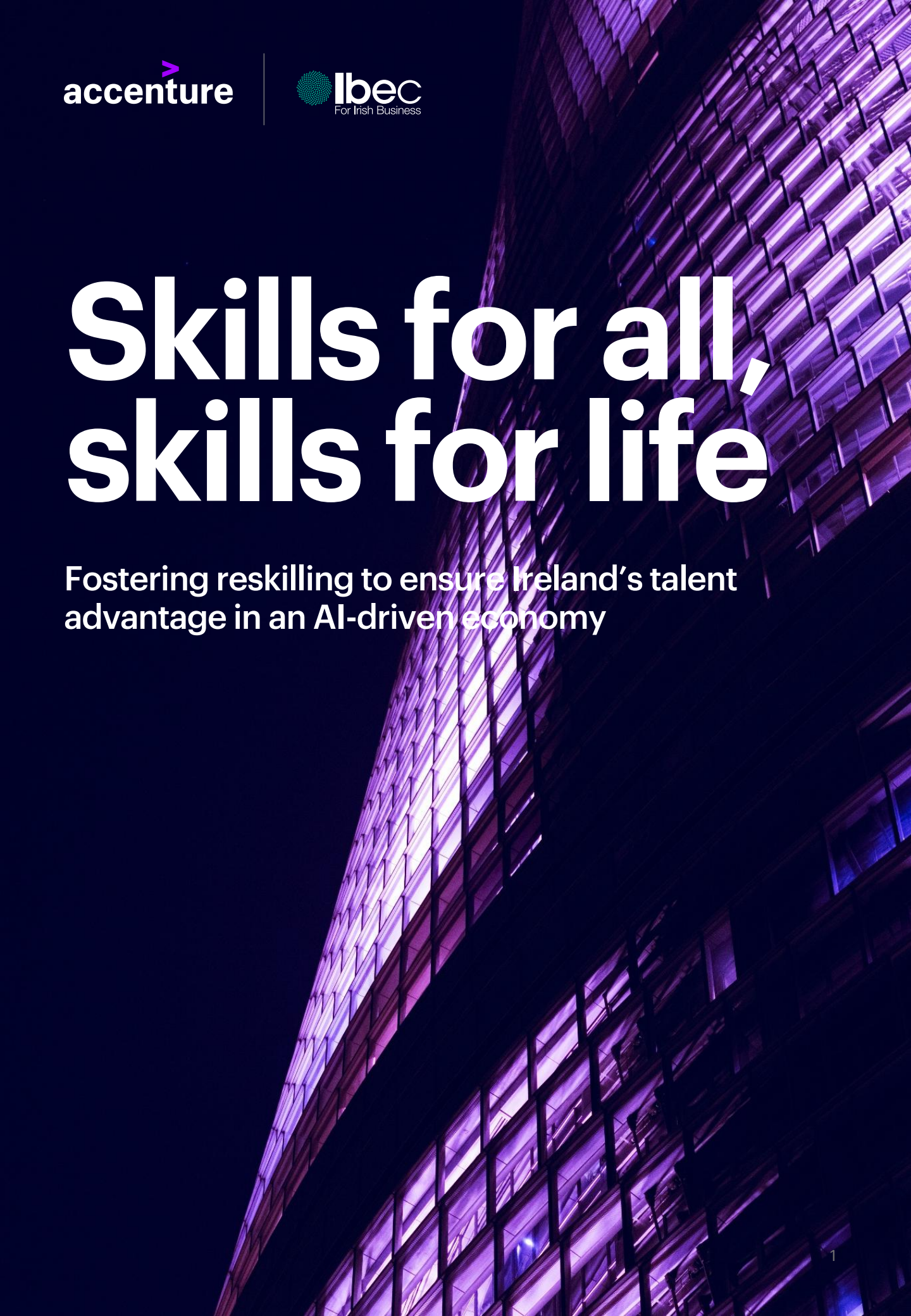


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Skills for all, skills for life

Fostering reskilling to ensure Ireland's talent advantage in an AI-driven economy

Preface

It is well established that Ireland's long-term success has been built on the strength of its workforce and its ability to continually grow and develop a talent pool with highly differentiated and sought-after skills. In a world of constant geopolitical, technological, economic and societal change, sustaining a differentiated talent profile will be key to drive economic and social success.

The world of work is no longer moving through discrete cycles of disruption. Change is persistent and careers now need to span longer working lives. Artificial intelligence and digital technologies are disrupting roles and occupational tasks continuously, and in doing so, requiring skills to evolve at increasing speed. As work shifts, so too must the systems that support people, employers and institutions.

Ireland is entering the era of intelligence from a position of strength. A highly educated workforce, an established knowledge-intensive economy, deep multinational investment, a growing indigenous start-up community, and a long-standing alignment between education and economic strategy have enabled the country to compete for complex, high-value work. Together, these factors have allowed Ireland to consistently punch above its weight internationally. Talent has been our economic currency, underpinning growth, investment and credibility.

Yet the model that delivered this success was built for a different era. Education was largely front-loaded. Careers were relatively linear. Skills could be applied with confidence over long periods. Today, that model is under strain. Gaps are emerging in the digital foundations of organisations, in confidence and trust around change, and in the systems designed to renew skills at scale.

If Ireland is to remain competitive and resilient, it must deliberately design for lifelong reskilling. This means designing and creating conditions that proactively encourage and empower curiosity, creating an environment where people feel able to grow professionally, where change is experienced as opportunity rather than anxiety and where adaptability is widely shared, not concentrated among a few.

Becoming a nation that facilitates ongoing reskilling will require coordinated leadership across government, employers and education. It will require clarity of intent and direction, stability of funding and a renewed commitment to treating skills as part of Ireland's core infrastructure – by government, educators, employers and individuals.

This report offers a point of view on how Ireland can respond to this moment, highlighting the structural gaps that are beginning to constrain progress and outlining the opportunities for action.

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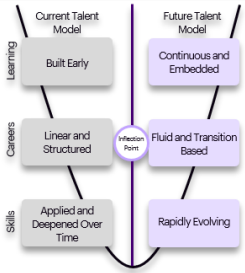
Contents

The Foundation



Talent as Ireland's Advantage 05-06

The Challenge



The AI Inflection Point 07 - 09



The Structural Gaps 10 - 11

The Opportunity



Building Curiosity as a National Capability 12 - 13



Recommended Actions 14-19

Talent has been Ireland's key economic differentiator



Today, Ireland is operating at near full employment, with over 2.8 million people in work.[1] We have one of the most highly educated workforces in Europe, with third-level attainment rates among the highest in the OECD.[2]

This combination of participation and capability has positioned Ireland as a global hub for knowledge-intensive activity across multiple sectors. Nine of the ten largest biopharmaceutical companies in the world have operations here,[3] along with fourteen of the fifteen largest medtech companies [4] and Ireland ranks as the second largest exporter of ICT services globally.[5] It is home to many of the world's largest technology companies, and we've produced a growing number of globally recognised indigenous businesses, from Stripe to Kerry Group that have scaled from Irish roots into international markets.

Over time, this has shaped the structure of the economy itself. Employment and output are now concentrated in sectors such as technology, life sciences and financial services, where value is created through specialised expertise and integration into global value chains.

Talent has been Ireland's key economic differentiator

This shift has been supported by sustained policy alignment, with long-term investment in education, workforce participation and close links between enterprise development and skills provision. Yet, despite the international profile of employers, Ireland's workforce is predominantly employed in indigenous companies, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and the public sector - sectors that form the backbone of everyday economic activity but whose skills needs are often less visible in national policy conversations.

Across every sector of our economy, talent plays the central enabling role. Workforce capability supports investment, underpins export performance, delivers critical services and sustains Ireland's position within competitive, knowledge-intensive industries.

Ireland's workforce capability has helped attract and sustain globally significant enterprise activity, supporting a highly export-oriented and knowledge-intensive economy.

1,800+

Multinationals operating in Ireland [6]

70%

IDA investments are repeat or expansions [7]

#1

in EU For knowledge-intensive services exports [8]

AI marks an inflection point for Ireland's talent model

Accenture modelling from 2024 suggested AI could add up to €148 billion to Ireland's GDP by 2038. [9] But that potential is not guaranteed. If organisations focus solely on cost cutting and automation, rather than on how AI can empower people to do higher-value work, Ireland could find itself on a path that leaves as much as €96 billion of that potential on the table. Ireland's talent advantage therefore needs be protected and brought front and centre to our AI growth strategy.

The impact of AI on work – how we acquire knowledge, how we operate, how we execute – compels us to examine how our current talent development model needs to evolve to ensure the ongoing and sustained relevance and differentiation of our workforce.

Work is being reinvented, not just automated

AI is reshaping how work is performed across a wide range of roles, particularly in the knowledge-intensive activities that have underpinned Ireland's competitive position. Accenture's 2026 Generating Impact research estimates that 82% of working hours in Ireland could be affected by AI. [10]

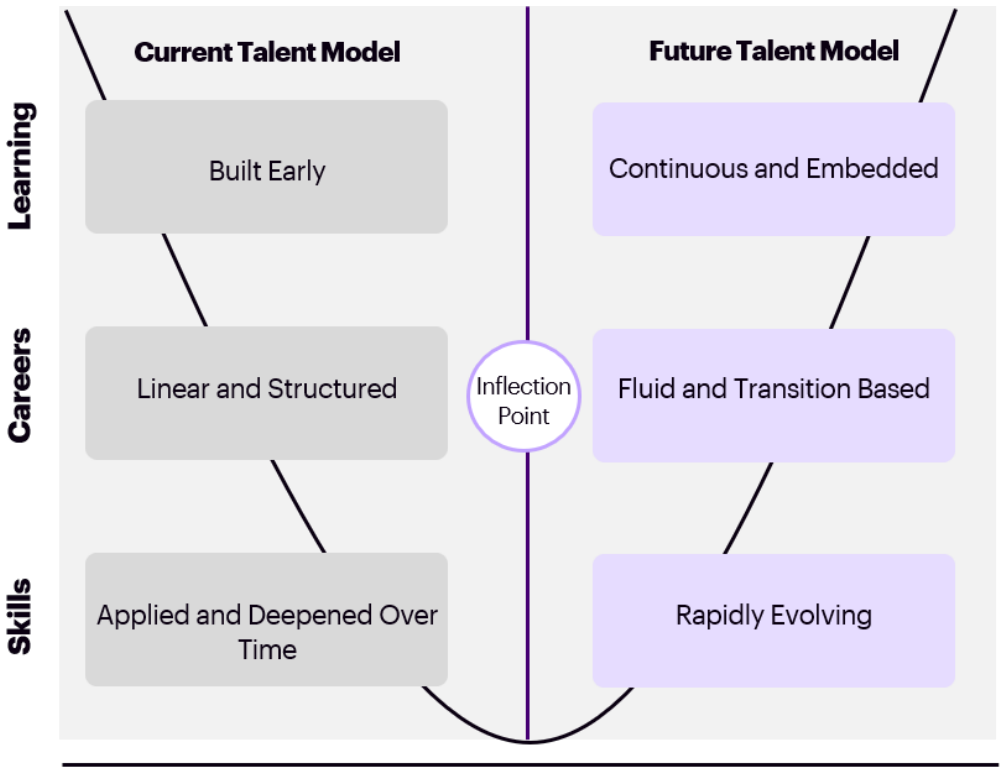
The ramifications of AI will be significant, particularly in industries where AI agents are expected to drive substantial change.[11] It is expected to take several years for most organisations to have scaled agentic capability in operation. However, the intent is there, with three times as many organisations planning to invest in agentic capabilities in 2025 compared to 2024. [12]



AI marks an inflection point for Ireland's talent model

The gap between required and available capability is widening

64% of roles will require significant reskilling as AI reshapes what work demands.[9] As job content evolves faster than job titles do, the capabilities that create real value - judgement, problem framing, domain expertise, the ability to evaluate AI outputs critically - are ones most organisations are not yet systematically building. The skills to work in an AI-enabled world won't come by osmosis or accident, it will require both deliberate and continuous development, as opposed to a one-time response.[11]



The model that supported Ireland's growth was built for stability. As AI reshapes work, that model must evolve to support continuous development and adaptation across the workforce.

Investment in AI won't deliver growth if our people can't use it

86% of leaders plan to increase their AI investment in 2026. [13] That investment will demand that they deliver demonstrable top line growth or headcount reduction. To achieve top line growth, we will need people using AI to do things differently and better – to create, to innovate, to solve problems, to sell. That's not about doing today's job faster, it's about doing it very differently. The criticality and indeed the challenge of the "human factor" for new value realisation is vastly understated or misunderstood.

The transition will not happen equally without deliberate action

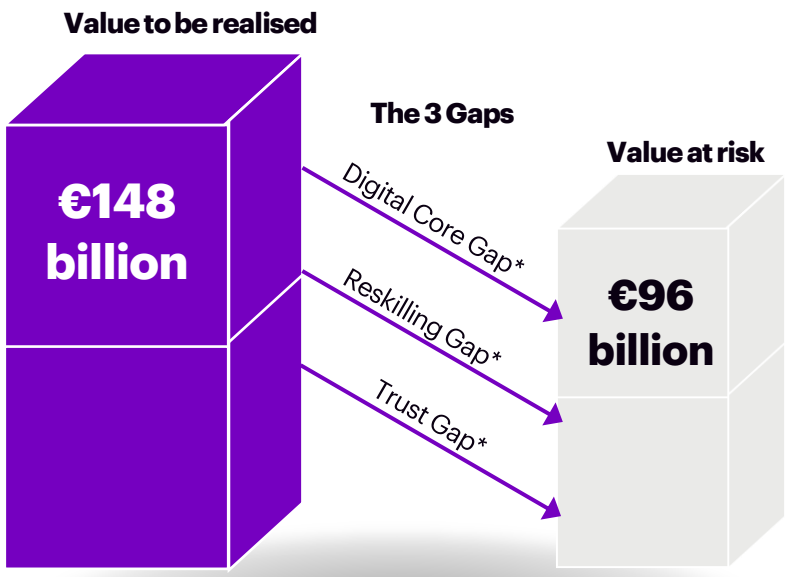
Large companies are nearly twice as likely as smaller firms to provide digital and AI training, leaving SMEs which represent the majority of Irish employment navigating this shift with the least support. [14] The risk is not just that some organisations move slower than others. It is that a significant portion of the workforce, and the business community, get left behind entirely. ESRI research shows Ireland already has the largest gender gap in advanced digital skills use in Europe. [15] The socio-economic divide is equally concerning. AI will widen existing inequalities unless we act deliberately to prevent it.

> AI is advancing faster than the organisations adopting it-with individual use racing ahead and the economic prize still largely uncaptured.

Three structural gaps that risk Ireland from fully realising the economic value of AI

Ireland has put in place important policy foundations to prepare the workforce for an AI-enabled economy. The National Digital and AI Strategy, published in February 2026, commits to a new national AI Skilling Platform and a nationwide digital and AI skilling campaign, supporting the Government's existing ambition for 75% of Irish businesses to adopt AI by 2030. [16]

These recent initiatives are a recognition that workforce capability will be central to the country's long-term competitiveness. However, when we look more closely at what is happening on the ground as organisations seek to scale AI, we see three structural constraints emerging.



Accenture (2024) Generating Growth: How generative AI can power Ireland's reinvention

Ireland's ability to adapt its workforce at scale will determine how much of this long-term growth opportunity is realised.

**The three gaps are examined in more detail in the following section.*

Three structural gaps that risk Ireland from fully realising the economic value of AI

01

Digital Core Gap

Legacy Infrastructure | Scalability Constraints | Strategic Ambiguity

The digital core, comprising data systems, cloud infrastructure and connected platforms, is what makes AI work in practice. Without it, organisations cannot deploy AI at scale, and the productivity and growth potential it offers goes unrealised. Too few organisations have the digital foundations needed to deploy new technologies effectively. For many, particularly smaller firms, the barrier is not only technical but strategic.

02

Reskilling Gap

Uneven Investment | Training Scarcity | Foundational Weakness

Evidence from Ibec shows that almost 82% of organisations report skills gaps, with many identifying these gaps as a constraint on growth.[14] While 64% of employees say they expect to reskill in response to AI,[10] only 5% of organisations are currently providing AI training at scale.[17] The reskilling challenge is particularly acute for SMEs and lower-skilled workers, who often have fewer resources and opportunities to access structured reskilling programmes.

03

Trust Gap

Low Confidence | Transparency Deficit | Tool Access

Enthusiasm for AI remains relatively low, with 44% of workers expressing little or no confidence that it will have a positive impact on them.[9] While leaders see workers at the heart of the transformation, trust in AI is built through transparency, understanding and day-to-day use. Without that trust, organisations are struggling to build the confidence needed for AI to be adopted at scale.



Building curiosity as a national capability

Together, these three gaps are already constraining Ireland's ability to respond to the pace of change. Addressing them will take investment, policy reform and employer commitment.

But investment and reform only deliver if people engage with them. If we want our workforce to develop mastery in working with AI, we must recognise the need for experimentation, application, practice and the space to learn and adapt over time.

This means that people from all backgrounds across Ireland need access to learning opportunities that help them stay curious, build confidence and continually adapt their skills throughout life.

> Curiosity is not a personality trait or a soft skill. It is the capability we need to manufacture and build.

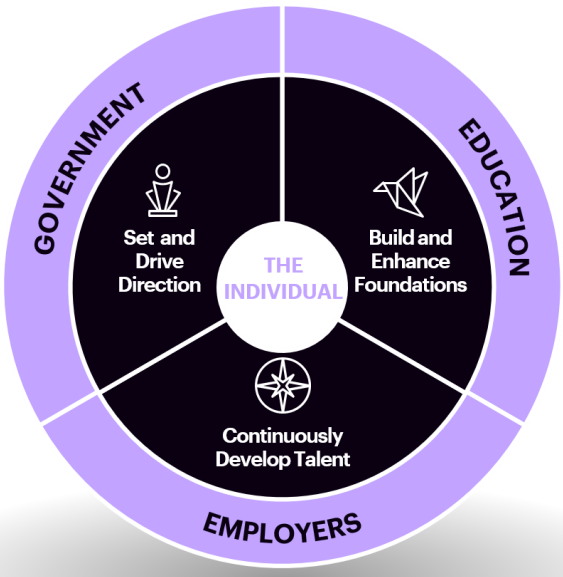
The conditions required to build a curious nation

Making this step change won't come from a single policy or programme. It will be built through an integrated strategy that brings stakeholders together around a shared ambition, supported by a single skills transformation roadmap with clear ownership, defined accountabilities and measurable milestones.

01 **Education**
Embed AI into learning at nearly every stage of education, building a highly educated, AI-literate population equipped to enter the workforce. Create more accessible pathways to lifelong learning that are inclusive, relevant and available to people at every stage of life and career.

02 **Employers**
Step up to the responsibility of reskilling. Set clear, measurable talent-building goals and be transparent about progress against them. Create the conditions where learning happens as part of work, not separate from it. Work in partnership with government and education providers to help build a workforce that can meet the demands of a changing economy.

03 **Government**
Clear ambition and direction at government level, with investment prioritised to reach those who need it most. A single owner of the AI Skills agenda would enable stakeholders across education, industry and employers to coordinate effectively.



Education



Public spending per student in Ireland remains below the OECD average across all levels of education [18], and real per-student funding at tertiary level has declined significantly over the past decade. At the same time, demand for places continues to grow, and expectations on institutions have expanded to include lifelong learning, digital capability and responsiveness to rapidly evolving skills needs.

If Ireland is to support longer working lives and more frequent career transitions, access to formal learning will need to be available across the multiple phases of a person's life. Equally, digital confidence and AI literacy should be inherent in how we learn, beginning in schools and continuing throughout life.

Universities and further education providers are adapting, but sustained reform requires coordinated leadership between schools, further and higher education. This requires funding stability and cross-sector policy alignment to ensure the overall system keeps pace with AI capability needs.



Considerations for education

Equip

Embed AI literacy as a core competency
Incorporate AI literacy across all levels from primary through to further and higher education, with clear staged learning outcomes so progression is coherent and measurable rather than treated as an elective or add-on.

Develop stackable, portable qualifications
Build accessible micro-credentials and short courses in AI capability that adult learners and those in the workforce can accumulate and carry across employers and stages of learning, reducing friction for those returning to education or changing careers.

Connect

Align institutional leadership behind a shared national framework
Establish a cross-departmental leadership group spanning schools, further and higher education, and employer representatives with real decision-making authority over skills policy. Underpin this with a national framework of equivalent ambition to the Digital Strategy for Schools, to the departments responsible for education, further and higher education and enterprise policy, with AI literacy champions designated at institutional level to drive consistent implementation.

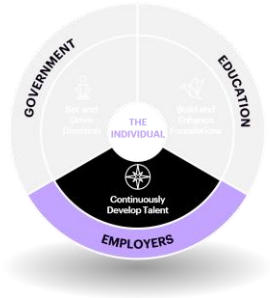
Strengthen lifelong guidance services
Introduce a national body for the strategic coordination, management and development of guidance services. Ireland has a nationwide, publicly funded adult career guidance service delivered through the Education and Training Boards, yet it remains largely unknown to those outside education settings. A coordinated approach could strengthen oversight, consistency and access across the guidance system, while raising the profile of services, and widening access current priority groups.

Fund

Restore and stabilise institutional funding
Provide multi-year funding confidence for Education and Training Boards (ETBs), universities and technological universities so they can plan, invest in staff and infrastructure and respond to growing demand.

Invest in educator capability
Commission a national continuing professional development programme for AI literacy, giving teachers and lecturers the confidence and knowledge to deliver it effectively across all settings. Without upskilling those delivering education, curriculum reform stalls.

Employers



How employers design work, develop people and respond to change shapes the capability of the Irish workforce more directly than anything else. Employers often see where skills demand is heading before it appears in any dataset, and they arguably have the greatest vested interest in closing the skills gap.

No single organisation can transform the national workforce alone, but collectively employers can have a scaled impact.

Reskilling can be harder for smaller firms than for larger organisations. Large employers, in particular, have a responsibility to contribute beyond their own organisations, and many already do through industry collaboration and the training they fund, for the benefit of the wider workforce.

Cost, time and strategic prioritisation remain the primary barriers to workforce development. While workforce capability has risen to the top of the CEO agenda, organisations are currently spending three times more on GenAI technology than on people. It is time for employers to make a step change in workforce development and skills investment.



Considerations for employers

Equip

Redesign workflows around AI, not just around people
Move beyond encouraging individuals to use AI tools and take deliberate responsibility for reinventing the processes, roles and workflows within which people operate. Map where AI can absorb routine tasks, identify where human judgement adds most value, and restructure team design and ways of working accordingly.

Support employees to build portable, recognised qualifications
Actively fund and encourage employees to pursue QQI-recognised programmes, including Springboard+ and micro-credentials, building qualifications they can carry across roles and organisations and increasing workforce resilience beyond your own organisation.

Connect

Extend your reach beyond your own organisation
Share training infrastructure with smaller firms in your supply chain, jointly commission programmes through Skillnet Business Networks, further education or higher education routes, that no single organisation could fund alone, and advocate for simpler access routes to funded provision for organisations with the least capacity to navigate the system.

Create the conditions for genuine experimentation
Explicitly separate experimentation from performance assessment and demonstrate that through leadership behaviour, not just communication. Establish dedicated time and space for teams to test AI tools on real but lower-stakes work and build communities of practice.

Fund

Set board-level commitment to workforce development with real accountability
Treat reskilling as a business transformation programme, not a training catalogue. Set explicit targets alongside financial and operational metrics, measure whether skills are being applied and workflows are genuinely changing, and report outcomes to leadership rather than tracking course completions alone.

Engage actively with national funding structures
Engage actively with national funding structures by contributing skills priorities and on-the-ground insights through structured channels into formal submissions to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. This could be coordinated through the National Skills Council and the cross-departmental leadership group, helping to align skills investment with workforce needs.

Government



Ireland already has many of the building blocks in place, but fully realising the AI opportunity will require national prioritisation, coordination across departments, and a funding model that reaches the organisations and workers who need it most.

Ireland is in the fortunate position of having an established National Training Fund (NTF), funded through employer contributions and designed to support skills development across the economy. As demand for reskilling and upskilling grows, there is an opportunity to optimise the use of the fund and ensure it can be deployed effectively and at pace. Realising this opportunity will require alignment on the fund's hypothecated treatment and its role in supporting national skills priorities.

Effective deployment of funding - in particular ensuring programmes with strong track records in further and higher education are optimised for impact – will accelerate progress of the national skilling agenda and help extend access to learning across the workforce.

Government has an opportunity to inspire people to participate in learning and to help ensure we see ourselves as others see us – part of a talent pool that is highly educated and skilled.



Considerations for government

Equip

Launch a national continuous learning campaign
Launch a 2030 national skilling campaign with a distinct emphasis on digital and AI, creating a sustained national narrative around talent and lifelong learning. Position skills development as a core part of Ireland's identity, nationally and internationally, grounded in real stories and consistent messaging. Measure success through participation and learning outcomes across every stage of life, rather than campaign outputs alone.

Share workforce foresight and labour market data
Establish structured channels for large employers to share real-time intelligence on skills demand and progress directly with education providers and bodies such as SLMRU, EGFSN and RSF, complementing their work with on-the-ground insight into how work is changing, which skills are becoming critical and where gaps are emerging.

Connect

Develop a single national platform for adult learning
Develop a single national platform for adult learning. Build on the national AI Skilling Platform commitment to create one accessible entry point where every adult can find courses, understand their options and access a comprehensive view of learning opportunities across guidance, education, training, providers and programmes.

Establish and drive an integrated AI reskilling plan
Shape an integrated AI Reskilling Strategy & Plan which demonstrably increases participation in reskilling. Establish a cross-departmental leadership group between schools, further education, higher education, relevant departments and employer representatives with decision-making authority over skills policy, funding, delivery and shared outcome measures.

Fund

Enable more effective deployment of the National Training Fund
Maximise the impact of the National Training Fund (NTF) by bringing clarity to its fiscal treatment and by enabling streamlined and longer-term funding horizons. Strengthen the coordination and governance of the NTF and broader reskilling agenda, bringing greater employer input into determining skills priorities.

Protect and scale proven programmes
Programmes with demonstrated impact - including those currently delivered through Skillnet Business Networks, Springboard+, micro-credentials/qualifications and Skills to Advance - require stable, predictable, multi-year funding across diverse cohorts of learners and employers. A longer-term approach to funding would help these programmes plan, grow and respond to evolving skills needs.

In closing

Ireland stands at a defining moment. The foundations of our talent advantage, a highly educated workforce, a dynamic enterprise base, and a long-standing commitment to skills remain strong. But sustaining that advantage in an AI-driven economy demands more than what the current system was designed to deliver. Closing the digital core, trust, and reskilling gaps requires government, employers and education to act with shared urgency and shared accountability. The prize is significant: a workforce that is not merely adapting to change, but driving it. Achieving that will depend not on any single policy or programme, but on Ireland's collective willingness to treat lifelong learning and curiosity as the strategic infrastructure of our future.

Ireland may not necessarily be the global epicentre of primary AI development, but we possess a golden opportunity to ensure we have the world's most competitive, AI-native workforce. Ultimately, our ability to emerge as a net beneficiary of the AI revolution will come down to how effectively we manage this massive skills transition.



Fergal O'Brien
Executive Director,
Policy Lobbying & Global Affairs,
IBEC

Our greatest opportunity in the age of AI is not the technology itself, but our ability to equip people with the skills to thrive alongside it. Realising this potential will require a shared national commitment, with employers in particular taking responsibility for their people. The question it poses to every leader, myself included: will we act boldly and quickly enough to make this moment count?



Hilary O'Meara
Country Managing Director,
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A note from the authors

We published this report because we believe Ireland is at a moment that deserves honest, practical conversation, not just about what is possible, but about what needs to happen and who needs to act.

The foundations are real. Ireland's workforce is one of the most educated in Europe. Our employers are engaged and, in many cases, already leading. Our education system has genuine capacity. What we are asking for is not a transformation of what exists, it is a more deliberate, more sustained and better-coordinated version of what Ireland already knows how to do.

We are asking government to provide the system with the certainty it needs to plan. We are asking employers to lead from the front by sharing intelligence, investing in their people and modelling the culture of continuous learning they want to see. And we are asking everyone who reads this report to view curiosity not as a soft concept but as a strategic imperative. It is the practical capability that will determine how well Ireland navigates what comes next.

Ibec and Accenture will continue to make the case for this agenda - in policy, in practice and in partnership with the organisations and people we work with across Ireland.

We hope this report is a contribution to that conversation, and an invitation to others to be part of it.

Ibec and Accenture



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