Microsoft

Building skills for an AI-enabled public sector

How to unlock efficiencies and improve the citizen experience

February 2024

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Introduction

It's time for the public sector to act on AI skills

We have been working with the public sector in the UK for four decades, and never has the expression "doing more with less" been more pertinent. Demand is high, budgets are squeezed, and resources are stretched.

Understandably, many people are now looking at AI and asking: "Is this the answer?"

In some ways, yes. Advances in AI offer huge potential for the public sector to revolutionise how it interacts with residents, and we have already seen so many exciting use cases. These start with simple productivity gains, but extend to managing calls in a contact centre, preparing case notes for a visit, or analysing images to spot and remove graffiti. No matter who we speak to, in all parts of central and local government, there is an idea that can be built on. So how do we turn them into reality?

To make the most of these technologies, organisations should take advantage of available skilling opportunities and focus on developing a culture of continuous learning. As the world becomes more curious about AI, it will be those organisations that recognise human ingenuity, and equip their people with the skills to be the best competitive asset they have, that will lead the way.

This guide exists to help leaders understand how AI can make workflows more efficient and improve the citizen experience. It also explores how to build the sector's AI skills to take advantage of these opportunities. To help organisations on their skilling journey, we have created a wide range of AI learning resources — many of which are available at no cost.

> We're committed to leading the AI revolution, and we don't want to leave anyone behind. With a fully skilled and engaged public sector, we can build AI systems that are safe, fair, and beneficial to everyone.

Simon Lambert
Chief Learning Officer
Microsoft UK
February 2024

The skilling opportunity

In the four decades we've been working with the UK public sector, we have seen how digitisation has improved the lives of employees and made services more accessible for residents. The recent breakthrough of workplace-ready AI promises another leap in capabilities — but how can government organisations keep up? And why now?

Doing more with less

Public sector organisations want to skill their residents and employees, invest in infrastructure, and create inclusive economic growth. But there are obvious challenges in delivering this: services are in huge demand, and costs for social care are continually rising. Plus, recruitment remains challenging for digital roles.

AI offers huge potential for organisations to shed some of their digital debt, by which we mean the time lost to the constant flow of data, emails, meetings, and notifications. In the public sector, the demands of this prevents them from tackling the creative work that makes a difference to citizens. AI can help ease this digital debt by handling many of the time-consuming administrative tasks, freeing up people to focus on the creative work that sparks innovation.

Our work with the public sector in this area has already proven the benefits, but the question is how quickly organisations can use the tools available, while avoiding technical debt along the way. AI won't simply "fix" work — leaders will need to help employees learn to use it effectively and responsibly to reap the benefits. Therefore, **comprehensive skilling in AI should be a primary area of focus**. We are working with the public sector to identify current skills gaps, as well as predict the skill requirements that will help make the most of future AI systems.

A culture of learning can make AI a success

AI is much more than just another digital technology that government organisations will need to find the time to learn. Building skills in AI promises to unlock a huge range of other benefits, and even compensate for skills gaps in other areas.

Encouraging a culture that embraces continuous learning will be essential to maximise the benefits. Teams may face a learning curve while adapting to new features, so training and support will be required to help employees feel comfortable using tools effectively.

Making the most of AI does require investment in learning. This means allowing people the time to become familiar with the technology and to experiment with it as it develops. This empowerment must come from the top, meaning leaders must be the initial drivers of change. But it can then become a virtuous circle. Microsoft research indicates that over three-quarters of employees would be more inclined to remain at a job if they were given more opportunities for learning and development.[1]

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[1] **Hybrid Work Is Just Work. Are We Doing It Wrong? Microsoft. September 2022.**

AI can help support this learning culture. It can help leaders understand their skill gaps and deliver learning programs that address people's unique needs. Proper grounding in AI also makes people more aware of the societal and cultural changes that are happening and how work will evolve over the coming years.
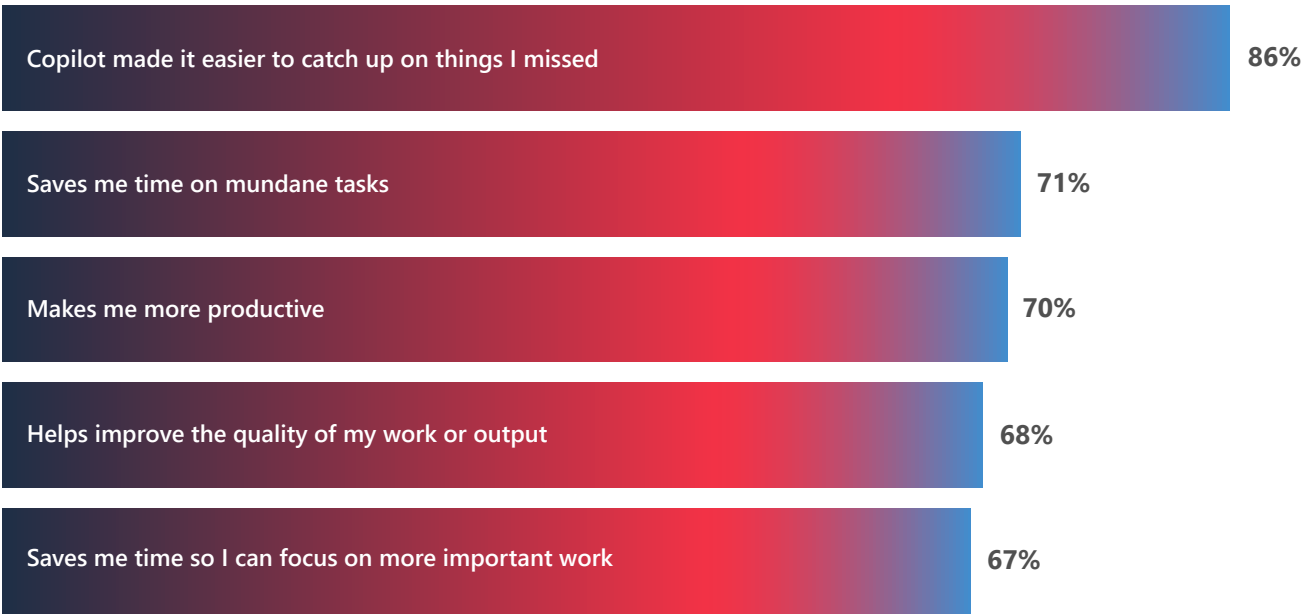
> Our experience has shown that one of the biggest factors in the success of an AI implementation is the culture of the organisation that's implementing it.

Boosting productivity with Copilot

We launched Copilot for Microsoft 365 — our AI-powered productivity tool for work — in 2023. It works alongside other Microsoft 365 apps like Word, Excel, Teams, and PowerPoint to help people focus on the parts of their work that matter most. Here's what some early users said about the impact Copilot had on their day.[2]

Copilot makes people more productive and creative, and saves time

Heres how it breaks down, according to early users

Copilot made it easier to catch up on things I missed	86%
Saves me time on mundane tasks	71%
Makes me more productive	70%
Helps improve the quality of my work or output	68%
Saves me time so I can focus on more important work	67%

[2] **What Can Copilot's Earliest Users Teach Us About Generative AI at Work? Microsoft. November 2023.**

How does AI work in the public sector?

A skill unlocker, not a skill replacer

AI is causing us to rethink what work looks like. The next few years could be similar to the industrial revolution of the Victorian era. But instead of machines taking on the manual work that was previously done by humans, they are now able to perform much more complex cognitive tasks.

We see the benefit of AI as freeing people to focus on the work that's uniquely human. AI is great at many of the repetitive tasks that take us a long time to do and are prone to human error. Things like sifting through unstructured data, transferring data between systems, summarising content, redacting data, and finding patterns in unordered information. It can already perform many of the basic digital tasks that skilled operators would rather not do, like writing up notes after calls and meetings, or finding and fixing simple code bugs.

AI won't replace experts in social care or software, but not every problem requires an expert. It levels the playing field so more people have access to transformative capabilities, and it can relieve the public sector from its long-term skill deficits. For under-resourced organisations, AI could be the step-change they need to become truly digital.

AI making a difference to public sector services

Public sector bodies across the UK are already using AI to improve employee and citizen experiences. Here are just some examples of real organisations tackling their digital debt directly with AI.

Buckinghamshire Council is exploring how **AI-powered assistants can help customer services**. Using Copilot for Microsoft 365 to assist handlers, the council has seen call wrap-up times fall by 2 minutes, which has reduced post-call admin and improved performance. This has helped them provide a better service for citizens, ensuring they have accurate information about their cases and lower waiting times. The ability of Copilot to quickly summarise calls and update back-office systems after a call has released the capacity of call workers and reduced costs. Tony Ellis, Service Director of ICT at Buckinghamshire Council, has been hearing a consistent message from staff that Copilot improves the way they work and has generated excitement about what can be achieved with AI. The council's AI Governance Board is already working on turning that excitement into carefully considered business benefits.

> We see the benefit of AI as freeing people to focus on the work that's uniquely human.
>
> AI won't replace experts in social care or software, but not every problem requires an expert.

Adult and children's social care services are under extreme pressure in the UK, in no small part due to spending cuts. But staffing shortages and increasing demand also play a role. This is a complex and pressing issue, and the solutions are multi-faceted, but AI can alleviate the strain — even in seemingly small ways.

Organisations can use our AI tools to record children's social care assessments and automatically generate transcripts. A social worker can then review this and record the information into the social care system. It would remove masses of paperwork from the workload of overburdened social workers and allow them to spend more time doing what they do best.

Many authorities spend significant amounts on **translation services** so all residents can access their services. Haringey Council has used AI to quickly and accurately translate documents for citizens. Using this service, a 10-page document costs around 21p to translate compared with £120, the typical cost of translating the same sized document without the use of AI.[3] This is a huge cost saving and enables organisations to deliver a translated version almost instantly. These solutions help the authority provide a fast, accessible, user-friendly service.

For typical translation costs using Microsoft
Azure AI Translator, please see:

[3] **Azure AI Translator pricing**

Building skills for an AI-enabled public sector

Learning to use AI responsibly

It's one thing to say that you're committed to responsible AI, but large technology companies like Microsoft need to lead by example, so that our customers can have confidence in the systems they build with us.

All our work in this area is based on decades of research and governed by six key principles. These ensure that AI systems are responsible by design and have a positive impact on society.

1

AI systems should be designed to treat all individuals **fairly**, without bias or discrimination.

2

AI systems should be **reliable and safe**, with built-in mechanisms to prevent errors and minimize harm.

3

The creators of AI tools and the developers who use them should be **accountable** for their systems.

4

AI systems should respect individuals' **privacy and data security**.

5

AI systems should be designed to be **accessible and usable by everyone**, including individuals with disabilities.

6

AI systems should be **transparent and explainable**, with clear documentation of their functionality and decision-making processes.

AI will change the world. By using it responsibly, we can ensure that change is positive. Any skilling initiatives should adhere to these principles closely, and responsible AI should be a foundational module for all practitioners.

Find out more about our commitment to responsible AI.
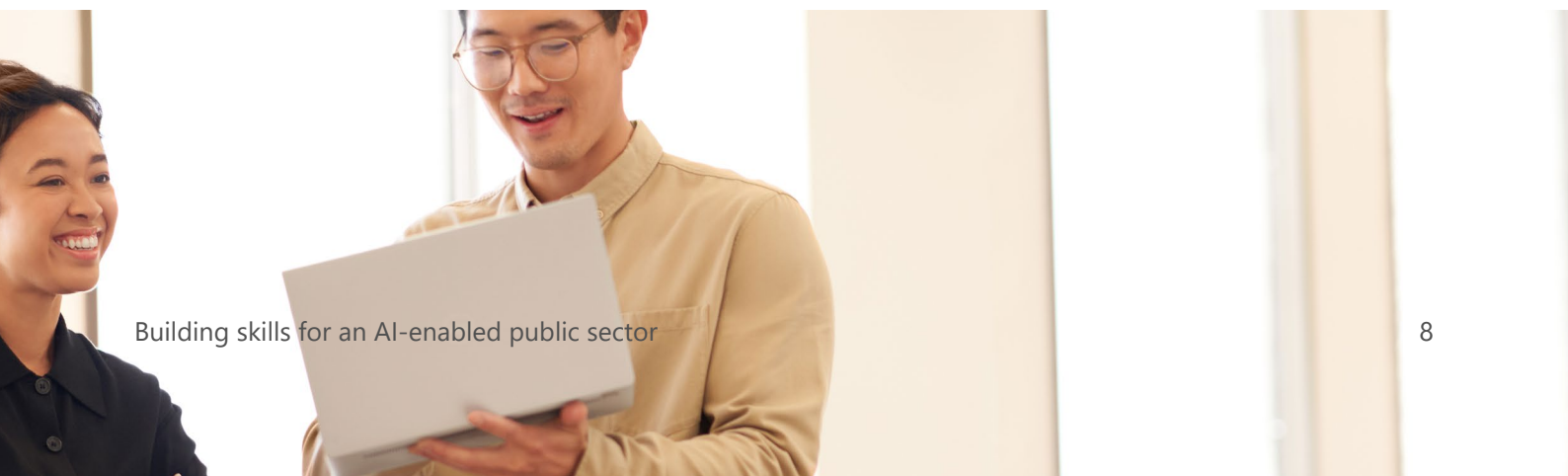
How can we improve AI skills today?

Skilling for AI is an organisation-wide exercise — so it is important to consider the range of competencies you will need to succeed across your organisation. These range from prompting skills for more casual users, through the engineering skills required for technical AI users, right up to the senior managers, who are looking at AI from a strategic, ethical, and business standpoint.

Government leaders can do their part by fostering a culture of learning. While partners like Microsoft can do our part by providing the pathways needed for learners to reach their goals and support you on your AI journey.

> "In the face of growing complex challenges, upskilling workers and helping councils to maximise AI in support of place-based leadership and change has never been more vital. Using AI in responsible ways enables local authorities, empowers frontline workers and enhances service delivery through a range of benefits such as:
>
> • Enhanced efficiency by automating tasks and reducing errors.
>
> • Better decision-making processes by providing insights based on data analysis.
>
> • Improved local planning models that support sustainable communities."
>
> **Mark Lumley**
> President, Socitm

[4] **Boost for UK AI as Microsoft unveils £2.5 billion investment., GOV.UK – November 2023.**

[5] **Getting ready for the AI economy: Microsoft's commitment to digital skills in the UK. October 2023., Microsoft – October 2023.**

Our skills commitment

We know how important it is that public sector employees use the new AI technologies that are emerging. But we also know the barriers that government faces in making this a reality.

As businesses and the public sector begin to embrace the opportunities that AI presents, we're working hard to build the infrastructure required and train people to deliver it responsibly. To help the UK cement its place as an AI superpower, we are investing £2.5 billion to expand AI data centre capacity.[4] Additionally, we are aiming to reach 1 million people in the UK with skilling programs to help them start, or move into, a career in AI.[5]

> Microsoft invest £2.5 billion to expand AI data centre capacity

AI capabilities in three core areas:

• **Building AI fluency:** We want current and future workers in government to have a fundamental understanding of what AI can offer and how it can be deployed effectively and responsibly.

• **Developing AI technical skills:** Those who understand the fundamentals of AI should have the opportunity to develop their technical skills and achieve certification through free online modules.

• **Supporting organisational transformation for AI:** Meaningful change starts in the top, so leaders should know how to manage digital transformation and the role that AI can play.

Your leadership drives a culture of learning

We work with partners to provide AI learning resources for public sector organisations, but these work best when used as part of a proper skilling strategy. Learning is an ongoing process, and organisations should acknowledge that they will need to stay updated on AI as its capabilities evolve.

Leadership commitment is crucial in driving any skilling initiative. Your leadership team should actively participate in the training program, demonstrating their dedication to embracing AI and encouraging their teams to do the same. This visible support will instil confidence in employees and foster a sense of shared responsibility in skilling.

When developing learning strategies with public sector organisations, we work to some guiding principles.

1

Learning is now a permanent requirement of work. Make time and space for individuals to learn and help them feel confident in prioritising their skills.

2

Recognize that learning isn't just about going on a course. People learn at multiple points through the day.

3

Listen generously and encourage constructive criticism. Consider all feedback as an opportunity to grow as a leadership team.

4

Look for the impact. Success isn't about how many people go on a course, but how many people apply these skills in the workplace to drive impact.

5

Adopt a listening rhythm and report back openly.

6

Consider how your own **internal tools and processes** encourage the behaviour you want to see.

To address individual learning needs, consider conducting skill assessments to identify your current gaps. You can then work to personalised learning paths, guiding employees through the relevant resources for their needs.
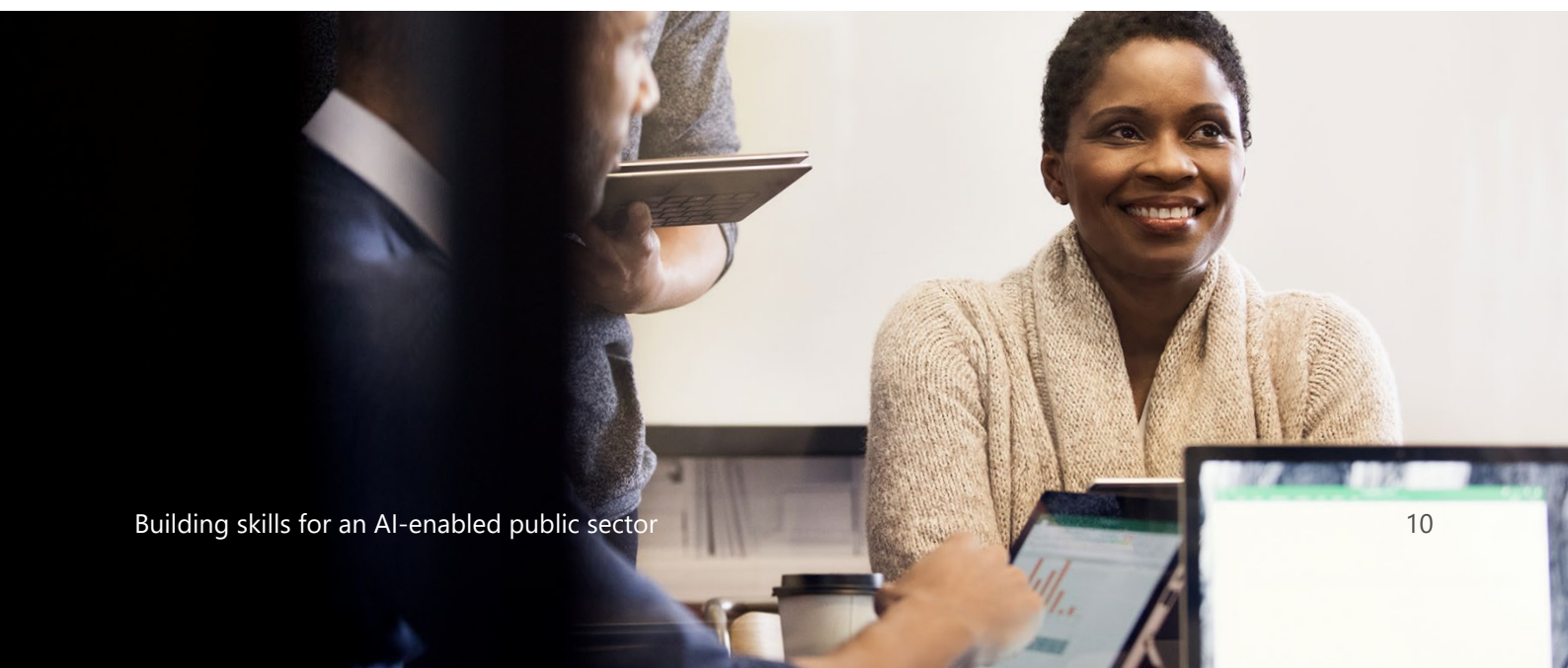
Empowering employees with AI at Scottish Water

Scottish Water is Scotland's publicly owned water company. Andrea McCheyne, Copilot Programme Manager at Scottish Water explains how teams were encouraged to find ways to work with AI on their own terms.

"We wanted to carve out some time for employees to experiment with Copilot for Microsoft 365 and see how the technology can work for them. It has the ability to empower information workers and help them save time on administrative tasks so they can focus on the value-added activities. So, we encouraged users to fully leverage the capabilities and transform their everyday processes.

Respecting the perceived stigma around generative AI and to prioritise time to value, our approach allowed users to volunteer to be a part of the pilot. By asking users to follow a set of self-managed regular feedback rules, we created a positive feedback cycle that helped us find high value use cases and determine the parts of the organisation that would benefit the most.

We would highly recommend an adoption and change strategy that includes user upskilling for any organisation looking to adopt Copilot for Microsoft 365. By empowering employees with the skills and knowledge, organisations can maximise the benefits of the technologies while fostering a culture of continuous learning – it's a win-win for everyone."

Andrea McCheyne,
Copilot Programme Manager
at Scottish Water

Your customisable AI learning guide

To turn our customer learning goals into reality, we have developed a specific AI Learning Companion which is free to access. This allows any learner to develop their skills AI in ways that suit their role, their goals, and their preferred learning methods. The companion brings together documentation, video, virtual training days, certification content, and self-study modules from across the Microsoft and LinkedIn learning libraries.

**Explore skilling opportunities with the AI Learning Companion.**

How leaders can use AI to improve AI

Becoming a high-performing digital organisation requires detailed knowledge of current skill gaps and the ability to deliver tailored training to each employee. Appropriately, organisations can now use AI tools to do just that.

Viva Skills is a new set of capabilities for the Microsoft Viva employee experience platform, which works alongside popular everyday apps like Word, Excel, Teams, and PowerPoint. It learns how employees use these tools and builds up a picture of an organisation's skill gaps. Leaders can then make decisions about learning pathways, and even provide in-app learning while people are using their Microsoft 365 tools.

Learn more about Skills in Viva
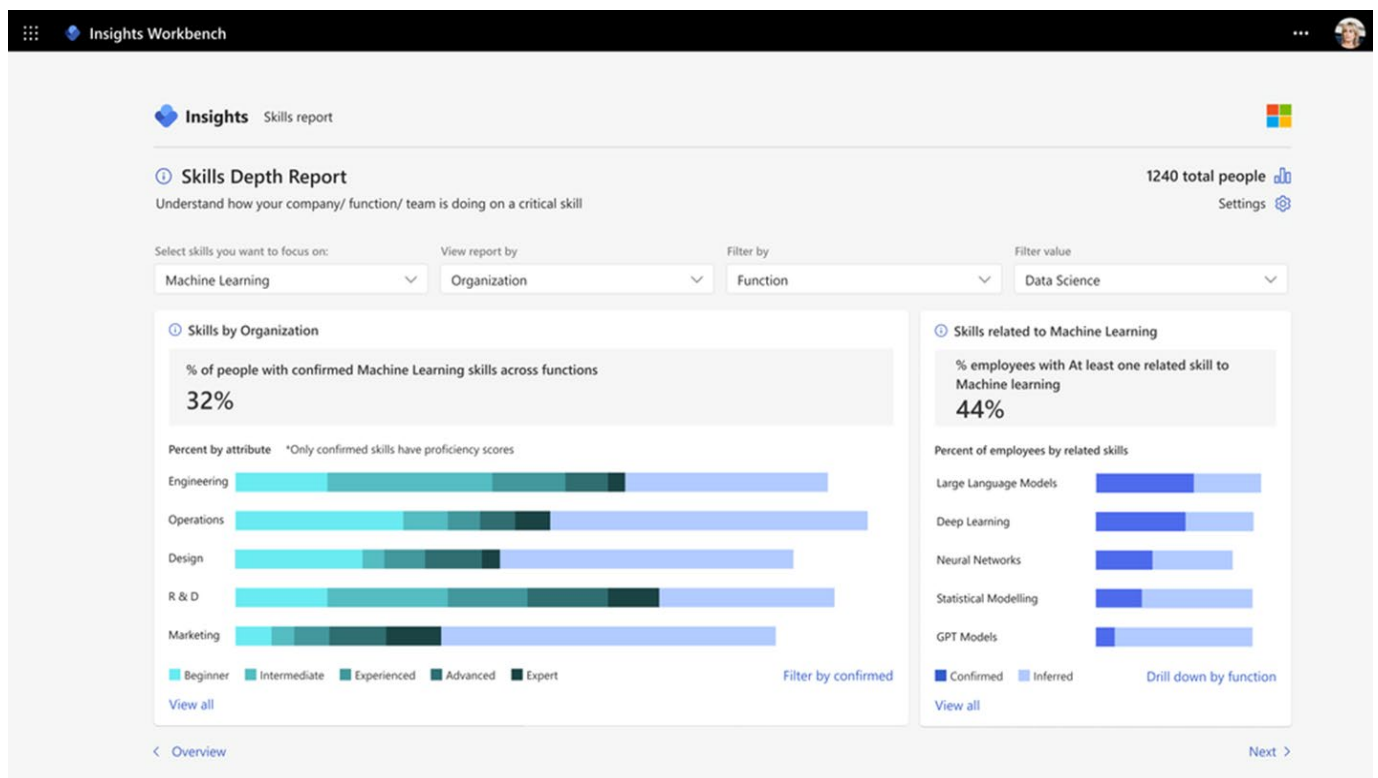
The power's in your hands

We all recognise the transformative potential of AI across the public sector. Now is your chance to make that potential a reality.

If you'd like help developing an AI learning strategy for your organisation, your local Microsoft team would be happy to help.