

DATA | AI | CLOUD | CYBERSECURITY

# DIGITAL

# EDGE

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**DAVID  
HAYES**

*Chief Data Officer at  
The Open University on  
Digital Transformation in  
Higher Education*

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# EDITORS NOTES

Welcome to Issue 6 of Digital Edge Magazine—our festive edition as we close out another year in data, digital and AI.

This issue brings together some of the most influential voices in the sector. We're pleased to feature David Hayes, Chief Data Officer at The Open University, whose work is transforming how the UK's largest university understands and supports its distance learners. With AI reshaping education at pace, David's perspective on data leadership in this space is particularly relevant.

We also profile Kinnari Ladha, award-winning CDO and winner of our Digital Edge People & Culture in Data & AI Special Recognition Award. Kinnari's approach to leadership demonstrates that successful transformation requires more than technology—it needs people who lead with clarity and purpose.

On our "Our Voice" platform, we spotlight Becky Lodge, whose work with Startup Disruptors and advocacy for women and neurodiverse founders is driving tangible change across the UK innovation landscape. Becky's approach is practical and direct—identifying barriers and removing them.

Alongside these interviews, you'll find all the regular features, Living on the Edge – A festive look at the trends shaping tech and society. Top 10 – The innovations and ideas that defined 2024. Behind the Solutions – Featuring Greg Freeman and the team at Data Literacy Academy. Global Events – The biggest moments from this year's tech calendar.

Whether you're planning for 2025, taking a well-earned break, or somewhere in between, I hope this issue offers something useful as you look ahead.

Thank you to our contributors, community and partners—and to you, our readers, for being part of Digital Edge.

Happy holidays from all of us at the magazine!

**James Pepper**  
*Editor-in-Chief, Digital Edge Magazine*

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# DIGITAL EDGE

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Exclusive Interview:  
**DAVID HAYES**  
CDO, The Open University



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Exclusive Interview:  
**KINNARI LUDHA**  
Chief Data Officer & Data Transformation Leader

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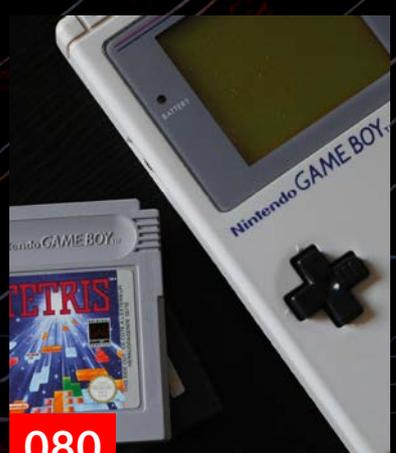
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**David Hayes**

CDO, The Open University



## Data plays a huge part in what we're doing at The Open University

David is leading The Open University's data function at an important juncture when society is requiring more flexibility and AI could support them to respond to student needs with greater ease. He talks to us about his role in this organisation where data is how they first get to know their distance learners.

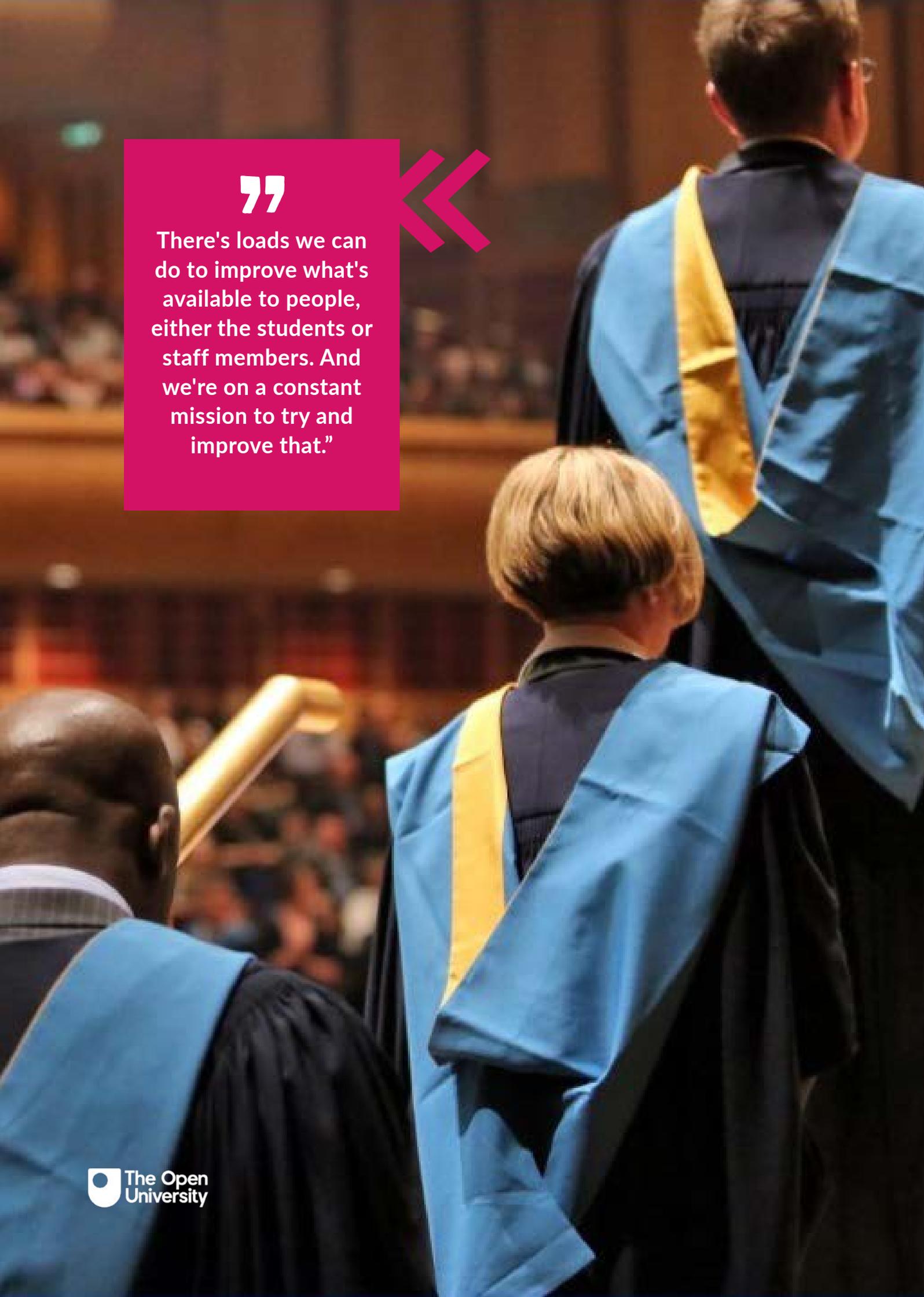
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There's loads we can do to improve what's available to people, either the students or staff members. And we're on a constant mission to try and improve that.”

## A VARIED CAREER

Like many who have risen to the rank of CDO, David didn't start in a data role but rather grew into it. He explains, "I started work in the water industry as a finance graduate and that probably sent me into the world of analytics."

After a brief stint in telecoms, David moved into banking. It was while he was at Abbey National that their acquisition by Santander saw David's career fortuitously transition into data.

He'd worked in data-heavy accounting roles before moving across to be an analyst in an operational area. Santander then needed people with a deep understanding of the organisation to support data migration.

David picks up the story, "They created a central team called Data Quality and Structural Systems, which was very much a Santander model. And we found ourselves being the team that were responsible for making sure that, when data migrated from Abbey National systems to the Santander platforms, it was all OK.

"That needed really strong finance skills. It needed somebody who understood data and could manipulate it, and it needed somebody who understood the organisation."

David had the skills and expertise that fitted those requirements, "That got me into data. We migrated millions and millions of records from many systems into one in lots of cases, and then we needed to control all of that data once it was in.

"The Santander model meant that you had to put much more emphasis in controlling your systems and your data. So, we ended up leading teams doing that. Then the banking crisis hit and banks evolved to need a CDO role. It started very much as a governance role – so, can we establish governance over our data, over the provenance, over the quality, over the way we report, etcetera?. I was leading the Data Quality and Structural Systems team at that time and was in the fortunate position to be invited to take the role of CDO.

"I grew the CDO role at Santander, and whilst dealing with the regulatory reporting and governance challenges all banks faced, the world of data lakes and data science exploded. We began to build a more end-to-end data function in Santander and I left quite a large team there in 2019 to move to The Open University."

Education is important to David. He'd considered teaching for a career and coaches children's basketball and football in his spare time. So, this move fitted with his personal area of interest – and this particular role was appealing too.

**“WHAT THE OU DOES  
AND WHY THE OU  
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OPPORTUNITY TO MISS.”**

While there was already a data presence in the organisation, David tells us, "We've been able to grow quite a significant data function here at the OU, initially through consolidating some existing teams, making great use of our partner Infosys to support us to build capability and capacity, and then by gradually bringing in new skills and experience from outside the organisation as the demand for data and AI has increased and we have delivered more and more.

At the end of the day, when it comes to delivering with data and AI it's all about the people and the teams, that was true in Santander and it is true today at the OU."

## DATA TO DELIVER ON A MISSION

The Open University has a mission to make learning accessible to all. With almost 200,000 students aged from 18 to 80 and over from all 4 nations of the UK and beyond, they're the largest university in the UK by student body. As a distance learning provider one of the unique features of the OU is that all of their teaching materials are available online and years of pedagogical experience is captured in those materials

David points out, "This means that data plays a huge part in what we're doing. The CDO would say this, but I tend to say that we know our students through the data they leave with us.

"So, we've been using that in the prospect to registration, to completion phase of the student's journey for some time. We track data all the way through that lifecycle as best we can. We can see where they're engaging.

"There's loads of room for improvement in that journey, but we use data throughout typically to support the student, but more often to support the people who are helping the student – whether that's the teacher, or the lecturer, or the support staff that are in our contact centres."

And there are a lot of these. Around 10,000 people work at the university, with about half of that number in teaching roles and half organising and helping the university.

Another important factor here is that a lot of students choose to study at The Open University (The OU) because it is, as its name suggests, more open to them – because they're able to study part time around work or other commitments or because of disability, for example.

David continues, "In the region of 30% of our students are registered with disability, so they're a really, really significant population of our university. We provide all kinds of learning adjustments and there's a very human touch to that. We make available a lot of humans who can speak to people, but we try to support those people as much as we can with information, systems, tools and processes to know where the student is in their learning journey."

He points out that all this work is ongoing, "There's loads we can do to improve what's available to people, either the students or staff members. And we're on a constant mission to try and improve that."

## THE POSSIBILITIES TO PERSONALISE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

As the conversation turns to AI, David tells us that at the moment, The OU is using AI behind the scenes to identify students who are at risk and then prompting teaching staff to intervene.

David explains, "We provide information into our teaching staff using a tool developed in the data teams that we call the Student Progress Tool, so they would know, for example, that someone is maybe at risk and needs a bit of support, and that might be because there's certain flags that we've seen in their engagement with the online learning, or it doesn't look like someone is going to submit their assessment. We drive that information into our teaching staff and we've got some great staff who make sure that they take the opportunity to contact students.

"So that's where we're currently focused. We believe that there's a great opportunity to go much further with that level of personalised support to make that information more visible to students themselves as well, so they can start to be prompted more directly or very carefully – because we want to be really careful not to prompt students in the wrong direction. There is quite a bit of testing that's needed for that."

Looking a little further ahead, "We believe that it's going to be possible at some point in the future to personalise more the way students engage with material directly. So, two people could be engaging with the same course, and maybe one person could engage with it in a different way to another, but both learn the same thing."

"We provide different materials today. So, you might get a video or some text, as a simple example, but you can work through the flow of the course today. We see a future whereby someone's learning preferences could influence the kinds of things that they look at and use, and then we could be using more personalised tools to give you the ability to test yourself as you go more than we do today.

"So, using AI in that sense to both flex the materials you're seeing and the tools you're using to test yourself, but not to replace the important role of the teacher in that space. And not to undermine the pedagogy and the content."

David explains that the art of learning is contained within the university's material because of all the years of "learning about learning, and learning about



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# Your Story for AI-D

AI is no longer a distant promise, it is the competitive battleground of today. Yet most organisations remain stuck in pilots, watching value slip through their fingers. According to MIT's State of AI in Business 2025 report, enterprises have invested billions in Generative AI, but 95% have seen no measurable return. Adoption may be high, but genuine transformation remains rare.

Partnering with Innova-tsn ensures your organisation is equipped to break through that barrier and become part of the 5% of companies already realising tangible value from AI.

## **THE MAIN OBSTACLES PREVENTING REAL IMPACT ARE:**

- *Lack of adaptive capabilities: Many solutions lack memory, learning, and personalisation. They do not retain context or adapt to evolving workflows, limiting their effectiveness in critical processes.*
- *Skills gap and fragmented adoption: Organisations launch pilots without a clear roadmap, while enterprise solutions fail due to complexity and misalignment.*
- *Generic tools versus tailored solutions: Off-the-shelf tools promise speed but rarely integrate effectively into real operational environments.*
- *Governance: Without clear governance, KPIs, and accountable ownership, initiatives lose credibility and become isolated experiments.*
- *These barriers differ by industry, culture, and digital maturity. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.*

"Innova-tsn is the strategic partner that ensures AI-driven success by adapting the approach to the unique reality of each organisation".

# Strategic Partner

# Driven Success

## 1. OVERCOMING THE ABSENCE OF ADAPTIVE CAPABILITIES

Agentic AI provides the paradigm required for complex use cases that demand flexibility, personalised experiences, and autonomous task execution. Innova-tsn is collaborating with Spain's Central Banking Authority on a solution that combines a conversational agent with evaluator agents to automatically and dynamically assess responses to public tenders, going beyond static systems towards adaptive architectures capable of learning and orchestrating processes autonomously.

## 2. CLOSING THE SKILLS GAP AND ADDRESSING FRAGMENTED ADOPTION

The journey begins with AI literacy, creating a strong foundation of knowledge across the organisation. Establishing a Centre of Excellence is a proven best practice, aligning priorities and accelerating transformation.

*"Identifying, defining, and prioritising business needs is critical to building a roadmap that drives transformation. Our Centre of Excellence aligns priorities while equipping members with the skills to deliver and scale AI solutions"* notes the Head of AI at a leading UK retailer

## 3. GENERIC TOOLS VS. TAILORED SOLUTIONS

The key to success lies in identifying the right processes, often backend workflows with the greatest potential return. It also depends on user experience and seamless integration into existing tools and workflows. Waiting for the "perfect model"

only delays progress; operationalising solutions early accelerates value creation. In this context, tailored solutions consistently outperform generic tools.

At The Open University, Innova-tsn supported the operationalisation of a solution using AI to streamline advisor support for student queries, embedding it into existing processes to achieve measurable efficiency.

*"By integrating AI into our student support workflows, we moved from pilots to production, delivering tangible ROI and operational excellence"* highlights the Director of Student Analytics at The Open University.

## 4. GOVERNANCE

Highly regulated sectors with low digital maturity and high reputational risk often face significant inertia. Establishing governance frameworks and embedding best practices throughout the AI lifecycle is essential. This is the work Innova-tsn is carrying out with the Spanish Financial Conduct Authority, creating governance structures that ensure transparency, accountability, and trust while enabling innovation without compromising compliance.

The next 18 months will determine which organisations convert AI into a sustainable competitive advantage. Innova-tsn enables success beyond providing solutions: we are your trusted partner in harnessing the power of AI. Together, we navigate your unique challenges, adapt the roadmap to your organisation, and turn ambition into transformative, lasting success.

*Stop piloting. Start transforming with Innova-tsn.*



online learning” that they have, “Because we have this history of pedagogy and we've got units across the organisation who really know what it means to teach online at distance using materials as well as the teaching methods that we have. The opportunity we see in front of us now is to try and answer the questions ‘How do we translate that using AI? How do we use AI to augment that and improve it whilst retaining the richness of the model we've got?’”

These approaches could play a part in keeping busy students actively involved in their learning journey. Drop-out rates for part-time distance learning are higher than in most other areas of learning, David tells us. Many of The OU's students are working, and some are in periods of their lives where there are big life changes such as moving jobs or home, getting married or having children, or other factors which could disrupt their learning. This is why they want to make continuing to study as easy as possible, “There's lots we can do. We believe that encouraging engagement is probably the most important thing.

“Anything that we can do to encourage people to be more engaged in material, whether that's changing the material, changing how we deliver the material, or prompting people to do things at certain times, we're interested in trying those things out carefully.”

### TRIALLING AI IN COURSE CREATION AND DELIVERY

While they're yet to roll out AI in assisting teaching or content creation, they are currently trying both of these. The university's OpenLearn offering supports this, “OpenLearn is a free learning resources website and we have a huge number of learners that use OpenLearn for free. So, it allows us also to test some things out.

One of the great parts of working at the OU is that we have access to world leading experts in educational technology and pedagogy. The Knowledge Media Institute (KMI) and the Institute of Educational Technology (IET), both OU organisations, have together developed some prototypes for AI assisted learning and using their expertise we have been trying out AI-assisted learning in Open Learn. There's some early positive engagement results coming from that – students seem to value it on the whole and it seems to drive more engagement, which is what we would expect.”

David points out that there are some competitors outside the UK that are already offering augmented teaching using AI, but this is something The OU is approaching with care, “We're on a path to try to get that into our learning environments and there's every opinion about that, so we're going very, very carefully.



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**Our students are going to be using AI in their future and we have an obligation to make sure they understand that and an obligation not to ignore it.**

Naturally there are some very bright people here, so there's some really well thought through arguments. You've got every opinion, from those who think that AI should not be considered at all and banned, to those who feel we should be embracing AI and everybody should be doing it now.

In 2025 the OU appointed a new Vice Chancellor, David Phoenix, and we are currently developing a revised strategy for the future. The foreground to that strategy remains the mission and purpose of the OU, and it is really clear that AI will play a really important role in that future, both as part of what we do and a major external influence in why we need to do certain things.

We're active now in the AI space and because the pace of change is going so fast, who knows where we'll be in five years' time, let alone wait another 10 years? So, we need to embrace it, we need to run with it and we need to do it smartly. And I think that's where the university is setting itself up now. So that, for me, is really good.

“We believe AI is something we need to do. But we are necessarily going carefully with that. We neither want to undermine students' futures by not having it or undermine the quality of what we do, so we've got to get that mix right.

“In parallel to trialling AI assisted learning, we're trialling the use of AI so that we can fast track the creation of content, but we don't want to take the academic rigour out of the content we create. AI still has a reputation for hallucinations, making stuff up and oversimplifying things. So, we're naturally being very careful with that. We have a rich history of content we can use as trusted input to the AI we create and because of that we are confident that it will be possible to put the guardrails we need around any AI created content to ensure it works well for our students.

David thinks it's really important to find the right balance between AI-driven outcomes and human connection in their learning environment which values empathy and academic guidance.

“We're learning through trialling the different AI ideas that we've got. Everyone's learning about AI in parallel. What everybody's saying, and we couldn't agree more with this, is the importance of keeping a human in all the way through the process is so, so vital. AI can shortcut a whole host of amazing things that I think can make our working lives a lot easier, but it doesn't replace humans. It doesn't do some things that humans do, and I think that's really important to hold on to.”

## PUTTING AI ON THE CURRICULUM

As well as the potential to support content creation and student learning, The OU wants to embed AI in their curriculum, “Teaching about AI in the context of the subject you're learning, whether it's History or Classics or Psychology or French or whatever it might be.

“Our students are going to be using AI in their future and we have an obligation to make sure they understand that and an obligation not to ignore it. But we also have an obligation to teach about it responsibly and do things ethically.”

We wondered how AI could or should be used in student assessments? “We take 3 approaches. One, you can use AI in this assessment. Two, you could use AI in assessment. Three, you mustn't use AI in this assessment.

“There's been a move for a very long time now to make assessment much more authentic and that might mean, for example, producing a video or doing some kind of group work – doing something that maybe is a bit more real-world like. The advent of generative AI is fast tracking that a little bit, partly driven by the fear of cheating, but more importantly driven by the reality that it is part of everyday life, so there's even more reason to make assessment even more authentic.”

While David transparently admits that he'd like to do more with upskilling people across the organisation in terms of AI capability, work is underway in this area. He gives kudos to the university's central academic teams, who are playing a big part in this, “They're doing a huge amount of work to improve AI literacy amongst the academic areas of the university. They've run events to try and provide first of all understanding, then learning, then guidance on how you can embed AI in learning, teaching and assessment.

As an example, “They ran a two-week ‘Faiesta’ session in September this year, where many of us – were talking about ‘What are we doing about AI in the organisation? How do we put our arms around it? What can you do in your role? How can you take it forward? Why do we think this matters? Ask us questions’ and so on. These were really good sessions.”

He points out that working with the wider teams across the organisation is key for the digital teams at The OU, “We don't deliver things in isolation. Typically, if you're going to deliver an application with AI in it, it takes all kinds of skills to do that, not just data people.

“There are such inspirational people around the university, so the ability for us to collaborate and get stuff done, I think is the crucial part. Without that, nothing happens.”

## THINKING BEYOND STUDYING

Looking beyond the learner experience, The OU have been using more traditional AI in their marketing and prospect funnel for some time. This enables them to identify cohorts of prospects or students they could reach out to and prompt during the signing up or re-registering process.

They also have internal use cases associated with the use of generative AI to make policies, procedures and processes quicker and easier to engage with.

David continues, “We're experimenting with Microsoft Copilot like many organisations are to see what we can do in those spaces. And we have relationships with other providers who are now embedding AI more natively in the things they do. So, for example, the HR team are looking at embedding AI in our HR systems to help just make those processes a bit slicker than they are today.

“And we're looking at a platform approach to Agentic AI as well. We're just at the start of the pilot approach of testing something out in that space that we think will help us to create, manage and control Agentic AI. We think there's a host of areas where we can improve our existing process using agents, but we've got a huge learning journey to go on in that space, like many organisations. We're trying out a platform that's going to help us put some control and governance around that.”

## PUTTING AI PRINCIPLES IN PLACE

With so much work ongoing, we wondered about the frameworks or governance models The OU is guided by in their approach to responsible AI. As they're also registered in Ireland, the EUAI Act is relevant to them and, David points out, forms a very good basis for what they should do as an organisation.

He tells us, “We've established a responsible AI policy which is signed off across the organisation. We're establishing guidance for staff members and students that's been published. And we're in the middle now of operationalising governance models that will essentially allow us to do a risk assessment of that.

Working with Kainos, our digital partner, we have trialled an approach they had created to run an early and ongoing risk assessment for AI solutions that puts the emphasis on early engagement and practical action to address risks.

“So, if someone's got an idea they want to do something with AI – they want to build an application or something – we'll do an early risk assessment using our responsible AI policy and the guidelines.”

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INSPIRATIONAL PEOPLE  
AROUND THE UNIVERSITY,  
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“The idea of the early risk assessment is so we say yes or no to this case upfront? And if we do, how do we help the owner of that case to fully understand the risk of the things that they are developing so they can mitigate them? Then what we will do is establish a process whereby people can illustrate how they've mitigated the risks associated with the AI.

“There's always going to be trade-offs and there's going to be challenges. There's a lot of grey, so there are some things that are just a no. There are some things that are going to be an easy yes. But most things are going to be in the middle of those two things. So, the management

of risk all the way through is really important.”

While they've been working through their approach, as a learning piece The OU has gone live with a generative AI solution to support staff with responding to student emails – and it's been teaching them a lot.

We're really proud of the fact that we have managed to get a Generative AI tool into production, especially when you hear the often-quoted statistic from MIT that only 5% of GenAI solutions make it to production. It was a real team effort, with great support and inspiration from our external partner Innova, working with teams across the OU to be user driven from the start, and always with the human in the loop. We know it is not perfect and we are embracing that because we also know that without going into production we would have missed a huge amount of learning about both what it takes to get a solution built and deployed and what it means to run a safe solution in production.

David shares, “It took us longer to create and go live with a solution for that because the governance wasn't in place, because the policy wasn't established, because we hadn't gone through that process. And therefore, we did lots of risk assessments, lots of pausing and reflecting, and then we added in lots and lots of checkpoints just to make sure it was OK.

“We're very hopeful that by having a clearer responsible policy and a clearer framework for going live with it, actually it's going to speed things up in two ways: we'll just not do some things, which is good, and then we'll be able to move forward faster in a clear path with the stuff we're running.”

#### **LOOKING AHEAD AT WHAT'S POSSIBLE**

While there's already a lot happening, there's more to come for The Open University – with the priorities for embedding data and AI capabilities in the coming years focused on what they can do to improve students chances of succeeding.

The OU wants to embed AI in what they teach, how they teach and how they operate, David tells us, “We'll try to drive up efficiency, improve how we teach and improve what we teach using AI. Those will all sit as priorities for us.

“If you jumped to the three outcomes we're looking for, we really want to improve student outcomes, we want to give students a higher chance of succeeding and we want to try and narrow the gaps that still exist between

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## Strengthening the Digital Experience for a Global Learning Community

### ● Modernising a Mature Digital Ecosystem

The Open University has delivered digital learning at scale for decades. However, legacy platforms required modernisation to meet current expectations for usability, reliability, and scalability. Kainos is supporting the upgrade of key components across OU's digital estate, ensuring systems can adapt to changing pedagogical needs and technological standards whilst maintaining service continuity for a large, diverse user base.

### ● Collaboration and Capability Building

Kainos operates as an integrated partner rather than a traditional supplier. We work in fully blended teams with OU colleagues, using user-centred design principles to transform digital touchpoints for learners. This approach delivers immediate improvements to the student experience whilst building internal capability within OU's technology teams. The focus is on sustainable change: equipping OU with the skills and practices to maintain momentum beyond individual project cycles.

### ● Respo Innovati AI and D

The partnership structured exploration of artificial intelligence through joint hardware and discovery s... The objective is to identify opportunities which can simplify administrative processes and personalise learning pathways, diminishing the need for connection centres, educational management, governance and implementation, guide all experiential ensuring innovation align with OU's various regulatory requirements.

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Since 2024, Kainos has partnered with The Open University (OU) as their strategic digital transformation partner, supporting the evolution of systems and experiences for over 200,000 learners, faculty, and staff.

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Kainos is supporting OU's cloud strategy to increase operational agility and system resilience. We have worked collaboratively with the OU to develop their cloud platform and move their first services to the cloud, including New Student Home, a student's virtual campus. As one of the first capabilities delivered on the new cloud platform, it continues to be essential to supporting the OU's global learner base. The modern cloud architecture reduced the technical barriers to access and enables the OU to scale new and existing services efficiently as demand fluctuates.

The partnership is delivering more intuitive digital services for students and staff, strengthening OU's position as a global leader in distance learning. Rather than a fixed endpoint, the work establishes foundations for ongoing digital evolution - ensuring OU's technology estate can respond to future challenges in higher education while maintaining the accessibility and flexibility that define the institution.

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different areas of society. There's a lot of thought that AI might widen those gaps because of digital divides, however I think we take the view that AI could help us to narrow those gaps, because it's easier to reach the student directly if you can give them easy-to-use tools.

“Obviously we also want to drive up the efficiency of the university – spend more of our hard earned money on teaching people rather than administering things. And we also believe that AI can continue to support us to maintain really high standards of education, so high quality research could be supported using AI, with AI, and about AI. We think that there's a lot we can do in that space.”

**“SOCIETY IS  
CONSISTENTLY LOOKING  
FOR MORE EASE OF  
LEARNING – LEARNING  
WHEN AND WHERE I  
WANT IT, HOP ON, HOP  
OFF, MAKE IT RELEVANT  
TO ME NOW.”**

### **THE FUTURE OF AI IN HE?**

Looking more broadly at how David sees data and AI may shape the future of Higher Education – particularly for part-time, remote learners – he thinks that significant change is ahead, “It's definitely going to reshape the sector. It's definitely reshaping learning. Students are already using AI in their learning and that's, I think, broadly a good thing. What we need to be good at is teaching them how to do that safely and critically, so they are equipped for a confident future with AI. I think it can help us reach more students and help them to be more successful, and I think it can help us be more efficient in the way we do things.”

When it comes to personalisation with AI, he sees that as being dependent on an organisation having the ability to get good data from the student that they're happy to provide because they trust the organisation with it, “We've got to be really good at collecting and being trusted with data. And then we've got to be really good at how we use students' data transparently and ethically back with them as well. I think that's going to be important for all universities across the sector.”

He thinks a wider trend of wanting flexibility is another relevant factor, “Society is consistently looking for more ease of learning – learning when and where I want it, hop on, hop off, make it relevant to me now.”

Add to this the importance of having really up-to-date content for students and that creates a challenge, “AI could really help in that space. I think it's quite possibly transformative. But it's transformative because society is transforming to be much more flexible and we need to be as ahead of that as we possibly can to provide what students really need.”

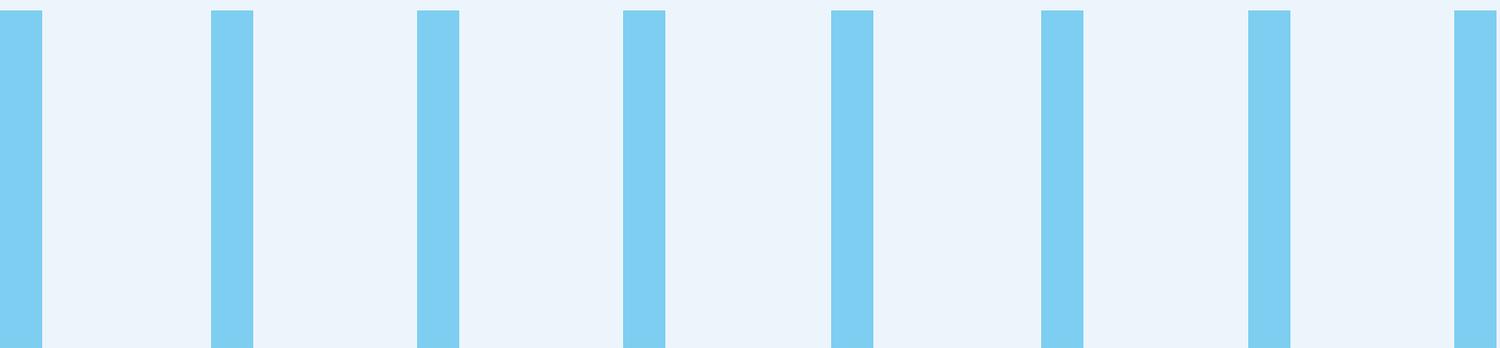
We wondered how hard it is for organisations of this scale and in this sector to plan for the future when technology is changing fast? It doesn't seem to faze David, “I find that really exciting. The idea that we would be in a static world: I find that would be a little bit dull. I like the change. I like the provocation that AI brings. I like the opportunity.

“The possibilities of what we can do with data and now with AI are huge. The challenge is getting that right and making it work. And, you know, we've had a pretty good few years trying to do things with data and AI. I'm pretty confident we can do a lot more as well.



# Enterprise AI, Realized

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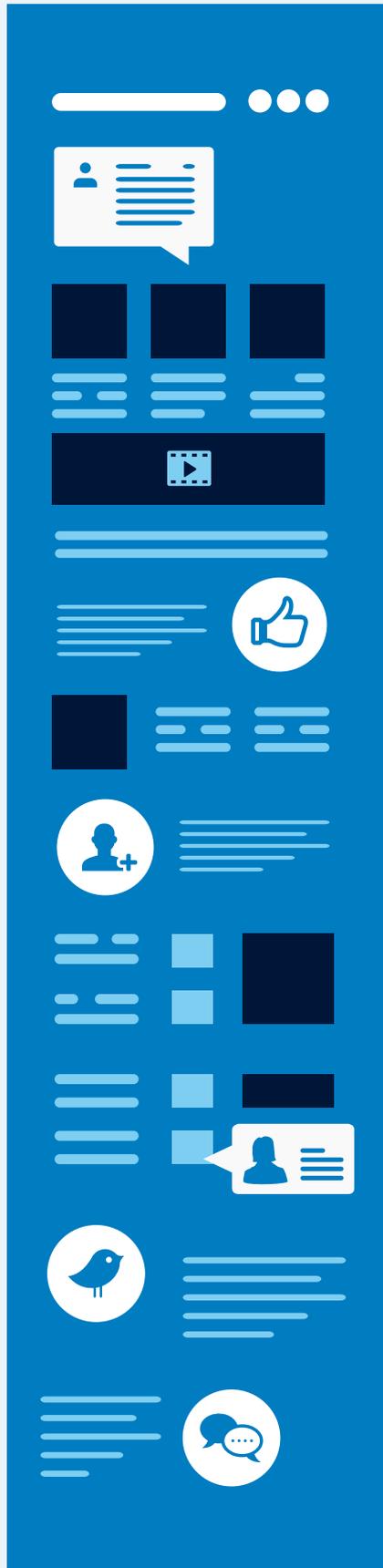
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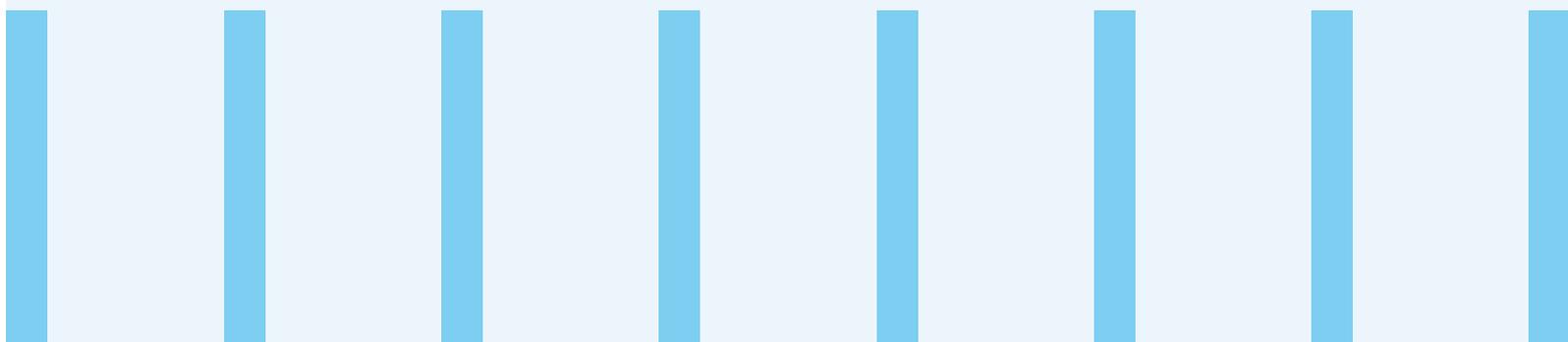


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- Dramatic reductions in manual effort and operational friction.
- Faster, more accurate decisionmaking across business and IT.
- Enhanced agility and resilience to meet shifting market demands.
- A reimaged services stack that becomes a true engine for competitive advantage.
- Quantifiable outcomes wherein organizations report accelerated resolution times, reduced overhead, and measurable improvements in service delivery.

Infosys Topaz Fabric transforms enterprise AI from promise to performance— delivering speed, agility, intelligence, and scale, while empowering organizations to unlock the full value of their AI investments and lead with confidence in a dynamic business landscape.

Learn more about Infosys Topaz Fabric [here](#)

# Global Tech Briefing

5 stories, 5 minutes, Stay ahead. » » » » » »

## TECH STOCKS SURGE AS AI MOMENTUM RETURNS

Global technology shares rallied strongly after Nvidia posted blow-out quarterly results and raised its forward guidance, suggesting strong demand for AI infrastructure remains intact.

Nvidia's forecast of around \$65 billion in revenue for the coming quarter—beating estimates—helped to restore investor confidence.

This optimism fed through the supply chain: Taiwan's TSMC, South Korea's SK Hynix and Japan's tech segment all saw gains.

However, while the boom is alive, analysts continue to caution about longer-term fundamentals, concentration risk (e.g., four large customers accounting for most of Nvidia's revenue) and infrastructure constraints.

### WHAT THIS MEANS:

The AI infrastructure wave is still powering tech markets and company valuations.

Organisations investing in data centres, GPU-compute or AI services are enjoying favourable investor sentiment.

But the caution flag remains: high valuations and supply constraints mean companies (and their customers) need to prove real value beyond the hype.

## A MASSIVE INTERNET OUTAGE UNDERLINES FRAGILITY OF DIGITAL BACKBONE

On 18 November 2025, Cloudflare — a key piece of internet infrastructure, providing CDN, DNS and security services — suffered a global outage due to an internal configuration error.

The outage impacted major platforms including ChatGPT (via OpenAI), X (formerly Twitter), Canva and others.

Cloudflare later confirmed the issue was not caused by a cyberattack but a bot-management feature file error that doubled in size and caused cascading failures.

### THE IMPLICATIONS:

Even organisations with robust infrastructure rely on third-party services; a failure in one "central" node can ripple widely.

For tech leaders (especially in sectors like higher ed, enterprise, SaaS), the incident is a wake-up call: resilience, diversification and risk visibility matter.

## GOOGLE OPENS MAJOR AI HARDWARE CENTRE IN TAIWAN

Google LLC has inaugurated its largest AI infrastructure hardware engineering centre outside the U.S., located in Taiwan.

This move signals Google's emphasis on region-specific hardware and chip-ecosystem build-out, reinforcing Taiwan's role as a strategic partner in AI supply chains and infrastructure.

### KEY TAKE-AWAYS:

Major tech players are shifting from purely software/ AI modelling to hardware-level investment—designing, validating, and engineering AI systems regionally.

For institutions or enterprises planning cloud, edge or AI deployments, the supply chain and localisation of infrastructure are increasingly strategic.

The move also raises broader policy and supply-chain questions (e.g., geopolitical risk, data sovereignty).

Tech doesn't slow down for Christmas. From trillion-dollar AI data centers to CEO deepfake scams, the past two months have been packed with shifts that will shape business strategy into 2026 and beyond. Here are the stories you need to know now.

## ALPHABET (GOOGLE) BREAKS OUT WITHIN THE "MAGNIFICENT SEVEN"

In the tech sector's "Magnificent Seven" group of leading firms, Alphabet has emerged as a standout performer.

Driven by its new AI model (Gemini 3), hardware investments, and core search/advertising strength, Alphabet has gained investor favour—even as others face headwinds.

### FOR TECH LEADERS:

The Google story underscores the importance of end-to-end innovation: from hardware to model to application.

It exemplifies how established tech companies can leverage AI advancements to reinforce existing strengths (search, cloud) rather than trying to reinvent entirely.

For organisations planning transformation, it stresses the value of aligning new AI or cloud projects with core mission and business model, rather than pursuing AI for AI's sake.

## AI POLICY & INVESTMENT REMAIN UNDER GLOBAL FOCUS

Beyond commercial activity, AI governance and investment flows remain highly relevant. For example, major multinationals and regions are weighing how to regulate AI (e.g., pre-empting state laws) or align with infrastructure investment strategies.

### WHAT TO WATCH:

Organisations delivering AI-enabled platforms (such as in education, finance, manufacturing) need to consider responsible AI frameworks, data governance and regulatory readiness.

As infrastructure builds out, decisions around cloud vs edge, hardware localisation, and data access & quality become strategic.

The interplay of geopolitics, capital flows, and technology investment means transformation programmes must be agile to shifts beyond pure technology.

## SUMMARY:

**01:** The AI-infrastructure wave remains real and potent—but it demands discipline, strategy, and alignment with business value.

**02:** Digital resilience and architecture matter, especially as the foundation of services becomes more globally distributed and network-dependent

**03:** Hardware, regional supply-chain strategy, and regulatory/governance readiness are increasingly part of the "tech agenda" for transformation projects—not just software or cloud migration.

## TAKEAWAYS:

**When you're pitching or planning digital transformation (for example in higher education, manufacturing, or enterprise services), these macro-themes provide context:**

When you shift systems to cloud or overhaul legacy services, anchor them to value, resilience, and data/AI readiness.

Ensure you're designing for failure and continuity (the Cloudflare outage is a cautionary tale).

Keep a future-ready mindset: hardware, AI, data ecosystems are evolving faster than ever — alignment now will prevent being left behind.

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# Kinnari Ladha

AWARD-WINNING CHIEF DATA OFFICER  
& DATA TRANSFORMATION LEADER

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## An innovator with influence

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If you want to feel inspired about the data industry, its possibilities and what a more diverse generation of leaders can do within it, talk to Kinnari Ladha

With two decades of industry experience behind her, regularly placed in the DataIQ 100 and a well-deserved winner of our very own Digital Edge Data & AI Leadership Award, we were excited to sit down with Kinnari to find out about the passion, dedication and expertise that drives her success.

DIGITAL  
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People &  
Culture in Data  
& AI

## DATA'S SHIFT IN STATUS

Having begun her data career as a hands-on practitioner and worked across a variety of industries as well as in consultancy, agency and client side, Kinnari has a depth of experience from her career journey so far.

While the power of data has always been evident to her, she's now seeing a new element of understanding of this among organisations. "Data is at the forefront now," Kinnari points out. "A lot of organisations are understanding data isn't just IT, and there are a lot more senior roles being recognised at C-level now. All other areas of the business – whether it's finance, marketing, operations, strategy – all need data to be able to successfully do what they need to do.

"So, it's a really exciting time for somebody who started out coding very early on in their career to be part of that change that's going on right now." "Data isn't just a technical asset anymore – it's a business growth engine."

This shift is where Kinnari has spent her career – helping organisations modernise platforms, elevate data literacy, redesign ways of working, and bring storytelling into the heart of transformation.

She explains, "Working at Merlin everyday was different. With over 140 attractions across 25 countries. We've got some iconic brands and one moment you might be speaking to somebody in the parks discussing guest behaviour and patterns with the attractions teams, the next you're working with executives on how data shapes the new digital revenue streams and what our strategy needs to be for the next three years."

While her role brought variety, it also resulted in some interesting contrasts that pushed how she utilised data to improve guest experiences in ways so seamless, they might not even have noticed what had gone into making their visits so enjoyable.

In Kinnari's words, "Merlin Entertainments' brands are built on imagination, so the challenge is connecting that creativity with the power of insight and data. My focus is on creating the data ecosystem that helps us make smart, real-time decisions, from how guests book to how they experience attractions and what we can do to improve that.

"Merlin was going through a significant amount of change at the time, driving data and digital transformation. And for the business, it was really key that we started delivering that, which meant I spent a lot of my time ensuring the data foundations were in place – that they were strong, scalable and connected. That helped us as a business to bring the magic of Merlin to life through digital intelligence."

## MAKING DATA MEANINGFUL

Kinnari leaned into the creative, guest-focused environment by focusing on why data was meaningful for their customers. "I often say to the teams all around Merlin that data is how we understand joy. Our guests don't come for dashboards or metrics, they come for real experiences, memories and a little bit of magic.

"The challenge for my team is to take something inherently analytical and make it more human. So, what we do is we turn data into stories and help our creative operation team to design better moments."

One example of this was their Guest 360 initiative, which was creating a single view of Merlin Entertainments' guests that brought together insights from every touch point, from booking to the rides they chose and even the snacks they were enjoying.

Kinnari continued, "This allows us to personalise the marketing that we do and tailor the recommendations we can make for upsell and cross-sell but also optimise experiences in real-time once they're in the park. That could be through reducing queue times, suggesting the right attraction at the right moment or understanding what makes each visit special."

This collaboration between her team and the wider team at Merlin Entertainments created something that went beyond a deeper knowledge of guest preferences.

She explained, "When our creative teams and data professionals speak the same language, I find something really powerful happens. We start designing experiences informed by empathy as much as analytics, and the result is more smiles, shorter queues, higher loyalty and happier teams because they can see their work actually making a real impact on our guests.

"And for me, data becomes meaningful when it serves the story of the guests, not the story of the system. It's not about showing what data can do. It's about what the guests can feel. That's what makes this environment so unique. It's the way imagination meets insight.

"What I love about working in such a creative business is that data doesn't compete with creativity, it fuels it. When we show somebody in the creative team or a park operator or a marketer what the



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Data becomes a creative partner, helping us turn insight into moments of joy for our guests.



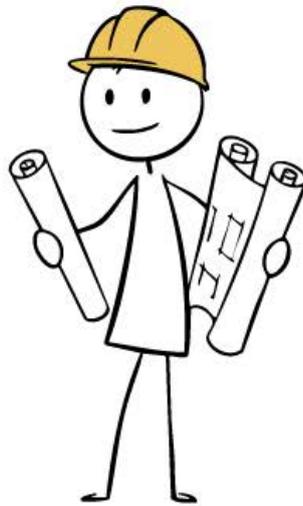
# It's Just Data But **Smarter**

// Meet our characters  
and uncover their AI  
adventures ->



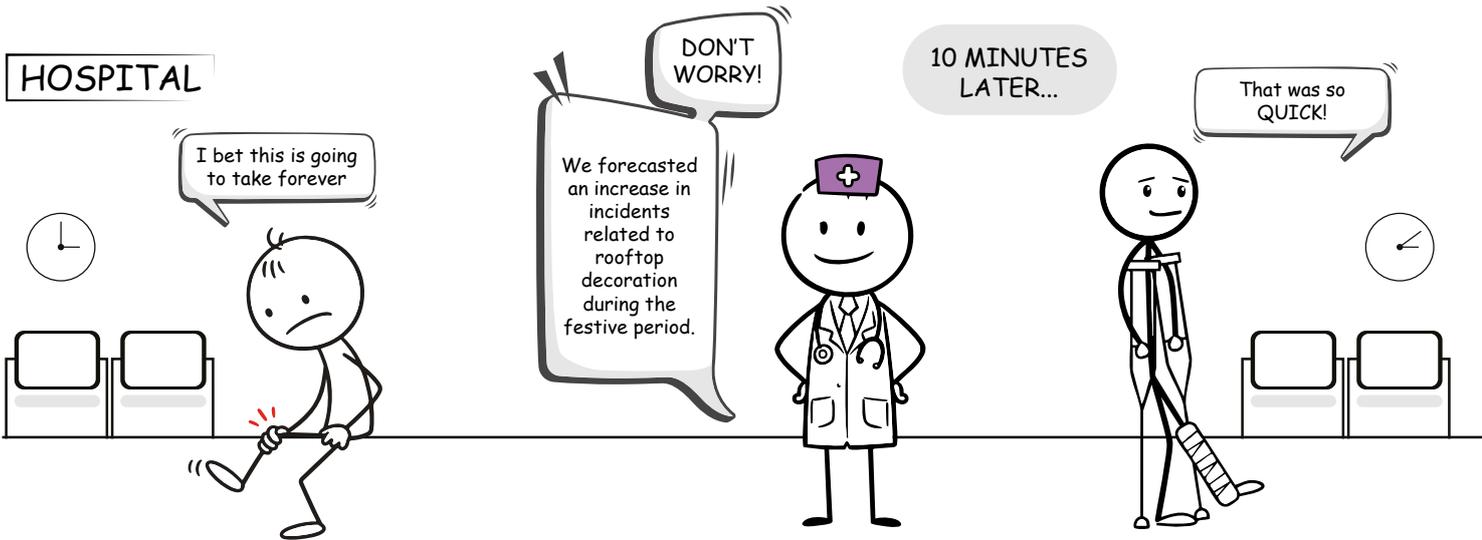


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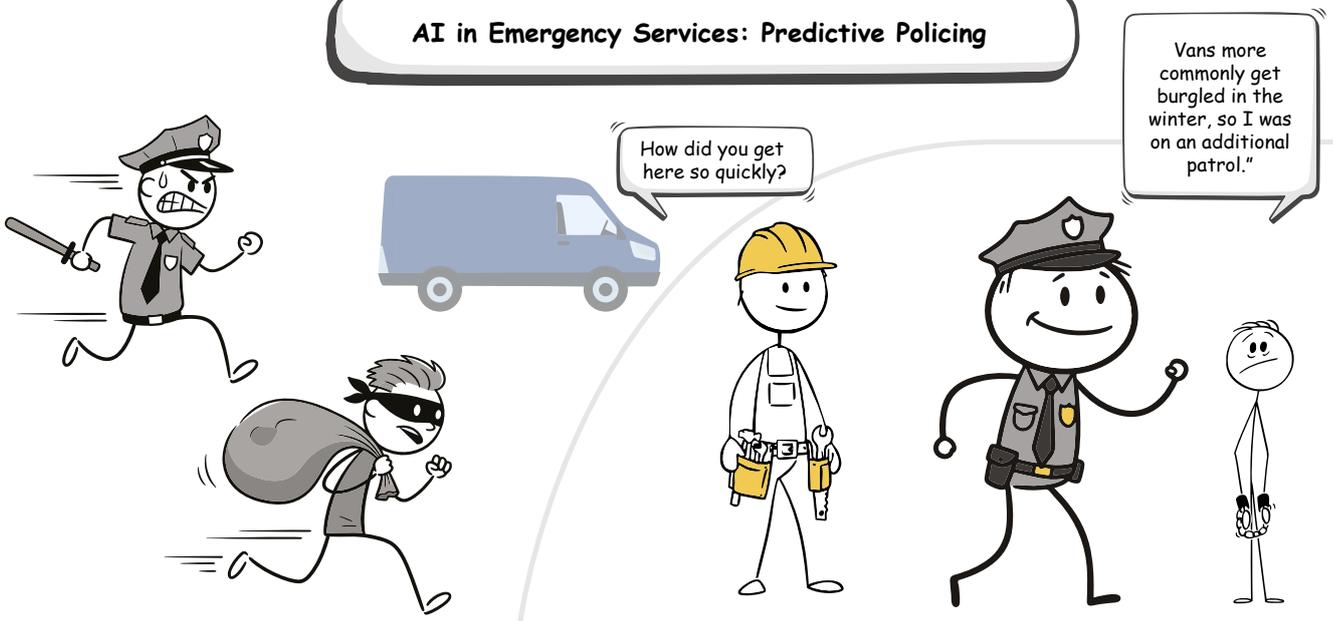


## AI in Healthcare: A&E Demand Forecasting

HOSPITAL



## AI in Emergency Services: Predictive Policing

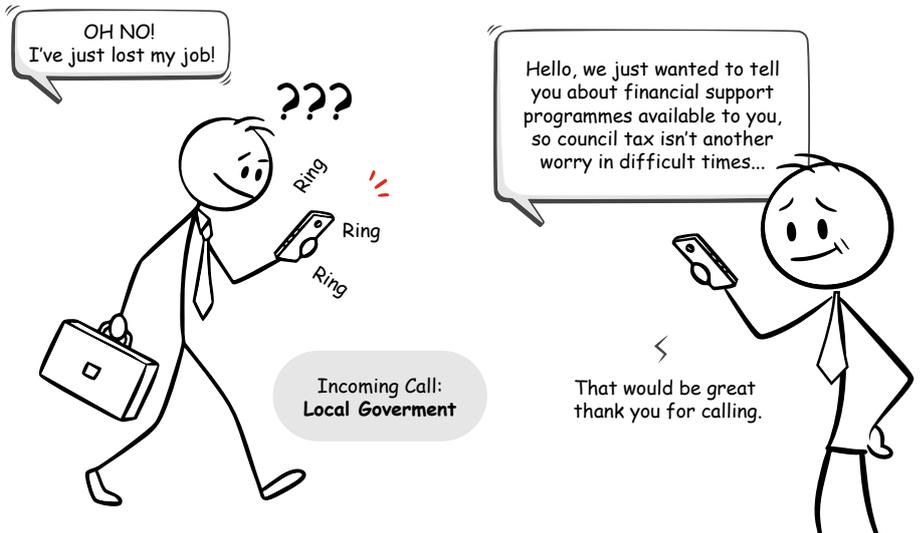


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## AI in Retail: Pricing and Promotion Optimisation

That looks amazing on you! How do they always have the latest trends on the shelves!



AI TREND ANALYSIS RUNNING...



Just lucky, I guess...

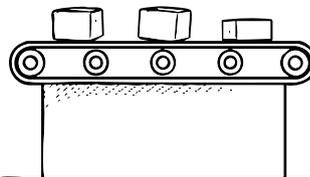
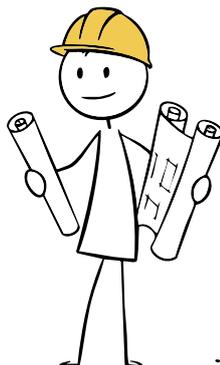


## AI in Manufacturing: Predictive Maintenance

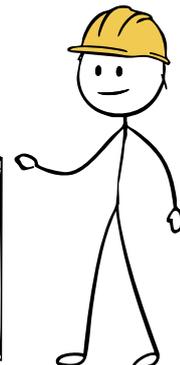
I am here to do maintenance on the conveyor belt



Oh that is great! It feels like it getting to its end of life



This will make it last another 3 years!!





data is telling them about how our guests are feeling, it really inspires them to think differently.”

Kinnari sums this up brilliantly, “Data becomes a creative partner, helping us turn insight into moments of joy for our guests.”

### **SMOOTHER RIDES, SMOOTHER EXPERIENCES**

As well as supporting creativity, data was also used to make a tangible difference to how parts of the parks operated.

In the past, ride performance and maintenance were managed by manual checks and reactive fixes. To find new and better ways, a team was created comprising people from engineering, operations and analytics to take a fresh, data-led approach.

Kinnari talked us through this, “We combined IoT sensor data, maintenance logs and live operational metrics to identify patterns that predicted when a ride might experience issues before guests even noticed it had slowed down.

“By applying predictive maintenance models and optimising staffing based on real-time demand signals, we achieved 13% ride throughput and an 8 percentage point uplift in NPS. It meant that guests were spending less time queuing and more time enjoying the experience.”

Kinnari reflected, “What I really like about this example is that it shows how data doesn't need to be flashy to be powerful. Sometimes it's the invisible innovations behind the scenes that create the most magic for guests.

“This was a simple thing to do, but it took quite a lot of different areas of the business to come together. For me that really symbolises what great leadership and collaboration looks like when you're using insight to solve real business problems. It united the teams around a shared goal and really helped improve the experience of our guests.”

This initiative was so impactful it was recognised at the Merlin Entertainments CEO Initiative Awards, while her team was also shortlisted for 'Data Team of the Year' at the British Data Awards 2024.

### THE POWER OF PEOPLE AND PARTNERS

Hearing of these successes, we wondered how Kinnari is bringing together technology, people and processes to embed a truly data-centric culture across a global team.

In her experience, transformation is 70% people and 30% technology, "People are where the magic and challenge lies. I do truly believe you can buy the best

I embedded cross-functional squads that co-created solutions, which enabled people from different global locations to work together in a way that they hadn't before. "It's been a big mindset shift, empowering teams to own their outcomes and not just deliver outputs. And that works really well.

"We also focus on storytelling, data literacy and creating that psychological safety – creating an environment where people can feel confident to experiment and where data isn't intimidating but empowering."

But it's not all about looking internally, Kinnari values what external teams bring to the table too, "I think the critical part of embedding culture has been the partnership ecosystem. We recognise that we can't and shouldn't do everything in house.

"Working with third-party partners including Telefonica Tech and Sullivan & Stanley has been really important for us. The network of forward-thinking technology and data specialists has allowed us to move fast to bring in new expertise and really stay at the forefront of innovation.

"Our partnership with Microsoft and Databricks have also helped us modernise our entire data platform, enabling AI machine learning adoption, reducing cloud costs and incidents on platforms as well. But beyond the technical impact, these partnerships bring fresh thinking, external challenge and access to global best practice. We get to see how our partners can really help us and raise the bar for our teams.

"The way we have set up teams is we view partners as essential to Merlin's capability. They collaborate and co-innovate with us to help test ideas and accelerate delivery."

"We combined external insight and the agility of our partners to bring a blend of people and process collaboration. I think that's what drives a truly data-driven culture across a global organisation. Ultimately, technology enables the change, but it's our people working in harmony with brilliant external partners that bring the strategy to life."

Kinnari concluded that a major reason their transformation worked so effectively was that they made a deliberate choice not to go it alone. They recognised early that shifting to a truly product-centric way of working required new skills, new behaviours, and new delivery practices. That was where their partnership with Sullivan & Stanley was pivotal.

”

**“The way we have set up teams is we view partners as essential to Merlin's capability. They collaborate and co-innovate with us to help test ideas and accelerate delivery.”**

tools, and there are so many out there, but without the right mindset and the culture, you'll never unlock the value of what that can bring.”

At Merlin Entertainments, the goal was to move away from a project mentality to a product-driven model where data, digital and technology teams worked as one, instead of as siloed teams.

They brought deep expertise in agile product delivery, helping us embed roles such as Delivery Leads and Technical Business Analysts who could translate strategy into action and ensure that our teams were focused on delivering value continuously. More importantly, they haven't acted as an external "supplier," but as part of the team collaborating closely with the business, coaching teams on modern ways of working, and creating a culture where data, product, and operations are shaping outcomes together.

This model has accelerated our ability to build capability while still delivering at pace. We now have stronger cross-functional alignment, clearer prioritisation around guest and commercial value, and a delivery rhythm that allows us to test, learn, and iterate quickly.

Ultimately, the partnership has helped us not just implement new processes but truly shift how we work. It has enabled our people to take ownership of digital and data products that scale across Merlin, and positioned us to sustain transformation as a core part of how we drive business growth.

### INDUSTRY DIFFERENCES AND COMMON GROUND

Having worked across industries including automotive, telco and retail, it's interesting to know what commonalities and differences Kinnari has identified in how organisations within these use data to drive transformation.

She tells us, "The common thread that I've seen is the aspiration in terms of where they want to be. Every organisation wants to be data-driven. They all say that, but very few truly understand what it means in practice.

"The ones that succeed recognise that being data-driven isn't about dashboards or platforms, it's about the courage, the culture and the strategy – making sure that data strategy and business strategy links together."

Courage is all about moving away from a 'this is how we've done it before' mindset and moving towards making decisions based on evidence rather than instinct, "I think that type of culture encourages curiosity, experimentation and continuous learning."

For Kinnari, the best examples of data-driven organisations are, "Those where leaders embed data into a decision making rhythm of the business."

"Data isn't an afterthought or separate agenda item, but part of the strategy and how it's shaped every day. It's when marketing, operations and finance teams speak the same language of outcomes. And that's where data roles and now starting to become a seat at the table. They're not an afterthought. They're not hidden under IT."

Some of the key differences she sees between different industries are to do with their relationship to creativity and risk.

"For example, sectors like finance tend to be very rules driven and compliance focused, so data transformation there is about precision and governance and risk management. In contrast, industries like travel, hospitality and entertainment are a blend of art and science, using data not just to optimise efficiency, but to amplify emotion and experience."

"And for me, that's what made Merlin so exciting. We were retail, operations and entertainment, and

we were mainly in the business of joy and memories.

"Our success was measured in smiles per minute, not just conversion rates. And data here is to serve creativity, not constrain it.

"We used insight to make the experience more magical, more personalised, more effortless for our guests, whether that's predicting the crowd flow, tailoring offers or designing next-generation attractions."

But back to differences for a moment. "Another key difference I've noted is the maturity versus momentum. Some industries have data maturity but move slowly due to legacy systems and regulations. Others, like entertainment, have incredible momentum and agility, but are still maturing with their data foundation.

**”**  
**Our success was measured in smiles per minute, not just conversion rates. And data here is to serve creativity, not constrain it.**

That was exactly where Merlin was at the time, at the sweet spot. What I was focusing on building at Merlin was balancing that creative energy and strong governance to ensure we had scalable platforms that empowered the data literate culture.”

While different organisations may be at different levels of data maturity, they have one thing in common. “I think the thread that ties all of it together is people. Whether you're in finance, retail or entertainment, data only drives transformation if people trust it and understand it – they feel part of that journey.”

### **MAKING A CONSISTENT IMPACT**

As we mentioned earlier, Kinnari has been regularly – and deservedly – recognised for her data leadership.

She tells us, “It was a proud moment being recognised in the DataIQ 100 seven years in a row and amongst friends and networks as well. And when I got recognised in The Top 20 Women in Data and Tech in 2023, that was really nice. When my team found out they were absolutely blown over.

“These recognitions are not just a personal milestone, they're reflections of the team I've led, the cultures we've built and the change we've driven together. It's humbling, but it's really important you share your achievements – that's a really hard thing to do!”

She attributes her consistency and impact as a leader to a clarity of purpose and always seeing data as a business growth engine rather than a technical function. This is something which perhaps sprung from her early career in consultancy, where she had to make sure the tech was linked back to what it meant for the business.

She shares, “I've focused on building teams that are commercially minded. I tell my people, “You know your tech inside out, but you need to be commercially minded, creative and human centred.” I think that is really making sure that everyone understands the purpose.”

There's another key theme behind her success, too.

“The other thing is consistency comes from curiosity. I'm always learning and listening and I share openly with my data community. I proactively make sure I network with people. And I also know that the world in data and tech is moving so fast.

“What I did five years ago, or even last year, has probably changed again. So how do I make sure the teams around me are also elevating themselves and what can I do to do that?”

For her, what's exciting about the recognition she's received is the ripple effect it's creating, “Seeing people I've mentored now leading a transformation of their own – that's a proud moment. And people who come up to me because they recognise me and ask me how I've overcome challenges – for me, that is more poignant than anything else.”

The Digital Edge Data and AI Leadership Award is the latest recognition that Kinnari has achieved, celebrating both her innovation and her influence. Perhaps characteristically, and definitely generously, she feels that this award isn't only about her.

“It's an incredible honour. While it's quite deeply meaningful on a personal level, it feels even more significant as a collective win. The recognition isn't just about my journey, it's a celebration of the entire data community at Merlin and where I've worked previously as well,

plus the broader network of women who are driving transformation in data and AI and technology every day.”

She reflects, “I think awards like these really amplify representation. They shine a light on what's possible.

“If even one woman sees this and thinks ‘That could be me, I belong here too’, then every late night, every tough decision, every challenge I've gone through, every self-doubt has been worth it.”

What's also important to Kinnari about this particular win is that it recognises influence, “Leadership in data isn't just about technical excellence, it's about shaping culture, mentoring others, using the platform to open doors.

“This award is a reminder that when we lead with purpose and authenticity, we don't just deliver the results – we also inspire change.”

In addition to the recognition she's received, a highlight in her career so far has been the opportunity to support potential in others to be realised.

“What's really important throughout my career is the colleagues I've collaborated with, the talent I've mentored and the diverse voices that I've helped elevate. Seeing others grow and thrive and lead – especially other women – is the most rewarding part of my journey. Because leadership isn't just about what you achieve, it's how you enable others.”

### **BREAKING BARRIERS – and helping others through them**

After creating such a successful career, it could be easy to overlook the challenges Kinnari has had to overcome to get to where she is today.



**“We love working with Merlin because they exist to make people happy in the purest of senses. Behind every laugh, every moment of wonder, there’s insight helping make that moment as impactful as possible. Knowing our work plays a part in enabling that insight makes it all worthwhile.”**

Andy Haley,  
CEO, Sullivan & Stanley

# FR DE

## BUILD

How leadin  
– and dec

In every in  
data not ju  
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# FROM DATA TO DELIGHT:

## MAKING THE INTELLIGENT ENTERPRISE

Leading organisations are turning data into insight, insight into decisions and decisions into unforgettable experiences.

In any industry, the organisations that win are those who know how to use data not just to look back, but to look forward. Yet for many leaders, the real challenge isn't collecting more data, it's connecting it.

Fragmented systems, legacy architectures and siloed teams mean insights aren't getting to the people who need them most. As a result, strategy slows down, innovation stalls and customer experience suffers.

That's where the Intelligent Enterprise comes in.

## DEFINING THE INTELLIGENT ENTERPRISE

At Sullivan & Stanley, we define the Intelligent Enterprise as an organisation that understands – quickly and continuously – the degree to which it's able to deliver the outcomes it cares about. It's an organisation that blends data, technology and human potential – blending the analytical power of data with the ingenuity of people. It's built on four types of intelligence:

**Human Intelligence: enabling teams and leaders to act with clarity, empathy and purpose.**

**Artificial Intelligence: turning data into insight through automation and adaptive learning.**

**Technology Intelligence: modernising digital ecosystems for scale, security and speed.**

**Execution Intelligence: bridging strategy and delivery to turn insight into measurable impact.**

When these come together, data becomes the connective tissue of the organisation – not just an asset, but a catalyst for change.

## WHY IT MATTERS

Technology leaders face competing pressures: to modernise, to manage complexity and to demonstrate value. The answer isn't another data lake or data warehouse. It's a smarter, human-centred way of connecting data to action.

The Intelligent Enterprise approach brings clarity to transformation, aligning technology with business strategy, ensuring every investment moves the needle on customer value, resilience and growth. For CIOs and CTOs, that's a competitive advantage. It's a necessity.

It belongs to organisations that think with data and act with purpose. At Sullivan & Stanley, we help them do both.



## MAKING DATA WORK HARDER – AND SMARTER.

**Our work with Merlin Entertainments is a powerful example.**

Together, we helped the global attractions leader reimagine how data supports decision-making, aligning insight with the company's mission to deliver unforgettable experiences.

By combining consulting expertise with embedded data capability, we helped Merlin:

**Strengthen their Data & Analytics leadership and redefine roles for agility and impact**

**Upskill teams with modern data practices that drive value from within**

**Accelerate delivery of insight-led initiatives across commercial and operations**

**Embed customer-centric decision-making at every level**

The result was a Data & Analytics function designed not around technology, but around the visitor experience, enabling Merlin to act faster, innovate confidently and keep the magic alive for millions of guests worldwide.



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



# AN INTERVIEW WITH JACOB PERRING

Client Partner at Sullivan & Stanley

When Merlin Entertainments set out to modernise its digital and data ecosystem, success depended on aligning bold ambition with practical delivery. Working across the Product Delivery and Data workstreams, Sullivan & Stanley has been instrumental in building the operating models, teams and rhythm that now power Merlin's Data transformation. We sat down with Client Partner, Jacob Perring, to understand how the collaboration evolved and why leadership and partnership have been the true differentiators in their engagement.

**Q:** J

**A:** Merlin's digital transformation is a multi-year journey, and unlike other organisations, we're not just looking at the Product Delivery side of the house. From the start, we've been working under a single umbrella, with Merlin's automation and data teams working together.

**Q:** DELIVER

**A:** The challenges we're facing are both technical and operational. By bringing in external partners like Kinross, we've been able to generate new ideas and build teams that can deliver on a much wider range of other projects.

**Q:**

**A:** The platform we've built is designed to be embedded into the data ecosystem, so that it can deliver value to the business. It's not just about providing access to data, it's about providing the ability to act on it.

**Q:**

**A:** The success of our outcomes is a result of the collaboration between our teams and the leadership of our clients. It's a true partnership that has led to a culture of innovation and continuous improvement.

## **ACOB, HOW DID THE PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN SULLIVAN & STANLEY AND MERLIN BEGIN?**

Merlin had a clear ambition to transform how it uses digital and data to elevate guest experiences and unlock business value. Our first engagement began with Product Delivery function, helping shape how new products are designed, prioritised and delivered. Thereafter, we expanded into the Data workstream under Kinnari Ladha's leadership, focused on turning Merlin's data capability into a strategic asset for insight, innovation and commercial decision making.

## **HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PRODUCT DELIVERY AND DATA?**

They are distinct but deeply connected. Product Delivery focuses on creating and improving guest experiences through products such as websites, e-commerce journeys and experience platforms. The Data workstream, led by Kinnari, harnesses the information those systems generate to drive smarter and faster decisions. Our teams operate across both, ensuring continuous collaboration on one side and data-driven intelligence on the other.

## **WHAT PROGRESS HAVE YOU SEEN WITHIN THE DATA WORKSTREAM?**

The shift has been significant. Under Kinnari's leadership, Merlin moved from building a data team to building a data-led culture. We helped integrate product and delivery disciplines into the Data teams, introducing ownership, prioritisation and tracking. That mindset change from projects to products means data is now managed with clear ownership and purpose. The results are tangible: faster time to reliable insight, stronger decision support for commercial and operational teams, and a growing ability to use data as a competitive advantage.

## **WHAT HAS BEEN KINNARI'S IMPACT AS A LEADER?**

She combines clarity with ambition. Kinnari understands that data only matters when it drives business results. She also builds inclusive and empowered teams that feel part of something bigger. That is why her recognition through the Digital Edge Data and AI Leadership Award is so deserved. Her approach proves that successful transformation depends on leadership and strategy as much as on technology.

## **Q: AND WHAT ROLE HAS SULLIVAN & STANLEY PLAYED IN ACCELERATING DELIVERY?**

**A:** Our philosophy is to move clients from strategy to execution quickly. At Merlin, that meant embedding multi-disciplinary teams made up of Product and Delivery Leadership and partnering with engineers to plug in directly into their environment. We helped establish operating rhythm, governance and measurement frameworks that always keep value visible. It has never been about outsourcing but about building capability that endures beyond our involvement.

## **Q: WHAT CAN OTHERS LEARN FROM MERLIN'S JOURNEY?**

**A:** Start by linking transformation to measurable business outcomes. Define ownership early and build accountability around it. Treat partners as an extension of your team rather than as suppliers. The most successful organisations collaborate with their partners rather than manage them. That shared mindset has been key to the progress at Merlin.

## **Q: WHAT COMES NEXT?**

**A:** The foundations are now strong, so the next stage is scaling data activation and preparing for AI adoption. Merlin recognises that artificial intelligence relies on trusted and well governed data. Our focus will be to continue enabling that by ensuring the operating model, talent and measurement are in place to turn potential into performance.

Merlin Entertainments' transformation shows how leadership, culture and partnership can turn ambition into measurable value. Under Kinnari Ladha's guidance, the Data workstream has become a model for activating insight and growth, while Sullivan & Stanley's work across Product Delivery and Data demonstrates how real transformation happens when strategy meets execution.

While she's actively supporting others to achieve their potential and reach leadership positions, she believes that systemic change is needed to ensure that data is a place where different types of leaders can belong and add value.

She tells us, "I've worked in this industry over 20 years and when I was a hands-on practitioner, it was almost equal in terms of gender. However, when I got to single leadership roles, I realised very quickly that I was the only female representative in every meeting in every organisation – and I've worked with a variety of sectors."

"We've made meaningful progress, but many of the remaining barriers are subtle and systematic. It's not just about representation. It's about visibility and voice and belonging."

"Women in data leadership often face environments where boldness is misinterpreted, confidence is second guessed and technical authority is also challenged more than it's respected. And I've personally experienced that myself throughout my career."

"These aren't always overt issues, but they shape how women show up and how they're perceived. The solution isn't more policies or pledges, I think it's more sponsorship and storytelling."

This is something Kinnari is doing herself, spending her personal time mentoring or sponsoring those earlier in their careers.

She points out, "We need senior leaders who don't just advise women behind closed doors but actively advocate for them in rooms where decisions are made. That means putting their names forward for stretch roles, backing them in high tech conversations, amplifying their achievements."

"Storytelling also matters. We need to normalise seeing women lead in data, engineering and AI not as rare exceptions, but as powerful examples."

"Visibility creates possibility. When young professionals see women thriving in these roles, it reshapes the aspirations and expectations. I didn't have anybody like that to look up to in data. I learned from other industries where I saw powerful women leading."

She thinks it's important that organisations look inwards, "At how meetings are run, how performance is evaluated, how leadership traits are defined, rewarding collaboration and empathy as much as technical

brilliance. Are we creating a space where diverse leadership styles can flourish?"

"I think, ultimately, removing barriers means shifting the culture, not just ticking boxes."

"It's about building an ecosystem where women don't have to adapt to fit in. They can lead authentically and be seen and heard and valued."

"And as someone who's broken those barriers, we're paving the way, but we need to make sure those doors aren't closed again. That's the really critical thing."

Her advice in a nutshell for emerging leaders? "The tools and platform will change, but curiosity keeps you relevant and visibility makes you influential."

## BEING A MODERN DATA LEADER

While Kinnari sums her own leadership style up as empathetic, she notes how it's changed over time.

"Early in my career I believed leadership is about having the answers. You have to know everything and be the expert in the room. Over time, I've learned that true leadership is about asking the right questions, creating space for others to contribute and enabling collective intelligence."

"My philosophy has shifted from delivery to empowerment and that's been quite hard for somebody who's been analytically minded. You need to trust your teams and build that trust."

"Today my role is to create clarity, remove barriers and build environments where others can thrive and succeed, whether that's my team, or whether it's my team working with others in the organisation. Bringing the business and the data teams together to thrive and succeed is really important."

"I believe great data leaders today are not just technologists, they need to be translators. I always say that my job is Chief Translator Officer because I sit between technology and the business – we are able to bridge the gap between the two."

She notes that it's important that today's leaders sit at the intersection of strategy, storytelling and technology, so they can understand the business deeply while also being able to communicate complex ideas simply and knowing how to turn the data into decisions.

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**Women in data leadership often face environments where boldness is misinterpreted, confidence is second guessed and technical authority is also challenged more than it's respected. And I've personally experienced that myself throughout my career.**

Kinnari continues, “Those leaders shouldn't be focused on models or metrics, they focus on outcomes and impact. I think modern data leaders also demand emotional intelligence. The ability to listen, to build trust and lead with empathy is just as critical as technical acumen. It's finding that balance.”

Curiosity is also vital, “The best leaders I've seen foster a culture of experimentation. They create safety for their teams and continuous learning.”

And there's one more factor that shouldn't be forgotten, something Kinnari thinks is key, “I think perhaps the most important thing is great leaders know that their legacy isn't just in the systems that they build, it's in the people that they grow.

“Whoever I've mentored or sponsored, they lead with purpose but make sure that they have space for diverse voices to shape the future of data.”

#### A FOCUS ON THE FUTURE

Looking back over her career, some of the standout moments have been leading transformations that many thought weren't possible by turning legacy environments into modern data-enabled environments.

Looking to the future at the time, she and the team were doing something similar at Merlin. “We've got the privilege of building out a new global data strategy that infuses innovation. It's not just about technology, it's about creating magical moments, making sure we impact our guests worldwide.”

“We're entering an incredibly exciting phase – one that feels less like evolution and more like acceleration. The foundations are almost in place. We're now starting to scale the innovative AI machine learning capabilities to show what we can do with that.”

Kinnari mentions that while many industries have already delivered highly personalised marketing or connected app or web journeys, low investment in data and digital in the last 20 years at Merlin has meant it hasn't been possible to create seamless guest experiences until now.

“This is going to help us really elevate ourselves. Imagine every visit for guests is tailor-made from queue times to food preferences to immersive storytelling.”

Ethical use of data is key to this, as are existing partnerships.

“We're deepening our partnership with some of the most innovative tech players in the industry. We're a Microsoft and Databricks house at the moment. These sort of collaborations are important, helping us fast track digital transformation.

“But it's not just the back-end systems, it's also frontline magic where the guests really experience it. I think it's

blending cutting-edge technology with human delight. That's where data becomes really powerful – and that's exciting.”

On a personal level, she'll continue to grow and champion diversity in data talent, which she considers vital for the industry's future. Kinnari explains, “I think the next generation of leaders will define what's possible in AI and ethics innovation. This is why I say diversity is really important when we're building amazing algorithms. If you've not got a diverse team, there's going to inherently be bias.

They're going to build those products unconsciously not realising there's a bias element.

“So, we need to make sure that we do have diverse teams and create visibility. That comes down to sponsorship and making sure when you're hiring, you've got a balanced team. Asking, ‘Are we doing the right things to attract talent into the organisation?’

“Representation isn't just a metric, it's a movement. I'm really committed to making sure the future of data leadership looks radically more inclusive than the past.”

So, what's next in summary? “More transformation, more impact, more diverse voices at the table. I think the journey is just getting started and I think it's going to be quite extraordinary.”

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“Representation isn't just a metric, it's a movement. I'm really committed to making sure the future of data leadership looks radically more inclusive than the past.”



# LIVING ON THE EDGE...

## CHRISTMAS EDITION

For all the latest in **lifestyle**, **gadgets**, and **personal tech**. From cutting-edge IoT innovations to smart home trends, wearables, and the future of connected living.



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SMARTEST  
GIFTS  
UNDER  
THE TREE  
THIS YEAR**

# LIVING ON THE EDGE

*"The Smartest Gift Under the Tree This Year"*



# TWINKLY SMART XMAS TREE

*“The Christmas Tree That  
Runs on Code”*

## WHAT IT DOES:

- A Christmas tree with addressable LEDs you can program like digital art. It's basically IoT meets Pixar.

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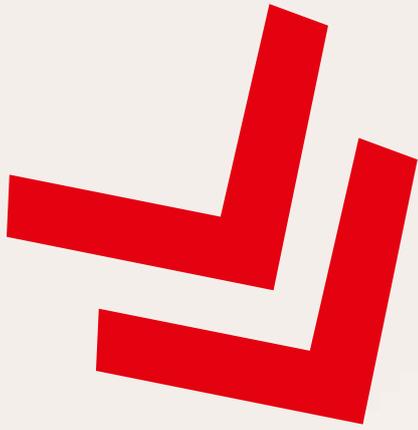


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it's a glimpse of how smart  
homes will sparkle next.*

# LIVING ON THE EDGE

*"The Smartest Gift Under the Tree This Year"*



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*“Meet the robot butler wrapping up your Christmas chaos.”*

## WHAT IT DOES:

- Patrols the house while you're out
- Plays festive music and follows you like a dog
- Checks on the oven or Christmas lights in another room
- Delivers snacks (robotic arm optional)

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*It's futuristic,  
slightly ridiculous,  
and great fun.*

# LIVING ON THE EDGE

*"The Smartest Gift Under the Tree This Year"*





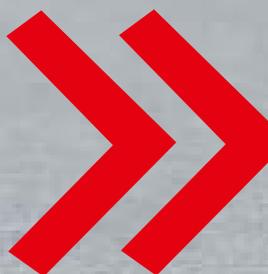
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*The Perfect Hot Chocolate Mug*

## WHAT IT DOES:

- Maintains the perfect temperature for mulled wine, coffee, or hot chocolate
- Wireless charging coaster
- Elegant winter edition colours

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*"Santa isn't the only one who deserves a warm drink that stays warm."*



# The Data Leadership Playbook:

- Mastering Data Leadership
- A Framework for Success
- Navigating the First 100 Days of Data Strategy and Leadership

**The Data Leadership Playbook - "Mastering Data Leadership" - launching January 30 2026 from Digital Edge Magazine**

Digital Edge's flagship editorial project for 2026 - a practical, insight-rich guide for data leaders navigating the complexities of AI, governance, cloud, and the data-driven business transformation.

Developed in collaboration with CDO's across the UK and USA, the Data Leaders Playbook combines original quotes and chapter forewords, professional guidance, leadership frameworks, and real-world examples to explore what it truly takes to lead data-driven change in complex organisations.

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Digital Edge - The Voice of Technology Leadership

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# OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE

Data is only as powerful as the **people** behind it – and the **voices** shaping its future.

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

women  
in  
data

®

Our Voice is a new monthly feature from Digital Edge Magazine, created in partnership with Women in Data®, to celebrate the individuals and organisations driving meaningful progress in equity, inclusion, and diversity (EID) across the data and technology landscape.

Each month, Our Voice will shine a light on those breaking barriers, redefining leadership, and proving that diversity isn't just good ethics – it's good business. We'll share real stories of transformation, real action being taken inside organisations, and the real change emerging as a result.

From boardrooms to data labs, this series will capture the passion and persistence of those carving the path toward a more inclusive digital future. Together, we'll explore how openness, representation, and allyship are reshaping what it means to lead in data.

*Because the most powerful change doesn't come from algorithms – it comes from people with purpose.*

# OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE



## Becky Lodge doesn't wait for systems to change. She changes them.



### BECKY LODGE

Founder of Startup Disruptors

Over the past decade, she's built two brands that address structural problems in the UK innovation economy today. **Startup Disruptors** trains and coaches business founders to build start-ups and investment-ready companies. Over 10,000 leaders have gone through the programme over the last decade since the movement started

in a Portsmouth pub to help people that wanted to start a business but were new to business. As a result of this 'real world research' and hands on coaching practice, she has honed this knowledge and used this data and knowledge to build 'Desk2Educate'; the ground-breaking AI/ML tech platform that connects skills development with social mobility; tailor made learning and leadership development at a fraction of the cost of a typical degree or leadership programme, personalised to each learner.

Lodge was one of the first signatories of the University of Nottingham's 'Charter of Inclusive Entrepreneurship' and is a highly awarded and decorated female in data and technology globally. This year she won three awards alone for her work in innovation, DEI and tech. Most notably she was included as one of the 'Twenty in Data and Tech' by Women in Data at their flagship event at the 02 in London sponsored by Snowflake, this added to her previous accolades from Sky News in 2018 (Sky News 100 Women); TechRound in 2023/2024 and named as one of Computer Weekly's Top 100 UK Influential Tech Leaders in 2024. Lodge is the epitome of introversion coupled with an undisputed moral compass that is always seeking to find better ways to include everyone.

Both of Becky's business brands tackle gaps that institutional players have ignored; or perhaps she is the first to see their potential? It wouldn't be the first time.

Lodge is also a vocal advocate for women founders and neurodiverse entrepreneurs and minorities. When Innovate UK in 2024 proposed funding cuts that would have catastrophically disadvantaged women-led businesses, she led the campaign backed by 500 women that forced a reversal reinstating £2.1MN of innovation funding in just 36 hours via a viral social media campaign on LinkedIn. In 2025 she helped them at their roundtable events to re-structure assessment processes and accessibility but in her own words 'this is only a small step, there is much more work to do'.

That's not activism for its own sake. It's accountability.

She operates from Portsmouth, UK, outside of the bubble of the London ecosystem. She's

**"THAT'S NOT  
ACTIVISM FOR ITS  
OWN SAKE. IT'S  
ACCOUNTABILITY!"**

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neurodivergent. She's built her social influence in B2B tech and business over 30 years quietly working hard and without following the standard playbook. These aren't biographical details, they inform how she sees the problems and what solutions she builds. She has a unique way of opportunity spotting and connecting ideas and innovation that others cannot see. She attributes this to a combination of her neurodivergence and upbringing from working class roots and a passion to make sure that everyone in business has equity and parity.

In this Our Voice interview, Lodge talks about what she's learned building brands, why the funding landscape still fails women entrepreneurs, and what needs to change in UK innovation policy. No rhetoric. Just experience.

## **Leadership, Innovation, and Inclusion: A Conversation with Becky Lodge**

Becky Lodge is widely recognised as a powerhouse in the UK entrepreneurial ecosystem, a disruptor, advocate, and mentor whose work spans commercial innovation, social impact, and ecosystem leadership. Over decades, she has built



businesses, championed female founders, and influenced policy, all while navigating the complex intersections of neurodiversity, leadership, and systemic change. In this in-depth conversation, Becky reflects on her journey, insights, and vision for the future of innovation in the UK.

**Q:** Becky, you've built a reputation as a powerhouse in the UK entrepreneurial ecosystem. When you look back at your journey so far, what moments stand out as the ones that genuinely reshaped your trajectory?

If I'm honest, my journey has been defined as much by

moments of loss as by moments of triumph. I am the UK's biggest failure. One of the earliest, and perhaps most formative, was realising that the world wasn't going to hand me access or opportunity simply because I was capable or ambitious. There was no roadmap for someone like me, a woman, neurodiverse, operating outside traditional networks; and that realisation forced me to become the architect of my own path. I am great at failing and totally surprised when I win. It's a mindset that's inbuilt. If someone says no, I will find another way until they say yes.

Another defining moment came when I had to walk away from partnerships that were emotionally and professionally misaligned. That was incredibly painful and upsetting at the time because these weren't just business relationships; these people felt like family. But stepping away created the space for me to innovate, to take risks I might otherwise have avoided. Our team is unassailable and my broader ecosystem work all emerged from that clarity and independence over time.

Then, there are the quieter affirmations, like being named one of Computer Weekly's Top 100 UK Influential Tech Leaders. On the surface, it's a public accolade, but for me it symbolised the recognition of decades of work often done behind the scenes, challenging norms, mentoring other founders, advocating for equality and working in my pyjamas through evenings and weekends when others were out with family and friends. Those moments, both personal and public, reshaped my trajectory because they taught me that courage, integrity, and persistence are not only strategic choices but moral imperatives in building an ecosystem that values inclusion.

**Q: You've spoken openly about neurodiversity and how it intersects with leadership and entrepreneurship. How has your neurodiversity influenced the way you think, create, and challenge established norms?**

Neurodiversity has been both a lens and a tool in my work. It shapes the way I see patterns and possibilities, allowing me to connect ideas that others might consider unrelated. I process complexity in ways that are non-linear, which is both an advantage and a challenge. It means I can anticipate gaps in systems, spot opportunities for disruption, and generate solutions that others might overlook.

But neurodiversity also demands intentionality. I've had to learn to manage my energy, protect my mental bandwidth, and design structures around myself to ensure I can operate consistently at a high level. There's a duality to it: it's a source of creativity and insight, but also of friction in a world built for linear thinking.

Perhaps most importantly, neurodiversity has given me a moral compass to question the status quo. I can't take systems at face value, I instinctively ask, 'Who benefits from this? Who is excluded? And why?' That questioning has been central to my advocacy work, to the brands I've built, and to the way I mentor other leaders. In short, neurodiversity isn't a label for difference; it's a source of strategic advantage if harnessed consciously and supported structurally. It can be problematic for neurotypical people to understand my thinking. For example, I don't acknowledge social hierarchy as I believe that as humans we are all equal. Societal construct would perhaps consider this naïve but when you remove the social barriers then life is less complex, and anything is possible.

# OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE

**Q. Only 1.85% of VC funding goes to female founders. You've been a vocal critic of these inequalities for years. In your view, what are the most damaging structural barriers still holding women back?**

The numbers are shocking, but they reflect systemic biases rather than isolated failures. There are several deeply entrenched structural barriers:

**1** Pattern-matching and bias in investment: Investors often fund people who remind them of themselves historically white, male, and linear in career trajectory. That leaves women, particularly those with unconventional paths or neurodiverse profiles, invisible in the investment landscape.

**2** Care responsibilities: Women disproportionately shoulder childcare and eldercare. Current funding processes rarely account for this, expecting founders to operate on male-centric timelines and availability norms.

**3** Network exclusion: Investment is relationship-driven, and informal networks continue to act as gatekeepers. Women outside London or established tech hubs often find themselves isolated from the conversations that lead to deals.

**4** Risk framing and scrutiny: Women founders are interrogated about risk; male founders are asked about potential. Women must justify why they are "investable," while men are invited to imagine scale. Gender stereotypes are still embedded in patriarchal structures and we need to restructure these from the ground up for the sake of equity and inclusion.

These barriers are structural because they are baked into policy, culture, and practice. They won't be solved by mentorship alone or by token funding initiatives or 'mentoring' or helping women to 'build confidence' we have this already; they require intentional redesign of the entire ecosystem, from investor education to funding criteria, to measurement of success.

**Q. Desk2Educate blends commercial innovation with genuine social purpose. What inspired the concept, and what change are you aiming to drive through it?**

Desk2Educate came from a very simple but urgent realisation: education in the UK is failing to equip all children equally for the digital and social economy. Schools struggle with infrastructure, training, and resources, and the gap between well-funded and under-resourced schools continues to widen. I've spent decades observing innovation ecosystems thrive in tech and entrepreneurship while education lags, and I wanted to bring the same principles of agility, data-informed decisions, scalable solutions into being.

We are not a charity, but a subscription based edtech business. It's systemic change. Desk2Educate is designed to give learners tools and frameworks that are scalable and sustainable; to enable entrepreneurial learners to understand their learning styles and have executive education and leadership development tailored to them it will help to close the digital divide that too often dictates life outcomes. By combining commercial discipline with social purpose (UN SDG's 4,5,8 and 10), we're proving that impact-driven initiatives can also be financially sustainable and that sustainability amplifies

social impact over the long term. It will also help to bridge the skills gap from school to work and aid start-ups to scale-up, so it is in itself an economic growth engine.



**Q:** Through your SME community at StartUp Disruptors, you've supported entrepreneurs with clarity, confidence, and commercial direction. What's the biggest misconception founders still have about building a sustainable, investor-ready business?

The biggest misconception is that investment is the starting point, rather than a lever to amplify an already viable business. Founders

often believe that if they can secure funding, growth and success will automatically follow. That's a dangerous assumption. Investors can accelerate growth, but they cannot create product-market fit, customer retention, or operational discipline from scratch.

Many founders also undervalue resilience and repeatability. Early-stage companies often focus on vision and innovation, which is critical, but they neglect the foundational mechanics: revenue streams, scalable processes, governance, and team dynamics. Without these, a business is fragile, and investment will simply accelerate the path to failure rather than sustainable growth. True investor-readiness requires a holistic view: clarity in purpose, robustness in operations, and courage in leadership. For women however investment is rarely or unlikely to come and this is leaving over £250BN per annum on the table for the UK in terms of economic growth (source The Rose Review), so women have to use savings, bootstrap or crowdfund. These should not be seen as viable options as the whole investment market is seemingly closed for business if you are a woman. This is slowly changing, but it needs to accelerate to be more meaningful.

6. Your work across the Portsmouth and Solent region has made you a central figure in the South Coast innovation community. What makes this ecosystem special, and where do you see its untapped potential?

The South Coast has a unique DNA: a combination of deep technical expertise, maritime and defence heritage, and an emerging tech-savvy entrepreneurial community. It's not a clone of London or Cambridge; it has its own rhythm, its own talent, and its own potential.

Where we fall short is cohesion. There are

# OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE

pockets of brilliance; university research, SME innovation, creative industries but they are too siloed and often work against one another. If we could intentionally connect these nodes, facilitate knowledge-sharing, and build funding pathways that remain local, the region could become a powerhouse for innovation that balances quality of life with economic impact. There's also untapped potential in talent retention: if we invest in infrastructure, mentoring, and digital literacy locally, young innovators won't feel compelled to leave for larger hubs, and the ecosystem can mature organically.

**Q:** You've collaborated closely with the University of Portsmouth Business School. How has that partnership helped shape the next generation of innovators and leaders?

The partnership has been mutually transformative. For students, it has brought real-world entrepreneurial insight into the academic environment not just theory but lived experience. They see what it takes to build a business under constraints, how to navigate ambiguity, and how to lead with integrity.

From my side, access to rigorous research and emerging insights into behavioural science, AI, and innovation theory has been invaluable. It's allowed me to refine the support we provide to founders, ensuring it's grounded in evidence, not anecdote. Beyond the curriculum, we've also co-created mentorship networks and innovation labs that act as bridges between theory and practice. The ultimate outcome is a generation of leaders who understand that innovation is a discipline: systemic, intentional, and human-centred.

**Q:** You've become a leading advocate for women's economic empowerment. If you could redesign the funding landscape for women from the ground up, what would the "Becky Lodge blueprint" look like?

If I were redesigning the landscape, it would be guided by three principles: equity, empowerment, and impact.

**EQUITY:** Funding criteria should recognise diverse career paths, care responsibilities, and intersectional disadvantage as assets, not risks. A woman who has been balancing eldercare and launching a business demonstrates resilience and strategic prioritisation, qualities investors should value alongside experience and career pedigree.

**EMPOWERMENT:** Women-led capital is critical. We need UK-wide investment vehicles run by women, deploying capital with the explicit goal of unlocking growth in untapped female-led markets. Mentorship, network access, and commercial skill-building would be embedded, not optional. I would like to see legislative change through the UK Government as exemplified in Canada, this would allow for tax breaks for female founded businesses and a commitment to tangible DEI.

**IMPACT:** Funding should not be short-term. It must support businesses through scaling challenges, internationalisation, and leadership development. Success metrics should include sustainable revenue growth, jobs created, and societal impact, not just ROI on paper.

The blueprint is about unleashing half of the UK's economic potential, not "helping women" in a tokenistic sense. We make up 51% of the UK population after all, but are woefully supported in business.

**IF I WERE  
REDESIGNING  
THE LANDSCAPE,  
IT WOULD BE  
GUIDED BY THREE  
PRINCIPLES: EQUITY,  
EMPOWERMENT,  
AND IMPACT.**

**Q:** We would describe you as both a disruptor and a force for good. Would you agree and how do you balance challenging broken systems with supporting the people who are trying to navigate them?

I would agree with that description, though I'd nuance it: I see myself as a constructive disruptor. Disruption for me is not about noise or antagonism; it's about intervention with purpose. Systems become broken when they fail to serve the

people they were designed to support and when they perpetuate inequity, exclusion, or inefficiency. I feel a responsibility to challenge those systems, not just for myself, but for those whose voices are silenced or overlooked.

Balancing disruption with support is an ongoing practice. I recognise that most people inside these systems are doing their best under the constraints they inherit. They are not villains; they are constrained actors. So my approach combines accountability with empathy: push hard on structures, policies, and processes that are unjust or ineffective, while offering guidance, mentorship, and advocacy for the people who are navigating them.

This dual focus; challenge the system, uplift the individual to me is critical. If we only disrupt without support, we risk creating chaos that leaves the very people we aim to help behind. If we only support without challenging the system, we perpetuate inequity. True leadership requires both courage and compassion in equal measure.

**Q:** For women founders, neurodiverse leaders, and the next generation of innovators, what's the one message you wish someone had given you earlier in your journey?

I wish someone had told me: your difference is your power, not your liability and if it doesn't feel right then challenge it and if necessary - leave. Early in my career, I spent far too much energy trying to fit into boxes that weren't designed for someone like me, as a woman, as a neurodiverse thinker, as a founder with unconventional priorities. That effort cost time, emotional energy, and even opportunities. Women are taught to be liked

# OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE

and be 'nice'. You don't have to do this; you just need to be yourself; contribute and show all the qualities that you have loudly. Do not shrink yourself.

Your difference, whether in perspective, approach, or lived experience is often exactly what allows you to see opportunities others miss, to innovate at the edges, and to lead authentically. The second part of the advice I would give is: protect your boundaries fiercely. Energy is finite. If you don't guard it, the system, with all its biases and expectations, will consume it. Finally, don't outsource your self-belief. The only person who can sustain it is you, and it will carry you through decisions, rejections, and setbacks that others will never fully understand.

Lastly, don't take people at face value. Believe in actions and not words. Some claiming to be allies are not. They will show themselves (as will the truth) in the fullness of time. Silence and patience overcome all obstacles, stoicism has its own rewards, cultivate it.

**OUTRO:** Becky Lodge has built a track record that speaks for itself: championing female founders, elevating neurodiverse voices, and launching ventures that address real gaps in the market. Her work has created a measurable impact in the Solent region and has resonated across all corners of the UK.

She's unafraid to challenge when women and minorities are disadvantaged. That directness has made her a significant voice and leader in the UK innovation and tech ecosystems.

The work continues. Digital Edge will be watching what comes next.





# Engineering the AI ready Enterprise

We build the data and AI foundations that power the highly regulated industries.

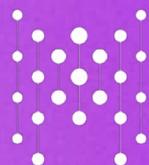
Our teams specialise in complex engineering, modern data platforms, MLOps, and AI orchestration at enterprise scale.

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Where critical programmes matter, we deliver.



[info@marionete.co.uk](mailto:info@marionete.co.uk)



**marionete**<sup>™</sup>

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## AI Strategy & Adoption for Regulated Industries

- AI Readiness & Operating Model
- Responsible & Trustworthy AI
- GenAI & Agentic AI Use-Case Prioritisation



## Insurance Market Expertise

- Lloyd's Blueprint II enablement
- Underwriting, Claims & DA automation
- AI-driven operational efficiency
- Cyber Insurance & Specialty Line data architectures



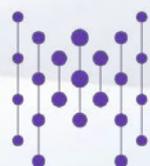
## Enterprise Data Engineering

- Modern Data Platforms
- Event-Driven Architectures
- Cloud-Native Data Integration
- Unified Governance



## AI Delivery & MLOps

- Model Lifecycle Automation
- MLflow, Feature Stores & Observability
- High-trust productionisation frameworks



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# TOP 10

This isn't just another tech roundup. Top 10 is your curated journey through the most compelling stories in technology today, handpicked for their potential to transform industries, challenge conventional thinking, or simply blow your mind.



# TOP 10 CHRISTMAS GADGETS OF ALL TIME:

“FROM PIXEL DREAMS TO  
SMART MACHINES: The Gifts  
That Defined a Generation”

Christmas and tech go hand in hand. Every era has had that must-have gadget—the one that dictated playground status, caused retail stampedes, and left wrapping paper flying across living rooms. From the 8-bit glory days to today’s sci-fi-grade wearables, these are the ten Christmas tech icons that shaped culture.



BATTERY

Nintendo GAME BOY™

Nintendo GAME BOY™

TETRIS™

ORIGINAL  
GAME LINK  
GAME PACK

Original  
Nintendo  
Seal of  
Quality

THIS SIDE OUT  
CE COTE A L'EXTERIEUR  
HERAUSRAGENDE SEITE

01

# Nintendo Game Boy (1989)

The handheld that defined portable gaming. Tetris, Pokémon, Super Mario Land—every stocking it touched created a lifelong gamer. Rugged, simple, and endlessly addictive, the Game Boy was Christmas for an entire generation.

# Tamagotchi (1996)

Digital pets that demanded constant attention... and we loved them for it. The Tamagotchi craze swept the globe, turning festive mornings into frenzies of feeding, cleaning, and panic-reviving. Primitive? Yes. Legendary? Absolutely.



SONY

walkman

CASSETTE PLAYER

WM-B12



# 03

» TOP 10 - CHRISTMAS GADGETS OF ALL TIME

## Sony Walkman

(1979-90s Xmas staple)

Few gifts made people feel cooler. The Walkman transformed the way we listened to music, turning holidays into mixtape-fuelled escapes. Suddenly, a pair of foam-padded headphones meant independence.

**DIGITAL  
EDGE**

Back to the Future - Casio CA53W

## “Self-Adjusting” Watch (1980's)

Immortalised on Marty McFly’s wrist, the Casio calculator watch became one of the most sought-after retro gadgets. A Christmas icon that blended sci-fi style with nerd-level practicality.



CASIO OUTATIME since 1985

PM 10:58 SU 50

ADJ MODE/C

WATER RESIST

DUAL TIME

0 0 0 +

ALM ON-OFF DATE/ST-HOUR

4 5 6 X

SIG ON-OFF

1 2 3 -

LAP-RESET

START-STOP

PM = +

WR

CASIO

3558

CA-500WE

WR

AUTO-CALENDAR

ASSISTANT  
BACK  
1A

© UCS LLC and Amblin

S-15720Y



# 05

» TOP 10 - CHRISTMAS GADGETS OF ALL TIME

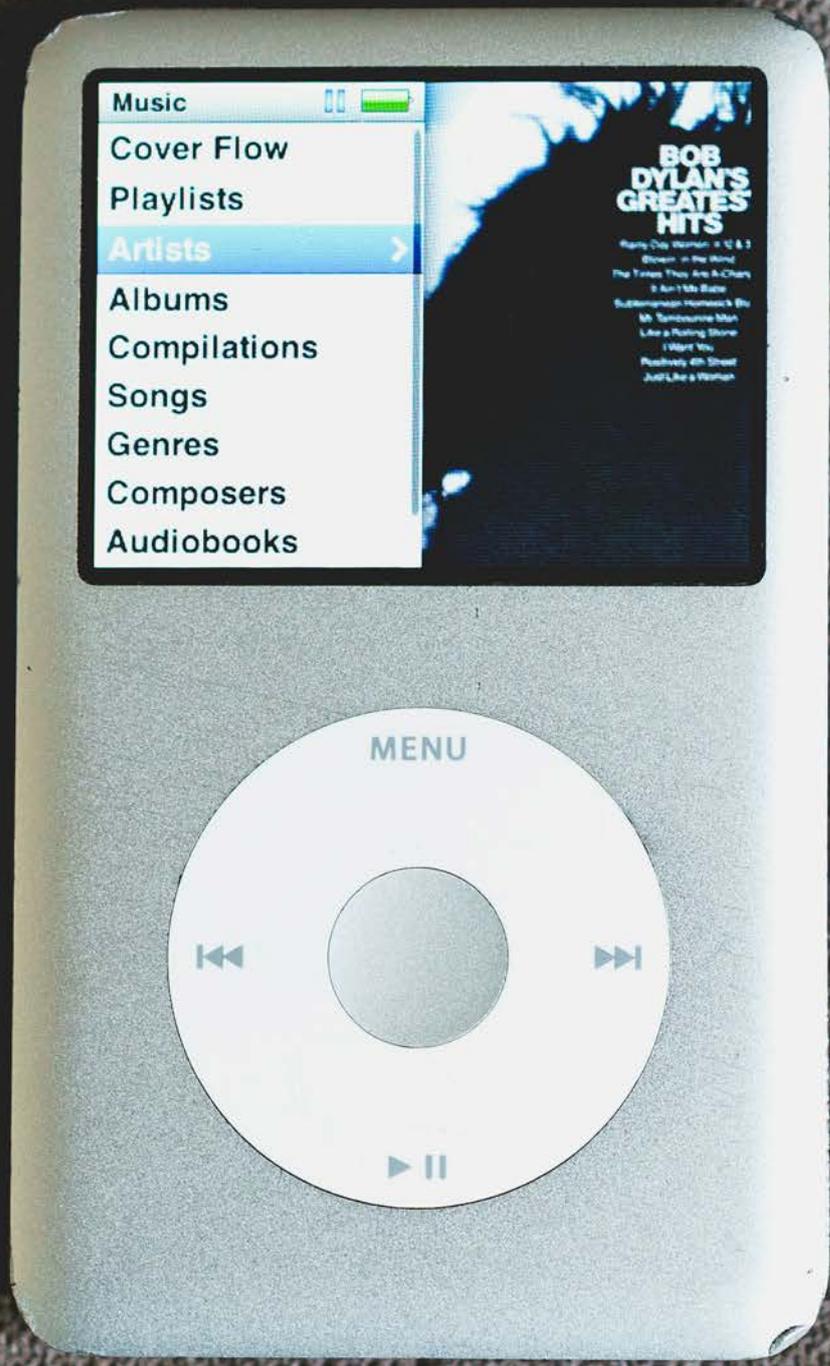
## Furby (1998)

Creepy? Yes. Lovable? Somehow, also yes. The Furby mania made it one of the hardest Christmas toys to find. Its blinking eyes and bizarre chatter earned it a place in festive folklore.

**DIGITAL  
EDGE**

# iPod (2001)

“1,000 songs in your pocket” was the Christmas miracle no one knew they needed. Sleek, white, game-changing—Apple’s iPod didn’t just top wishlists; it reinvented the music industry.



Music

Cover Flow

Playlists

Artists

Albums

Compilations

Songs

Genres

Composers

Audiobooks

**BOB DYLAN'S GREATEST HITS**

- Blowin' in the Wind
- The Times They Are a-Changin'
- A Hard Day's Night
- Subterranean Homesick Blues
- Mr. Tambourine Man
- Like a Rolling Stone
- I Want You
- Positively 4th Street
- Just Like a Woman

MENU





SONY



SELECT

ANALOG

PlayStation

START



# 07

» TOP 10 - CHRISTMAS GADGETS OF ALL TIME

## Playstation 2 (2000)

Still the best-selling console of all time, the PS2 ruled Christmas for years. With blockbusters like GTA, Final Fantasy, and Gran Turismo, it turned holiday breaks into marathon gaming sessions.

**DIGITAL  
EDGE**

# Microsoft Kinect (2010)

Motion-controlled gaming reached its peak with Kinect. For one glorious Christmas, living rooms became dance studios, bowling alleys, and chaotic family battlegrounds.



Microsoft



amazon

# 09

» TOP 10 - CHRISTMAS GADGETS OF ALL TIME

## Amazon Echo (2014)

AI entered the home in a big way with the first Echo. “Alexa, play Christmas music” became a festive command heard worldwide. A modern seasonal staple that marked the smart home era.

**DIGITAL  
EDGE**

# 10

## Oculus Quest (2019)

The gift that made VR truly mainstream. No wires, no PC, no fuss—just jaw-dropping immersion. For many, Christmas morning 2019 was spent dodging virtual zombies and painting in 3D air.



## The Gifts That Keep on Giving

From pocket calculators to pocket universes, these Christmas gadgets represent more than tech—they mark moments. Moments of excitement, discovery, nostalgia, and the kind of magic only the holiday season brings.



# Behind **the** Solutions

Digital Edge's regular deep-dive into the major tech vendors and solution providers driving enterprise innovation.

Each feature uncovers the story behind the technology and services — from the challenges they solve to the teams behind the scenes and the customers they empower.



## Interview with Greg Freeman, *Founder and CEO*

» You founded Data Literacy Academy to close one of the biggest gaps in modern organisations, the ability to actually understand and use data. What was the moment you realised this wasn't a nice to have, but a critical business competency?

I wish there was a moment when it came down like a lightning bolt and I understood it. But as a leader on the commercial side, it became evident that the better I got at understanding and working with data, the more it helped me understand my audience, the way we made money, where we made money and where we didn't make money.



But a lot of other non-technical commercial leaders just didn't seem to have that insight. As the market, and the data industry, evolved, the large thought leadership organisations started to take it way more seriously. For instance Gartner raised it up from #7 on the list of things that would keep data leaders in their jobs to #2. It just became apparent that enabling the business beyond the technology and its spend was going to be the thing that opened the success and value realisation of data.

# Behind **the** Solutions

Powering Data-Driven Transformation across Industry





# Data Literacy Academy



Equally, in the last three years, the evolution of accessible AI in society and business has been extremely rapid, which meant that 12 to 18 months ago, it was a total no-brainer to start going after the AI literacy space as well. But with both of these, it is purely about realising value and business success. There is no other reason to use data in business and AI if it's not for successful outcomes for stakeholders, whether those are monetary stakeholders or just public sector audiences. So for me, it's all about opening up the world of business with data and AI.

**Many leaders believe data literacy is solved by buying more technology. From your perspective, what's the most common misconception companies have about becoming genuinely data-driven?**

The idea that technology is a silver bullet has been widely pushed by Silicon Valley. I don't know if people feel that technology will solve data literacy, but I think they believe technology will solve data and that is slightly different.

I see two big misconceptions. Number one, that it will be solved organically and we won't have to be intentional about how we bring the people on the journey and that we don't have to be intentional about how we embed data and AI literacy and data culture within the organisation. And the second major one is that leaders, especially senior leaders, can treat this as somebody else's problem. All they have to do is put a bit of lip service to it and then somebody else will sort it. That isn't the case at all.

In the same way as technology won't be a silver bullet and won't solve it, businesses won't be successful with this unless leadership at the most senior level materially champions and sponsors it. Another barrier is that senior leaders on the commercial side of businesses don't understand this space well enough, they don't understand the art of the possible well enough, and therefore they don't champion data and AI to a meaningful enough level to generate a successful culture within the organisation.



# Behind **the** Solutions

Powering Data-Driven Transformation Across Industry

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**Data Literacy Academy focuses heavily on practical capability building, not theoretical training. What does effective data literacy look like inside an organisation that's truly got it right?**

Great question. I think fundamentally it comes down to the way it's measured. Doing it the right way includes understanding: "What mindset changes are we observing and can we measure? What behaviour changes are we observing and can we measure, and what realised value are we observing and can we measure? This approach drives the business to think about delivering data literacy in a different way.

If you're looking for that type of outcome, with emphasis on outcome, not output or vanity metric, you wouldn't make this a tick box exercise. Everybody knows that without really meaningful change, without actually engaging people and getting them to think differently and behave differently, you are not going to achieve those types of outcomes.

I encourage leaders to be more intentional and more respectful of the need to do practical capability building. We can't assume we've nailed it if all that matters is that people show up with smiley faces. We've got to look at what matters: things like technology adoption, behaviour change, data quality and governance improvements.

And if you're not, and you're just measuring how many people got trained and certified, then all of a sudden you are in the realm of it just being training for training's sake.

**You work with organisations at different stages of maturity. What's one example where improving data literacy unlocks a measurable business impact, whether in decision making, productivity or culture?**

I think one of the things that gets overlooked is the fact that a good, responsible data and AI governance culture is underpinned by literacy. One of my favorite pieces of work we've done recently is with Raven Housing Trust, who are a housing association based in Surrey. They set out with a really difficult challenge to improving their governance culture. It's tricky because they've got such a broad range of job roles, from senior executives right down to manual

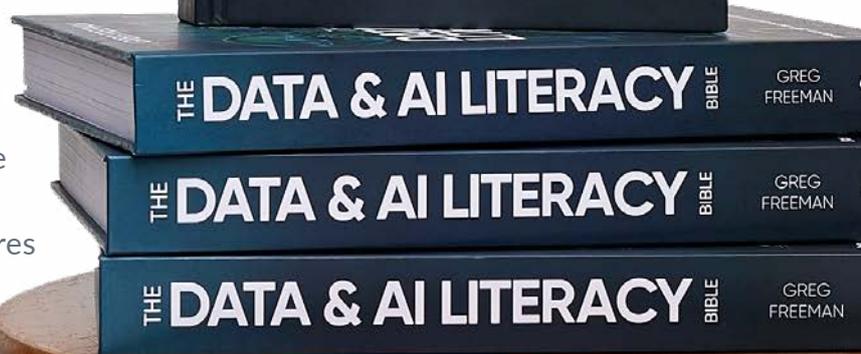
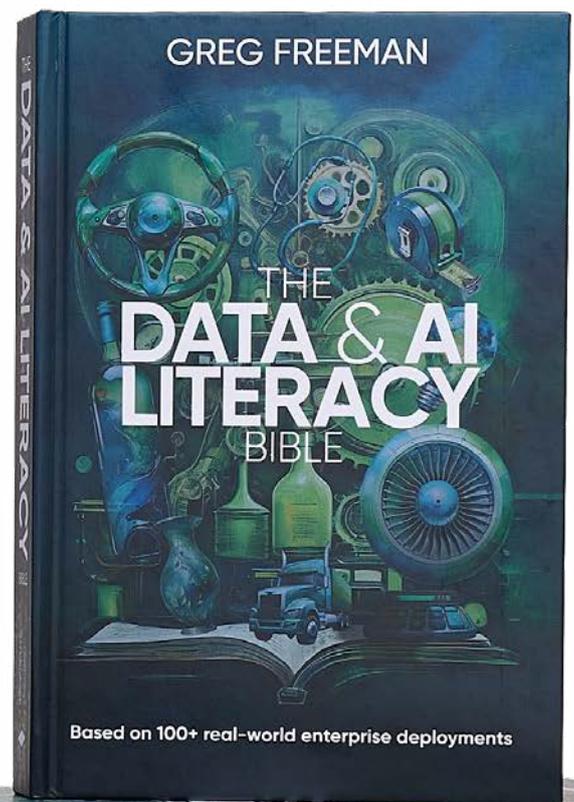


# Data Literacy Academy

workers who are going into people's homes, changing light bulbs and painting walls.

But they've been doing the programme in a thoughtful way. They've been engaging their data stewards and owners in a meaningful live learning path, whilst having that supported by really good executive engagement. From the CEO downwards, they all agreed to be a part of the programme, engage in the workshops and meet the teams in real life. What they have achieved is a significant uplift in the awareness and the adoption of governance, adoption of data quality.

And I think that's a really good measurable business impact. It's currently one of the biggest things that the "new" regulator cares about. I see this in financial services: the Financial Conduct Authority is becoming more cognizant of the need for good data and AI practices, good AI practices, which the housing sector is facing as well. So the next time Raven Housing Trust is assessed, they'll be able to provide clear data points and communicate a good story to the stakeholders that matter. And that's driving impact.





# Behind **the** Solutions

Powering Data-Driven Transformation Across Industry





# Data Literacy Academy

## Looking ahead, what new skills or mindsets will the next generation of data literate professionals need as AI becomes embedded in everyday business workflows?

I think a key part of the data and AI mindset is firstly accepting that it's going to be a part of the world we work in. At the moment I talk a lot about hype cycles and the fact that it very much feels like AI is almost at the peak.

And I wonder if some people think this might be a bit like blockchain or the Metaverse, where it was popular, people talked loads about it, there was a media storm about it and then it disappeared. But I think the reality is that it's going to be more like cloud computing, or going a little bit further back, more like the internet. People first doubted that the internet would have an impact on business

longer term. But now we all see it as the foundation of most things within the digital landscape.

So firstly people have to get their heads around that. That data is more prevalent in their working life, the expectations around that are growing, and then furthermore, AI is not going to go away. And I think it's going to become something that does do parts of our jobs for us, to enable us to be more valuable, deliver more success and drive outcomes.

Therefore it's key to ask: "What can I do within my working environment to make myself as valuable as possible by using data better, by using AI better, and therefore making more successful, higher value decisions off the back of that."

### » DATA LITERACY ACADEMY AT A GLANCE

» **CEO:** Greg Freeman

» **FOUNDED:** 2022

» **HEADOFFICE:** Birmingham, England

» **WORKFORCE:** 51-200

» **WEBSITE:** [www.dl-academy.com](http://www.dl-academy.com)



By

**David Bruce**

*Chief Data Officer, Financial  
Ombudsman Service*

WHY

**CONSENSUS**

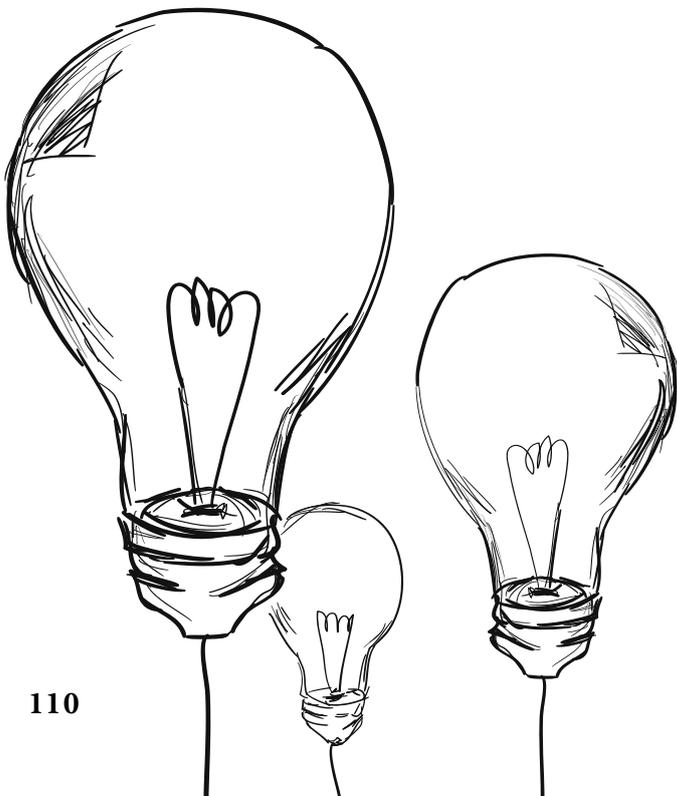
IS KILLING

INNOVATION

AND **WHAT**

**TO DO**

**INSTEAD**



## HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO A HOSPITAL WITH AN AILMENT?

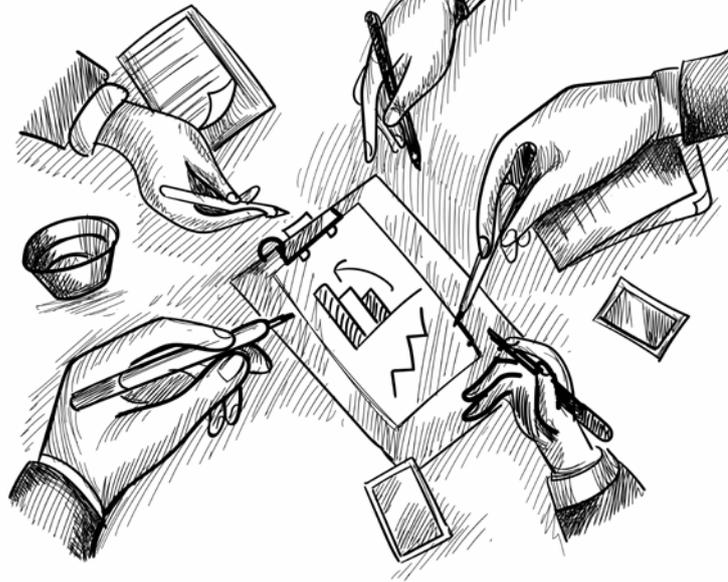
The medical team runs diagnostics, applies expertise, and recommends a treatment plan. Now imagine if, before deciding, they asked everyone in the waiting room for their opinion, the tradesperson, the finance executive, the motivational speaker, even the CEO. Would you trust that process? Would the doctor's voice carry the same weight if no one knew their credentials?

Sounds absurd, right? Yet this is exactly what happens in business every day.

We've built a culture where "everyone should contribute and all opinions matter." Noble in theory, but dangerous in practice. Sometimes, your opinion, and mine, doesn't matter. In fact, in some cases, it's irresponsible to weigh in. If my doctor asks for a consult, I'll politely decline.

So, the next time you're invited to a meeting with a diverse group to reach consensus on a complex business problem, pause and ask:

Are we the right people to make this decision? And should this even be a consensus call?



## THE PROBLEM WITH CONSENSUS

Consensus-based decision-making has its place, large-scale changes that require broad buy-in, for example. But when it becomes the default, especially in ambiguous or fast-moving environments like AI, it's a recipe for disaster.

Consensus is slow. It struggles with ambiguity. It often delivers a "bag of bits" with little return of investment. And when results disappoint, the usual fix? Add more people and more steps, making everything slower and the final product worse. With 70–95% of AI use cases failing, we need a change!

### Three Decision Models You Need to Know

Instead of defaulting to consensus for AI, consider the three models in isolation:

	(Military) Top-Down Approach	(Government) Consensus-Based Approach	(Cellular) Decentralised Approach
	A hierarchical decision-making process in which decisions are made by top-level executives and cascaded down to lower levels of the organisation	A participatory decision-making process that involves reaching a shared agreement among all stakeholders through discussion and collaboration	A distributed decision making process where decision authority is delegated to lower levels of the organisation, allowing for more autonomy and faster decision making
<b>Pros</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Provides clear direction</li> <li>2. Creates alignment</li> <li>3. Efficient decision-making process</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Inclusive decision-making process</li> <li>2. Promotes collaboration</li> <li>3. Enables buy-in from stakeholders</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Empowers lower-level employee</li> <li>2. Faster decision making process</li> <li>3. Promotes innovation</li> </ol>
<b>Cons</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of input and involvement can lead to disengagement</li> <li>2. Potential resistance to change</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Time consuming</li> <li>2. Difficult to reach consensus</li> <li>3. Potential compromise on quality</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Potential lack of coordination</li> <li>2. Inconsistent decision making</li> <li>3. Potential duplication of efforts</li> </ol>

## HOW TO APPLY THEM

» Big AI change, lots of stakeholders? Start with Consensus but be aware that big-bang AI change, rarely works.

» Ambiguous business problem? Go Top-Down , set the direction so teams know what problems they're solving.

» Clear business problem, unknown solution? Go Decentralised , find the best person to crack it.

And here's the kicker: be ready to switch. Start top-down, then pivot to consensus when the solution impacts many. Move from consensus to decentralised when you get into the detail. The key is intentionality.



## FINAL THOUGHT

In the age of AI, ambiguity isn't a glitch, it's the operating system. And that reality exposes the limits of consensus like never before. When organisations default to broad agreement, they slow decisions, blur accountability, and produce solutions designed to keep everyone comfortable instead of driving real impact.

Consensus still matters but only when it's intentional, for decisions where alignment truly moves the needle. It's not the universal answer to every complex or time-sensitive challenge.

The leaders who win in this environment do something different: they choose their decision model with purpose. They know when to cut through the fog with a top-down call, when to hand the reins to an expert, and when consensus is the right lever for adoption. They switch gears deliberately because they understand this: AI demands an adaptive rhythm, not a democratic ritual.

So, which model do you lean on most? And when was the last time you changed course, not because the process told you to, but because the situation demanded it?



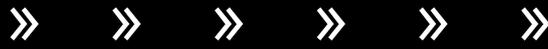
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The views expressed  
in my post represent  
my own opinions  
and not those of my  
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- David Bruce



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● A Hyve Event

ExCeL London  
21 - 23 January 2026



**Meet with me at**  
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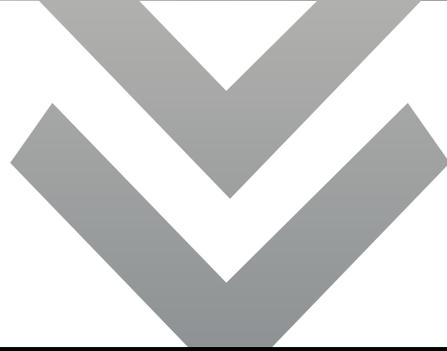
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## 4-5 FEB 2026 - OLYMPIA, LONDON



### TECHEX

TechEx Global brings together 200 speakers across 6 conferences to tackle the roadblocks on your roadmap to innovation-led business transformation. From cyber security to GenAI, TechEx offers a one-stop resource for tech-led teams.

## 4-5 MARCH - EXCEL LONDON



### TECH SHOW LONDON

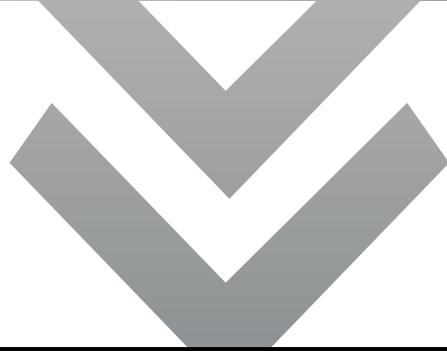
Tech Show London is the UK's most important B2B technology expo and conference. Held on 4-5 March 2026 at Excel London, the event connects 17,340+ decision-makers across AI, cloud, cybersecurity, and more.

## 16-20 MARCH 2026



### UK TECH WEEK

UK Tech Week showcases the tech innovation, expertise, and talent across the nation and champions the vibrant technological ecosystem in the UK. Here, you will discover the latest advancements, create strategic and meaningful connections, and amplify the collective voice of UK tech.



## TBC -



### WOMEN IN TECH [UNFILTERED]

Women In Tech [Unfiltered] is part of Manchester Tech Festival and is dedicated to breaking down the barriers that prevent true diversity in the tech industry. Taking place at DiSH MCR, the event will feature a series of thought-provoking talks, interactive workshops and panel discussions.

## 27 APRIL – 1 MAY 2026 - MANCHESTER



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The AI Summit Series brings together tech enthusiasts and investors from across the globe to network, learn and showcase ground-breaking technology solutions for business. We look beyond hype and buzzwords to focus on practical applications of AI technologies.

DIGITAL  
EDGE



# Coming Up in Issue 07 of Digital Edge

The next issue of Digital Edge will be packed with exclusive insights from industry leaders who are shaping the future of technology, procurement, supply chain and manufacturing.

If you're passionate about AI, data, digital transformation, cybersecurity, cloud, and the latest in supply chain and manufacturing tech, you won't want to miss this!

## Inside Issue 07:



*Exclusive Interview:*

**Bronwyn Barnett**

Director of Product at AI & Automation OVO



*Exclusive Interview:*

**Greg Steel**

Data Leadership in Global Banking



*Exclusive Interview:*

**Carly Macic**

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**Michelle Conway**

Lead Machine Learning & AI Engineer

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women  
in  
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women  
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data

**26TH MARCH 2026**  
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