DIGITAL EDGE

ROBIN SUTARA

Field CDO at Databricks

TALKING AI ENABLEMENT AT THE EDGE

TOP 10

BIGGEST TECH INVESTMENT MISTAKES

+Plus
VIP PARMAR

GLOBAL HEAD OF DATA MANAGEMENT AT WPP

Regular Feature:
LIVING ON THE EDGE
SOKITO:
For The Love Of The Game

Plus all our regular features:
OUR VOICE Woman in Data ● GLOBAL TECH NEWS ● TOP 10 ● EVENTS & more.

ImpactOS

The Shift in Public Sector Social Value Management

From 'Bid-Stage Only' to 'Whole-Life Evaluation'

Before

(Traditional Approach)

- Social value **only evaluated at tender stage.**
- Commitments often **generic** and hard to measure.
- **Little or no follow-up** once contract awarded.
- Reporting ad hoc — **reactive, spreadsheet-based.**
- Difficult to **prove delivery** to buyers or stakeholders.

After

(With UK Procurement Act 2023 & Sector Policy Shift)

- **Whole-life contract monitoring** – commitments tracked from award to completion.
- **KPIs tied to specific outcomes** (e.g., apprenticeships, local spend, CO_2 reductions).
- **Regular reporting** (quarterly/annual) built into supplier obligations.
- **Digital portals** replace manual spreadsheets — live progress dashboards.
- Evidence base to **protect future bid success** and maintain supplier reputation.

Sector Convergence

Sector	Before	Details
Central Govt	PPN 02/20 tender scoring; minimal contract monitoring.	Mandatory bid-stage SV + growing requirement for in-contract reporting & PPN 06/21 carbon plans (>£5m). PPN 002 Social value.
Local Govt	Social Value Act 2012 "consider" duty; evaluation varied widely.	Many councils now require quarterly/annual SV delivery reports; portals in use.
NHS	Carbon plans (>£5m) + 10% SV tender weighting; weak post-award follow-up.	SV commitments linked to NHS net zero & workforce KPIs; reporting tied to annual sustainability plans.

How ImpactOS Delivers

- Centralised 'Single Source of Truth' – All commitments and results in one place.
- Cross-Sector Ready – Aligns with central, local, and NHS standards.
- Audit-Ready Evidence – Supports UK Procurement Act compliance.
- Bid-Ready Outputs – Pull verified SV delivery data straight into tenders.

EDITORS NOTES

Welcome to Digital Edge Magazine – Issue 05, our special Data & AI Awards edition celebrating the innovators, leaders, and game-changers redefining what's possible with data.

This issue shines a spotlight on our Digital Edge Data & AI Award winners — a clean sweep for women in data leadership, featuring Robin Sutara, Field CTO at Databricks; and Rosanne Werner, CEO at Xcelerate IQ. Each brings a unique perspective on how data and AI are transforming industries, empowering people, and building more inclusive futures.

Their success provides the perfect lead-in to our brand-new regular feature, "Our Voice – Real Stories, Real Action, Real Change." In this debut edition, the formidable Roisin McCarthy and Fiona Sweeney of Women in Data™ set the tone with an inspiring call for collaboration and authenticity. Their message flows through our subsequent interviews with Cathy Arnold at Leeds University and Dawn Carter at Canada Life — two data

leaders driving meaningful change inside their organisations. Balancing the gender scales, we also hear from Vip Parmar, CDO at WPP, who offers a behind-the-scenes look at data strategy inside one of the world's largest media networks. Our Behind the Solutions feature turns the spotlight on Eden Smith, exploring how their innovative model is supporting the next generation of data talent.

And, as always, we round out the issue with our regular insights — including a fascinating look at sustainability in sportswear through the lens of Sokito football boots, proving that technology, purpose, and performance can coexist beautifully.

So settle in, get inspired, and join us in celebrating the people and partnerships driving the next wave of digital leadership.

James Pepper
Editor-in-Chief, Digital Edge Magazine

Personalised coaching for data and business leaders

BlueSky DataWorks is a specialized consultancy dedicated to empowering data professionals in today's complex data landscape.

Led by Jennifer Agnes, a seasoned executive coach and former Chief Data Officer, the company empowers data executives to excel in their roles through targeted executive coaching, addressing common challenges like imposter syndrome which affects over 70% of professionals at some point during their career.

By partnering with **BlueSky** DataWorks, data executives gain the tools and confidence to make strategic decisions, overcome self-doubt, and drive professional and organizational success.

find out more

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FRONT COVER:

ROBIN SUTARA
Field CDO at Databricks

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Talking AI enablement at the edge

and much more…

ROBIN SUTARA »

Field CDO at Databricks

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AWARD WINNER

Data & AI Leadership Award

"I'm probably the most non-traditional technologist you'll ever meet," Robin tells us. With academic achievements including a Master of Law in Intellectual Property and a career that began with a non-data role in the US Army, Robin has since risen to the role of CDO at Microsoft UK and now is Field CDO at Databricks, the company that's on a mission to simplify and democratise Data and AI, helping data and AI teams solve the world's toughest problems.

It's clear her experience is as broad as it is deep, making it little wonder that Robin's been recognised in the DataIQ 100 Enablers 2023 and recently our Digital Edge Data & AI Leadership Award, recognising her exceptional impact, innovation and leadership.

"

AI enablement is a big conversation these days, and how do you do that in a governed, controlled way?

Though very deserving of this award, it's something she wasn't expecting, "I have to admit, it was a total surprise. The UK community has a very strong data and AI community across the entire ecosystem and so for me, it is a complete honour to be recognised. I know all of the nominees this year were completely amazing, so I'm super honoured to be recognised in this way."

We set out to discover Robin's take on what's driving successful digital transformation, any shifts she's seeing in how enterprises are approaching data strategy today and how she's supporting organisations across continents to execute against their data and AI strategy. Plus, she shares some of the lessons she's learned as a woman rising into leadership roles and how she's helping others on their way.

AN IMPRESSIVE CAREER DRIVING DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

Robin brought her 23 years of experience from Microsoft into her role at Databricks, where she's been working for the last three years – first based in the UK, now in the USA.

At Microsoft, her first role was delivering IE5 support on Windows 3.1. Having continued her career journey across multiple technical and business roles, her final positions there were Chief Operating Officer of Azure Data Engineering and Chief Data Officer of Microsoft UK, where she supported the UK leadership team to be more data-driven while also supporting their UK customer base.

Now she's travelling across the world with Databricks in a role that sees her, as she says, "Working with some amazing organisations, helping them figure out how to tackle their data and AI strategy and execute against that."

"Databricks is a very technical organisation and we have a great technical platform. But oftentimes I find that organisations don't necessarily always struggle with the technology – it's often people or process, operating models, organisational design. AI enablement is a big conversation these days, and how do you do that in a governed, controlled way?"

Supporting organizations in Europe and the Americas, she's able to bring a more global perspective to their many customers.

Robin continues, "Databricks is on a phenomenal growth scale right now. I'm super fortunate that we have more than 20,000 customers that are using Databricks platform to solve their data fundamentals on how do they make sure that they have a single source of truth that their organisation can build their business insights and analytics on top of, as well as their experimentation around AI as and the traditional Machine Learning AI solutions that they're integrating."

Over her career, she's developed a deep knowledge of what truly drives successful digital transformation. And while she finds most organisations focus on the technology, for many of the organisations she works with, what's central is the people and the process.

Right now, a lot of Robin's conversations are based around this. She tells us, "Lately, I am spending a lot of time helping organisations think about 'How do you define what an AI enabled workforce means?'

"And that doesn't mean we treat everyone the same when it comes to AI, so how do we really start to think by persona and by domain area of expertise? What is the expectation for them to use and leverage AI to make them more productive?"

While workforces may be concerned about loss of roles, this isn't something Robin is witnessing, "What I'm actually seeing is organisations figuring out how to do more with the same number of people, not how to do more with less.

"The ones that are being the most successful have placed their focus on how they make sure that they're taking the people in the organisation along on that journey. How do they reassure them that it's not displacement roles? And how do they make sure that they are meeting them where they are based on their current maturity around data and AI – and take them on the transformational journey without it being focused just on technology and tools?"

CREATING A DATA CENTRIC MINDSET

The people and culture aspects of data transformation are key but can be challenging too. We wondered how, in her role and with her experience, Robin is supporting leaders to embed a truly data centric mindset across their teams.

She answers, "I think some of it is traditional change management. I think for many organisations, it is thinking about how you are designing your organisation in order to be able to empower that?"

While there's much talk about democratisation, Robin thinks it's more about enablement, "It's not necessarily forcing people to change, but how do we make sure that you are tying it to actual, tangible business outcomes so that they understand and it creates a desire in them to change?

"For example, I've spent the last week or so speaking to energy companies across the US and Canada. And that's an industry where hundreds of years' worth of data assets exist across an organisation.

"So how do we get them to attract net new talent, which I think is very interested in using AI to improve processes to minimise carbon footprint and achieve those societal, organisational and commercial benefits?

"But a lot of it is bringing the existing workforce along on the journey. How do we make sure that data teams are sitting with the business so that they understand the day in the life of an electrician or a nuclear engineer or whatever it might be, so that we stop giving this high level perspective from the centralised data team about what the business needs to do to change?

"How do we actually get to that closer integration? So, I'm talking to most organisations about what they think about AI enablement on the edge? How do we make

Strategic partnerships like Databricks' collaboration with Advancing Analytics are critical for accelerating customer success with data and AI. These partnerships bring together deep technical expertise and proven accelerators, enabling organizations to modernize their data platforms and achieve faster, measurable outcomes.

By working with partners, customers gain access to tailored solutions, best practices, and industry-specific guidance, making implementations smoother and more relevant to their needs. Advancing Analytics is a great example of true partnership. For example, they help enterprises integrate complex data sources such as SAP, optimize governance, and unlock advanced analytics and AI-driven insights. This reduces risk and ensures value is delivered quickly.

Collaborations are effective because they unite domain experts and technology leaders, streamline deployments, and foster continuous innovation. This ecosystem approach allows customers to focus on business outcomes while relying on partners like Databricks and Advancing Analytics to manage technical complexity and evolving requirements.
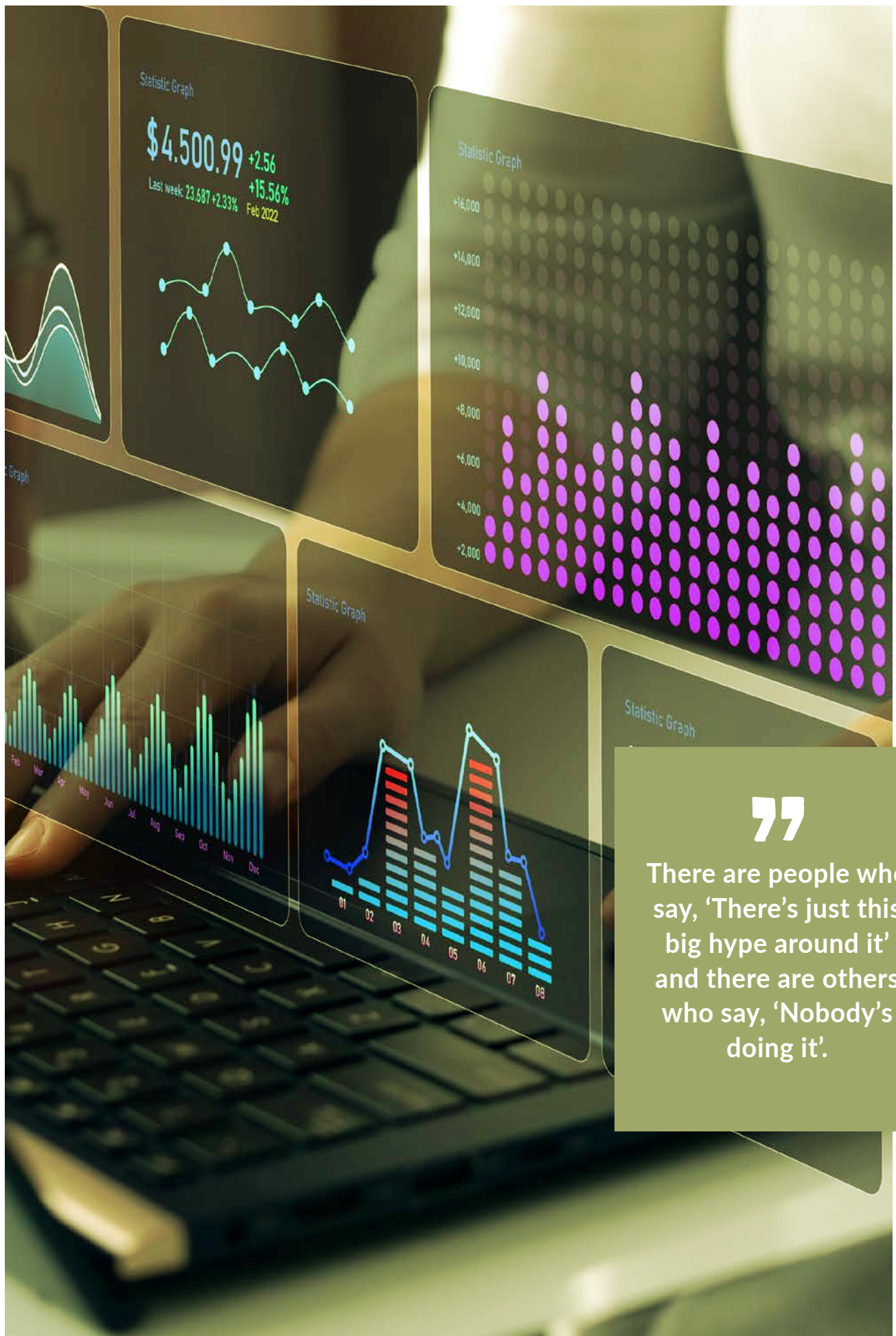
> **There are people who say, 'There's just this big hype around it' and there are others who say, 'Nobody's doing it'.**

sure that we have analysts and data scientists that are in their domain area of expertise – for example, they were a nuclear physicist at some point or they can do that translation layer between the two."

Robin is seeing many industries thinking about how to add this expertise to their data teams to complement the traditional STEM role. She points out, "You need that STEM talent and those capabilities, but how do we up-level some of these domain area of expertise too so we can have a community that exists at both of those resources, so that it's really clear line of sight on the return on the investment as well as driving that desire for those roles to culturally want to change their existing regular processes?"

SPOTTING SHIFTS IN DATA STRATEGY

With Databricks at the heart of the data and AI ecosystem, Robin has a vantage point from which to see how enterprises are approaching data strategy today and any trends that are occurring.

She's noticed many are still focused on the fundamentals. Conversations often centre on how to get data ready for AI, and how to make sure the right governance structures and policies are in place so the organisation can innovate at the edge in a controlled way that minimises risk at a time when regulatory and legislative requirements for AI and data are still shifting.

Robin expands on this, "I think many organisations are looking at it in a way that says, 'How do we make sure that we're meeting the fundamental ethical and moral requirements that we have as an organisation? And then how do we make sure that what we're building today has explainability, transparency – the basic fundamental governance structures that we know will be in place whenever regulatory or legislation continues to evolve?' I think that is a global trend."

She notes there are two schools of thought around AI, "There are people who say, 'There's just this big hype around it' and there are others who say, 'Nobody's doing it'. And while people who read that MIT study on the volume of failures that we're seeing in AI experimentation were looking at it quizzically, I'm actually not seeing that type of volume."

Instead what she's seeing is that most organisations she works with are actually at scale in production, rolling out AI solutions Robin shares, "Many of them are built on traditional AI, which has been around since the 70s.

"I've seen lots of organisations leverage the capabilities of generative AI and agentic systems to solve back-office process issues – things like internal policy aggregation and summarisation, things that they can very much control. I do see organisations actually rolling that out at scale globally. I think there's lots of opportunity for us to continue to see the evolution of that."

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"But the majority of the focus is how do we make sure that we're getting our data and the fundamentals and foundations in place? How do we continue to drive the existing AI and traditional machine learning use cases that we were already executing across the organisation? And then how do we make sure that we're minimising the risk and continuing to experiment as we're learning more and more in this generative AI, agentic AI future that we see in front of us?"

While these fundamentals including breaking out of silos, modernising, ensuring that the right governance structures are in place and enabling the organisation are something many organisations have in common globally, the legislative and regulatory requirements that exist around AI and data clearly vary for the organisations Robin works with based on their geography.

These differences can impact how organisations approach AI maturity and data-driven decision-making while working to comply with whichever requirements apply to them.

"I think that's where I see the biggest differences, how they're enforcing governance and policy to be able to support the legislative requirements. But in my opinion, when you start to extrapolate it, the fundamental requirements are the same.

"Do you have transparency? Can you do end-to-end lineage? Do you have explainability – can you actually explain to legislators, even if legislation doesn't exist today but will tomorrow, what transformation has happened? What model do you apply to it? What weightings? What's the algorithmic logic that went behind the AI that you're creating? What data products or AI products did it create? What consumers did it touch? What employees did it impact?

"I think all of that will be fundamental requirements regardless of a region, but right now it is very region-specific on how they're creating their governance structures to be able to support that."

LEADERSHIP IN THE AGE OF DATA AND AI

With AI now influencing almost every function of business, what does good leadership look like in Robin's opinion? She spends a lot of her time talking to execs and boards, so she's in a great position to share what works well.

"There are a couple of things that I've seen that have been very successful. I think for most organisations, where there is a strong innovation culture that's still within the governance requirements for the organisation, I see transparency and clarity from the leadership team.

> ## "I THINK ORGANISATIONS STRUGGLING ARE THE ONES THAT KEEP TELLING THE BUSINESS, 'JUST WAIT WHILE WE FIGURE IT OUT'.

"I think the ones that are super successful are the ones that say, 'We don't have everything figured out, but here's what you can do and we'll continue to work on these other aspects to make sure that we're mitigating them in a way that allows us to proceed and allows you to innovate without having to create your own separate governance, platform, technologies, tools, and so on.'

"So, I think for most organisations, it's that transparency between what you're building as a data leader, or an AI leader, or a technology leader and making sure that you're clearly communicating to the business what that's going to look like, as opposed to setting up roadblocks for them."

And when it comes to minimising risk while enabling innovation, Robin has some specific skills that support organisations to find the correct balance for them.

DUAL DOMAIN EXPERTISE

With a plan to be a lawyer at Microsoft, Robin went back to university where she added a Masters of Law in Intellectual Property to her Juris Doctorate qualification. While her career plans changed, her legal knowledge has been helpful in her data career – particularly when negotiating on technology risk.

"With a lack of legislation or regulatory requirements, I think legal and security officers tend to lean toward risk aversion and put in as many controls, policies and limitations around technology as possible to minimise the risk to the organisation. But oftentimes the business then feels stifled because they don't have the capability to innovate," she explains.

"I think a legal background gives me a great vantage point to go in and operate as a negotiator between the different

vested parties and the governance steering committee within an organisation to help them think about, 'Yes, there's the possible, but what's the probable when we think about your organisation?'

"Of the 62 risk factors that we know exist according to the Databricks Security Framework (which is also being adopted by NIST) standards, not all of those will apply to an organisation. So how do we make sure that we're only creating limitations and restrictions on the things that absolutely matter to the organisation? And how do we then enable the organisation to innovate where we don't necessarily have to lock it as tightly?"

Some of the softer skills she learned in law school have also proven to be beneficial in data, "If we think about storytelling, executive buy-in, a lot of that is no different than aggregating law and presenting to a judge – it's aggregating data, presenting it to the business, or to a board, or to a CEO.

"I think for my career, it's been super helpful to have that dual technology plus another domain area that I could bring a different perspective to."

And this isn't only limited to legal knowledge, as Robin is keen to mention, "This is why I love data, actually. I think there's so much transferability of other areas of study into data and technology. It's super exciting.

"You could be in fashion design and that can help you with user interfaces, or know foreign languages, which helps you think about how to do data science and navigate the different computer languages."

This is something Robin has experienced not only with her legal studies, but earlier in her career too, which started in the US Army. "I'm probably the most non-traditional technologist you'll ever meet. I did not study undergrad in a technology field.

"My first job was repairing electrical and weapon systems on Apache helicopters. And from there I got into data because we were looking to use Excel to track parts and the maintenance records of the Apaches."

"There's no better technology space than data and AI where non-traditional backgrounds are super valuable.

"I think having some level of domain area of expertise, having some knowledge that is non-technical, but you have a passion for technology and you can start to learn technology on top of it – that is where I think the real power is as we think about the future and the opportunity in front of us."

Welcoming people from different professional backgrounds into data isn't the only thing Robin is passionate about. She's also keen to attract more women into data and support them on the way to data leadership positions.

PROMOTING GENDER DIVERSITY

Robin is heavily involved in both Women in Data®, which has a 90,000 strong community of women and allies, and Women Leaders in Data and AI.

Robin explains, "I am the chair for North America expansion of Women in Data that we're currently working on as we continue to grow our footprint here in the US, which is a completely different market around DE&I and gender diversity and representation to the UK."

In addition to this, she was the founding member of Women Leaders in Data and Analytics in Europe, "I continue to maintain that membership here in the US. This is more focused on executive women and how do we get more female representation in leadership roles in data and technology, whereas Women in Data is for women at every level.

"They both have a phenomenal charter of how to make sure that we're driving and addressing the systemic issues that are precluding us from having more diverse representation across every level and making sure that we create that environment."

Being part of creating positive change is important to Robin, "I always think, if I can do something that will help the next generation be more successful than I was,

Driving Change from Boardrooms to Boat Clubs

Advancing Analytics works with organisations to make data accessible and valuable – we focus on adding strategic business value, not just solving challenges. Our approach combines technical expertise with a focus on outcomes that make a difference. As a Databricks Elite partner, Microsoft Solutions partner, and AWS Select partner, we deliver data and AI solutions that help clients achieve measurable results with tangible value.

But technology is only part of the story. The real difference comes from the people behind the projects - their skills, perspectives and commitment to doing things the right way. Because increased diversity and inclusivity benefits everybody, not just under-represented groups.

Our People at the Centre

Two of our team members, Dr Gavita Regunath and Tori Tompkins, illustrate how expertise and perspective intertwine to shape the way we work.

Gavita is our Chief AI Officer, Databricks MVP, Microsoft MVP and Forbes Technical Council member. Truly passionate about AI, Gavita's work ensures that solutions are designed responsibly and deliver long-term value. Working with Azure Databricks, she has helped clients productionise AI and GenAI, supporting innovation without compromising trust. "When teams reflect the world they serve, solutions become smarter and more inclusive," she says.
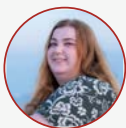
Tori, our Principal AI Consultant, is a Microsoft MVP and Trustee Board Member at Girls in Data. Her focus is on building frameworks to support ML, GenAI and Agents in production often focusing on measuring performance and fairness, using Databricks to scale testing and improve governance. Her recent work on large language model evaluation has shaped best practice for organisations exploring AI responsibly. "It's not just about performance, we've got a duty to measure fairness too, especially when the impact hits the real world," she explains.

A Project with Purpose:
Fulham Reach Boat Club

Our work with Fulham Reach Boat Club shows how data can support social impact. Fulham Reach Boat Club provides access to rowing for young people who might not otherwise have the opportunity, including disabled people, youth development, and prison programmes. Their challenge was to demonstrate the effect of their programmes to funders and stakeholders.

We developed a reporting solution using Power BI. This allowed Fulham Reach Boat Club to consolidate survey data and create interactive dashboards. The organisation now has further insights into quantitative and qualitative data, providing huge value - these insights strengthen funding applications and help Fulham Reach Boat Club plan for growth.

As Fulham Reach Boat Club's leadership put it, "Data has given us a voice. We can now show the difference we make - not just tell it." You can support this amazing charity's work by booking your next teambuilding event with them or joining one of their environmental days.

Why This Matters

Projects like Fulham Reach Boat Club succeed because they combine technical capability with an understanding of people. Diversity in data roles is part of that equation. It provides diversity of thought, shapes decisions, influences design and ultimately improves outcomes. This principle aligns with Databricks' people-first approach, and the incredible work Women in Data do to address the gender imbalance in tech.

Our partnership with Databricks continues to support clients across sectors, from community organisations to global enterprises. By combining technology with inclusive thinking, we deliver solutions that make a real difference.

ADVANCING ANALYTICS

then I've done something right. If they're fighting the same battles that I fought 20 years ago, then we're missing the opportunity – I haven't changed the system in a way that actually sets them up for success."

NOW I REALLY WISH THAT I HAD JUST TAKEN A RISK ON MYSELF AND NOT BEEN MY OWN WORST CRITIC

WORDS OF WISDOM

While the journey to where she is today may not have been without its challenges, Robin has learnt some important lessons on the way. We wanted to know what advice someone in her position, with her level of experience, would give to women aspiring to leadership roles in data and technology today? And we got some great pointers.

"There are a few things," Robin answers. "Throughout my career, I think I was always my own worst critic. There are lots of roles in hindsight that I wish I had applied for so that I could have had a bigger impact, or driven greater business value, or had a bigger influence on some of the thought leadership in the market."

She explains that she'd talk herself out of these roles because there was one requirement out of the many listed that she didn't have. Whereas now she realises that these requirements are often a wish list and organisations don't necessarily expect one person to meet all of them.

She tells us, "Now I really wish that I had just taken a risk on myself and not been my own worst critic to talk myself out of those opportunities. Because I often find that men tend to apply for those roles even if they don't meet all the requirements, and they often get the role because those requirements sometimes are just wish lists of a unicorn candidate.

"So, number 1 is just take the risk. Don't talk yourself out of potential future opportunities because you feel like you have some gap in competency. I don't think there's a negative consequence in risking that."

Robin moves on to her next piece of advice, "I also think everyone needs to think about their board of directors.

"As you go through your career, as you work through networking and communities etcetera, you will find people that you build a great rapport with – whether it's at the same organisation or a different organisation, they will become your sounding board.

"You have a close enough relationship with them that they know who you are, they know what your superpowers are and where your weaknesses are. They are great for you to reach out to when you're struggling with a problem or you're looking to make a change – and they're also your cheerleaders, so when you have a really bad day, there will be somebody on your board of directors that will talk you off the ledge. And you can operate in that same capacity for them and for others. I think you need that group around you.

"So, I think there's a real opportunity as we think about female communities. How do we get more board of director exchangeability between us to build that out?"

And the last piece of advice is to secure an executive sponsor. Robin explains what this means because earlier in her career, she wasn't completely clear what her expectations of an executive sponsor should be, "For me, an executive sponsor means someone within my existing organisation that is at a level above me where they are in a closed-door conversation that I would never be privy to, but they are making strategic decisions for the organisation that would result in a net new opportunity for me. "Typically, I've worked with them in some

capacity, so they know my strengths, my aspirations and what impact I'm looking to have and the business outcomes I'm looking to drive. As new roles get created within the organisation, I want them to proactively put me forward as being someone who's the ideal candidate.

"I think as you go through your career, you should always be looking either at your manager level, or across your stakeholders at that same level, or your skip level. And be really clear with that person or persons what you're expecting from them as your executive sponsor.

"At the level I'm at now, I've actually figured out multiple executive sponsors because they're all in that same conversation with the CEO and I want them all to be putting me forward as they're having those conversations."

She has some advice about mentoring too. She's found this has been helpful through her career in supporting her to address specific competencies or capabilities that she wanted to develop, but at first she struggled with what she could offer to any potential mentors.

"Early in my career I really avoided mentorship because I always felt like I had to have a value proposition to bring back for the mentor and I often struggled to determine what that was. Clearly I would get value from the mentor, but I could never figure out what I was going to provide," she shares.

25

Now she wants to tell people, "Don't feel like you have to have a value proposition. The value proposition is getting insight, having the conversation. People sometimes call it reverse mentoring. I feel like as a mentor, I get so much benefit from talking to those that are early in their career.

"They have a different point of view, they have a different background than I do. And that for me is really helpful, as well as hearing what their aspirations are, or about whatever it is that they're coming to me to help them to develop.

"I just get excited. It's always nice to talk to people who are new in their career, really excited to be there and passionate. You feed off those conversations just as much as a mentor as you do a mentee."

Clearly, the journey towards gender parity in data isn't only about external communities addressing systemic issues or individual women gaining the skills or sponsorship they need to progress within the data industry. It's also vital that organisations take practical steps to foster more inclusive environments. One way that Robin thinks they can do this is by creating internal networks or communities.

She tells us, "I think every organisation has the ability and capability to create communities around attributes such as gender, cultural, racial, sexual orientation, where people feel like they have a safe space they can go where that attribute

is similar to others, where they can bring problems and successes and there is a group within the organisation that can celebrate those with them, or commiserate, or help problem solve – particularly if that then leads to requests for policy change or programme changes within the organisation.

"I think every organisation should be creating those safe spaces."

LOOKING BACK – AND FORWARD

When we ask Robin to look back over her career journey so far at what stands out the most, she has a very generous answer, "I think what I'm most proud of is the data and AI community. I remember when I first started, it felt very alone when you were trying to drive digital or data transformation across an organisation.

"I think it's the phenomenal ability that we have created to come together, to be able to share issues and concerns and problem solve together. It isn't a competitive space, it's a collaborative space. I'm super proud that I've had the ability to participate in that, to meet others across the network in the community and learn from them, as well as be able to provide some level of insight or knowledge."

As for what's next for Robin, "Right now I'm really working on how to help organisations create that AI enablement definition. Again, a very people centric approach."

While the traditional approach has been that everyone has to be AI literate or data literate in some capacity, Robin firmly believes that the level of literacy needed varies widely depending on the persona of the people within the organisation.

IF YOU'RE A POWER LINE WORKER OR YOU'RE AN ELECTRICIAN, FOR EXAMPLE, AI HAS THE POWER TO HELP TRANSFORM THE WAY THAT YOU DO YOUR JOB

She explains this further, "For example, a line worker in an energy company is going to be very different from a finance officer at a global 500 or a global 100. And so how do we make sure that we're not creating generic enablement which either, in my opinion, tends to be a super high level – because a lot of people still think AI is magic – or tends to be very low level where we're getting into just the technology and the platforms and tools.

"How do we start to create the right level of enablement so that people are thinking about the power of data and AI in the context of their role, their persona and how they would actually change these legacy processes? How can they have societal impact? How can they have environmental impact? That sort of knowledge and transformation comes from the people within those roles and functions.

"And I'm super excited that AI is now making it accessible for people that don't necessarily have STEM or technical backgrounds. So how do we now make sure that we're creating the right enablement flywheels, that we're not trying to put everybody into a data science or data engineer or data analyst bucket?

"If you're a power line worker or you're an electrician, for example, AI has the power to help transform the way that you do your job today so that you can do so much more, or you can do the things that you enjoy doing as you continue your career."

It's clear that Robin will continue to bring her people-first approach and an incredible level of clarity and commitment not only to her role and clients at Databricks, but also to support the next generation of women data leaders.

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Global Tech Briefing

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10 stories, 5 minutes, Stay ahead.

Tech doesn't slow down for summer. 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 10 stories you need to know now.

01 GOOGLE'S AI CARBON RECKONING

» Google revealed that Gemini AI queries emit around 0.03 g CO_2 and five drops of water each. Despite a 51% rise in emissions since 2019, Gemini is 33× more efficient—intensifying calls for carbon transparency across the AI sector.

02 OPENAI CHAIR: "DOT-COM REDUX"

» OpenAI chairman Bret Taylor compared the AI surge to the dot-com bubble. He warned only useful, real-world applications will survive the hype cycle—making 2025 a watershed year for AI winners and losers.

03 META FREEZES AI HIRING

» Meta paused recruitment in its AI division, splitting the team into four specialized groups. Analysts call it a strategic "pause to sharpen focus," not a retreat from its multibillion-dollar AI investment.

04 » META'S AI CULTURE CLASH

Chief AI Officer Alexandr Wang (ex-Scale AI) is sparking tension with Meta veterans. His closed-model philosophy is colliding with the company's open-source tradition—igniting a high-stakes cultural divide.

05 » TRILLION-DOLLAR AI ARMS RACE

Google ($85B), Amazon ($100B), and Meta ($64–72B) are outspending rivals in AI infrastructure. But soaring demand for energy and legal battles over training data have added fuel to the debate on responsible scaling.

06 » DEEPFAKE SCAMS TARGET CEOS

CEO-impersonation scams, powered by deepfake audio and video, hit 105,000 incidents in 2024, costing $200M in Q1 alone. Security leaders warn the scams are becoming harder to detect.

07 » AI CHIPS RIDE POLICY TAILWINDS

Nvidia, AMD, and peers are surging as the U.S. "AI Action Plan" eases export limits and Big Tech spending balloons. Analysts call chips the "picks and shovels" of this AI gold rush.

08 » OPENAI LAUNCHES GPT-5

Released August 7, GPT-5 delivers faster performance, more accuracy, and a massive 256,000-token context window. "Mini" versions aim to broaden adoption in industries from finance to education.

09 » OPENAI BETS ON MEGA DATA CENTERS

OpenAI's CFO revealed plans for trillion-dollar-scale data centers, built to power its own AI models and sell infrastructure capacity—pitting it directly against AWS and Azure.

10 » NO-CODE AI BREAKTHROUGHS

OpenAI added proactive Agents and Study Mode in July, while Google unveiled Opal, a no-code AI app builder using natural language prompts. The next wave of innovation may come from those who've never written a line of code.

QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"The biggest risk is thinking you're avoiding risk." — Anonymous VC on missing the AI wave."

STAT OF THE MONTH

$100 billion — Amazon's 2025 AI infrastructure budget, the largest in corporate history.

From efficiency battles to trillion-dollar bets, the signal is clear: AI isn't just shaping technology—it's rewriting the economics of business itself. The leaders who thrive will be those who cut through noise, spot the signals early, and move fast.

ROSANNE WERNER

XCELERATEIQ

DIGITAL EDGE

AWARD WINNER

People & Culture
in Data & AI

Q&A

WE SIT DOWN WITH ROSANNE WERNER, CEO OF XCELERATEIQ TO CONGRATULATE HER AS THE WINNER OF OUR PEOPLE AND CULTURE IN DATA AND AI AWARD

>>> Intro & Background

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOURSELF, YOUR CAREER AND YOUR CURRENT ROLE AT XCELERATEIQ

My story spans continents as much as industries. Born in Hong Kong, raised in Australia, and now based in London, I've spent my career leading transformation.

My career started in finance, qualifying as a Chartered Accountant and leading finance strategic initiatives in pharmaceuticals, oil and gas, and mining. My work included rolling out enterprise resource planning systems, embedding international reporting standards, designing SOX-compliant controls, and reinforcing governance frameworks in highly regulated environments.

At Coca-Cola Europacific Partners, I was asked to bring the people element into data and AI transformation. My highlight of that time was the "Data in Action" programme, which reached more than 2,000 "Data Catalysts" across functions and geographies. We trained and empowered these employees - embedded in their teams - to champion and influence new habits and mindsets around decision-making. That experience showed me that sustainable transformation isn't about more tools. It's about confidence, curiosity, and culture.

Q&A

ROSANNE
WERNER

XCELERATEIQ

After a decade driving change at Coca-Cola, I launched XcelerateIQ to make a broader impact across industries: building data and AI fluency, embedding data habits, creating safe spaces for experimentation, and building cultures where people are curious, confident, and empowered to turn data and AI into everyday value. We don't just train people; we create experiences that rewire how they think and feel about data.

>>> **Bridging the human–tech divide**

YOU OFTEN INTEGRATE BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE INTO DATA/AI CHANGE. WHICH ONE OR TWO BEHAVIOURS ARE THE REAL UNLOCK FOR ADOPTION AT SCALE, AND HOW DO YOU MEASURE THAT SHIFT?

The real unlock is less about technical skills and more about human habits. Two behaviours stand out above all others.

The first is the habit of asking better questions of data. It sounds deceptively simple, but it changes the dynamic entirely. When managers and teams make data part of everyday conversations: "what does the evidence show?" or "how do we know this?" it creates a cultural pull where data and AI naturally find their place in decision-making. That shift comes directly from behavioural science: curiosity triggers our brain's reward system, releasing dopamine when we uncover answers, which makes people want to repeat the behaviour. Once that becomes habit, adoption spreads far faster than any top-down mandate could achieve.

The second is building confidence, not just competence. Neuroscience shows us that when people feel psychologically safe, they're more likely to take risks, try new tools, and form new neural pathways that embed those behaviours. Data programmes often only focus on literacy, teaching concepts, dashboards and tools, but if people don't feel confident, they won't apply any of it. We design "confidence-first learning" experiences, where small wins with data are celebrated and reinforced, so people associate data with success rather than fear.

As for measurement: it's so easy to count training session attendance and certificates issued, but how are you measuring that the learnings are put into action? The real signals are behavioural: Are teams using data in meetings? Has the language shifted, are people asking for insights before committing to decisions? Do managers model the behaviour by showing how AI influenced their choices? These are observable behaviours that tell us adoption is real.

It's those micro-shifts: better questions and genuine confidence, that unlock adoption at scale. Once they take root, the technology stops being "new" and simply becomes part of how work gets done.

WHEN YOU ENTER AN ORGANISATION, HOW DO YOU TRANSLATE "AI STRATEGY" INTO THE FIRST THREE BUSINESS OUTCOMES WITH MEASURABLE ROI—AND WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE KPI FOR EARLY TRACTION?

The key is to turn ideas into steady action fast. When I walk into an organisation, my first question isn't "What's your AI strategy?", it's "Where's the friction in your business right now?"   If we can identify the pain points that matter to both people and performance, that's where AI can deliver early visible wins that build momentum and trust.

Those first wins must be confidently owned and trusted by the people using them. If employees don't trust the insights or understand how AI adds value, you'll lose that early traction. Focus must be on use cases that are transparent and people-focused: solving everyday frustrations, saving time, or improving accuracy, because that's where confidence grows fastest.

From there, I anchor outcomes in three key areas:

>>> Productivity and efficiency: cutting repetitive manual work or accelerating decision cycles.

>>> Accuracy and risk reduction: improving forecast precision, compliance, or error rates

>>> Customer and employee experience: where AI makes life easier and satisfaction rises. Happier customers spend more; engaged employees perform better.

Each one ties to a measurable result such as hours saved, error rates reduced, cycle times shortened, satisfaction scores improved, or incremental revenue captured. Over time, those metrics compound into financial ROI, but the early signal of success is far simpler: when people start saying things like "This saves me so much time," "Now we can make decisions faster," or "I actually trust the numbers." That's when you know the strategy is landing where it matters: inside everyday work.

My favourite early KPI is time-to-decision. It's a telling indicator that show how quickly people can move from insight to action. When teams start making decisions faster and feel confident in the outcome, it's a clear sign the technology has become part of their day-to-day roles. That's when you know the investment is paying off. AI is no longer a project on the side, it's integrated as part of how the business operates.

>>> **Playbook from large-scale programmes**

FROM YOUR EXPERIENCE LEADING MINDSET AND ENABLEMENT PROGRAMMES, WHAT REPEATABLE TACTICS—CHAMPIONS, MICRO-LEARNING, INCENTIVES—ACTUALLY MOVED THE NEEDLE, AND WHAT WOULD YOU DO DIFFERENTLY NOW?

Large-scale mindset and enablement transformation isn't a one-off campaign; it's a continuous cycle of learning, reinforcement, and shared success stories that make progress feel real.

First, design learning experiences that work with the brain, not as a tick-box exercise. People remember best when learning is delivered in small, repeated, and engaging bursts, rather than long, one-time events.

Our approach draws on neuroscience techniques proven to make learning stick:

>>> Micro-learning – short, focused sessions that fit naturally into the flow of work.

>>> Spaced repetition – revisiting ideas at intervals to strengthen neural connections and prevent the forgetting curve.

>>> Retrieval practice – helping people recall and apply what they've learnt through questioning, discussion, or quick scenario challenges.

We pair these with gamification such as badges, team challenges, leaderboard, to activate the brain's reward system and make learning enjoyable. Each small win releases dopamine, reinforcing the habit of coming back for more.

Next, change takes hold when people learn by doing and learn together. Practical application turns theory into habit, while collaboration builds accountability. Teams work on real business scenarios, share results openly, and learn from each other's experiments. Within this, 'Data Catalysts' - trusted peers who model the desired behaviours - keep this momentum alive. They act as local advocates, translating ideas into context and supporting colleagues as they build confidence. When someone sees a peer succeed, progress feels achievable rather than intimidating.

Behavioural change only lasts in a supportive environment. That's where leadership advocacy, consistent communication, and community collaborations come in. Leaders set the tone by showing curiosity, asking data-informed questions, and recognising teams who do the same. Multi-channel communication such as short stories, quick wins, spotlight features, keeps the conversation visible and relatable. Communities of practice then sustain momentum long after training ends, creating spaces to share challenges, ideas, and success stories.

If I were to do things differently, I'd bring the data and technical teams even deeper into the transformation journey from the very start. Too often, cultural and mindset initiatives are aimed at the business side, while data and tech teams stay in the background as enablers. But they're just as much a part of the change.

When engineers, data scientists, and architects participate in mindset and behavioural programmes alongside frontline business teams, something meaningful happens: a shared language forms. They stay closer to the frontline challenges, see how their solutions are used, and develop a stronger sense of business ownership. It also keeps them accountable, not just for delivery, but for outcomes that truly matter to the people using their products.

This approach turns data and technology functions into true partners in the transformation, rather than a support service on the sidelines. It ensures that AI and data initiatives are built intentionally to address real business problems, rather than theoretical potential.

>>> Governance without slowdown

WHAT LIGHTWEIGHT GUARDRAILS (POLICY, TOOLING, SKILLS) LET TEAMS EXPERIMENT FAST WHILE STAYING SAFE— ESPECIALLY WITH GENERATIVE AI AND "SHADOW AI" USAGE?

Good governance shouldn't feel like handbrakes on innovation. It should act more like lane markers that keep you moving in the right direction. The goal is to give people room to explore and be creative while ensuring the organisation stays safe, compliant, and ethical.

The first step is clarity, not complexity. Most employees don't ignore governance out of defiance; they do it because the rules are vague, hidden, or filled with jargon. We design short, plain-English "rules of play" that outline what's acceptable, what's risky, and where to go for support. A simple one-page guide or short video usually works better than a forty-page policy no one reads. The key is making compliance cues obvious—visible, simple reminders that guide people at the moment they need them.

Next comes tooling that guides, not polices. Approved, easy-to-access AI sandboxes give teams a safe environment to test ideas without fear of crossing a line. Built-in usage monitoring, watermarking, or data-classification prompts can nudge ethical behaviour automatically. Most of the time, people just need gentle reinforcement at the point of action, not a compliance email after the fact.

Equally important are skills and awareness. We run short "Tech Talk" sessions that teach teams how to question AI outputs, protect data, and recognise bias. These 'learn together' sessions give people the confidence to explore responsibly and learn from each other. When employees understand both the potential and the pitfalls, they self-govern far more effectively.

Finally, leadership needs to set the tone. Executives should use generative AI openly, talk about how they fact-check outputs, and model ethical experimentation. Visible role-modelling builds trust faster than any policy.

The balance is simple: keep governance visible, human, and adaptive. Give people freedom within a clear framework, link every rule back to its purpose, and educate rather than restrict. When teams feel trusted and equipped, they move faster and safer than any locked-down environment ever allows.

>>> Talent & org design

FROM A TALENT AND ORGANISATION DESIGN LENS, HOW CAN COMPANIES CONNECT THEIR DATA AND AI STRATEGY WITH THEIR TALENT MODEL?

Many organisations still treat their data and AI strategy as a technology initiative, when in reality it's a people transformation. You can't change how decisions are made without changing how people are developed, measured, and rewarded.

Organisations need to clearly define what data and AI fluency looks like across functions. Not everyone must build models, but everyone should feel confident questioning data and using insights. These expectations should be built into job profiles, development plans, and performance reviews so they're part of how success is recognised.

Rewarding the right behaviours matters just as much as building the right skills. When employees use data to make better informed decisions, simplify work, or identify new opportunities, that behaviour should be acknowledged and celebrated. Recognition reinforces value, and sets the tone for the attitudes and behaviours that ultimately shape its culture.

Role clarity is equally important. It's common to see responsibility for data quality, ethical use, or model outcomes sits vaguely "with the data team." But in reality, every role, from analyst to executive, has a part to play in how data and AI are created, interpreted, and applied. Embedding expectations into job profiles and performance criteria removes confusion and eliminates "handover culture." Instead of operating in silos and focusing on delivery, teams collaborate on shared outcome and overall impact.

>>> Industry Trends & Innovation

WHAT AI TRENDS DO YOU EXPECT TO MATERIALLY CHANGE ENTERPRISE OPERATING MODELS IN THE NEXT 12–18 MONTHS—AND WHICH POPULAR TREND DO YOU THINK IS OVER-HYPED?

From my perspective, the most important shift ahead will come from re-engineering the human operating model around AI, not just the systems that enable it.

Organisations have invested heavily in building digital capability, but far fewer have rebuilt how their people, culture, and structures work with AI. The businesses that will set themselves apart are those that invest in the evolution of their ways of thinking as quickly as the technology itself. That means redefining roles, expectations, and learning so employees understand what it means to work in partnership with intelligent systems, where judgement, creativity, and ethical reasoning remain human strengths and AI handles the heavy lift of scale and speed.

We're seeing a surge in companies designing hybrid workflows where people focus on questions, context, and relationships, while AI deals with pattern recognition and prediction. This new model changes everything from job design to leadership capability. Managers will have to move from directing work to designing problem-solving environments, teaching teams how to challenge, verify, and refine AI output rather than execute tasks.

The other major part of the human operating model is trust. AI adoption only scales when people feel confident using it. Employees need transparency about how AI affects their roles, what data is being used, and how decisions are made. That psychological safety builds stronger adoption than any mandate.

What's over-hyped, in my view, is the idea that a next-generation tool alone can transform how a business operates. Technology can enable change, but without parallel investment in people such as re-skilling and upskilling, communication, ethics, and leadership alignment, AI will simply expose existing weaknesses faster. It won't fix poor data habits, fragmented workflows, or a lack of trust in decision-making; it will magnify them.

Q&A

The real opportunity is around reshaping the human system around AI. Companies that get this balance will use AI to unlock the best of human potential, not replace it. Their people will feel equipped, informed, and trusted. Their culture will value curiosity, experimentation, and responsible innovation.

Most importantly, they'll build organisations that can continually adapt, where learning never stops, and roles evolve as fast as technology does. They train leaders to spot new opportunities, build teams that can pivot quickly, and create systems that reward flexibility and learning over fixed expertise. In doing so, they futureproof their workforce, by creating people and cultures capable of shaping the future, not just surviving it.

LIVING
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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.

LIVING ON THE EDGE

THIS BOOT CONTAINS CORN WASTE, CASTOR BEANS, WOOD FIBERS, SUGARCANE, BAMBOO AND RECYCLED PLASTIC BOTTLES
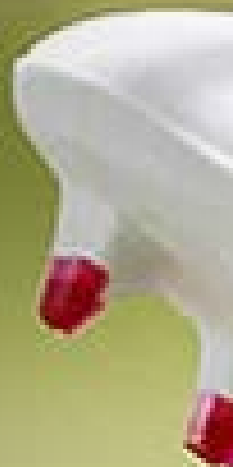
SOKITO

ORIGIN STORY

Sokito is pioneering sustainability in football boots. What sparked the idea to challenge such a traditional, performance-driven market with an eco-first approach?

The idea came to me during a visit to a Hanoi market. I was on holiday and one evening I saw some tailors making shoes from off cuts that had been discarded. Seeing shoes being made from what was considered 'waste' at the time made me wonder if the same could be done with football boots so I asked one of the cobblers to make me a pair.

While the results weren't great, the idea was born and I started exploring different ways to make football boots from more sustainable materials. The name Sokito is a tribute to this moment; a combination of the words 'soccer' and 'Kito' (the name of a tour guide who showed me around the market).

MATERIALS & INNOVATION

From recycled plastics to plant-based leathers, sustainable materials are tough to balance with elite performance. What breakthroughs have made Sokito boots stand up on the pitch as well as in terms of impact?

Our first model, the Devista, was a breakthrough product in 2022 as it featured the highest concentration of recycled materials compared to any other boots on the market. The Devista Vegan came soon after and was the first football boot to be certified by the Vegan Society. On one hand this got the conversation going about sustainability and the materials used by most brands in the market while players such as Tessel Middag, David Wheeler and Dom Bernard were wearing them week in week out, proving that more sustainable materials can perform at a professional level.

A major breakthrough was the debut of the Scudetta at the African Cup of Nations. The Scudetta, made with bio materials including bamboo, sugar cane waste and castor beans, was unlike anything at the time. Nigeria men's team captain, William Troost-Ekong, wore a customised version of the boots during the tournament, scored 3 goals and was awarded MVP (most valuable player) of the tournament.

Fast forward a few months and Ola Aina wore the Scudetta and scored an absolute screamer for Nottingham Forest against West Ham. Today we have male and female players wearing our boots at international level and playing in the top leagues in Europe, US and Asia. Proof enough that a more sustainable product can perform just as well at the highest level.

THE INDUSTRY CHALLENGE

Football is a billion-pound industry dominated by giants like Nike and Adidas. How does a challenger brand like Sokito carve out space against global heavyweights?

We're gaining traction because players at all levels want something different. The bigger companies have gotten too comfortable and there's been a lack of innovation for some time. Sokito is disrupting the status quo by creating a brand driven by a community of 80+ professional footballers. They're giving us input on boot design, colourway options and campaigns which also helps us to be a lot more agile and reactive to the market. We've just announced Millie Bright as the latest investor and ambassador for the brand so we're excited to have such a high profile and respected player join our team. Sokito is a brand that's built by players for players.

BEYOND THE BOOT

Sustainability is more than materials—it's supply chains, circularity, and culture. How rethinking the entire lifecycle of a football boot, from design to disposal?

Sustainability is a key pillar to our business and embedded into our culture. It's a big try to be as transparent as possible about our products and business. We provide a breakdown of the materials we use on our website, and even list them on the side of We're also close to completing the first LCA (lifecycle assessment) so we can better the real impact of manufacturing a football boot.

Sokito is the only brand to offer a football boot recycling scheme where customers a their worn out boots (any type and brand) to be recycled and get a discount off a ne Sokito. We've collected close to 1000 pairs since the scheme launched in 2022 and w with our recycling partner to explore some reuse options for the shredded boot mate signed up to the 'Love Stock Hate Waste' campaign so any boots we receive through stock that can't be sold is put to use through our partners and player charities.

Beyond our business, we try to make the sustainability message creative and access campaigns and partnerships. Our latest collab with Copenhagen side B.93 is testame we're supporting the club with their EMAS certification whilst exploring the concept club as a circular hub through some upcycling and reuse initiatives.

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SOKITO

LIVING ON THE EDGE

LOOKING AHEAD

What's next for Sokito? Can we expect wider product lines, major club partnerships, or even a shift beyond football into other sports?

We're focused on football for now but we have some exciting plans for next year with some new additions to our lines. The main focus is on growing our presence in Europe and the US so our priority is to develop our sales network, increase market share and get more players wearing Sokito.

SOKITO

BONUS QUESTION:

Which player, past or present, would you most like to see wearing Sokito boots?

Digital Edge:
Teemu Pukki for Norwich City!

Sokito: Teemu is a good shout but I'm a life long Liverpool fan so it would have to be Steven Gerard.

DIGITAL EDGE

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.

Partner with us in shaping the future of data leadership.

As we launch the Data Leadership Playbook, we're inviting a select group of brands to feature alongside the world's most respected data leaders.

SPONSORSHIP INCLUDES:

Brand visibility across the print & digital editions of Digital Edge.

Inclusion in the Playbook's launch campaign and CDO network distribution.

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Align your brand with the leaders redefining the role of data in business.

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Digital Edge - The Voice of Technology Leadership

VII

We had the pleasure of talking with Vip to get his perspective on making data more accessible, the importance of entrepreneurial spirit and where human skills still count at a time when technology is rapidly evolving.

Energetic about data and enthusiastic about future possibilities, Vip's career has taken him from operations at telecoms company Tiscali, onto TalkTalk, and now he heads up data management at WPP. This creative transformation company is a world leader in marketing services, with more than 100,000 people across 100 countries.

Prepare for Vip's powerful takes on collaboration, failure and putting business objectives first before the latest shiny technology.

VIP PARMAR

Global Head of Data Management at WPP

"WE ARE THE DRIVERS OF ALL OF THIS CHANGE. WITHOUT US HUMAN BEINGS, WE CAN'T MAKE ANY OF THAT HAPPEN."

» BRIDGING THE DATA GAP

We started our conversation with Vip in an area that may be familiar to many data leaders – how to make the wealth of data in their organisation more accessible and usable.

Throughout his career, Vip has observed that only about 15% of workforces can confidently access and leverage data. Determined to change this, he has poured his efforts into improving data accessibility and fostering a culture of learning.

The key theme to this is a people-first approach. Vip shares, "It's very important to make sure that people can actually access data in an intuitive way which isn't daunting to them."

He expands on this, "Us humans are very resistant to change. We don't like new ways of doing things. We default to what we know best. So, by having more of an understanding of human behaviours and what drives us to change – and how compelling things need to be, how simple and intuitive they need to be – making sure that we're factoring all of those things into delivering solutions and getting those outcomes is absolutely paramount.

"Also educating people in terms of what insights that they can get where and guiding them through the tools, the processes, the ways of working, so not only can they leverage that for themselves, but they can guide their teams and their peers around how best to actually do that.

As Vip has touched on, there's a need for a cultural shift to turn data from a specialist resource into a universal capability. We wondered how he and the wider team at WPP are handling this?

"Trying to push people into changing ways of working or mandating things is often met with resistance," Vip points out.

"So, it's more about leading people to them, helping people understand how they might benefit – how a new process or a new piece of tech might be compelling for them. And then letting them make the decision.

"I think trying to drive that change naturally rather than forcing it is absolutely imperative."

But as well as helping lead people to make decisions for themselves that will positively impact the organisation, making the right

decisions about the scale of change for the organisation is also part of the equation. And that doesn't always mean taking the path of least resistance.

Vip shares, "What I've learned a tremendous amount about over the last few years is it's not all about adaptation, sometimes it's about reengineering the things we do.

"SOMETIMES MAKING PARTS OF A PROCESS BETTER OR MORE EFFICIENT ISN'T NECESSARILY THE RIGHT ANSWER. WE MIGHT NEED TO BE BOLD AND BRAVE, REDESIGNING AND CREATING A COMPLETELY NEW PROCESS."

"Sometimes making parts of a process better or more efficient isn't necessarily the right answer. We might need to be bold and brave, redesigning and creating a completely new process."

Of course, a larger scale change can be more difficult to manage, with people having to learn something from scratch rather than simply adapting to an adjustment. How is this larger scale of change handled?

"Again, it's about people bringing people along on that journey and then making them very in tune to what that means for them and the benefits that it actually brings. And let them be the decision maker in terms of them hopping aboard that journey."

» PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

People are also at the heart of the data strategy at WPP, which goes far beyond infrastructure to focus on enabling people. But with technology evolving at pace, how is it possible to plan ahead for a future that is difficult to predict?

"I think it's about taking a very forward thinking yet balanced view on how to change, and then knowing that change is always a constant," Vip answers.

"The world of technology is moving rapidly. It's being accepting of that, and adapting to that as well.

"We're not putting everything into a particular change, a particular delivery or a solution. It's about knowing that what you might build today, there might be a better way of doing tomorrow, and embracing that rather than resenting it. But also taking a view in terms of 'What does the forward view look like in the world of technology?'

"We're now in the world of AI and people are talking about AGI – Artificial General Intelligence. There are things like humanoids being tried and tested.

Sightly®

Win at the Speed of Culture

Transform your media strategy for superior outcomes. Our AI-powered Brand Mentality® unlocks real-time marketing, reaching the right audiences in the moments that matter most.

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Moving at the Speed of Culture

In a world where cultural moments shift by the minute, brands can no longer afford to react slowly. They must anticipate, adapt, and act with purpose.

Sightly was built for exactly that. As a media technology partner specializing in real-time marketing and decision intelligence, Sightly helps brands and advertisers stay ahead of culture—activating smarter, values-aligned media decisions at the speed of change.

Our proprietary Brand Mentality® platform transforms how brands connect with audiences, ensuring every impression, placement, and piece of content reflects a brand's unique identity and values.

Powered by Brand Mentality®

At the core of Sightly's offering is **Brand Mentality®**, an AI-driven platform that interprets culture in real time. It empowers marketers to understand what matters to their audience right now—and to take precise, brand suitable action across YouTube, TikTok, Connected TV, Live Streaming, Reddit, Open Web OLV + Display, and beyond.

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Sightly's proprietary web agent scans the open web to create a unique marketing blueprint for every brand. Each profile is then enhanced with human review and approval, resulting in a robust, actionable taxonomy that ensures every campaign aligns seamlessly with brand values and audience mindset.

Real-Time Data that Never Sleeps
Our platform continuously ingests signals from:

- **YouTube metadata** (via an exclusive YTMP partnership)

- **TikTok Hashtag & Brand Mention APIs** (as a Badged TikTok Marketing Partner)

- **150,000+ curated news sources**

- **Video-level CTV and social data**

Data refreshes **every five minutes**—powering decisions that are as dynamic as the culture itself.

From Insight to Activation—Instantly

Sightly's Brand Mentality technology doesn't just observe culture; it activates against it. With flexible options across **Managed Service** and **Self-Service** models, Sightly makes it simple for marketers to translate intelligence into impact.

• **Managed Service Media:** Expertly executed campaigns across YouTube, TikTok, Connected TV, Programmatic, Pinterest, Reddit, Meta, and more.

• **Self-Service Media:** Direct access to our Brand Mentality platform for YouTube, TikTok, Connected TV, and Programmatic, empowering in-house teams with the same cultural intelligence and precision.

• **Decision Intelligence Partnerships:** For brands and agencies who want to integrate our platform into their own planning workflows.

Every activation delivers transparent, content-level insights that tie audience engagement to brand suitability and real-time cultural resonance. As the model continuously evolves, so does your brand's ability to connect with consumers in the moments that matter most.

Proven Results with the World's Leading Brands

Sightly's approach doesn't just sound good—it drives measurable outcomes. Our research with **MAGNA Media Trials** confirmed that campaigns powered by our Brand Mentality technology **double search intent and triple purchase intent** compared to traditional digital campaigns.

Today, global brands and top agencies trust Sightly to help them move with confidence and precision in an unpredictable world. With Sightly's Brand Mentality technology, they gain more than media efficiency—they gain cultural agility.

Because when culture moves fast, your brand should move faster.

Sightly®

"It's trying to understand what innovations are potentially in the pipeline, how they might impact what you're striving to deliver, but being very open to that change as well.

"Whilst we want the users of our technology and the things that we create to be adaptive to what we put out there, we have that same duty upon ourselves to adapt to that world around us as well – understand it, and embrace it, and live and breathe change."

Being agile may be key, but it can come with financial risk as well as the potential for reward. Getting agreement for investment in technology that may be superseded by something more powerful or effective within a relatively short period of time must come with its challenges. How is Vip managing this?

"It's trying to effectively build the case around the level of competitive advantage that might give us – sometimes in the short term and sometimes in the medium to long term – trying to draw out the distinction around what that means for us and the benefit that it will create," he explains.

"The things that we sometimes overlook are the other fringe opportunities. There might be a way of introducing something that might help our colleagues become a little bit more efficient. That might be something that we might be able to package and potentially sell to clients. Or there might be opportunities to advise clients around their journey.

"So, trying to embrace it but also understand where the commercial advantages will exist."

» COLLABORATING TO CREATE ADVANTAGE

One of the areas where Vip is embracing both technology and a collaborative approach is through the innovative 'Chat with your Data' project.

He and his team are working on this with key partners including ServiceNow (WPP's data catalogue provider) and Sightly (for AI powered real-time cultural intelligence).

The project began after ServiceNow published a whitepaper which explored using a large language model with a knowledge graph to answer questions more accurately. Vip wanted to put this into practice.

They first looked to make large language models more conversant with contextual paths, or pieces of information or applications, with the objective that people would be able to ask questions via natural language inputs to get an answer back.

Vip explains, "We've been building this out and we're almost complete with rolling it out. With going through that process, we've realised that human interfacing that data, which was the primary objective, is great. But there's another opportunity in allowing applications and services to interface with that data. There's also an opportunity here to integrate systems and platforms using AI to these services as well.

"We've stopped and thought 'How do we get systems talking to our data, as well as our people talking to the data?'"

He continues, "We're looking at other interfaces that are part of people's workflows. So, people might be trying to ideate or brainstorm with other people digitally. How can we bridge that gap so insights are coming into that process, rather than people having to navigate away to another screen to get something and then bring it back in? We're thinking about how we bring those insights a little bit more closer to people's ways of working.

"We've now got a very strong approach. We've got a much broader team doing this and the investment behind it to make that happen. We're on track to getting this rolled out very early next year."

Being part of this forward-thinking project is not only interesting because of what's being achieved, but because of the opportunity for close collaboration between his team and the teams at ServiceNow and Sightly. Vip is a builder and a collaborator at heart, so bringing together a group of people to achieve something like this plays to his strengths.

"It helps realise the power of collaboration. This is a collective journey where we need not only our collective expertise, but our collective capabilities to be able to achieve this goal," Vip says.

"Everyone has a distinctive role to play in this. Yes, there's a vision and we need to go away and formulate the strategy and, ultimately, the delivery plan of how we get to that. But this is something that we all input in, that we all live and breathe and that we all benefit from, because we're all doing something that's unique and arguably pioneering too. Everyone benefits in that way."

Vip talks about the power of having people from these companies pulling together to achieve this, "It's fantastic having a group of diverse people. While we talk about technology a lot, it's having people with diverse experiences, diverse skill sets, diverse abilities and so on that really ensures we're engineering something that is fit for the future.

"Having strong relationships with organisations who we deem as partners and also folk in our own network is important. Being able to tap into their expertise, to be able to have conversations where you can share ideas and walk away with some learnings is really, really important. You've got to be talking and engaging all the time."

» CURIOSITY, CREATIVITY & FAILING

Collaboration isn't the only thing that's important to Vip when it comes to transformation. Curiosity and creativity play a key part too.

"Just because something is great today, it could be good tomorrow and mediocre the day after. I think it's very important to be curious about how you could make something better, what might threaten it or might make something less effective than what it is."

But, Vip reflects, "It's one thing being curious and trying to understand more. It's another thing to be creative thereafter."

The realities of experimentation, prototyping and building is something that Vip thinks should be shared, "I think it's something that we don't often talk about when I'm having conversations with peers in the industry. We talk about the great things that we've done in terms of 'We've done X and it meant Y', but we don't talk about that journey where we go from curiosity to being quite creative to sometimes actually failing.

"Because sometimes we'll go down a path or fall down a rabbit hole and then realise, well, actually that's not quite right – or it works, but it doesn't work in a way which it should.

"I think something we should be doing as leaders more often is talking about not only the successes but also our failures, because that's part of the process."

Has failure played a part in getting Vip to where he is today? "I feel as though I've learned a lot just through failure. Someone once said to me, and this really stuck with me, "I've never lost. I've always learned.""

Vip continues, "The more that we share about those failures, the more we can learn from others without having to potentially make those mistakes or fall down those rabbit holes ourselves."

"This is where having circles of trusted folks that you can engage with and share these things with in a very candid way is really,

really important, I think. But I also think when we're looking at future generations and their ways of working, it's something that we should be instilling in them too.

"It's not always about the great results, the shiny things that you create and the great case studies and success stories that come from it. Behind it is lots of pain, lots of failure, sometimes lots of cost, but we don't often see that. "We should be OK with failure, just as we are with success."

» TECH VS OBJECTIVE

Being curious and creative plays into Vip's position of 'Don't start with the technology as the answer, start with the problem or opportunity.' In other words, think about what you're trying to solve and then figure out what technology you need to solve it, rather than wanting to use a technology for the sake of it.

Emerging tools can be exciting yet distracting, so how is this mindset of focusing on the problem first being embedded across teams?

Vip says, "It's constantly grounding people into the objective or the outcome that we're here for. It's all too easy for people to

get kind of fixated on the shiny new tools, tech, ways of working, new processes, new buttons – whatever it might be – and I think it's something that we all default to. We find something new and then we want to make use for it.

"Start with the objective. Make sure that you're really grounded in that. And the answer doesn't have to be AI or a tech, sometimes it's process engineering and sometimes it can just be use of very lightweight AI or some lightweight data."

Throughout the process, Vip is always mindful of the 'So what?' question. "Through the conversations that you have and through the guidance that you give, it's always asking, 'How do we do this better, quicker or more efficiently,' or whatever it might be. It's always about getting to that outcome and being laser focused on it throughout."

Vip points out, "It takes human skill to be able to understand and ask those objective questions."

» CULTIVATING AN ENTREPRENEURIAL ENERGY

With human input still key, fostering a sense of experimentation within WPP's data function is important to their continued progression. We asked Vip how he achieves this.

He shares, "I think there's two things here. Firstly, you've got to make capabilities available to people, because there's lots of tools, technologies, and services. Make them available and then people will experiment and they'll try new things.

"We should be OK with failure, just as we are with success."

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At ServiceNow, we manage massive amounts of data across our operations. As our data stack continued to grow in volume and complexity, our procurement teams found themselves moving from system to system, searching for insights and information across separated sources. This fragmented approach created a productivity bottleneck that was slowing down our decision-making processes.

Our analytics dashboards were operating in rear-view mode, and the resulting actions from insights were often delayed. We needed a solution that could seamlessly connect our data onto a single unified source, bring analytics closer to where our teams work, make insights actionable, and improve productivity through our platform.

Building an analytics powerhouse on our platform

The ServiceNow AI Platform provided the foundation we needed to create a comprehensive analytics solution built on a two-pronged data strategy that addresses both velocity and volume challenges simultaneously.

Velocity: Processing data at lightning speed

RaptorDB Pro is our new proprietary database, achieving query responses that are 27 times faster than our previous system. By migrating to this next-generation database model, we can handle data at incredible speed and scale, turning raw information into actionable insights in real-time.

Volume: Connecting diverse data sources

Workflow Data Fabric acts as the intelligent layer that seamlessly connects vast amounts of data—both structured and unstructured—from multiple external systems onto our unified platform. This comprehensive layer leverages integrations and APIs to bring together data from systems like Workday, SAP, and Okta, while streaming data capabilities provide seamless connectivity without data duplication.

The connected analytics ecosystem

Workflow Data Fabric doesn't just connect data—it creates an intelligent bridge between RaptorDB's high-speed processing power and actionable outcomes. Once different data sources feed into RaptorDB through the fabric, the platform uses Process Mining and Large Language Models to understand patterns and extract insights.

This understanding then flows seamlessly into Workflow Studio, where AI Agents, Packaged AI Workflows, and Custom AI Workflows can immediately act on those insights, creating a closed-loop analytics system that automatically responds to changing conditions and triggers appropriate business actions.

We act on insights from our data instantly

RaptorDB and Workflow Data Fabric have eliminated the need for our teams to navigate multiple systems.

Our query processing is now 27 times faster than before, enabling teams to access critical information without the delays that previously hindered their work. SQL performance has improved by 29.5%, while user transaction performance has increased by 25.5%, creating a seamless experience for employees who rely on data-driven insights.

Instead of operating in reactive mode with delayed insights, we now have real-time visibility into our operations with the ability to act immediately on the information we discover.

"

We are the glue, we are the drivers of all of this change and without us human beings, we can't make any of that happen.

"Giving them great – even competitive – reasons to be able to flex those skills and those tools and services is also key.

"We've run a number of hackathons over the years where we will give people a particular objective which is centred around the use of a tool or a technology or a particular set of data or insights. We want people to work with others that they haven't worked with before across disciplines: a cross-functional group of people with different skill sets and capabilities.

"And have some kind of reward, something that is attainable to them that is not something that they would normally be able to get – whether it's getting the recognition from senior leaders or the ability to showcase this in front of a broader group of people."

Vip feels that what is important in these situations isn't only access to technology or the ability to have fun and learn at the same time, it's also the opportunity for face-to-face human engagement instead of communicating through technology.

Vip points out, "You still need to talk to people. You still need to engage with people. Technology sometimes drives us away from that level of human engagement, understanding and reasoning.

It's crucial because it forms the foundation for achieving our goals. Without it, our objectives remain out of reach.

"We are the glue, we are the drivers of all of this change and without us human beings, we can't make any of that happen."

He continues, "I think it's always important to come back to that human element because we dehumanise a lot of things in the future world because we think we have the answers for it in a systemic and technological way, and it's not always the case.

"I think it's really, really important for us to be part of that loop and part of that engineering process as well.

"One thing I've heard over the years is the statement around, 'AI is going to take our jobs' or 'It's a threat'. I don't think it is. I think it's just around the way in which we adapt to using technology. Humans are always going to be part of that technological loop and we're always going to be the driver."

Vip uses an example here to explain his point, "When you look at the taxi industry, which has arguably been revolutionised by Uber, it still needs someone to say, "Here's where I am and here's where I want to go". It still needs someone to actually make that happen."

When he thinks about technology and the future, he continues, "It's important to have the mindset of 'How do I adapt? How do I seize those opportunities? Where do I need to brush up on some skills – learn a little bit more about new ways of doing things?' I think it's exciting for humankind moving forward."

And with that, we look forward to seeing how Vip's focus on collaboration and using new technology to meet objectives drives innovation at WPP.

DIGITAL EDGE

OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

women in data®

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

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.

ROISIN MCCARTHY

FIONA SWEENEY

In the inaugural edition of Our Voice — Real Stories. Real Action. Real Change. We sit down with Roisin McCarthy and Fiona Sweeney, the Founder and the Strategy Director behind Women in Data®, an organisation that has become synonymous with progress, purpose, and empowerment across the UK data community.

To begin, could you each share a little about your background and what led you to champion gender representation in data and technology?

Fiona: I graduated from university in 1985 and joined the Data and Analytics industry at a time when it wasn't properly recognised as a discipline. I immediately fell in love with the complexity and creativity of what we do and have worked on some of the biggest,

game changing data & tech initiatives over the years. But above all, I have always been motivated by the difference that data based decisioning can make to individuals, organisations and society.

Over the last 4 decades I have witnessed significant change, mostly from when I was the only woman in the room, and I have seen first-hand how greater diversity and inclusion has enhanced this industry. In recent years,

I have witnessed the skills emergency our industry is facing in to, and the urgency to change is dialled up when you place a gender lens over the sector. With such a complex challenge in skilling the future workforce, particularly in the light of the government's commitment to the UK as an AI magnet, I believe that the support and retention of experienced female talent is an industry imperative.

Over the years, I have been unwavering in creating positive career paths for women, particularly into senior leadership. On my own career journey, I surrounded myself with fantastic mentors and allies to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude, and so I have always paid that back to be a positive mentor and advocate for others.

Roisin: I began my career in 2000 as a junior recruiter at Datatech, the specialist recruitment & talent agency. I was very young, in fact 16 years old. Apprenticeships did not exist in this space at that time, ultimately that was the style of entry level role I entered in to. I quickly established myself as an authority and expert in data talent acquisition and retention. Over the following 25 years, I have built teams and secured leading talents for many of the FTSE 500 organisations and SME data businesses, have built some of the UK's most cutting-edge data teams and supported over 5,000 professionals in securing new career opportunities.

In 2014 I founded Women in Data®, simply because I was witnessing in real-time the decline of female talent in our industry. I honestly did not expect the growth and the demand for Women in Data®. What Women in Data® started, we had a 125 members in the community, it has grown into a thriving membership of over 100,000 women and

"I FOUNDED WOMEN IN DATA® BECAUSE I WAS WITNESSING IN REAL-TIME THE DECLINE OF FEMALE TALENT IN OUR INDUSTRY."

Roisin McCarthy

allies. We are reshaping the landscape of data through advocacy, opportunity, and visibility for women working in the field. I have the best job on the planet and whilst its tough a great deal of the time, mainly through demand and supply of what we do, the rewards are priceless.

Roisin, you've been a driving force behind Women in Data® since its creation. When you look back to its early days, what key moments or turning points stand out as having shaped its success?

Looking back, the journey of Women in Data® has been shaped by a series of pivotal moments that each added momentum to our mission of achieving gender parity in data and tech.

One of the earliest turning points was the realisation through my work in recruitment, that fewer and fewer women were entering or progressing in data roles. That insight, combined with countless stories of women being overlooked for promotion or lacking visibility, sparked the creation of Women in Data®. It wasn't just about representation, it was about building a platform where women could connect, be seen, and thrive.

Our first event in 2014 was modest in scale, but monumental in impact. It proved there was a hunger for community and visibility. From there, the growth was exponential, from 125 attendees to tens of thousands of members globally. Hosting our flagship

annual events, which now attract thousands of women, was another major milestone. This event is so much more than a data conference, the flagship event annually sparks change, creates partnerships, showcases innovation at the cutting edge and places data at the heart of societal challenges and solutions.

Another key moment was launching the "Twenty in Data and Tech" initiative. Spotlighting trailblazers and rising stars gave our community role models and helped shift the narrative around what leadership in data looks like.

More recently, our work has expanded into systemic change, from influencing policy to developing tools that remove bias from job descriptions. We've also seen a shift in how organisations engage with us: they're no longer just supporting events, they're embedding Women in Data® into their Data, AI and People strategies.

But perhaps the most powerful turning point has been the community itself. The stories, the resilience, and the collective ambition of our members continue to shape Women in Data®'s evolution. Every time a woman tells us she stayed in the industry because of this community, or that she found her voice through our platform, that's the real success.

You've often spoken about cultural and systemic change. What does real progress look like to you, and how can organisations tell if they're genuinely moving the dial?

Real progress, to me, is when cultural and systemic change stops being a side project and becomes embedded in the DNA of an organisation. It's not about one-time initiatives, events or performative gestures. It's about shifting the structures, behaviours, and mindsets that have historically excluded or undervalued women in data and tech.

One of the clearest signs of genuine progress is when the responsibility for change moves away from "fixing women" and instead focuses on fixing the systems that hold them back. That means rethinking how we recruit, promote, and retain talent. It means removing bias from job descriptions, redesigning career pathways, and ensuring that leadership development is inclusive by design.

At Women in Data®, we've seen that when organisations act on evidence and not assumptions, the impact is profound. For example, our research has led to C-suite conversations that sparked new sponsorship schemes, leadership programmes, and measurable improvements in promotion rates for women. A mark of success can not be a single metric, yes representation needs to improve, but so does retention. Organisations should be owning the drive for cultural shift and creating safe spaces and places of belonging, listening to feedback of

employees is crucial. Creating accountability in leadership and not just in targets, whilst ensuring visible role modelling can take place is essential.

The ratio of men to women in data remains around 4 to 1. From your perspective, what are the biggest barriers still holding women back from entering or advancing in this field?

The 4:1 ratio of men to women in data is more than a statistic, it's a reflection of systemic barriers that begin early and persist throughout a woman's career.

IT WASN'T JUST ABOUT REPRESENTATION, IT WAS ABOUT BUILDING A PLATFORM WHERE WOMEN COULD CONNECT, BE SEEN, AND THRIVE.

One of the most significant barriers is the entry pipeline itself. Girls are underrepresented in STEM subjects at school fewer than 15% take computing A-level, and the majority of physics and maths students are male. This early divergence means many women never even consider data as a viable career path. When they do the industry's traditional emphasis on technical degrees and

coding can immediately exclude, especially when we know that the future of data also depends on skills like communication, critical thinking, and ethical reasoning.

But the challenge doesn't stop at entry. There's a "Broken Rung" on the career ladder, for every 100 men promoted to their first managerial role, only 81 women make it. This stalls progression and contributes to the alarming statistic that 50% of women leave the industry by mid-career. They're not leaving the workforce, they're moving to sectors where they feel more valued, supported and visible.

The reasons are complex but consistent: pay inequity, lack of sponsorship, limited visibility, and rigid workplace cultures that don't accommodate the realities of women's lives. And while caregiving is often cited, our research shows it's rarely the main reason women leave. Instead, it's the cumulative effect of being overlooked, underpaid, and underrepresented.

Women in Data® has grown into a powerful platform for connection and change. What are you most proud of when you look at the community's evolution so far?

What fills me with the greatest pride is the way our community has become a living, breathing force for change, not just in data & tech, but in culture, confidence, and connection.

Our growth has been extraordinary, but it is more than the numbers. It's about the stories, the breakthroughs, and the sense of belonging we've created together. This community has also been my support network, my counsel and my inspiration and for that I am forever grateful.

We collectively have built a space where women feel seen, supported, and celebrated. We have helped women find mentors, secure their next job, return after career breaks, and step into leadership with confidence. What is not to be proud of?

None of this would be possible without the phenomenal team behind Women in Data®. Their creativity, resilience, and relentless drive are the engine behind everything we do. From curating impactful content to building partnerships and delivering unforgettable experiences, they are the heartbeat of this movement.

Women in Data® is proof that when you build with heart, purpose, and the right people, you can create something that truly moves the dial and has a soul.

Looking ahead, what's your vision for the next phase of Women in Data, and how do you see partnerships like this one with Digital Edge helping to accelerate your mission?

Looking ahead, my vision for the next phase of Women in Data® is one of deeper impact, broader reach, and sustained resilience. As we enter our second decade, we're not just expanding, we're evolving. Our focus is on embedding equity into every layer of the data ecosystem, from early education and career re-entry to leadership development and policy influence. Initiatives like the State of the Nation Research Project and our expanded Flagship Event 2026 are designed to surface real experiences and drive systemic change[1].

Partnerships like the one with Digital Edge are pivotal to this mission. They amplify our voice, extend our reach, and bring

fresh perspectives into the fold. Through collaborative storytelling and shared DE's platform, we're able to spotlight the brilliance and realities of women, in data.

Ultimately, our goal is to ensure that Women in Data® remains not just relevant, but essential. In a time when some organisations are scaling back DE&I efforts, we're doubling down. We're building a future where every woman in data feels seen, supported, and empowered to lead and where our partners are active co-creators of that future.

Fiona, you've said before that diversity isn't just about fairness, it's a business advantage. How do you see data and analytics helping organisations prove that case more clearly?

As a data led organisation, we use the insights available to prove the case, whether that is our own State of the Nation annual report or other trusted sources like ONS, Gartner, McKinsey and so on. But like all great data teams we rely on our storytelling and influencing skills to ensure that the message not only resonates but has real impact and effects real change. But we don't do that alone, we have a small but mighty army of role models and evangelists with

over 90 partner organisations who are as passionate as we are about driving gender equity. When you look at the calibre of our Twenty in Data & Tech alumnae for example, the impact we make becomes clear.

And yes, gender parity is a proven business advantage. According to McKinsey, companies in the top quartile for gender diversity were 25% more likely to have above average profitability. It is becoming hard to ignore that enlightened businesses are more effective.

Women in Data®'s new leadership initiative is driving professional change. How does the project connect under your wider vision?

The biggest lever we can pull to achieve gender parity is to encourage more women to join the industry, and at Women in Data® we do that really effectively through our schools and university outreach and our hugely successful jobs board. But if we bring more women in, we have a huge responsibility to ensure that they can optimise their careers and stay for the longest possible time. However, 50% are leaving by the mid-point in their careers and not for the reasons that most people think. The biggest catalyst for people leaving their job was 'lack of career progression' at 25% yet 'caring responsibilities' was a very low 3%.

So alongside everything we do, we started a new initiative to retain female talent and expedite their journey to leadership.

Our Leadership Equity Accelerator Programme (LEAP) was born out of the insights we were getting from the industry. While 90% of women want to move into management or leadership roles, only 25% believe this will happen easily.

We could see that there were hundreds of female leadership courses available and most enterprises were running their own initiatives. Yet the dial was not moving. So, we set about doing something different from standard or traditional female leader courses.

Researching the market, we found that most focus on confidence building and 'fixing' the perceived flaws in female talent. However, we believe that any woman who is emerging as a future leader is already, highly skilled and resilient.

Female talent in this industry is pretty amazing. They have bucked the trends and societal expectation at every stage. From making tough and often isolating choices at school and university to entering a truly male dominated industry with a ratio of 4:1, where we know the odds are stacked against them. Everyone who has got this far should be deservedly proud of all that they have already achieved.

Women wanted frameworks and skills to do the job better and were looking for role models and mentors, both male and female to guide them through potential challenges.

This ethos is at the heart of LEAP, and the impact does not stop at graduation. Each graduate is carefully matched with a mentor to guide them to the next phase, and the Alumnae programme will keep them connected throughout their career.

What role do allies and leadership teams play in creating environments where women can thrive in data careers?

I don't really like talking about allies in this context. For me an ally is like a dedicated football fan. They turn up rain or shine every week; they buy the strip every season and they will defend and passionately support their team year after year without fail. Whilst supporters are great, their efforts do not move the dial and make little difference to their team's position at the end of the season.

Advocates in my analogy are the people in the dressing room, the managers, the coaches and the physio's, choosing the team, on the side of the pitch, investing in new players and ensuring the long-term success of the club. Women need advocates, both men and women who will elevate them, make space for them at the table and work tirelessly for the success of the whole team. Good leaders make good decisions and so by definition are advocates.

How do you measure the impact of Women in Data®'s work — both for the partners you collaborate with and for the wider data community?

This is a really interesting question, and the answer is very nuanced. Before Covid 19, the percentage of women in the industry was continually rising and at a rate that we were confident that the gap would eventually close. But the pandemic took its toll, and we shifted from 30% to the low 20's. Figures have only partially recovered-but on the positive side, in absolute numbers, there are more women in the industry due to the growth in the sector.

In last year's State of the Nation, we recorded a gender pay gap for the data industry of 9%. This was driven mainly by the lack of women in senior roles, the impact of part time working and disproportionate allocation of bonuses. This 9% number is a baseline against which we will be holding organisations to account.

but we noticed that there was very little data on the human in the mix. The SOTN seeks to understand not just how people are faring but how they feel about the industry.

At Women in Data® we believe that it is important that every voice is heard for SOTN. We create a totally representative sample across gender, job role, seniority, vertical and geography. This is why we ask everyone to complete the survey and rely on our allies and ambassadors to amplify the call.

I will not see gender parity in my lifetime, but that is not a reason to stop! Whilst we would love to be boiling the ocean, we recognise that we cannot change everything. We focus on working with our growing community of Brand Partners to ensure that they are moving the dial on gender parity. We are amplifying their activities to signpost what good looks like and at the same time we are working tirelessly with other organisations right up to government level to promote the interventions that will make the necessary change happen.

Finally, your upcoming "State of the Nation" survey promises to shine a light on the real experiences of people in our industry. What insights or changes do you hope this research will spark across the industry and how can male allies help shape the survey from an equality perspective?

The State of the Nation report is not just for women, it is designed to fill the gap in research about how all practitioners are being impacted at a time of extreme change. Much is reported on the size of the AI market, the Tech landscape and the skills of the future

IN LAST YEAR'S STATE OF THE NATION, WE RECORDED A GENDER PAY GAP FOR THE DATA INDUSTRY OF 9%

The Data and AI industry is, in my opinion a great place for women to work, hopefully my long tenure is testament to that and there are no valid reasons why women cannot thrive.

Many of the difficulties that women face are due to biases and assumptions that could be dismantled if the will was there. I hope that the annual State of the Nation report will highlight what people are feeling and what can be done

OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE

■ EXECUTIVE SPOTLIGHT

CATHY ARNOLD
Head of Data Services, University of Leeds

women in data

Fireside Chat with Cathy Arnold, Head of Data Services, University of Leeds

Q: **Cathy, let's start with your journey. How did your career path bring you into data leadership?**

Cathy: I started as an architect in the private sector in the 1980s and was lucky to work on some exciting projects in the airport sector, education and regeneration including the development of Canary Wharf. I got interested in contract disputes and qualified as a Chartered Arbitrator in 1990. That legal dimension coupled with my design work was all joined together by project delivery and over the years I moved to local government and then the Civil Service and began to deliver projects outside the estates world, in digital and cyber and eventually data and here I am in Leeds. What this shows is that there is not always a logical or straight path to the data world and a leadership position does not mean detailed technical data expertise (although some is helpful), but it is about people and empathy. Good data leadership is about culture and that is enhanced by diversity.

Q: **When you think about diversity in data teams, what does that mean to you?**

Cathy: Our team at University of Leeds was established at the beginning of 2023 to support the University with its digital and data transformation strategy, part of the overall Global Strategy.

(Ed: The digital element can be found here)

Our recruitment campaign was supported by Women in Data and deliberately so, as we wanted to address the issue of under-representation of women in data roles. We also wanted to have a properly diverse team, not just by gender, but looking at how we can support carers, neurodivergent individuals, different ages and backgrounds to join the data profession.

With Women in Data's help, we developed a recruitment strategy to include different modes of engagement both online and in person, opportunities to question our leadership ahead of the application process and the chance to see interview questions in writing. These are just a few of the tools used.

"GOOD DATA LEADERSHIP IS ABOUT CULTURE – AND CULTURE IS ENHANCED BY DIVERSITY."

Q: Can you share an example of how diversity in your team has sparked innovation or new ideas?

Cathy: The University of Leeds has a research farm as part of its Global Food & Environment Institute. A meeting between our data engineering team and some of the researchers has led to the development of ideas around how to harness their data to improve the impact of data from their projects on wider research activity. With the advent of MS Fabric, there are opportunities to make things easier and more innovative for our research colleagues.

Another area of work has been the partnership with Smart Data Research UK, which has its Healthy and Sustainable Places Smart Data hub in Leeds. We helped them by building the data portal or front door to the data hub at https://hasp.ac.uk/. Having a diverse team means you get different perspectives on the approach to innovation and new projects. This work was delivered with one of our key data partners, MetadataWorks, who provided a project team and expertise using their metadata solutions to develop the portal for researchers. Whilst providing their expertise, what I like about their approach is the way in which MetadataWorks support upskilling of in-house team members and the knowledge transfer needed to sustain things once the project is complete. We hope to be able to allocate funding to build on our initial projects with MetadataWorks to develop a one stop shop for all things data at University of Leeds. With the data portal, anyone who is looking for details of our student, operational or research datasets will be able to search and source the relevant metadata simply and efficiently. We hope we can deliver this during the next 12 months.

Q: How do you create an environment where everyone feels they can contribute ideas?

Cathy: For me, authenticity and empathy are core values and these are woven into the way our team works. When we first came together, we used the Insights Discovery model to provide individuals with assessments of their preferred working and engaging style and how to maximise this or adapt it when working with stakeholders. We then built on this with work on coaching and listening, and team dynamics.

The model helped us develop a common language to support conversations and empower team members to know that there is no one size fits all and that we can all adapt our delivery approach to suit different situations. Hierarchy has its place from an accountability perspective, but otherwise I believe in flat structures when it comes to delivery with every voice being equal.

I am often heard saying there is no such thing as a stupid or wrong answer, just different points of view and they are all valid. In data, it is important to have a measured approach to risk to protect data, especially from a regulatory point of view, but it is also important to take risks to enable ideas to bubble up and become innovative data products. This is supported in our team by empowering initiative and allowing team members to develop ideas and bring them forward for discussion and development in the wider group. Everyone plays to their strengths and this is where leadership style is important – let others take centre stage, listen, support and nurture ideas.

land

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"Using lighthouse projects an idea championed by Oakland Everything Data has helped us demonstrate success and design effective data products. Oakland's support in mapping our student and curriculum data has enabled us to improve insights and create repeatable patterns that make rolling out new data products more efficient."

Cathy Arnold,
Head of Data Services,
University of Leeds

weareoakland.com

Q: You've said before that not everyone in data needs technical skills. How can people from different backgrounds still make a difference?

Cathy: A key aspect of data leadership, indeed data work more widely, is managing people, their behaviours and their culture. It is also about understanding their business and what they need from their data to provide real insights and process improvement. This is where stakeholder management and governance skills come in.

A combination of people who understand operational culture and those who have in-depth technical knowledge enables us to deliver projects effectively. Our team has people from different sectors – Civil Service, health, higher education, retail, telecoms – and this adds depth to our understanding of how businesses work and what they need to manage their systems and results.

Q: What would you say to professionals looking to transition into data from other careers?

Cathy: Anyone interested in data should seek to network with data professionals, hear about their journeys and take advice on how they managed their careers.

A good start would be to join Women in Data – you will definitely find your tribe there and that applies to male allies as well!

The range of career options in data is wider than people think and includes communications work, governance, legal and ethical as well as technical roles, so there is something for everyone. Don't let anyone convince you there is no role for you, as there undoubtedly will be.

Q: What practical steps do you think organisations can take to make sure people feel they truly belong in data teams?

Cathy: I strongly believe this is about giving everyone space to be heard and also to be quiet. Not everyone wants to shout their ideas from the mountain top and some folk like to feed their ideas quietly and in writing. The different approaches are all valid.

It is about respect and support that is authentic and not just to tick boxes. I think it is always obvious when it is not authentic and I hope that those working with our service can see that they are getting a real, honest approach to delivery where team members are free to challenge and disagree in a healthy way.

All ideas have their value and different groups will have different ways of sharing their ideas – we need to give everyone the right space.

Q: How has diversity within your teams influenced the impact of your work at Leeds?

Cathy: This can be about matching the right people to a project so that they can show their empathy with and experience of an issue. Where we have individuals who may find it challenging to engage with some stakeholders, particularly more senior ones, we will make sure they are supported through the right kind of introduction and empowered with the techniques they have gained through our Insights work.

Using lighthouse projects, an idea promoted by one of our partners Oakland Group, to demonstrate success has also helped. This means we can use our results to help

stakeholders see that we can design and deliver effective data products. Oakland Group has supported us with mapping our current student and curriculum data landscapes and helping us prioritise work to improve our management of these data to improve insight and analysis of student experience. Through work on these lighthouse projects, we have been able to develop repeatable patterns for data products, making the roll out of new and innovative products more efficient as we build up our catalogue.

> **"THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A STUPID OR WRONG ANSWER, JUST DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW – AND THEY'RE ALL VALID."**

Over the last two years we have built our enterprise data platform and also a number of data products to support student experience, research and health data work. As these products are successfully launched, confidence in our team grows.

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" Our partnership with Data Literacy Academy is enabling us to embed a truly human-centred data culture, by giving our people the confidence and skills they need to thrive in the age of AI.

Tony Zona
Chief Data Officer, Grant Thornton UK

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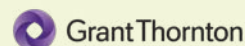
Data Literacy Academy

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Speak with us to learn how you can embed org-wide data & AI literacy today.

Our issue now is how to focus on the right projects for the university whilst seeing increasing demand for our services. This is where tying things back to the overall strategy for the University of Leeds is key. Our institutional enabling strategy is to "organise the intellectual, operational, digital and physical assets to enable our talented, diverse, digitally-literate, collaborative and empowered community to deliver our academic ambition, and underpin our sustainable societal impact." From a data perspective this means getting buy-in at the top of the organisation and across the business to champion improvements to our data literacy and data ambition. We have started that journey in partnership with Oakland Group and another of our partners, Data Literacy Academy (DLA). Data literacy is not at a high level across our organisation and, like many other higher education institutions, is something we need to build on to support business teams with making their data a real asset.

DLA and Oakland held workshops with senior leaders in late 2024 and we are now moving into the next stage of our data literacy agenda to support all staff to make effective use of data in their day-to-day roles. DLA and Oakland are supporting us with the understanding of the balance needed between people, process and technology. Through workshops to date, we have been able to pinpoint the key challenges and opportunities for the University of Leeds and use this to develop the brief for data projects across the change programme for the organisation. Diversity and the understanding of managing diversity is very important if we are to get the best out of people to harness technology and improve our processes.

DIVERSITY AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF MANAGING DIVERSITY IS VERY IMPORTANT IF WE ARE TO GET THE BEST OUT OF PEOPLE

Q: From a leadership perspective, how do you make sure diversity drives innovation rather than slows things down?

Cathy: This is about fostering a sense of belonging and actually walking the walk. The saying goes you cannot be what you cannot see, so this is why diversity is so important.

As others look in and see the diverse range of individuals that make up our team, they will see that this is key to our success, but that only works if that diversity is championed by the leaders – so by our CDO and me as well as other leaders across the organisation.

We need to value all points of view and champion equity as part of our overall leadership culture. Allowing ideas to surface and not micromanaging means that the team members lead the team – we are all leaders and that is how it should be.
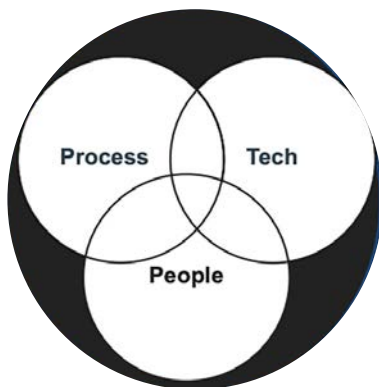

Q: And finally, looking ahead, how do you see diverse and inclusive teams shaping the future of data strategy?

Cathy: With the pace of change in data and in technology more widely, in areas like generative AI, learned language models, predictive analytics and sustainable data management, it is more and more important to accept a diverse range of views, business models, approaches and people to support us as we grapple with the tensions between innovation and sustainability.

Climate change is a massive challenge. We know the impact AI is having on water usage and data strategies need to adapt to ensure we can move into the future with confidence to reduce or halt the impact data strategy is having on our environment.

In that journey we need all views and all ideas, so diversity is critical to success.
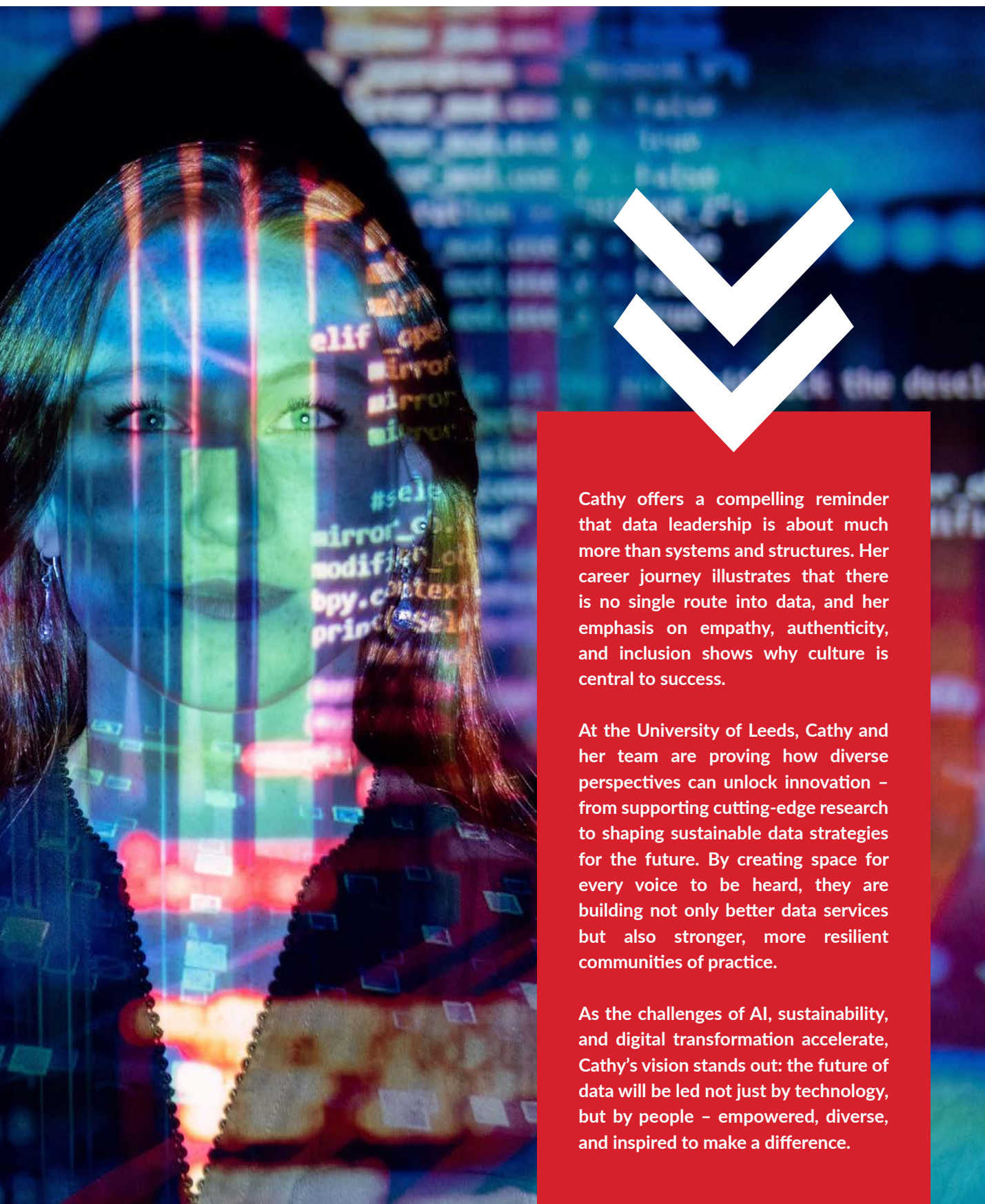
Cathy offers a compelling reminder that data leadership is about much more than systems and structures. Her career journey illustrates that there is no single route into data, and her emphasis on empathy, authenticity, and inclusion shows why culture is central to success.

At the University of Leeds, Cathy and her team are proving how diverse perspectives can unlock innovation – from supporting cutting-edge research to shaping sustainable data strategies for the future. By creating space for every voice to be heard, they are building not only better data services but also stronger, more resilient communities of practice.

As the challenges of AI, sustainability, and digital transformation accelerate, Cathy's vision stands out: the future of data will be led not just by technology, but by people – empowered, diverse, and inspired to make a difference.

OUR VOICE

REAL STORIES, REAL ACTION, REAL CHANGE

DAWN CARTER

Head of Data Architecture at Canada Life

women in data

Beyond the Dashboard:
Dawn Carter on Inclusion, Architecture, and People-First Leadership

DIVERSITY & ACCESSIBILITY IN DATA

You've spoken passionately about making data and technology accessible to everyone, not just those already in the room. What practical steps do you think organisations and industry events could take to create genuinely inclusive experiences — from deaf awareness to mobility access and quieter spaces?

Inclusion isn't about being invited into the room and being told to play nice. If you have to change who you are to "fit" in, then you don't belong, you're just surviving in a world that wasn't built for you.

This is personal for me. I am part of a signing choir, where songs are translated to British Sign Language (BSL) to make music accessible to the D/deaf community. I'm also on the board of Epilepsy Scotland, having been diagnosed with Epilepsy at 14. So,

when I talk about accessibility, it's a lived experience.

I attend numerous events and conferences, and I am always shocked by the lack of accessibility. Most recently I attended a large, well-known event where I witnessed people tripping over the exhibitor stages, mobility scooters almost toppling over, only one lift in the building working despite having stages across multiple floors, and countless people remarking how over-stimulated they found it to be.

Would it be so difficult for a major conference to add live captions? Or provide quiet spaces for when the noise and lights get too much? These aren't luxuries if we actually mean "everyone is welcome".

One group I see leading the way on this is Women in Data - their flagship event has introduced a quiet space, welcomed mums

with their infants, and the event has BSL interpreters. This is how you make people feel like they belong.

The same concept applies to how we enable people to consume data. Self-serve doesn't add value if the only people it serves is your data team. It's about enabling people to make informed decisions with the information they have. If we make it so complicated, or inaccessible, then we've lost the point of what we do, and why we do it.

THE ICEBERG OF ARCHITECTURE

Often, businesses only see the "tip of the iceberg" — the dashboards and insights — without recognising the governance, technology, and architecture beneath. How do you persuade stakeholders that this hidden work is an enabler of long-term value, not a blocker?

This is my most used analogy. Businesses see the shiny dashboards or reports (the bit above the water) but rarely do they pay attention to what's lurking underneath... the architecture, governance, integrations.

Being a data leader means standing up for what's right, not what's easy. Sometimes that makes me the awkward voice in the room, the professional feather ruffler or a trusted agitator (thanks Caroline Carruthers).

COMMUNICATING THE INVISIBLE

In your view, what are the most effective ways to communicate the importance of strong data foundations — architecture, governance, integration — to senior leaders who may be more focused on short-term results?

The trick to getting buy-in isn't to just show them diagrams (I'm an architect - I love a good diagram) but to show them what's in it for them. Finance wants trusted numbers. Sales want consistent pipelines or single views of customers. Operations want to spend less time firefighting. But how do we do all that if we don't understand what our data is, what we meant by the terms, where we find it and how it relates to other data? Everyone wants data but no one wants to take ownership for it.
If it was easy we'd all have solved it by now. We are playing catch up on the rising speed of Data including AI, which means many organisations that haven't invested in the enabling foundations are trying to build on sand, and there's a very expensive lesson in not having money to do things right, and having to find money to do it wrong more than twice. How do we do just enough, just in time?

One of my other favourite analogies to use is Ikea (or Argos for those of us old enough to remember that) to tell the importance of data catalogues. You see a wardrobe you like on display in the marketplace, but you can't just lift it up and pop it in your house. You check the ticket, and it will tell you where to find it in the warehouse. Off you go to aisle 26, location 4, and find three boxes that you can put on your trolley and take home. But now you have to build it according to the instructions.... sound familiar to what your data team have been talking about - knowing the data you want/need, knowing where to find it, getting at it and joining it together to give you the output you want/need.

You have to bring it to life with pictures people get - data isn't as scary as people think it is.

PEOPLE-FIRST LEADERSHIP

You emphasise that "technology only works if people do." How do you approach growing teams, nurturing talent, and building environments where people feel motivated to do their best work?
For me, leadership starts with knowing people are humans. I know what it feels like when my team has my back and when I have theirs.

Technology will continue to change, the tech we use, new developments are being created at speeds we can barely keep up with... so what's the constant? People, adaptability and the ability to learn in a safe space. A safe space to fail, to learn and safe to succeed - whatever that means for them.

And yes, that means making bold calls. Protecting your team, saying no to unrealistic deadlines and most of all challenging "that's how we've always done it". Those choices aren't always popular, but they build loyalty, creativity, and long-term results. They make you a leader of people not just a people manager
Ultimately, it's about standing up for what's right, not what's easy.

The best leaders I have had have given me stretched targets and said "I believe in you, I've got you" to get a more productive Dawn, and a much happier Dawn - and she is a force!

AUTHENTICITY IN A CHANGING WORLD

From AI-written CVs to the pressure of networking, it's easy to feel like authenticity gets lost. What advice would you give to women in data about building their careers and networks while staying true to themselves?

Let's be honest, AI writing CVs to be read by AI? That's not authenticity, that's parody.

My advice, don't contort yourself into someone else's mould. When I first said I wanted to be a data architect I was told I had "too much personality" for that. Good - it's what makes me a great data architect and data leader - it's what I'm known for.

I recall being asked to write about my unconventional career journey and I wrote an article about why I think it's ok to be selfish. I was told it was "too provocative", and the editor wanted to change my words to soften it. My response? Don't publish it then. You asked me because you wanted to hear my voice then tried to silence it.

That's the thing about authenticity: you have to know your non-negotiables. What are your boundaries? Because if you stand for nothing, you fall for everything - yes that's a Katy Perry reference.

So, my advice, be unapologetically you. Share your story. Find your cheerleaders and those that genuinely support what you do. Harsh truth - no one cares about your career more than you. So, carve it out how you want, and if you don't know how to do that - find someone in that position and ask them how they got there, find your way of doing it, then smash it. You only get one shot at life, and no one gets out alive.

Don't be afraid to ask for what you want. That's when my ex-team member coined #BeMoreDawn - the number of times that I have gotten something/somewhere just because I was brazen enough to ask.

SHAPE THE FUTURE OF DATA & AI

Take Part in the State of the Nation Survey

As leaders and practitioners in Data & AI, we are constantly adapting - learning new skills, responding to shifting priorities, and redefining our place in a sector that's reshaping the world.

That is why the Women in Data® State of the Nation Survey, is so important and why we're asking for your help.

This annual research isn't just about women's experiences – it is about all of us.

Capturing the collective voice of everyone working across Data, AI, and Tech. Revealing how we are experiencing our working lives, from a professional and personal level, where barriers still exist, and what tools and skills are necessary to drive the sector forward.

By taking just 20 minutes to complete the survey and then sharing it across your teams and networks you will help build a comprehensive, data-driven picture of the challenges, opportunities, and ambitions shaping our industry today.

Most importantly, the insights will ensure that leaders, decision-makers and employers have the evidence they need to act with clarity and purpose to create a stronger, fairer and more sustainable industry for us all.

Your experience counts. Your reach matters. Together, we can shape the future of our sector.

Take the survey now

women in data

Thank you for supporting the State of the Nation Survey - together, we can make change happen.

Fieldwork closes in mid December, with the full report launching March 2026.

» » » » » »

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.

In tech, fortunes are made—and lost—on the back of bold bets. From Apple and Bitcoin to Netflix and Nvidia, history is littered with missed chances, doubters, and outright flops.

Here are ten of the biggest investment mistakes, where fear, FOMO, and hesitation cost billions.

TOP 10 BIGGEST TECH INVESTMENT MISTAKES:

FEAR, FOMO, AND FORTUNES LOST

1 "WHO NEEDS THE INTERNET?" (1990S)

In the early days of the web, many analysts dismissed it as hype. Investors who stayed out missed Amazon, Google, and eBay. The lesson? Every revolution looks like a toy before it rewrites the rules of business.

2 IGNORING THE IPHONE (2007)

When Steve Jobs unveiled the iPhone, experts predicted failure. Nokia and BlackBerry scoffed. Investors who bet against Apple missed one of the greatest stock runs in history, fuelled by the device that changed how humans live, work, and connect.

THE ONES THAT GOT AWAY...

We asked leaders to share their own misses (anonymously):

...*"I was pitched Bitcoin in 2011. I laughed."*

...*"I turned down a SaaS founder who's now a unicorn CEO."*

...*"I sold my Tesla stock for a quick 20% gain. Ouch."-*

3 PASSING ON NETFLIX (2000S)

Blockbuster had the chance to buy Netflix for $50 million in 2000. They laughed the founders out of the room. Today, Netflix is worth over $200 billion, and Blockbuster is a trivia question. Sometimes the future knocks and you bolt the door.

4 BITCOIN AT $1 (2010)

The ultimate FOMO play. Thousands saw Bitcoin when it was dirt cheap. Few believed it. A $1,000 bet back then could have made you a multimillionaire today. It's the modern reminder that ridicule often precedes revolution.

5 FACEBOOK'S "FLOP" IPO (2012)

Early coverage mocked Facebook's IPO as overhyped. Shares even dipped. Those who stayed away missed the rise of one of the most powerful firms in tech, now Meta, shaping how billions interact, shop, and argue online.

6 SLEEPING ON TESLA (2012–2019)

To many, Tesla was "just another car company." Investors doubted Elon Musk's ability to scale. Today it's a symbol of EV dominance and one of the world's most valuable automakers. Missing Tesla wasn't just missing a stock—it was missing a movement.

7 OVERLOOKING NVIDIA

For years, Nvidia was dismissed as a niche graphics card maker. Fast forward to the AI boom: its chips power everything from ChatGPT to autonomous vehicles. Those who underestimated GPUs as "gaming toys" missed the foundation of modern AI.

8 CRYPTO WINTER FIRE SALES

After every crash, some investors sold too soon, only to watch digital assets rebound again and again. Volatility is brutal—but the mistake is confusing short-term pain with long-term irrelevance.

9 THE AI STARTUPS NOBODY BACKED (PRE-2022)

Early AI ventures often struggled for support. Fast-forward, and OpenAI, Anthropic, and Hugging Face now dominate global conversations and valuations. The AI "hype" turned out to be history's most expensive "we'll pass."

10 THE "TOO RISKY" EXCUSE

The evergreen error: doing nothing. Risk aversion can feel safe in the moment but costs dearly when disruption hits. As one VC said: "The biggest risk is thinking you're avoiding risk."

DIGITAL EDGE VERDICT: » » » » » »

If hindsight is a cruel teacher, tech investing is its favourite classroom. The lesson? Innovation rarely waits for certainty. Those who hesitate risk watching the next trillion-dollar opportunity pass them by—while someone else cashes in. The only real mistake is never placing a bet.

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 — from the challenges it solves to the teams building it and the customers it empowers.

Eden Smith
SUSTAINABLE FUTURES WITH PEOPLE & DATA

» How has Eden Smith's vision evolved since its founding, and what priorities are shaping the company's role in the fast-moving data and AI landscape today?

» When Eden Smith was founded in 2016, our mission was clear: to ring the bell on out-dated recruitment models and to help organisations access and nurture the best data talent so they could make better decisions. We began as a specialist data staffing company but quickly recognised that clients needed more than recruitment. They needed end-to-end data solutions and a trusted partner to navigate an increasingly crowded market of service providers.

As data has matured and AI has shifted from experimentation to everyday impact, our vision has evolved. Today, we see our role not just as connecting talent, but as an active partner in shaping data and AI transformation strategies. We enable organisations to become both data-powered and people-centred, combining consulting, staffing, and training to build strong internal data cultures, support responsible dataAI adoption, and create learning pathways so teams can keep pace with change.

Behind the Solutions

Powering Data-Driven Transformation Across Industry

We continue to invest in strategic partnerships and programmes such as Nurture and NextGen, which accelerate the talent-to-impact journey and prepare future-ready leaders and teams. And we remain focused on ethics, sustainability, and inclusivity, ensuring that data and AI deliver long-term value and positive social impact. For us, staying relevant is less about chasing trends and more about staying curious, building ecosystems of expertise, and giving people the skills and confidence to turn data and AI into lasting outcomes.

Eden Smith emphasises a people-centred culture. How is this embedded into the organisation, and why does it matter both for clients and the teams delivering data solutions?

People are at the core of everything we do. We believe that successful transformation is fundamentally a human challenge - not a technology one.

Inside Eden Smith, this translates into a culture where curiosity, wellbeing, and personal growth are non-negotiable. Our teams have flexibility and trust, and we invest in continuous professional development so they can stretch their expertise and bring fresh ideas to the team and our network. We foster psychological safety, growth mindset,

and open knowledge sharing, ensuring that everyone can bring their whole self to work and collaborate with confidence.

For clients, this culture creates genuine transparency and trust. It means every conversation about the art of the possible is honest and outcome focused. The result is closer engagement, stronger innovation, and better retention.

Where are the biggest gaps in skills or mindset across the data and AI workforce, and how is Eden Smith helping to bridge them through initiatives such as the Nurture Programme?

The biggest gaps we see are not purely technical but human and strategic: change management during transformation, translation between business needs and technology, robust governance, and the storytelling skills to bring insights to life. Many professionals are technically excellent but struggle to communicate impact or inspire change.

Eden Smith addresses these gaps through thought-leadership and programmes like Nurture. We work with universities and

industry leaders to give emerging talent real-world projects, expert mentoring, and career coaching. By helping businesses build sustainable in-house capability and by equipping the next generation with genuine workplace experience, we create a more resilient and adaptable workforce whilst also delivering business impact and social value.

With services spanning consulting, training, executive search, and sustainability, how does Eden Smith ensure consistent value delivery across such a broad portfolio, and what impact has this had for clients?

Managing a multi-line business can be complex, but our value proposition is simple and consistent: every service starts and ends with people and outcomes. We begin by understanding a client's strategic goals and data maturity, then combine that insight with specialist expertise and a repeatable framework built to deliver measurable impact.

This integrated model delivers powerful synergies. Consulting engagements often reveal capability gaps that our training can immediately address; executive hires arrive with a ready-made support network; and

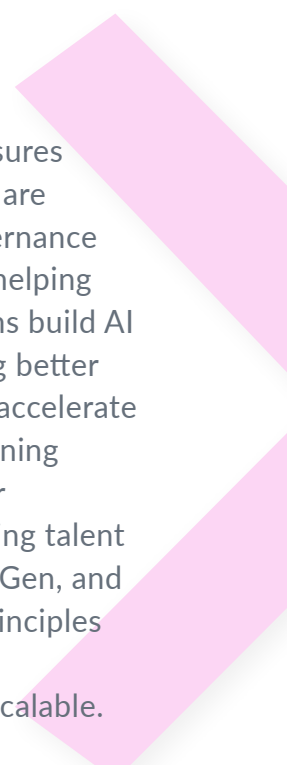sustainability insights help embed lasting change. By connecting these services, we reduce complexity, accelerate delivery, and help organisations turn data and AI into tangible, enduring value.

Executive search keeps us one step from the knowledge pool, directly informing our consulting and training. Our ability to mobilise talent rapidly shortens time to value and ensures that solutions are both adopted and sustained. The result is lower risk, higher ROI, and deeper trust.

5. Looking ahead, what are the most pressing opportunities and challenges organisations face in leveraging data and AI, and how is Eden Smith positioning itself to address them over the next 18–24 months?

The next two years will be decisive. Organisations face change fatigue as they move AI from pilot to production, pressure to comply with fast-evolving regulation, and the need to build trust through ethics and governance. We need to bring people on the journey as quickly as possible and build more robust multigenerational teams.

Eden Smith is helping clients turn these pressures into opportunities. We are strengthening our governance and ethics consulting, helping boards and senior teams build AI fluency, and supporting better workforce planning to accelerate delivery. We are deepening partnerships across our ecosystem, strengthening talent pipelines through NextGen, and embedding green AI principles to ensure innovation is sustainable as well as scalable.

By focusing on measurable outcomes, board-level literacy, and responsible adoption, we will continue to be a trusted, human-centred partner, helping organisations scale data and AI with confidence, speed, and long-term resilience.
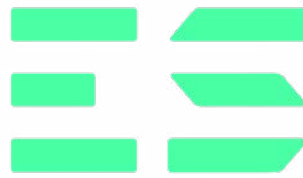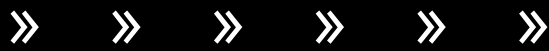
Eden Smith

SUSTAINABLE FUTURES WITH PEOPLE & DATA

» EDEN SMITH AT A GLANCE

» **CEO:** Jez Clark

» **FOUNDED:** 2016

» **HEADOFFICE:** Essex, UK

» **WORKFORCE:** 11-50

» **WEBSITE:** www.edensmith.group/contact-us

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More info

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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.

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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.

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