

# Expanding the Network:

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Understanding the barriers to entering the digital connectivity sector

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# Foreword

The networks that form the backbone of modern life and the economy are fundamentally built and maintained by people. In a sector defined by speeds, coverage percentages and rollout it is easy to disconnect from the fact that all of these key metrics are underpinned by the many talented people who make the sector work. Whether that is engineers in the field, network planners in the office, customer support teams helping customers when they need it most, HR, finance or legal teams. From the junior entrants taking their first steps in telecoms to seasoned CEOs and senior figures, everyone has a role to play in keeping the country connected.

But there is a question emerging, ‘are enough people coming into the sector and are there the skills needed to deliver connectivity today and into the future?’.

It is a question that is complex and goes to the very heart of what telecoms is and what people think of it. And it matters more than current telecoms employment figures suggest. Recorded telecoms employment has seen a contraction over the past two years, but that is largely the tail-end of an extraordinary full-fibre build cycle rather than a sign of declining need. Beneath it sits something more serious – an ageing workforce, insufficient numbers of new entrants, and a skills gap that will widen unless industry acts now. We will need substantial new talent in the coming years simply to replace those expected to retire. That is before we consider the capabilities the next decade will demand as technology advances, the full scope of roles that keep every company running regardless of sector, alongside the traditional technical roles associated with telecoms, and the changes on the horizon as AI reshapes the landscape. The backdrop to all of this will be an ongoing march where connectivity becomes increasingly entrenched into everyday life.

Recruiting more aggressively will not be sufficient on its own to address this. It requires the sector to address more uncharted questions. ‘What is turning people away from telecoms?’, ‘are we losing talent to competing sectors?’ and ‘is telecoms seen as an open and accessible place for everyone to build a career?’.

The Digital Connectivity Forum’s research has been brought together by its Skills and Inclusion working group’s investment in tackling these questions. Much of the data that exists across this area is fragmented, sitting across commercial recruiters, individual operators and official statistics with no point of truth to baseline from.

The DCF’s work to ask recruiters, young people and job seekers directly, though the sample pool is limited, marks a start on what to do next, where to go next and, alongside the supporting research, provides a look at where we are starting from.

The report’s central ethos that visibility, inclusivity and accessible routes are not a separate agenda sitting alongside the skills challenge but are the means with which

the sector can solve this challenge is the right starting point for an important challenge of our sector's time.

The call to action with recommendations is a welcome one, and we look forward to seeing where industry, government and relevant stakeholders can act either alone or in collaboration to make meaningful change that ensures that the telecoms and digital connectivity sector is a place built for everyone, by everyone, and that the sector itself has access to the talent it needs to sustain itself today and drive itself into the future tomorrow.

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## Executive Summary

The UK telecoms and digital connectivity sector underpins modern society. Forming a critical component of national and regional economic growth through better connectivity for homes and businesses, opening up opportunities for remote work, and powering sectors which generate jobs and growth in their own capacity. Yet reports across the industry suggest that it faces a growing workforce and skills challenge. This report sets out to examine the current state of play, the case for a more diverse and inclusive workforce, and what this research discovered about awareness of the sector, perceptions of the sector, and the barriers to entering both telecoms specifically and the wider working environment among young people and students, job seekers, career returners, and experienced professionals over 45.

**The problem is present but risks being masked.** Recorded telecoms employment fell by approximately 21,000 filled jobs between 2023 and 2024, but this reflects the natural tail-end of an extraordinary full-fibre build cycle rather than declining need. Beneath it, around 60% of UK telecoms engineers are over 50, the sector faces an estimated 30,000-person engineering shortfall over ten years, and as many as 200,000 engineers are expected to leave the workforce by 2030 against a graduate pipeline of 14,000 a year. Artificial intelligence is reshaping entry-level hiring at precisely the moment the sector most needs to expand it.

**The telecoms workforce is not yet fully representative of the country it serves.** Women made up 19% of the UK telecoms workforce in 2020, against 37% globally. Ethnic minority representation amongst telecoms engineers stands at 11%, the lowest of any IT specialist occupation and below the national workforce average.

**Awareness rather than perception is a key barrier.** Across three independent research cohorts, the binding constraint is awareness rather than negative perception. Among young people and students, 58% held a positive view of the sector and just 3% a negative one, whilst 38% describe themselves as neutral or unaware. When asked whether they felt represented in the sector, 47% could not comment because they felt that they did not know enough.

**The sector is understood as an engineering employer whilst its hiring challenge is broader.** The three functions that recruiters spoken to reported as among the hardest to fill were cyber and information security, ESG/sustainability, and legal, policy and regulatory affairs. Two of these three were also among the roles that candidates least associated with telecoms.

**Access to clear, concise information is a challenge.** Access to clear, concise and reliable information covering what the sector is and the roles available is a key point of possible action, cited as something that would be helpful across multiple demographics.

**There is concern around the recruitment process.** Automated CV screening was the most frequently raised concern by potential candidates across multiple research areas, with two independently surveyed samples, one predominantly over 45 and one under 25, objecting to the same mechanism. Research across the US, UK and Germany also found that 48% of employers using applicant tracking systems automatically screen out candidates for middle-skills roles with a six-month CV gap, and 32% for high-skills roles, something which research found disproportionately impacts career returners. Though it is important to note that different countries may have different employment rules dictating how ATS is used and applied, and many UK companies utilise ATS alongside human involvement, as discussed later in the report. Transparency and feedback throughout the recruitment process is both a present point of friction and an opportunity to lead for telecoms.

**Much of what is needed is already working somewhere in the sector.** Openreach's civils engineering roles are lowering accessibility barriers and opening opportunity. BT Group is the UK's leading private-sector apprenticeship employer and Vorboss's apprenticeship partnership with the ITP allowed them to reach 36% female engineers against an 18% industry average. Government-funded Skills Bootcamps offer funded opportunities to upskill and reskill, and the ITP has an abundance of useful careers information through its framework. Cellnex is leading the way through its inclusive hiring processes. The task is less about invention and more about targeting and scaling.

**Transferrable skills information and flexible working is a key support mechanism for workers looking to stay or move into telecoms.** Flexible and hybrid working, alongside clear information on transferrable skills were listed by surveyed job seekers as the most powerful support levers to help them stay or enter the sector. The importance of understanding transferrable skills is something echoed by attendees of a Connected Careers event that was run by the Digital Connectivity Forum in collaboration with the Department for Work and Pensions and featured an audience of DWP customers engaging with presentations on what the sector is, how it works and the opportunities available.

**Key barriers reported by young people** included lack of work experience, lack of clear information and not knowing where to apply.

**Key factors that would most discourage established career job seekers from applying for a role in telecoms** included lack of awareness of available roles, location or travel requirements and concerns about age, gender or background bias.

# Key Findings at a Glance

## THE SECTOR IS NOT DISLIKED



**58%**

positive view

**3%**

negative view

Seen as a place to start a career.

Young people and students, n=74

## IT IS NOT KNOWN



**47%**

could not say

Whether they felt represented in the sector, they did not know enough about it. The largest single response.

Young people and students, n=74

## WHAT STOPS YOUNG PEOPLE



**59%**

lack of work experience

**58%**

lack of clear information

Both practical barriers, not perceptual ones.

Young people and students, n=74

## WHAT DISCOURAGES JOB SEEKERS



**43%**

unaware of roles

**43%**

location or travel

**40%**

age or background bias

The three most-cited factors, of eleven offered.

Job seekers, n=88

## WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE SAID WOULD MAKE JOB HUNTING MORE ACCESSIBLE



Transparency of how AI is used in the recruitment process



Better communication



Jargon free adverts



Advance notice of interview structure

Young people and students, n=74. Volunteered in free-text responses rather than selected from a list.

## WHAT ATTRACTS JOB SEEKERS



**69%**

salary and benefits

**52%**

interesting or meaningful work

The top two of eight options offered.

Job seekers, n=88

## THE STRONGEST LEVER



**48%**

paid training or reskilling

**47%**

higher starting salaries

Would make them more likely to consider telecoms.

Job seekers, n=88

## THE SUPPORT THAT WOULD HELP MOST



**49%**

hybrid or remote working

**38%**

information on transferable skills

The top two of twelve options offered.

Job seekers, n=88

## WHAT RECRUITERS SEE



**6 of 7**

competitive salary and flexible working

**5 of 7**

clearer progression for graduates

Strongest draws, and the biggest graduate lever.

Recruitment professionals, n=7

## HALF OF JOB SEEKERS FEEL REPRESENTED



**50%**

said yes

Read alongside the finding to the right.

Job seekers, n=88

## HOW THE SAMPLE WAS COMPOSED



**70%**

aged 45 to 64

**83%**

male

Closely reflects the sector's current profile, so read the two together.

Job seekers, n=88, sample composition

# Introduction: A Sector in Transition

This report examines the barriers to entering the telecoms and digital connectivity sector. Exploring levels of awareness and perception amongst different demographics, particularly young people and students, as well as the sector's own accessibility and points of entry at a broader level.

It has three key aims: to establish a clearer picture on the sector's workforce pressures and the barriers facing current and prospective entrants, to test how telecoms is viewed by the people it most needs to attract, and to distinguish barriers that are perceptual from those that are structural, in recognition that both will require different responses.

The UK telecoms sector is navigating a period of significant structural change. An ageing workforce and insufficient numbers of new entrants are creating a growing skills gap, meaning the sector will need to bring in substantial new talent to maintain the expertise needed to power the engine of this critical industry.

Two elements risk clouding this emerging pattern. The first is that recorded telecoms employment has fallen over the past two years, as discussed later in this report, which can be mistakenly read as a contraction of the sector's growth, but is in fact a natural tail-end of an extraordinary full-fibre build cycle. These recent shifts should not obscure the deeper, long-term risk sitting beneath them. The second is that this is arriving alongside a technology shift, as AI reshapes the roles which the sector needs and the entry-level market it recruits from.

Historically, telecoms has been viewed as a male-dominated, build and engineering trade, rather than as a modern and varied digital career option. That perception matters across multiple fronts. It is out of date, and it risks being self-reinforcing. A sector that is understood as being targeted or suitable for certain people or characteristics, will tend to keep attracting only those characteristics, struggling to grow its diversity and widen its talent pipeline.

A recurring difficulty in producing this report centred around the available data itself. Much of the data currently available is fragmented, sitting across commercial recruiters, individual operators and official statistics, meaning there is no central point of truth from which the sector can baseline and build. Telecoms-specific workforce and diversity data is particularly scarce.

That gap shaped the design of this report. The Digital Connectivity Forum reached out directly to recruiters, young people and students, and job seekers to identify the up to date challenges facing individuals and the sector. The full approach, sample composition, and limitations are set out in the methodology and evidence base.

The report is organised by key areas to answer the questions that have been identified. Part one sets out the market conditions that are driving the workforce challenge, alongside the societal structure that these labour markets operate from.

Part two presents the case for a more diverse and inclusive workforce both through the lens of foundational fairness and the supporting business case.

Part three outlines the primary research and findings that have been gathered through the Digital Connectivity Forum's outreach into key demographic areas, supported by existing research from other organisations and sources.

Part four shifts its focus from perception to structure. Examining the barriers to entering the sector, before moving into routes in. Part five explores what is already working, identifying case studies from companies that are getting culture right, and how to attract and retain a thriving, empowered and diverse workforce.

The report concludes with recommendations across industry and employers, the Digital Connectivity Forum itself and Government.

## How this report was produced

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This report draws on published UK and international research alongside three strands of primary research conducted by the Digital Connectivity Forum, alongside input from telecoms operators and other relevant stakeholders. The primary research was undertaken because the published evidence base could not answer the questions above. No comprehensive dataset on the UK telecoms workforce exists, and telecoms-specific evidence on awareness, perception and barriers to entry was extremely limited. Seven recruitment professionals working across the sector, seventy four young people aged 18 to 25, and eighty eight job seekers from the wider market were asked directly. Samples, methods and limitations are set out in Methodology and Evidence Base.

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# Scope, Definitions and a Note on the Data

## What this report covers

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This report uses "telecoms and digital connectivity" to describe the businesses that build, operate, maintain and supply the UK's fixed and mobile communications networks, together with the professional functions that support them. In practice that includes network operators and infrastructure builders, alternative network providers, mobile network operators, and their supply chains and contractors.

Deliberately, this report treats the sector as broader than its engineering workforce. Alongside field and network engineering it covers cyber and information security, ESG and sustainability, legal, policy and regulatory affairs, finance, data, commercial, customer service, people and HR, and all other roles found across the sector. This report's own research identified that awareness of these roles lags behind awareness of technical ones.

## A note on the data

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It is important to note that no comprehensive dataset on the UK telecoms workforce exists. Data is fragmented across commercial recruiters, individual operators and official statistics, with no central point of truth from which the sector can baseline. This is not a limitation the report has sought to work around and is instead one of the report's findings.

Important areas of note include that official statistics do not isolate telecoms. DSIT's Digital Sector Economic Estimates are used at several points, and telecommunications appears within them as a subsector, but the diversity figures those estimates provide most often describe the digital sector as a whole, which is a considerably broader population. Where a digital-sector figure is used, it is identified as such.

The report relies on proxies where telecoms-specific data does not exist. Engineering and technology data is used due to its substantial overlap with telecoms' own technical workforce. Evidence from financial services is used on the question of which skills survive automation. These are informative rather than equivalent and are labelled where used.

Some figures are older or narrower than ideal. The most-cited gender figure for UK telecoms dates from 2020, and the strongest sector-specific evidence on workplace happiness and productivity comes from a single 2019 study within one company.

Where UK evidence was unavailable, international research is cited and identified as such and has been treated as indicative of direction rather than as a UK measurement. Where evidence is genuinely contested, this report presents the disagreement rather than only one represented side.

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# Methodology and Evidence Base

## Approach

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This report combines a review of published research with primary research conducted by the Digital Connectivity Forum. This includes both structured surveys and qualitative input across young people and students, job seekers and recruiters within the sector. All research was conducted between January and August 2026.

### Desk research

Published UK and international evidence was reviewed and drawn from official statistics and government analysis, sector bodies and professional institutes, academic literature, and independent research. Sources were reviewed up to August 2026. Where telecoms-specific data did not exist, the closest available proxy was used and identified as such. Where our research found that evidence was contested, this is clearly labelled with both sides presented.

### Recruiter research

Seven recruitment professionals working across the sector were asked using a structured survey about barriers facing under-represented candidates, candidate availability, hardest-to-fill roles, hiring process trends, attraction and retention factors, and competition from other sectors. Participants spanned agency recruiters, in-house talent partners, recruitment process outsourcing and managed service provider consultants, covering roles from technical and engineering through to commercial, legal, ESG and executive functions, and career stages from entry to C-suite. Their client base extends across IT and data, financial services and fintech, energy and utilities, and infrastructure and construction, meaning participants could speak to competition for talent between telecoms and its rivals rather than to telecoms hiring in isolation. We also spoke to internal recruiters working directly for telecoms companies themselves.

It is important to note that seven practitioners cannot represent the sector and as such these findings should be taken as indicative insights using direct expertise rather than a sector representing statistic.

### Young people and students survey

This was conducted using a structured survey of 74 respondents aged 18 to 25 and those still in education. The survey covered awareness, perception, accessibility, representation, barriers to entry and the hiring process. Distributed via higher education student cohort networks, the survey combined scaled questions, multiple-choice questions and free-text responses, with most questions carrying an explicit "I don't know enough to comment" option, which proved analytically significant to this report. The sample skewed toward the older end of the bracket, with 47% aged 25 or over, 32% aged 22 to 25, 11% aged 20 to 22, 7% aged 18 to 20 and 3% under the general age bracket at 16-18. This means that the findings may somewhat under-represent those earliest in their education or career decision-making.

### Job seeker survey

This was conducted using a structured survey of eighty-eight respondents from the wider job-seeking market, including people working elsewhere, career switchers and career returners. These were reached via recruiter networks. The survey covered familiarity and understanding, roles recognised, awareness, perception and comparative appeal, attraction factors, representation, interview accessibility, reasons for leaving previous telecoms roles and what would bring people back.

This cohort is not representative of the general working-age population, and the composition materially affects how several findings should be read. No respondents were aged 18 to 24 and only 5% were 25 to 34, while 70% were aged 45 to 64. 83% were male, 13% female, 1% non-binary and 3% declined to answer. Telecoms and digital connectivity were the most commonly reported previous sector of work, followed by IT, software and technology, and of all respondents 55% had five years or more of telecoms experience against only 10% with under six months, with 16% preferring not to answer. 31% were employed full-time and 30% freelance or contractor, and no respondents identified as students. Regionally, responses concentrated in the South East at 24%, the South West at 15% and London at 13%,

with several UK nations and regions including the Highlands and Islands and North and Mid Wales returning no responses.

This is substantially a survey of sector insiders and long-tenured professionals rather than an outside audience. Two findings therefore carry caveats. The high familiarity and understanding scores could be read as reflecting who answered rather than awareness among the general job-seeking public, and the finding that half of respondents feel represented must be read against independent evidence that UK telecoms is itself disproportionately older and male. Both are addressed where they arise.

### **Comparability and how to read the findings**

The two surveys sampled different populations and are compared only where the difference in composition is stated.

None of the primary strands is statistically representative. Percentages indicate direction rather than precise magnitude, and sub-group figures rest on smaller numbers. The confidence this report places in its findings therefore comes from consistency across independent strands rather than the power of any individual one. Where different groups agree, findings are treated as robust. Where they diverge, the divergence is reported.



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PART ONE

# Current market characteristics and challenges

## The full fibre build cycle and the recent employment picture

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The sector generates over £185.6 billion in turnover<sup>1</sup> and continues to grow at an average company growth rate of 8.2% per year as reported in Data City's UK telecommunications industry real time data page, yet the past two years have also seen a contraction in UK telecoms employment. DSIT's Digital Sector Economic Estimates<sup>2</sup> recorded a fall of approximately 21,000 filled jobs in the Telecommunications subsector between 2023 and 2024, one of the sharpest of any digital subsector.

Considered alone this could risk misrepresenting the growth taking place in telecoms. However, contextually this is a natural shift following a remarkable build phase as UK networks rolled out full fibre connectivity across the country.

Between 2018 and 2025, the UK experienced exponential growth in the number of homes able to access full-fibre broadband, seeing a shift from 6% coverage in 2018 to 78% in 2025.<sup>3</sup> This shift to full-fibre broadband triggered a hiring wave as companies worked hard and fast to meet government ambitions of 99% gigabit capable broadband coverage by 2032.<sup>5,4</sup>

To meet these demands, Openreach alone moved from roughly 33,000 people in 2018-2019 to 37,000 people in 2023, which included the recruitment of 2,800 new engineers.<sup>6</sup> Build is now experiencing a natural slowing as industry focuses on the remaining, often harder-to-reach premises as it nears the 2032 target.<sup>7</sup> An industry that builds and upgrades will naturally experience these peaks and troughs in technical and field-based hiring as new technologies emerge and upgrades are required. However, there remains the need for technical and field-based skills as the sector moves beyond the peak of the full-fibre build cycle into a more settled build and maintenance cycle.

## An ageing workforce and a narrowing talent pipeline

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But beneath that natural adjustment sits a deeper structural challenge, with industry research showing that the sector has an ageing workforce and a weaker talent pipeline than the wider technology sector.

Around 60% of UK telecoms engineers are over 50, and the sector faces an estimated 30,000-person engineering shortfall<sup>8</sup> over the next ten years, with as many as 200,000 engineers expected to exit the workforce by 2030 against a graduate pipeline of just 14,000 a year.<sup>9</sup> The engineering shortfall is hard to predict, with 'engineer' often being used as a catch all term ranging from a fibre engineer to a radio frequency (RF) engineer. As a result, it is hard to differentiate where shortfalls might appear or be most acute, coupled with the natural peaks and troughs that technology sectors see within hiring as new technologies are developed, emerge and are built. As a result, this is a figure that is subject to change and influence and one that should be read with these natural undulations and greater need for specification in mind. However, the available statistics when taken together at face value point toward a sector that will struggle to meet its needs unless it actively addresses its pipeline now, combined with a risk that today's fibre build cycle masks a deeper skills challenge and longer-term talent cliff as the workforce

contracts. However, the sector will continue to need talented individuals to maintain these networks. Alongside this, differing levels of hiring contraction in different areas of the sector, as fibre and mobile operate their own individual build and technology cycles, make the differentiation within the terminology used in assessing engineering skills and shortfall important to accurately assess where these might emerge.

Compounding this, representation across the sector remains narrow. Women made up only 19% of the UK telecoms workforce in 2020, against 37% globally,<sup>10</sup> placing UK telecoms behind its own international peers, and behind most comparator sectors. This structural pressure sits within a wider skills system that is itself under strain, with employers reporting that more than a quarter of vacancies across the economy are hard to fill due to skills shortages, and total training expenditure of businesses across England having declined by 9% between 2019 and 2024.<sup>11</sup>

## Women in Telecoms

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A common figure cited for telecoms is that 19% of the UK telecoms workforce was female in 2020 against 37% globally in 2022.<sup>10</sup> In a 2024 review by techUK they found that a male majority exists at all levels in the UK telecoms force, but is particularly acute for skilled trade, professional occupations, managers, directors and senior officers.<sup>10</sup>

Evidence suggests that the pipeline narrows long before recruitment begins. EngineeringUK reported that women make up 17% of engineering and technology roles against 56% of other occupations, and girls represent 12% of engineering and technology T Level students and 17% of apprenticeships.<sup>12</sup> In addition, studies suggest perception forms even earlier than this. EngineeringUK's Science Education Tracker found that only 16% of girls thought engineering was suitable for them.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, an employer receiving fewer female applications is potentially seeing the outcome of pathways that were formed years earlier when subjects were chosen. With the added context that exposure and social factors might have impacted perception, rather than a lack of interest. An argument for earlier and more visible outreach, and not necessarily an indicator of lower demand from girls for these subjects, emerges here.

The more significant recent development is that the sector is losing women it has already recruited. EngineeringUK reported in 2024 that the proportion of women in engineering and technology roles fell from 16.5% to 15.7% within the past year, concentrating around women aged 35 to 44, with its chief executive, Hilary Leever, arguing that the sector must better understand why women leave and create routes for those who have left to return.<sup>14</sup> The loss of women from the sector is something that the Digital Connectivity Forum's own research in 2023 corroborates, finding relative gender balance until age point 35, at which point female representation drops steeply from the sector.

On the reasons, the 2025 Lovelace Report challenges a common assumption. It found lack of career progression, not caregiving, to be the leading cause of women leaving tech roles at 25%, followed by lack of recognition and pay inequality.<sup>15</sup> It

also highlighted that 40,000 to 60,000 women are exiting UK tech and digital sector roles annually at a cost of up to £3.5 billion.<sup>15</sup> This aligns closely with this report's own findings, where recruiters identified clearer progression pathways as the strongest attraction lever, and job seekers cited lack of progression among their common reasons for leaving. The retention problem for women therefore in part looks like a sharp example of problems identified elsewhere in our broader research, offering a potential curb cut effect, meaning that acting in one area can have far reaching benefits – which is something that repeats across recommendations found later in this report.

The sector is live to the challenge of female underrepresentation, and some of the response is already coordinated. Ofcom and major UK telecoms organisations signing a joint pledge, targeted action within companies such as Vorboss and Openreach, the convening of the Women in Tech Taskforce by UK Government and its recent call for evidence around building a tech sector for everyone all point to a sector wanting to change.

## Disabled, Neurodivergent and Long-Term Health Talent

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Analysis of ONS data for October to December 2025 by Lancaster University's Work Foundation found employment among disabled people at 52.8%, down 1.2 percentage points, with 218,000 fewer disabled people in work than twelve months earlier and the employment gap standing at 29.5%. The researchers attributed this to structural barriers including limited access to flexible work, inadequate workplace adjustments and insufficient tailored employment support.<sup>16</sup> All three appear independently across this report as areas of benefit or improvement to multiple demographics.

The Buckland Review of Autism Employment, commissioned by the Department for Work and Pensions and published in February 2024, found that only around 30% of working-age autistic people were in employment according to ONS data from 2021/22, compared with half of all disabled people and eight in ten non-disabled people, despite the majority saying they would like to work.

The Review identified negative mechanisms directly, naming recruitment processes such as interviews that feature ambiguous questions, challenging sensory environments, vague or generic job descriptions, and non-disclosure of diagnosis for fear of discrimination.<sup>17</sup> Notably some of these are areas which surfaced throughout the recruiter discussions in this report, which suggests that these are live features found in the telecoms sector's own hiring practice.

There is already work underway to provide support in this space with the Connect to Work supported employment programme being designed to kick-start local plans with £115 million in funding to enable local areas in England and Wales to deliver new back-to-work support, with an ambition to support up to 100,000 people a year from 2026/27.<sup>18</sup> The Buckland Review also recommended promoting the Autistica Neurodiversity Employers Index, which enables organisations to measure themselves against best practice on designing inclusive processes and procedures.<sup>17</sup>

Within the sector, BT Group has set a target for 17% of its employees to be disabled colleagues by 2030 and is a signatory of The Valuable 500.<sup>19,20</sup>

## Ethnicity and Cultural Diversity

The BCS, Chartered Institute for IT, 2024 diversity report found that BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) representation among IT specialists stood at 21% in 2023, higher than the 15% recorded across the total workforce. Telecoms engineers, however, sat at the bottom of that distribution at 11%, against a range across IT specialist occupations rising to 30% for "other" IT professionals.<sup>21</sup>

Regional concentration compounds the picture. BCS found representation among IT specialists ranged from 5% to 6% in the North East, Wales and Northern Ireland to 35% in London.<sup>21</sup>

Tech Talent Charter data found ethnic minority representation at 25% of the technology workforce against 12% of the wider UK workforce, while only 14% of senior technology leaders were from ethnic minority groups.

Disaggregation and intersectionality are important considerations. Binary categories can obscure the position of particular groups. The same body of research indicates that Black women accounted for only 0.6% of IT specialist roles in 2024.<sup>22</sup> Meaning a single figure can look representative while particular groups remain almost entirely absent.

## Artificial intelligence and the entry-level market

Against this backdrop, artificial intelligence is also reshaping the job market. Across the industry, operators are beginning to reduce headcount as certain functions, particularly customer service, fault detection, and elements of network operations, shift toward automation. With some UK operators attributing<sup>23</sup> a meaningful share of planned workforce reductions directly to digitisation and AI adoption. This mirrors a wider pattern across UK hiring, with entry-level and graduate roles having fallen by up to 35% over the past 18 months<sup>24</sup> nationally, and James Reed, chief executive of Reed, telling Times Radio in 2025 that his site advertised around 180,000 graduate jobs three or four years ago, and this was now down to 55,000.<sup>25</sup>

Government analysis is careful to note this correlates with, rather than is proven to be caused by, AI adoption specifically. Noting that the same roles are seeing reduced hiring at every level of seniority, suggesting a wider economic contraction compounding, not solely explaining, the AI effect. Government research also recognises that whilst there is no clear pattern in changes in hiring across seniority, employers are likely to favour more experienced candidates, particularly for roles with a surplus of applicants which is an important consideration for entry level candidates in a contracting employment market.<sup>26</sup>

The national evidence base on this point is varied and emerging. King's College London research, conducted by Klein Teeselink in 2025, suggests that employment reductions appear to be concentrated at a junior level, with AI exposed firms reducing total employment by 4.5% and junior positions specifically by 5.8%. The

report also noted that highly exposed firms were 16.3 percentage points less likely to post vacancies at all. Meanwhile separate analysis of UK job adverts found graduate postings down 45% year-on-year and entry-level postings down by 25%. Against this, the Skills England report noted that other research has found no clear evidence that AI specifically is behind the graduate slowdown, pointing instead to a gradual decline since 2022 that is difficult to separate from post-COVID labour market adjustment and the normal economic cycle, with Skills England drawing the conclusion that it is ultimately too early to say whether, and to what impact, AI will have or is having on graduate jobs.<sup>11</sup>

Short-term hiring contractions, particularly in industries with ageing populations, make long-term thinking about talent pipeline more urgent. Today's junior hires are the future's mid-level and senior figures, and a sector that reduces graduate and apprentice intake now in response to short-term AI-driven efficiency gains risks recreating, in ten years' time, the same skills cliff that has been identified among today's ageing workforce. Entry-level roles being expendable to AI rather than viewed as the foundation of the sector's future capability, risks exacerbating the talent shortage that industry is trying to solve.

## **An AI skills shift**

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The question therefore is nuanced, moving beyond how many junior roles AI removes today, but what those roles need to become so that the people filling them are equipped for the sector that AI will have built in five or ten years' time. National skills policy is already moving in this direction. Skills England notes that its guiding principle is to prioritise "no regrets" skills, meaning capabilities that are not only valuable now but are likely to remain essential regardless of how AI develops. These include skills such as communicating, handling information and content, and problem solving, and are set out in FutureDotNow<sup>27</sup> and DSIT's AI-embedded Essential Digital Skills Framework.

These are in some cases now being prioritised over narrow technical AI specialism alone. On the basis that most workers will need practical AI literacy rather than deep technical skill. This is reinforced by separate research from FSSC's (Financial Services Skills Commission) 2026 report, that suggests that as automation absorbs more routine tasks employers may place growing value on distinctly human skills such as empathy, adaptability and resilience, precisely the capabilities that are hardest to automate and therefore likely to hold their value longest.<sup>28</sup> Marking an interesting shift away from traditionally viewed 'soft skills' in recognition of these core behaviours being foundational drivers of innovation and success.

## **Building AI capability into entry routes and the existing workforce**

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The combination of a retiring workforce, a shrinking traditional entry pipeline, and a technology shift that is simultaneously reducing some roles whilst creating others presents a question that must be answered for telecoms. The sector's global adoption of AI is advanced, with NVIDIA's fourth annual State of AI in

Telecommunications survey<sup>29</sup> highlighting trends around AI adoption in telecoms - with 60% saying their organisation is using or assessing generative AI, up from 49% in 2024, and 89% saying they plan to boost AI spending in 2026, up from 65% the previous year.

That same capability and appetite for investment can be capitalised and combined with solving the sector's own talent problem. With key areas of long-term action, rather than a single fix presenting a possible way forward.

- Entry-level and graduate roles themselves may need to be redesigned around AI-augmented work
- Combining foundational technical training with exposure to AI tools from day one to allow new entrants to develop judgement in directing and quality-checking automated systems
- AI literacy and applied AI skills training becoming a standard and structured part of both entry-level and existing-workforce training

A national benchmark for what this should look like already exists. Skills England's "AI foundation skills for work"<sup>30</sup> framework defines six core competencies across three domains.

- technical skills (such as writing clear instructions for AI tools and using them to support routine tasks)
- non-technical skills (such as using simple software and adjusting how an AI tool works to get better results)
- responsible and ethical skills (understanding the risks and consequences of AI use and analysing information using AI tools)

Offering a ready-made structure to build entry-level and reskilling training around, rather than developing standards from scratch.

Government infrastructure already exists to support this more broadly. National programmes such as DSIT's AI Skills Boost, which has an ambition to upskill 10 million UK workers by 2030 through free training,<sup>31</sup> alongside a new Level 4 AI and Automation Practitioner apprenticeship<sup>32</sup> introduced in 2025, present resources that the sector could draw on directly rather than building training infrastructure alone.

At the established workforce level, with an ageing engineering base facing retirement over the next decade, AI-driven reskilling offers a genuine route to retain institutional knowledge for longer, allowing organisations to redeploy experienced engineers into high value oversight, training, and quality-assurance roles as automation absorbs more routine technical work. Helping to transition a retirement cliff into a managed, extended transition rather than an abrupt loss of expertise, as well as expanding the opportunities available to those who may want to stay in the sector longer.



02

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PART TWO

# The case for a diverse and inclusive workforce

## Fairness as the foundation

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The case for building a genuinely diverse, equitable and inclusive workforce should begin with a simple, positive ambition:

**The people who build and maintain the infrastructure that the whole country depends on should reflect the population itself.**

Better levels of diversity have been associated with a proven business case, and alongside this there is a fundamental moral case centring on the core ethos that workforces should represent the communities they serve as a measure of fairness. This section of the report will explore both the moral and the business case for improved accessibility and diversity across the telecoms sector.

Framing fairness as a principle, rather than solely to a financial end, gives it a steadier footing, and one that holds independently against a changeable economic climate. The business case, covered later in this chapter is encouraging and well worth understanding, sitting neatly alongside this foundation, reinforcing it rather than replacing it.

## What does UK society look like

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- Almost a quarter (24%)<sup>33</sup> of working-age adults were disabled in 2023/24
- Around 22.6% of working-age adults live with a common mental health condition such as anxiety or depression<sup>34</sup>
- Between 15% and 20% of the population, which is as many as 13.5 million people, is neurodivergent<sup>35</sup>
- The population is 51% female<sup>36</sup>
- 16% of the UK population was from a minority ethnic background<sup>37</sup> in 2024/25

Each of these groups represents a pool of talent, perspective and capability that a growing, ambitious sector can use to deliver the best possible products and services.

Building a workforce where everyone has a genuine route in, and a genuine route up, is simply the right foundation for an industry that connects the whole of the country, and one that many telecoms employers are already actively pursuing in recognition that fairness is expected, and an opportunity to lead.

## Where the sector stands against the UK population

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Despite clear momentum across the sector in closing representation gaps, improving diversity and ensuring that telecoms and digital connectivity is a sector delivered by everyone, for everyone, gaps still exist when the sector is considered against the UK population. Whilst telecoms specific data is lacking, Engineering UK

reported that only 17% of the engineering<sup>38</sup> and technology workforce are women, compared with 56% in other occupations.

Across the wider Digital Sector, as identified by DSIT in their Economic Estimates<sup>2</sup> 2024 and defined as incorporating nine sub-sectors spanning electronics manufacturing, computer/electronics wholesale, publishing, software publishing, film/TV/radio/music, telecommunications, computer programming and consultancy, information services, and computer/communications equipment repair, women hold 28.5% of filled jobs and disabled workers 15.1%, against holding 48.1% and 18.4% shares of the UK workforce overall. Though it should be noted that telecoms is only a component part of the digital sector definition, representing 9.1% of the digital sector filled jobs in the UK in 2024. The number is therefore indicative and subject to inaccuracy when considered at a more granular telecoms level.

## A rising expectation among younger workers

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There is also evidence to suggest that basic fairness is becoming an expectation, particularly among younger generation workers. UK-specific research from 2025 found that nearly 60% of working adults<sup>39</sup> would consider leaving their employer if it rolled back its diversity, equity and inclusion commitments, rising to 68% among Gen Z workers specifically, with millennials also ranking well above half at 64%.<sup>39</sup>

When considered on a global scale this pattern remains. Deloitte's Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey,<sup>40</sup> which gathered responses from over 22,000 people across 44 countries, found that 44% of Gen Z workers and 37% of millennials have rejected a work assignment due to ethical concerns, while 39% and 34% respectively have turned down employers that don't align with their values. This is a strong signal that employers who lead confidently on inclusion, social governance and acting in a way that is consistent with social good will position themselves as a competitive choice for Gen Z and millennial talent. For a sector working to offset an ageing workforce, this generational appetite for fairness is good news as these candidates actively seek employers who get this right.

## The business case for diversity and inclusion

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Alongside the moral case sits a genuine business case. A strong body of evidence showing that inclusive, diverse workforces tend to perform well, and often better, than less diverse counterparts. This evidence should be read as encouraging confirmation that doing the right thing for people is also good for business.

A 2026 study of 567 listed European companies over a ten-year period (2014-2024) found that stronger diversity and inclusion, such as gender, cultural diversity and investment in people development and inclusive workplace policies, was associated with higher financial performance.<sup>41</sup>

Whilst the evidence is strong, it is worth noting that the research and literature in this space can be contested territory. The McKinsey Diversity Series, published between 2015 and 2023, is a widely cited body of diversity-to-performance research. Its 2023 release, *Diversity Matters Even More*,<sup>42</sup> drew on 1,265 companies across 23

countries and six global regions, reporting that companies in the top quartile for gender diversity on executive teams were 39% more likely to financially outperform their industry peers, and that companies in the top quartile for ethnic diversity were also 39% more likely to outperform.

The findings of this report have come under challenge in recent years. A 2024 study<sup>43</sup> by accounting professors at Texas A&M University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill reconstructed a comparable dataset of S&P 500 companies and reported that they found no statistically significant relationship between executive ethnic diversity and any of six financial performance measures tested. The same study also suggested a reverse-causality problem in McKinsey's original approach, suggesting that already-successful companies may simply have more capacity to diversify their leadership and invest in people, rather than diversity itself driving the success. It is worth noting that this challenge was specific to McKinsey's ethnic diversity findings; it did not examine or challenge the gender diversity findings, which have not been subject to the same independent scrutiny.

This does not undermine the case for inclusion, which remains strong both morally and from a business perspective. But it does highlight that this is a difficult area to study with precision and reinforces why the case for diversity must sit alongside the ambition for inherent fairness, rather than instead of it.

## Diversity, inclusion and performance

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A 2024 study examining the impact of diversity within top management teams<sup>44</sup> offers a particularly clear illustration of the central argument of inclusive culture being a driver of productivity. This research found that diverse management teams can enhance the quality of decision-making and innovation, precisely because they draw on a wider range of perspectives and experiences than a homogeneous team might have access to. Different backgrounds foster different ways of thinking, surface different questions, spot different risks, and generate a broader set of possible solutions before a decision is made. Manifesting most commonly into improved financial and innovation performance. Diversity in top management teams can also enhance market resilience and competitiveness due to greater numbers of perspectives offering a better understanding of how to serve different market needs which can translate into greater success and financial return.

But the same research is equally clear that diversity does not automatically deliver this benefit alone. The study also suggests that greater team diversity can introduce meaningful challenges, with the potential to hinder productivity. Areas such as communication style differences, cultural clashes, subconscious social categorisation and process and approach conflict can undermine decision-making and teamwork if left unaddressed. Drawing on case studies from Google and IBM's approaches to diversity management, the research points to what separates the teams that benefit from diversity and those that don't: building a genuinely inclusive culture, improving how teams communicate across difference, and adapting

management practices to help different perspectives connect, and to give space and safety for all voices to be heard.

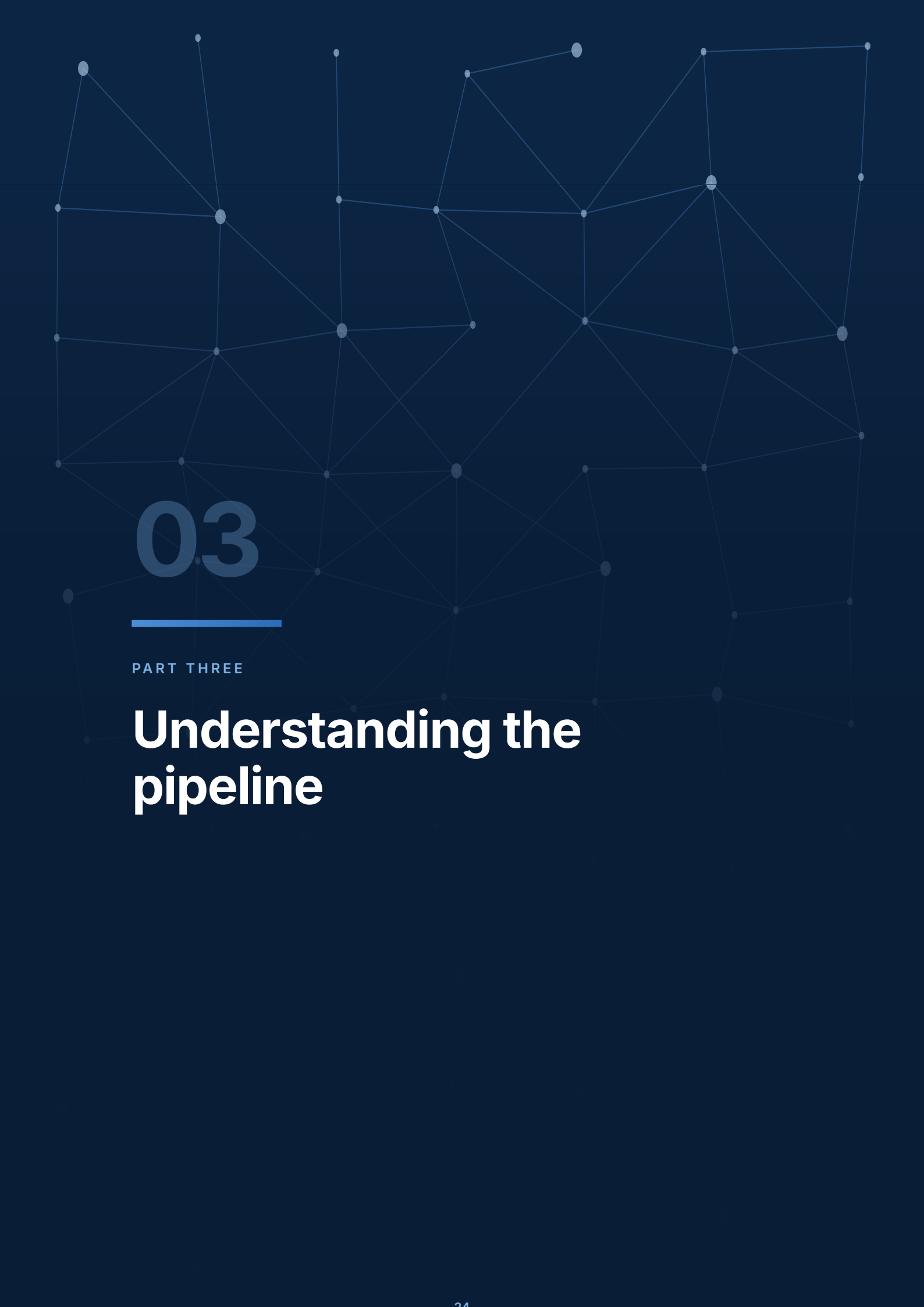
How we respond to greater diversity promoting greater financial outcomes is also important. A 2022 study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* by researchers at Yale School of Management and London Business School, used an analysis of Fortune 500 company public diversity statements, finding that 80% justify diversity efforts using business cases, whilst fewer than 5% utilise a fairness case.<sup>45</sup> The study found that framing diversity in purely instrumental, business-case terms can undermine the sense of belonging felt by under-represented employees. In turn reducing their interest in joining the organisation, and weakening the culture that the business case is meant to strengthen. Despite its positive intent, the business case appears to function as a risk to being viewed transactionally or undermining someone's merit, making people feel valued only for what their identity contributes to performance, rather than as individuals.

## Why inclusion delivers the benefit

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Diversity, on its own, is simply the presence of different people, perspectives and experiences within a team or organisation. It is a precondition for better decision-making, not a guarantee of it. What determines whether that diversity translates into genuinely better outcomes, sharper decisions, more innovation and stronger performance is whether those different perspectives are heard, valued, and given the space and opportunity to shape outcomes. That is when inclusion happens. The deliberate, sustained work of building an environment where difference is not only present in the room but is able to genuinely and actively contribute.

Put simply, diversity brings the raw materials. Inclusion is what allows them to be built into a vehicle of positive delivery. A team that is diverse but not inclusive may see less return on the benefits that this chapter has described, and some of the friction presented by some studies, or those who have found inconsistent links between diversity and performance, are not evidence that diversity doesn't matter but evidence that diversity alone was never the whole answer. As a result, studies measuring diversity without also measuring inclusiveness of the environment that surrounds it are likely to find a more mixed, inconsistent picture, as this wider literature shows.



03

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PART THREE

# Understanding the pipeline

Part One of this report established what is happening to the telecoms workforce. This part turns to what people working in, aspiring to, or on the outside of the industry are seeing and thinking.

Key voices were approached and surveyed by the Digital Connectivity Forum to understand more, including recruitment professionals working across the sector, young people aged 18 to 25 and those still in education, and job seekers from the wider market. Their samples, methods and limitations are set out earlier in this report under Methodology and Evidence Base.

The three key groups are presented by theme rather than one after another, reflecting that where there is agreement is where the evidence is strongest and we can draw the strongest conclusions. Each group was drawn from a distinct population, reached by a different route, and asked a different set of questions. Where all three arrive independently at the same conclusion, that convergence carries more weight than any one strand alone. Where they diverge, the divergence is reported.

## Availability, activity and points of pressure

Recruiters describe a market that is functioning rather than seizing up. Three of the seven described current candidate availability as strong, two as balanced, and two as tight. Compared with twelve months previously, sentiment was evenly split: two reported slightly better availability, two saw no real change, and two said that it had become slightly worse. One recruiter noted that this varied by specific skill and role type. On the employer side, hiring activity was overwhelmingly described as steady (5 out of 7) with one characterising it as selective or cautious and another noting that the answer depends heavily on the sub-sector in question.

### How recruiters describe the market

Recruitment professionals working across the sector, n=7. Single choice per question.

#### How would you describe current candidate availability?



#### Compared to 12 months ago, candidate availability is:



#### How would you describe employer hiring activity right now?



Not shown: other 2.

Where the pressure sits is perhaps more revealing than hiring difficulty overall. When asked which skills are currently hardest to fill, recruiters most frequently named cyber and information security, ESG and sustainability (including HSE), and legal, policy and regulatory affairs. None of the three hardest-to-fill areas were the

traditional field engineering roles that this report examines elsewhere, which suggests the sector's skills pressure is broadening beyond the engineering workforce into other roles and functions. This finding returns below, because it intersects with what candidates indicated that they believe the sector does.

This finding was not unanimous across all recruiters spoken to. Some indicated that attracting talent from outside of telecoms is relatively straightforward and is more a case of placing the right adverts, in the right places, in the right way. With telecoms being seen as a good employment space with good benefits, once it is seen, understood and candidates are reached. It was flagged that a greater blocker to non-telecoms talent can sometimes be an internal desire for telecoms experience, rather than a lack of external interest in non-engineering roles.

Recruiters also described three trends in how hiring is being conducted. The most commonly cited was that role requirements change during the recruitment process, a possible sign that employers are still refining what they need as they hire. Alongside this they noted longer hiring processes, a shift toward reduced headcount but higher skill requirements per hire, and a move toward permanent rather than contract hiring.

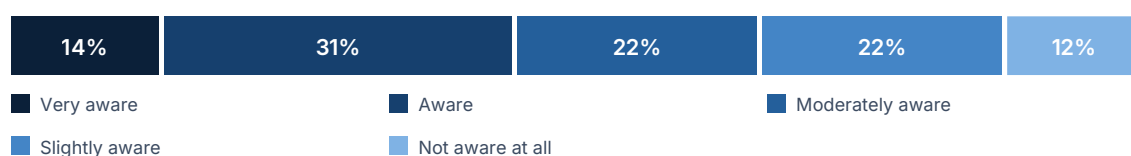
## Awareness as a constraint

The clearest finding in this part of the research is that the sector's problem is not being disliked. It is not being known.

Among young people and students, awareness levels were mixed, with the largest single group landing in the middle of the scale. Just under a third of respondents, 31% described themselves as "aware", while 55% combined, reported being "not aware at all" or only "slightly or moderately aware". Only 14% described themselves as "very aware". This suggests a sector that has not fully broken through as a recognisable career destination, with most respondents sitting somewhere in the middle rather than at either extreme.

### Awareness of the telecoms and digital connectivity sector

Young people and students, n=74. "How would you rank your awareness of the telecoms and digital connectivity sector?"



Views on personal accessibility skewed positive but with noticeable hesitancy amongst young people. The largest group, 36%, described careers in the sector as "moderately accessible", with a further 24% saying "very accessible", but a combined 19% described the sector as "slightly" or "not at all" accessible, and 18% did not feel able to comment at all because they lacked the knowledge to make an informed judgement.

## How accessible careers in the sector feel

Young people and students, n=74. "How accessible do careers in the sector feel to you personally?"



Not shown: prefer not to answer 1; other 1.

The last figure is one that recurs. Asked about whether they felt they were represented in the telecoms sector, 47% said they did not know enough about the sector to comment, narrowly the largest response to that question. When asked about their perception of the telecoms sector, 7% said the same. When asked what makes it difficult for people their age to access careers in the sector, 58% cited a general lack of clear information and 43% reported not knowing where to apply.

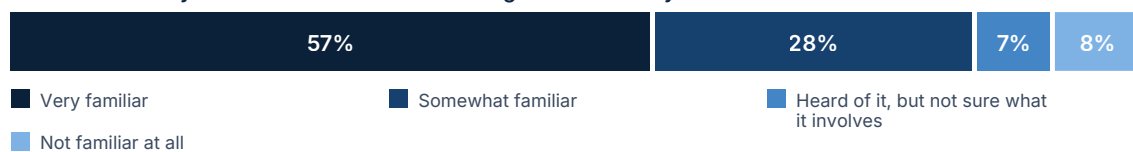
Read together the pattern is consistent. Rejection or negativity toward the sector is rare, but not knowing enough to form a clear view is prevalent. As a result, "Don't know enough to comment" is not missing data, but a finding that the sector's reputation is not reaching far enough.

The job seeker survey appears at first to contradict this. Familiarity was high overall, with 57% describing themselves as "very familiar" and a further 28% as "somewhat familiar", a combined 85% reporting at least some familiarity against only 8% not familiar at all. Understanding of the specific types of jobs available followed a similarly confident pattern, with 32% rating their understanding as "excellent" and 38% as "good". Only 7% reported no understanding at all.

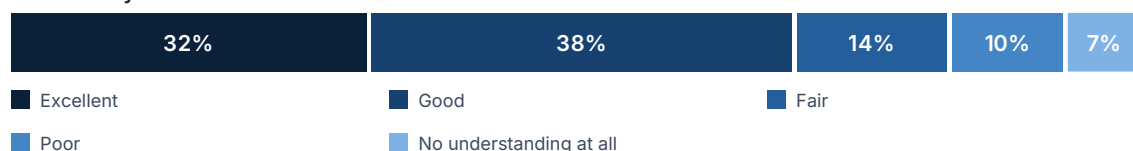
## Familiarity with the sector, and understanding of the roles in it

Job seekers, n=88. Two questions, single choice each.

How familiar are you with the UK telecoms and digital connectivity sector?



How would you rate your understanding of the types of jobs available in the telecoms and digital connectivity sector?

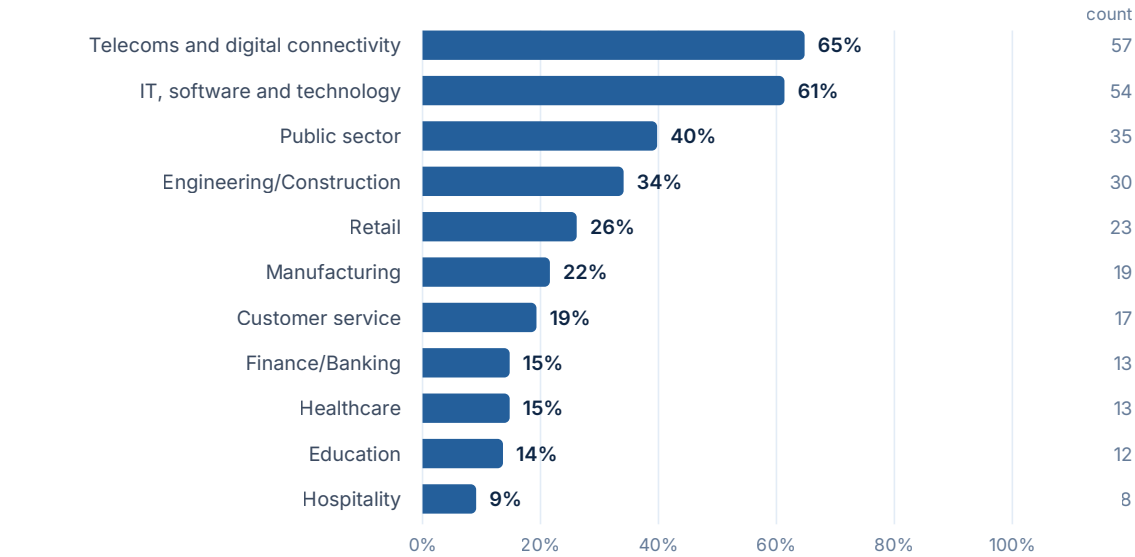


However, this is explained by who answered. Asked which sectors they had previously worked in, telecoms and digital connectivity itself was the single most common answer, closely followed by IT, software and technology. Of all respondents, the largest group by far, 55%, had worked in the sector for five years or more, against only 10% with under six months experience, with a further 16% preferring not to answer. This is substantially a survey of insiders and long-tenured professionals rather than an outside audience, and the high familiarity scores should be

read as a reflection of that rather than as evidence of strong awareness among the general job-seeking public.

Sectors the job seeker respondents had previously worked in

Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.



Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

Length of experience in telecoms

Job seekers, n=88. Single choice.



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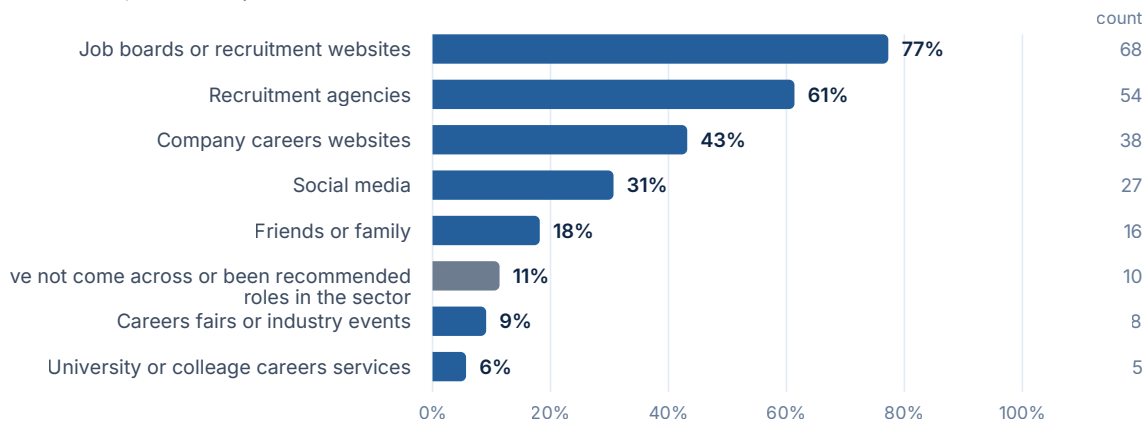
With this in mind, the two surveys do not contradict each other. One asked people outside the sector how much they knew about it and found that for many awareness and knowledge was limited. The other asked people largely inside the sector the same question and found that awareness and knowledge was high.

Where people hear about roles, and where they want to

Among job seekers - job boards, recruitment websites and recruitment agencies were by far the dominant channels through which respondents heard about telecoms roles.

## Where job seekers have heard about roles in the sector

Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.



Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

Young people, asked separately what would help them enter and understand telecoms, named channels such as campus recruitment, university partnerships, company presence at job fairs, and internship programmes as effective, tangible ways to reach students directly.

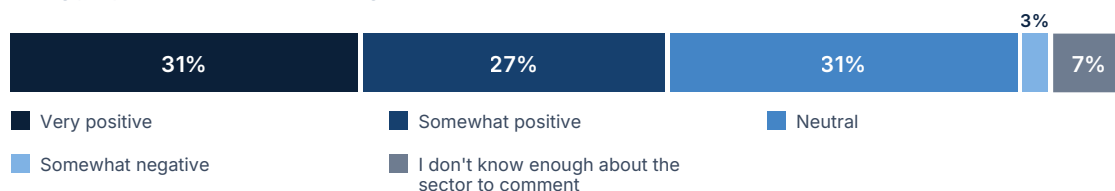
## Perception of an outdated image for a broader sector

Where awareness is thin, perception generally remains positive, though the two audiences diverge sharply, and this is the first of two genuine divergences in this research.

Among young people, perception was notably more positive than awareness. "Neutral" and "very positive" were the joint largest responses at 31% each, and combined with "somewhat positive" at 27%, well over half of all respondents hold a neutral or positive view of the sector as a place to start a career. Negative sentiment was almost negligible with 3% reporting a somewhat negative perception. A further 7% felt they did not know enough to comment.

## Perception of the sector: young people and students

Young people and students, n=74. Single choice.

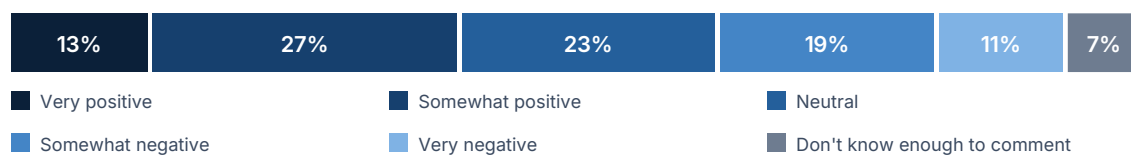


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Sentiment among job seekers was considerably more mixed. 40% held a positive view (comprising 13% "very positive" and 27% "somewhat positive"), but 31% held a negative view (comprising 19% "somewhat negative" and 11% "very negative"). A further 23% were neutral. That is a much larger negative share than among young respondents and is worth flagging as a genuine divergence between the two audiences with a caveat that the sample sizes create indicative suggestions rather than a consistent sector-wide story.

## Perception of the sector: job seekers

Job seekers, n=88. Asked about the sector as an employer and career option; the young people question above asked about it as a place to start a career.



Comparative appeal against other industries that job seeker respondents had worked in or considered showed a similar split. 31% rated the sector "about the same" as other industries, 22% said "much more appealing", and a combined 31% rated it "slightly" or "much less appealing".

## How the sector compares with other industries

Job seekers, n=88. "How appealing does the telecoms and digital connectivity sector feel compared to other industries that you have worked in or are considering?"



Not shown: prefer not to answer 2.

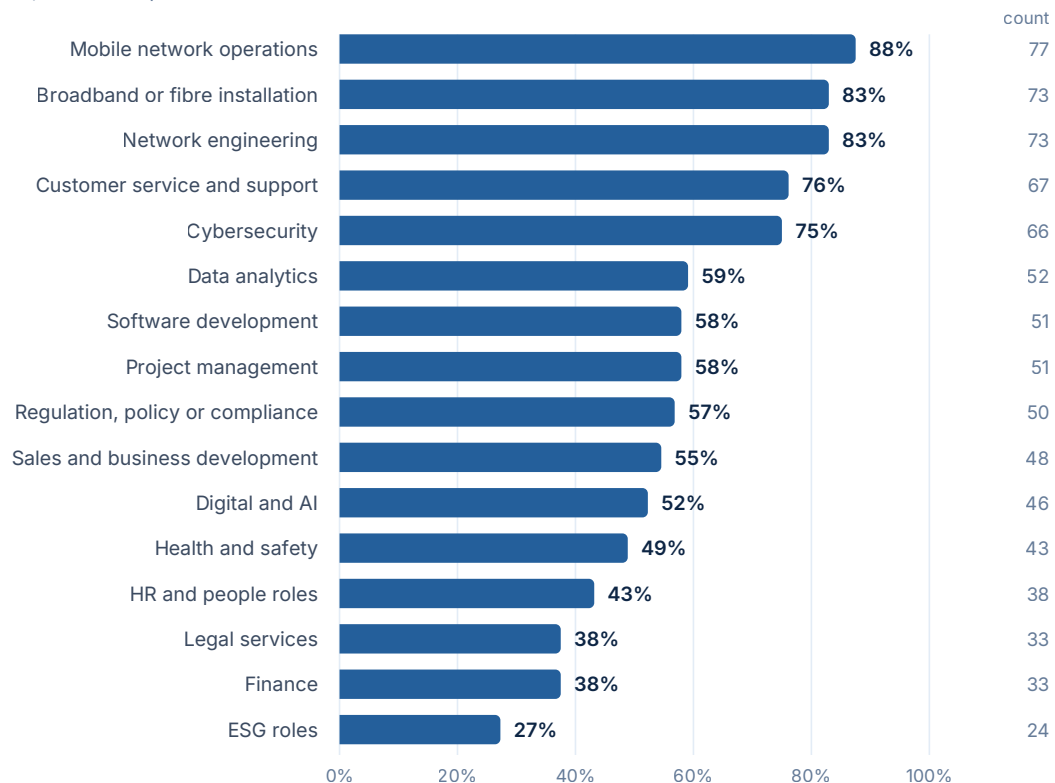
## What people think the sector is

Asked which statements best describe how they currently see careers in the sector, job seekers produced a nuanced picture. Positive perceptions were common, with "offers a variety of roles and opportunities" and "delivers positive social and wider societal impact" frequently selected. But a more critical side also emerged. "Is mainly technical" and "is male dominated" also ranked prominently, and a strong portion of respondents said that they felt the sector "lacks clear career progression opportunities". Multiple respondents indicated they felt the sector "is inclusive and diverse", a response worth reading against the demographic makeup of who was answering, addressed below.

Asked which roles they believed exist within the sector, awareness of technical and network-based roles was strongest. Mobile network operations, broadband and fibre installation, network engineering, customer service and support, and cybersecurity were the most recognised. Awareness dropped off for less traditionally technical functions, with ESG roles, legal services, and HR and people roles selected far less often, despite being functions that cut across every sector. The sector's public image appears to remain anchored heavily in engineering and network infrastructure, with its broader professional and corporate functions comparatively much less visible.

## Which roles job seekers believe exist within the sector

Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.



Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

### The finding that emerges from putting these together

When considering the role-recognition data alongside the roles recruiters reported are currently hardest to fill suggests an additional thread to the low awareness picture.

The three areas that recruiters named as hardest to fill were cyber and information security, ESG and sustainability, and legal, policy and regulatory affairs. Two of those three, ESG and legal, policy and regulatory, are roles that candidates least associated with telecoms. Suggesting that some of the sector's needed skills sit within parts of itself that prospective candidates are least aware of.

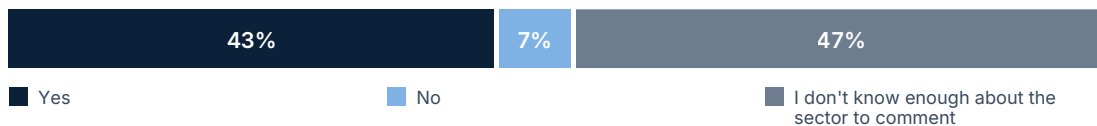
Read in conjunction this suggests that telecoms may largely be thought of as a technical and engineering employer, whilst its broader talent needs are much more diverse.

## Representation and belonging

Among young people, when asked if they feel personally represented in the sector, 47% said they did not know enough about the sector to comment, 43% said yes, and 7% said no. Among job seekers, 50% said yes, 26% said no, and 18% said they did not know enough to comment.

### Do you feel represented in the sector? Young people and students

Young people and students, n=74. Single choice.



Not shown: prefer not to answer 1; other 1.

### Do you feel represented in the sector? Job seekers

Job seekers, n=88. Single choice.



Not shown: prefer not to answer 1; other 4.

The job seeker figure needs care. The surveyed group was overwhelmingly older and male, with 70% aged 45 to 64 and 83% male. Independently verified sector data elsewhere in this report confirms that UK telecoms is disproportionately represented by these demographics. A majority of a demographically similar group reporting that they feel represented raises the possibility that this result is less a sign of genuine inclusion than a statistical artefact of asking a relatively homogeneous group whether they see themselves reflected in a sector already known to be dominated by people who share their characteristics.

### What the qualitative responses say

The free-text responses in both surveys are considerably more critical than either topline figure suggests, and they demonstrate areas of convergence.

Young people focused on visibility. Referencing that it would help if companies showed more visible examples of young people, international students, and people in non-technical roles working across the sector. Others addressed underlying issues, noting that the sector is still heavily male-dominated and has a perception of lacking diversity in leadership and technical roles, with visible case studies, industry event speakers and product design teams often not reflecting the full range of users, which can make it harder for some groups to feel they belong.

Job seekers focused on the sector as having a limited young person intake, being largely comprised of middle to late age male representatives, with this concentrating across management. Respondents identified that while helpdesk and customer service roles showed younger representation, these too remained male majority.

Asked what would help them feel more included, job seekers raised several recurring themes. Some referred to an entrenched, decades-old culture, with some noting that most current staff have been in the sector 20 to 30 years and identifying that there are cultures that need to shift as the workforce moves forward. Several raised age discrimination concerns specifically, asking for training and opportunity to be extended to older workers and experienced candidates from both within telecoms and adjacent industries. Several called directly for more women in technical and managerial roles, with better recognition and appreciation of women

already in the sector. Multiple respondents felt that employer expectations that candidates arrive with fully developed skills can result in avoidance of investment in training and development. And there were recurring requests for staff and applicants to be treated "as people, not numbers", including responses to unsuccessful applications, feedback, genuine listening to ground-level staff, and greater honesty and transparency in communication across both hiring and employment.

## What recruiters say

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Recruiters were consistent in identifying the barriers under-represented candidates report facing when trying to enter or progress within the sector. Three emerged jointly at the top: bias against candidates with career breaks (including parental or caring leave), experience requirements that structurally disadvantage career changers and returners, and the geographic concentration of roles limiting accessibility for candidates outside of key hub locations. A second tier, accent bias and the cost of travel to interviews or roles followed.

Beyond the top five, recruiters flagged overly rigid entry qualifications such as specific A-level or degree requirements, a lack of scheduling flexibility that disproportionately affects parents and carers, unclear communication around reasonable adjustments, limited access to professional networks or career coaching, the rigid insistence of three to five days in the office as back to office mandates begin to emerge across the sector, and reluctance among candidates to disclose disability, pregnancy or neurodivergence for fear of it counting against them.

That final barrier deserves note because it is the only one in this research that would be relatively invisible from the employer's side. A candidate who does not disclose a disability, pregnancy or neurodivergence does not appear in any diversity monitoring. The absence of a request for adjustment is therefore not necessarily evidence that none was needed.

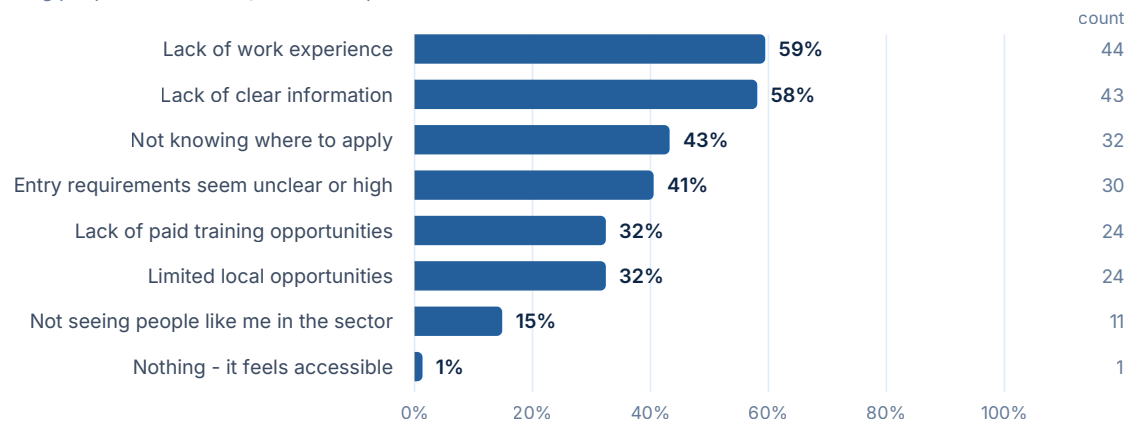
## Barriers to entry and what stops people

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Asked what makes it difficult for people their age to access careers in the sector, young people cited lack of work experience most often, closely followed by a general lack of clear information. The remaining barriers, in descending order, were not knowing where to apply, unclear or high entry requirements, lack of paid training opportunities, limited local opportunities and not seeing people like them in the sector.

## What young people think makes the sector hard to access

Young people and students, n=74. Multiple selections allowed.



Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

The two dominant barriers point toward practical, fixable process issues rather than deep-seated perception problems.

Among job seekers, lack of awareness of available roles and location or travel requirements were the joint most-cited discouraging factors, followed closely by concerns about age, gender or background bias, with salary concerns and unclear entry routes following.

## What would discourage job seekers from applying

Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.



Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

Three barriers therefore appear independently across all groups.

**Geography:** recruiters named the geographic concentration of roles in their joint top three, job seekers named location and travel requirements in their joint top position, and young people cited limited local opportunities.

**Experience and entry requirements:** recruiters named experience requirements that disadvantage career changers and returners in their joint top three and rigid entry qualifications beyond that, young people ranked unclear or high entry

requirements third and lack of work experience first, and job seekers named unclear entry routes.

**Information:** young people ranked lack of clear information second and not knowing where to apply fourth, and job seekers ranked lack of awareness of available roles joint first.

## The hiring process and how it impacts people and pipeline

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This is the theme on which sample groups converge most strongly, and the one most fully within employer control.

### Automated screening

Concern about AI and automated screening was the most frequently raised, organically occurring, theme in the entire job seeker survey. A substantial number of respondents felt that greater human involvement in CV and application review, alongside or instead of automated filtering, would improve their experience of the process, reflecting a view that automated keyword-matching can overlook relevant experience that is not phrased in expected or exact terms. Multiple respondents independently called for an end to AI-based CV/application screening, describing it as filtering out qualified candidates on keywords rather than merit, and asking for human review to be reinstated.

The younger cohort raised the same concern. Multiple respondents explicitly asked for humans, not AI, to evaluate CVs and applications, or at minimum for human led video interviews rather than AI, showing a clear preference for human contact during the process. Separately, young people asked for clarity on whether ATS keyword filtering is being used at all, since relevant experience can otherwise be filtered out for lacking the right keywords.

Two independently recruited samples, one with a median age well over forty and one under twenty-five, raised the same objection about the same mechanism in their own words rather than by selecting it from a list, marking the strongest signal in this part of the research that there is large disquiet about the prevalence of AI in the hiring process. Something respondents agree should be a human process.

It is important to note that how AI is used is a critical consideration here, and one that might not be fully transparent or understood by candidates in the hiring process. Different organisations may utilise AI in different ways, ranging from filtering by key role match information such as ‘engineer’ for an engineering role, to a more intensive use of AI. At the release stage, where a candidate would be released from the process if they were unsuccessful beyond an initial ‘auto reject’ criteria phase (such as within the key qualifier example used above), this process is performed by a human. Whilst we cannot comment as to whether all companies adhere to this across UK telecoms, initial conversations suggest that many do. However, lack of transparency and communication in the process can cause confusion and distress as lack of proper communication causes misunderstanding that a human never saw the application at all.

As such, and with recognition that AI is becoming augmented into many of our new ways of working – greater focus on ensuring that AI is used minimally and fairly, in a way that supports business workflow, but also ensures that qualified candidates are not missed and human intervention is applied at critical junctures in the process, including at second review, progression and release, and a move towards greater education and transparency on how companies apply AI into their process, represents a step that could benefit both businesses, candidates and the hiring trust that exists between the two.

### **Job advert accuracy and clarity**

Several job seekers described frustration at applying for roles that turned out to be already filled or no longer active and saw keeping adverts current and accurate as a straightforward way to improve candidate experience.

On clarity, both surveys asked for the same things. Young people wanted clearer job descriptions with less jargon, more entry-level roles advertised for people without prior sector experience, and an explicit distinction between essential and nice-to-have requirements. Job seekers asked for role descriptions to reflect genuinely essential requirements rather than broad qualification thresholds such as degree requirements that may exclude experienced, capable candidates, and for clearer distinction between overlapping fields, for example IT versus telecoms or project manager versus delivery manager, that are sometimes used interchangeably in job adverts.

### **Communication and feedback**

There was a consistent and repeated request across both surveys for clear, timely communication throughout the process. Acknowledging applications, providing feedback where possible, and ensuring that information shared with candidates remains accurate and up to date. Among young people, unsuccessful applicants receiving a feedback email rather than silence was raised as something highly valued by graduate applicants.

### **Process and interview design**

Young people asked for advance notice of interview structure and format, flexible or remote interview options, and accommodation by default, not by request.

Job seekers raised published salary ranges, visible tracking of application progress, shorter or less formal recruitment processes, and a greater mix of interview formats including face-to-face and video, as clear, implementable changes that candidates would welcome. In addition, from broader research conducted for this report, flexible interview options, advance notice of structure and questions, and clearer processes would have a cross-cutting positive effect for underrepresented groups as well, such as neurodivergent candidates.

### **Fragmentation of information**

Some young people raised the fragmentation of job platforms and the lack of a single, trusted place to find genuine vacancies and information on the companies that operate in the sector. Job seekers reached toward the same problem with one

respondent proposing a single government-hosted listing for all sector vacancies, and another suggesting greater support from Jobcentre Plus and DWP specifically around technology skills training.

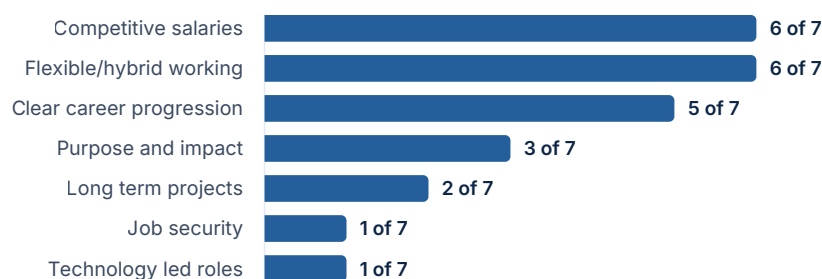
## What attracts candidates, and how it differs by career stage

Across all levels, recruiters named competitive salary and flexible or hybrid working as the strongest positive draw for candidates, with clear career progression close behind, followed by purpose and impact, long-term project stability and job security.

Job seekers ranked salary and benefits as the dominant factor, well ahead of every other option, followed by interesting or meaningful work, working with new or emerging technologies, job security, and flexible or hybrid working.

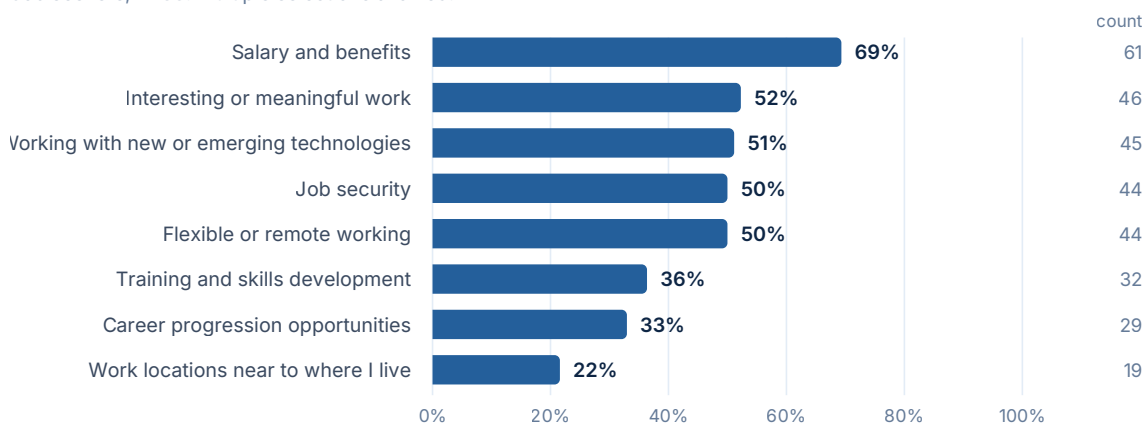
### What most positively attracts candidates: recruiter view

Recruitment professionals, n=7. Multiple selections allowed.



### What would attract job seekers to a role in the sector

Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.

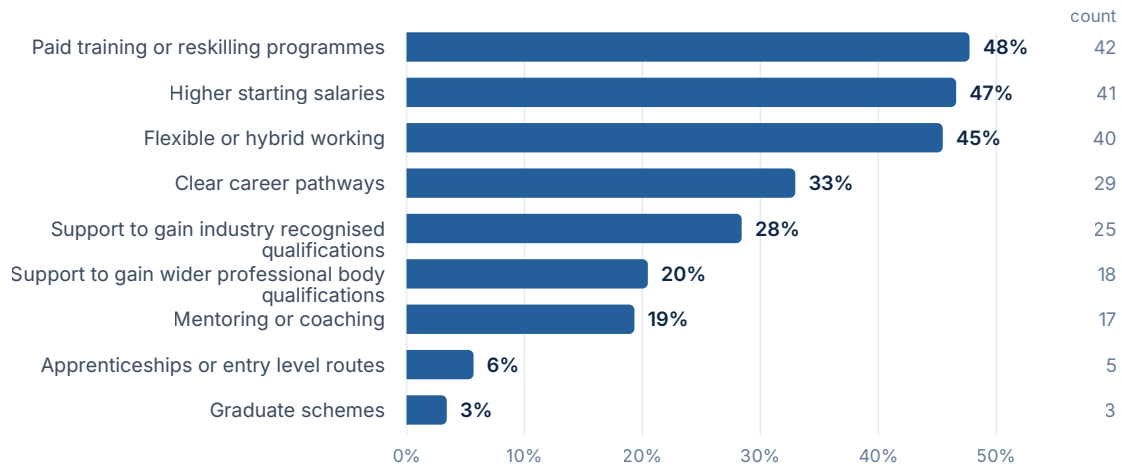


Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

Asked what would make them more likely to consider a telecoms role, paid training or reskilling programmes and higher starting salaries led the results, with flexible or hybrid working close behind. Apprenticeships and graduate schemes were the least selected, which is unsurprising for a cohort largely at more senior levels of experience and therefore possibly more a statistical result of the response sample than a clear result across the full job seeker market. On support needs specifically, hybrid or remote working options and clear information on transferable skills were the most requested.

## What would make job seekers more likely to consider a telecoms role

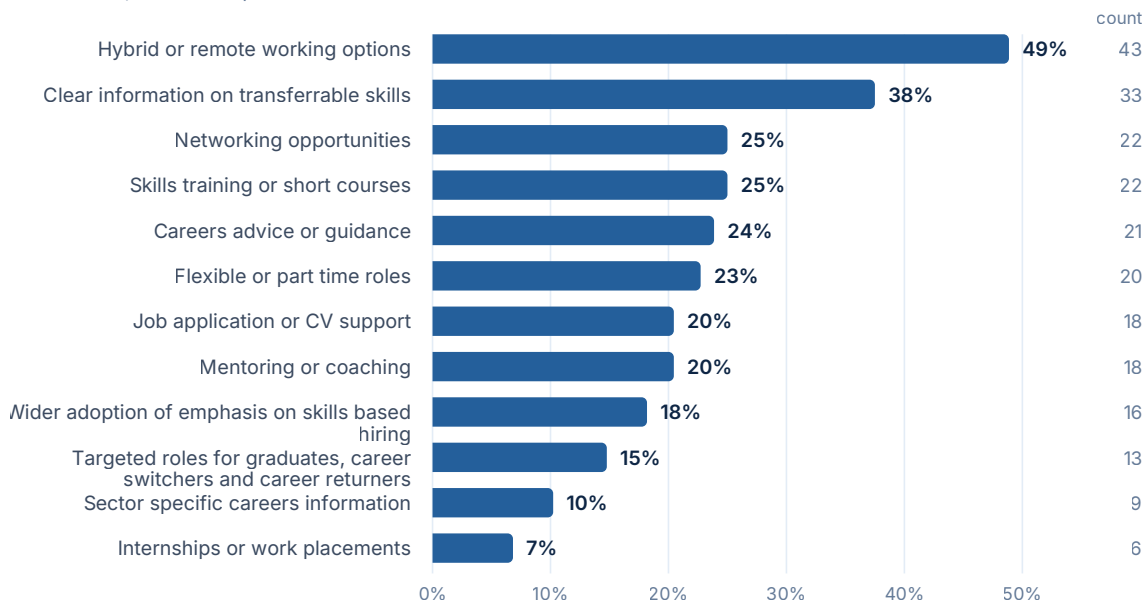
Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.



Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

## Which types of support would be most helpful

Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.

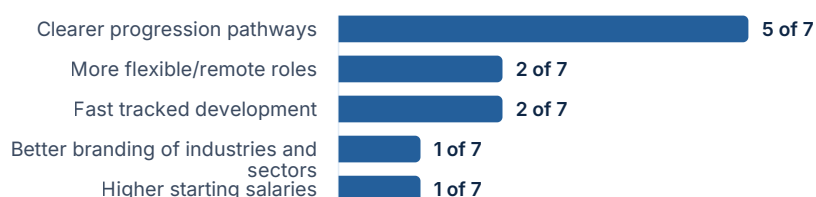


Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents and do not total 100%.

Asked specifically what would most improve graduate attraction into the sector, recruiters named clearer progression pathways as the dominant answer. Pay ranked as the joint highest general attraction factor across all career stages, and as the dominant factor among experienced job seekers.

## What would most improve graduate attraction: recruiter view

Recruitment professionals, n=7. Multiple selections allowed.



Not shown: no informed opinion to share 1; prefer not to answer 1.

Pay is therefore the strongest lever available for attracting a broad range of candidates and clarity about where a career leads is particularly important to young people, but a necessary lever across all age bands and experience levels.

Finally, it is important to note that flexible and hybrid working can benefit everyone but may have exponential benefits for those who otherwise might be more isolated from the workplace. A job seeker respondent noted that visible and available flexible or hybrid working is particularly important for those managing chronic or ongoing health conditions, allowing them to remain in work around flare-ups. That reframes flexibility from a competitive benefit into an accessibility measure, and an important one for a sector that wants to ensure it is accessible to all.

## Retention and why people leave

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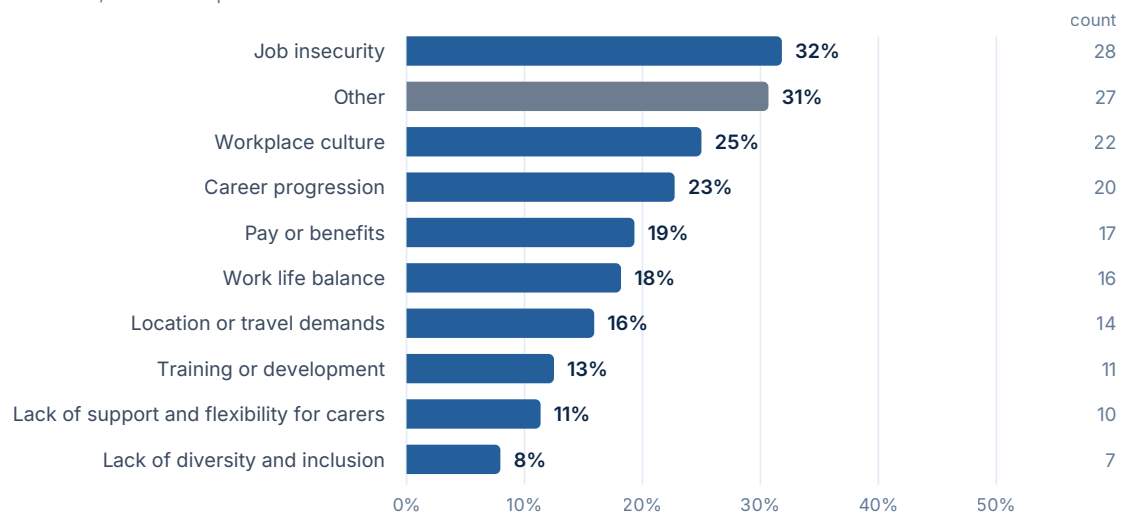
On retention, recruiters most frequently pointed to a lack of upskilling opportunities and candidates receiving better offers from competitors or other sectors as the two greatest risks, followed by burnout and workload pressure then slower progression and inflexibility.

Overall candidate interest in working in telecoms and digital connectivity was reported as moderate to high by the majority of recruiters, but the sector is not immune to competitive pressure. The leading factors reported as discouraging candidates were limited flexible working, direct competition from tech, cloud and fintech employers, salary competitiveness relative to other sectors, and skills stagnation with a perceived lack of development opportunity. Reported at a much lower scale, but worth noting, was a perception of slower innovation and instability tied to project funding, which likely connects to the build-phase wind-down discussed in Part One. Four of seven recruiters said candidates are at least sometimes actively choosing alternative sectors over telecoms, and where an alternative destination was named, energy, power and utilities emerged as the most common competitor for talent, though recruiters were careful to note this pattern was not unanimous or universal.

Job seekers who had previously left a telecoms role identified job insecurity as the clearest driver, followed by workplace culture and career progression concerns. A strong number also selected "other", with free-text reasons including redundancy and end-of-contract, which reinforces job security as the dominant underlying concern even where job insecurity was not the category selected.

## What affected job seekers' decision to leave a telecoms role

Job seekers, n=88. Multiple selections allowed.



Respondents could choose more than one option, so bars are the share of all respondents. "Other" is shown in grey and carried free-text reasons including redundancy and end of contract. Not shown: i have never worked in the sector 13.

## What respondents asked for - recommendations and points of action

### Visibility and information

**Close the awareness gap.** Since negative sentiment is minimal but awareness is genuinely low, industry marketing effort is well spent on visibility and explanation, what the sector is, what roles exist and what a career here looks like.

**Showcase the full breadth of careers the sector offers.** Awareness of non-technical roles including ESG, legal, policy and HR lags well behind awareness of engineering and network roles.

**Publish clear, jargon-free career pathway information, consolidated in one trusted place.** Not knowing where to apply or what roles exist was a primary barrier for young people, and respondents in both surveys raised the fragmentation of job platforms and the absence of a single trusted source.

**Expand engagement through student positive channels.** University and college careers services and careers fairs were expressed as positive and welcome avenues for young people, who showed a strong appetite for exactly this kind of engagement.

### Recruitment process

**Commit to greater transparency about how and where AI is used in the process, alongside human review at release and interview stage.** Automated screening was the most frequently raised theme across both surveys, and the clearest opportunity for the sector to lead.

**Strengthen confidence in job advertising.** Keeping adverts current and accurate and closing roles promptly once filled is a low-cost, high-impact way to improve candidate experience and build trust.

**Make clear, consistent communication a hallmark of the sector's recruitment, and guarantee feedback to unsuccessful candidates.** Acknowledging applications, offering outcome feedback and keeping candidates informed on process and timelines were widely requested across both surveys.

**Review entry requirements to ensure they reflect what is genuinely needed.** Distinguishing essential from desirable criteria emerged as a common theme with respondents in both surveys feeling that broad qualification or experience thresholds sometimes exclude capable candidates.

**Standardise interview transparency and accessibility as baseline practice.** Publishing interview format and structure in advance, defaulting to offering flexible or remote options as standard, and adopting an accommodation by default rather than by request approach.

**Take a proactive look at how bias may enter the process, however unintentionally.** With a meaningful share of respondents citing concerns about age, gender or background bias, there is a genuine opportunity to review recruitment tools and practices to ensure they are working as fairly as intended.

## Routes and development

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**Treat lack of work experience as a solvable design problem.** As the single largest barrier for young people, this points toward structured entry points that understand the experience catch 22, such as internships, apprenticeships, placements and paid trial or taster schemes, positioned explicitly as no-experience-required routes.

**Lead with visible investment in training and development.** Some respondents felt reliance on candidates bringing existing skills can be used to substitute for structured onboarding and ongoing training. Being explicit and generous about what training is available and on offer builds confidence among applicants.

**Tailor incentives to career stage.** Paid training and reskilling, alongside competitive salaries, resonate most strongly with experienced candidates, while progression clarity, apprenticeships and graduate schemes matter more to newer entrants.

## Representation

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**Make representation visible.** Feature young people, under-represented groups and non-technical roles prominently in recruitment materials, case studies and event speaker line-ups.

**Use these findings as a prompt to look deeper on representation.** While half of job seeker respondents felt represented, that finding must be read alongside the demographic makeup of who was asked, and the qualitative responses behind it were markedly more critical than the headline number suggests.



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PART FOUR

# What Stands in the Way

This part moves from what people think about the sector to what structurally prevents them entering it. Awareness, geography and socioeconomic background are examined here, alongside what it takes to deliver great company culture and thoughts and research on inclusive process design.

## Access and Entry to the Telecoms and Digital Connectivity Sector

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It is important to consider not only the awareness and perception of the sector but also review it in terms of access. The structural, geographic, socioeconomic and social factors that determine whether people from different backgrounds and locations can realistically enter the sector, regardless of their awareness or interest in it. Some of these barriers have already surfaced throughout this report's primary research. Others emerge clearly from wider UK evidence on engineering, technology, and apprenticeship access, and apply directly to telecoms given its close overlap with these fields.

### Awareness as a foundational barrier

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This report's own research has already established that awareness in some capacity is the single most consistent barrier. In the young-people survey, "lack of clear information" and "not knowing where to apply" ranked among the most-cited barriers to entry, and "don't know enough to comment" was frequently a high-ranking response to questions about perception and representation, suggesting that for a meaningful share of potential entrants, the sector is not being actively rejected but is simply not visible enough to form a view on.

### Geographic concentration

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Beyond awareness, where telecoms jobs are physically located has a direct bearing on who can realistically access them. This is confirmed by telecoms-specific government data. DSIT's own Advanced Connectivity Technologies Market Scoping Analysis 2025 found that London and the South East account for 43% of all UK telecoms firms by registered location, compared to 34% for UK businesses generally and this concentration is even sharper for advanced connectivity technologies specifically, where London and the South East account for 53% of identified firms.<sup>46</sup> Though it is important to note that this relates to business registered location and not necessarily job locations, and is therefore indicative.

This matters directly for access as people may be unwilling or unable to relocate for roles due to a variety of reasons from family, caring responsibilities, not being able to afford to, retaining friend and family networks, and not wanting to. This report's own job-seeker survey found "location or travel requirements" tied as the joint most-cited factor discouraging people from applying to sector roles and "limited local opportunities" was independently cited by young people as a barrier to entry. Read alongside the DSIT data above, this potentially goes beyond a perception issue, meaning that for a meaningful proportion of the UK population outside the

London/Southeast corridor, telecoms opportunities may be genuinely less geographically available, not just less visible. Something that could be addressed from better advertisement of telecoms opportunities that do sit outside of these key geographic strongholds, as well as better promotion of flexibility and remote/hybrid roles to bring more geographically diverse talent into the sector.

## Socioeconomic background

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Given telecoms' heavy reliance on engineering, technical apprenticeships, and STEM-adjacent qualifications as entry routes, socioeconomic factors become a key point of exploration regarding the accessibility of the sector.

The Sutton Trust's 'Bridging the Gap' report on socioeconomic diversity in engineering, a field which overlaps with telecoms' own technical workforce, suggested that socioeconomic background remains a significant, if often overlooked, factor that is shaping who enters and progresses within engineering-adjacent professions. The report found that while engineering is relatively more socioeconomically diverse than comparable professions (21% of engineering professionals come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, versus just 6% of doctors and 13% of law professionals) this still falls short of the 29% share of the wider UK workforce from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The report suggests that the pipeline narrows long before anyone enters the workforce, with pupils eligible for free school meals achieving GCSE maths at a lower rate than their peers (44% vs 71%), and access to gateway subjects like Triple Science and Design & Technology varying sharply by school and region, potentially disadvantaging pupils who might otherwise pursue engineering. Apprenticeships, often viewed as a more accessible route than university, do not fully correct this disparity, with engineering degree apprenticeships reporting as less socioeconomically diverse than comparable apprenticeships in law or finance, with only 5.6% of engineering apprenticeship starts at advanced and higher level coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>47</sup>

Whilst the broader engineering evidence above shows that apprenticeships have not fully solved socioeconomic access, it is important to note that some of UK telecoms' own entry routes are deliberately designed to remove challenges seen elsewhere in engineering.

Openreach's civils engineering roles are explicitly open to candidates with no formal qualifications beyond a full driving licence.<sup>48</sup> Its 2022 recruitment drive created 4,000 new roles and 3,000 apprenticeships.<sup>49</sup>

BT Group's apprenticeship programme offers places across BT, EE, Plusnet and Openreach, representing the largest apprenticeship programme of any private-sector employer in the UK.<sup>50,51</sup>

This matters for the socioeconomic picture specifically because it addresses several of the barriers that the Sutton Trust report identifies directly for the wider engineering sector. It removes the GCSE attainment gap as a filtering mechanism to success, sidesteps the possible university admissions bias toward higher socioeconomic background students, and offers a genuinely regional, rather than London/South-East-concentrated, route in - with Openreach recruitment running across the

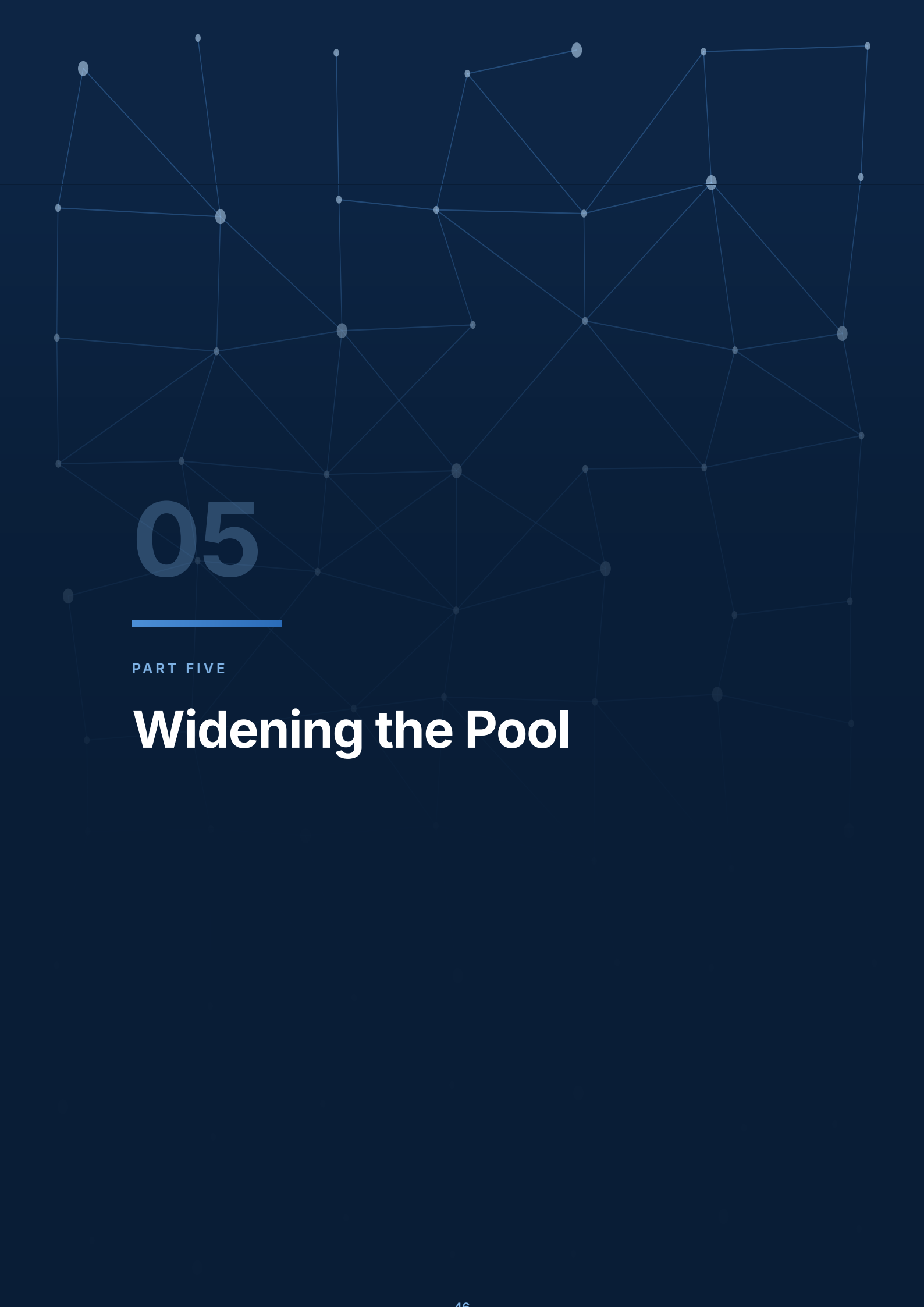
whole of the UK, including rural and semi-rural areas. Similar principles are visible elsewhere in the sector. Vorboss's apprenticeship partnership with the Institute of Telecommunications Professionals achieved 36% female engineers against an 18% industry average through the recruitment of over one hundred apprentices.<sup>52</sup> This demonstrates that structured, employer-led apprenticeship routes can shift outcomes meaningfully within a short timeframe when deliberately designed to widen access.

## The risk of compounding factors

None of these barriers operate in isolation, and for some candidates, they can become stacked. A young person from a lower socioeconomic background attending a school with limited STEM engagement, living outside of the London/Southeast corridor where telecoms opportunities concentrate faces a materially different, and considerably harder, path into the sector than a candidate without any of these constraints. This is a useful point to review as the barriers identified separately throughout this report are not necessarily unrelated points but can become sets of overlapping disadvantages that compound rather than existing independently.

### What this means for the sector

- **There's a genuine opportunity to extend awareness efforts into areas beyond the sector's existing geographic clusters.** Schools, colleges, and job seekers in regions with fewer local telecoms employers stand to benefit from clear, more visible information, since informal awareness through local employers, family, or community networks is naturally higher in areas where businesses are already well established. Reaching beyond that is a chance to open the sector up to talent it may be currently less visible to. It is also an area which has strong benefit regardless of geographic region, meaning it has a large-scale opportunity to deliver positive results across the board.
- **Telecoms already has a strong foundation in low-barrier apprenticeship entry to build on.** Openreach's civils engineering routes, requiring no formal qualifications beyond a driving licence, and BT Group's position as the UK's largest private-sector apprenticeship provider, show the sector already has an accessible model that works. The opportunity now is to extend the reach and visibility of this model further still.
- **Telecoms is unusually well placed to solve a barrier it understands better than most sectors.** Where apprenticeship or training delivery is online,<sup>53</sup> ensuring genuine connectivity and equipment access removes a real barrier for some. Something the sector is already doing at pace.
- **Regional investment and infrastructure roles present a ready-made opportunity.** As the full-fibre and gigabit rollout continues to prioritise hardest to reach areas, the sector has a chance to create and visibly promote local employment opportunities precisely in the regions currently under-represented in telecoms' geographic footprint. Turning build activity into a channel for local talent access and advertisement, and not just network coverage.



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PART FIVE

# Widening the Pool

## Routes into UK Telecoms: A Summary Across Pathways

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Telecoms is unusual among engineering-adjacent sectors in offering a genuinely wide spread of entry routes, several of which are specifically designed to lower the barriers explored elsewhere in this report. This section summarises six distinct pathways: internships, university, apprenticeships, online/distance-learning university routes, career switching and bootcamps.

### 1. Internships and industrial placements

Internships and year-long industrial placements sit alongside, rather than instead of, the graduate route, typically taken during a university course (most commonly a "sandwich year"). BT Group and Openreach both run structured placement programmes across technical and commercial functions. Including finance, commercial management, and enterprise mobility. Often explicitly designed as a "fast track" into the graduate scheme for those who perform well.

### 2. University

The conventional degree-then-graduate-scheme route remains a major pathway into telecoms, particularly into technical, commercial, and finance graduate schemes which are offered by multiple employers across the sector.

### 3. Apprenticeships

Telecoms apprenticeships range from entry-level trainee engineer roles through to Level 6-degree apprenticeships, with BT Group alone supporting more than 700 new apprentices a year across Level 2 to Level 6, spanning customer service, project management, cyber security, and software engineering.<sup>51</sup> The Institute of Telecommunications Professionals (ITP) is a leading provider of telecoms related apprenticeships across all levels.

### 4. Online/distance-learning university routes

The Open University offers full undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Engineering, Computing with Electronic Engineering, Cyber Security, and AI, delivered entirely through flexible, part-time distance learning. These routes are explicitly designed to be studied alongside work or other commitments. It also offers a broad range of other degrees which are directly relevant to the many roles in telecoms.

### 5. Career switching

Career switching into telecoms is supported by a mix of structured returnship programmes (BT's returnship, Vodafone's ReConnect) and reflects those either new or established in their careers who are looking to shift industries, roles or both.

### 6. Skills Bootcamps

Skills bootcamps are a government initiative to help people develop new skills that employers look for, representing an opportunity to train in new skills for a new industry. With bootcamps available across areas such as digital skills, data engineering and software development, as well as technical skills including engineering

and other key business areas, they represent a possible route into telecoms and digital connectivity.

## Career Returners as a source of talent

Alongside graduates, apprentices, and career switchers, one further group deserves specific attention - career returners. Skilled professionals seeking to re-enter the workforce after an extended break for childcare, eldercare, health, or other reasons. This group is overwhelmingly female. Research from Career Returners in 2026 found that 89% of respondents were women, and its wider professional community is over 90% female.<sup>54</sup> A pattern consistent with the well-documented reality that career breaks for caring responsibilities often fall disproportionately on women. This matters directly for telecoms. A sector that is already working to close a gender gap has, in this group, a source of experienced and motivated talent.

### The scale of the challenge

The scale of the challenge that career returners face is stark. Career Returners' 2026 Indicator survey of 733 professionals found that 99% of those actively job-hunting find it challenging to return to a professional role, with 74% describing it as "extremely challenging", a figure that has risen in each of the last three years.<sup>54</sup> 80% have actively upskilled during their break, whether through formal qualifications, professional certification, or skilled volunteering, and 92% believe that the skills they've gained will add value to a future employer.

### Confidence, recency bias and the CV-gap penalty

However, 82% of returners believe most employers won't value those skills, 89% feel that being on a career break has had a negative impact on confidence and 40% identify recruiter bias against the CV gap itself as the single biggest barrier to returning, ahead of confidence loss, ageism, or inflexible working arrangements.<sup>54</sup> This is a well-evidenced, structural issue rather than an individual one. Independent research from the Recruitment and Employment Confederation found that "recent experience" in the industry was a priority for over 55% of recruiters when screening candidates, with one in four saying it was their top priority.<sup>55</sup> This prominence towards recency bias can disproportionately hinder those who have had to take career breaks for a variety of reasons, and risks widening the seniority gaps women experience in the workplace as they face decisions that place career progression against family and personal need.

Harvard Business School research across the US, UK and Germany found that 48% of employers using applicant tracking systems filter out candidates for middle-skills roles with a CV gap of six months or more, and 32% do so for high-skills roles.<sup>56</sup> Indicating that employers may equate applicants with more recent experience as being more likely to have better professional skills, which is not necessarily true.

### An experienced, motivated and retrainable talent pool

Returners are not simply seeking to pick up where they left off in their original roles. Two-thirds are open to a career pivot or complete change, and 93% are open

to retraining specifically into AI or data roles, with 71% describing themselves as "very open"<sup>54</sup> to this. This represents a huge opportunity for telecoms and digital connectivity to strengthen its pipeline and support talented, enthusiastic people back into the workplace.

The key to this is a supported route back into the workplace. 95% of career returners surveyed as part of the Career Returners Indicator 2026 prefer a structured return pathway, most commonly a "returnship" (a time-limited, supported route into a permanent role).<sup>54</sup>

### Models already working within telecoms

This is not a hypothetical opportunity for the sector. There are already examples of working models within telecoms itself. BT Group has run its own returnship programme,<sup>57</sup> delivered in partnership with Career Returners, offering a structured six-month route back into a permanent role, complete with mentorship, training and hands-on experience. Vodafone runs its ReConnect<sup>58</sup> programme which is designed to attract talented and experienced individuals who have left the workplace for 1 to 10+ years, launched with an ambition to recruit 1,000 women on career breaks in its first three years, including 500 in management roles and 500 in front-line roles. These examples show the model is already proven within the sector and the opportunity now is to extend and scale more consistently across the sector, rather than treating career returners as a one-off initiative and shifting into inclusivity by design in the recruitment phase, as discussed elsewhere in the report.

The economic case reinforces the moral one. Independent research commissioned by PwC in partnership with Women Returners and the 30% Club estimated that addressing the "career break penalty" nationally could add £1.1bn in annual earnings with an overall impact of £1.7bn<sup>59</sup> to the wider UK economy. For a sector already facing a well-documented engineering shortfall and an ageing workforce, career returners represent a source of experienced, qualified, motivated talent that requires comparatively little additional investment to access and is largely a matter of adjusting recruitment design rather than building new pipelines from scratch.

### What this means in practice for telecoms employers:

- **Review screening processes to ensure they identify the best candidates, regardless of CV gaps.** Taking a fresh look at both automated (ATS) and manual screening offers a straightforward way to make sure strong, experienced candidates aren't missed due to career breaks.
- **Build on the returnship and supported-hiring models already established in the sector.** BT and Vodafone have both established structured routes back into permanent roles, offering a proven template that the wider sector can adopt or adapt, alongside standard recruitment channels.
- **Position returners explicitly within AI and digital upskilling strategies.** Given the very high stated openness to retraining into these areas as noted in the Career Returners Indicator 2026 this is a natural, high-readiness talent pool for the sector's AI ambitions discussed elsewhere in this report.

- **Signal flexible and hybrid working clearly in job advertising.** Being explicit about what's on offer helps returners self-select in with confidence with hybrid full-time work being widely sought after amongst this group.
- **Engage directly with specialist networks such as the Career Returners Professional Community.** Alongside general job-board advertising, this offers a more direct route to an experienced, motivated talent pool which reports suggest is currently under-reached.

## Supporting Over-45 Talent

This report has already established that UK telecoms has an ageing workforce, with around 60% of engineers currently aged over 50 and a projected 30,000-person engineering shortfall over the next decade. The sector's response to this reality should go beyond simply recruiting to replace those retiring by actively supporting, retaining, and re-engaging the over-45 talent both within and available to the sector. People are living longer and increasingly needing to work longer as the State Pension age rises toward 67 and beyond, and many want to work longer, provided the right conditions are in place. Telecoms has an opportunity to retain the institutional knowledge and technical depth this workforce holds, and a responsibility to support the people who have built networks that the country depends on.

### The scale and cost of early exit

Standard Life's Centre for the Future of Retirement found that 3.4 million workers over 50 and 450,000 over 65 are employed across eight growth sectors, including digital and technologies, and seven of the eight sectors have older-than-average workforces. Yet the same research found that early retirement, ill health, and other over-50 exits are costing the UK £31 billion in lost annual output.<sup>60</sup>

### A recruitment challenge as well as a retention one

This is not simply a retention problem, but a recruitment and re-engagement problem too. Independent research from the Centre for Ageing Better found that more than 800,000 people aged 50 and over are currently not in work but would like to be, and that workers over 50 are half as likely to change jobs as those under 50. Combined with some of the DCF's own findings from the older respondents in the survey aimed at job seekers, this is a sign that older candidates who do want to move can face structural friction or may be less inclined to want to move roles. The same research also found that many older jobseekers feel their age counts against them during recruitment, a perception directly relevant to earlier sections of this report, where survey respondents independently raised concerns about age bias in recruitment and screening processes. In addition, relevant data suggests that the oldest and youngest workers are among those hardest impacted by the pandemic and its lingering legacy.<sup>61</sup>

### What the evidence says works

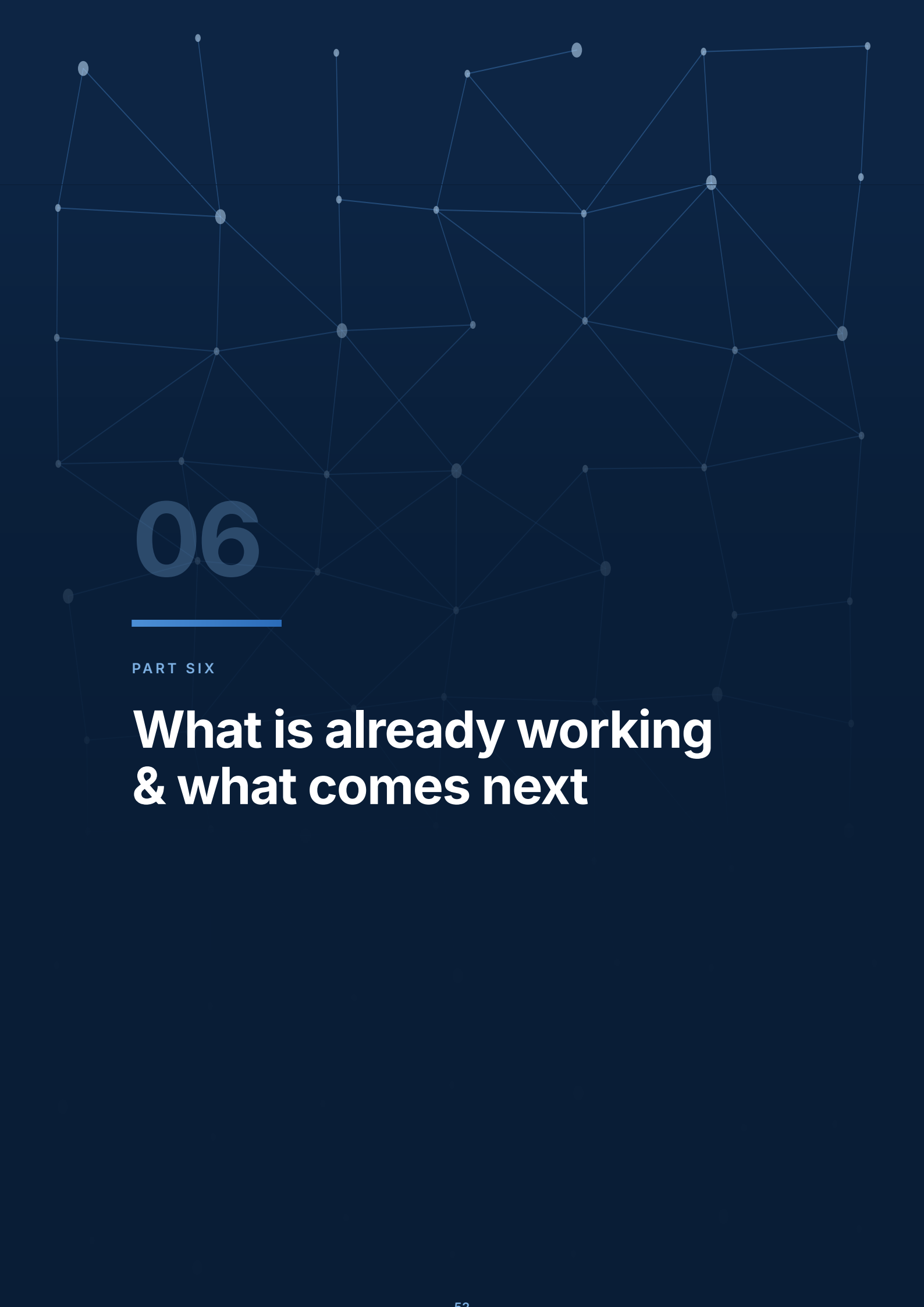
What the evidence suggests is that this is not fundamentally different from good practice more broadly, but it does require deliberate design. Reed Talent Solutions'

research into internal mobility, which surveyed both senior HR leaders and employees over 40, points to structured reskilling, redeployment into new roles, and flexible working, including the option to reduce hours or days, as practical levers that improve retention, support career development, and can reduce the time and cost of hiring, since retaining and redeploying existing experienced staff is frequently more efficient than recruiting and onboarding externally.<sup>62</sup>

This challenge is not unique to the UK, or to telecoms. OECD and Generation's<sup>63</sup> research, which spans the UK, US, and six European countries, frames the ageing of the workforce as a structural, long-term shift driven by longer lifespans and falling birth rates, meaning the barriers facing midcareer and older workers are a near-permanent feature of the modern labour market.

#### What this means in practice for telecoms employers

- **Give retention of experienced, over-45 talent appropriate strategic focus.** With experienced engineers and professionals representing an asset that the sector already has, there's a real opportunity to build on this and the opportunity to draw on older talent to mentor future talent.
- **Build structured internal mobility pathways.** Redeployment, reskilling, and flexible working arrangements give experienced engineers and professionals routes to remain in new or adapted roles as the sector's technology and skills needs evolve.
- **Take a fresh look at recruitment processes to ensure they welcome experienced candidates of all ages.** Particularly where automated screening is used, an area that both the Centre for Ageing Better's national research and respondents in this report's own job-seeker survey suggest is worth reviewing.
- **Bring experienced engineers fully into the sector's AI transition.** The reskilling and redeployment opportunities discussed earlier in this report, including turning the retirement cliff into a managed, extended transition through oversight, training, and quality-assurance roles, offer a genuine way to keep valuable expertise engaged for longer, to the benefit of both individuals and employers.
- **Recognise flexibility as a powerful retention tool, not just an attraction one.** The ability to adjust hours, days, or role scope as personal circumstances change is consistently highlighted across this research as one of the most effective ways to keep experienced talent engaged and thriving in work for longer.



06

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PART SIX

# What is already working & what comes next

## Case Studies: Positive Action in Practice

### CASE STUDY

**Inclusive Hiring, Cellnex:** *As part of its commitment to reducing barriers in recruitment, Cellnex UK has strengthened inclusive hiring practices across the candidate journey. Key initiatives include inclusive job adverts, structured interview packs, trained and diverse interview panels, and providing candidates with an overview of interview themes ahead of time. Together, these actions support a fairer, more transparent process and help attract talent from a wider range of backgrounds, all of which supports candidates to demonstrate their skills and experience.*

## Moving forward and expanding the network

Across every audience surveyed or researched for this report, including 18–25-year-olds and those still in education, job seekers, career switchers and returners, and experienced professionals over 45, one theme recurs more than any other and that is that it is rarely outright hostility toward the sector that holds people back. It is a lack of clear, accessible and relatable information about what telecoms is, who works in it, and whether someone like them would be welcome and supported there as well as structural support and inclusive processes.

This section draws together the evidence gathered throughout this report into a practical set of recommendations for how the sector can present itself more effectively to each of these audiences.

### Reaching each audience

**Students and young people** consistently asked for direct, in-person engagement. Campus recruitment, university partnerships, presence at job fairs, access to trustworthy, centralised information of what the sector is and the companies that exist within it, and internship or exchange programmes were named repeatedly in the young-people survey's qualitative responses.

**General job seekers** were already reached effectively through job boards and recruitment agencies, so there's an opportunity to build on channels that are already working. Although noting the sample limitations, greater educational work could be required here too. Strengthening trust and clarity within the recruitment process. Ensuring adverts are accurate, current, and clearly labelled offers a straightforward way to improve the candidate experience with accuracy and clarity the improvements most welcomed by respondents.

**Career switchers and returners** are best reached through specialist, purpose-built networks rather than general advertising. The Career Returners Professional Community, for example, already connects directly with a highly engaged, work-ready audience of over 10,000 professionals, and BT and Vodafone's own returner programmes demonstrate this channel already works within telecoms specifically. General job-board advertising, by contrast, is where this group told researchers they are most likely to be filtered out before a human review of their application. It

is also a demographic that cited confidence as a key factor, which human intervention and designated programmes can help to overcome and reconnect these valuable professionals to the workplace.

**Older candidates** are less well served by any single channel identified in this research. Suggesting that the opportunity isn't about finding a new platform, but about making the most of the channels already in place. Ensuring job advertising and employer branding clearly and visibly welcomes older, experienced candidates, either through imagery, language, and process design, can support in widening the pool of strong applicants reached through existing channels such as job boards, agencies, and direct applications.

**Existing action.** Across every audience in this report, the sector's own existing companies and initiatives, such as the ITP's Telecoms Career Framework, and established returner/reskilling partnerships already running at BT and Vodafone, provide foundations to scale outreach from, rather than requiring completely new ideas to be built. The opportunity for the sector is less about invention, and more about coordinating, resourcing, and consistently promoting what already exists.

## Inclusion & Retention: Building Cultures People Want to Stay In

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Recruitment and retention are two sides of the same challenge, and this report has so far focused heavily on recruitment and how the sector attracts new talent. But if a sector struggles to keep the people it already has, it will never close a skills gap through recruitment alone. This section turns to the other half of the equation, 'what makes a workplace one that people want to stay in?', and what the evidence says works for retaining top talent across businesses.

## The importance and power of good company culture

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Gallup's global research estimates that low employee engagement costs the world economy \$8.9 trillion in lost productivity every year, and Harvard Business Review research has found that a strong sense of belonging at work is linked to a 75% reduction in sick days, alongside measurable gains in engagement and retention.<sup>64,</sup>

<sup>65</sup>

Telecoms itself has some of the strongest direct evidence available on this point with Oxford University's Saïd Business School working with BT over a six-month period to track around 1,800 contact-centre workers who self-reported their happiness weekly. The study found workers were 13% more productive in weeks they reported being happy compared to weeks they reported being unhappy with happier workers achieving more within their standard work hours. The researchers describe it as the first causal field evidence directly linking happiness to productivity.<sup>66</sup>

## Retaining top talent

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Retention is a genuine, measurable UK-wide challenge. CIPD's benchmarking, based on ONS Annual Population Survey data, puts average UK employee turnover

at 34% a year (27.4% moving to a new employer, plus a further 6.6% no longer working a year later).<sup>67</sup> Separate 2025 data put UK technology attrition specifically at 19%, ranking above the European technology average of 17.4%, and rising 11% since the year before.<sup>68</sup>

The cost of this is substantial. Replacing an employee earning £30,000-£50,000 typically costs around 20% of their annual salary,<sup>69</sup> once recruitment, lost productivity, and onboarding time are accounted for. This represents a substantial recurring cost to any organisation with high turnover.

Within telecoms and digital connectivity specifically this report's own exploration with recruiters discussed retention as a live concern, with lack of upskilling opportunities and better offers from competitors or other sectors as the two greatest risks. This report's job-seeker survey found similarly that among those who had left the sector before, workplace culture was cited as one of the most powerful reasons.

This is echoed in wider evidence bases. A 2023 UK-wide Mercer survey of 2,000 full-time employees found that the top three reasons people quit were insufficient pay, burnout from workload, and poor relationships with line managers - reinforcing the importance of company culture across all levels, particularly the way that teams and individuals behave.

This reflects an important consideration that management quality shapes day-to-day engagement more directly than almost any other single factor. Something supported by research of job switchers across industries over the course of 15 years by Bernstein, Horn and Moesta, writing in Harvard Business Review (2024), which said that while compensation, career growth and work-life balance contribute to staff retention, a dominant factor in decision making is whether people have managers and colleagues who value, respect and trust them. Highlighting the importance of getting company culture right at every level of the business.<sup>70</sup>

**What supports retention in practice.** The evidence points consistently toward a small number of strong levers including visible and funded upskilling, genuine flexibility in how and where work happens, transparent and well-communicated pay and progression and managerial quality and behaviour, since research suggests that even strong pay and benefits cannot fully offset a poor line-management relationship.

## Progression, pay, and leadership pathways

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Pay transparency specifically has a strong, quantified link to retention. Payscale's analysis of over 578,000 US workers found that improving employees' perception that their pay is fair can reduce intent to leave by 27%.<sup>71</sup> Research from Remote's Global Payroll reported that more than half of employees said that they would consider leaving if their salary concerns were ignored.<sup>72</sup>

Deloitte's research adds a generational dimension directly relevant to this report's earlier findings on younger workers. Younger generations prioritise career growth and financial stability specifically and sharing clear information about the pay potential of future roles and not just current pay helps workers visualise a long-

term future with an employer, which in turn supports loyalty and retention. This is a particularly acute retention point when coupled with the fact that a large share of Gen Z workers have left roles that lacked purpose or conflicted with their ethics.<sup>73</sup>



# 07

PART SEVEN

## Conclusions and Recommendations

## Conclusions

This report opened by identifying three fronts on which the sector needs to act. It is worth returning to each and stating what this research has established.

### On awareness and perception

The sector's problem is largely visibility, not reputation. When speaking to people about the sector, negative sentiment toward telecoms was often limited, while not knowing enough about the sector to hold a view at all was common. Among the youngest cohort surveyed, only two respondents in seventy four reported a negative view. What the research found instead was a substantial group of people who could not say whether the sector was accessible, whether it offered roles they would want, or whether people like them worked in it, because they had never been exposed to the information that would allow them to decide.

**A sector that people actively dislike faces a long and uncertain task in changing minds. A sector that people have simply not heard of faces a large but straightforward one: being clearer, more visible, and more specific about what it does and who it needs.**

### On the current picture

Whilst there is a range of data available to create a disparate image of a sector that is ageing, male dominated and actively engaging with the challenge of a lack of diversity, the data available is often fragmented and dated. The absence of a central point of truth remains one of the most significant constraints on the sector's ability to act. Producing this report required the use of engineering-wide proxies, digital-sector aggregates that cover a much broader population than telecoms, and the use of older data in some instances. Where occupational data does exist, it reveals a sector that needs targeted action in practical, targeted and scalable ways.

### On barriers to entry

Often the barriers identified were practical and procedural. Not knowing what roles exist or where to apply, entry requirements pitched higher than the job demands, the catch-22 of needing experience to gain experience, and automated screening filtering keywords rather than capability all featured highly in the primary research results. Beneath these sit a layer of more structural challenges such as geographic concentration of job opportunity, and educational access and exposure of engineering as a career option early in the key stages narrowing the pipeline years before application.

Many remedies that have been identified through this report's own research, or through the curation of others, sit within the sector's gift. Improving transparency of how and where AI is used in the recruitment process and committing to human review at critical junctures, distinguishing essential requirements from desirable ones, publishing interview formats and questions in advance, offering a variety of

interview options as standard and guaranteeing feedback are changes achievable in months rather than years, and each helps several groups at once rather than requiring a separate initiative per demographic.

Flexible and hybrid working illustrates this curb cut effect clearly. It is valued by nearly everyone, but for those managing chronic health conditions, caring commitments, or a return after time out, it is the difference between participating and being frozen out of the workforce. This is the curb cut effect, provision designed with the excluded in mind that ultimately benefits the majority. The sector's most effective response to barriers to entry is therefore not a set of targeted programmes but processes designed inclusively from the outset which, on the evidence gathered here, would widen the pool and improve the experience of every candidate who enters the sector and works within it.

### **What follows**

The recommendations set out in this report are deliberately practical. Many of them cost very little and represent simple process changes and guarantees rather than sweeping investments. Guaranteeing feedback to unsuccessful applicants, keeping job adverts accurate and current, distinguishing essential requirements from desirable ones, stating interview formats in advance, ensuring a human person reviews applications, and making flexibility visible where it already exists are changes individual employers can enact quickly.

Others require the sector to act collectively, and some require government. But the central conclusion of this research is an optimistic one. The barriers this report identifies are most frequently matters of design rather than attitude, and things designed by a sector with an intention to make progress can be redesigned by them to be better.

## **Recommendations for Industry & Employers**

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### **Human centred recruitment processes**

Industry commitment to greater transparency of how and where AI is used in the recruitment process, as well as confirmation that human review will be used within the recruitment process through review to interview.

### **Clear, non-jargon job adverts that are up to date**

Clear, concise and jargon free adverts that clearly outline the role and its responsibilities. Ensuring that adverts are kept up to date if they change or are filled.

### **Increased commitment to inclusive hiring processes**

Greater utilisation of inclusive hiring processes, including inclusive job adverts and language review, structured interview packs, trained and diverse interview panels, and providing candidates with an overview of interview themes ahead of time.

### **Communication as standard**

Provide feedback or outcome notification as standard for all applicants.

**Improved focus on skills-based hiring and recency bias**

Better use of skills-based hiring that more accurately reflects key competencies and in recognition that binary experience based criteria can disproportionately affect underrepresented groups, impact career returners and switchers and reduce the positive impact and utilisation of transferrable skills.

**Publish pay ranges with advertised roles**

Include pay ranges alongside advertised roles to support job applicants.

**Greater representation in materials and events**

Ensure published materials and event speakers feature a broad range of people that reflect wider society.

**Focused management training**

Train and upskill managers on management specifically. Recognising management as a critical element of retainment, overseeing progression, morale and directly influencing daily culture.

**Make progression pathways clear and visible**

Make progression pathways clear and visible within your organisation. This could be through the publication of role-to-role maps, promotion criteria and indicative timescales.

**Promote flexible working and make it visible**

Promote and make visible flexible options where available and consider them as a key way to help people stay and thrive in the workforce whilst still delivering company needs.

## **Recommendations for the Digital Connectivity Forum**

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**Creation and sharing of best practice**

Working with industry to establish a shared position on good culture, and the curation and release of best practice guides capturing how to identify, create and deliver great company culture.

**Create and share educational materials on telecoms**

Work with relevant partners to create and distribute educational materials covering what the sector is, what it delivers and how to join in line with key life stages such as primary school, secondary school, university students and job seekers.

**Create a detailed and shareable career framework that articulates the range of roles available and how they connect**

Work with relevant partners to build a career framework that includes the full breadth of technical and non-technical roles available in telecoms, including which transferrable skills relate to each role and how these intersect with alternative roles and sectors.

### **Exploration of how to deliver information on transferrable skills**

Explore as part of the Inclusion and Skills working group what would be the most effective and impactful way to create, house and distribute simple information on transferrable skills and how these interrelate across different roles, industries and daily life.

## **Recommendations for Government**

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### **Distribution and hosting of targeted telecoms career information**

Voices in the report across multiple areas called for clarity and a central host point for active roles and careers information. This could present an area that the telecoms sector and Department for Work and Pensions could work on to create a centralised home for telecoms industry information, career information and active roles as a one stop telecoms shop.

National Careers Service and Skills England career maps should reflect telecoms and digital connectivity pathways explicitly, drawing on the ITP's Telecoms Career Framework.

### **Upskilling Government careers advisors on telecoms and its opportunities**

Working with the industry to upskill National Careers Service/Skills England and Jobcentre Plus advisers, equipping them with sector-specific route information as well as what the sector is, the talent it needs, and how to enter it would present a meaningful way to broaden opportunities available to DWP customers and beyond, whilst supporting the telecoms sector to access the talent it needs.

### **Disaggregate telecommunications within official digital sector workforce statistics**

When reporting digital sector workforce statistics, ensure that telecoms and digital connectivity is represented as a consistent and distinct subsector so that industry can baseline their progress and more readily access accurate workforce data.

### **Make returnships available for funding in the same way as apprenticeships**

Support for employer-delivered returnships to be made eligible for skills funding on the same basis as apprenticeships.

### **Extend AI Skills Boost explicitly to mid-career and over-50 workers**

Set explicit participation targets within AI Skills Boost for workers over 50 and for career returners, prioritising infrastructure sectors facing documented retirement cliffs in delivery.

### **Greater support for mid-career reskilling**

Improved support for mid-career reskilling that is reflective of the life stage many of these candidates may find themselves in, such as flexibility around work, credit for prior learning and qualifications, and clearly marketed to people who may not think of themselves as students, would be something of direct benefit to mid-career candidates looking to reskill or upskill. This could be through improved guidance to coordinate with the forthcoming Lifelong Learning Entitlement<sup>74</sup> (LLE), which

provides funding that can be drawn on for reskilling. Whilst the National Careers Service is available to everyone, those who are employed and mid-career may be less aware of the proactive support available to figure out how to retrain and where, or whether now is the right moment. Broadening of the existing ‘mid-life MOT’ service offered by Jobcentre Plus<sup>75</sup> or a ‘career switching advice service’ could provide support to people aged 35+ to review their skills, and to provide advice toward other roles they may naturally match well with, or toward LLE-funded training, could help address the problem of where to begin, which funding alone doesn’t address.

## Annexes

### Annex A: Glossary and abbreviations

**Diversity and inclusion** are used distinctly and not interchangeably. Diversity refers to the presence of different people, perspectives and experiences within a team or organisation. Inclusion refers to whether those perspectives are heard, valued and able/empowered to shape outcomes.

**Under-represented groups** refers to groups holding a smaller share of sector employment than of the UK working-age population, on the measures for which data exists.

**Career returner** describes a skilled professional seeking to re-enter the workforce after an extended break for childcare, eldercare, health or any other reason. A career switcher describes someone changing role or industry to a substantial, non-linear degree.

**Returnship** is a time-limited, supported route into a permanent role.

**ATS (applicant tracking system)** refers to software used to receive, filter and manage job applications, including automated screening against keywords or CV criteria.

**Neurodivergent** is used as an umbrella term covering conditions including autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, consistent with the definitions used by leading organisations such as the National Autistic Society. Though it is important to note that there is no agreed or ‘official’ list of who is considered neurodivergent.

#### Abbreviations

**BAME** Black, Asian and minority ethnic, as used in the BCS diversity report cited in this report.

**BCS** The BCS, Chartered Institute for IT.

**CIPD** Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

**DCF** Digital Connectivity Forum.

**DSIT** Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. DSIT was closed in July 2026, with science and innovation moving to the Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, digital to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and artificial

intelligence to the Office for the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The DSIT publications cited in this report were issued before its closure, and the skills work they describe continues.

**DWP** Department for Work and Pensions.

**ESG** Environmental, social and governance.

**FSSC** Financial Services Skills Commission.

**HSE** Health, safety and environment.

**ITP** Institute of Telecommunications Professionals.

**LLE** Lifelong Learning Entitlement.

**OECD** Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

**ONS** Office for National Statistics.

**RF** Radio frequency.

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## Expanding the Network: Understanding the barriers to entering the digital connectivity sector