Smarter Start

Structured Early Careers development from day one

Three funded pathways: Business Foundations, AI Foundations and Data Foundations

For people aged 16-24 entering or early in their careers.

Build the professional, human, digital and occupational capability emerging talent needs to contribute confidently in an AI-enabled workplace.

Fully funded for 16-24 year olds. Around four hours a week. Built into real work.

Employer Guide | October 2026

Future Talent Learning

The Early Careers challenge has changed

Recruiting good people is only the beginning

Employers need to solve two connected challenges: **how to recruit for potential**, and **how to develop that potential consistently once someone starts work.**

Early Careers development can otherwise depend too heavily on individual line managers, informal coaching and uneven access to feedback, projects and responsibility.

At the same time, the workplace is changing. Employers increasingly need emerging talent who can:

- communicate and work confidently with others
- manage priorities and deliver reliably
- ask good questions and act on feedback
- solve problems and exercise judgement
- use digital and AI tools responsibly
- adapt as roles and technology change

Smarter Start provides the structured development around the hire.

The evidence points in the same direction

Young people need better routes into work - and better development once they arrive

1 million+
16-24 year olds were not in education, employment or training (NEET) in early 2026.

77%
of employers surveyed by the Institute of Student Employers agreed that young people who completed a structured internship or placement arrived with better skills and attitudes.

13 core skills
now sit within Skills England's new Employability Skills Framework, designed to provide a common language for employability and explicitly support Early Careers development.

100% funded
Apprenticeship training and assessment for 16-24 year olds is fully government funded, whether or not you pay the levy.



AI raises the stakes further.
As routine entry-level tasks change, emerging talent needs stronger communication, judgement, problem-solving and professional confidence alongside the ability to use AI well.

What employers get

Smarter Start gives you a funded, structured way to turn potential into performance.

- **Fully funded for 16-24 year olds.** Training and assessment is government funded, levy or not.
- **A consistent development system, not a lottery**. Every learner gets a coach, 1:1 support every 10 days, workshops, peer groups and monthly missions.
- **Less load on line managers**. FTL provides the structure. Managers protect time, open up opportunities and give feedback.
- **AI capability with judgement**. Learners use AI to practise and learn to question, verify and take responsibility for what it produces.
- **Capability that shows up in the work**. Around four hours a week, applied through real tasks, projects and conversations.
- **Evidence you can report**. Starts, retention, missions, qualifications and development against Skills England's 13 core skills.

Three Smarter Start pathways

	Business Foundations	AI Foundations	Data Foundations
Apprenticeship	Level 4 Associate Management Consultant	Level 3 Digital Support Technician	Level 3 Data Technician
Best fit	Broad business, operational, customer, service, project and coordination roles	Digitally enabled operational, support, customer and coordination roles	Data, reporting, finance, people, customer, service and analytical roles
Primary development	Professional and business capability	Confident, critical and productive participation in an AI-enabled workplace	Using data to understand work and support better decisions
Duration	12 months	12 months	14 months
Funding band	£9,000	£13,000	£13,000

A highly funded route to develop emerging talent

Funding has shifted decisively towards younger apprentices

For eligible apprentices aged 16-24 at the start of training, apprenticeship training and assessment is fully government-funded in England, whether or not the employer pays the levy, up to the relevant funding band maximum.

	Business Foundations	AI Foundations	Data Foundations
Funding band	£9,000	£13,000	£13,000

Additional employer incentives can also apply to some younger apprentices and particular cohorts.

Funding rules and eligibility apply. Position correct at October 2026.
FTL can help employers understand the funding position for a proposed cohort.

Smarter Start: Business Foundations

Professional and business capability for Early Careers
Delivered through the Level 4 Associate Management Consultant Apprenticeship

Application & fit

For school and college leavers, graduates and colleagues aged 16-24 early in their careers working in business, operational, customer, service, project or coordination roles who would benefit from broad professional development. This is not a junior management programme.

What colleagues build

- professional communication
- teamwork and effective working relationships
- planning, prioritisation and reliable delivery
- confidence contributing to projects
- evidence-led decision-making
- problem-solving and professional judgement
- effective use of digital tools
- responsible use of AI

Qualifications

- Level 4 Associate Management Consultant Apprenticeship
- Microsoft Azure AI Fundamentals certification

Duration: 12 months
Funding band: £9,000

Smarter Start: AI Foundations

Confident, critical participation in an AI-enabled workplace
Delivered through the Level 3 Digital Support Technician Apprenticeship

Application & fit

For emerging talent in digitally enabled operational, business support, customer, service, administrative or coordination roles. It combines practical AI and digital confidence with the professional communication and judgement people need early in working life.

What colleagues build

- confidence using AI and workplace digital tools
- effective prompting and critical evaluation of AI outputs
- responsible and secure AI use
- everyday digital productivity and workflow improvement
- digital problem-solving
- confidence supporting colleagues and users
- professional communication
- human judgement about when not to rely on the tool

Qualifications

- Level 3 Digital Support Technician Apprenticeship
- Microsoft Azure AI Fundamentals certification

Duration: 12 months
Funding band: £13,000

Smarter Start: Data Foundations

Use data and evidence to understand work and support better decisions
Delivered through the Level 3 Data Technician Apprenticeship

Application & fit

For emerging talent working with data, reports or information across operational, finance, people, customer, service, performance and entry-level analytical roles.
It combines practical data skills with the communication, confidence and judgement needed to use evidence effectively at work.

What colleagues build

- collecting and preparing data
- improving data quality
- analysing information and identifying patterns
- questioning evidence and assumptions
- secure and responsible data handling
- explaining findings clearly and working effectively with stakeholders
- evidence-led recommendations
- responsible use of AI with data

Qualifications

- Level 3 Data Technician Apprenticeship
- Microsoft Azure AI Fundamentals certification

Duration: 14 months
Funding band: £13,000

Progression visible from the start

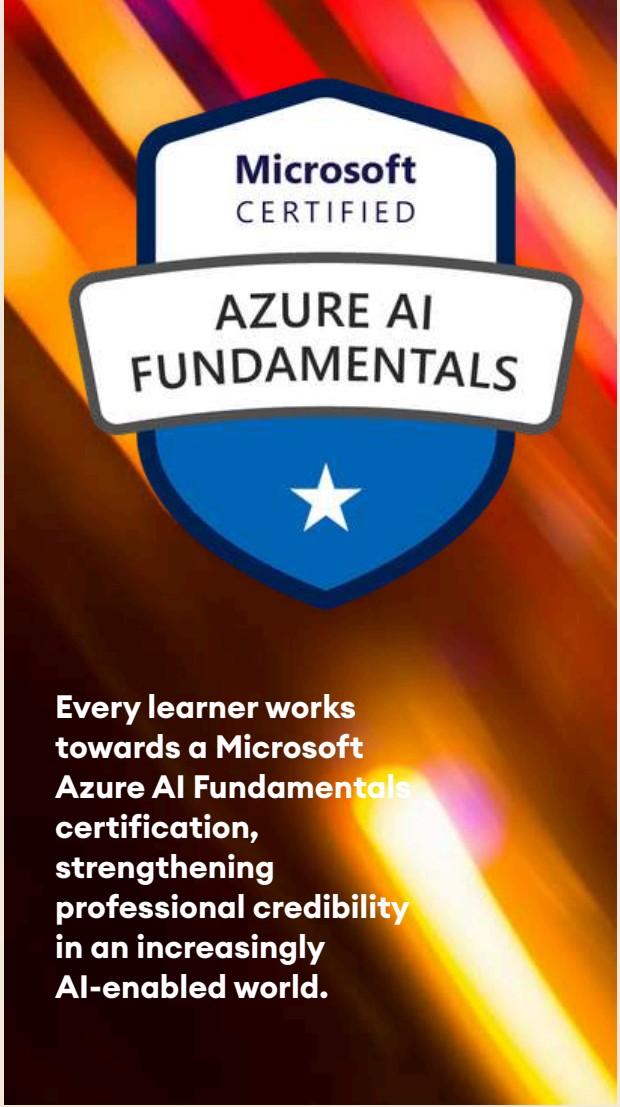
Smarter Start is a foundation, not a dead end

Business Foundations
Can build a foundation for specialist progression into AI, data, transformation and potentially management as responsibilities develop.

AI Foundations
Can support progression into FTL's Level 4 AI & Automation Management Programme.

Data Foundations
Can support progression into FTL's Level 4 Data & Insight Management Programme.

Start with the pathway that fits the work now. Build from there as responsibilities grow.



One shared foundation across all three pathways

Whichever pathway they follow, Smarter Start learners deliberately develop:

- **Professional capability** - reliability, accountability and confidence
- **Communication** - listening, speaking, writing and adapting to audiences
- **Collaboration** - relationships, teamwork and different perspectives
- **Self-management** - planning, priorities, resilience and feedback
- **Judgement and problem-solving** - asking good questions and making responsible decisions
- **Digital capability** - using workplace tools safely and productively
- **AI capability** - using AI critically while maintaining human oversight
- **Learning capability** - finding information, reflecting and continuously improving

The occupational emphasis changes by pathway. The common foundation does not.



This framework aims to create a shared language that helps young people describe their capabilities and helps employers identify potential more consistently.

Skills England, Employability Skills Framework, October 2026

A structured support system around every learner

Every learner receives:

- their own experienced development coach
- regular 1:1 support, typically around every 10 days
- interactive live workshops
- coach-facilitated peer study groups
- personalised practice through Mentarri
- neuro-inclusive learning resources
- structured monthly workplace missions

Employer benefit

FTL provides the development structure around each learner, reducing reliance on individual managers to create an Early Careers development programme themselves.



Practice before the stakes are real

Mentarri + human coaching

Mentarri is an AI learning platform that provides personalised practice and support between sessions; the development coach provides human judgement, mentorship and reflection. Learners can use Mentarri to:

- rehearse an unfamiliar conversation
- prepare for a meeting
- practise a presentation
- work through a decision
- reflect on feedback
- test prompts and AI outputs
- find relevant learning resources
- practise before a situation matters for real

AI extends the support available to each learner.
It does not replace the human coach.

Peer learning beyond the immediate team

One of the benefits of Smarter Start is learning alongside people developing similar workplace capabilities across different roles and organisations.

Learners can compare approaches, test ideas, hear different perspectives and build a network beyond their immediate team.

Monthly coach-facilitated study groups give learners space to discuss workplace situations, dilemmas and different approaches.

Interactive live workshops provide further opportunities to practise skills, explore ideas and build confidence.

Learners develop through the programme, their coach and each other.



Designed to fit around work

Approx. 4 hours of protected learning time per week

Protected structured learning can include:

- 1:1 coaching
- interactive workshops
- peer study groups
- online learning
- Mentarri-supported practice

Applied development then continues in the flow of work, through tasks, projects, meetings, reporting, conversations, reflection and preparation, and workplace systems already part of the learner's role.

Learning shows up as better work, not time away from it.



Monthly missions turn development into workplace value

Learning is built around doing

Business Foundations

- plan and prioritise live work
- deliver a stakeholder update
- contribute to a project
- use evidence to make a recommendation
- improve an everyday way of working

AI Foundations

- use and check AI outputs
- improve a digital workflow
- solve a practical digital problem
- support a colleague using a tool
- identify where automation adds value

Data Foundations

- improve data quality
- investigate a live question
- analyse patterns
- explain insight to a stakeholder
- support an evidence-led decision



The test for every mission: what can this learner now do more effectively at work?

Line managers support application, not programme delivery

Future Talent Learning provides

- curriculum and programme structure
- experienced development coaching
- workshops
- study groups
- Mentarri
- learning resources
- assessment support
- developmental continuity

Managers create the conditions for application

- protect learning time
- identify suitable workplace opportunities
- give feedback
- discuss progress
- allow progressively greater responsibility

FTL provides the curriculum, coaching and structured learning support. Managers help learners use it in work.



Built around the national language for employability

Not generic employability training

Skills England's Employability Skills Framework, published on 5 October 2026, provides a common national language for employability and brings established standards and frameworks together.

Smarter Start is intentionally aligned to:

Skills England Employability Skills Framework
13 core skills, including what they look like in a first job and in an AI-enabled workplace.

Gatsby Benchmarks
Informing the transition from education towards employment and understanding the workplace.

Skills Builder Universal Framework
Providing established language for essential human skills including listening, speaking, teamwork and problem-solving.

FutureDotNow Essential Digital Skills Framework
Practical digital capability for work, including communication, information handling, problem-solving and safe digital working.

FTL translates these national frameworks into structured workplace development through coaching, monthly missions and recognised apprenticeships.

Recognised credentials. Credible delivery.

Every Smarter Start learner works towards:

- a nationally recognised apprenticeship
- Microsoft Azure AI Fundamentals certification

Delivered by Future Talent Learning

- rated Good by Ofsted
- Microsoft Training Services Partner
- Neurodiversity Smart accredited

Around 3,000 apprentices have completed FTL programmes in recent years, with a 100% pass rate and 85% achieving a distinction.



Microsoft Azure AI Fundamentals included



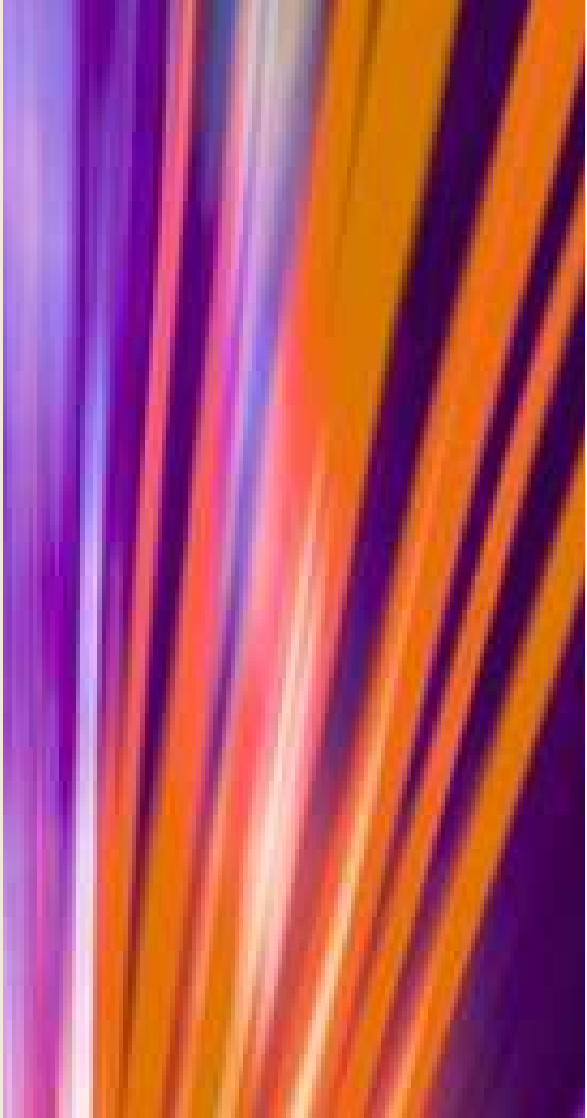
Institute of Leadership – Most Innovative Training Provider 2024



Neurodiversity Smart Accredited by Lexxic

FTL provides top-tier, highly engaging, effective and innovative methods of teaching and learning leading to high success rates.

Ofsted



Build your Smarter Start pathway

FTL can help you turn your Early Careers priorities into a practical first cohort.

1. Map your Early Careers population
Identify where emerging talent enters your organisation, the roles involved and the capability you want to build.

2. Select the right pathways
Match Business Foundations, AI Foundations and Data Foundations to the work people are doing and the skills they need to develop.

3. Design and launch your cohort
Plan learner eligibility, funding, cohort structure, line-manager engagement, learner communications, Discovery Sessions and enrolment.

FTL can support role mapping, cohort design, learner engagement and programme launch.

Talk to us about Smarter Start cohorts

More details about the Smarter Start programmes' curriculum, study groups and events are on our website.

www.futuretalentlearning.com

Future Talent Learning

Sources and authority

Smarter Start is informed by established evidence and national frameworks

National employment and skills

- Skills England, Employability Skills Framework, October 2026
- House of Commons Library, youth NEET statistics
- Alan Milburn review into young people and work, interim findings 2026
- Institute of Student Employers, Student Development Survey

Work and AI

- Daniel Susskind, What Should My Children Do? How to Flourish in the Age of AI, 2026
- OECD PISA findings, 2026

Established development frameworks

- Gatsby Benchmarks
- Skills Builder Universal Framework
- FutureDotNow Essential Digital Skills Framework

Funding

- Apprenticeship Funding Rules 2026-27
- Growth and Skills Levy reforms