Data skills are now ‘fundamental’ in the age of AI, says expert

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A more concerted approach to improving data literacy is urgently needed to unlock the full growth potential of artificial intelligence (AI), claims data consultancy Carruthers and Jackson.

As AI tools become embedded across everyday business functions, data and AI literacy can no longer be viewed as niche skills reserved for specialist roles. From HR and finance to marketing and operations, employees are increasingly expected to interpret data outputs, question automated recommendations, and make informed decisions based on AI-driven insights.

For businesses, the challenge is becoming more urgent. While AI adoption continues to accelerate, workforce capability is not keeping pace.

In Carruthers and Jackson’s annual Data Maturity Index - a survey of senior data leaders - 40% reported that AI is being used by a high number of employees across their organisation or within specific departments, up from 21% in 2024.

Yet 58% said that most of their employees are not data literate, with a further 3% reporting that almost no employees in their organisation are data literate.

Carruthers and Jackson, one of the leading global data consultancies and part of the Praesto Group, warns that this disconnect threatens to undermine global AI ambitions. Significant investment is being channelled into new platforms, infrastructure and tooling - but technology alone cannot deliver transformation.

Caroline Carruthers, Co-Founder and Chief Executive of Carruthers and Jackson said:

“Artificial intelligence is now embedded in everyday workflows, and data literacy can no longer be confined to technical specialists. It is becoming a core business capability that is every bit as fundamental as financial literacy or digital skills.”

“All the AI investment in the world will count for little if our people cannot question outputs, challenge assumptions or translate insight into action. If an organisation, or a country, fails to act now in improving data literacy they will fall behind and the highest-value, data-enabled roles will simply be outsourced elsewhere.”

Ultimate responsibility for a shift in approach to data literacy, however, remains unclear.

While financial literacy has undergone a step change in recent decades with increased financial education in schools and a proactive role played by the banking sector, there is no single commercial player in the AI and data space with the same incentive to champion broad data literacy beyond product-specific training. As a result, says Carruthers, the burden must be shared. The education system needs to embed data literacy earlier, employers must invest in upskilling their current workforce, and governments must provide consistent and clear guidance to enable both.

Caroline Carruthers added, “*We are entering what I call the ‘second coming’ of data. Where many board-level conversations about data were centred on compliance, now the questions are more strategic and purpose-driven. Organisations are increasingly asking where they want to go with their data, why, and for whom. The answers require not just technical capability, but a workforce confident in interrogating and applying data responsibly.”*

“We’re already in the next industrial revolution, and the real question is how we intend to bring people on board with it. For modern workplaces it might mean reframing their thinking towards the younger generation. They’re often digitally native, highly curious, and adaptable - ideal characteristics for a data-savvy employee. Smart, imaginative organisations are going to embrace that skillset and reap the benefits of effective data and AI.”

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