

TURNING AI INTO AN EDUCATION ADVANTAGE

The UK education system is one of the largest UK employers, with a growing share of the 1.66 million people in the sector now employed in multi-academy trusts (MATs). MATs manage complex, multi-site workforces under intense pressure to raise standards, meet compliance requirements and operate within tight budgets.

MATs also face persistent challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers, support staff and specialist roles, pressures that are heightened by the UK Government's ambitious target to recruit 6,500 more teachers by the end of this parliament. NFER's Teacher Labour Market Report 2025 finds that 90% of teachers considering leaving the profession cite high workloads, driven by bureaucracy and administrative burden, as a key factor. Against this backdrop, the question is no longer whether to use AI, but how to align it with the realities of school life so it genuinely helps staff do their best work.

Our latest report, *The Grey Zone: The Untapped Advantage of AI Alignment*, surveyed leaders and employees across multiple sectors to explore how AI is reshaping the relationship between organisations, their people and the work they do. The research

shines a light on the gap between AI adoption and genuine alignment – the Grey Zone where technology exists but doesn't yet deliver its full potential value.

For Zellis, and our customers, AI alignment means ensuring that AI tools are built around the way people actually work – the tasks, schedules and priorities they face day-to-day. AI tools should support sound judgement, rather than becoming just another unused system.

Building on the main research findings, this deep dive highlights the data most relevant to the public sector in the UK and focuses on how AI is reshaping work and workplace culture. For MATs, the data points to clear momentum – and important alignment gaps between leadership intent and frontline experience.

THE MULTI-ACADEMY TRUST REALITY: COMPLEX WORKFORCES, HEAVY COMPLIANCE

MATs bring together multiple schools, often across different local authorities and communities, each with its own legacy systems and culture. Central HR and payroll teams must navigate term time only contracts, multiple allowances, cover payments and irregular overtime, while delivering accurate, timely pay.

On the ground, staff still report high levels of administrative work such as tracking attendance, logging behaviour and safeguarding concerns, maintaining assessment records and meeting reporting requirements for regulators and trust boards. With Ofsted's renewed education inspection framework introduced in November 2025, the compliance burden on MATs has intensified. Furthermore, the Government has announced plans to introduce direct Ofsted inspections of MATs, potentially beginning as early as 2027, which will focus on leadership, governance and impact across each trust. With a strong desire to "do more with less paperwork", but limited time and headspace to explore new tools, digital change can sometimes add complexity rather than remove it.



THE ALIGNMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION

Across the public sector, 94% of leaders say their organisation currently uses or interacts with AI tools as part of its operations, yet only 58% of employees say they use AI regularly or occasionally in their role. This shows AI is already embedded at organisational level, but employee level adoption still has room to grow.

When AI is in place, 52% of employees say it improves their productivity, and 61% say it gives them time back for more meaningful or strategic work, and over a quarter (31%) say it increases their job satisfaction. Leaders echo this, with 59% of leaders agreeing that AI improves the quality of outputs and almost half (44%) saying it increases productivity.

For MATs, the alignment opportunity lies in focusing AI on the pain points staff talk about most:

- Intelligent scheduling and cover planning to manage timetables, absence and interventions without relying on spreadsheets.
- Automated workflows for safeguarding, policy updates and mandatory training, so staff spend less time chasing paperwork and more time with pupils.
- AI assisted HR and payroll checks that reduce pay errors and give staff clearer visibility of their hours, leave and allowances.
- Searchable access to trust policies and guidance, addressing the "lack of information" many public sector workers cite as a barrier to change.

CONFIDENCE AND CULTURE

Education sector employees show strong appetite for learning with 67% saying that AI provides opportunities to learn new skills, and almost half (49%) agree that AI encourages self directed learning and development. Furthermore, over half of leaders (57%) believe that AI increases job satisfaction.

However, there are clear differences in how responsible use and involvement are perceived. 62% of leaders feel confident their organisation uses AI responsibly and ethically, 61% believe that employees are involved in decisions about how AI is used, yet only 22% of employees feel involved in those decisions.

For multi-academy trusts, closing this gap means:

- Bringing teachers, support staff and school business leaders into the design, piloting and rollout of AI tools which will align with the Government's Improving Education Together agreement with both unions and employees.
- Providing clear, role specific training that shows how AI supports judgement rather than replacing it.
- Being transparent about where AI is used, what data it draws on and how decisions are ultimately made.

The findings highlight that when AI is aligned with frontline needs, 59% of employees say it reduces work related stress, and 71% say it improves productivity. Leaders agree, with 62% saying AI gives their people time back for more meaningful or strategic work.

Zellis helps multi-academy trusts:

- Streamline complex HR, workforce management and pay processes across multi-site estates.
- Reduce low-value administrative tasks so staff can focus on teaching and pupil support.
- Build trust by giving people accurate, accessible information about their work and pay.

By turning AI from an abstract initiative into a practical ally in day-to-day school life, MATs can protect cultures that attract and retain great people – and give them the tools and time they need to make a difference.

CLOSING THE AI ALIGNMENT GAP

Organisations that align leadership ambition with frontline expectations and AI enabled technology will be best placed to sustain services, retain talent and protect outcomes for citizens in an increasingly constrained public sector environment. As public bodies navigate tight budgets, evolving regulation and persistent workforce pressures, the ability to do more with existing resources has become a necessity rather than a choice.

Zellis invites trust leaders to explore how AI enabled HR, workforce management and pay can help close the alignment gap and realise the full value of AI across their organisations – turning grey into great.



TAKE THE NEXT STEP

Learn more about the ways AI can unlimit what's next for your people and performance.

[Download the full report](#)

Our AI-enabled HR, Workforce Management and Pay platform is reshaping workplaces and our solutions pay one in seven people working in the UK and Ireland.

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