



## **AI compounds the telecoms talent conundrum**

Securing AI skills was on the minds of telcos at MWC 2024. Telcos have plans in place to address the shortfall, but will these be sufficient to deliver the necessary in the near term?

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## MWC 2024 highlighted the skills challenge

STL Partners supports the position that telcos must build skills for the future sooner rather than later. Telcos aspire to be like tech companies, but lag behind in the penetration of those skills that techcos leverage for success, for example: software, data analytics, cloud, automation, innovation, UX and AI and ML.

Conversations at the Mobile World Congress (MWC) 2024 reiterated the challenges of building a future-ready workforce – particularly in the light of AI developments. Telcos will need to acquire – or more likely - train AI specialists, as well as non-specialist staff (e.g. strategists and leaders) to leverage AI for internal use cases as well as creating value externally.

Even if telcos do not decide to train their own large language models (LLMs), for example, the organisation must have the capabilities to define a vision of their involvement with AI (e.g. conduct risk/reward analysis to separate hype from the reality). They may also need to:

- Select LLMs that meet appropriate commercial, technical and legal criteria
- Ensure the availability of high-quality data pipelines for chosen use cases, whilst avoiding privacy and intellectual property rights violations
- Fine-tune models, incorporating telco-specific domain knowledge and applying machine learning (ML), data analysis and modelling skills to achieve optimal solutions
- Write and engineer prompts to maximise the value of use cases for end users.

## What are telcos doing?

Acquiring these types of skills externally is complicated by the general shortage of specialist skills and the high level of competition for such skills, when they are available.

Telcos like **Telenor** and e& are partnering with players like Microsoft and Udacity to upskill AI specialists within their organisations and engaging others like the GSMA, Nokia and other vendors for non-specialist or user training.

Telcos at the Congress spoke about the need for skills-based HR, relinquishing the tendency to emphasise formal qualifications like degrees when appointing people to roles in order to broaden the talent pool under consideration. Upskilling and reskilling efforts are also being supported by increased employee mobility and collaborative team-working in order to prevent important skills from being locked into silos. For example, Deutsche Telekom established an AI Competence Center with this in mind. This group, together with its T-Systems' AI Factory, supports all Deutsche Telekom's AI projects with the right skills and resources. Telcos are also re-thinking employee career paths to ensure that employees are incentivised – and not penalised – by changing career tack.

In order to successfully attract skills externally, telcos need to build their **employer brand** and increase engagement in relevant communities. The GSMA introduced a Talent Arena at MWC this year ostensibly for this purpose, albeit from an industry perspective. It organised a **hackathon** leveraging network APIs and demonstrated industry tech to the prospective “employment candidates”. There was a sentiment that telcos cannot wait for their brands to lure talent, but should be more proactive about taking the brand to the talent.

Some telcos are targeting recent graduates specifically and providing them with focused training in order to turn them into the professionals the telcos require. Others are working to collaborate with the education system, or focusing their outreach to build the talent pipeline from school age. Telenor in Norway invites school girls to experiment with tech - mentoring them over a period to encourage their consideration of careers in telecoms.

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These are just some of the talent strategies that were discussed inside the Fira.

## Can AI help?

Of course, MWC talk also turned to the potential of AI to help address the need for skills:

- AI democratises knowledge
- It can help to shorten learning timelines
- It can contextualise learning and enable learning in the flow of work
- It can provide learners with timely feedback
- It can be used to validate people's skills.

However, telcos must be cognisant of AI's limitations, for example, the potential for bias.

## Conclusion

In summary, AI escalates the talent challenge – and telcos must focus on building their skills base here. Our Future skills tracker indicates the gap between telcos and hyperscalers/tech companies in terms of the penetration of this expertise. It also illustrates that techcos have been quicker to build skills in this space. Telcos need to onboard expertise – and quickly – in order to operate efficiently and create value to meet techco aspirations.

For further information on:

- Future Skills Tracker, click [here](#)
- STL's Executive Briefing Service, click [here](#)
- STL's AI research bundle, click [here](#)

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