Discover Tech

SOCIAL IMPACT REPORT

YEAR ONE - 2026

cisco

DISCOVER TECH

connectr Early Engagement

FOREWORD

By Sarah Walker, Chief Executive, Cisco UK & Ireland

When we launched the Cisco UK & Ireland Manifesto, we set out a clear ambition: to help make sure that the benefits of a digital society are felt in every community, across every corner of the nation. We know that technology (and specifically the rapid acceleration of artificial intelligence) is the single greatest driver of UK economic growth. But technology is only as powerful as the people behind it.

Today, the UK stands at a critical juncture. On one hand, too many talented young people look at the tech sector and see a world that feels distant, intimidating, or simply not built for them. On the other, our digital economy faces acute skills shortages, with businesses competing fiercely for talent.

That is a challenge no single organisation can solve. And it is precisely why Cisco founded **Discover Tech.**

We're incredibly proud of the impact the programme has had to date, and grateful to Connectr Early Engagement for how they brought our vision to life - but as this report shows, the true impact cannot be measured in numbers alone. It is seen in the young woman who saw quantum computing up close for the first time and realised she belonged in deep tech; in the student who walked into an office doubting his future and left with the confidence to apply for a degree apprenticeship; and in the 90% of participants who now see a viable, exciting career for themselves in our industry.

To our founding partners, employer members, and the hundreds of dedicated volunteers who gave their time and passion, we'd like to thank you. You have shown what industry can achieve when we unite behind a shared purpose.

As we look ahead, our ambition is uncompromising. Over the next four years, Discover Tech will scale, in new regions, and expanding into Year 12 and 13 to create clear, unbreakable bridges from the classroom into high-value apprenticeships and careers in tech.

We believe in the opportunity that we are helping to create. If you see a role for your organisation in Discover Tech, we'd love to hear from you.

Sarah Walker
Chief Executive, Cisco UK & Ireland

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OUR PARTNERS

LED BY

FOUNDING PARTNERS

ENDORSED BY

EMPLOYER MEMBERS

Executive summary

For many young people today, the future feels uncertain. At a time of economic instability, growing competition for jobs and the widespread adoption of artificial intelligence, many young people are feeling anxious about their futures and the pathways available to them. They need more than qualifications alone. They need confidence, inspiration, real-world experience, and a clear sense of possibility.

We are living through unprecedented times. The UK is grappling with a growing youth employment crisis with almost **one million young people aged 16 to 24 who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).**[1] At the same time, Digital and Technology is one of the UK's priority sectors for growth,[2] yet the industry continues to face skills shortages and struggles to attract and retain diverse talent. According to the Talent Tech Charter, only **9% of technology employees are from lower socio-economic backgrounds, 29% are women or non-binary and 25% are from minority ethnic backgrounds.**[3] As government calls for a broader, coordinated response to the NEET crisis,[4] employers have an important role to play in creating meaningful opportunities that help young people develop skills, explore career pathways, and access the world of work.

"The Discover Tech programme, led by Cisco and other key industry partners, is fantastic. It does a brilliant job of breaking down barriers for underrepresented young people, helping them better understand the real opportunities and career pathways available in the tech industry. Connecting them directly with businesses is crucial and exactly the right way to bring those opportunities to life."

Phil Smith - Chair, Skills England

1. Department for Work & Pensions, (2026), Young people and work: interim report: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report
2. Department for Business & Trade and Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade, (2025), Sector Plans: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-sector-plans/sector-plans
3. Talent Tech Charter, (2024), Diversity in Tech: An annual report tracking diversity in technology across the UK, available at: https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/information-technology/diversity-in-the-tech-industry/
4. Department for Work & Pensions, (2026), Young people and work: interim report: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report

The rapid growth of artificial intelligence is adding further urgency to this challenge. **76% of young people believe AI is changing the skills their generation needs for work,** with success increasingly dependent on a combination of AI and digital literacy alongside essential workplace skills such as communication, problem-solving and teamwork.[5] Yet for many young people, the chance to develop these skills in real-world settings remains out of reach, with **62% of young people citing a lack of work experience as their biggest barrier to employment.**[6] Discover Tech bridges this gap by providing practical industry exposure, skills development, and access to role models, ensuring young people gain the confidence and capabilities to thrive in a future workplace.

This is why Discover Tech matters.

Led by Cisco, Discover Tech is an industry-first collaboration that brings together leading employers from across the technology sector to collectively tackle challenges that no organisation can solve alone. Discover Tech delivers impact in three key areas:

+

Inspire future talent

by increasing awareness of technology careers, broadening horizons, and challenging perceptions of the sector.

+

Building future-ready skills

by empowering young people to develop the knowledge, confidence and workplace skills needed to succeed in a rapidly evolving labour market.

+

Improving access

by creating pathways for underrepresented groups to access opportunities within the technology sector.

By connecting students directly with employers and industry professionals, Discover Tech provides meaningful encounters that can have a lasting impact on aspirations and outcomes. The Careers & Enterprise Company reports that **young people who have four or more meaningful encounters with an employer are 86% less likely to be NEET.**[7] Through Discover Tech, young people gain valuable insight into the workplace, develop essential skills, and leave with greater confidence and a clearer understanding of the careers available to them.

Our Scalable Ambition:
Over the next four years, Discover Tech aims to reach 7,000 young people across 4 major UK cities, whilst advancing social mobility, closing the digital skills gap, and building a more inclusive, resilient and innovative tech sector for the future.

What Success Looks Like So Far:
In 2026, Discover Tech delivered meaningful work experience to 664 students across London and Manchester with the active support of 15 forward- thinking tech employers.

- **41% of students** identified as **female or non-binary, 82%** were from a **minority ethnic background** and **88%** had at least one **social mobility marker.**
- **90% of students** agreed that they're **more likely to consider a career in tech.**
- **28% point increase** in **student confidence** in **tech-specific skills** such as **AI, cybersecurity** and **programming.**

The programme has also generated clear value for employers by raising awareness of early talent pathways, strengthening volunteer engagement, and creating a practical model for collective action. Through a ready-made framework and practical support, the programme enables employers of all sizes to play an active role in inspiring the next generation of talent whilst expanding access to meaningful work experience for young people across the UK.

5. King's Trust, (2025), Gen(eration) AI: How AI could transform youth employment: https://www.kingstrust.org.uk/about-us/news-views/gen(eration)-AI-report
6. Department for Work & Pensions, (2026), Young people and work: interim report: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report
7. Mann, A., Kashefpakdel, E., Rehill, J., and Huddleston, P., (2017), Contemporary Transitions: Young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college: https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Contemporary-Transitions-30-1-2017.pdf

The Discover Tech Model & Goals

Discover Tech is a two-day work experience programme that empowers young people to explore the breadth of careers across the tech industry, whilst building deeper connections, knowledge and skills. The programme is an outstanding example of best practice careers engagement and is aligned to the Careers & Enterprise Company's (CEC's) modern work experience model.[8]

> "Discover Tech is a strong example of what high-quality modern work experience should look like: targeted, employer-led and grounded in clear learning outcomes. By giving young people early exposure to different roles, workplaces and pathways, the programme reflects the principles of EQUALEX and helps ensure meaningful experiences reach those who could benefit most."
>
> **Paul Lewis - Chief of Strategy & Communications, Careers & Enterprise Company**

To ensure Discover Tech was shaped by the people it was designed to support and engage, we ran separate roundtables with 21 students, 14 teachers and 15 employers across the tech sector. We wanted to create an inspiring, impactful, and memorable experience for young people and to design an innovative model that navigated the growing challenges and uncertainties of today.

Across all these conversations, clear themes emerged:

21

Students

Students wanted practical, hands-on experiences, relatable role models and clearer routes into tech careers

14

Teachers

Teachers highlighted the importance of real-world exposure, learning about ethical AI and confidence-building activities

15

Employers

Employers emphasised communication, workplace etiquette, problem-solving and AI literacy as key readiness gaps

8. Careers & Enterprise Company, (2026), Modern work experience: https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/modern-work-experience

These insights directly informed Discover Tech's two-day model, combining employer-hosted sessions, skills workshops and exposure to apprentices and early-career role models to de-mystify the sector and build students' confidence, knowledge and career readiness.

> "Discover Tech could completely change young people's outlook about their careers, themselves, and what they can achieve."
>
> **Natalie Vincent - Business Engagement Officer, Saint John Bosco College**

+ THE MODEL

DAY 1

Sector & Skills Showcase

Hundreds of young people gather at a central location to meet multiple employers, participate in hands-on tech workshops and hear from tech industry experts about the future of the industry in an age of AI. Students explore topics such as AI agents, cybersecurity and cloud computing, and have the opportunity to network and ask their burning questions.

DAY 2

Inside the Industry

Students are split into smaller groups between participating employers so that they can experience a real workplace, learn about one organisation's culture, roles and pathways and build work-readiness skills. Students develop their communication, problem solving and collaboration skills and receive valuable feedback on a group presentation.

SUPPORT

Wrap Around

The programme was designed to be easy for employers to get involved no matter their size. To enable this, Connectr Early Engagement managed the student journey, the behind-the-scenes event logistics, facilitation and the programme design & learning content with input from Founding Partners.

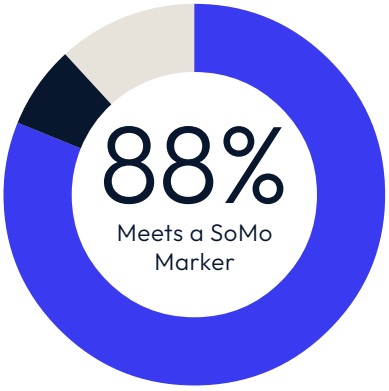
+ YEAR 1 OF DISCOVER TECH

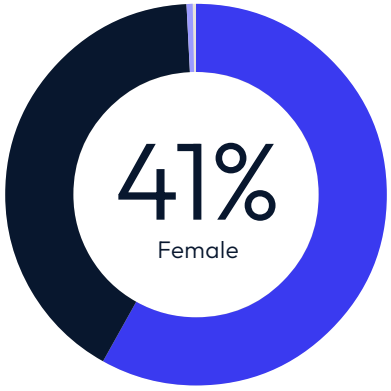
In its first year, Discover Tech moved from an initial pilot to a programme with growing momentum and reach. Beginning with 100 students in London in February 2026, it expanded into two larger July programmes across London and Manchester, giving 600 more young people the opportunity to step inside the world of tech. Our year 1 goals were:

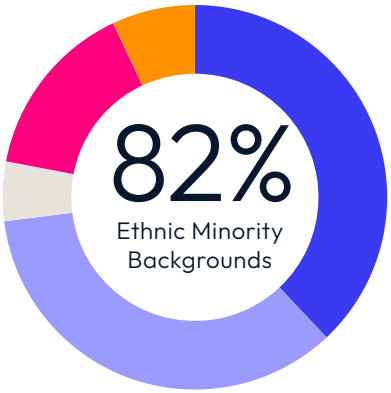
GOAL 1	GOAL 2	GOAL 3
700 students attend with 75% of attendees meeting at least one social mobility marker.	80% of students agree that Discover Tech has made them more likely to consider a career in the tech industry.	80% of volunteers have a positive experience and would volunteer again.

Demographics and Social Mobility

FIGURE 2: DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY (SOMO) CHARACTERISTICS OF THE YEAR 1 COHORT







Social Mobility Markers:

- 81% Meets a personal SoMo Marker
- 7% School IMD Score 1-3
- 12% No SoMo marker

Gender:

- 58% Male
- 41% Female
- <1% non-binary
- 1% prefer not to say

Ethnicity:

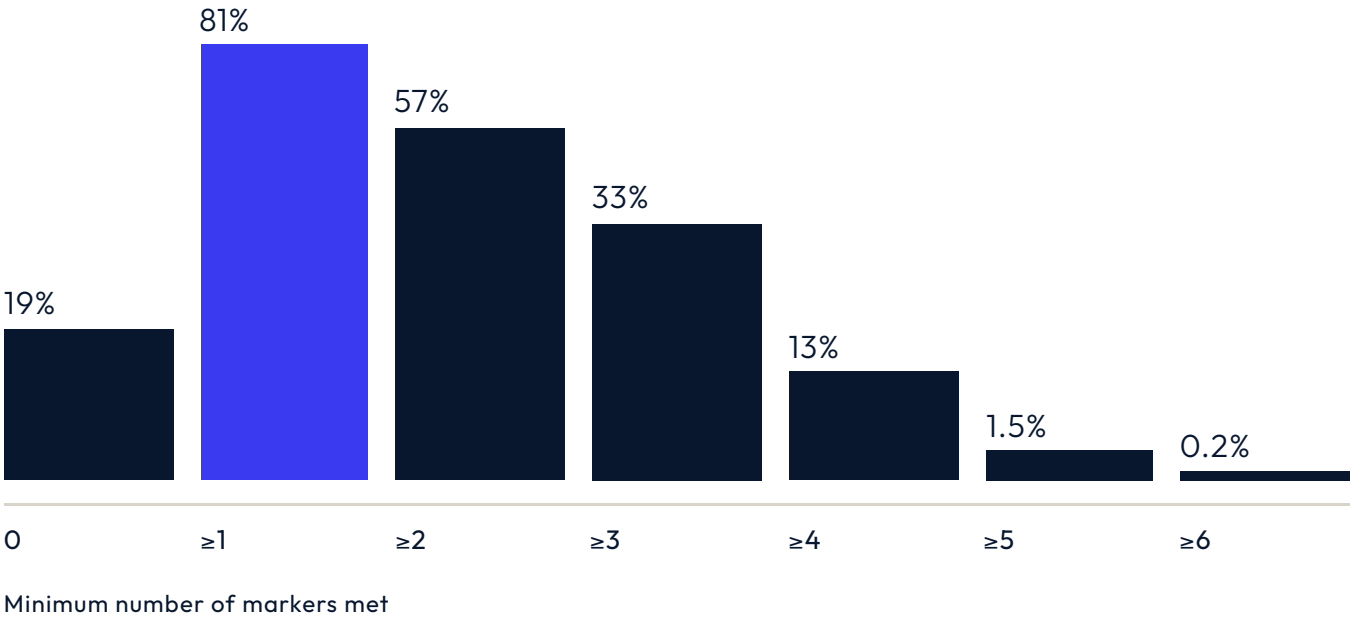
- 38% Asian / Asian British
- 35% Black / African / Caribbean / Black British
- 5% Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups
- 15% White
- 7% Other ethnic group / Prefer not to say:

Students were selected using seven personal social mobility markers: eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM), receipt of a sixth form bursary, parental occupation, lack of parental experience of higher education, refugee or asylum seeker status, experience as a young carer, and experience of local authority care.[9] Together, these measures identify young people who research has shown are more likely to face barriers to accessing professional networks, workplace experiences, and career opportunities. Where students did not meet any of these indicators, we used the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) as an additional measure. Students attending schools located in the most deprived 30% of areas nationally were prioritised. These barriers are also associated with an increased likelihood of becoming Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET).[10] This reflects the evidence that socioeconomic disadvantage can limit access to educational, economic, and social opportunities.[11,12]

Discover Tech successfully reached its intended audience, with **88% of participants** meeting at least one social mobility marker, significantly exceeding the programme's 75% target. Many participants also met multiple markers, which is particularly significant given evidence that disadvantages can compound, with young people facing multiple barriers often experiencing poorer educational, employment and social mobility outcomes than those facing a single challenge.[13]

9. Department for Education, (2023), Free School Meals: Guidance for local authorities, maintained schools, academies and free schools: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools-and-local-authorities/free-school-meals-guidance-for-local-authorities-local-authority-maintained-schools-academies-and-free-schools
10. Youth Futures Foundation, (2025), The Youth Opportunity Index and Youth Employment Outlook: https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/publication/youth-employment-2025-outlook/
11. Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, (2025), English Indices of Deprivation 2025: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2025
12, National Audit Office, (2024), Improving Educational Outcomes for Disadvantaged Children: https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/improving-educational-outcomes-for-disadvantaged-children/
13. Impetus (2025), The Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring Compound Disadvantage: https://www.impetus.org.uk/publications/policy-briefings/youth-jobs-gap

FIGURE 3: CUMULATIVE NUMBER OF STUDENTS MEETING PERSONAL SOCIAL MOBILITY MARKERS.



Discover Tech successfully engaged a broad and diverse cohort of young people, helping to widen access to an industry where many groups remain underrepresented. At 41%, the proportion of female participants exceeded the proportion of women currently employed in UK technology roles (29%).[14] Across the three programmes, the proportion of applications received from female students remained relatively consistent, suggesting that further improvements in gender balance will depend on increasing the proportion of young women in the application pool. Expanding engagement with female students remains an important opportunity for future programme delivery.

14. Talent Tech Charter, (2024), Diversity in Tech: An annual report tracking diversity in technology across the UK: available at: https://www.prospects.ac.uk/jobs-and-work-experience/job-sectors/information-technology/diversity-in-the-tech-industry/

Programme Impact in Year 1

Feedback was collected to understand the impact of the experience on participants' career awareness, confidence, interest in technology and development of employability skills.

Programme Impact on Participants:
Student feedback shows that Discover Tech made a tangible difference, equipping participants with greater awareness of the tech sector and confidence in pursuing future opportunities.

9/10 **Average recommendation score**

Qualitative feedback reinforced these findings. Students reported that **Discover Tech helped build their confidence, develop professional behaviours** and **strengthen** their **understanding** of how their **existing skills** could be **applied within technology careers. Networking opportunities, interactive workshops, group projects, presentations and workplace-based activities** were consistently **identified as highlights,** with students valuing the **opportunity to meet employers, explore different career pathways, and gain confidence** through collaboration and real-world challenges.

FIGURE 4: DISCOVER TECH YEAR ONE: HEADLINE STUDENTS OUTCOME

95% found the people leading the programme helpful and engaging.

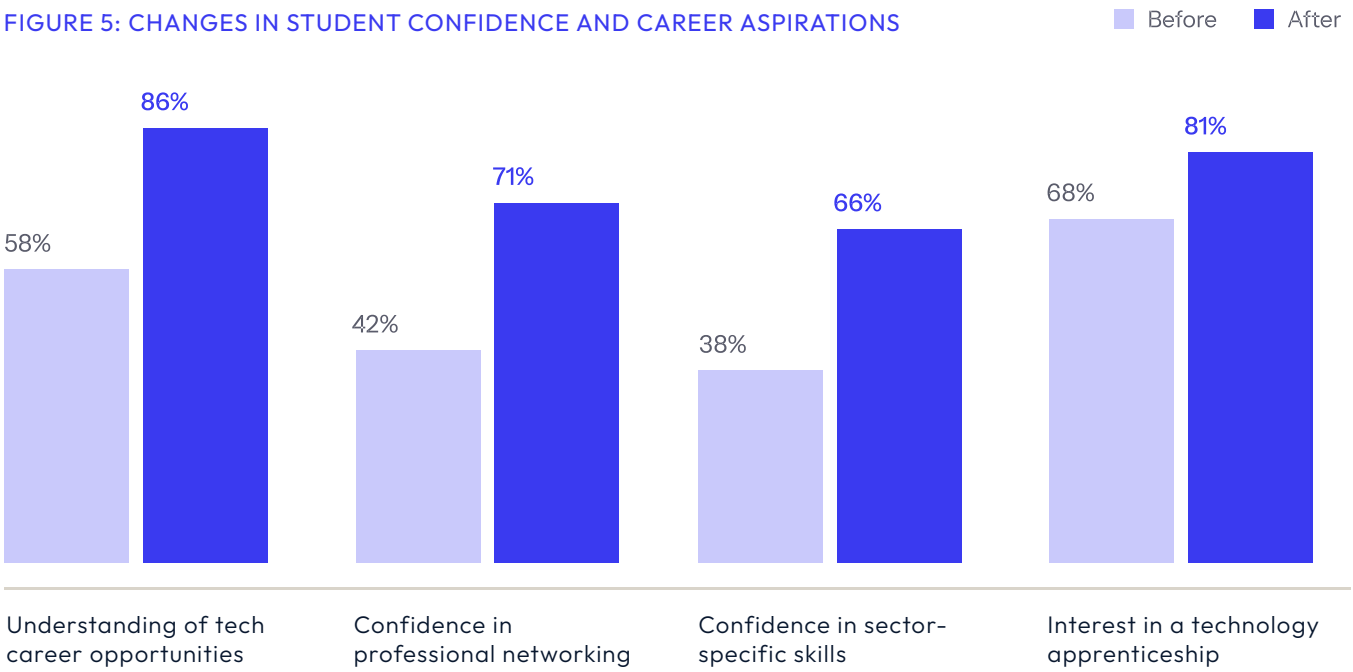
90% agreed that attending the programme made them more likely to consider a career in technology, exceeding the Year 1 target of 80%.

87% agreed that attending Discover Tech made them more likely to consider a career with one of the employers involved in the programme.

Changes in Student Confidence and Career Awareness*

To understand how attitudes and confidence changed over the course of the programme, students participating in the July London and Manchester cohorts completed surveys before and after attending Discover Tech. Positive movement was seen across all measures. Understanding of technology career opportunities increased **from 58% to 86%,** confidence in professional networking rose **from 42% to 71%,** and confidence in sector-specific skills increased **from 38% to 66%**. Interest in pursuing a technology apprenticeship also increased from **68% to 81%,** suggesting that participants left the programme feeling more informed about opportunities in the sector and more confident in pursuing them.

FIGURE 5: CHANGES IN STUDENT CONFIDENCE AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS



The most notable changes were seen in students' understanding of technology career opportunities, confidence in professional networking, and confidence in sector-specific skills including programming, cybersecurity, AI, cloud computing and digital storytelling. Respondents also reported increased interest in technology apprenticeships and opportunities with participating employers, demonstrating that Discover Tech helped students see a future for themselves in the sector and inspired them to take their first steps towards a career in technology.

Developing Skills While Making a Difference

Volunteers played a central role in creating the student experience, helping participants develop confidence, explore technology careers, and gain first-hand insight into the industry.

Discover Tech significantly exceeded its target of **80% of volunteers reporting a positive experience and expressing interest in volunteering again.** Almost all volunteers (99%) found the experience rewarding and enjoyable, while 97% said they would consider volunteering at similar events in the future. Importantly, the benefits extended beyond giving back, with 82% of volunteers agreeing that participation supported their professional development. Together, these findings demonstrate that Discover Tech provides a meaningful opportunity for employees to support the next generation of talent while developing valuable skills of their own.

*This data applies to the July cohort only as we introduced this measure after the pilot event. We will continue to measure this in Year 2.'

Student and Volunteer Case Studies

STUDENT CASE STUDY

Deborah - London February Pilot Student

Deborah joined Discover Tech after struggling to secure work experience that matched her interest in STEM and technology, despite having strong grades and clear ambition. Deborah jumped at the opportunity to join the programme and enjoyed participating in a range of activities that built her understanding of the tech sector.

On Day 1 Deborah's highlights were the senior leader panel that deconstructed myths about the tech industry and the digital storytelling tech breakout where she used Adobe Express to create a CV and strengthen her personal brand. Deborah attended IBM on day 2, where she developed her interview skills, saw a quantum computing model up close and spoke with degree apprentices whose experiences felt relatable and inspiring.

> "I'm glad I got to experience Discover Tech and to see that it's not just about sitting at a desk and coding. I was happy to learn what day-to-day life was like at IBM. Before, I wasn't 100% sure I wanted to work in the tech sector... but this experience confirmed that I do."

VOLUNTEER CASE STUDY

Rhea - Business and Technology Delivery Associate, Accenture

Rhea wanted to get involved in Discover Tech to give back and support young people exploring the same apprenticeship route she took. Across both London and Manchester, she supported the networking conversation corners and tech breakout sessions, answering questions and helping students feel comfortable exploring careers in technology.

A highlight for Rhea was the Jenga-style networking game she designed for the Accenture stall. The blocks were colour-coded into different themes, with each one featuring a question or prompt. This gamified networking and made starting conversations feel more natural and less intimidating. It led to honest discussions about apprenticeship applications, working in technology, building confidence, and the different career paths available. Rhea's standout moments were seeing students who initially seemed hesitant become more confident, curious and willing to share their ambitions as the sessions progressed. Having once been in their position, it was incredibly rewarding to offer the encouragement and honest insight that she would have valued herself.

> "Having taken the apprenticeship route myself, it meant a great deal to support young people considering the same path. Watching their confidence grow and knowing that even one conversation could help them feel more certain about their future made the experience truly special."

Learnings & Recommendations

What We Learned Through Year 1

01 Collaboration enables high-quality work experience at a scale that would be difficult for individual employers to achieve alone

Discover Tech demonstrates that a collaborative model can significantly increase the reach of meaningful work experience. By bringing together employers of different sizes and specialisms, students are able to gain exposure to a broader range of career pathways, technologies and workplace environments than would typically be possible through a single-employer experience. The model also reduces the resource burden on individual organisations, making participation more accessible for employers with limited capacity, while enabling a broader cross-section of the technology sector to contribute to tackling the growing NEET challenge and supporting more young people into careers in technology.

02 Combining breadth and depth creates stronger career insight

Student feedback highlights the value of Discover Tech's distinctive two-day model. The multi-employer insight day on Day 1 enables students to engage with a wide range of employers, expand their awareness of technology careers, and build sector-wide understanding through networking and interactive workshops. This is complemented by employer-hosted workplace experiences on Day 2, where smaller groups of students gain direct exposure to working environments and have more personalised interactions with employees. Together, these experiences combine the breadth of sector exploration with the depth of a workplace visit, helping students develop a clearer and more informed view of potential careers in technology.

03 Developing confidence and work-readiness skills is as important as developing technical knowledge

The strongest improvements seen through the programme in Year 1 were not simply in interest in technology careers, but in areas such as networking, understanding career opportunities, communication and confidence. This suggests that effective work experience should combine technical insight with opportunities to develop workplace behaviours and employability skills. These findings highlight the continued importance of in-person work experience, which provides young people with opportunities to practise and build essential workplace skills in real-world professional environments, experiences that are difficult to replicate through classroom learning or online engagement alone.

04 Employer collaboration creates value beyond student outcomes

The programme generates clear benefits for participating employers. Across year 1, volunteers reported highly positive experiences, while employers were able to strengthen employee engagement, showcase opportunities, learn from peer organisations and contribute to a shared future talent pipeline. The collaborative Discover Tech model created value not only for young people and the employers involved in Year 1, but also for the wider sector.

"Discover Tech creates value in every direction: students gain insight and experience, volunteers build confidence, and employers collaborate to strengthen the future tech talent pipeline. It's fun, factual and for the future."

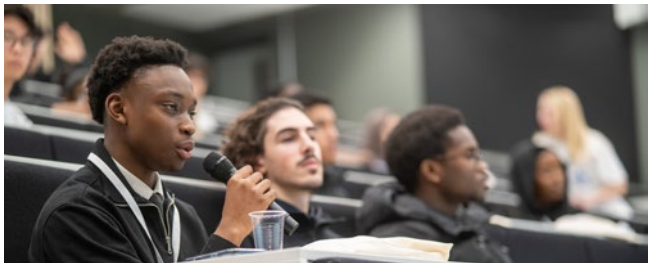
Teresa Nicastro - Programme Manager, Associate Academy, World Wide Technology

Looking Forward and a Call to Action

Discover Tech has shown what is possible when competitors become collaborators and employers unite behind a common goal. The programme is proving that collective action can deliver meaningful opportunities for young people whilst helping to build a stronger, more diverse and future-ready talent pipeline for the technology sector.

> "Discover Tech came at exactly the right time for Adobe, giving us a low-risk way to inspire and engage under-18s for the first time. Partnering with other big names in tech allowed us to get in front of hundreds of young people on day 1, and we hosted 58 students across year 1 on day 2. This is scale and impact we could never have achieved alone."
>
> **Rebecca Clarke - Head of Talent, EMEA, Adobe**

Every young person deserves the chance to see where their interests, skills and ambitions could take them, and we want to continue encouraging employers to be part of the solution that is already changing young lives. Building on the incredible impact of year 1, Discover Tech now plans to **scale to 1200 students and 20+ employers across London and Manchester in 2027.** To reach these scaled targets and to support employers' talent pipeline goals, the programme will open to year 12 and year 13 students. We will also continue to strengthen progression opportunities for this year's cohort of students and track their next steps.



The call to action for employers is clear. By joining Discover Tech, businesses can:

- Directly help young people move closer to meaningful employment
- Reduce their risk of becoming NEET.

Every workplace visit, volunteer conversation and skills activity gives students a stronger understanding of their options and a clearer pathway into the future workforce.

DISCOVER TECH

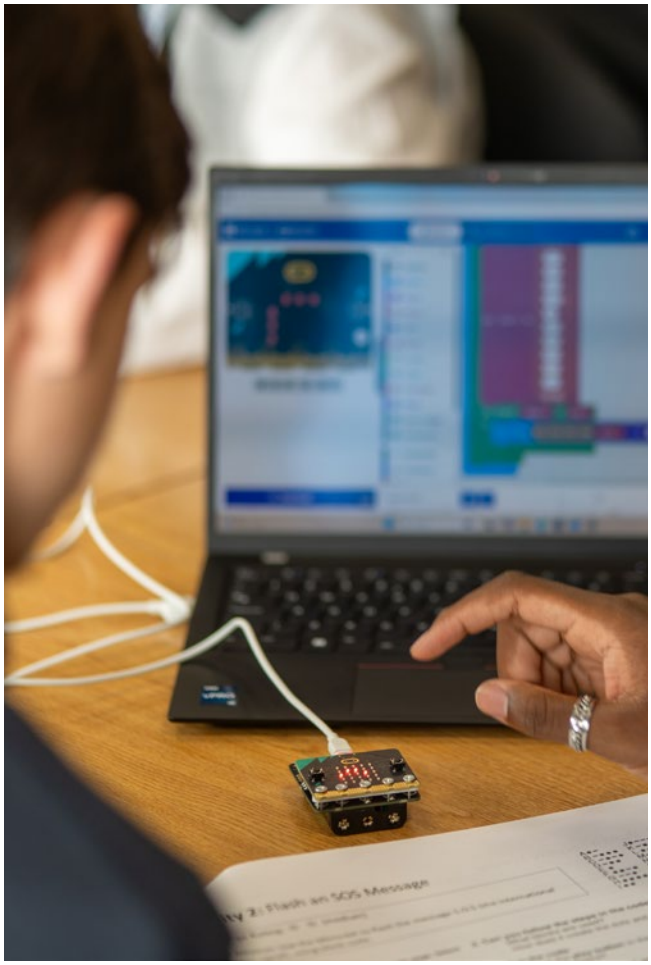
Are you ready to join the movement?

Find out more here

Acknowledgements
We would like to recognise Cisco's leadership in the creation of Discover Tech and the support of our Founding Partners – Accenture, Adobe, IBM and World Wide Technology, alongside our Employer Members – BBC, CDW, FDM, HighPoint, Kao Data, Network Rail, NTT Data, PwC, Siemens and Softcat. Your commitment to social mobility has helped establish Discover Tech as a growing sector-wide collaboration, creating opportunities for young people across the UK and building the foundations for a more inclusive and representative future workforce.

We'd also like to thank the hundreds of volunteers who generously shared their time, expertise and personal career journeys. By opening up conversations, offering guidance and providing authentic insights into the sector, you have helped inspire and support the next generation of talent.

Finally, we'd like to thank the students and teachers for your ongoing insights and feedback that has and will continue to shape Discover Tech. Your voices have helped ensure Discover Tech remains grounded in what young people need, value and hope for as they explore their next steps.



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