

Guide to Digital Adoption for Professional  
and Financial Services Firms

# Digital Adoption

October 2025



Innovate UK  
and ESRC

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# Introduction

Digital adoption has been a common practice for Professional and Financial (PFS) organisations for a long time, ever since paper-based processes were transformed by the earliest forms of digital technology. The business case for digitisation is therefore well established. However, despite this heritage there are still many processes that remain paper-based and manual across PFS organisations.

Furthermore, digital adoption is not ‘one and done’. There are regular advancements in digital technology that require organisations to update their digital processes or, in some cases, think differently and creatively about their organisation. Thus, PFS organisations are caught in a seemingly endless drive to digitise or to upgrade their digital tools and practices. Whilst some have thrived in the face of this challenge, others have found it difficult to keep pace – citing barriers such as funding, skills and time.

Whilst this guide cannot solve funding or time, it can help you start to navigate the topic of digital adoption and to imbed examples of best practice within your organisation. If you are already familiar with digital adoption, we hope this guide serves as a useful refresher and offers new ideas for introducing the topic to others.



**Innovate UK  
and ESRC**

**Innovate UK and ESRC team:**  
Stephen Browning, Astrid Ayel,  
Winn Faria, Martin Martinoff, Sarah Pagan.



**Whitecap Consulting team:**  
Julian Wells, Michael Fletcher,  
Queralt Smith Vila.

# The Fundamentals

Critical questions this guide will help you answer

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## What is Digital Adoption?

Digital adoption is the practice of maximising the value a PFS organisation generates from digital technology. Whilst there may be a wide scope to do this across your organisation, remember, good digital adoption does not always require radical change.

2

## What is a Digital Adoption plan and how can I build one?

An adoption plan describes your objectives and lays out the key steps to actioning them. Creating a plan helps to coordinate and communicate with your organisation, reducing internal resistance and better flagging risks and dependencies. A good start to developing a plan is to have open discussions about existing problems internally, getting a sense of the resources available to drive change and getting any required commitment(s) from senior leadership.

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## How do I get a sense of the current state of adoption within my organisation?

No two PFS organisations are the same, which is true also for their digital maturity. Digital technology can impact all functions of a PFS organisation and to get a sense of current levels of adoption you should examine all your organisation's functions. Also, it can be hard to tell what 'good' looks like and this guide helps to answer this by describing 'indicators of a positive current state' including: accessibility, independence, interoperability, modular, scalability, stability and transparency.



"It is not uncommon to find outdated technologies in Professional and Financial Services organisations, especially those who have been around for a long time. These outdated systems are slow, clunky and can often require significant money, time and energy to make small changes. Organisations who use these systems often miss out on the pace of change in technology and the value this can provide."

– Alex Lu, Founder and CEO, PortF

"When firms start exploring adoption in more detail, they begin to realise the power of digital technology and start thinking differently about their organisation and how to organise. The changes can be profound."

– Katy Mason, Co-Investigator UKRI TiPS Accelerator; Professor of Markets and Management and PVC Dean; University of Salford; President, British Academy of Management



# The Fundamentals

## Critical questions this guide will help you answer

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### How do I research and evaluate new digital tools?

One of the benefits of an adoption plan is that you formally capture the aims and objectives of your digital adoption process. These aims and objectives are critical to performing targeted research, asking the right questions of vendors and evaluating their responses using the correct criteria. Lean on existing vendors and experts in your network for support, particularly for getting really clear on the key criteria and what 'good' looks like.

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### How do I create an implementation plan and what goes in it?

Once you have a tool, or new process in mind, creating a plan to roll this out to the required function(s) and team(s) in your organisation is key. Like any good plan, this helps coordinate and communicate the desired outcomes and steps to achieve it. Whilst the precise plan will differ from case to case, a few consistent considerations to explore include testing and roll-out, training and support, culture and knowledge sharing and security, privacy and compliance.

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### Why is it important to bring stakeholders along on the journey and how can I do this in my organisation?

People make technology work, not the other way around. Any successful digital adoption programme will have scoped the requirement around people's challenges, got their buy-in to the vision and actions required and were taken on the journey step by step. Without this, your adoption process runs the risk of unsuccessfully getting your people bought in, leading to resistance or lack of engagement, or successfully deploying a new tool or process which no one asked for. Creating a process which is framed as a choice, that clearly evidences the benefits on offer and openly and continually seeks feedback stands a good chance of being successfully adopted.



**"Developing a clear sense of the problem you are trying to solve is key, as is getting a sense of your competitive landscape and what your competitors are doing – perhaps there is a burning platform they are already aware of." – Adam Roney, Founder and CEO, Calls9**

**"Do not underestimate the resources needed for the project. Define the resources up front and make sure everyone understands their roles and responsibilities. Define who is accountable and who is responsible. Make sure that the project plan is achievable and do not just concentrate on the technology. Projects often fail due to lack of operational impact assessment and implementation. Staff are key to the launch of any project. Do your front-line staff and other users fully understand what you are trying to achieve? Do they live and breathe it and can they communicate it to customers if needed? Are they fully involved?" – Paul D'Ambra, CEO, Consectus**





# What is Digital Adoption?

Digital adoption is the practice of maximising the value a PFS organisation generates from digital technology.

It is a common misconception that digital adoption is focused solely on successfully onboarding new technology. Whilst this is an important part of this practice, digital adoption is also concerned with how PFS organisations extract the most value out of their existing digital tools.

Whilst this guide spends time exploring how to scope and onboard new digital tools, the heart of digital adoption is in people; making sure you are solving their problems or meeting their needs and ensuring they are brought along on the journey. Without this, even the best digital tools can go underutilised or be used in the wrong way.

## What is digital technology?

A segment of technology which focuses on computerised systems and software. Examples include hardware (e.g. computers and mobile devices) and all software delivered On-premise or the Cloud (via the Internet).

## What is On-premise and the Cloud?

Different software delivery mechanisms. On-premise is installed and managed locally. Using the Cloud, services and data are managed remotely by third-party providers. It is not uncommon to hear 'hybrid', which is a combination of the two.

## Why is Digital Adoption important?

Digital adoption is a broad term, it includes all digital technology (including the benefits and challenges they present) and the practices by which an organisation and, critically, its people create value from it.

**60%**

**of law firms**

are planning to upgrade their digital systems in 2025.

OneAdvanced PR

**90%**

**of UK accountants**

believe that technology enhances their ability to deliver greater value, whether to their organisation or their clients.

AccountingWEB

**74%**

**of financial services companies**

are satisfied with the value generated by their investments.

KPMG

# Developing an Adoption Plan

A well thought out adoption plan will better coordinate and communicate your objectives and actions required to achieve them, reducing resistance, better flagging risks, maximising pace and the likelihood of success adoption. Whilst there are many ways to achieve successful adoption a commonly used methodology is shown here.

## Define objectives

Like any good plan, being really clear about the objectives of adoption and setting clear success metrics is key

A few examples of business objectives for PFS firms could be:

- a lending business wants to improve its customer experience by digitising parts of its customer onboarding
- a law firm wants to improve the efficiency of its case management process by consolidating its workflow and case management tools into one solution
- an accounting firm wants to improve its compliance process and data security protocols by integrating its client data sets and improving its employees' data entry and management approach

## Top tips

- have open conversations internally about existing pain points that need to be addressed
- get a sense of the resources available to improve adoption or bring in new tools
- get a commitment from leadership to advocate for the initiative by supporting a greater internal focus on innovation through digital technology

## Stages of adoption

### Define objectives

What business goals are you trying to meet? Make sure to define clear metrics to measure success like return on investment (using revenue or cost savings), rates of active users, or reduction in risk metrics.

### Current state analysis

Work with internal stakeholders to identify gaps. This should include processes, systems and people.

### Resource assessment

What skills and bandwidth currently exists? Where and in what quantity might you require external support?

### Gap analysis

Prioritise high value gaps, those which could generate the most significant impact toward your desired business goal.

### Research solutions


Review competitors, research vendors and search for sources of best practice. Consider asking your peers for recommendations.

### Evaluate solutions

Develop and internally agree on evaluation metrics for comparison. Lean on vendors for additional insight.

### Implementation and monitoring

Develop and execute implementation including governance, testing, risk management, training and support.



“Do not feel paralysed because you have not written out your ten year technology strategy. Spend a few hours trying to automate a low risk, back-end process like expense claims in Power Automate. You will learn something, whether or not you end up using the automation or tool you build.” – Martin Spring, Professor of Operations Management, Lancaster University Management School and Principal Investigator of the Technology in Professional Services (TiPS) Innovation Adoption Accelerator



# Getting a Sense of Your Current State

All PFS organisations will be at different stages of digital maturity. Some are just starting to digitise their manual or paper-based processes, others may have already digitised much of their operation and are looking to further improve upon them.

Wherever your organisation is along this journey, digital technology offers an opportunity. Given the breadth of impact digital technology can have on your organisation, getting a sense of your current adoption will require looking across the different functions of your business. If it feels like you are not sure of the extent to which your organisation is currently maximising the value it receives from digital technology, you may find the following exercise helpful.

On the following page we have included a few questions for each typical PFS business function.

## What does 'good' look like?

Even when you have the right questions, it can be difficult to be comfortable that the answer you come up with is correct. To help, here are a few indicators you can look out for which help describe what 'good' looks like for digital technology at the time of writing.

### What is digital maturity?

If digital adoption is the practice of maximising the value your organisation receives from digital technology, digital maturity is a measure of progress. A digitally mature organisation is one that is and can continue to successfully leverage digital technologies to deliver value across its operations.

#### Indicators of a positive current state and for new tools which are being explored:

Indicator	Description
Accessibility	All relevant parties have ease of access to the tool. Similarly, this also includes safeguards for parties who do not require access.
Independence	The organisation is not dependent on vendors for options regarding delivery and required technologies.
Interoperability	Different systems and functions of the organisation (and required external parties) can easily and securely share data and workflows.
Modular	Able to 'switch on or off' different features and functionality, which may include adjacent products or services, with ease.
Scalability	Able to extend tools to new stakeholders and business functions and channels with ease.
Stability	Consistency in functionality and accessibility, even when adjacent systems or processes are being disrupted or altered.
Transparency	The organisation has complete clarity about the systems processes, data, operation and key dependencies.



# Getting a Sense of Your Current State

Once completed, you should have a better sense of your organisation's digital maturity and where in your organisation you are furthest ahead and behind.

## Sales and marketing questions:

- how effectively are we using digital channels to reach and engage our target customers?
- are we leveraging data analytics to understand customer behaviour to tailor our marketing strategies?
- how integrated are our customer resource management (CRM) systems with other digital tools to provide a seamless customer experience?

## Product and service questions:

- are our products and services accessible through digital platforms and do they meet the needs of our customers?
- how frequently do we update our digital offerings based on customer feedback and market trends?
- are we using technology to innovate and differentiate our products and services from competitors?

## Information and technology questions:

- how robust and scalable is our IT infrastructure, how well does it support our digital initiatives, data security and compliance?
- how well are we utilising cloud computing, AI and other emerging technologies to enhance our operations?
- are our IT systems integrated across departments to enable efficient data sharing and collaboration?

## Regulation and compliance questions:

- how up to date and flexible are our compliance systems?
- are we using technology to monitor and report compliance issues in real-time?
- how effective are our digital tools in managing and mitigating compliance risks?

## Leadership and governance questions:

- do we have a vision for digital adoption and is it communicated effectively across the organisation?
- how involved is leadership in driving digital initiatives and fostering a culture of innovation?
- are there governance frameworks in place to oversee and guide our digital adoption efforts?

## Suppliers, partners and collaborators questions:

- how digitally integrated are we with our suppliers and partners to ensure smooth and efficient operations?
- are we leveraging digital platforms to collaborate and share information with our partners?
- are we able to assess the digital maturity of our partners and suppliers to ensure alignment with our digital goals?

## Finance and reporting questions:

- are our reporting systems automated and capable of providing real-time insights?
- how effectively are we using digital tools to analyse financial data and make informed decisions?
- do we have secure and efficient digital processes for managing transactions and financial records?

## Human resources (HR) and administration questions:

- how effectively are we using digital tools for HR functions such as recruitment, onboarding and employee engagement?
- are our administrative processes digitised to improve efficiency and reduce manual workloads?
- do we have digital platforms in place to facilitate internal communication and collaboration among employees?



“Companies sometimes try to choose the tech before they identify the problem they want to solve – be clear about the business objectives from the outset. One useful approach to achieve this can be to set aside some time, perhaps one day, to focus on a few specific areas and try to explore feasibility. This and the initial discovery phase are critical to minimising issues later in an adoption project.”

– Deanna Sharma, Director, Doza Consulting





# Researching and Evaluating Solutions

Once you are clear about where in your organisation there are opportunities to solve a problem or supercharge areas where the organisation is already strong, exploring solutions to action these is a natural next step.

These solutions might be solely internal, such as improving skills, usage across a specific team or sharing existing tools to other business functions. However, some may require new ideas, tools or processes which your organisation may need to look externally to source.

There are many ways to manage the process of researching and selecting an external tool. We have included a tried and tested example here.

## Top tip

Selecting the right assessment criteria is critical and sometimes difficult. Lean on internal expertise, listen to challenges and engage with experts or existing vendors for support if required.

Cyber security and compliance is critical for PFS firms. Managing them is not a discrete step during selection but a continuous and open dialogue during planning, early stage assessment and adoption.

## Standard process for vendor selection

### Assessment objectives

What specific problem am I solving and why?

### Assessment criteria

What sort of tool am I looking for, what features, functionality, integration and safeguards are required? How will these requirements scale over time?

### Vendor Input

Vendors should be trying to give you what you need, not the other way around. Ask for demos, discussions and sector-relevant testimonials.

### Criteria Evaluation

Map vendor responses against your assessment criteria and rate how they each perform.

### Compare and Decide

Create a standardised scoring system and compare the vendors against each other to determine which may be best for your objectives.



## Keys to success

## Examples for a PFS firm

<b>Assessment Objectives</b>	Establish specific and measurable goals. Ensure the technology supports your broader business strategy and clearly explain how employees would benefit. Thoroughly evaluate the complexity of the technology and lay out a plan with sufficient time and budget for the adoption process, including training and support.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use an AI tool to reduce fraud and improve security in a small payments business</li> <li>• replace a law firm's case management system to improve productivity and effectiveness</li> <li>• digitise an accounting firms' paper-based accounting process to improve service efficiency</li> </ul>
<b>Assessment Criteria</b>	Work with end users to set out detailed criteria that would cover the technological features required. Ensure the technology can scale and include security needs. Assess how the technology would integrate with existing systems.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to reduce fraud, prioritise scalability and security</li> <li>• to improve case management processes, focus on user needs and integration into existing systems</li> <li>• to improve accounting processes, focus on scalability and regulatory compliance</li> </ul>
<b>Vendor Input</b>	Identify vendors via independent research, peers and networks (like Innovate UK AI for Services). Compare input and proposals from multiple vendors to get a balanced view. Validate vendor claims, evaluate the level of post-adoption support offered and explore value-add or managed services.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• verify vendor claims about leading the market through independent research, peers, advisory groups or networks</li> <li>• request detailed proposals, including end-to-end process, integrations, training and ongoing performance monitoring</li> <li>• narrow down quotes to three to five vendors</li> </ul>
<b>Criteria Evaluation</b>	Finding an off-the-shelf solution that suits all your needs will be difficult, so be sure to develop objective metrics and ensure mutual understanding of criteria and complexities. Give yourself ample time to thoroughly evaluate options. Remain flexible to adapt to evolving needs and tools that can scale with your business.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focus on metrics to evaluate ai capabilities</li> <li>• break down complex workflows into simple processes to be evaluated and discussed with vendors</li> <li>• allocate sufficient time to measure criteria for review</li> </ul>
<b>Compare and Decide</b>	Use standardised and consistent scoring methods to reduce bias. Take time to make an informed decision and encourage open dialogue with end users and key stakeholders. Conduct risk assessments to make confident and compliant decisions that would support your business plans now and the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• lean on metrics, independent research and case studies to validate efficacy of AI tools</li> <li>• focus more on open dialogue for deciding case management processes</li> <li>• lean heavily on risk assessment findings to build trust in a new tool aimed at core products or services</li> </ul>

# Researching and evaluating solutions

Each of these stages can be challenging to navigate and complicated, depending on the case. Below we suggest a range of questions that you can ask prospective vendors to help you develop a clearer view about the quality of the solution, tool and service offered.

# Evaluation Criteria

Whilst the precise criteria of evaluation will vary from case to case, there are widely accepted criteria for what ‘good’ looks like – which we mentioned previously. Here, we highlight a range of questions you can ask to vendors which can help you develop a clearer view about the quality of the tool and service offered.

## Accessibility

- how do you ensure that all relevant parties have ease of access to the tool?
- what measures are in place to safeguard the tool from unauthorised access?
- can you provide examples of how your tool has been successfully implemented in environments with diverse or complex accessibility needs?

## Independence

- how does your solution ensure that our firm is not dependent on your services?
- can the tool be integrated with other third-party services or technologies without your direct involvement?
- how do you handle data ownership and portability if we decide to switch vendors in the future?

## Interoperability

- how does your tool facilitate secure data sharing between different systems and functions?
- how do you ensure that data integrity and security are maintained during data transfers between systems?
- what is your process for handling interoperability issues that may arise during implementation?

## Modular

- how easy is it to enable or disable specific features and functionalities within your tool?
- can you provide examples of how your tool has been customised to include or exclude adjacent products or services?
- how do you ensure that the tool remains stable and functional when modules are switched on or off?

## Scalability

- how does your tool handle an increase in the number of users or data volume?
- what is the process for scaling the tool to meet growing business needs?
- how do you ensure that performance remains consistent as the tool scales and what support do you offer for this?

## Transparency

- how do you provide visibility into the tool's processes, data and operations for our firm?
- how do you handle incidents or issues and how transparent are you in communicating these to your clients?
- what mechanisms are in place to ensure that our firm has complete clarity about the tool's performance and any potential risks?

## Stability

- how do you ensure the tool remains stable and functional during system updates or changes?
- can you provide examples of how your tool has maintained stability in environments with frequent changes?
- what measures are in place to handle disruptions or alterations in adjacent systems or processes?
- how do you monitor and address potential stability issues proactively

### Top tips

Ask for examples where vendors have solved these questions for clients in your sector and ask about how this differs from other sectors if they serve them. Regulation and compliance relevant to your specific sector should be discussed regularly.

Ask about how costs scale with users or data and whether there is a testing phase where the business can opt-out of the agreement should the solution or tool be deemed not fit for purpose.

# Implementation

Once you have selected a digital tool, developing an implementation plan is helpful to identify and mitigate risks, get the vendor(s) on the same page and inform employees about necessary changes or disruptions.

As part of this plan, you should set milestones, phase activities and create a clear resourcing schedule. Responsibilities and ownership should be clear across departments and stakeholder groups, if required. You should aim to summarise this plan into a roadmap document which, in addition to the above, should include detail and action about the items on the right.



**“Effective project management with clear workstreams, leads and stakeholders is crucial. Involve legal, HR, Equality and Diversity teams and end users in risk management. Ensure resource planners and IT teams are engaged, especially for integration with data infrastructure. Implement secure authentication processes like single sign-in and two-factor authentication. Identify success measures, run pilot projects with diverse groups and be prepared to adjust approaches as needed.”**

– Associate Professor Joel Mills SFHEA,  
Head of Generative AI and Digital Learning,  
BPP Education Group

## Testing and roll-out

- use load testing to assess how the tools perform against expected service-level agreements, which might also include crash point testing and user volume testing
- develop a monitoring framework to assess and report risks and failures in key interfaces and functions on a regular basis
- develop contingency plans, including scenarios and required support in the event of disruption or failure

## Training and support

- develop training programmes, either internally or through vendors, to equip employees with the required skills
- training and support might take various forms, such as: live workshops, online tutorials, video demonstrations or printed manuals
- consider pairing competent users with less familiar employees, who are keen to learn and adopt new technologies

## Culture and knowledge sharing

- establish communication platforms which are cross-functional, perhaps including a small group of stakeholders from each function
- openly encourage ‘controlled experimentation’ particularly early in the process but also on an ongoing basis once adopted
- work with internal marketing and communications teams to assist with employee messaging on training and compliance check lists

## Security, privacy and compliance

- the roadmap should be shared, reviewed and confirmed with existing audit, compliance and risk management functions within the organisation
- clear control processes and protection measures should be established – especially (but not exclusively) for processes involving customers and customer data
- complete a risk review to identify processes, workflows and technologies that are of greatest threat of adverse impact



# Stakeholder Engagement

## Considerations for achieving key stakeholder buy-in:

- clearly define the change and what is expected of them.
- use data to evidence the expected benefits.
- ensure key stakeholders are included during the analysis phase, so that they have a thorough understanding of the changes proposed and how their role can make it a success
- provide evidence to support the preferred choice, to dispel any doubts and resistance
- present behaviour changes as a choice, highlighting the preferable option so that it is a 'no brainer' to embrace change
- gather feedback to ensure you are aware of other options or choices
- remove any barriers to avoid friction and sustain engagement

## Mechanics for achieving these considerations:

- interactive walk-throughs of the technology, preferably through a company voice rather than an external provider
- step-by-step guides
- lunch and learn sessions
- Q and A's
- bi-weekly drop ins
- town hall presentations
- nominate and advertise "change practitioners" or "change champions" within the business (and preferably each team affected) to drive the message
- offer virtual help-desk style support during the introduction of technology
- send regular email updates, carefully drafted to tailor to each audience
- involve key users in user acceptance testing for key users



**"Like any transformation project, digital adoption requires to a certain extent cultural and behavioural change within an organisation in order to be successful. Hence, leaders of Professional and Financial Services firms should proactively manage this by clearly communicating the rationale and benefits of the new technology, involving staff early in the planning stages and offering comprehensive training and support throughout implementation and beyond (running the 'new normal')."**

– Dr Symeon Dionysis, Research Fellow in FinTech, Nottingham Business School (Nottingham Trent University)



# How to Continue to Progress with Digital Adoption

## Useful links

### Publicly available materials for further reading:

Further reading about change management and its role in technology adoption:

[dwf, 2024. How to handle the 'But, why?' Change management in tech adoption](#)

Whilst not specific to Professional and Financial Services, an interesting and useful sources for digital adoption frameworks, guidance and exercises:

[Coordinatesport, 2023. Self Assessment Workbook – Enabling Digital Adoption](#)

[Pulsion, 2024. Complete Digital Transformation Framework Guide](#)

[Whatfix, 2024. How to Conduct a Technology Needs Assessment](#)

### Contributors to this guide:

**Alex Lu** at PortF

**Katy Mason** at TiPS

**Adam Roney** at Calls9

**Paul D'Ambra** at Consectus

**Martin Spring** at TiPS

**Deanna Sharma** at Doza Consulting

**Joel Mills** at BPP

**Symeon Dionysis** at University of Nottingham

### Join the Innovate UK AI for Services Network:

Scan the QR code to stay up-to-date with all relevant opportunities and events for PFS, or [click this link](#).



For further support on digital adoption, two dedicated innovation accelerator programmes have been funded by ESRC and Innovate UK to support financial and professional services firms to adopt digital technology:

[Technology in Professional Services \(TiPS\) and Future Finance](#).

## Innovate UK

Innovate UK, part of UK Research and Innovation, is the UK's innovation agency. It works to create a better future by inspiring, involving and investing in businesses developing life-changing innovations.

Its mission is to help companies to grow through their development and commercialisation of new products, processes and services, supported by an outstanding innovation ecosystem that is agile, inclusive and easy to navigate.

[www.ukri.org/councils/innovate-uk](http://www.ukri.org/councils/innovate-uk)

## Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

ESRC is the UK's largest funder of economic, social, behavioural and human data science.

[www.ukri.org/councils/esrc](http://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc)

## Whitecap Consulting

Whitecap is a regionally focused strategy consultancy which works across a wide range of sectors, including Professional and Financial Services and its high growth sub-sectors such as FinTech and LegalTech.

The firm typically works with boards, executives and investors of predominantly mid-sized organisations and helping clients analyse, develop and implement growth strategies.

[www.whitecapconsulting.co.uk](http://www.whitecapconsulting.co.uk)



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and ESRC**



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October 2025