CLOSING THE GAP

WHY DATA CENTRES ARE THE ENGINE ROOM OF A MORE INCLUSIVE DIGITAL FUTURE

PRESENTED BY

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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

FORUM FOR WOMEN IN DATA CENTRES

FWD

CAPSTONE

INTRODUCTION

We live in a world of breathtaking technological leaps. AI can compose music, cloud platforms connect global markets in a heartbeat, and quantum computing is redefining speed. Yet, as with many technological revolutoons, progress is not being distributed equally. While AI promises efficiency and innovation; it is also exposing a widening gender gap in access, opportunities and leadership - a gap with serious consequences for industries like data centres, where we are already battling a critical skills shortage.

Despite the rapid expansion of AI, data, and digital infrastructure, the representation of women in these fields remains critically low and, in some sectors is declining.

22%

Women account for only 22% of the estimated 300,000 AI specialists worldwide[1] and hold just 29% of executive-level roles in data and AI[2]

8-12%

Women hold only 8-12% of technical roles within data centres, with just 5% in leadership positions[5]

10%

Over 75% of DC operators report that women make up 10% or less of their workforce and nearly 20% have no women in design, build or operations roles[6]

1 in 4

According to the International labour organisation, AI could disproportionately affect female-dominated jobs, with 1 in 4 women's jobs at risk compared to 1 in 10 for men[3]

3x

Women are three times more likely to lose their jobs due to AI-driven automation, particularly in high-income countries[1.3]

25%

Women are 25% less likely to possess basic digital skills, creating early barriers to entry in tech fields[10]

UK CONTEXT

20%

Women represent just 20% of AI and Data professionals in the UK[7]

93% of UK businesses report IT skills gaps, with 42% attributing it to fast-paced tech change- a factor that disproportionately affects underrepresented groups, including women[11]

16.9%

Overall, women hold only 16.9% of IT roles in the UK, with even lower representation in infrastructure-heavy positions like data-centre engineering[8]

24%

In Q1 2025, women filled only 24% of new permanent IT positions, falling short of their 29% share of the UK tech workforce[9]

UNPACKING THE ROOT CAUSES

Blaming infrastructure alone is too simple. The roots of the gender gap run much deeper, often invisibly, through our social and corporate structures. These systemic barriers work in conjunction to limit opportunities at every stage of a woman's career.

EARLY SOCIALISATION

The digital gender divide starts young. By age six, children often internalise societal stereotypes, perceiving girls as less capable in engineering or computing. These beliefs shape interests, confidence, and educational choices for life. Societal norms about 'appropriate' careers can discourage girls from pursuing technical subjects, leaving women underrepresented in STEM degrees linked to AI, cloud, and data centre technologies[12]. Changing perception is as important as changing policy - if women cannot see themselves in infrastructure careers, they are unlikely to pursue them

ECONOMIC TRADE-OFFS

Even with affordable internet, women may prioritise family or small business needs over personal devices or upskilling courses, limiting early access to technology[25]

Early experiences contribute to lower self-efficacy and higher technophobia among women, leading to risk-averse behaviour and less confidence in adopting new technologies. Limited hands-on exposure during formative years reduces familiarity and comfort with STEM subjects, impacting later career choices[28]

BIASED DESIGN

Technology has historically been developed with male users in mind. From "shrink it and pink it" marketing to AI algorithms trained on male-centric data, products often fail to meet women's needs, creating further barriers to engagement and adoption

WORKPLACE CULTURE

Once in the professional world, women face subconscious bias

- Hiring: Technical and infrastructure roles are perceived as male domains, discouraging applications
- Promotions and feedback: men are encouraged and promoted based on potential, women on proven past performance, creating the "broken rung"[14]
- Bro culture and attrition: Exclusionary workplace cultures, a weak sense of belonging, and limited gender diversity in leadership drive women out of tech, with 55% leaving within five years and 87% within ten years[13]

- Lack of clear pathways: women receive less career support than their male counterparts - including fewer sponsors and advocates, which limits their opportunities for advancement and slows their career progression[14] This creates the illusion of autonomy without fulfilment, highlighting career pathways that fail to provide meaningful support
- Career breaks and health impacts: women often experience slower career progression due to time off for childcare and caregiving responsibilities. Women may also face menopause-related challenges, compounded by workplace stigma and lack of supportive policies[26]

STRUCTURAL BARRIERS

Inflexible work patterns and limited childcare support hinder retention. Visible role models are scarce: entry-level women comprise ~20% of roles, mid-career technical roles drop to 12–15%, and only 25% reach senior leadership. Minority women face sharper barriers in the UK tech sector; they make up less than 2 % of senior tech leadership roles, despite ethnic minorities accounting for around 14 % of the tech workforce more broadly.[12] In the U.S., policy restrictions on diversity and equity initiatives have reinforced these structural barriers, reducing institutional support for programmes that could aid career progression and retention for women and underrepresented groups[27]

THE CONSEQUENCES OF EXCLUSION

The digital gender gap is more than a women's rights issue, it's a structural drag on economies, industries, and societies. Exclusion has ripple effects that compound across every layer of the digital economy:

1. ECONOMIC LOSSES AT SCALE

Systemic exclusion doesn't just limit women's earning power it reduces national productivity. The UN Women 2025 Gender Snapshot highlights that closing the gender digital divide could add as much as $1.5 trillion to global GDP by 2030, implying a large current and future cost of exclusion if the gap remains unaddressed[15]. Closing the mobile internet gender gap could add $1.3 trillion to GDP by 2030, yet progress has slowed and millions of women remain offline[16]. These substantial figures underscore the economic imperative of bridging this divide.

2. INTENSIFIED TALENT SHORTAGES

Industries already face acute skills gaps. In data centres, nearly half the engineering workforce is nearing retirement, yet women remain vastly underrepresented – excluding them only worsens the crisis. In the UK only, the sector is already losing 4.3 hours per worker per week to inefficiencies, costing £57.2 billion annually[17]. A striking finding is that roughly 60,000 women exit the UK tech sector annually, resulting in an economic loss of up to £3.5 billion[23]. Ignoring half the talent pool risks leaving critical infrastructure dangerously understaffed.

3. INNOVATION AND PERFORMANCE DECLINE

Homogeneous teams mean fewer perspectives, weaker problem-solving, and reduced creativity. The evidence is clear: gender-diverse teams perform 25% better financially, whilst ethnically diverse teams are 43% more profitable[18]. Exclusion isn't just unfair, it's bad business.

4. THE NEXT-GEN SKILLS GAP

Tomorrow's economy will be built on AI, cybersecurity, and cloud, yet women remain sidelined from these fields. For example, female share among AI professionals rose only marginally, from 22% in 2016 to 28-30% in 2025[19].
Men are adopting AI tools at twice the rate of women, and women lacking AI proficiency could face a 2% salary penalty. These risks are creating an even deeper divide before the current one is closed.

5. INEQUALITY AND SOCIAL STAGNATION

Skill gaps fall hardest on women and marginalised groups, further entrenching inequality and blocking social mobility[11]. When women are excluded, societies lose not only productivity but also progress toward equity and opportunity.

6. ESG AND REPUTATIONAL RISKS

Investors and regulators increasingly judge companies on ESG performance. Diversity, especially gender balance, forms a key part of the "Social" criteria. Failing to act puts data centre operators at risk of reputational damage and reduced access to funding[18].
Inclusion is not simply a social responsibility. It is a strategic lever for workforce resilience and long-term competitiveness.

HOW TO CLOSE THE GAP

Fixing the digital gender gap requires more than goodwill; it demands deliberate, coordinated action across every level of the talent pipeline, from entry-level through to the executive suite. Companies committed to change must embed inclusivity into their operational DNA, moving beyond performative acts to measurable outcomes.

1

REDESIGN ENTRY GATES

Proactively expanding the talent pool is critical:

- Paid internships, graduate programmes and apprenticeship opportunities, and supported "returnships" for those women re-entering the workforce
- Skill-based assessment focusing on aptitude and potential rather than prior experience alone. Research indicates that AI roles increasingly value skills over degrees, with skill premiums outweighing formal qualifications by up to 23% in the UK[20]
- Early development programmes, various apprenticeship schemes, provide school leavers with real-world data-centre experience and qualifications, cultivating the next generation of leaders[21]
- Unbiased hiring for experienced women:

1. Use structured, skill-focused hiring, including standardised interviews, evaluation rubrics, blind CV reviews, and carefully designed job adverts and hiring criteria to avoid gender-biased language or requirements, thereby reducing bias throughout the recruitment process.
2. Ensure diverse hiring panels and actively reach out to experienced women from other sectors to create fair opportunities in technical and leadership roles.
3. Broaden talent sourcing beyond traditional engineering paths, redefine roles to focus on transferable skills, and recruit for capability and potential rather than historic profile matching.
4. Provide ongoing support to help employees succeed, including guidance for career breaks, menopause, and other life-stage needs

2 CHAMPION INTERNAL TALENT

Sponsorship and mentorship:

Attraction without retention simply recycles the problem. Sustainable progress depends on structured support, sponsorship, and clear progression pathways. Mentorship is helpful; sponsorship is transformative. Leaders must actively advocate for high-potential women:

- Assign stretch projects that build skills and visibility
- Advocate during promotion and succession planning
- Connect women with influential senior leaders and clients

Male allyship is also critical: women supporting women alone is often insufficient to break systemic barriers. Senior men must actively sponsor female colleagues, push for balanced hiring shortlists, and hold organisations accountable for equitable outcomes.

3 ENGINEER AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE

A genuinely inclusive environment supports employees through every life stage:

- Ongoing unconscious bias training, not one-off seminars
- Audit promotions and job adverts role descriptions to remove biased language
- Normalise flexible working for all, removing stigma that it's a "women's perk"
- Support life events and changes such as parental leave, menopause and caregiving, without derailing careers
- Partner with organisations in data centres, offering mentorship, scholarships, and networking to build visible role models and retain talent[7]
- Collaborate with hiring partners who maintain gender balanced teams and provide gender balanced shortlists, ensuring diversity is embedded both in recruitment processes and within the partner organisations themselves

4 BUILD NEXT-GEN SKILLS

Targeted training is essential to close emerging technology gaps:

- STEM outreach programs to inspire and equip children with knowledge around AI, data centres, Cloud and STEM careers
- Equitable access to AI tools through workplace upskilling programs
- Numeracy confidence initiatives (e.g., the National Numeracy tools supported by Capital One UK) to reduce self-doubt and encourage women to pursue data-rich roles[22]
- Supported focused communities such as Gen+1, who are building and supporting the next generation of infrastructure talent by connecting young professionals with opportunities to learn, develop and network through targeted events, masterclasses and targeted training

5 MEASURE, REPORT AND BE ACCOUNTABLE

Transparency drives progress:

- Publicly report diversity metrics by role, team, and seniority, including lateral hires of experienced women
- Track promotion, pay equity, and retention outcomes to ensure interventions are effective
- Align reporting with ESG frameworks to protect reputation and funding potential

6 LEVERAGE COMMUNITY AND EDUCATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

Scaling impact requires external collaboration:

- Partner with colleges and universities to shape apprenticeships and internships for underrepresented groups
- Participate in programs like “Girls in Data” to inspire early STEM engagement and retain mid-career talent
- Collaborate with communities such as the Forum for Women in Data Centres to connect with like-minded professionals, amplify female voices and create mentorship and networking opportunities that raise the visibility of women across the data centre ecosystem
- Engage in structured mentoring programmes such as Capstone Mentored, which connects experienced industry professionals with emerging talent to share knowledge, build confidence and support career progression, helping strengthen pathways for women in the digital infrastructure sector

INDUSTRY RESPONSES

Leading organisations are advancing gender diversity and leadership in data centres through targeted programs. A few examples of these are:

Equinix supports gender diversity through its Women Leaders Network (EWLN) and Pathway for Her programme, offering mentoring, leadership development and return-to-work support for women in tech.

Microsoft embeds gender diversity into its core strategy through inclusive engineering, product design, women-in-tech talent pipelines, global networks, transparent reporting and leadership accountability.

With 25,000+ members, Women in Data offers mentoring, networking, career acceleration, and the “Girls in Data” initiative to inspire young girls in STEM.

As part of the JLL Women’s speaker series they host joint forums and training events championing inclusivity across the sector; promoting women to take part in industry event panels - addressing the gender imbalance and skills gap.

Schneider Electric has committed to 50% women in new hires, 40% in frontline management, and 30% in leadership roles by 2026, with progress tracked against WGEA indicators and embedded within leadership performance frameworks.

QTS Data Centers supports gender diversity through its Data Center Academy for early-career and non-traditional entrants and its Women Inspiring Leadership (WIL) group offering mentorship and professional development for women.

Digital Realty integrates DEI into ESG reporting - embedding inclusion into corporate responsibility,

KAO Data launched ‘Critical Careers: Celebrating Women in Digital Infrastructure’ to spotlight women’s contributions and inspire global participation.

A MODEL FOR COLLABORATION

FORUM FOR WOMEN IN DATA CENTRES

FWD

Spearheading collaborative change is the Forum for Women in Data Centres (FWD).

FWD understands that industry-wide challenges require industry-wide solutions and is creating a powerful ecosystem for change.

Founded by a diverse group from across the industry, FWD is a vibrant community driving inclusivity, mentorship, and collaboration within the data centre sector. It provides women at all career stages with a platform to connect, share experiences, and access professional development opportunities.

- Community & Networking: FWD supports meaningful professional relationships through networking events and regional workshops – helping members expand connections, gain industry insights, and find mentors to guide their careers
- Mentorship: By linking experienced professionals with newcomers, FWD helps mentees build skills, confidence, and career direction, while enabling mentors to shape the future of the industry
- Male Allyship: FWD actively engages men as allies – promoting inclusive leadership, challenging biases, and amplifying women's voices to cultivate a fairer workplace culture
- Industry Support: Collaborations with industry sponsors to provide resources for running events and initiatives designed to advance systemic change in the sector

In short, FWD is more than a networking group - it is a catalyst for change; empowering women to connect, grow, and lead.

Through community, mentorship, allyship, and industry support, the forum is shaping a more inclusive and dynamic future for data centres.

EMBEDDING INCLUSION INTO WORKFORCE STRATEGY

Alongside industry wide collaboration, meaningful progress also depends on how inclusion is embedded within workforce strategy. Capstone operates across the real estate, construction and mission critical sectors, with a strong focus on data centres and digital infrastructure throughout EMEA and the US.

Within these traditionally male-dominated industries, its approach has centred on addressing attraction and retention as interconnected components of long-term talent resilience. The company has deliberately built a gender balanced business because diversity strengthens decision-making and delivers better outcomes for clients.

CAPSTONE

Capstone is a specialist talent business supporting the real estate, construction and mission critical sectors, with a strong focus on data centres and digital infrastructure across EMEA and the US.

While recruitment is part of what we do, it is far from the whole story. Much of our work is about helping clients pause, step back and think differently about talent. That might mean benchmarking, building future talent pipelines, shaping workforce strategy, or supporting organisations as they scale into new markets or mobilise major programmes.

In fast-moving, high-pressure environments, getting the people piece right is not a nice to have. It is fundamental to delivery.

Over the past 12 months, 36% of Capstone's recruitment placements have been women, more than double the approximate industry average of 15% representation in technical infrastructure roles. This reflects deliberate changes in hiring practice: broadening sourcing strategies, challenging narrow role definitions, and prioritising capability and potential over pattern-matching past profiles. Retention is treated as equally critical.

Capstone Mentored is a structured mentoring programme designed to support the retention and development of talent across the digital infrastructure sector by providing an additional layer of career and personal development beyond the day job. It connects established leaders with emerging professionals to share insight, build confidence, and accelerate progression, while fostering a highly engaged community that is more than 90% female represented.

The programme helps create clearer pathways for women to thrive and progress into leadership within the sector. Beyond immediate hiring, long-term pipelining remains central. Initiatives such as the **Talent Talks Podcast** and engagement with schools and early-career influencers aim to demystify digital infrastructure careers and widen awareness of entry routes.

Educating educators and increasing early visibility helps reshape perceptions of who belongs in the sector. Together, these measures reflect a broader principle: inclusion is not peripheral to workforce strategy, it is fundamental to addressing structural skills shortages and building resilient, future-ready organisations.

CONCLUSION

Technological progress, particularly in AI, is transforming our world. Yet without intentional action, it risks widening the gender gap through automation, unequal access to skills, and persistent underrepresentation.
The data centre industry both reflects and amplifies these challenges. At the same time, the sector's unprecedented growth offers a unique opportunity to close this gap. The industry isn't just replacing a retiring workforce (nearly half of the current engineers are approaching retirement), it's also staffing for a global expansion at an unprecedented scale. This explosive growth makes now the ideal moment to build a more diverse workforce.

Closing the gender gap in data centres requires a multi-layered approach: early education, equitable upskilling, inclusive cultures, and bold policy support. Mentorship, industry collaboration, and embedding inclusion within strategic talent planning and workforce development all play a critical role in improving gender representation and retention across the sector.

Diversity is not an afterthought- it is a strategic imperative. Inclusive hiring, transparent career pathways, and cultural reform are essential to building the resilient, innovative workforce needed to power the digital infrastructure of the future.

The question is no longer whether we should prioritise gender diversity in data centres. The question is: can our digital future really thrive without it?

AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Chhavi Nayak

Chhavi is a certified data centre professional (EXIN EPI® CDCP®) with over 15 years of international experience leading complex, mission-critical infrastructure and capital programmes across diverse markets. She has contributed to landmark developments, including one of India's first hyperscale data centres, bringing deep expertise in programme assurance, CAPEX optimisation, risk management, and delivery governance. Her experience spans Big Four and leading global real estate advisory firms, where she has led multidisciplinary teams, driven transformation initiatives, and built trusted client relationships across data centres, infrastructure, and real estate portfolios.

Chhavi is a passionate advocate for increasing the representation of women in the data centre sector. She is an active member of both the Forum for Women in Data Centres and the Capstone Mentored programme and values the role each plays in advancing gender equity, unbiased hiring practices, and mentorship within the industry. Through her work and industry involvement, she remains committed to fostering leadership, visibility, and stronger support networks for women across the sector.

EDITORIAL REVIEWER PROFILES

Alexandria Iveson

Alex is a business development leader in the data centre sector with over 16 years' experience across diverse, predominantly male-dominated industries including legal tech, healthcare tech, real estate and digital infrastructure. A mid-career mover into the industry, she combines commercial strategy with operational leadership, bringing a strong understanding of how complex technical organisations grow, adapt and deliver.

Alex is a Founding Member of the Forum for Women in Data Centres, an initiative focused on supporting women to thrive in the mission critical space through networking, events, education and closing the skills gap in digital infrastructure. Passionate about social mobility, mentorship and inclusive talent development, Alex regularly speaks on reskilling, workforce diversification and building a future-ready data centre industry.

Sarah Davenport

Sarah is Managing Director and co-owner of Capstone, a specialist talent consultancy supporting the built environment across real estate, construction, and critical infrastructure, with a strong focus on data centres and digital infrastructure. While Capstone is known for delivering high-quality recruitment, Sarah's work extends well beyond hiring. She advises organisations on leadership capability, workforce strategy, benchmarking, and future talent pipelines, particularly in high growth and high-pressure environments. She is also actively involved in industry initiatives, panels, and speaking opportunities focused on improving representation across the sector.

Her focus on closing the gender gap is practical, not theoretical. She has founded Capstone Mentored to provide visible leadership, personal support, and structured career development, particularly for women navigating a sector where female role models are still limited. The programme connects senior leaders with emerging professionals to create clearer pathways to progression and long-term retention. Sarah says, "I am driven by a belief that meaningful change requires action, not just conversation, and I am committed to building practical solutions that strengthen both people and the industry as a whole."

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