



With the explosion of AI in the workforce, tech education company **DECODED** is having one of its biggest years yet. Brunswick's **KIRSTY CAMERON** talks with their CEO, **KATHRYN PARSONS.**

PARSONS

Kathryn

IS CEO OF DECODED,

a world leader in technology education, delivering digital literacy and skills for clients that span the FTSE 100, policymakers and businesses across every industry and geography. Parsons successfully campaigned for code to be introduced to the UK national curriculum, and was awarded an MBE for Services to Education.

She sat down with Brunswick's Kirsty Cameron to discuss AI and the workplace, Decoded's mission and why she is passionate about lifelong learning. AI will prove revolutionary, she says. But to take advantage of it, business needs to be focused on people rather than technology.

Let's start from the beginning. What led to the founding of Decoded?

I studied Latin and Ancient Greek at university, and I've always loved languages. Back in 2011, I saw technology and coding as just another language I wanted to learn. I wanted a course that would teach me the basics quickly but nothing like that existed. My co-founder Richard and I started out teaching how to code in a day and have now expanded into all sorts of other areas such as data and analytics and the ethics of AI.

I still remember our first cohort of learners in a kitchen in Shoreditch—it was such a diverse group of people, which just showed us the scale of interest. We had the CEO of a mining company, a head of policy, a student thinking ahead to the world of work. They all had one thing in common—they wanted to learn. It just exploded from there, but our mantra remains the same. At Decoded, we make people excited about tech. We make it fun; we make it accessible, whoever you are. Lifelong learning is a passion of mine.

Moving on from "code in a day," why did you decide to include data and analytics as part of Decoded's program?

Our first big data program was in 2017 with Marks & Spencer (M&S), who made a big

statement of intent. The CEO wanted over 1,000 M&S colleagues to be upskilled as part of its data skills initiative and ambition to become a “digital first” retailer. The leadership team really understood that there’s a great “people” part to digital transformation. Most companies just think you need to go buy the technology. We helped the Marks & Spencer workforce move beyond spreadsheets, to think about more efficient ways to house and analyze data. And of course, with data, you can see the impact of the work we have done quite quickly.

So what does success look like for big businesses investing in Decoded’s programs?

This is something I’m really passionate about. We measure success primarily with feedback—for example, do employees feel like they understand the company’s digital strategy? Do they have the skills needed to do their jobs? Will they collaborate with the data and tech teams going forward? We ask these sorts of questions six months after our courses end.

Second, we want tangible results. We want to understand, are employees now using data more effectively within the business? We want to see that employees are finding and applying data-led solutions in their day-to-day roles and using data in new ways. Companies that are smart like M&S, have clear goals for their transformation. We also have some killer case studies—an energy company, for example, found a fault that saved the company millions of pounds following one of our courses.

What do you think leaders are missing when they think about the evolving tech landscape?

One thing we quickly realized when we were starting out is that there aren’t enough people coming out of education with the right kind of technical skills for the workforce. There are just not enough data scientists and technically skilled workers to go around. They are hot property and widely sought after but, the way I see it, you’ve got incredible talent within your organization, invest in those people instead of outsourcing. It takes money to affect true digital transformation and leaders who get it, realize people are the missing part. Currently 95% of digital transformation funds goes to buying technology. Only 5% goes to people. That seems totally wrong to me.

In January [2023], we won a pitch to upskill and reskill 22,000 people at Aviva, the UK’s largest insurer. The program will prepare people for roles in software development, data engineering, data science, product management, UX design and beyond. I am particularly proud of the social impact of this

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work. The CEO, Amanda Blanc, has committed to extending the learning opportunities for free to college leavers and small businesses across East Anglia. It makes this one of the most significant investments in regional workforce skills by a FTSE 100.

What is the biggest hurdle you face when talking to businesses about your courses?

My biggest challenge is time. People need to give their time. And a day is becoming increasingly hard. We’ve introduced micro-learning sessions of 30 minutes, even using games to keep people’s attention. A lot of the courses are virtual and people get distracted! I tell leaders if you’re serious about this, you need to give people time.

Conversely, leaders will always make personal time once something is a priority. We are seeing an uptick in leaders prioritizing understanding these new technologies. They are making time to learn this stuff. We are living through a time of such change with AI, data and analytics advancements, leaders don’t want to get left behind and are leaning in. We coached the Senate back in 2020 in DC and it’s been fascinating to see that increase in leaders carving time out to learn and grow.

Tell us about Decoded’s leadership team.

Me and my co-founder Richard Peters have worked together since 2006. We are “ying and yang”; it’s a great partnership. I spend a lot of time talking to our current and prospective clients whilst Richard designs our courses along with our head of product.

What’s next for Decoded?

Currently, we’re rolling out our AI courses, it has been one of our biggest years. The programs we create are very in depth and they take time to formulate, the material is created from scratch. We launched our AI content in March 2023, we usually launch new courses with a client.

I’m interested in the role Decoded can play in the future—for example, teaching tech experts how to speak in more human terms and teaching people to be translators. People can be negative about San Francisco, but this is where something game changing is happening. Companies need to get ready for it. Some roles will soon be completely automated, some will be partially automated, we are all going to be impacted by this technology. It’s a total game changer. AI is going to be transformative. And it’s just the beginning. ♦

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