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Q1

What was your very first strategic move?

Our first strategic move was to identify a small group of internal champions who were willing to experiment with the technology, train staff, and help us understand both the opportunities and the risks of using AI in a school setting.

Back in early 2023, we found three additional members of staff, alongside me, who were keen to be involved: the Head of Computing and two enthusiastic Science teachers. That was important because I did not want AI to be seen as just an SLT initiative or a passing technology project. We needed credible classroom practitioners who could explore the tools, test use cases, and help other staff see the practical value.

The early aim was not to roll AI out at scale immediately. It was to build understanding. We needed to know what these tools could do, where they were useful, where they were risky, and how they might fit into Swanmore's teaching and learning culture.

In effect, the first step was to create a small, trusted group who could give staff safe permission to experiment, but not a free-for-all.

Q2

How did you balance data safety with giving teachers the freedom to experiment?

Our usual process for introducing new technology includes review and sign-off from both IT and our data protection staff. We applied the same principle to AI.

In the early stages, we made a very clear decision that staff should not enter pupil or staff data into public AI tools. That meant no identifiable pupil information, no safeguarding information, no SEND details, no behaviour information, and no confidential school information. This allowed staff to experiment with relatively low-risk tasks while avoiding the biggest data protection concerns.

So the balance was: staff could use AI for planning, drafting, resource creation, adapting explanations, generating questions, producing model answers and similar tasks, but they could not use it to process personal or sensitive information.

That boundary gave staff confidence. They knew they were allowed to experiment, but they also knew where the red lines were. The message was: use AI as a drafting and thinking assistant but protect data and keep professional judgement at the centre.

Q3

Did you create a standalone AI policy, or just update your existing ones?

We created our first standalone AI policy in 2024. We felt that AI was moving quickly enough, and raising enough specific issues, that staff, pupils and governors needed something explicit to guide them.

The policy provides a framework for the use of AI in our school. It includes sections on ethical use, data protection, privacy, data governance, user responsibilities and, very importantly, human oversight. We have been clear throughout that AI can support professional work, but it does not remove professional responsibility. The teacher remains responsible for the final resource, the final judgement and the final decision.

The policy also includes an acceptable use section for pupils. We now ask all Year 10 pupils to read and sign this acceptable use agreement, particularly because they are beginning courses where coursework, non-examined assessment and exam board rules become more significant. It explains in detail how they can and cannot use AI as part of their work.

We placed the policy on a six-month review cycle because the technology has been changing so rapidly. Our understanding has developed over time, and we have tried to keep the policy in line with both the technology and the risks.

The policy has also been reviewed and approved by governors. That was important because many governors had limited prior exposure to AI, so we also provided governor training. We wanted them to understand not just the risks, but also the educational possibilities.

Q4

IT can stall or block innovation. How did you work with IT to make this happen?

I line manage IT, so they were involved from the beginning. I think that helped because AI was never presented to them as something being done around them or despite them.

Our IT department is fundamental to ensuring that we have a stable and secure platform in school. Where IT raise concerns, those concerns usually come from a sensible position: avoiding unnecessary risk, protecting systems and keeping the school safe. I do not see that as blocking innovation. I see it as part of responsible implementation.

The key was to involve IT early, but also to be clear about roles. Teaching and learning should lead the purpose: what are we trying to improve, what workload are we trying to reduce, and how might pupils or staff benefit? IT then help us understand the safe route: access, filtering, accounts, platforms, security and risk.

So my view is that education should lead the purpose, and IT should help define the safe route. If IT are involved early, risks can usually be understood and mitigated appropriately.

Q5

What was the biggest source of pushback or anxiety from staff, and how did you win them over?

One of the ironies is that a major reason for using AI is to save time, but one of the initial sources of pushback was that staff did not feel they had enough time to learn or experiment with it.

We addressed that through our training programme. We gave staff structured time to try the tools, see examples and apply AI to real tasks they already had to do. The key was not to start with futuristic claims about AI. It was to start with practical workload: planning, questioning, modelling, feedback, differentiation and resource adaptation.

There was also some anxiety about whether AI might eventually replace aspects of the teacher's role. I think staff became more relaxed as they saw that AI is a tool to support and improve teaching, not a replacement for the teacher. AI can help with drafts, prompts, explanations and examples, but it still needs a skilled professional to judge quality, accuracy and suitability.

My own biggest concern is about pupils using AI in a way that erodes their ability to think. Our role as educators is to help pupils use AI to support learning, not to replace learning. That could become a significant educational divide: some pupils may learn to use AI intelligently to deepen understanding, while others may use it simply to bypass the thinking.

I am also beginning to see thoughtful scepticism from both staff and pupils. Some pupils have raised concerns about the environmental impact of AI. Some staff share my concern about outsourcing too much thinking and too many processes to technologies that are outside our control and may carry wider social, commercial or political risks.

So I would say we have won people over not by dismissing those concerns, but by taking them seriously and keeping the message balanced: AI can be powerful, but it needs professional judgement, clear boundaries and educational purpose.

Q6

What was the single best quick win use case that got a sceptic hooked?

The biggest quick win for us was automating part of our lesson observation process.

This saved senior and middle leaders many hours in writing up observations, but it also helped produce a more consistent and useful response for teachers being observed. It supported better feedback, reduced administrative time, and gave SLT a clearer view of patterns across teaching: where strengths were emerging, where there were common areas for development, and where support might be needed.

That was powerful because it was not an abstract use of AI. It solved a real workload problem. It showed staff that AI could reduce administrative burden while still keeping human judgement at the centre of the process.

It also reinforced one of our core messages: AI is most useful when it helps us do important professional work more efficiently, not when it tries to replace the professional judgement itself.

Q7

What is your staff training model, how effective has it been, and what would you do differently?

We have a dedicated CPD slot every Monday. Pupils go home early, and we use that time for staff training. AI has formed part of that programme through a six-week rolling AI education sequence. Over the past two years, we have now trained all teaching staff in the use of large language models to support their teaching.

The model has been deliberately practical. We did not begin with lengthy theory about how large language models work. We began with teacher tasks: creating resources, adapting explanations, generating questions, planning lessons, producing model answers, writing feedback and supporting differentiation.

The training has evolved as the technology has evolved. Some teachers have now been through the training more than once, and their second experience has been different because the tools have become more capable and our understanding has improved.

In terms of impact, I think the training has been successful in improving confidence and giving staff safe ways to begin. The strongest evidence is around staff engagement and workload reduction. I would be cautious about claiming a measurable impact on pupil outcomes at this stage, but I am confident that many staff now use AI to get from a blank page to a strong first draft much more quickly.

If I were starting again, I would collect baseline evidence earlier. I would measure staff confidence at the start, gather examples of use, create case studies and perhaps find a simple way to capture time saved. We have good anecdotal evidence, but I would now build evaluation into the process from the beginning.

Q8

Did you lead this centrally, or use departmental AI Champions?

It was led centrally by me and the three AI champions.

That central leadership was important at the beginning because we needed a clear whole-school message. Staff needed to know what was allowed, what was not allowed, and what the school's expectations were around data, accuracy, professional judgement and pupil use.

However, I think the next stage is more departmental. AI looks different in different subjects, so departments need to develop subject-specific practice. The whole-school principles remain the same, but the best examples in Maths, English, Art, Science or Computer Science may be quite different.

So the model is: central leadership for the principles, departmental development for the practice.

Q9

AI looks different in English than it does in Maths or Art. How did you handle those differences while keeping a cohesive school-wide standard?

We tried to separate principles from practice.

The principles are whole-school: protect data, check accuracy, avoid over-reliance, maintain human oversight, follow assessment rules, and make sure pupils are still doing the thinking.

The practice varies by subject. A year or so ago, the tools appeared much stronger in language-based subjects than in graphical or mathematical subjects. In the beginning, we struggled to provide convincing examples for Maths teachers, because AI was not always reliable with notation, diagrams or multi-step mathematical reasoning.

That has changed significantly. AI can now interpret diagrams, produce better explanations, support problem design, identify misconceptions and solve more complex mathematical problems. It still needs checking, of course, but the subject range has widened considerably.

In English, the issues are more about authorship, drafting, originality and coursework. In Art, there are questions around creativity, image generation and ownership. In Computer Science, AI can be very powerful for explaining code, debugging and generating examples, but there is also a real risk of pupils bypassing problem-solving.

So the cohesive standard was not that everyone must use AI in the same way. It was consistency of principle, flexibility of practice. Every subject works within the same safety and professional boundaries, but each department develops the use cases that make educational sense for its own curriculum.

Q10

How are you teaching students to use AI as a learning tool rather than a shortcut for cheating?

The key message we are trying to teach pupils is the difference between supporting thinking and substituting thinking.

AI can support learning if pupils use it to ask for an explanation, generate practice questions, quiz them on a topic, give feedback, or provide a hint. It becomes a shortcut when pupils ask it to produce the work that was meant to demonstrate their own understanding.

For Year 10 specifically, we hold an assembly on the JCQ requirements around AI use. This is followed by pupils reading and signing our acceptable use agreement. That gives them a clear explanation of what is allowed and what is not allowed, particularly in relation to coursework.

We have also started explicitly teaching AI use to Year 9 pupils. The focus is on prompting AI tools to support learning rather than using AI to do the learning. We want pupils to understand that AI can be a tutor, a questioner or a feedback tool, but it should not become a substitute for effort, thought or understanding.

We also send messages home to parents about how they can support their children with AI use at home. The next stage is to invite parents in for AI education themselves, because this is not just a school issue. Pupils are using these tools at home, and parents need to understand both the opportunities and the risks.

Q11

How are departments practically managing exam board rules regarding AI and coursework?

Departments with non-examined assessment are aware of the JCQ rules around AI and refer to them explicitly at the start of coursework. Pupils are told that submitting AI-generated work as their own is malpractice.

Departments are also alert to changes in the quality, tone or style of pupil work. We had an example this year where we suspected possible AI use because the quality of a pupil's work appeared to improve dramatically in a presentation they were preparing. We ran the work through ZeroGPT and other AI checkers, but the results were inconclusive. That was an important reminder that AI checkers can be useful as one indicator, but they are not reliable enough to be used as proof on their own.

The more important evidence came from further discussion with the pupil and parents. Those conversations gave us enough confidence to conclude that the pupil had not used AI inappropriately.

We now sample Year 10 and Year 11 coursework across subjects to look for possible AI use. To date, we have not found any absolutely irrefutable examples of AI misuse. But we are clear that managing AI and coursework is not just about detection. It is about prevention, education and authentication.

In practical terms, departments need to use checkpoints: planning notes, drafts, version history, teacher conversations, supervised work where appropriate, and teacher knowledge of the pupil's normal standard. AI has made teacher judgement and the authentication process even more important.

Q12

Looking back, what was your biggest mistake or false assumption? What should other schools actively avoid?

The biggest mistake was probably not focusing on pupils early enough. We have had an acceptable use policy for a couple of years, but we have only recently started incorporating AI education into the KS3 scheme of work. Many Year 9 pupils are already familiar with using AI, and some are very good at getting AI to do the work for them rather than using it as a learning tool.

My biggest false assumption was that once staff had seen a few good examples, adoption would spread fairly evenly. In reality, staff confidence varies hugely. Some colleagues immediately see the possibilities; others need more structure, more reassurance and more subject-specific examples.

I also underestimated the importance of capturing evidence from the start. We saw staff using AI and reporting workload benefits, but if I were starting again I would be more systematic: baseline confidence, examples of use, case studies, and perhaps a simple way of measuring time saved.

The thing I would tell other schools to avoid is unmanaged enthusiasm. There are two unhelpful extremes. One is panic: banning or ignoring AI and pretending staff and pupils are not already using it. The other is hype: rolling it out as if it will transform everything without proper boundaries, training or evaluation.

The danger is not AI itself. The danger is unmanaged AI use.

Q13

If you could give a curriculum leader starting this journey tomorrow just three Golden Rules, what would they be?

1. Begin with workload, not wonder. It is very easy to be blown away by what large language models can do. But my advice would be to begin with real tasks teachers already have to do: planning, questioning, modelling, feedback, differentiation and resource adaptation. Do not start with futuristic claims. Staff need to see immediate professional value.

2. Set boundaries before scaling. Be clear from the beginning about data protection, safeguarding, assessment integrity and professional responsibility. Staff should know what they can use AI for, what they must check, and what they must never put into a public AI tool. This is about creating safe permission, not a free-for-all.

3. Keep the teacher and the learner doing the thinking. AI should support teacher judgement and pupil learning, not replace either. If AI removes thinking from the process, it is probably being used badly. If it improves questioning, explanation, feedback or access to learning, it may be very powerful.

The best test is this: is AI helping the teacher teach better, or the pupil learn better? If yes, it may be worth using. If it is simply bypassing thought, then it is not helping education.

Overall, I would say AI adoption is not simply a technology project. It is a teaching, learning, safeguarding and leadership project.