

# CAPSLOCK, the organisation addressing the UK's cybersecurity talent shortage

*As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Dr. Andrea Cullen, CEO and Co-founder of CAPSLOCK about the cyber skills gap, flexibility and trusting your instincts.*

Temps de lecture : minute

---

6 June 2024

## What was the catalyst for launching CAPSLOCK?

Our motivation for launching CAPSLOCK was driven by the desire to remove barriers to entry into life-changing education. Having worked in Higher Education and the cyber sector for several years, we had noticed that certain individuals were being excluded solely because of their background or previous experience.

We aimed to create a course that would value determination, passion, hard work and potential over previous qualifications. Our goal was to develop a curriculum that would equip individuals with life skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creative solution building and independence, alongside technical skills.

We wanted to do things differently to other offers on the market, with a curriculum that prioritised skills and relevance to the industry without any constraints. We started with a blank piece of paper, analysed the skills needed, and then developed a course that addressed them directly.

We did this by speaking to several people in the industry to identify recurring cyber problems. We also referenced the NIST NICE framework and made sure our work was aligned with it. Our primary teaching methods were team-based learning and problem-based learning. Rather than teaching just theory, we presented real problems and encouraged learners to develop practical solutions.

## Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

CAPSLOCK is a cyber education organisation that offers reskilling programmes to individuals from any background, equipping them with the necessary skills to pursue cyber roles within 16 weeks.

Our primary focus is to address the cyber skills gap in the UK and promote diversity in all aspects, including background, socio-economics, gender, ethnicity and more. We use the most effective teaching and learning techniques we've encountered, including team-based learning and problem-based learning to enhance learners' cybersecurity knowledge retention and skills development. Additionally, we offer full wraparound support services including careers curriculum, one-to-one careers advice, professional coaching, and wellbeing support.

Our services are available to both individuals and businesses. Individuals can choose to study part-time in the evenings or full-time during the day. Meanwhile, businesses can work with us to meet their cybersecurity needs through our Deploy or Reskill models. In the Deploy model, we work with organisations to train individuals who are then employed on a contracted day rate. In contrast, the Reskill model focuses on internal talent acquisition and the opportunity for businesses to improve diversity by moving employees into cybersecurity roles.

We work with many large institutions, including BT and BAE Systems, and connect with our customers through referrals, direct and indirect marketing channels, events and current network contacts.

## How does CAPSLOCK answer an unmet need?

We are directly addressing the UK's cybersecurity talent shortage by offering accessible reskilling for all levels of cyber roles, from entry to senior. Organisations must understand that many employees don't have the expertise, experience or financial means to open doors to a new career path. The sector needs to remove barriers for individuals who want to enter the cyber, no matter their academic background, work experience, or financial status. With CAPSLOCK learners only have to pay 10% upfront, removing financial barriers and opening doors for those who might not otherwise afford it. This can kickstart careers, empower individuals, and equip them with the skills desperately needed in the cybersecurity field. It's a win-win for both individuals and companies.

At CAPSLOCK we understand what companies and individuals need and provide learners with flexibility. Not only do we teach technology skills, but we also focus on teaching learners about soft skills including analytical thinking and problem-solving. This is what other cyber curriculums lack. From teachers, nurses, composers and taxi drivers, we can reskill and deploy learners from all backgrounds to a new career in cyber in their current organisations, leading to higher retention rates.

## How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

CAPSLOCK began enrolling learners in February 2021. Initially, we had a small team dedicated to providing reskilling and career support. However, we have now expanded to a team of 25, working across various

departments such as careers, coaching curriculum, admissions and marketing.

We run up to six 16-week courses simultaneously and work more closely with businesses to address their skills requirements. Recently, we have launched our Deploy model where contractors are trained and then deployed at a fixed day rate within organisations that need to bolster their cybersecurity skillsets.

## Tell us about the working culture at CAPSLOCK

At CAPSLOCK, we value openness, honesty, down-to-earth values, and appreciate that everyone, irrespective of their background, can succeed. We foster a culture of support, collaboration and teamwork.

## How are you funded?

We initially started with an Innovate grant from the Government. Later, we obtained funding from our lead investors - Ufi VocTech Trust and GC Angels who are both social impact investors. Ufi and GC continued their investment in the second round, and we also welcomed several angel investors. In total, we have secured around £1M of funding, which includes the Innovate grant. We needed to get the right kind of investment aligned to our mission and values, so we have declined some offers at critical times.

When it comes to our courses, they are funded through Department for Education (DfE) contract payments, and business contributions (as part of the DfE requirement of 70% large and 90% small businesses) where individuals can secure 100% funding. In addition, some businesses and individuals pay upfront, whilst others use our interest-free loan or shared income agreement.

# What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

One of the main challenges we face is managing the growth of the company while maintaining our culture. We have recently restructured our Senior Management Team and added a coach focused on employee wellbeing to help us. We have also opened several new channels to improve the effectiveness of our communication and made efforts to be more transparent about the work going on internally so that we can collaborate more efficiently on projects.

# What's in store for the future?

Our future plans include expanding internationally, growing our Deploy model, and creating an on-demand curriculum that uses AI.

The ability to increase diversity in the sector and to employ flexible resources has never been more relevant. Our Deploy model helps organisations achieve both goals. We are already working with several financial institutions using this model and plan to expand to other sectors that struggle to attract the talent they need. Our next step is to expand internationally, starting with the Middle East and the US where we have seen growing interest.

Additionally, we are exploring the use of AI to simulate teams in asynchronous learning on demand, allowing for a flexible learning environment that still provides the benefits of our methodology.

# What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

One important piece of advice for founders is to trust their instincts. In

terms of logistics, a lot of the early set up of a company is to navigate legal agreements between founders and investors. Organisations need to ensure that agreements such as founding agreements are rigorous because they only need to get them out of the drawer if there are problems.

## And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

My daily routine typically involves some form of exercise and using a standing desk for at least the morning. I try to maintain a healthy work-life balance by closing the office door whenever possible in the evenings and weekends, although I don't always succeed. I also try to take a break for lunch away from my desk.

The rest of my day involves a combination of business and operational tasks. Some days can be quite long, especially when working on the business and in the classroom (sometimes until 9 pm).

Dr. Andrea Cullen is the CEO and Co-founder of [CAPSLOCK](#).