

The Scale-Up Playbook: North Star and Product Strategy

Moving from chaos to clarity

CreateFuture



Introduction

It's a story we hear from executives and founders again and again. The superpowers that launched their start-up – a clear vision, gut decisions, and pure hustle – are becoming their kryptonite. As they scale, they lose a little of their start-up magic.

The velocity, pace of change, and rapid decision-making that once felt fluid now become slow and tangled. Priorities clash, decisions stall, structures are unclear – and progress depends more on personalities than process. They face the uncomfortable truth: what got them here won't get them there.

Our strategy, engineering and product teams at CreateFuture have had the great privilege of working embedded inside businesses that have grown from humble beginnings and have since become global brands. Some of these, such as FanDuel and Multiverse, have achieved unicorn status.

It's fair to say that after experiencing these kinds of partnerships, we're hooked - it's where we genuinely thrive: contributing to business on a fast-scaling trajectory.

As an independent digital consultancy that has scaled from 50 to over 500 people in five years, we've also learned from our own growth journey.

Today, our clients number some of the most dynamic UK brands out there, including Skyscanner, Multiverse, and MoneySavingExpert.



110m+ monthly users

multiverse

22,000 global learners

MoneySavingExpert

16m+ monthly users

A modern framework for scaling

We've distilled the hard-won lessons from these journeys into this playbook. We built it to help you at every stage of the growth curve, from fast organic growth to the stages between funding rounds. This playbook serves as a reference point for when rapid growth brings complexity, teams pulling in different directions, and risk. In its pages, you'll find the questions and tools to pressure-test your strategy, uncover bottlenecks, and make the moves that unlock progress.

But tools alone won't get you there. The journey is too important to leave to chance. We're here to keep the process objective: it's easy to burn months on the wrong priorities.

With over 500 experts, we're a genuinely viable alternative to Big Consulting, with the scale to take on the most important and impactful digital transformation challenges. If you need a plan that delivers, we can help de-risk your growth journey and unleash your business potential.

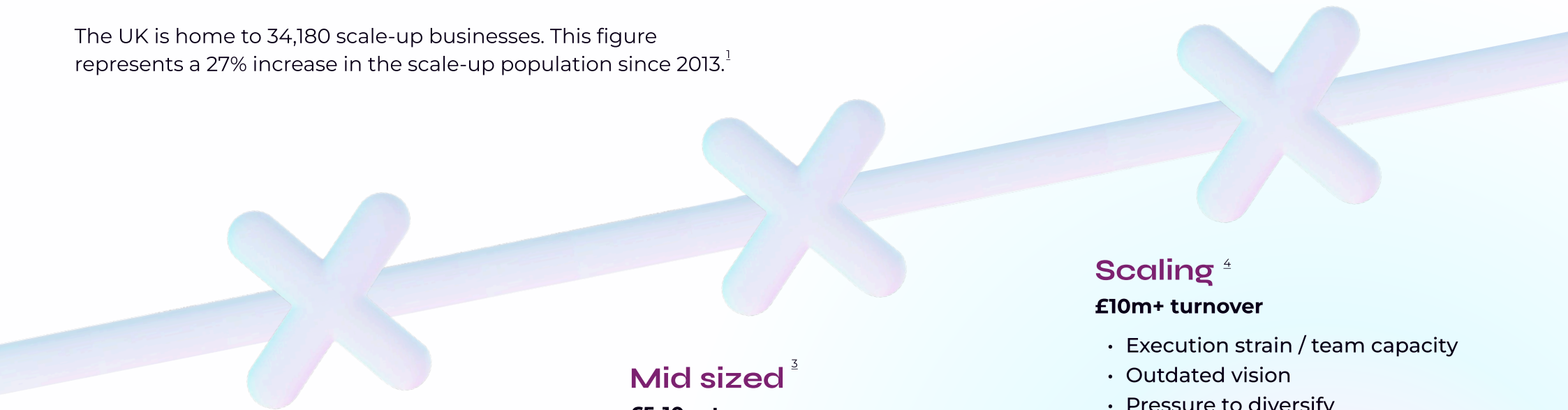
We always begin with your direction of travel, creating a consumable, marketable destination for your business. It's the anchor point for every decision you'll make while scaling, and setting the correct direction is the first step to go from chaos to clarity.



Your Scale-Up Journey:

The Challenges Ahead

The UK is home to 34,180 scale-up businesses. This figure represents a 27% increase in the scale-up population since 2013.¹



Early stage²

£0-5m turnover

- Loss of clarity
- Founder-led vision
- Hockey-stick growth trap

78%

of companies that successfully build a product and find product-market fit fail to scale.

Mid sized³

£5-10m turnover

- Decisions by opinion
- Poor onboarding / churn
- Weak team alignment

92%

of scale-ups with a mentor find the guidance valuable.

Scaling⁴

£10m+ turnover

- Execution strain / team capacity
- Outdated vision
- Pressure to diversify

66%

of scale-ups identify hiring skilled employees as their biggest growth barrier.

1: www.scaleupinstitute.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Scaleups-in-the-UK-2024.pdf

2: www.mckinsey.com/uk/our-insights/the-mckinsey-uk-blog/the-scale-up-conundrum

3: www.scaleupinstitute.org.uk/scaleup-review-2022/leadership-policy-overview

4: www.inspirepeople.net/employer-branding-tech-recruitment-insights/scale-up-institute-review

CHAPTER 1:

Strategy & Direction: From Tactical to Transformative

There are many ways to set direction, and most leaders experiment with a few. Vision statements inspire, but often feel too lofty to guide day-to-day decisions. Others turn to frameworks like OKRs, which provide structure but can quickly become heavy, complex, and disconnected from the customer.

Mission statements, values, and strategic pillars all play their part – but none on their own give a fast-scaling business a single, unifying point of focus.

That's where the North Star comes in.



SECTION 1

What is a North Star, and why does it matter?

Let's start with what it isn't: it's not your mission, your vision, and it's definitely not a set of OKRs (which can sometimes feel like homework).

A North Star is a clear, measurable indicator that captures the core value you deliver to customers. It provides everyone, from leadership to frontline teams, with a shared destination – and it removes ambiguity when priorities compete. Unlike OKRs or detailed roadmaps, it's simple, durable, and always points the business in the same direction.

It's all about clarity and focus. Your mission is the big-picture 'why' – the reason you exist. Your North Star Metric (NSM) is the 'how' – the one metric that tells you if you're actually delivering value. And your goals are the 'what' – the specific, short-term actions you take to move that metric.

This matters most in a scale-up. When speed slows, priorities clash, and decisions stall, a North Star helps to cut through the noise. It restores focus, replacing personality-driven decision-making with clarity, and gives the entire company a way to move fast again without the chaos of 'just one more push' to get things done.



When your business is accelerating and expanding over 20% year on year, refining your North Star might be the furthest thing on your mind. In reality, it should be the one thing that matters most – a powerful statement that can shift the needle from chasing the tactical to driving real transformation.

Make it a singular point of focus for the next 12 to 24 months.

Give it the room and elevate its standing. This is the priority that counts. It's the anchor that keeps you from scattering across endless targets, creating the space to execute with intention.

Not just a KPI, a good North Star should be:

Grounded in customer value: It reflects the core value customers actually get from your product or service, not just revenue.

Measurable and unambiguous: Everyone knows exactly how it's calculated, with no room for interpretation.

Simple and memorable: It's a rallying point more than a reporting tool; it should be easy to explain across the company, and people should be able to recall it without opening a one-pager.

Moved by what the team does: A common pitfall is choosing metrics the team can't influence – those that are external or purely market-driven. A good NSM is one that the team can actively choose to guide their decisions and actions.

How your North Star connects to Mission, Vision and Values

Leaders often push back on the idea of one metric. The breakthrough comes when you show how the North Star links mission to goals – translating purpose into measurement, and then into action.

A North Star doesn't stand alone. It's powerful because it links back to your organisation's mission and values, and forward to the work your teams deliver every day. Without that chain of connection, it risks becoming just another metric.





Your 'Why'

Your Mission

This is your purpose. It's the reason you get up in the morning, and it should inspire your team and your customers. It's not a target; it's a belief.

Example (Retail Bank):

The mission for the mobile app was 'to empower customers by supercharging their money, unlocking value and supporting their life goals – all in one place.' This vision gave the teams a clear purpose to rally behind and framed the app as a trusted hub for money management, not just a place to check balances.



Your 'How'

Your NSM

This is your single, most important metric. It connects everything you do to the value you create. It's a leading indicator, not a lagging one. It tells you if you're on the right track before the revenue numbers do.

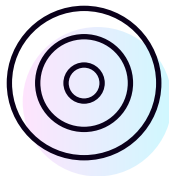
Example:

The NSM was defined as 'increase in number of customers using the mobile app as their primary channel for banking.' This single measure became the source of truth across product and design – aligning day-to-day delivery with the broader mission of empowering customers to take control of their finances in one place.



A North Star doesn't stand alone. It's powerful because it links back to your organisation's mission and values, and forward to the work your teams deliver every day.





Your 'What'
Your Goals

These are the clear, actionable targets you set to move your NSM. They're time-bound and specific, built to drive the business forward one sprint at a time.

Example:
A good short- to medium-term goal was set: 'increase monthly active users (MAU) of the mobile budget planning tool by 20% within the next six months.' By focusing on a feature that deepens engagement, the team could nudge customers toward more frequent, meaningful use of the app – in turn driving adoption as their primary banking channel.

Characteristic	Mission Statement	North Star Metric	Goal/ Objective
Why?	Your fundamental purpose.	The single best measure of value delivered.	A specific milestone.
What?	A qualitative, inspirational statement.	A quantitative, measurable metric.	A specific, time-bound target.
How long?	Enduring, rarely changes.	Long-term, but can evolve.	Short- to medium-term.
Example	'To empower customers by supercharging their money, unlocking value and supporting their life goals – all in one place.'	'Increase in number of customers using the mobile app as their primary channel for banking.'	'Increase MAU of the mobile budget planning tool by 20% within the next six months.'

Together, the mission sets the ultimate purpose, the NSM quantifies the long-term success of that purpose, and the goal provides a specific, actionable step to make progress toward that success. This clear, cascading relationship shows a strong and cohesive product strategy.

Make your North Star unmissable

Can you ask five people in your company where it's going and get the same answer? If not, that's a common signal that the team is slipping off course. That's the quickest test of whether your North Star is doing its job – and if it's not, people are already pulling in different directions. At the scale-up stage, that lack of a shared purpose presents a critical risk to sustainable growth.

Scaling is a race between ambition and clarity: push ahead without it and teams scatter; move too slowly and the market moves on.

The result is a costly trail of wasted time and missed opportunities.

Writing a North Star statement is the easy part. The true test is whether every person can explain it and how their role contributes. That shared understanding needs to flow through the company: people should see the link from their daily effort, to their team's goals, to their department's priorities, to the organisation's direction. Even then, a North Star isn't static; as your business grows, the vision that got you here must evolve with it.

We help clients make their North Star into one shared mission, turning a simple statement into a powerful tool that aligns teams, clarifies priorities, and accelerates growth.

“

Can you ask five people in your company where it's going and get the same answer? If not, that's a common signal that the team is slipping off course.

”

Evolve. Don't erase.

When a company reaches the scale-up stage, the founder's original vision has already proved itself. It brought in customers, attracted a team, and established product-market fit. The task now is not to discard it, but to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

This phase is about building on that success so the vision can carry the company through its next stage of growth. That often means strengthening it through wider collaboration and deeper research.

A clear sense of continuity matters; people should still recognise the core of what inspired them to join, even as it adapts to the reality of a larger, more complex business.

If you skip this step, you risk clinging to a vision that no longer matches your market or operations. The question then becomes: how do you evolve the vision without losing the authenticity that made it powerful in the first place?





Capture different perspectives

The answer is to move from a vision that lives in one person's head to one that reflects the whole organisation. To make it feel shared, not handed down, you must capture cultural perspectives from every level of the business.

That means running stakeholder interviews that go beyond the boardroom to include:

New hires who see the company with fresh eyes.

Frontline staff who deal directly with your customers daily.

Senior leaders responsible for executing the company's strategy.

We witnessed this trap firsthand with a healthtech scale-up. The team had become addicted to chasing the hockey-stick curve, the 10x growth every investor, board, and shareholder celebrates.

On the surface it looked like success, but underneath it was masking some real challenges: the business was caught in a cycle of short-term fixes, reacting to immediate issues rather than building the foundations for sustainable growth. Progress was fast, but not always in the right direction.

Redefining the vision with input from across the organisation created a turning point. It helped the leadership team shift from constant problem-solving to focusing on long-term growth and replacing uncertainty with clarity. Because it wasn't just a new strategy written at the top, but a purpose shaped by voices across the business, people felt a stronger sense of ownership. And that matters: research in Harvard Business Review shows purpose-driven companies outperform the market by **5–7% per year** in growth and profitability.

That can mean running storytelling workshops to build compelling narratives, guiding teams through future press release exercises that bring the vision to life in concrete terms, or producing short, impactful videos that make the vision easy to share and digest across the business.

These activities not only socialise the vision but also ensure it becomes part of the organisation's culture – consistently understood and acted on at every level.



Communicate your vision clearly

A North Star that's just an abstract idea won't unite a company. To make it real and actionable, you need to give people something concrete to hold onto.

Individuals connect with direction in different ways: a powerful statement inspires some, a single metric drives others, and a vivid picture of the future provides clarity for the rest. The most effective North Stars cater to all of them by combining these elements into a single, cohesive framework.

One of the best ways to do this is by building your North Star around a mix of practical artefacts:

- 1. A Vision Statement:** A short, memorable sentence that captures the company's purpose and inspires the team.
- 2. A North Star Metric:** A single, measurable goal, often tied to a specific customer behaviour you want to influence.
- 3. A Vision Blueprint:** A detailed picture of the future customer experience that shows teams what they are building towards.

Together, these elements make the company's direction both inspiring and operational. One major travel scale-up we've worked with shared the parallel stories of two customers whose journeys eventually converged, providing its employees with a powerful narrative instead of just bullet points.

Without these real-world components, a North Star remains an abstract idea that quickly fades, resulting in the kind of disconnected work that wastes time and money.

Embed your North Star in everyday decisions

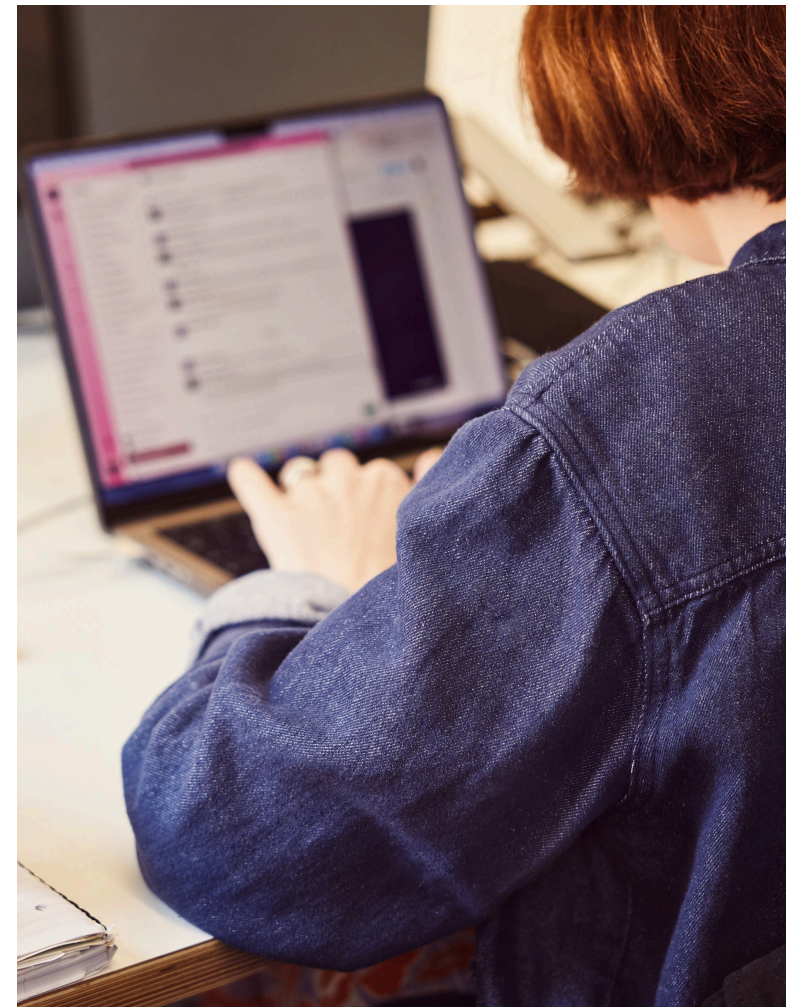
Your North Star must become the filter for every decision and priority, connecting your high-level direction to the everyday business goals.

While creating workable artefacts is a critical milestone, the real impact comes from weaving them into the fabric of your daily operations. Your North Star must be more than a one-off workshop output – and you can measure its influence in how often it naturally comes up in conversation.

In scale-ups that win in this area, people frequently reference the company's North Star to the point where colleagues start to joke about it.

The discipline is simple: at every quarterly or fortnightly review, teams must ask, 'Is this moving us closer to our North Star?' If the link isn't clear, that work shouldn't be on the table.

Listen for the warning signs: leaders making excuses or teams drifting into work that 'feels important' but moves nothing forward. When you see this, the response should be immediate.



Like Toyota's production system, where even small defects stop the line, scale-ups that get this right treat going off track as a critical failure and halt work until it's fixed. That pause is the moment to ask whether the vision is still right – or if the business needs to pivot to stay competitive. **Strong leaders don't wait for a crisis to do this; they track their confidence in the vision over time,** revisiting it as pricing, customer needs, or market shifts demand.

A simple scorecard can help keep teams honest:



Are current goals still contributing to the North Star?



Do teams still have influence over it?



Are reports showing the NSM is moving in the right direction?

This disciplined approach makes it clear when to press the 'big red button' – and ensures small drifts don't turn into costly detours.

SECTION 2

Product strategy:

Moving from a clear direction to a focused plan

Setting your North Star and embedding it in the culture locks in the company's direction. The next challenge is deciding how to get there. Answering that question is the job of your product strategy: translating that high-level vision into a plan that guides every feature, sprint, and new market entry.



Translate your North Star into a product strategy

In a scale-up, product strategy isn't a standalone artefact – it should draw directly from the business strategy. If your North Star and core objectives are clear, **every function should be asking: 'How will what we build move us closer to our North Star?'** It's the product equivalent of the rowing team's mantra: 'Will it make the boat go faster?' – a simple test that keeps focus on the one thing that matters.

The most effective method begins by bringing leaders from every vertical together to connect the dots and ground the conversation in facts, rather than opinions.

Done well, product roadmap becomes an extension of the business plan – showing exactly how to scale, make processes repeatable, and create a defensible market position.

You can draft this yourself, but it's difficult to spot gaps from inside the day-to-day. An external partner can bring the objectivity and structure that help leadership teams align on one clear, shared direction – and turn ambitious goals into repeatable results.

But what happens when that direction isn't clear, or it's aimed at the wrong target?

“

Every function should be asking: 'How will what we build move us closer to our North Star?'

”



Know the risks of a misaligned product strategy

When product strategy goes wrong, the damage isn't minor. The two fundamental risks are clear: you can end up building something the market doesn't want, or you can focus on the wrong problem entirely.

All too often, teams pour resources into adding features when their onboarding experience is so poor that most new customers drop out before seeing value. The lesson is simple: find the most valuable problems to solve first. That means understanding where changes will have the most critical impact on the business, from long-term growth to customer retention, before committing resources.

A good process is important – but the real safeguard is knowing how to spot the red flags early.

Warning signs of a product strategy that's lost its way include:

- Decisions being driven by opinion rather than evidence
- Features or services that go unused
- Customer dissatisfaction rising and churn increasing as people move to cheaper alternatives
- Poor team dynamics and lack of cross-team collaboration
- Forecasts that are consistently missed

Recognising these signals early helps prevent teams from pouring effort into the wrong product, de-risks costly development, and keeps strategy on track.

Match your strategy to your biggest challenge

Product strategy is never one-size-fits-all. The right approach depends on the primary pressure your business is under. To illustrate, we've outlined four distinct strategies below, each drawn from a real-world client engagement where a specific business pressure dictated the path forward:

- 1. Stakeholder alignment:** Stakeholders at one consumer finance brand were pulling in three directions. The commercial team wanted a retention play, editors wanted a membership model, and the founder wanted to protect the brand's core mission. By setting clear guardrails, we built a single, cohesive strategy the entire organisation could back.
- 2. De-risking:** A healthtech company relied on a single unregulated product for 95% of its revenue. The risk was huge. The strategy focused on creating a defensible moat and diversifying into new markets, all while building towards a targeted exit in five years.
- 3. Customer experience:** Designers built a financial services app around internal product silos instead of customer needs. They targeted mid-salary households, but the app's actual users turned out to be wealthy retirees. The fix was a set of clear experience principles acting as decision-making filters for every new feature.
- 4. Market expansion:** A B2B platform had reached the limits of its home market and needed a credible expansion plan to attract investment. A strong internal purpose guided the plan. The team wanted to enter markets where they could make a meaningful difference, not just generate profits.

The risk of a mismatch is clear: you end up wasting time and resources while leaving the real threat to your growth unresolved. We provide the clear-eyed, external view needed to ensure your strategy targets the right audience.

Plan your next move before you need it

Even the best-aligned strategies eventually outgrow their original scope, at which point the conversation turns to diversification. The most effective scale-up leaders plan their next move long before they make it, using strategic foresight to map out plausible futures based on market and technology trends.

At least once a year, leadership teams should step back to ask the big questions: Is our vision still right? Are we in the right market?

Are we still relevant? This critical health check prevents complacency and keeps the company alert to changes in customer behaviour, competitor activity, and emerging technology.

The cost of skipping this check-up is a gradual loss of market position to more agile competitors. That's why we push leadership teams to take this uninterrupted time away from the business, working with a facilitator who can keep the conversation honest, focused, and productive.

“

‘At least once a year, leadership teams should step back and ask the big questions: is our vision still right? Are we in the right market? Are we still relevant?’

”

What comes next

You've now seen how a clear North Star and a focused product strategy can align teams, close the gap between ambition and execution, and protect you from costly missteps. This shared focus is the foundation of scaling – but it's only the first step.

At the scale-up stage, you manage multiple teams and bigger investments, facing intense pressure to hit the milestones that unlock your next period of growth in just a few short years.

The next chapter takes us from strategy to execution. We'll explore how to develop the delivery capability that keeps pace with your ambitions and ensures you equip every team to deliver outcomes at scale.

If you want to get there faster and with fewer wrong turns, now is the time to pressure-test your current plan. Book a North Star & Product Strategy call and we'll show you exactly how to set your direction, align your teams, and deliver on the goals that matter most.

Book a North Star strategy call

Who we are

CreateFuture is an award-winning digital consultancy delivering high-quality technology consulting at pace. We embrace AI to drive meaningful business impact for ambitious brands in Financial Services, Consumer Technology, Travel, iGaming, and Public Sector – including PayPal, adidas, NatWest, Baillie Gifford, MoneySavingExpert, Skyscanner, Penguin Random House, Multiverse, and FanDuel.

With over 500 professionals across five locations in the UK and Europe, we deliver end-to-end digital transformation covering CX Strategy, Product Innovation, AI Enablement, Cloud & Infrastructure, and Data & Analytics. We believe in the transformational power of digital. We're on an action-driven mission: to create tomorrow, together, today.

CreateFuture

Create Tomorrow, Together, Today