

Pandemic has widened the digital skills gap

With the UK economy likely to take an upward trajectory post Covid, the ICT industry must first bridge the digital skills gap that threatens to block its path, writes Greg Denholm. This issue is not new to our industry and nor should it take our readers and contributors by surprise. Back in 2016 IBM tech guru Sanjay Brahmawar predicted we would have one million unfilled jobs in the IT sector by 2020. He was not wrong.

At the end of 2020, Tech Nation's UK Tech Ecosystem update report supported by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Digital Economy Council, revealed that a tenth of all UK job vacancies are tech roles. They estimated then that if the growth continued at the same rate, there would be 100,000 job vacancies per month before the end of June 2021.

Last year, the Open University concluded that the UK skills shortage is currently costing organisations £6.3bn which, according to Crissi Williams, CEO of the Institute of Telecoms Professionals (ITP), has been greatly exacerbated by Covid-19.

"The skills gap is particularly significant in the context of the pandemic, with many businesses pivoting towards a more digital focus, and many employees continuing to work remotely, meaning digital skills are more valuable than ever," she said.

Williams cited Microsoft's report 'Unlocking the UK's Potential with Digital Skills', which reveals a macro image of how recruiters are viewing the issue.

The report found that 80% of UK leaders believe investment in digital skills will be important to the country's post Covid-19 economic recovery, whilst 78% also view a large pool of digital talent as essential to the UK's competitiveness. And, two-thirds of UK business leaders surveyed said their organisation was facing a digital skills gap, with concerns being expressed that new roles could go unfilled.

This illuminates an ongoing issue for recruiters. With the technologies we utilise and sell being improved and replaced at an exponential rate, the industry must ensure new hires and existing staff are up to date with the digital skills required. This is a view shared by this month's Kaleidoscope contributors.



SOHINI RAIATHATHA
REDSQUID

"During the last year, technology has rapidly and fundamentally changed the way we work, which has instantly increased the demand we have for digital skills in our workforce. This change, which occurred overnight, created an instant demand for the right candidates with the suitable qualifications. The shortage of digital skills must be addressed quickly to avoid the otherwise serious issues we will meet, which will affect both our economy and society. I find it paramount that the industry takes on responsibility to upskill and develop the talent we already have. This will make us equipped to handle the change in digitalisation and cloud-based solutions going forward. To overcome this shift, re-training of workforces should be implemented continuously while accelerating the learning curve. This will be the only way to prepare our industry to meet customer demand and the speed of which new technologies continue to develop."



PAUL WATSON
TRUSTACK

"The Coronavirus pandemic has had a profound effect on IT skills and the IT services industry. Demand for IT services such as agile working or cloud-based services has increased due to national and local lockdowns, placing much greater demand on IT skills which were in short supply before COVID had an impact. In addition, both the pandemic and the skills shortage have been catalysts for widespread consolidation within the IT sector; companies are either being acquired and consolidated or are themselves an acquirer. Consolidation is being seen as a way to 'buy' the IT skills which companies need to develop those services in demand such as cybersecurity and cloud services. Once acquired, highly skilled individuals are being well looked after with salary increases and enhanced benefit packages effectively placing them out of reach of smaller companies, compounding the skills shortage even further."



AIDAN PIPER
WELCOMM
COMMUNICATIONS

"With the technology industry booming and traditional geographic barriers no longer a concern for many employers due to newly introduced remote working policies, we are finding it challenging to onboard skilled IT personnel ready to hit the ground running from day one. We are seeing an influx of hospitality and tourism trained workers applying for support roles, but often they do not have the digital skills or experience that we need to support our business customers. As our lives become more digitally oriented, with devices and applications increasingly accessible and integrated in everyone's day-to-day working lives, I think it is incredibly important for all of our people to have exposure and understanding of how our technology solutions work. That is why, as an industry, we must shift our focus and invest heavily in internal training programs, providing opportunities to develop those that show potential to deliver greater value to customers."



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Digital skills gap in ICT industry



DARROL STEVENS
NEOCI

"This has a lot to do with employer expectations. For example, 10-15 years ago companies were more open to considering candidates with transferable skills and were more willing to invest in training. The technical advances we've seen in recruitment tools such as job boards, professional networking etc. mean that finding a nearly exact match to your job description is more achievable. Employers have high expectations because this is what they've become used to. I think the problem isn't necessarily a lack of suitable talent, but rather a lack of willingness to invest in training. A job description used to be a summary of what was expected in a role. These days, it's become more of a checklist for what you need to be doing already. If employers can embrace a 'will over skill' approach to hiring and invest in training, this will help bridge the gap."



LIZ MCDOWALL
ICA

"As an SME, recruitment is a highly concentrated process for us because the impact on our business is far greater than for some of our larger competitors. Finding potential candidates with suitable qualifications is easy, if you remain open-minded and have time to mould and nurture. However, finding the right candidate, with desired experience and skills for working in technology is difficult. It immediately narrows the criteria, overlooking credible people because they have not got desired qualifications in STEM or any prior work experience in the industry. To bridge the gap for those entering the sector, a grounding platform to build knowledge and understanding is a necessity. The induction into the sector needs to be just as concentrated as the recruitment process is. However, this creates the new challenge of keeping this up with an ever-changing industry that can become outdated within the space of 12 months."



CHERIE HOWLETT
JOLA CLOUD SOLUTIONS

"At Jola we have recruited staff during lockdown on Teams in sales, provisioning, accounts and support departments. We are currently recruiting for sales and marketing positions and have been pleased with the volume and quality of the applications. We are passionate about building a diverse team and train and mentor in-house to encourage staff to develop their careers with us. In our industry we have the advantage of using the technologies we sell, so are in a good position to offer work experience and apprenticeship programmes to enable new starters to learn on the job and acquire relevant qualifications. It also allows us to employ the right people and bring them into the channel from other industries. Online and distance learning is much more popular today and easy to fit into busy lives. It is often more cost-effective too, which helps the training budget go further."



ADAM CATHCART
9 GROUP

"As the country emerges out of lockdown, we've observed a surge in recruitment across the board, which is positive to see. We've spotted a trend amongst ambitious candidates who are at the early stages of their career, searching for their next step up. The quality of candidates that we've had approach us has been phenomenal. There's no doubt that a basic digital skillset is almost universally required these days. Four in five job vacancies now require candidates with a basic digital skill set, but around a quarter of applicants have a skills gap, according to a research by the Learning and Work Institute. The channel plays a crucial role in driving digital growth, both through delivering solutions that transforms how people work, and by helping to develop its employees to become digital leaders. Helping young people to establish strong digital skills is crucial, as they will form our future workforce."



LAUREN MCMANUS
GAMMA

"Firstly, it's important to understand why there is a digital skills gap in the UK. The way businesses operate has changed because of rapid advancements in technology and the implementation of digital transformation strategies across all industries. Because of this, the skills required for any given jobs have also changed and the digital skills gap will only continue to grow as technology continues to evolve. The bad news is that it's not an issue you can just throw money at in hope of recruiting more skilled employees. In a few years, even your new, highly-skilled recruits won't be suitable for those jobs generated by the coming technological advancements. The solution lies in investing to reskill current employees. Whether through an ad-hoc programme, or by enrolling employees into third-party courses, businesses will need to ensure their existing employees have the digital skills required to succeed in the Fourth Industrial Revolution."



ANDY MURPHY
PESCADO HOSTED

"Without doubt it is a difficult market to find the right blend of personality, fit and the digital skills/experience we need as an employer. At Pescado we are generally choosing to look at apprentice/junior level employment, with individuals we see as the right 'team fit' and then look to upskill them with specific internal training. We are also looking at implementing a buddy system with more experienced colleagues who will act as a technical mentor providing that real world experience. In terms of what the industry can do to drive this and assist, we need more generic training availability in areas such as Installation and Operational ordering/porting – these sort of training courses would be an invaluable additional to induction plans for junior staff."

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