

State of the Workforce Survey 2023 Results

State of the Workforce 2023 examines the changing skills and labour market across the tourism and hospitality sector in Northern Ireland, incorporating the views of over 75 employers. The second in **a series of themed reports**, this edition looks at the effect that skills gaps and shortages are having upon the sector.

Skills Gaps and Shortages

What the research is telling us:

Employers report that core/soft skills and behaviours are where they anticipate challenges both now and in the future. They also highlight that skills gaps are occupying one spot in a wider context of overlapping issues: high vacancies; churn; pay rises and inflation and staff shortages.

There is a continual move towards digital skills needs as new technology is used to drive efficiency and customer expectations shift towards digital interaction. Employers report there are still gaps in digital skills, especially for older demographics. On the other side of the coin, physical interaction with customers is still a need, and there is an expressed lack of interpersonal skills, especially among younger new starters.

Environmental skills are also highlighted as a strong development need, for entry level workers especially. Whilst energy saving and reducing carbon footprint tends to be a focus at central/planning level, the training at entry level isn't as widely available.

Rapid promotions into middle management are also shown to be causing large skills gaps in effective management and leadership skills.



Assessment of current skills needs

Employers rated current skills development needs on these five overarching themes - customer service, digital, environmental, resilience and management skills. The following skills were identified as having a high development need:

Customer service

 <p>Persuasive speaking skills</p>	 <p>Dealing with difficult customers</p>	 <p>Willingness to improve</p>	 <p>Time management</p>
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Digital

- Artificial intelligence/robotics
- E-commerce
- Augmented reality/virtual reality
- Marketing online
- Monitoring online reviews
- Social media









Environmental

- Ability to minimise the use of energy
- Use of environmentally friendly practices
- Knowledge of climate change
- Promotion of environmentally friendly activities



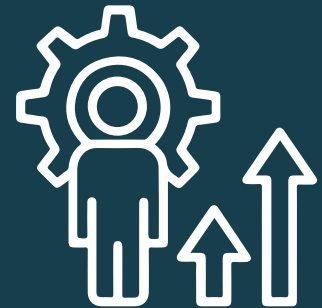
Resilience

 <p>Problem solving</p>	 <p>Flexibility</p>	 <p>Initiative</p>
 <p>Self-awareness</p>	 <p>Well-being</p>	 <p>Managing conflict</p>

Management

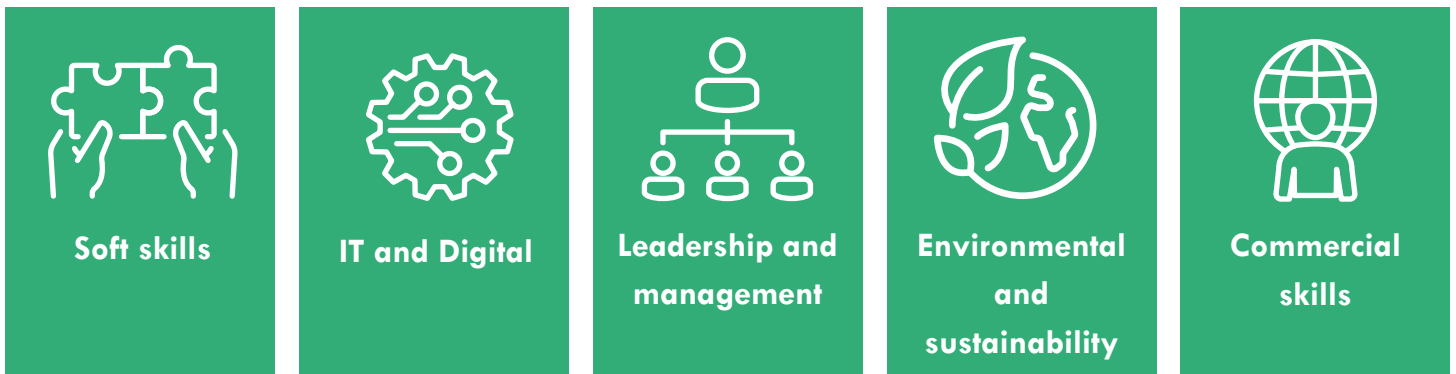
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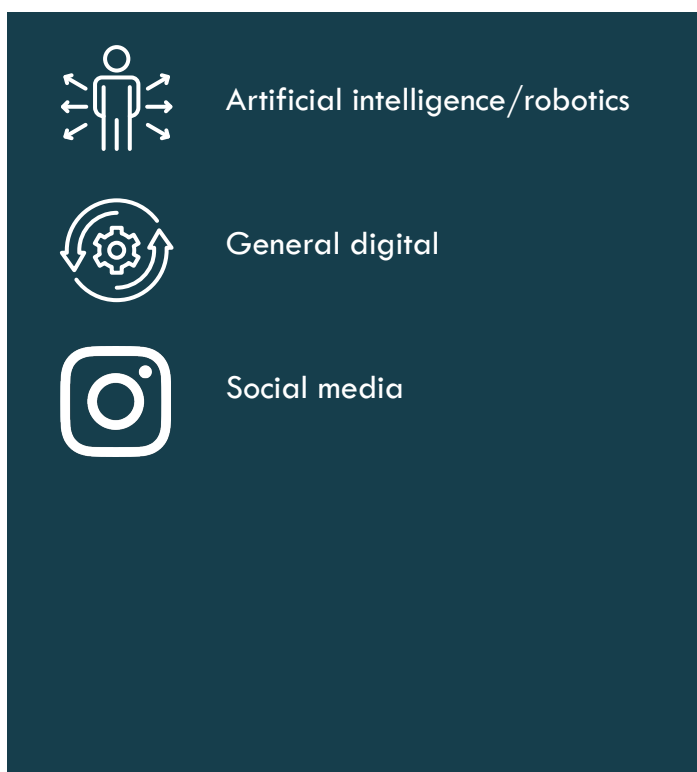
Emerging skills needs

Employers were asked to describe emerging skills needs in the next two years. The five most common themes were:



Taking a closer look at IT and digital and soft skills, the top referenced skills include:

Digital



Soft skills



Effective approaches being adopted by employers include



Skills mapping and assessment:

- Develop occupational profiles that map out the knowledge, core and technical skills and behaviours for each specific role.
- Identify performance gaps within teams.
- Conduct skills needs assessments with employees to identify gaps.
- Develop learning plans to address skill gaps and enhance existing skills in order to improve performance levels and support role mobility.



Greater communication between education and industry:

- Engage with a local college, university and/or training provider to develop effective partnership working to support in building a skilled and robust future talent pipeline.
- Offering work experience for students, running masterclasses or guest lectures and providing CPD opportunities for college staff are just a few opportunities.
- In return colleges/universities/training providers can offer access to work-ready staff and skills solutions to upskill existing employees.



Establish a culture of lifelong learning:

- Continually upskill and reskill the workforce to provide staff with up to date, flexible skillsets, enabling the organisation to stay competitive.
- Provide quality learning opportunities through flexible learning pathways, micro-credentials and hybrid learning.



Give managers access to continuous professional development:

- Support and develop staff with managerial responsibilities through a hybrid of learning formats including face-to-face and virtual training and development, e-learning and coaching to give them the skills to become competent managers that can lead on developing the talent pipeline.



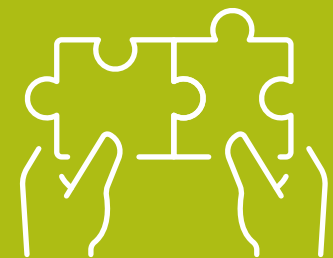
Incorporate behaviours into job descriptions, induction and appraisals:

- Build in clear expectations around behaviours within job descriptions and the induction process.
- Support this with a common set of constructive workplace behaviours that are measured within performance reviews to create a sense of shared accountability in the team for their behaviours and impact.

HATS Network response

We live in a dynamic and turbulent world dominated by constant, rapid change - new regulations, new technology, shifts in customer service preferences, changing visitor markets, as well as other mega drivers – all of which have the potential to impact the type of skills that employees in tourism will need to possess in the future. The fact that 70% of employers do not believe the training and development opportunities they offer fully meet the skills needs of employees is evidence of the situation the industry faces. Without investment in training and development that targets an individual's specific learning needs, the skill gaps will not close. Employers need to make sure their people have the skills to meet these customer expectations and adapt to changes in the future. Education and training providers need to be aware of the potential future requirements of the labour market to make sure that they offer individuals and businesses the training and development they require to be competitive in the future. Closing the skills gap remains critical to growing an internationally competitive tourism industry.

Core skills are becoming increasingly important in the modern workplace. There is a growing recognition that the development of the essential skills such as problem solving, initiative, teamwork and self-motivation are crucial to enabling employees to secure and retain a job and progress and adapt as they develop their skills in response to changes in technology or the workplace. Without essential core skills, businesses risk losing out on increased productivity, stronger interpersonal relationships, and more innovation.



It's unsurprising that in a people-oriented industry, employers continue to highlight that customer handling and communication skills are critical both now and in the future, and that competencies such as dealing with difficult customers and conflict resolution continue to rise in importance. These social skills, coupled with the growing importance of digital and environmental skills that reflect the ongoing technological transformations and the emerging opportunities related to sustainability have again been recognised as critical for both the current and future workforce. These findings align heavily with those of the **Next Tourism Generation research** which provides a European and National Blueprint Strategy to respond to the fast changing and increasing skills gaps in digital, green and social skills sets.



The identification by employers of team leaders/first line managers and supervisors requiring the highest level of development aligns with wider research indicating that more and more managers and leaders are being promoted without the skills they need to fully perform their role. This affects a wide range of business areas, and can lead to low productivity rates, poor staff retention, reduced sales and turnover, and even loss of business. Without investment in developing these leaders of the future, these issues will only continue to grow.

To tackle the challenges highlighted it is imperative that:

- Core skills are embedded into education, pre-employment training, induction and on-going learning and development
- Leadership and management skills are prioritised to address the rise of the 'accidental manager'
- Customer handling skills are developed to foster high levels of service excellence
- Digital and green skills are built into education and training

To view other reports in the series visit hatsnetwork.co.uk/state-of-the-workforce-2023

We would like to thank Hospitality Ulster, Northern Ireland Hotels Federation, Northern Ireland Tourism Alliance and Tourism Northern Ireland for their support in disseminating the skills survey and encouraging their employer networks to take part.