

CASE STUDY:

Digital Skills Pilot: Developing digital skills to ‘Re-boot’ the regional and national economy

The pace of digital adoption and the use of new technologies has increased exponentially as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with many industry specialists calling the disruption witnessed a ‘quantum leap’ at both organisational and industry level.

Governments and companies across the world have been forced to accelerate the adoption of emerging technologies to mitigate the detrimental socio-economic impacts of the virus. Many Governments, including our own, have also recognised the role technology will play in supporting economic recovery and growth.

Despite the growing significance of digital technologies in the day-to-day operation of businesses, there exists a skills gap ‘*where workers simply don’t have the skills to meet the demands of a digitally powered economy*’. Data collated through an Open University survey evidenced the extent of this skills gap with:

- 9 in 10 organisations in the UK lacking digital skills in areas including cybersecurity, cloud-based development and management and emerging technologies
- 56% of businesses reporting that skills gaps and shortages are already having a negative impact on productivity,
- half expecting profitability to be negatively affected in the next five years.

To help address this skills gap, at least in the West Midlands, the Combined Authority (WMCA) designed and implemented a Digital Skills Pilot project, with the dual aims of promoting and improving digital literacy and developing more technical and sector specific skills.



**West Midlands
Combined Authority**

CASE STUDY:

What we did

The Digital Skills Pilot is being delivered in two phases. Phase One, initially due to finish in July, has been extended until mid-2021, and offers digital skills training to unemployed WMCA residents, while the focus for Phase 2 has shifted to employed residents, seeking to enhance their digital literacy, and to increasing the number of women in technology.

Using a combination of stakeholder interviewing (including with providers), observation of training sessions, student satisfaction surveys, and a review of provider performance, our early-stage evaluation of Phase One provided WMCA with an evidence based assessment of the processes that the three active providers used to deliver bootcamp training of between 4 and 16 weeks, and a qualitative assessment of the early impacts on training providers, learners and the wider economy.



What we learnt

The overarching finding from this research is that bootcamp delivery is an effective and viable approach for accelerating digital skills development and equipping individuals for employment. However, the success of bootcamps is built on establishing an employer-based approach. As Clare Hatton, Head of Skills Delivery at WMCA states:

‘Employer-led projects and master classes allowed us to look beyond qualifications to develop training to deliver the skills employers actually need. The result is a programme that employers can reliably recruit from.’



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CASE STUDY:**Upskilling of unemployed residents**

- Students stated that their confidence with computers, and with basic IT and digital platforms, has been significantly enhanced and they feel in a stronger position to access employment in the near future
- Students have developed skills in employer requested specialisations such as Cybersecurity, DevOps, Machine Learning and Project Management
- Bootcamp delivery focuses on wider employability. Students were supported with CV development and interview preparation, but also helped to improve their verbal and written communication, team working and problem solving

Supporting employed residents to progress into higher-level roles

- Training, including the use of Digital Café's¹, provided much-needed flexibility to people working 9am to 5pm, and those with additional responsibilities, such as childcare. Access to the café was limited but provided users with access to one-to-one tutor support and more advanced IT equipment.

Effectiveness and viability of 'bootcamp' delivery

- Bootcamps of between 4 and 16 weeks have helped providers to engage with a large number of students and to prioritise learning outcomes and skills that are most important to equip students for employment
- The time between starting a course and securing either employment or an interview, or developing new skills, is short. This is attractive to students who need to find work quickly. This delivery approach is also attractive to students looking for a career change, who may be interested in the Tech and Digital sector but have limited experience of it.
- For businesses looking to support existing employees to develop new skills or enhance existing skills, short-course, intensive, provision limits the disruption to their day-to-day activities
- Employers can provide practical experience, where learners can contribute to business outcomes, while also being monitored throughout the course. This results in more immediate productivity gains from recruiting and reduces the risk of employing based only on an interview and aptitude tests.



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¹ Digital Café's operate outside of 'core' course hours and provide learners with access to equipment and tutor support for up to 3 hours on a couple of evenings a week. Learners are able to practice what they have learnt have receive help with completion of any assignments or portfolios.

CASE STUDY:

What happens next?

The Government is ZOOMing in on the rapidly growing tech sector and highlighting its role in job creation and improvements to efficiency and productivity. *‘Even now, in the midst of the COVID-19 recession, some 90,000 new job vacancies a week are being advertised.’*

The Prime Minister’s recent skills speech, of 29th September, explicitly set out plans to create new training opportunities for the 2.5m people who the Bank of England expects could be left unemployed by Christmas. A key pillar for these plans is a commitment *‘to roll out boot camps as a way to boost the UK’s digital skills in preparation for what we must surely hope will be a tech-led national revival.’*

Winning Moves’ recent evaluation of the Digital Skills pilot has taken on greater importance and will be of particular interest to Government, policy makers and other combined authorities and devolved institutions.

For further information on this project or on the work that Winning Moves is completing in the Education and Skills arena, please contact Michelle Hollier, Director of Research and Evaluation on michelleh@winningmoves.com or Paul Woodcraft, Consultant in Education and Skills on paulw@winningmoves.com



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