

Tackling the digital skills gap decimating businesses in a post-pandemic world

Young people have been some of the hardest hit by the pandemic, with individuals between 16-25 being the worst affected by job shortages. Salvatore Nigro CEO of JA Europe and Anna di Silverio, President of Europe for Avanade ask how businesses can tackle the digital skills gap and look at the importance of entrepreneurship programmes for youth employment.

According to a recent 165-page World Employment and Social Outlook report by the UN “all countries have suffered a sharp deterioration in employment and national income” during the pandemic, which has aggravated existing inequalities and risks long-term scarring effects on workers and enterprises. This has created an “unparalleled labour market crisis” that will affect the employment market for years to come.

Ironically, four in ten businesses across Europe are currently reporting difficulty in finding staff with the right skills, at time when over 140 million full time jobs have been lost across the world. These vacancies reflect skill shortages which

are already having adverse consequences on the productivity and competitiveness of European enterprises.

With the world changing beyond recognition, the pandemic is only accelerating these very real challenges.

There is currently a huge skills shortage in Europe, particularly when it comes to the digital sphere. A staggering 40% of the European population currently lack the necessary digital skills required to survive in today's market, meaning that the continent is heading towards a 'digital skills shortage disaster'. This issue is particularly prevalent amongst our youngest generation, where 3.1 million under 25s are currently unemployed, an increase of 438,000 from the same time in 2019. Given that youth unemployment was already one of the biggest problems that the EU faced before the crisis, this issue cannot be allowed to slip further down the list of priorities.

So why is it that this problem has been allowed to escalate? And how can businesses start to repair the decimating impact of the digital skills gap in a post-pandemic working era?

The answer lies within collaboration, investment, and commitment.

Whilst there is a lack of digital skills, there is not a lack of talent. Businesses across Europe, of all sizes, need to work more effectively with government agencies and nonprofits to introduce catch up schemes, training and reskilling programmes and job guarantees, to help prepare youth for work.

Investing in these areas would help to drastically fill the current skill gaps and equip the next generation with the talents needed for long-term economic recovery. This is even more crucial in countries such as Spain where the youth

unemployment rate has surpassed 40%, requiring significant investment into upskilling, access to financial support, entrepreneurship-start up support and mentoring.

Educational institutions also need to work more effectively with businesses to implement these sorts of programmes. There are more barriers to higher education than ever before, and the transition from education to work is as large as it has ever been. University curriculums alone are not specialised enough to close this gap, so what we need are tailored learning platforms.

This is a fight *JA Europe* and *Avanade* are spearheading through our entrepreneurship and work readiness programmes, supporting hundreds of thousands of under 25-year-olds. We focus on teaching critical work and digital skills that prepare young people for college, trade school, or the workforce. Whether job shadowing skilled mentors, testing their skills through digital experiences, or developing solutions during technical and business challenges – JA students are prepared for the future of work. And the immediate benefits from these programmes are clear, evidenced by JA alumni attaining degrees in higher numbers as well as being 25% less likely to be unemployed after graduation.

A new Generation in Europe has born: Gen-E, the generation of Europeans who believe in the importance of Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship as witnessed by the recent gathering of the most entrepreneurial minds of the Gen-E competition and in an ever-changing technological world, competition is rife. There is no room for employees and entrepreneurs to lack digital skills or businesses to neglect the upskilling of staff. However, through collaboration, investment and commitment to training, employees can future proof their careers and businesses can unlock their performance capabilities, sustainably.

Salvatore Nigro is the CEO of JA Europe and Anna di Silverio is the President of Europe for Avanade