

Can Gen Z really 'save' us from the digital skills shortage?

As much as others might like to claim otherwise, no generation is quite as in tune with tech as Gen Z. Whilst those before them were born into a world with varying degrees of technological exposure, Gen Z are the first truly digital native generation.

Considering they were immediately exposed to a world of high-speed internet, global connectivity, and phones with the processing power of supercomputers, it's no surprise that the innate digital skills of Gen Zers far outweigh that of any other generation.

But when it comes to the digital skills needed to succeed in the workplace, there is a slight disconnect between the kind of tech skills Gen Zers are expected to have, and those they actually possess. IT leaders, for example, overwhelmingly feel that *Gen Z are the silver bullet* that can help alleviate the increasing digital skills gap. But young people clearly aren't quite as confident. Only a quarter of 16-24-year-olds surveyed think their age is an advantage when applying for tech jobs, according to a report by CWJobs. For the majority (56%), a career in the IT industry seems "complicated".

Rather than just assuming Gen Z will enter the workforce fully equipped with the necessary tech skills for future job roles, we need to take a step back and assess how we can shape their experiences - both in higher education and in

the early part of their careers – so they are put on the right skills development pathway.

Understanding the disconnect

The UK's digital skills gap is a growing phenomenon that needs to be addressed. Whilst the exact 'size' of the skills gap is a point of contention, it's clear that there is a disconnect between the skills employers need in their workforce and those they can recruit for or already have at their disposal.

Research commissioned by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media & Sport shows for example, that almost half of businesses (46%) have struggled to recruit for roles that require data skills, whilst around a quarter of businesses said that their sectors had insufficient data skills in key areas like machine learning and programming.

Whilst it seems logical that the so-called 'digital generation' would be the antidote to the digital skills gap, there is still a lot of work needed from both sides to help them do so. Gen Z possess a large amount of natural ability when it comes to engaging with technology, and this will hold them in good stead as they enter the job market.

Knowing the basics of operating computers and smartphones negates the need for rudimentary tech training, and they're likely to be adept at multi-tasking when it comes to using tech through years of practice. There's also the element of being tapped into online trends and shaping digital discourse that other generations may be lagging behind in that makes the younger generation so valuable to businesses.

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But whilst Gen Z may possess the natural ability to engage with technology, that doesn't mean they know or have the resources to learn exactly which skills will be most needed by businesses in future. On top of this, a third (32%) of business leaders admitted that they wouldn't even know how to train them, leaving the likelihood of Gen Z slotting seamlessly into unfilled digital roles very unlikely.

What does digital skills really mean?

The first step to finding a solution is establishing a clear idea in the minds of both young people and employers on what digital skills really means in the context of work. Business leaders fail to understand that being raised around

technology doesn't directly correlate with all young people being equipped with the digital skills needed to thrive in tomorrow's workplace. There is also a lack of information being given to Gen Zers on what the most sought-after digital skills will be in upcoming years – this means that both employers and younger employees are left without clear direction when it comes to skills development and learning.

Faethm's data looks at which skills are likely to be most sought-after as technology progresses, as well as the professions where automation is likely to replace the need for certain skills. Professions in industries such as retail and manufacturing have a huge potential to be displaced by technology – for example, 21% of full-time equivalent retail cashier roles have the potential to be fully automated in 2022, whilst in financial services, the same data shows that 20% of admin work could be fulfilled by automation.

At the same time, Faethm's data shows that *demand for digital skills* will accelerate over the next five years, with digital collaboration and communication being the most sought after skills by Gen Zers. In data, there will be a significant increase in demand for people specialising in statistics and predictive modelling. This means that if the next generation of employees are to bridge the digital skills gap, then they need to be steered away from jobs most at risk of being replaced in the near future, and instead given specialist training to help equip them with the right skills in key areas.

Mapping out the future

Whilst investment in training is an important step to solving the digital skills gap, it won't be enough to simply throw vast sums at broad skills initiatives. There are varying levels of competency amongst those who are being trained, and some require different learning programmes to bridge their gaps in knowledge. Instead, you first need to address why this gap is appearing within your business specifically. With new tech comes new job roles and mapping out how the demands of work are set to evolve, along with how your own demand for skills will change as a result, is a useful first step to solving this issue.

Having a clear idea of what skills your workforce needs in future means that as Gen Zers begin to enter the workforce, they can be supported with the right learning and development to ensure they're equipped to fill these roles. Businesses need to use the resources available to them to identify where they currently lack digital skills and which digital skills their industry needs the most going forwards. They can then invest in targeted training programmes for Gen Z employees based on this knowledge, meaning not only will their investment be more profitable for themselves, but they'll also contribute to bridging the skills gap for the wider UK workforce.

Solving a problem as multi-faceted and nuanced as the digital skills gap will take time – there's no overnight remedy that can cure a problem developed over many years, and it's certainly not an option to sit back and let Gen Z come along and fix it themselves. If we're to rely on the next generation to fulfil our technological skills needs, then business leaders need to play an active role in making that happen and start taking the steps needed to guide Gen Z along the right path.

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