

Solving the skills crisis: how training and assessments equip the workforce with skills for the future

**New insights into tackling the UK's skills shortage
and identifying priority areas for development**



Contents

John Kleeman: Report Aims	3
UK market summary	4
Three emerging issues	5
The lack of crucial modern skills among UK workers	6
The barriers to closing the modern skills gap	8
The importance of training underpinned by robust assessments	12
Ensuring results are right, and fair	14
Benefits of workplace assessments	15
Conclusion: train to change	16
About Questionmark	17

John Kleeman: Report Aims

The United Kingdom's economy is at a critical juncture. Two years on from the outbreak of the pandemic, we are emerging into a new world. Historically accepted norms have been challenged. And while everyone knew that change was coming, few could have anticipated the pace with which rapid digital acceleration has irrevocably altered the workforce.

Remote operations have led a shift in how, where and why people work. Yet, at the same time, the pandemic - combined with other macroeconomic forces - was an active driver in people leaving the workplace or changing their role entirely. These major changes have been predicated on constantly improving tools and technologies that have been an enabler of change. People and businesses have seen the art of the possible and there is no going back.

It's a scenario that has thrust the value of people and skills to the fore. That's the subject of this report. Given the speed and volume of workplace flux, it should perhaps come as no surprise that there is a crucial lack of modern skills among the UK workforce. But just as it is clear work needs to be done in training, education and development, our research also highlighted that, with the right understanding and processes in place, this gap can be bridged.

That is why the coming years are so critical. Now is not the time to ease off the accelerator of change but going further, faster to get the right people with the right skills, in the right job. This is a fundamental element to rebuilding and reestablishing the UK economy for generations to come.

This report seeks to help employers determine their priorities for skills development and to illuminate the barriers that are preventing team members developing the skills they need. It is based on original research about how employees feel about their own skills base and their attitude to development.

About the research

We commissioned research agency YouGov to conduct omnibus research among a panel of 2000 adults in the UK. All people who participated in the research were either in work or looking for work.

UK market summary

We're seeing the biggest shift in workplace activity for generations. A movement dubbed, 'The Great Resignation'. Despite the clear and obvious pressures created by the pandemic, it also created a burning desire for change and with it, new opportunities. Workers are voting with their feet. A November 2021 Randstad report found almost a quarter of UK workers are actively planning to change employers in the next few months. ¹

The desire for employees to have more flexibility when it comes to work - and the willingness of many businesses to facilitate it - is creating a more geography-agnostic workforce. This is evidenced by the latest in a long line of regional property price booms. But this also plays into the agenda of the UK government. Its Levelling Up agenda is actively looking to spread the skills, jobs and spending power of the populus away from the major city hubs. ²

But this is just the beginning of a major workplace evolution that will define our economy for the foreseeable future. There remains much to do in order to ensure businesses and employees are future-proofed.

Analysis by McKinsey reveals that, if workers are to realise the full benefits of reskilling over the next decade.

More than
94%
of the UK
workforce
will need to
be trained. ³



³ The economic case for reskilling in the UK: How employers can thrive by boosting workers' skills, McKinsey, November 2020

This equates to about 30.5 million UK workers who lack the full suite of skills they will require in 2030 to perform their jobs well. Among these workers, 25.5 million would benefit from upskilling, and a further five million require retraining.

But what are the modern skills that UK workers need, and don't have? How can we train and upskill them appropriately and what will happen to the economy if we are successful in doing so? These are the critical macro issues our research has looked to answer.

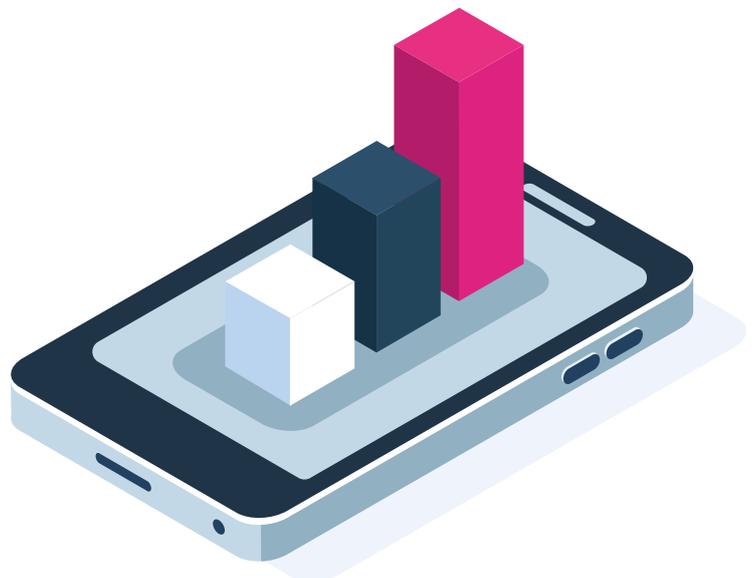
¹ The Great Resignation - Coping with Mass Exodus, Randstad, November 2021.

² Levelling Up whitepaper, UK Government, February 2022.

Three emerging issues

Our research, conducted at the end of 2021, highlighted three key issues when it comes to the skills of the UK workforce. These are:

1. The lack of crucial modern skills among UK workers
2. The barriers to closing the modern skills gap
3. The importance of training underpinned by robust assessments



1. The lack of crucial modern skills among UK workers

Perhaps the most telling data from the research is that UK workers underestimate the extent of the skills challenge. They lack the skills they need for the future, but they are not necessarily aware of it.

Some workers are more aware of the problem than others. The research found that almost a third of those questioned (30%) strongly agreed that they do not have the skills required to deal with the workplace today. But the problem is far more widespread than that. Only three of the ten skills the World Economic Forum predicts businesses will require by 2025 are confidently possessed by more than half of UK workers.

30%

strongly agreed that they do not have the skills required to deal with the workplace today.



WEF identified skill ⁴	% of UK survey respondents who believe they possess skill
Analytical thinking and innovation	47%
Active learning and learning strategies	48%
Complex problem solving	46%
Critical thinking and analysis	55%
Creativity, originality and initiative	45%
Leadership and social influence	35%
Technology use, monitoring and control	37%
Technology design and programming	13%
Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility	57%
Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation	72%

It's clear there is work to be done. Employees must embrace the skills they have and become more aware of those they don't. Employers meanwhile urgently need to identify skills development and training priorities. With workers failing to grasp the nature of the "skills shake up" required, asking team members what support they need is clearly not going to cut it.

Employers need to robustly measure the skills of their workforce with staff assessments to get a clear read of their training and development priorities.

“ Employees must embrace the skills they have and become more aware of those they don't.”

⁴ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/10/top-10-work-skills-of-tomorrow-how-long-it-takes-to-learn-them/>

2. The barriers to closing the modern skills gap

Language and jargon

Part of the confusion may be rooted in the language that employers are using around business priorities and the skills needed to execute them. Without meaning to, UK employers are “skills shaming” workers by using confusing language around workplace skills and strategies.

The research reveals that workers are unclear as to what skills they are expected to have to do their job and progress in their career. They are also confused by the language used to discuss business strategies and priorities. Many could be put off from applying for new jobs and promotions by jargon and buzz words which are rarely explained, contributing to the skills shortage acutely felt by employers.

31%
of workers
claim they were
unlikely to ask for
support or assistance
when they didn't
understand the
language being used.



Phrases such as “big data” and “digital transformation” are increasingly prevalent in office culture. Yet almost a third (31%) of respondents claim to be confused by the former, with over a fifth (21%) confounded by the latter. Some 18% find ambiguous the instruction to be more “agile”. More than one in ten (12%) are unsure what’s expected of them when asked to display “critical thinking”.

Common words and phrases, misunderstood

% of UK survey respondents
confused by this language

Big Data	31%
Digital Transformation	21%
Agile	18%
Critical Thinking	22%

Workers are often not identifying with phrases used in job descriptions or adverts, even though they may well have the skills to do the job well.

Despite being a common requirement in job specs, just 22% of respondents identified as a “strategic operator”. Yet, when clearer language was used, more than double (46%) considered themselves capable of setting objectives and working toward them. Less than a third (31%) thought of themselves to be a “self-starter”, but 62% believed they could manage their own deadlines. While half of respondents did believe themselves to be capable of “critical thinking”, considerably more (71%) saw themselves as excelling at “problem solving”.

The secret skills shortage

24%

of employees are too embarrassed to ask for support or assistance when they don't understand language being used.



Senior managers could be unaware of the extent of the problem. A significant proportion of people confess to keeping quiet about their confusion. Almost a third of respondents (31%) claimed they were unlikely to ask for support or assistance when they didn't understand the language being used. The common reasons for this include:

- ◆ Preferring to try and find out for themselves (42%)
- ◆ Assuming that the problem was with them as everyone else seemed to understand (27%)
- ◆ Being too embarrassed to ask (24%)
- ◆ Fearing that asking for clarification would reflect badly on them (23%)
- ◆ Not wanting to be perceived as old fashioned or out of touch (18%).

When workers don't truly understand the business strategies, or what skills they need to support them, creating meaningful training and development plans is impossible.

Confusion around exactly what is required for a vacancy can prevent competent internal and external candidates from stepping forward.

Online staff assessment gives leaders real data on strengths and weaknesses across the workforce while helping cut through the confusion and make better decisions on training, promotions, team structures and recruitment.

Different types of assessments offer different kinds of insights. For example, anonymous assessments reduce any sense of stigma and enable team leaders to get a really authentic sense of the skills gap across the team. However, tests where an individual's performance is tracked allow employers to better identify the training need of each staff member.

“ Cut through the confusion and make better decisions on training, promotions, team structures and recruitment. ”

3. The importance of training underpinned by robust assessments

If there is one take away from our research, this is it: workplace training is essential to equipping businesses with the skills they need to face the future of work. Unfortunately the data from our respondents indicates that there are too many generic development programmes that are failing to hit the spot.

20%
found workplace
training too
general and not
job-role specific.

It found:

- ◆ Two thirds (66%) of respondents did not agree with the statement that “training is relevant to my job role.”
- ◆ 17% claimed that they were frequently trained on things they already knew how to do. A further 20% found workplace training too general and not job-role specific.
- ◆ More than one in ten (13%) thought that the training they received seemed random and unplanned.
- ◆ Just 15% of people claimed to remember a lot of the content of a workplace training course six months later.
- ◆ Over a third (36%) confessed that much of the knowledge had faded.

The right training is essential to equipping the workforce with the skills it needs for the future. But generic, irrelevant training won't deliver for employers and can demotivate the team members that take part. By conducting online skills assessments before training, leaders can get real information on what skills employees need to work on. They can ensure that training programmes address them. Assessments also highlight which team members really need the support, reducing wasted training.

Assessments during and immediately after the course show which participants have learnt what they should. Further tests and assessments six months down the line show whether the knowledge has stuck.

Assessments also help reinforce learning and reduce forgetting. There is clear evidence from learning science that answering questions about what you have learned, makes you less likely to forget.⁵

“ The right training is essential to equipping the workforce with the skills it needs for the future. ”



⁵ https://www.questionmark.com/professor-roddy-roediger-on-applying-the-retrieval-practice-effect-to-creating-and-administering-assessments/?lang=en_GB

Ensuring results are right, and fair

Workplace assessments can give employers real information which can transform the success of training programmes. But if they are going to truly trust the information they receive, they must make sure that tests and assessments are protected against cheating.

18%

of workers claim that they would cheat at a workplace assessment if they felt they could get away with it.



Our research found that:

- ◆ **18% of workers claim that they would cheat at a workplace assessment if they felt they could get away with it**
- ◆ **38% admit that they don't feel that cheating in a workplace assessment is as serious as cheating in educational exams**
- ◆ **13% of respondents confessed that they would try to find out the questions from colleagues who have already sat the assessment**
- ◆ **9% would attempt to look up answers on a phone or computer while taking the test.**

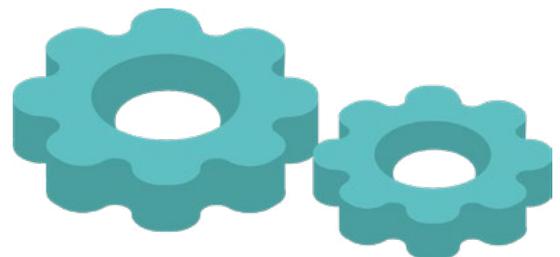
Employers must be able to trust the results they are getting. This requires an assessment platform that contains a number of features that help deter cheating or test fraud. It might be as simple as using a randomised question function so that no two people ever sit the same assessment. Or when the stakes are high, a proctoring service can video the assessment taking place. It flags any anomalies for future review.

Benefits of workplace assessments

Regular testing and assessment of employees can reveal where strengths and weaknesses lie across the workforce. Training and interventions can be tailored, and the effectiveness of those measures can be tested by further assessment.

The information from staff assessments can:

- ◆ **Improve the quality of hire** – after implementing assessment technology, 76% of corporations have seen an increase in the quality of hire.⁶
- ◆ **Build trust and increase revenue** – setting up rigorous programmes to assess and award team members based on skills boost revenue
- ◆ **Ensure new starters hit the ground running** – managers can proceed with confidence that the new employee is ready to carry out important tasks
- ◆ **Increase product expertise** – as new products and upgrades come online, managers must be sure their front-line staff understand the details
- ◆ **Deliver meaningful training** – ineffective training leads to errors and confusion. Tests can check that people are really learning and drive improvement in training content. Tests before training can also identify those that already possesses sufficient knowledge, reducing wasted training
- ◆ **Reduce risk** – mistakes cost money, time, reputation, and competitive advantage. Once employers are sure staff understand the rules, mistakes can be avoided
- ◆ **Increase motivation** – by developing robustly assessed certification programmes that enable team members to measure their career progress.



⁶ Brandon Hall Group, Assessing Assessments: Value and Impact

Conclusion: train to change

The world of work has changed forever. Without the modern skills to face the future, businesses will struggle to compete. The UK economy as a whole will suffer.

The majority of UK workers are unaware of the scale of reskilling they require. This makes it harder for employers to understand the extent of the skills gap across their own workforce. This problem is confounded by confusing language around skills and business priorities. Employees are unlikely to admit that they don't understand what is really needed of them.

Information from staff assessments gives employers real information about the strength of skills across their workforce. They can use it to make better decisions on training, recruitment and career development. With this crucial data, they can deliver relevant and engaging training and ensure that they have the skills they need to thrive.



About Questionmark

We help organisations and their people unlock their potential to deliver better performance. Questionmark provides a secure enterprise-grade assessment platform and professional services to leading organisations around the world, delivered with care and unequalled expertise. Its full-service online assessment tool and professional services help customers to improve their performance and meet their compliance requirements. Questionmark enables organisations to unlock their potential by delivering assessments which are valid, reliable and fair, which can be defended.

Questionmark offers secure powerful integration with learning management systems (LMS), learning record stores (LRS) and proctoring services making it easy to bring everything together in one place. Questionmark's cloud-based assessment management platform offers rapid deployment, scalability for high-volume test delivery, 24/7 support and the peace-of-mind of secure, audited U.S., Australian and European-based data centres.

To further explore how Questionmark could work for your organisation, or to book a free consultation and demo, please see:

questionmark.com/demo

