

Building a diverse and highly-skilled workforce for the future

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By 2020 the digital skills gap will have grown to a huge 500,000 people according to Europe's Digital Progress Report 2017. At the same time, UK school systems still primarily encourage more traditional routes into higher education via University excluding many young people from professional roles and emerging opportunities due to a lack of qualifications and employability skills.

At IBM we're tackling the issue head on with different pathways and a focus on skills beyond the conventional three-year degree for individuals from a diverse range of educational, cultural and social backgrounds. That's why we're expanding our award-winning apprentice programme and launching the new Business Partner Apprenticeship Programme.

Starting this year, the new 23 month programme will give apprentices the opportunity to work within the sales team at our business partners across the UK. These companies range from traditional resellers to new, born-on-the-cloud companies; from solutions architects to deployment experts. Apprentices will experience working within IBM and our Partner Ecosystem and jointly selling creative IBM solutions to our joint customers.

The full-time IBM apprentices will complete the programme with a Level 3 - IT Technical Sales Diploma, equipping them with qualifications and practical experience needed to excel within a technology sales environment. The new programme provides a pathway for school leavers to start a career in the industry and work with some of our Business Partners; providing maximum exposure for the individual and some of the most exciting talent for our Business Partners.

An apprenticeship is just one option for young people at IBM. Our "Ignite" scheme is committed to tackling youth unemployment through provision of high-quality vocational training and work experience opportunities for young people within our business, helping to break the cycle of 'no work experience so can't get a job'.

We focus on areas with the highest levels of childhood deprivation in the UK, so we partner with a successful East London charity City Gateway, supporting its work readiness programme, adding real work experience, for young people aged 16-24 from disadvantaged backgrounds. Seeing first-hand the impact of the programme has inspired us to expand the programme to our Hursley campus in Winchester, where we also engage with Southampton-based charity Wheatsheaf Trust and its STEP programme. This is the perfect local fit to provide a programme with a more technical focus that offers placements in Media, Hardware and Internet of Things.

Designing the programme, we took into consideration the disadvantaged background of the candidates. For example, many are drawing unemployment benefits, are carers or may be tackling mental health challenges. The entire programme is based upon providing the trainees with employability skills, work experience and self-confidence positioning them well for a job in tech. Each week provides a mix of work experience and 'back to base' days where we focus on soft skills including communications, presentation skills and digital skills which then evolves in to putting those skills into action.

Building on the need to advance digital skills in education and develop a diverse workforce, earlier this year we also launched P-TECH, Pathways in Technology, a non-selective, approach to secondary school education established by IBM.

The P-TECH model provides students — largely in disadvantaged communities — with a viable career path in today's increasingly digitised economy. The model combines a focus on good academic achievement and the acquisition of 'employability' or professional skills, along with the integration of study programmes up to Level 4, simultaneously delivered by F&HE providers. Students emerge from school at age 18/19 with both A-Levels and units of learning that will count towards the achievement of a Level 4 qualification (BTEC/ HNC). Students on the P-Tech programme will have opportunities to undertake work experience, and potentially, paid internship opportunities provided by employer partners.

This IBM programme is one of the most significant global initiatives of its kind, with 200 P-TECH schools currently or planned, already serving 125,000 students across 13 countries, including the UK, when the scheme will commence for the first time this September in Leeds.

If the UK is to remain competitive and take advantage of the growing digital economy, businesses around the country must work hand in hand with our education system to build the next generation of highly skilled workers.

Do you work for or know a UK business that would be interested in joining our PTECH scheme, initially in Leeds, but potentially elsewhere in the UK, as an employer partner? Get in touch via: Mark Wakefield - wakefim@uk.ibm.com.

For more information on IBM's open opportunities for school leavers and apprentices please follow: <http://ibm.biz/schoolleaver>

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