

IBM tackles digital skills gap with UK launch of SkillsBuild

Following the P-TECH launch earlier this year, the new SkillsBuild platform reinforces IBM's commitment to life-long learning in the UK

London, UK - 16 October 2019: Around the globe, new technologies are rapidly transforming the world of work, and – as a result, the skillsets people need to be successful.

To ensure an inclusive workforce, we must change the way we think about both traditional education and vocational learning. Unaddressed, a mismatch in tools and talent can result in a pronounced skills gap, directly affecting a country's ability to compete on the international stage.

We have seen this first-hand in the UK in recent years. [A 2019 report](#) from the government's Department for Digital Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) concluded that factors like the speed of innovation, as well as the sheer volume of new technologies are impacting every business and every job role, and there is a gap in digital skills to meet business needs. Digital skills are required in at least 82 percent of online advertised openings across the UK, but the precise skills demanded are not uniform across the country. For example, the capital region has the greatest demand with 87 percent of advertised roles, spread across almost all sectors while the West Midlands has a slightly lower demand at 82 percent of roles, but the well-developed manufacturing sector means that machining and engineering software skills are required in 24 percent of those roles in the West Midlands.

This is why I am delighted that IBM in the U.K. is launching its SkillsBuild programme. This new programme, which features a digital platform integrated with hands-on supports, is specifically designed to help adults who are unemployed or changing careers, including refugees, women returning to work, asylum seekers and veterans, develop the technical and professional skills needed for competitive “new collar” jobs. The platform is deployed with support by charities and NGOs including [Salute My Job](#) and [City Gateway](#). IBM Volunteers along with these organisations will offer learners personalised coaching and experiential learning opportunities which bring to life the online training, setting SkillsBuild apart from other training platforms.

“Ensuring people's skills are fit for the future is an essential part of improving productivity growth, wages and living standards up and down the country,” says John Cope, CBI Head of Education and Skills policy. “As we embrace new technologies and the world of work changes, tackling skills gaps through high-quality employer training will become commonplace”, he added.

The SkillsBuild approach addresses the changing requirements of the labour market. “New Collar” jobs, a term coined by IBM chairman Ginni Rometty, describes emerging IT roles, such as those focused on data science, cloud computing or Artificial Intelligence (AI), for which a traditional university education might not be the most effective way of obtaining the relevant skills.

By focusing on personalised coaching and experiential learning, SkillsBuild helps develop the skills required to join the workforce in these “New Collar” roles. [Accessible online and free to use](#), it also brings untapped talent to the fore, opening roles to individuals often excluded from the labour market due to disadvantaged backgrounds, or because a lack of knowledge, skill or experience has seen them become under-employed or unemployed. A recent IBM study on the [skills gap](#) revealed that over 2 million workers in the U.K. may need to be reskilled or retrained in the next three years, highlighting an urgent need for action to address this critical issue.

Learners on the SkillsBuild platform begin with a personal assessment for cognitive capabilities and personality

via MyInnerGenius. They will then learn foundational knowledge about digital technologies, as well as professional skills such as resume-writing, problem solving, communication, etc. – all those needed to succeed in today’s job market. These professional skills are becoming increasingly more important to potential employers since job roles are ever-changing. Learners then also receive recommendations on role-based education for specific jobs, that include technical and professional learning.

The practical part of the learning experience will range from classic internships at IBM or partner companies to innovative project assignments for NGOs, in which learners participate in digitisation and transformation solutions. Participants will learn about current design thinking methods, modern project management and also demonstrate the ability to work collaboratively in a team.

“We’re working with SkillsBuild to help improve the connection between the supply and demand of military talent in technical roles,” said Andrew Jackson, Managing Director of Salute My Job. “It will both help veterans realign their careers by gaining employable skills at their own pace and environment, and for employers, it will help them more easily find transitioning military personnel with the skills and experience they need.”

Representing the next step in IBM’s commitment to life-long learning in the UK, SkillsBuild follows the launch of IBM’s Pathways in Technology Early College High Schools ([P-TECH](#)) which started its first year this September with over 50 eager students. A direct response to STEM skills shortages, as well as a lack of high-quality education for underserved young people, the P-TECH model combines traditional secondary school approaches with tertiary education, structured work experiences, and paid internship opportunities provided by employer partners. IBM started the new education model in 2011.

P-TECH is currently in place in two schools and a college in Leeds: Cockburn School, Cockburn John Charles Academy and Leeds City College. Upon completion of the programme, students will study a range of topics from cyber security to digital media and graduate with a Level 4 qualification, such as BCS awards in cyber-security. This will enable them to enter a competitive entry-level job, undertake a higher level or degree apprenticeship or further pursue higher education.

“The deep employer engagement at the heart of P-TECH provides a fantastic opportunity for the young people of Leeds to develop the employability skills and adaptability required to thrive in the 21st century workplace” commented Sue Wynne, Chief Officer Employment and Skills, Leeds City Council.

Leeds is rapidly establishing itself as one of the digital centres of the north. [Digital companies](#) and specialist technology firms currently employ around 45,000 people in Leeds city. The sector is predicted to grow by 15 percent over the next 5 years, providing new jobs and investment together with opportunities for local people and the student population. This pace of change means that attracting high skilled labour is now the number one challenge for the area.

The launch of both P-TECH and SkillsBuild is an important step in IBM’s support of the UK as it tackles the digital skills gap. European Commission estimates suggest the gap between the demand and supply of ICT specialists in the EU will be around half a million by 2020. And because UK school systems are primarily designed to enable progression to university, rather than employability skills, its citizens may find themselves excluded from “New Collar” opportunities.

Programmes like P-TECH and SkillsBuild will ensure people of different ages and backgrounds have the opportunity to develop their skills and lead successful new collar careers.

Bill Kelleher, Chief Executive, IBM UK and Ireland
