



Telecoms workplaces need digital inclusion

A digital divide lurks within telecoms workplaces. As technology transformation progresses, employers may find that employees lack digital proficiency to capitalise on tech changes, preventing a full realisation of benefits.

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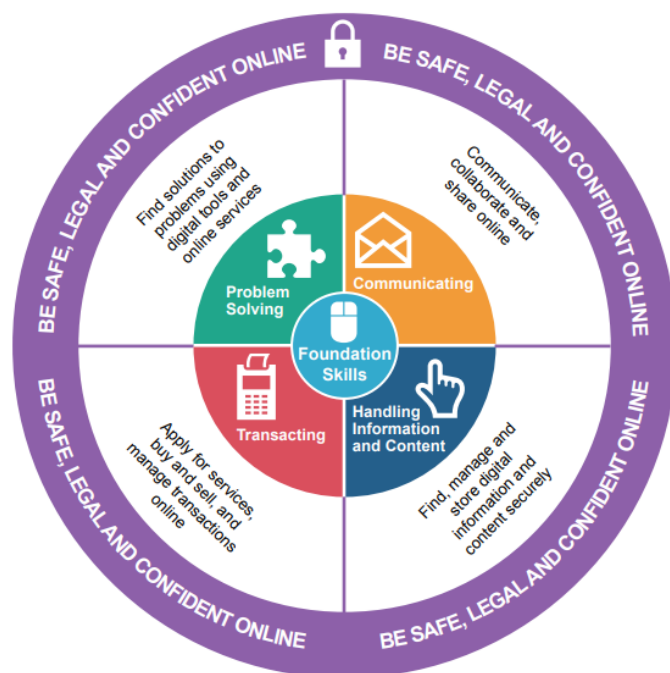
What is digital inclusion in the workplace context?

Digital inclusion is most typically used in a societal context to describe “the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)”.¹ A similar type of challenge exists in a workplace context where there is a growing number of people without the digital skills necessary to adequately leverage new workplace solutions and environments. This necessitates digital inclusion efforts. Where once “Microsoft Office-proficiency” was considered a sufficient level of digital literacy for most roles in a modern workplace, it is no longer enough to capture the full range of digital nous required today.

Recognising a gap in general digital skills

Telecoms companies are generally aware of the requirement for technical digital skills, such as those outlined in STL Partners’ *Future Skills Tracker* (e.g. Software, Cloud, AI and ML). These specialist skills are needed to build and implement new tech solutions in the first place and so are a first order priority for business. But companies might be unfamiliar with the growing requirement for less technical, yet vital, general digital skills needed by users. Skills such as those outlined in the UK government’s Essential digital skills framework², for example, which outlines capabilities such as effective use of collaboration tools, building professional networks, using new digital tools to problem solve (e.g. Chat GPT), and more. Hybrid working alone places additional tech demands on workers, requiring them to be more IT-capable than before. And this is before we get to job-specific capability requirements. People may not necessarily have the language to describe their knowledge gaps, or may be too embarrassed to admit them. And they do not naturally acquire these skills.

Figure 1: Essential digital skills framework



Source: UK Government

¹ What is Digital Inclusion? – The Center for Digital Equity
² Essential digital skills framework - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

The size of the gap in general digital skills can be significant within a business. According to one study, 54% of the UK's working population does not possess all the digital capabilities that industry and government consider necessary for the workplace³. Corporate digital inclusion efforts are required to bridge the gap and secure business digital resilience for the future.

Bridging the telecoms digital divide

This is not exclusively a telecoms issue. Other industries are wrestling with the same challenge and governments are (or should be) equally invested in finding solutions in this area as digital skills underpin economic growth ambitions in many markets. There are a number of free resources available in the public domain to help corporates in this regard.

The key digital inclusion tasks for telecoms employers are to conduct a skills audit, to create a forward-looking skills plan to fill current and emergent skills gaps, to provide learning and development opportunities to employees, and to engage with educational institutions to build stronger talent pipelines.

Figure 2: Digital inclusion activities



Source: STL Partners

Skills audit

Telcos and telecoms players need to take stock of where current skills gaps exist. They can take advantage of skills frameworks to define the skills that are necessary for different roles. Frameworks like the Essential digital skills framework (above) or more detailed, technical ones such as those published by the [Chartered Institute for IT](#) (the British Computer Society) – based on the [SFIA framework](#) - or the [Institute of Telecommunications Professionals](#) provide language for required digital skills and as such enable skills gaps to be identified. While these are UK-based organisations, the remit of the SFIA framework extends beyond the UK, and similar tools do exist in other markets. Telcos will also need to consider the company's future ambitions to determine what skills gaps will emerge down the line.

Skills plan

It is not sufficient to make a skills plan based on what line managers think are the missing skills in their teams, nor in response to a leadership directive on skills requirements (as has been the case with AI). Such practices may not recognise the real development needs that limit full digital inclusion across the work place. Once the company knows where its skills gaps are, it can plan more effectively to fill them. This may mean training employees to increase their in-role efficiency, or developing them to follow new career paths.

³ [231122-lloyds-consumer-digital-index-2023-report.pdf \(lloydsbank.com\)](#)

Learning and development

Some public organisations and companies, like Cisco, IBM and Microsoft, offer numerous resources to help individuals to increase their digital proficiency. Corporates can make use of these resources where content mirrors their requirements. However these courses are typically generic and may lack immediate relevance to an employee's day job, hence may not achieve desired outcomes on their own.

Telecoms companies should also refrain from placing the onus for upskilling entirely on individuals themselves (e.g. by assigning them online course work). Where they are unable to allocate time and headspace to the task, employees will tend to prioritise their work tasks over their learning, hence the necessary skills will remain unlearned.

Other forms of professional development may be more effective, e.g.:

- A digital skills bootcamp (an intensive course focused specifically on what the employer requires)
- Apprenticeships
- Reverse mentoring (where a senior leader is mentored by a younger employee)
- An informal structure for learning (e.g. where colleagues volunteer to show others a new skill, learning on the job)

It should be acceptable to upskill in work time and companies should foster environments where continuous learning is encouraged and it is safe to learn, both formally and informally. Initiatives to make people care about tech in the organisation may also help in this regard (e.g. communities of interest, or business partners with allocated responsibility for a new tech).

Learning enablement in this way will allow telecoms companies to access further pools of talent, e.g. those returning to work following parental or sick leave. It should also make it easier to fill jobs, if companies are not dependent on finding individuals that meet every single criteria for the position (i.e., they have skills for a customer service role, but lack one or two digital skills).

Telecoms companies should consider working with others (e.g. via associations like [the Institute of Telecommunications Professionals](#)) to identify new training resources and methods to secure the requisite digital skills profiles for their employees.

External outreach

It is also important for telcos and tech companies to engage with schools and educational institutions to secure their digital skills pipeline going forward. They need to communicate the capabilities that their companies require and get involved in careers education, to ensure that young people understand the need for digital skills and the breadth of opportunities that such skills can open up for them. Delivering a greater understanding of what it's like to work in the telecoms sector can also serve to make telcos more accessible and attractive to young people as employers.

Conclusion

New technology will not be a digital enabler or growth driver in the telecoms workplace on its own. An uplift in general digital proficiency and technology literacy is required across the business for organisation's to digitally transform. Everyone needs to understand how the digital solution works for them and they need to speak a common digital language.

The introduction of new digital workplace solutions will also increase the requirement for skills such as critical thinking, team work, relationship building (across diverse teams in a hybrid context), empathy and understanding. Companies should value these skills accordingly.

Telecoms businesses need to factor such requirements into their resource plans and build/curate the requisite capabilities in their people to ensure their organisations' continuing competitiveness. Learning and development – for both existing and prospective employees - is key to digital inclusion in the workplace and must become a strategic imperative for all telecoms businesses as they transform.

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