

FET Enterprise Challenges and Opportunities

In a rapidly changing world of work, it is important that enterprise engagement be increased to ensure that the programmes delivered best reflect the current and future skill needs of industry. This article outlines why this matters and how it might best be achieved.

Introduction

Today we live in a much less certain world. Disruption is the order of the day, brought about by technological changes and now global pandemics and climate change. In this article I will share some thoughts on the opportunities and challenges for further education and training (FET) and how the sector can best position itself to continue to meet the upskilling needs of companies.

My role as a regional skills manager in the mid-west gives me a unique insight into the world of learning and upskilling from both enterprise and education-provider perspectives, arising from my engagement with employers across industry sectors, from micro businesses to multinationals.

The Regional Skills Forum (RSF) is a national network of nine Regional Skills Fora supported by the Skills Planning Enterprise Engagement (SPEE) unit in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS). The work undertaken by the RSF reflects the government's strong focus on strengthening links between industry and providers of education and training, to ensure that workers and graduates have the skills necessary to meet new and emerging job roles.

In summary, the RSF has three primary functions:

- engage with industry and create links with education and training providers
- identify skills needs and gaps in programme provision
- implement upskilling responses (new courses) in collaboration with education and training providers.

Changing world of work

As I write this article, there is a growing shortage of labour and skills across all business sectors. Debate and analysis have offered up various reasons for why businesses are struggling to find new talent. When we talk about skills shortages or gaps, we must understand the labour market we



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are operating in. On the demand side are employers seeking skilled talent, while on the supply side are providers: universities and further education colleges. By understanding each other's needs through greater engagement, we can ensure that learners have the relevant skills and competencies to meet employers' requirements.

One thing is certain. Despite our changing workplace, two essential skills are required for those looking to enter the labour force or advance in their career: interpersonal skills, such as leadership and customer service, and basic digital skills, such as navigating Microsoft Office or using the internet.

One challenge for FET is to assess how we can continue to resource and provide businesses with upskilling programmes to develop the digital skill levels of their workforce. The 'Explore' digital training programme funded by the DFHERIS and managed by Regional Skills Fora targets older workers with low or no digital skills. Year on year, the demand from employers across industry sectors to register workers for the programme shows the extent of the digital skills gap.

A report by SOLAS in June 2020, titled Digital Skills Requirements of Workers in Ireland, stated that 'the share of people working in low-skilled and medium-skilled occupations who need digital skills (any level) is greater than the EU average'. The Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated a view held by many that every job can now be considered a STEM job, as workers engage with some form of digital process and data capture.

FET and industry skill needs

The FET sector has evolved considerably in recent years, in terms of both organisational change and programme delivery. The alignment of provision between post-Leaving Certificate courses, adult education, traineeships, and apprenticeships provides the platform to showcase to industry the scale and breadth of learning and upskilling on offer.

The nature of work and career pathways are evolving, and we have to challenge the belief that degrees alone are the passport to successful careers. I speak with employers daily, many of whom will hire based on the right skills and attitude over academic qualifications alone. An example of how the rules of talent acquisition are changing is the recent decision by IBM to abandon a core hiring rule of 'no degree, no job' in favour of work-based ICT apprenticeships, to ensure that employees had the right skill set.

Based on enterprise feedback, the future of work will therefore not just be about college degrees but about job skills and cultural fit. The FET sector has an opportunity to compete on a level playing field with universities, which in many cases are shielding students from the real world of work, with elongated degree programmes against work-based learning.

If we shift the focus from degrees to skills via apprenticeships and traineeships, we will create a larger and more diverse and representative workforce, while also reducing employment gaps, skill shortages, and social

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exclusion. Achieving this requires active engagement with enterprise. Illustrating the speed of our changing workplace, a survey by Accenture stated that 65% of today's primary school children may work in jobs not yet created.

The FET sector is uniquely positioned to address this, with access to post-primary learners who are tomorrow's workforce. A more strategic approach to connecting enterprise with these learners can help ensure that students embark on the most suitable career path.

As Ireland moves into a post-pandemic period and our economy regrows, acute labour and skill shortages are impacting negatively on enterprise growth; left unresolved, these shortages will slow our social and economic progress. FET is ideally placed to support companies in upskilling existing talent teams while also responding to emerging skill needs, through new work-based traineeship and apprenticeship programmes in partnership with regional employers.

Another challenge for FET is to reassess its relationship with enterprise to create a strategy that makes employer engagement central to all future programme development.

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The paradigm shift and industry desire for continuous learning outcomes to maintain a highly skilled workforce will mean transitioning to an always-on, skills-based education that embraces not just accreditation and certification but recognition of learning credits for on-the-job learning in partnership with industry. This viewpoint is articulated in many articles, such as the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's 2019 Future Jobs Ireland report: 'In addition to improving provision of lifelong learning solutions, the engagement of enterprise with providers will be critical to successfully adjusting to the future economy' (p. 50).

Today, employers are looking for more than core technical skills and competency. They want people with transversal skills, an eye for detail, and the confidence to propose solutions to problems. These skills can be learnt more easily through traineeship and apprenticeship programmes, which the FET sector has the platform and expertise to deliver.

With acute labour shortages, talent retention is a key priority. Investing in worker development through upskilling is becoming the norm, even in sectors that heretofore undervalued the importance of career development and career pathways. With an increasing narrative on the value and importance of apprenticeships, it is also important to highlight the role of traineeships as a model of training in addressing skill shortages.

Traineeships are the lesser-known upskilling option for companies, yet they offer the agility for colleges of further education and training to create new talent pipelines in response to regional skill needs. A traineeship can range from 6 to 18 months, with employers supporting work placement that can account for 70% of overall learning.

Traineeships offer more immediate solutions to talent needs while also giving learners pathways to apprenticeships or higher education. To align programmes that meet industry skill needs in a way that will prove attractive to career-seekers and employers, more work must be done to promote traineeships as a model of training.

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the training opportunities and upskilling supports that ETBs can provide, because many businesses are not aware of, or do not understand, the role that FET plays. This is an opportunity to increase engagement with enterprise. The geographical location of many FET centres offers significant potential to strengthen links with local companies in delivering regional skill needs.

The great resignation

A global survey by Microsoft of more than 30,000 workers showed that 41% were considering quitting their jobs or changing profession. Four million Americans quit their jobs in July, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. The 'war for talent' is real. The 'great resignation' is now a popular phrase to highlight the huge challenges facing employers as their workers reassess their careers and lifestyles because of Covid-19.

Prospective employees now place a much higher value on career pathways before deciding on an employer or sector. Covid-19 has laid bare the sectors most affected, with workers transitioning to other sectors perceived as offering greater opportunities for personal development and career progression.

Talent retention is a top priority for companies as our labour market tightens further, while they simultaneously try to identify new skilled talent. Companies are acutely aware of the costs of talent drain: it is often said that people don't leave jobs – they leave cultures and organisations that don't offer career progression.

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Employee movement across industry sectors presents FET with the potential to offer programmes up to and including level 6 to help employers retain talent and increase sectoral attractiveness to the next generation of talent. Employers that have historically experienced high employee turnover are more focused than ever on retaining talent. Providing new career pathways will help certain sectors to retain and attract new talent.

Increasing the percentage of those at work remaining in some form of upskilling requires greater alignment between FET programme offerings and enterprise. This is paramount if we are to provide employers and their workers with the right upskilling pathways.

Collaboration and clusters

The future of learning is a public-private partnership, as stated by the Future Jobs Ireland 2019 report. Education providers must offer the foundation for upskilling and training, but collaboration with industry is vital. Recent examples include the decision by global giants Amazon and Google to

upskill their own US-based workers in the absence of collaboration with state education providers.

Our value proposition in the mid-west region is collaboration. We are extremely fortunate to have several industry networks across ICT, manufacturing, logistics, aviation, retail, and hospitality. These networks, first and foremost, provide for relationship-building across companies in similar business sectors, the value of which we should never underestimate.

Successful regions the world over have examples of best-practice industry clusters. Ireland is slowly focusing more on the importance of clusters, and we have much work to do in developing and appreciating the social and economic value they can bring. Our regional industry networks enable an agile response to identified skill shortages, in partnership with both further and higher education providers.

Future skill needs

Changing skill needs are being driven principally by three factors: digitisation, climate change, and business processes. Sustainability in all its guises offers the FET sector another achievable opportunity in delivering the thousands of skilled workers required for the green economy and to retrofit, upgrade, and build the houses so desperately needed.

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In the current business landscape, there is no alternative to digital disruption. Both individuals and enterprises must either adapt to these changes or face being left behind. Digital technologies are already changing how businesses function, and processes are changing as companies embrace and adopt new forms of digital engagement.

How we learn, retrain, or upskill has also changed significantly with the move towards online delivery, shorter modular-type courses, and recognition of workplace learning. Education providers that offer agility in learning provision and place a higher value on work-based competencies and recognition of prior learning (RPL), as outlined in the FET strategy, will experience positive engagement with enterprise in terms of learner numbers.

New technologies and online learning are transforming how upskilling can be delivered. The speed of innovation will require education providers to continually adapt to newer learning methodologies. We need to embrace online delivery, continuous learning pathways, and short modular-type programmes if we are to significantly increase the percentage of those at work upskilling into the future.

Conclusion

Companies can no longer rely on our education and training providers to deliver a supply of skilled talent on their own. They must engage more actively in the design of programmes to ensure that the next generation of talent will have the skills necessary to meet changing occupational job roles and tasks. Transversal skills are unlikely to become obsolete by

technological innovation or economic disruptions. In a changing world of work, with increased remote and flexible working, these skills are even more important as workers interact less in workplace environments.

The prevailing viewpoint of many in industry, especially SMEs (small to medium-sized enterprises), that learning is a long-term commitment of time, travel, and costs underlines the importance of communicating the changing nature of learning towards shorter, online, and blended options. These are becoming more readily available across training providers.

With Covid-19 restrictions easing, we need to tell the great story that is FET through a variety of communication channels, including on-site or virtual showcase events for employers to improve awareness of the learning proposition on offer.

The world of learning is a competitive marketplace. Education providers that place a greater value on enterprise engagement will be more innovative and responsive in their programme provision to meet the changing skill needs of business.



Some of the most recent group of Carbery farmer graduates who were presented with their diplomas in UCC in November 2021.

Left to right: Ian Kingston, Dermot O'Leary, Jerome O'Brien, Tadhg O'Mahony, Diarmuid Manning, Belinda Gascoigne (UCC), Brendan Brady, Michael Nyhan and Vanessa O'Connor