Marchmont Observatory University of Exeter

**UNISON: COVID-19 and Public Sector Skills**

 

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# Foreword

UNISON is the UK’s largest public sector union with 1.3 million members. Members work in local authorities, the NHS, police and probation services, colleges and schools, the electricity, gas and water industries, transport and the voluntary sector. Public service workers are the backbone of Britain, providing vital services in every corner of our society.

However, years of austerity have not just impacted services for the public, but have taken their toll on public service workers too. These staff have experienced a lack of investment in their education and skills, making the jobs they do harder in a changing landscape of redundancies, automation and outsourcing.

Over 38,000 UNISON members responded to the 2019 Skills for the Future Survey. Based on the responses of more than 38,700 members, this represented one of the largest skills surveys in Europe and provided a detailed picture of members’ skills and their associated aspirations and concerns. It identified many themes and made recommendations for action. COVID-19 has led to considerable changes to the way people work and to how workplaces operate.

This short report was commissioned to give contextual understanding to some of the findings from the major 2019/20 UNISON commissioned study ‘Skills for the Future’ in light of the considerable pressures placed on job roles and working environments by the COVID-19 crisis.

COVID-19 has impacted considerably on the two skill areas most commonly identified as needing development – digital skills and management & supervisory skills. We found that whilst new and modified activities and initiatives concerning the former have been considerable, the latter has received far less consideration.

We have revisited the survey results to examine specifically what skills members were interested in developing - re-contextualized these in light of COVID 19. We have also:

Looked at the impact of COVID-19 on both Public Services and the Working Environment

Looked at evidence of changes in the demand for the skills most requested by UNISON survey respondents (digital and management & supervisory skills) as a consequence of Covid-19

Provided an example of a regional good practice – highlighting the availability of new courses an materials to address these skills (Digital)

Described the Government policy-driven responses in England with respect to adult skills

# COVID-19 and Public Services

Public services covers a wide array of different industries, and so it becomes more difficult to make general statements. However, there are some key findings that can be drawn from current understandings of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

After the collapse of the post-war consensus, the idea of the public service began to change, and the COVID-19 crisis has heightened this: as the country entered lockdown, questions about necessity were brought to the forefront of public consciousness[[1]](#footnote-1).

The Philosopher Julian Baggini argues that this impact may “finally erode the 40-year economic bias against regulation” as part of a transformation in how people view the economy[[2]](#footnote-2). This is also a factor in Accenture’s advice as to how public services can best adapt for the future: the public are much more aware of the role of public services in their lives than they may have been previously, emphasising the need for careful brand management, expert advice, and flexibility in both planning and capacity, as part of a new social contract built on trust[[3]](#footnote-3).

Further impact on public services is due to the impact of austerity over the preceding decade[[4]](#footnote-4): as the Institute for Government notes, this decade of budget pressure meant that:

*“Quality declined, staff became more stretched, buildings were poorly maintained, and vital equipment went unbought”[[5]](#footnote-5).*

As with much of the economy, the crisis has hit public services hard: this ranges from delayed surgeries and critical diagnostic procedures to children’s education and the processes of the courts[[6]](#footnote-6). This means that there are greater stressors on public service, especially as large numbers of public service employees will have had to keep working through the pandemic (exemplified here by UNISON members[[7]](#footnote-7)), despite the difficulties rather than being furloughed.

In terms of public service impact, one factor of note is the ONS calculation of public sector productivity: as of the most recent data, this is at 97.2 (indexed against 2011’s productivity as 100). This is the first entry in the quarterly data to have dropped below 2011’s productivity. This is not to say that demand is not still high in many public service roles: according to data from Burning Glass, the top ten occupations in greatest demand in both July 2019 and July 2020 in England included ‘nurses’ and ‘care workers and home carers’. These roles moved up to 1st and 3rd position respectively in 2020.

For some roles, demand on their services will have increased due to economic damage elsewhere in the economy: the rapid increase in Universal Credit claims relies on an underlying administrative structure. Accenture has stressed the importance of building surge capacity[[8]](#footnote-8). It also worth noting the increased impact on health demand due to the link between unemployment and physical and psychological health issues[[9]](#footnote-9), as well as impacts from COVID-19 and lockdown.

Demand is nonetheless not the only important factor: many public service workers are under far greater threat of covid-19 related mortality than in other sectors, including social care workers[[10]](#footnote-10), and transport workers (to the point that MPs called for death-in-service pay-outs[[11]](#footnote-11)), as well as the directly exposed staff in the medical field. There are also implications for equality: 85% of the social care workforce are women, and a sixth are not originally from the UK, while 72% of all health and social care staff that have died with COVID-19 have been black[[12]](#footnote-12).

In terms of employment impact, public services are also impacted by other cross-sector factors such as what has been described as “the most significant shift to digital we are likely to see in our lifetime”[[13]](#footnote-13). City Councils that might previously have resisted changed have seen a major shift towards paperless transactions, data sharing and home-based work, including 400 contact centre members of staff at Birmingham city council being moved online.

Other major impacts include increased cross-sector collaboration, such as between the NHS, police and 3rd sector; increased innovation due to the rapid need for technological development, such as Swindon council’s improved use of automation for school meal vouchers; and an expected increased acceleration away from physical infrastructure and capital[[14]](#footnote-14). Different sectors will recover in different ways.

The ONS has developed data dashboards for Criminal Justice, Education, Health Care and Work and Pensions, but the data for these is yet to be updated to account for potential impact of the COVID-19 crisis[[15]](#footnote-15).

# COVID 19 and the Working Environment

With UK government guidance in March 2020 forcing millions of workers to transition into remote homeworking, the Covid-19 pandemic has starkly highlighted the importance of computer and digital skills in order to adapt to the ‘new normal’. In what may be considered “the most significant shift to digital we are likely to see in our lifetime”[[16]](#footnote-16), digital skills are imperative for employees to successfully work from home, both for service delivery and for remaining connected (digitally) to colleagues within their organisation.

In the public sector and public services, demand for services to support citizens during the pandemic and lockdown has increased, including healthcare, benefits, and emergency housing. Alongside this increased demand, many of the workers in these roles will have faced additional pressure from having to provide these essential services remotely. The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified the need for the digitisation of a wide range of administrative services to support the needs of the public, as well as accelerating the emergence of services including eHealth, e-Education and digital government applications. For the employees providing these digitised services remotely, digital skills are a prerequisite for success[[17]](#footnote-17).

Whilst the public sector has been seen as traditionally slow in adopting new technologies, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced various service areas to rapidly embrace and implement emerging technologies. In a 5 day IT project, HMRC moved their 50,000 office-based employees to remote working, allowing staff to connect from home.[[18]](#footnote-18) In some areas of the public sector such as councils, there has been a U-turn in the adoption of technology because of the pandemic - away from a firm reluctance to adopt technology and towards an acceptance of data sharing, a move to paperless transactions, a move away from regular, large meetings, and a large-scale shift to homeworking[[19]](#footnote-19).

One of the most impacted sectors throughout the pandemic has been education, as the ‘traditional’ face-to-face delivery of teaching could not take place under strict social distancing guidelines, compelling educators to move learning online. Because of the pandemic and mass school closures, staff in education have had to rely much more heavily on learning and utilising digital skills to successfully broadcast lessons, accept student’s work and create distance learning resources digitally. Not every school - and within this not every member of staff – has been on a level playing field when transitioning to online: when schools closed in March, 60% of independent school teachers reported having an online platform to broadcast lessons or to receive homework, compared to 37% in state schools in affluent areas, and 23% of teachers in the most deprived schools.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Whilst the transition to working from home has resulted in nearly half (47%) of the UK workforce doing some of their work from home – 86% of which as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic[[21]](#footnote-21) – the transition to homeworking has not been possible for all workers. A recent survey found that most UNISON members continued working from their usual workplace during the pandemic (45%), with 40% working from home[[22]](#footnote-22) – less than the national average. Whilst there is no data to indicate specific sectors or organisations which had low rates of homeworking, Public Technology reported that in April just 20% of staff in the Department for Work and Pensions were working from home, whilst most other departments had a 90% remote workforce[[23]](#footnote-23).

A large number of the UNISON members unable to work from home are providers of vital public services including health and social care, police and ambulance services, refuse collectors and cleaning staff. Broadly speaking, “high-skilled” occupations (in the first three major occupation groups) are more likely to have the opportunity to work from home than manual and elementary occupations - ONS data for April 2020 reported homeworking rates of over 60% for the first three major occupation groups, compared to 15% for ‘Caring, leisure and other service occupations’, 16% for ‘Sales and customer service occupations’ and 5% for ‘Process plant and machine operatives’[[24]](#footnote-24).

# COVID-19 Employment and Skills Response from Government

The government’s response to the COVID-19 crisis has included a great deal of measures in support of businesses. This has included the:

[COVID-19 Job Retention Scheme](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-the-coronavirus-job-retention-scheme)[[25]](#footnote-25)

[Self-Employment Support Scheme](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-extends-self-employment-support-scheme-and-confirms-furlough-next-steps) [[26]](#footnote-26)

[Furlough scheme](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-extends-furlough-scheme-until-october)[[27]](#footnote-27)

Business Support Hub[[28]](#footnote-28)

SME Term Funding Scheme[[29]](#footnote-29)

Future Fund for Tech start-Ups[[30]](#footnote-30)

Discretionary fund for small business[[31]](#footnote-31)

COVID-19 Large Business Interruption Loan Scheme[[32]](#footnote-32)

£750M for R&D intensive businesses[[33]](#footnote-33)

Employee wage guarantee scheme[[34]](#footnote-34)

There was also considerable new guidance for public bodies on payment of suppliers to ensure service continuity during and after COVID-19 and even changes to insolvency laws.

There have also been developments to support workers including around their health and wellbeing at what has been particularly challenging time for so many:

Guidance for the public on mental health and wellbeing relating to COVID-19[[35]](#footnote-35)

Guidance and support for employees during COVID-19[[36]](#footnote-36)

ACAS advice on COVID-19[[37]](#footnote-37)

Guidance from the Health and Safety Executive on COVID-19[[38]](#footnote-38)

Skills and employment have inevitably featured prominently in responses to the crisis such as the Kickstart Scheme[[39]](#footnote-39) where funding is provided to employers to create new 6-month job placements for young people who are currently on Universal Credit. Tackling unemployment will be a priority and Jobcentre Plus have courses and training offers available[[40]](#footnote-40).

In April 2020, the Department for Education launched The Skills Toolkit – an online learning platform providing free access to digital and numeracy courses, designed to boost job-related skills and employability in preparation for the post-virus economy, and provide furloughed workers with opportunity to continue developing skills whilst out of work[[41]](#footnote-41). The courses are split into introductory, intermediate and advanced and ranging from Video Calling and CV preparation through to Programming in Python and Cyber Security.

The government subsequently launched two new programmes with £20 million invested to help improve leadership and problem-solving skills for small businesses in the wake of COVID-19: The Small Business Leadership Programme focusing on strengthening leadership to address management challenges, and the Peer Networks Programme focusing on improving problem-solving skills to address common COVID-19-related business challenges.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Further schemes included targeting vulnerable and disadvantaged young people across the country to receive free laptops.

# Skills for the Future Survey Findings and COVID-19

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## Digital Skills

The need for Digital Skills has been exacerbated by COVID-19 with many people now working from home utilising online and virtual programmes and activities, possibly for the first time. Digital skills were one of the two skill sets most requested and desired by UNISON members and COVID has now shifted these form desirable to essential.

Our Skills for the Future report identified that Digital skills were becoming near-universal requirements for employment. Acquiring specific digital skills makes career progression as well as a pay increase more likely. In certain fields, job seekers need to develop digital skills related to specific technical tools of their chosen discipline to advance their careers.[[43]](#footnote-43)

The study revealed a fairly considerable skills gap in terms of ‘computer and digital skills’ with one-in-seven (14%) members using computer and digital skills at work believing that their level of competencies in this area in below that needed at work. The data from our survey revealed the main differences were by qualification level and age (Figure 1.)

* Members with no or low qualifications[[44]](#footnote-44) were more than twice as likely as those with high level qualifications (Level 4 and above) to report a deficiency in computer & digital skills, and management & supervisory skills; and were more than five times as likely to report deficiencies in numeracy and literacy
* UNISON’s oldest members (aged 50 and over) were six times more likely than the its youngest members (aged 16 to 26) to report of computer & digital skills but were least likely to report insufficient management & supervisory skills. However, even among this older group, one in six (16%) respondents who needed managerial & supervisory skills at work felt their competencies in this area were below the requirements of their role.

Given the importance of digital skills to online working it could be that some groups have actually been left further behind through others progressing through access to online learning and/or the shifting of existing face-to-face training into mediums (online) that they are less able to access.

Future work could explore digital skills around topics like:

Who has received digital training following COVID-19? (And what type) and who hasn’t?

Has the volume and the nature of ‘the ask’ for training changed? (Are people looking for different types of courses now?)

Has the age element in the request persisted?

Has the link to low qualifications persisted?

Figure 1 How well do you feel your computer, digital skills match the skills you need in your current job? The % responding that skills are lower than those needed at work

Base: All respondents needing each skill at work

## Skills for Progression

The 2019 survey (Figure 1) revealed a potential among the UNISON membership for greater responsibility and career development given the finding that significant numbers have skills that are currently under-utilized. Two of the impacts of austerity within the public sector (from which most UNISON members are drawn) have been freezes on recruitment and pressure on training and career development opportunities.

Skills for the Future recommended that UNISON needed to ensure that staff being placed in positions with management and supervisory responsibility have been suitably trained/skilled – our survey suggested this may be problematic and can be anticipated to have both negative impacts on the organisations and individuals concerned. Furthermore, the repercussions of poor management and supervisory skills cascade into the organisations affecting morale, productivity, recruitment & retention.

COVID-19 has placed unusual strains on management and supervision due to:

New health and well-being concerns

New ways of working (distanced, remote etc.)

New software and new systems

An increased need to manage and supervise online and in different ways

Future work could explore management and supervisory skills provision around topics like:

Has the desire for this training persisted/shrunk/grown?

Has the nature of ‘the ask’ for training changed? (Are people looking for different types of courses now?)

Has the age element in the request persisted?

Has the link to low qualifications persisted?

## Concerns with the Impact of Technical Automation

Skills for the Future found that the threat of technical automation was felt more widely in public services than across the UK workforce more generally with almost three fifths (57%) of UNISON members feeling that automation is putting their jobs at risk with workers aged 50 and over (60%) and those working in utilities (69%) and further education (61%) most likely to feel this way. One third (34%) of its members experienced significant worry that their position will be made redundant in the next three years.

This issue of technological change was explored further with respondents asked, “To what extent do you agree that technological automation is putting public service jobs at risk?” (Figure 2). Overall, 57% of respondents either strongly agreed (21%) or agreed (36%) with this statement. Less than one in ten (9%) either ‘strongly disagreed’ (2%) or ‘disagreed (7%) with the statement. The results suggest that UNISON members are more concerned about the threat of automation than workers generally across the UK.

COVID-19 has accelerated the use of digital technologies but will not (yet) have led to major new investment in technical automation within the public sector. Most roles being carried on virtually where practical - rather than replaced.

Any future work looking at technical automation could explore in more depth whether:

The significant fears of the impact of automation are realistic and;

Whether they have changed following considerable exposure to working virtually.

Figure 2 Automation uses computer technology to carry out tasks previously performed by people. To what extent do you agree that technological automation is putting public service jobs at risk?

Base: All respondents (33,328)

## Feelings about the future of work

A stand-out finding from the report was in response to a question concerning how members felt about the future of work. They were asked to choose which of the following four statements most closely described how they felt about the future of work as it was likely to affect them. Did they feel *mostly*?

Excited – I see a world full of possibility

Confident – I know that I will be successful

Worried – I’m nervous about what the future holds

Uninterested – I tend not to think too far ahead

Overall, most respondents (57%) selected “worried” with fewer choosing “confident” (22%), “uninterested (14%) and “excited” (7%). Figure presents these results alongside those of a global[[45]](#footnote-45) study of the general public commissioned by PWC in 2017 and 2014. The PWC report, “Workforce of the future: The views of 10,000 workers”[[46]](#footnote-46) found much higher levels of positivity than is evident among UNISON members. UNISON members are almost three times more likely to say they are worried about the future than workers globally in 2017.

Figure 3 When you think about the future world of work as it is likely to affect you, do you feel MOSTLY …?

Base: All respondents (34,547)

Patterns by respondent characteristics were such that: ‘Worried’ comprised the largest group across all characteristics. By personal characteristics women (58%) tended more likely to be worried than men (53%) although it was disability (66%) that was most closely associated with being worried about the future.

COVID-19 has impacted enormously on the world of work and on people’s lives in general. Concerns about the future logically will have increased across the board and it would be interesting to see if this extends to what the ‘future of work’ would look like. However extrapolating this from general worries and concerns at the ‘new normal’ may well be problematic. Nonetheless this was so significant an initial finding that if fears have increased even further – it would imply a need for a change in the way organisations are currently supporting their employees.

A potential driver for the above concerns was the finding that when members were asked to select one from a selection of six reasons why some respondents felt at risk from redundancy, ‘changes within the business or organization’ (78%) was highlighted by easily the largest group of respondents. COVID-19 therefore comes at a time of considerable pre-existing uncertainly. Future work could more specifically look at whether COVID-19 has impacted on the existing employment and skills uncertainties.

## Satisfaction with current job

Job satisfaction is a fairly standard indicator of the level of happiness of workers. A survey of over 5,100 workers for the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) as part of the *UK Working Lives* (UKWL) series[[47]](#footnote-47) found that 69% of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with their job. The survey revealed a clear relationship between occupation level and satisfaction within three-quarters (75%) of those working in the highest social group[[48]](#footnote-48) reporting satisfaction with their job compared with around three-fifths (62%) of workers in the lowest social grades[[49]](#footnote-49).

Our study revealed rather lower levels of satisfaction than the CIPD survey suggesting that job satisfaction among public service employees was lower than average across all sectors of the economy. Overall, the survey revealed that 55% of respondents were either satisfied (42%) or very satisfied (13%) with their job. One quarter (24%) were neural and one-fifth (20%) were either dissatisfied (14%) or very dissatisfied (6%).

Future work could more look at whether COVID-19 has impacted on job satisfaction as different people have either enjoyed or not-enjoyed changes to working life such as furlough, virtual working and the loss of personal (physical) interaction.

## The Desire to Learn

Another stand out finding from the research was the very high percentages of respondents who expressed positive desires for learning - over 80% said that ‘learning is important’ and that they were ‘ready to learn new skills’. In particular they identified that digital skills and managerial and supervisory skills were what they needed for the changing world of work. Overall, 95% of members identified at least one area of skill they would like to develop. More than four-fifths identified that ‘learning is important to my self-esteem’ and they were ‘ready to learn new skills to remain employable in the future’.

Consistent with previous research the survey found that motivation to learn *increases* with qualification level and *decreases* with age – nonetheless, motivation was high even among the oldest – with more than four-fifths (82%) of respondents aged 50 agreed they were ‘ready to learn new skills’.

COVID-19 has resulted in large amount of free and easily accessible online provision being made available and sign-posted to employers and individuals, including via their Trade Unions.

Unsurprisingly, given members’ assessment of their own skills gaps, computer and digital (68%) and supervisory or management skills (47%) were the most frequently mentioned. Under COVID-19 the former has certainly received enhanced attention – but primarily to overcome barriers to working from home.

Future research could look at whether this has reduced a perceived need to know/train more, made no difference or had the opposite effect. Similarly the impact on COVID-19 on where members now see a need for training would be interesting. Whether this now indicates a need for different types of digital skills and indeed different kinds of management and leadership would also be interesting. These could be followed up through focus groups.

## Attitudes to learning

Overall, the results reveal positive attitudes to learning with more than four-fifths claiming that ‘learning is important for my self-esteem’ (81%) and that they were ‘ready to learn new skills to remain employable in the future’ (86%). Perhaps understandably, members were less prepared to completely retrain although even this group accounted for more than half (55%) of those interviewed (Figure 4).

The survey explored the extent to which UNISON members’ motivation to undertake future learning was influenced by their perception of the benefits. Interestingly, even members who felt they already possessed all the skills they would need for the rest of their career[[50]](#footnote-50), demonstrated high interest in future training with more than three-quarters (78%) claiming they were ready to learn new skills for work. This compared to nine-in-ten (90%) who thought that they would need to develop new skills to remain employable.

It would be interesting to see if this positive attitude for training had persisted and for which groups – linked to identifying where recent new learning, perhaps due to COVID-19, had taken place. Are members still this enthusiastic?

Figure 4 To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Base: All respondents

## Responsibility for Training

The survey also explored members’ views on the statement: “It’s my own responsibility to develop my skills rather than relying on my employer”. Opinion was fairly divided on this: almost two-fifths (39%) agreed that it was their responsibility, one-third (33%) neither agreed nor disagreed and more than one quarter (28%) disagreed with the statement.

COVID-19 saw large amounts of training being provided by employers and the government, with furloughed workers also allowed to study and train online. It would be interesting to see if subsequently members are increasingly recognizing the employer’s or government’s responsibility to provide training.

## Method of learning

The survey explored the characteristics of this learning in terms of how the learning is being delivered. Off-the-job training (attended away from their usual work station) was the most common with two-thirds of members learning this way in the last 12 months (Figure 5). Online learning was the second most popular (55%) followed by on-the-job training (52%) which is typically delivered at learners’ normal workstation. Two-fifths (41%) of learners had taught themselves using supporting materials (41%) or through trial and error (27%). One-in-seven (16%) had taken an evening class.

Clearly a great deal of workplace training has now shifted online. This was already a well-established medium within the public sector.

Figure 5 Which of the following types of learning have you undertaken in the last 12 months?

Base: All respondents undertaking learning in the last 12 months

When we looked at on online learning, the survey revealed a positive correlation between accessing online learning with rising qualification level. Highly qualified learners (59%) were significantly more likely than learners with no or low level qualifications (44%) to access online learning. By sector, online learning was highest among learners in social care (61%) and lowest among learners in schools (46%), transport (47%). Logically not all workers can easily access online learning and further analysis of who these groups are and where they are located would be valuable – as they may well now be missing out.

## Learning Needs

Unsurprisingly, given members’ assessment of their own skills gaps computer and digital (68%) and supervisory or management skills (47%) were the most frequently mentioned followed by job specific, technical or practical skills (31%), complex analytical skills (27%), numeracy, maths skills (21%), literacy, reading or writing skills (18%) and physical or manual skills (9%).

Relatively high levels of interest in developing literacy and numeracy and physical and manual skills were seen among members belonging to an ethnic minority group, young people and those with low level qualifications. It would be valuable to see if these groups are receiving any training.

## Changes within the workplace

Questions we asked about changes within the workplace provided an all-important context ahead of COVID-19. They enabled us to see how respondents’ working lives were evolving; what kind of pressures they felt their role and perhaps their job/sector was being placed under and what kind of future it had; whether the changing world of work was impacting on them and how they felt about the future. We included a look at just how happy members were in their current role and whether this was impacting on training and learning decisions.

Ahead of COVID-19 the majority (84%) of respondents had observed at least one form of workplace change during the last three years, most commonly change in work organisation (65%). A significant minority, had seen reductions in the number of people doing the same work as them and the introduction of new technologies. These findings will have very significantly changed.

## The Skills to do the Job (Alignment of Skills)

Our research pointed to a UNISON membership that though, on the whole, was appropriately skilled for the roles they carry out – had some persistent skills needs and offered its employers greater potential from enhanced skills-utilization. The finding that the predominant skills issue was one of underutilization, as opposed to deficiency, was echoed in the 2017 UK Employer Survey (UKES) which reported that “the under-use of skills affects a considerably larger proportion of employers and the workforce than skills deficiencies do”.

These findings echo those of the 2017 UK Employer Skills Survey which found that more than half (53%) of establishments identifying a skills gaps within their workforce reported a deficiency in management and leadership skills and more than one third (35%) identified a shortage in digital skills. The persistence of skills deficiencies within the UK workforce suggest that sub-optimal training is an issue – and subsequent productivity repercussions as well as mental health consequences on individuals’ being asked to perform tasks that they are ill-prepared to perform.

Where skills deficiencies were reported, these were mostly likely to be with respect to ‘computer, digital skills’ (14%) and ‘management or supervisory skills’ (18%). With COVID-19 these will have changed, but may well also persist, as the need for new skills may not coincide with the subsequent provision of online training.

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## Recent learning activity – new pressures

The vast majority of UNISON members were recent learners with four-in five having participated in some form of learning during the last 12 months. This was most commonly for work or career (70%) rather than private or personal reasons. While ‘attending training away from your work station’ was the most common method of accessing training (66%), more than half recent learners had accessed an ‘online training course’. Online learning was the most popular form of learning among agency workers (56%) but was less popular among those with no or low level qualifications (44%).

COVID-19 therefore, with its requirement for greater online training and CPD therefore would have had a workforce where the majority are able to access and indeed are familiar with the learning style – but where those lowest skills and often hardest to reach for learning may be in danger of greater marginalization.

## Awareness raising and the role of ULRs

A surprising number of respondents were not particularly aware of the learning that was on offer to them via UNISON. Those that had accessed the learning were extremely positive and this suggests there is real potential to help support far more learners if the message about the current offer can be better communicated. ULRs could be central to this. Similarly many respondents knew they needed help or some training but were not in a position as yet to articulate just what that was.

With many staff furloughed and looking for support – this is clearly an opportunity for UNISON to target them with their existing online resources. However COVID-19 will have placed challenges for how ULRs work and it would be valuable to share practices in how ULRs are finding innovative and successful new ways to contact and support potential learners.

# COVID-19 Non-Governmental New DigitAl Resources Targeting Digital Skills

As the Covid-19 pandemic rapidly changed our immediate world, individuals, communities, educators and businesses have responded with to quickly establish ways of supporting each other. In 2019, Lloyds’ annual UK Consumer Digital Index[[51]](#footnote-51) found that in the UK alone, 17.3 million people in employment do not have the Essential Digital Skills required for today’s workplace. Given the pressures to work from home and work utilising digital media – possibly for the first time – there was a major push to ensure people have access to the skills needed. The following (from Tech UK[[52]](#footnote-52)) are a reasonable cross-section of initiatives in this field:

[BT Skills for Tomorrow](https://www.bt.com/skillsfortomorrow/index.html) - A range of free online or face-to-face courses, designed to help you feel more confident and comfortable in the online world.

[Institute of Coding](https://instituteofcoding.org/courses/) - The Institute of Coding is working to encourage a larger, more diverse group of learners onto digital skills courses, and offers 200+ on its course catalogue.

[Lloyds Bank Academy](https://www.lloydsbankacademy.co.uk/) - The Lloyds Bank Academy is a free learning initiative that focuses on giving you the key digital skills you need for work and day-to-day life.

[Microsoft Digital Literacy](https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/digitalliteracy/home) - Microsoft Digital Literacy is for anyone with basic reading skills who wants to learn the fundamentals of using digital technologies.

[Google Digital Training](https://applieddigitalskills.withgoogle.com/s/en-uk/digital-training) - Explore the trusted curriculum to find the computer skills you want to learn, from data analysis to research and communication.

[Huawei ICT Academy](http://www.huaweiacad.com/) - Huawei ICT Academy provides a wide range of learning pathways with rich learning resources, simulation tools, practical labs and certiﬁcation exams.

[Flatiron School](https://flatironschool.com/free-courses/coding-bootcamp-prep) - They have a number of free courses including, Hacking 101: Introduction to Cybersecurity, Data Science Bootcamp, and Intro to Careers in Design.

[Open Learning](https://www.open.edu/openlearn/) - OpenLearn gives you free access to course materials and expert opinion on topical issues from The Open University.

[Learn My Way](https://www.learnmyway.com/) - Learn My Way is a website of free online courses, built by Good Things Foundation to help people develop their digital skills. From improving your health, finding a job and managing money online Learn My Way helps people improve their lives through digital.

[FutureLearn](https://www.futurelearn.com/courses?filter_category=open&filter_course_type=sponsored&filter_availability=started&all_courses=1) - 11 million users taking short online courses, micro-credentials, and undergraduate and postgraduate degrees that improve their working lives.

# COVID-19 Good Practice: A Regional Response

This example outlines how a relatively new regional structure (Digital Skills Partnership) in the Devon and Somerset area (Heart of the South West LEP) collaborated to support businesses and individuals within its geography.

The Digital Skills Partnership decided the best way to support was to draw together information on digital tools and freely available digital training to support the use of those tools. Further for those looking at a period of self-development they put together a list of free online learning for individuals across a wide range of digital skills levels and topics. They also signposted to general advice and guidance for businesses in response to COVID-19 on the dedicated page at the Heart of the South West LEP [Growth Hub](https://www.heartofswgrowthhub.co.uk/covid-19-guidance-for-business/%C2%A0)[[53]](#footnote-53) .

Resources included:

Remote Working Toolkit (COSMIC)

Cyber Security Advice (SECURIOUS)

Remote Teams, Culture and Tools (TRELLO)

Home Working: Common Challenges (Google)

**Google Hangouts Meet**

**Google Classroom**

**Microsoft Teams Guide**

**Zoom Guide**

**Remote Working Webinars**

**Free Courses** (BT Skills for Tomorrow, Future of Tech, Cisco Networking Academy, Google Digital Garage, Institute of Coding, Code Academy, Future Learn, Learn My Way, Lynda - LinkedIn Learning)

**Resources for Schools (STEM Learning, Cyber School, Barefoot, 2 Simple, Code Academy Pro, iDEA, TECH WE Can Tuesdays, SideQuest, Sparx, Code Creates, Minecraft)**

Rapid Calls for Support (such as ventilator innovation and design)

 Resources for Community (iDEA, BT Skills for Tomorrow)

The DSP and LEP also negotiated access to the Coursera Platform – for 5,000 individual licenses. Coursera had offered local Government's access to their platform for free until the end of 2020. Examples of Coursera’s (4,000+) offer include:

From Idea to StartUp (11 hours)

Grow Your Business with Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women (4 hours)

Introduction to G-Suite (7 hours)

Spreadsheets for Beginners (2 hours)

Introduction to Data Analysis using Excel (20 hours)

Create a Blog using WordPress (2 hours)

Create Customer Support in Google Sheets (2 hours)

Healthcare Innovation (21 hours)

Google IT User Support Technician (23 hours)

The Digital Business Support package in the LEP is advertised as: Bounce Back Digital. This offers free webinars, online short courses and cyber support ‘buddy sessions’ for businesses.[[54]](#footnote-54)  Examples of the digital offer included:

 Setting up e-commerce websites

 Moving to cashless payments and digital bookkeeping

 Mastering online productivity tools

 Using digital marketing tools

 Being cybersecurity confident

# Recommendations and possible areas for new analysis and research

Low skilled

Low-skilled workers receive less training and are less likely to ask for it. Overall, 34% of members with no or low level qualifications had not undertaken any learning in the analyzed year. Given the need for training to keep workers safe and to adapt to new ways of working – ensuring this group is not missing out on training and becoming even more disadvantaged is a priority.

Part-time workers

Part-time workers were least likely to have undertaken any learning and were less likely to have trained for ‘work reasons’. This, linked to the female dominated gender make-up of the part-time workforce, suggests access to training is an equalities issue. As with low-skilled workers, ensuring this group have had access to skills training is important.

Innovations to Union Learning Fund (ULF) activity

UNISON and other unions have re-purposed elements of their ULF activity to support workers in new and different ways. It is worth evaluating the success of this both to influence ongoing activity and to help inform the Department for Education (as funder). This could be done in partnership with the TUC who evaluate their ULF activity annually.

Explore links with the National Re-training Scheme and FE Review

Government policy concerning the funding of adult skills has never stood still, and now is no exception. The FE Review and the funding of skills within a national policy setting focusing on ‘levelling up’ should provide opportunities for UNISON – but these may need local and regional initiatives. This needs more than a watching-brief and scoping regional pilots would make good sense.

Are certain worker categories missing out on training now?

Our 2019 study found that there are more skills imbalances among flexible workers - particularly those on ‘zero hours’ contracts. Workers on flexible contracts were also more likely than members on other forms of employment contract to report being discouraged from progressing their career, accessing training or getting more involved in their union because of a lack of skills or confidence in literacy or numeracy. This issue was particularly prevalent among agency workers. Exploring whether these workers have suffered disproportionally - given COVID-19’s influence on the labour market could be an area for future attention.

Age

Nationally unemployment has risen sharpest amongst young people. This is largely down to the impact of COVID-19 on certain sectors with many younger employees. We would not necessarily expect this to be the case within the public sector, apart perhaps from impacts on apprenticeships who may have struggled to continue/start their courses. Greater impact may be anticipated on those older workers in the labour market who have been more vulnerable to COVID-19 and may have entered long-term furlough or had to take very prolonged periods away from colleagues. Along with those individuals in the following category, it would be interesting to know what kind of learning they have accessed and what their reflections have been on its usefulness.

Disabilities, health and wellbeing

COVID-19 has been particularly impactful on older people and those with underlying health conditions. It has also placed very considerable pressures on individual’s physical and mental wellbeing. Whilst these may not be specifically ‘skills’ issues the potential support and help that can be sourced is somewhat dependent upon individual’s ability to access it. Consequently digital literacy and workplace support from ULRs will be important and examples of where UNISON have been able to support these workers would be valuable.

Key workers

Key workers have borne the brunt of COVID-19 workplace illness and mortality. They have found themselves with a pressing need to learn new skills and new ways of working whilst, in many cases, also coming under very considerable workplace pressures and receiving greater volumes of work. Examples of skills interventions that have been successful (and otherwise) would be valuable. Similarly identifying where this group can now identify new skills requirements would be important in supporting them in their work.

Responsibilities for learning provision

The finding that opinion was fairly divided on who should shoulder the responsibility for workplace training with almost two-fifths (39%) stating that is was their responsibility and only one quarter (28%) disagreeing with this statement may have rung a few alarm bells within unions and government. COVID-19 has resulted in considerable investment in training (time and money) by employers and government and it would be interesting to see if members are now recognising more of a role for these groups in the provision of appropriate skills to working age adults.

Barriers to learning

It would be useful to know what new and growing barriers to learning have emerged under COVID-19 – as a precursor to developing new provision or tweaking existing.

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