

Heart of the South West Digital Skills Partnership

The use and provision of digital skills in the Heart of the South West LEP region

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The HotSW Local Enterprise Partnership (HotSW LEP) have identified digital infrastructure and utilisation as critical to the region's success. Subsequently, in June 2018 the LEP was named as one of only two LEP areas in England that attained pilot area status for the development of a 'Local Digital Skills Partnership'. The pilot areas are tasked in developing a 'playbook' for other LEP areas to learn from in developing digital skills in their respective areas.

In support of these goals, HotSW LEP Digital Skills Partnership identified a need for a 'digital skills needs mapping exercise' within the region, and this was carried out jointly by the University of Plymouth and University of Exeter. This was supported by a desk based review to identify existing data and literature on digital skills relevant to the HotSW LEP geography. Finally an employer survey and accompanying interviews with employers and providers were carried out to explore existing and emerging skills needs and how they are impacting on training/education supply.

The challenge for the DSP is to provide leadership for the digital agenda; to spread good practice more widely across the two counties through:

- Collaboration.
- Signposting and supporting employers and learners to find the appropriate learning, advice and guidance as the changing nature of recruitment will make it more important to be digitally literate.
- Work with government (DWP, JCP, Employment Hubs etc.) to address barriers.
- Draw on new funding streams to realise the region's potential.
- Where practical the DSP should seek to align activity and priorities with the other pilot within the Lancashire LEP.

The DSP needs to be 'evangelical' about the potential transformative impacts of digital and itself needs to be recognised as a good practice adopter. There is need for a communications strategy and website and the new DSP staff should prioritise this alongside signposting activities. In advance of goals for government and others it makes sense to build a list of 'worked up' fundable ideas. We have identified a series of six themes and each has accompanying recommendations.

THEME 1. Developing world-class skills for productivity and growth

The Heart of the South West region has an enviable cross-section of businesses and sectors of world class potential. A common thread is their adoption of and investment in digital technology and their need for advanced digital skills to stay ahead of the curve. All businesses and not just the specialist ‘adopters’ should benefit from action to support digital growth and innovation.

Recommendations

1. Encourage the creation of a significant (new and/or greatly enlarged) Digital Apprenticeship offer at Higher and Degree levels with significant regional intake.
2. Target bids to funding streams including the £1 million Digital Skills Innovation Fund to scale up and capitalise on innovative programmes that are already addressing local and regional digital challenges, seeking to ensure that such innovations incorporate a strong local element of learner progression.
3. The DSP to actively promote Digital Leaders programmes and seek to ensure representation within these within the LEP.
4. The LEP to be more proactive in strengthening the image of Devon and Somerset for high tech businesses and championing success by promoting the high tech assets of HOTSW linked to a communications strategy.
5. Develop Advanced Digital Skills hubs led by Exeter and Plymouth universities and our Colleges and supported by the proposed Institute of Technology to act as catalysts for the development of advanced digital skills, developing employer networks and showcasing the cutting edge and higher level training available.
6. DSP to provide leadership of the digital agenda with local leads in Devon and Somerset who can bring together other partners.

THEME 2. Responsive skills and employment system

Matching the provision of skills to labour market demand requires the development of labour market information to generate, analyse and disseminate reliable sectoral and occupational information to partners.

Recommendations

1. Government ask: To enable underspend by levy payers within the Heart of the South West to be retained and invested in local programmes to develop the digital skills of the workforce.
2. Government ask: LEP should lobby for more sensible remuneration associated with the level 6 Data Analyst qualification.
3. Government ask: Accreditation processes need to be speeded up, this includes the development of current and future apprenticeship standards.
4. The LEP should seek to improve the coherence of digital skills provision by setting targets for increasing the numbers of people within the LEP area who are accessing certain types of training.
5. Launch a HotSW Digital Schools Programme/Network for primary and secondary schools to showcase the range of funding and support available to schools to promote the digital agenda.
6. As part of 5 (above) develop a series of ENTHUSE Pilots with STEM LEARNING to support CPD for teaching staff to develop their skills in digital technologies across the school and Further Education network.

7. Use links with external organisations offering support (Google, Barclays etc.) to inform the approach of the DSP and to provide innovative provision that adds to the regional offer.
8. It is critical that 'digital' forms an important element within management and similar qualifications delivered in the region.
9. Providers should be encouraged via the DSP to include 1 or 2 questions within chamber of Commerce/FSB surveys (and similar) to help inform where there are gaps and issues in provision.
10. There is a need to promote the awareness of the potential of levy transfer within the LEP's larger employers, and the DSP could help ensure this has a digital focus.

THEME 3. Transitions to employment – Young People

If the DSP is to successfully drive up digital skills it needs to start with encouraging more young people to take up computing qualifications at GCSE, A level and Further Education. Gender remains a pressing issue, with females' considerably under represented on many ICT and digital courses. There is a need for improved links between employers and schools/colleges for work experience and internships and the development of relevant materials for careers resources.

Recommendations

1. There is an urgent need to develop clear and useful resources to help young people, their parents and teachers understand the growing workforce need for digital roles/skills and to help overcome a broader lack of understanding of business needs. Supporting local innovative employers to work with schools is a central element of this. The proposed South West Institute of Technology is an obvious potential source of materials of this kind.
2. Local EBPs and/or the Careers Enterprise Company should be supported to develop a Digital Group which can take a lead in establishing relationships between local employers, schools and the voluntary sector.
3. The LEP should monitor the proposed Exeter Digital and Data hub (EDDE) for potential to extending the outputs across a wider geography.

THEME 4. Transitions to Employment – Inclusion

For those out of the labour market, the expectation amongst learners is that learning will be free and in order to build confidence learners need to be able to have taster sessions to see if different courses are right for them. With the move of benefits and health support increasingly online there is a growing need for digital confidence amongst anyone seeking to access public services.

Recommendations

1. Access the Digital Inclusion Fund to support the work of the library service, Unionlearn and voluntary providers to deliver the first steps support people need to build their digital skills and confidence. Particularly in terms of:
 - a. The needs of women returners
 - b. Addressing gender under-representation
 - c. Supporting the unemployed

- d. Developing provision that will build confidence of all those in the workforce who lack digital skills
2. Encourage local providers to bid to/access the new National Retraining Scheme to test the use of artificial intelligence and innovative education technology in online digital skills courses, so students can benefit from this emerging technology.
3. Subsidise a programme of basic IT training, support and guidance so that people can try courses before committing to them and be signposted to courses at the appropriate level.
4. Develop a network and database of Digital Champions.
5. Develop a programme of workshops to bring together charities, providers and funders to raise awareness of the range of initiatives and funds available to support local communities to develop their digital skills.
6. Work with training providers to ensure that when the basic digital skills entitlement is introduced from 2020 that providers collaborate to ensure that there are no gaps in provision or duplication of effort.
7. Work with Government to ensure the post-Brexit Prosperity Fund allows a local focus on digital inclusion.
8. It is important to focus on young people who have (for a variety of reasons) missed out on education (e.g. NEETs) to ensure they can access services and future employment. Working closely with JCP and DWP.

THEME 5. Employer investment in digital skills

One of the barriers faced by SMEs in accessing digital learning is knowing what is right for them and their firm. There is an understandable reluctance to commit investment because of a lack of confidence in identifying relevant training. SMEs need support to understand their needs and signposting to appropriate initiatives/training programmes.

Recommendations

1. There is a need to draw down funds to develop and subsidise a programme to support SMEs to improve their data analytics, digital awareness and skills - along the lines of the successful “Get up to Speed” programme. It is important to link-in with existing local infrastructure such as the Growth Hub.
2. There is a long tail of SMEs adopters – the LEP should encourage or develop benchmarks so that SMEs can see where they are on a digital maturity scale.
3. Develop a DSP platform to illustrate that the LEP represents good practice – perhaps in line with activities such as SMART North West.
4. With the imminent arrival of T-levels – there is a need to ensure digital skills are embedded within this delivery.
5. Employers need to be aware of the importance of digital skills in relation to productivity.
6. The LEP should encourage its larger employers (including local authorities) to focus elements of their Training Levy on digital and digitally-related apprenticeships – including within their supply chain businesses/employers that are within the LEP area.

THEME 6. Retaining and attracting talent

Closer links between the universities and employers to help promote local vacancies, careers and internships could do much to help retain graduates within the local economy. Furthermore, the DSP

should explore the scope for cross-LEP working with Bristol and others in the south west to identify areas for co-operation and exchange of good practice. There is a need to work to promote the region for its quality of life in much the same way as other digital clusters have done like Bournemouth and Brighton.

Recommendations

1. The emerging Local Industrial Strategy should include significant 'digital elements' such as Big Data and Data Analytics with a core ask around supplying our innovating employers and those with considerable exporting potential to access the skills they need locally.
2. The LEP's FE institutions and universities should be encouraged to take a lead in sharing a commitment to boosting employer engagement and graduate retention.
3. An App or website should be developed to enable local employers to promote their employment opportunities, work experience and internships to local undergraduates and postgraduates. Targets should be set to drive placements into local employers (particularly SMEs).
4. Seek to use the Digital Skills Innovation Fund to map local digital training provision, link providers at all levels and seek to create new pathways and new and enhanced provision.
5. Build greater training provision at higher levels into the existing work around Analytical Cities, AI and Data that is already happening in our LEP cities.

Sponsors



Authors

