

# Accelerating Digital Skills Adoption in Ireland

Perspective and recommendations from IBM and Cisco



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## Executive Summary

Digital skills are a necessity for all citizens in order to ensure inclusion, help foster economic recovery and ensure future economic growth and prosperity in Ireland. In the new modern era, digital skills are as essential as basic numeracy and literacy skills in almost every job role. Every business, every employee, needs digital skills enablement. Ensuring an effective educational transformation of Irish businesses and citizens will require a common vision, detailed collaboration between public and private sector, and behavioural change by citizens towards lifelong learning.

IBM Ireland and Cisco Ireland have collaborated on this white paper to review existing research and plans relevant to digital skills in Ireland, future jobs predictions, training content providers, and accessibility issues related to upskilling or reskilling of citizens.

Our combined goal was not to reinvent valuable research already completed in these domains, but to identify some key areas of innovation that would have immediate and widespread impact in boosting our national strategy for digital skills enhancement. Solving the skills mismatch between the demand cycle of industry for relevant skills on one hand, and the supply capability of the public and private sector educational system on the other, is the key challenge to be solved.

Covid-19 has fundamentally restructured the world of work and accelerated digital transformation while highlighting the vulnerability of certain job categories. The challenge for Ireland is to restructure our learning model to address these challenges and use the opportunity to gain competitive advantage over our European and Global competitors.

Our analysis highlights some fundamental challenges that can be substantially addressed in the short term, in particular:

- The motivation among citizens for life-long learning is a challenge, particularly among low-skilled labour roles and those with more limited educational qualifications;
- Citizens who may wish to upskill or reskill are unsure about the relevance of digital skills courses that pertain to the career type they are following or wish to follow;
- Citizens find it difficult to assess their own capability in achieving various learning outcomes without expert guidance and assessment of their particular attributes;
- Citizens find it difficult to find courses that are easily accessible, affordable and supported;
- If digital skills gaps are not addressed in a socially equitable way, we are at risk of continuing to widen the digital divide.

Across well-developed countries, there are several best practices for digital skills development that should be considered when looking at digital skills adoption in Ireland. We have included several of these best practices in this paper. Ireland has excellent digital skills training content providers such as Skillnet and SOLAS, advanced public and private educational establishments offering access to a diverse range of courses, and many community schemes helping solve accessibility issues.

In addition, the new online portal for people seeking to upskill or retrain which was launched by Minister for Further and Higher Education Simon Harris in January 2021 is a welcome development is accelerating digital skills adoption.

To augment this strong position, IBM Ireland and Cisco Ireland are suggesting the following actions:

- The further development of the national Skills portal that offers citizens 'career guidance' supported by artificial intelligence to assess learners' capabilities, soft skills, advice on future jobs and recommendation of relevant courses;
- The launch of a national program, both online and via traditional media channels, to promote the need for lifelong learning and to direct citizens towards this national reskilling and assessment portal;
- Accessibility issues are being addressed by the National Broadband plan and the emergence of regional hubs for remote working. We recommend these hubs facilitate citizen access for those with accessibility challenges;
- Online learning tools should be complemented with a network of available and easily accessible mentors and trainers who can provide support on the tools for learners;
- For content providers to agree a standardised mechanism for learning content, to be accessible through mobile devices and a mobile app that is developed for the national Skills portal;
- A strong push across society for both traditional and digital apprenticeships.

A national portal with regulated and validated AI-assisted career guidance, supported by a national promotional campaign, will substantially address the key challenges identified. It will drive focus and synergy between the citizen and learning content provider. Industry will help rationalise the digital skill levels required for different job types at different levels.

This paper highlights much of the research related to digital skills both at a European and national level, analyses the state of play for training course providers in Ireland, presents global best practices and recommends an approach to accelerate digital skills adoption in Ireland.

For more information:

To learn more about our recommendations and for further information on any of the topics discussed in this paper, please reach out to:

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