Digital skills priorities for creating an enhanced Arts and Culture sector offer and safe-guarding jobs in the region

KEY MESSAGES

The Arts and Culture Sector is a particularly broad categorization where our analysis has identified a number of areas where policy intervention could make a considerable, positive, benefit for individuals, employers and the regional economy.

From an inclusion perspective, particular sub-sectors such as visitor-attractions, galleries and museums do have staff and volunteers lacking basic digital skills – which if addressed would have positive impacts on the employers and individuals concerned. The same employers could often also better use digital methods to reach their audience.

By contrast, sub-sectors such as Film/Screen Skills need more skilled CREA-TECH staff urgently and education providers need to recognize and come together to respond to the considerable opportunities here.

CONTEXT

This policy paper presents a series of recommendations from the Marchmont Observatory at the University of Exeter, following interviews, workshops and focus groups held (within the framework of the ACSOL Erasmus+ project) with a group of 'triple helix stakeholders' (employers, education organisations, trade unions and policymakers/local government) held online and with a key focus on the South West of England.

This is a regional proposal at sectoral level with recommendations and strategies to better support both worker's digital skills needs and the needs of employers in the sector. These needs have both been exacerbated by, and highlighted as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

The Pandemic has led to considerable impacts on jobs and the labour market conditions critical for maintaining a successful and inclusive sector.

The paper includes reference to our research which has identified risks, needs and opportunities, from digital transformation as well as the key digital skills for employment in the sector.

DIGITAL SKILLS IN THE SECTOR

Our research has been very useful in identifying where the workforce and managers/owners in the sector felt new skills were needed and the issues around accessing the right training.

In the performance and attendance-based areas of the sector audiences remain considerably down. There is a slow move back to the audience numbers evident pre-pandemic, but it has nowhere need returned to 'normal'.

There is a perceived lag between the skills of the audience and the skills of the sector. The users want to access in lots of new ways - but employers just don't know what they could offer and how. These are the tricky 'unknown unknowns'. Audiences want new types of engagement with the arts and cultural experiences. Some performers can use Zoom or other routes to reach an audience, but this is very tough for museums and galleries and other more 'static' offers – which actually are at the heart of a regional or city cultural ecosystem. Organisations do not know how to change the way they work to make the most of this. But there is a huge potential market and audience.

In the Screen Sector there is a major boom in jobs due to the emergence of new streaming services. Users value the high levels of production that are achievable now through the application of tech skills in making the film and TV materials.

Within the Screen sub-sector the major gaps are in Create-Tech. Finding people who wish to work in the arts and to be creative but also come with the ICT skills needed. The individuals most impacted by the skills gaps are the art department and their design team who have a very different approach to the later stage tech workers. They need to collaborate more.

A sectoral concern, emphasises by unions, relates to intellectual property rights – and worker's rights to their 'own' materials when working with artificial intelligence. This is a complex field, but workers need to protect their rights around voice and image. The industry moves very quickly and its employees need to protect their materials and stay on-top of digital development.

Within the sector, club and variety acts tended to lack digital skills, but that industry is still quite "old-fashioned", and as yet, are not articulating a specific, pressing need.

Organisations are looking at their core money (often public funding) and how they can access this. They often forget to include finance for self-development and skills. Digital now needs to be a key theme in tendering for centralised funding - to help the sector to develop and innovate. Failure to do this will lead to employers fighting for an ever-smaller slice of the funding cake.

Getting time off for training and learning can be very difficult and a persistent barrier. Certainly, they need:

- Sector specific software skills
- The ability to advocate for their own work (as so many are Freelancers)
- Help and training around understanding the impact of Artificial Intelligence
- Achieving an enhanced understanding of how to digitise museum and art gallery collections
- Some basic digital skills needs in volunteers and others in less well-paid roles in the sector

REGIONAL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Recognise the need for basic digital skills amongst many in the sector in customer-facing and volunteer roles

Unions have seen a rise in demand (and this was also highlighted in the survey) for training and skills in the use of hardware and data systems.

In the Pandemic, people were often citing frustrations with using new digital and virtual ways of working in areas such as accessing new media and software (and even meetings) and even problems logging on.

Even before COVID there were recognised skills needs in areas such as using QR codes and logging people into systems and recording people's arrival or bookings.

When the pandemic hit the following were quickly identified as issues for many:

- Making presentations online
- Sharing presentations and screens
- Using Teams and Zoom (and others)
- Using social media to push the services of the employer or their own work

These are exacerbated by a sector that has many volunteers and part time staff with perhaps fewer links to training. Similarly, freelancers and self-employed workers often struggle to access funds for training. They are therefore:

- Time poor
- Struggling to buy onto courses

Courses and materials can also be quite cumbersome. Self-directed learning is well-perceived and could be a route for delivery.

Respond to the opportunities presented by the growing digitalisation of major parts of the sector

'Create-Tech' is the major need. They need people who are seeking careers being creative but have hard-level ICT skills - such as coding and digital technology. Staff often work remotely and digitally and there is a major need for their skills at the moment. With the explosion in Streaming Services there is a massive demand and currently production companies are running out of film crews.

The animation sector was hit by Brexit and has a need to attract people from computer science etc. Some training needs to be in very industry-related software. In one case – a trainee needs 400 hours practice to be useful to the sector. But learning and working this way can be quite isolating.

In the Screen Sector individuals prioritise their qualification and software skills – these are ones that will get them employment if they can demonstrate they have them. The employers are more likely to highlight softer skills around management and leadership. Funders therefore should incorporate 'digital training and preparedness within funding calls.

Prioritise the retention of older workers

There are many volunteers in the sector – they could have the skills that could help underpin new ways of working – but they also may be the ones most in need of digital skills provision – as they can be older workers and recent leavers from the labour market. The Value My Skills Tool offered (free) by the TUC is a way to have conversations with these groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SECTORAL TRAINING PRIORITIES

Our recommendations from the study indicate that the following should be prioritised:

(1) Develop a CREA-TECH Skills Escalator for the SW Peninsula

The University of Exeter developed a very successful Skills Escalator to help identify where new provision is needed in the Data Analytics sector (https://escalate.projects.uvt.ro/data-analytics-skills-escalator-video). A similar model would appear ideal for helping to meet a very considerable growing demand in the CREA-TECH sub-sector – where there is a massive need for new staff but this demand may not be apparent to potential learners and training providers.

(2) Highlight basic digital skills opportunities for those working and volunteering

Some significant parts of the sector have a large proportion of older workers - who as a group are both seemingly most in need of enhanced digital skills, AND those most likely to be leaving the labour market in the 2022 Retention and Recruitment crisis. Free generic training is reasonably plentiful (like https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/wranx or https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/learn/learn-my-way), but more targeted delivery of industry tailored basic skills programmes would be welcomed.

3) Sectoral Mid-Life Skills Reviews

The Value My Skills Tool created and offered for free by the TUC could be a way by the TUC is a way to have conversations with older workers, particularly if part of a wider Mid Life Career Review. https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/value-my-skills

4) Demonstrating how the sector can better reach its audience through Digital

Some sub-sectors are very clear about the need for and merits of digital skills provision. For others however, such as smaller museums and galleries, the potential that digital offers to enable 'audience reach' needs to be better articulated. Potentially through sectoral good practices and case studies. Funders should also seek to ensure they are building the digital capacity of the sector's workforce through their tenders and calls.

ABOUT THE ACSOL PROJECT

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PROJECT PARTNERS