

Skills Shortages and COVID-19

Article from Prospects: <https://www.prospects.ac.uk/careers-advice/getting-a-job/skills-shortages-and-covid-19>

Since the pandemic began in March the UK jobs market has changed substantially, take a look at what this means for recruitment and occupational shortages

Before the pandemic began, a report from Luminate, *Skills shortages in the UK 2019/20*, which takes its data from the Employer Skills Survey (ESS) 2017, stated that a third of vacancies (33%) in the UK were considered hard to fill. Vacancies are often hard to fill due to a lack of required skills, qualifications or experience among applicants.

What sectors has COVID-19 affected?

The graduate labour market has suffered significant damage, particularly in the arts - but things are far worse for non-graduates. Many key graduate employment sectors - in health, social care, IT, business services - have been much less affected than other areas of the economy. And it's notable that many vacancies that were hard to fill before the pandemic are in that group. Of the top five graduate professions for the number of hard-to-fill vacancies only HR and recruitment has clearly seen a very serious fall in demand. Nursing, medicine, IT and housing/welfare are all still in demand.

What about the future?

There's still a way to go before we can be completely clear about the effects of the pandemic, but many businesses are thinking hard about their future skills needs.

PWC observe that the Local Government Association estimates that the 'low carbon workforce' will treble by 2030 and that demand for digital skills and transferrable skills such as creativity, critical thinking, interpersonal communication skills and leadership skills will also become more important as technology advances and virtual working becomes a lot more common.

Hard-to-fill and skills shortage vacancies

The report highlighted the professional level occupations, which were reported by employers to have experienced the most vacancies during the survey. 'Professional level' means managerial, professional and associate professional roles. Nursing came top of the list, followed by HR and industrial relations professionals, business sales executives, welfare and housing associate professionals and IT user support technicians.

The report also demonstrates that despite thousands of graduates entering the job market every year employers still find certain positions difficult to fill. An employer reported a vacancy as hard to fill if they found it difficult to recruit for, for any reason.

The largest number of hard-to-fill vacancies were:

- nurses
- programmers and software development professionals
- human resources and industrial relations officers
- medical practitioners
- welfare and housing associate professionals.

Design engineers, accountants, marketing associate professionals and vets also made the list.

Vacancies that recruiters find hard to fill due to a lack of relevant skills, qualifications and experiences are often referred to as 'skills shortage vacancies'. Similar to the hard to fill list graduate jobs that experience the most skills shortage vacancies include nurses, programmers and software development professionals and business sales executives. However, unlike the hard to fill list teaching and other educational professionals, finance and investment analysts and advisers and graphic designers also feature.

According to the report the following industries experienced a particularly large number of hard-to-fill vacancies at professional level:

- **architectural and engineering activities**
- **computer programming and consultancy**
- **education**
- **employment and HR**
- **financial services**
- **human health activities**
- **legal and accounting services**
- **office administrative, support and business activities**
- **public administration and defence**
- **residential care activities**
- **retail trade**
- **social work.**

Occupational shortages by region

The UK is not one homogenous labour market and workers are not infinitely mobile, therefore local shortages exist.

In the East Midlands, like in most regions, nursing has the most hard-to-fill vacancies. However, draughtspersons and product and clothing designers are particular to the region. The East of England has the longest list of shortage occupations and these include medical practitioners, nurses, design and development engineers, veterinarians and business executives.

With a large and business-oriented labour market it's unsurprising that London's appetite for business support professionals in IT, recruitment, consultancy, law, sales and marketing is reflected by shortages in these occupations.

The top four shortages in the North East include nurses, medical practitioners, human resources and industrial relations officers and programmers and software development professionals. The region also struggles to recruit graphic designers.

The North West has more hard-to-fill vacancies in sales than any other. It also has one of the most serious shortages of nurses, recruitment professionals, housing professionals, youth workers and accountants.

The South East has a strong graduate labour market. However, the region has the largest number of shortages in the UK in nursing, IT support, insurance and housing.

Solicitors and legal professionals are in particular short supply in the South West. Other shortage occupations include medical practitioners and programmers and software development professionals.

There are notable engineering shortages in the West Midlands. Sales staff, nurses and human resources and industrial relations officers are also in short supply.

Yorkshire struggles to recruit electrical engineers, IT operations technicians and child and early years officers. Marketing associate professionals are also hard to find.

Why vacancies are hard to fill

Skills shortage vacancies frequently occur at managerial level, with candidates often failing to demonstrate sufficient work experience. 43% of ESS respondents said that managerial positions were hard to fill due to a low number of applicants with the required skills. 29%

cited a lack of required work experience, while 19% blamed a low number of applicants generally.

Professional-level jobs also show a similar pattern, although there are fewer issues with insufficient experience and more with applicant shortage. Competition from other employers and lack of interest in these types of roles also played a part. 46% of employers said that candidates for professional roles lacked the required skills, 28% said that a low number of applicants generally made these types of roles hard to fill.

When asked what skills were particularly hard to obtain for managerial jobs, over half of employers found it hard to recruit applicants with a demonstrable ability to manage. 67% of employers said it was hard to obtain specialist skills and knowledge related to the job, while 52% found complex problem solving skills to be particularly scarce. Knowledge of products and services and of how an organisation works also proved elusive. Soft skills that were lacking included managing and motivating staff, influencing others and the ability to manage own time and prioritise workloads.

When recruiting for professional jobs specialist knowledge was again the hardest skill to find. Advanced or specialist IT skills and complex numerical or statistical skills were also hard to come by. Applications for professional roles also lacked evidence of the following soft skills - ability to manage own time, motivating other staff and customer handling skills.

This webinar featured in the Prospects Future You: Live event in November 2020:

<https://youtu.be/2-UCDOXJGPo>

Find out more

- [Search graduate jobs.](#)
- Discover how best to approach [job hunting in a pandemic.](#)
- Read our [job profiles](#) to learn more about your chosen career and the skills required.

- Visit [Luminate](#) for more labour market information.

Written by Editor
Prospects · July 2020