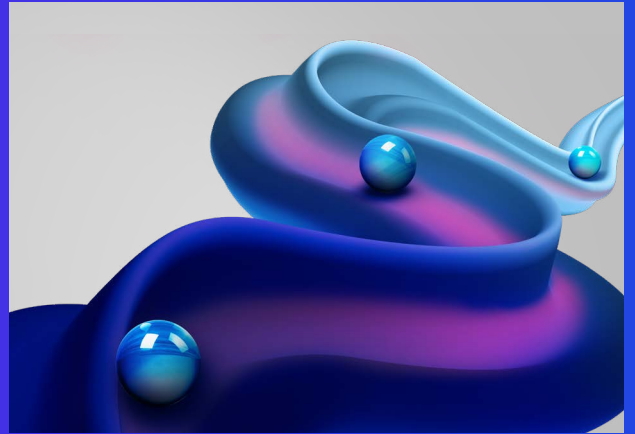KPMG | techUK

How to harness the potential of technology to bridge the digital skills gap

A case study from NHS England

Digital skills – NHS England

The UK has an acknowledged digital skills challenge, which cuts across both the public and private sectors. It has been estimated that the UK economy has only around 60% of the digital skills it needs. Overall, there are around 200,000 vacancies for positions requiring digital skills.

In the public sector, including the health service, these challenges are especially pronounced. So what actions are being taken to address the digital skills gap and enable public service bodies to harness the technology era?

NHS England on the digital pathway

This is something that has been explored during a series of workshops KPMG has been running with trade body techUK around creating a 'Smarter State', identifying the challenges and the best practice solutions. This has included speaking individually to a number of participants for a focused view – including James Freed, Deputy Director of the Digital Academy for Health and Care at NHS England.

Digitisation has been part of the NHS' national strategy for well over two decades now. This includes the massive and complex task of implementing electronic patient records that can be accessed and updated from multiple entry points and by many different users.

But while the importance of the digital agenda, including digital upskilling, is widely recognised, nevertheless James points out that there are many competing perspectives.

"Most people in the NHS agree that digital skills matter," he says, "but some will see other factors as more important – clinical safety, doctor and nurse staffing numbers, the teaching of surgery and surgical techniques, etc. So one of my priorities has been to establish digital skills at its appropriate level of importance, establishing a starting position that no one could disagree with."

'The most impactful thing we can do'

Where do organisations start? Right near the top. James is emphatic and passionate about it. "There is no doubt at all in my mind that digital is the best way of making change possible, of ensuring that outcomes tomorrow are better than those of today. It's the most impactful thing we can do."

However, James also points to international studies that have turned up a striking finding: 70% of digitally mediated change programmes fail to deliver the full outcomes set out in their business case.

"There are a range of reasons for this," James says. "In around 20% of cases, the choice of technology is the primary reason. In another 20%, it's down to resourcing issues. But in about two thirds of cases, the main inhibitor is cultural, process and behavioural factors. In other words, it's people and skills reasons. Skills are absolutely key to digital success – and this can be addressed through education."

Digitally willing and able?

This eloquently sets the context for the work that is ongoing through multiple channels and forums to drive up digital skills in the NHS. With 1.4 million staff encompassing a hugely diverse range of roles, it's obviously a huge undertaking. But James believes that some relatively simple key principles help to provide focus and momentum.

"Firstly, you need an organisation that is digitally willing," he explains. "That means establishing the culture and behaviours where digital is seen as an enabler, something that will help make users more effective, efficient and productive in their jobs. We need a data-driven, user-centred NHS. That needs to be led from the top, from Board level down through the whole organisation."

"Secondly, the organisation must be digitally able. This means having the right digital infrastructure, tools and support. Obviously this means big system-wide enablement, but it's also about putting the right tools into the hands of staff on the front line. For example, we asked 600 nurses what they wanted in digital terms – and their responses were clear and consistent: give us decent modern devices, give us connectivity wherever we are, and enable us to access, read and update patients' electronic records. The needs and demands are actually quite simple."

The third key principle is digital literacy. While perhaps 40% of NHS staff have the digital skill level that encompasses all basic digital literacies required for modern day working, with a smaller subset able to use innovative new applications such as AI, around 15% don't have basic digital literacy. The rest sit somewhere in between.

Digital Boards development programme

One of the success stories in the NHS to date has been the Digital Boards Digital Development programme that James helped set up and commission. True to the acknowledgement that the digital agenda must be embraced from the top to be successful, the programme is designed to support the 217 NHS Trust Boards in understanding, embracing and actioning digital. Initially launched at the beginning of March 2020, it seemed to face an uncertain future given that the Covid pandemic started just weeks later – but in fact, Covid made boards realise that digitisation was more essential rather than less and so in some senses kickstarted the programme.

"We actually exceeded our targets for 2020, with 24 Boards going through the programme," James says. "Around half of all the NHS Boards have now been through it. It's delivered by NHS Providers, who sub-contract Public Digital to run the actual training sessions. It's been a highly successful partnership. We've had excellent levels of interaction and engagement. It has raised confidence levels in considering the digital agenda and, anecdotally, has supported Boards to make big digital decisions faster and better, for example around electronic patient records. I really believe that it is helping to drive the data-driven, user-centred culture and environment we're trying to create."

Willing learners

James is very conscious, however, that the Board programme is only a step in the journey – there is no 'end point'. It's also only one component in what needs to be a multi-faceted, holistic strategy driving digital skills at every level across the NHS. But it has helped him see a universally important learning that could apply across the public sector, he says:

> "You can't force education on people. They have to want to learn. That means you need to make them see the benefits and why it matters. You've got to help them come to want it. Get that in place, and the magic will start to happen."