

How lifelong learning will help you build career resilience

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My previous column on skills generated significantly more responses from readers than usual, and therefore I have decided to follow-up with a further article exploring some of the points raised.

As the world of work shifts towards more knowledge-intensive sectors such as ICT, professional services and industries linked to sustainability, many people currently in the labour market will find themselves needing to update their skills to find employment in the years ahead.

The workforce qualifications profile has been steadily improving for many years. Only around one-fifth of workers in 2012 had a qualification at RQF level 6 or above (typically degree level or above), but that proportion now sits at about one-third, reflecting the increasing demand for higher skilled and qualified staff.

To meet this increasing demand moving forward, in a region where the working-age population is no longer growing, lifelong learning must become more than just an educational slogan. With birth rates falling and immigration a sensitive issue, employers can no longer rely on increasing numbers of young people leaving the education system to fill skills gaps.

This puts increased emphasis on the need to maximise the potential of the current working age population to supply the future demand for talent. This includes those in work, those with caring responsibilities, the long-term sick and the unemployed.

Many in work may feel that their days of learning are over, but for those in jobs at higher risk of redundancy, developing skill sets that are valued in other growing sectors of the economy could be more important than they think.

This includes technical skills such as IT or finance qualifications but also broader transversal skills which cut across multiple roles and sectors. These include problem-solving, communication, presentation and critical thinking which can increase a person's long-term employability.

These skills become particularly important in uncertain economic times, when employees may need to move between firms or industries. Even in advanced fields such as cyber security or data analytics, transversal skills are indispensable.

It is well recognised that technical skills can open the door to a job, but broader transversal skills often determine how well an individual performs and ultimately progresses in their career.

Management and leadership skills is another area in need of specific attention for lifelong learning. Recent surveys suggest that management practices and leadership training in many businesses here lag our peers across the rest of the UK and Ireland.

We have too many 'accidental' managers, people who have performed well at an operational level and then been promoted to lead or manage a team. On one level this is appropriate reward for high performing members of staff, but the skill sets required to manage and lead a team are very different from delivering effectively as a team member.

This is underestimated by many firms and training and support is often needed for those reaching management grade. The rewards can be tangible for firms because research shows that effective management raises productivity, innovation and staff retention and a strong pool of managers nurtures the future leadership pipeline.

One interesting finding from the skills research we completed was that most job vacancies are not filled by those leaving education to make the transition into employment, but by those already in the labour market moving from one job to another.

Therefore, some people will require guidance to navigate these opportunities, particularly those who last completed a job application form 30 years ago. As a result, careers guidance cannot be seen as something exclusively for those in their late teens or early twenties.

Many people would significantly benefit from mid-career guidance and advice, particularly if they believe their job is at risk, or those returning from caring responsibilities and older workers nearing retirement who might want to transition into a part-time role.

Depending on individual circumstances, this may include advice on potential training and development courses to increase qualifications. It is much better to be proactive and make decisions about your own career rather than have others make those decisions for you.

For all the challenges, the future remains bright if we take advantage of the opportunities. Modernising health and social care will demand fresh talent, from nurses to specialist care workers and growth areas such as data analytics, advanced manufacturing and financial technology will create high-value roles that reward those with the right mix of technical, management and transversal skills.

Therefore everyone, from the 16-year-old picking their A-levels to the 60-year-old considering a shift to part-time working, has a role in the future labour market.

It is just a case of taking the right advice and investing in the training and development that is right for your circumstances.

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About UUEPC

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