

Skills for the Future:

A report by UNISON and the University of Exeter

For the past nine years public sector staff have been battling to deliver services against a backdrop of swingeing cuts across the sector.

While the impact of austerity on employee numbers, pay and morale are well documented, its effect on the public sector skills gap is less well known.

Almost 39,000 UNISON members were surveyed in the largest skills audit in Europe to establish the future skills needs of public sector employees.

The results show austerity is not only affecting the workers of today, but its legacy of a weakened further education sector and the reluctance of employers to invest in staff training, could have far-reaching implications for the future.

About the survey

The survey was carried out between November 2018 and February 2019 and is based on 38,700 responses. This is one of the largest non-governmental skills surveys in Europe and provides a detailed picture of public service workers' skills, aspirations and concerns.

Findings

Changes within the workplace:

- Around a third (34%) felt it was 'very likely' or 'somewhat likely' that their position would be made redundant in the next three years
- More than four in five (84%) had observed at least one form of workplace change – such as a major restructuring or redundancies – during the last three years
- Just under half (45%) had seen a reduction in the number of people doing the same jobs as them
- More than two-fifths (44%) had seen the introduction of new technologies
- Half the local government workers surveyed thought their position was at risk of redundancy, with similarly high rates in utilities (49%), and further and higher education (44%)
- Just under three fifths (57%) felt technological automation was putting public sector jobs at risk
- Workers over 50 (60%) and those working in utilities (69%) and further education (61%) were most likely to feel this way.
- A majority (57%) reported feeling worried about the future of work as it was likely to affect their jobs
- Just over a fifth (22%) felt confident, while 14% were uninterested and just 7% excited about the future.
- Just over three fifths (61%) of workers in utilities and 61% of local government were the most worried about the future.

- Overall 55% of respondents were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their jobs
- Workers in social care (51%) and London (50%) were the least likely to be satisfied with their jobs.

Skills audit

Although respondents on the whole felt they had the were appropriate skills for their roles, there are some persistent skill gaps.

- Skills deficiencies were most reported in respect of 'computer and digital skills' (14%) and 'management or supervisory skills' (18%)
- Those with no or low qualifications were more than twice as likely as those with the highest qualifications to report a deficiency in 'computer and digital skills' and 'management and supervisory skills' and were more than five times as likely to report deficiencies in literacy and numeracy
- A lack of skills and/or confidence in literacy or numeracy had stopped just under a fifth (17%) of respondents from applying for promotion.

Barriers to learning

- More than half (52%) of staff who hadn't done any training in the past 12 months thought work-related training would have been useful
- Issues with employers, including not being willing to provide additional training, were more frequently reported as barriers than personal factors such as 'difficulty finding time for training'.
- Almost half (48%) those who were not learning for their current job believe it didn't harm their employment prospects
- One third (31%) believed their employment prospects would suffer through a lack of training.
- People with a disability were most likely to feel a lack of training had a negative effect on their employment prospects.