

Digital Technology and Creative Sector Interviews: Thematic Analysis

DORSET LSIP

INSIGHTFUL RESEARCH TEAM

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Introduction

This report will outline the findings of the Dorset Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) research in the digital technology and creative sector. These findings will provide valuable insight into the current feelings of employers in Dorset and what they desire from education providers. The research methodology used to gather these findings was based on best practices from current literature and is briefly outlined below.

Digital technology and creative sector executive summary

Employers within the digital technology and creative sector outlined extensive and clear actionable insights on how to better support and prepare the sector and learners to excel in all areas. Most pressing skill needs were highly technical, with software developers and programming skills being in high demand. Adding onto this, IT skills in using different software packages, and data analysis skills, were deemed extremely important for employers. Furthermore, employers also emphasised the significance of non-technical skills within this sector, where there are priorities in employees having improved communication and team-work skills, which will support the key skills required in client management and discussions.

Some of the main challenges experienced by employers relate to an abundance of self-taught employees, where many have not gone through formal training or

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courses, outlining a need for more specific college courses and avenues for learners in the sector. Additionally, employers would value more non-technical skills development taking place on courses directed towards this industry to allow learners to develop the needed communication and teamwork skills for their workplace. Furthermore, experience opportunities have been outlined as vital for employers. Employers value recruiting candidates who have high levels of experience in applying their skills.

In terms of net zero, the most important discussion surrounded the lack of knowledge that employers in this industry have to deal with for the transition. Employers demonstrated that they lack the specific understanding needed to put large-scale changes in place within their workplace.

Table 1.
Overview of most frequent interview content

Technical Skills		Non-technical Skills		Recruitment Focuses	
Software Developers are in high demand	14	Client/Customer Relationships	22	Experience	16
Specific programming languages	13	Communication	18	Personal Interest	16
Software proficiency	10	Passionate	11	Experience and Skillset more valuable than Qualification	11
Web Design Skills	10	Teamwork/Collaboration	10	Formal Qualifications and Training	10
Foundational Programming Skills	9	Problem Solving	10	Portfolio of work	8
Marketing	8	Drive to learn	8	Assessment	5
Business skills	8	Initiative	5	Attitude	5
Video and Photo editing	6	Time Management	5	References	5

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Cross Sector Methodology

Firstly, a psychometric survey was created and distributed to employers to assess their satisfaction with employee skill levels. This survey was carefully developed in a 3-stage process of item generation, theoretical analysis, and psychometric analysis. The aims of these stages respectively were to generate items that are clearly understood and relevant, to ensure the items have clear definitions and measure the intended construct, and to test the item's reliability and validity. This resulted in a final survey of 12 questions measuring employee's technical skill level, employee's non-technical skill level and the organisation's preparedness for the transition to net-zero. This survey was distributed by the research team and Dorset Chamber resulting in 386 responses. In follow up to this survey, several employers were invited to participate in a qualitative 1:1 interview. For a survey response or interview to be eligible it had to meet the following criteria: the individual must be responsible in some way for ensuring staff have the skills required, the business must operate within Dorset and it must fit into one of the targeted sectors.

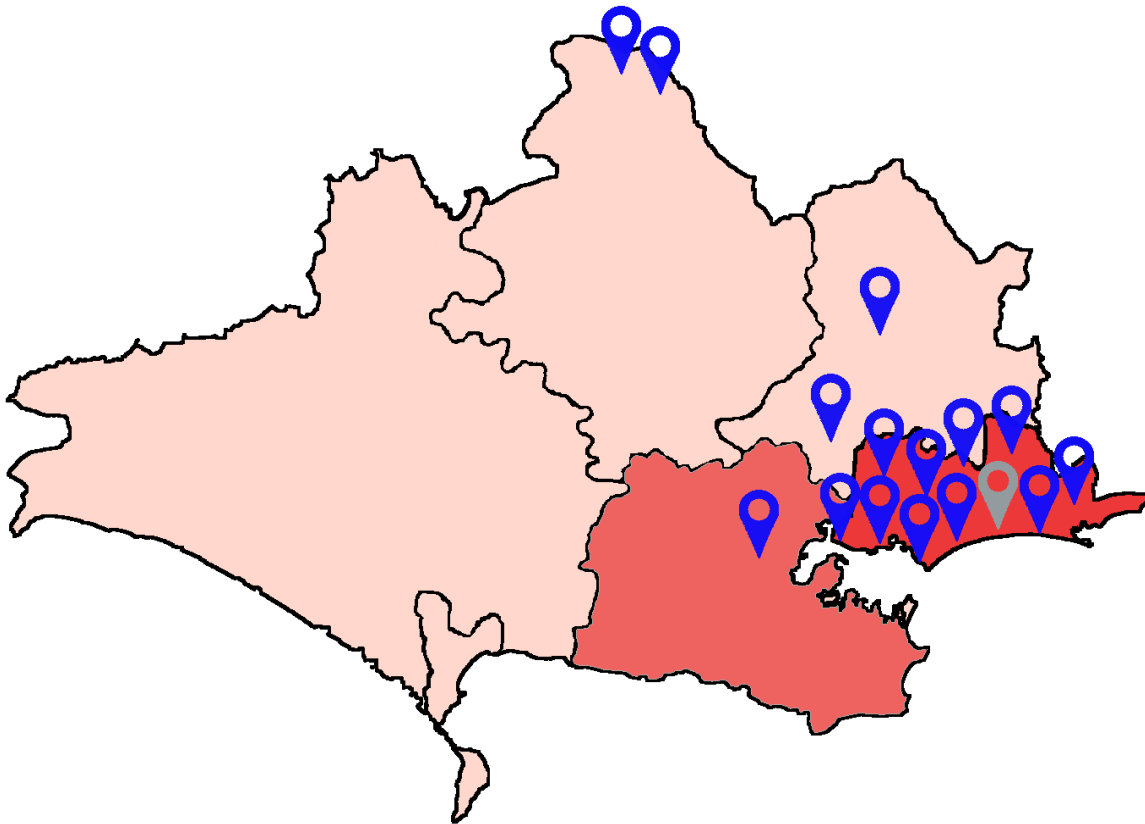
Interview recruitment was challenging, so to supplement the number of interviews and target specific areas that were underrepresented, direct interview recruitment was used in conjunction with leads and partners provided by Dorset Chamber. The interviews were semi-structured, and 15 interviews were conducted from the digital and creative sector between 22/12/22 and 06/03/23.

The interviews were transcribed and anonymised by the research team increasing familiarity with the data. An inductive 'bottom up' process of thematic analysis was used to identify themes from the interviews and involved two rounds of coding. The first-round organised data into meaningful groups and the quotes from these groups were used to create a code book which was then applied during the second round of coding. Additional codes were added as needed during the second round

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of coding and the whole process was collaborative and iterative. After the second round of coding was complete, themes were identified, reviewed collaboratively and then finalised.

The following report describes the final themes in detail and provides a clear representation of the views of employers regarding skill deficits, the causes of these deficits, potential solutions and where they are in the transition to net-zero.



B.C.P	45
North Dorset	9
East Dorset	8
South Dorset	19
West Dorset	7

Survey responses:	88
Interview responses:	15

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Digital Technology and Creative Detailed Interview Analysis

1.0 Skill Needs

This section details the priority and future skill needs expressed by employers through 1-to-1 interview engagements. Within the digital technology and creative sector, employers outlined a wide range of technical and non-technical skills required to suit their needs.

Code frequencies for each of the themes outlined were high, demonstrating clear consensus on the important needs within this sector.

Code frequency counts across different code categories have been outlined in the following link:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1etf133Va8shh0zqiivy3h7S4GUaRJRxBpgP77lSjbNg/edit#gid=0>

1.1 Priority Skill Needs

Software developers are in high demand

A key finding throughout the interviews is that the digital tech sector is being hampered by a lack of developers in the area, resulting in key roles for their business being hard to fill.

Transcript 7 "Person 1: So on that, what kind of skills, sort of, are you struggling to recruit for at the moment from the Dorset area? Person 2: Okay so. As far as I can tell, everyone is struggling to find any developers."

Transcript 11 "it's the actual technical developers, which is, yeah, almost almost impossible to hire at the moment."

Transcript 7 "So we're trying to find PHP and JavaScript developers. And I spoke to a few people I know at other different places, and everyone is struggling to find any developers like really hard."

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Programming skills are in high demand

Within the digital tech sector, programming skills are priority key skills that lead to the success of businesses. The priority needs from businesses range from foundational programming skills, which encapsulate the abilities to read, write and understand code, to the more defined skills using certain languages or multiple languages (HTML, SQL, Python, C-Sharp, Java, JavaScript, R, Ruby, PHP). The language or languages a business requires are specific to the service the business provides and finding developers with these specific languages is proving difficult.

Transcript 7 "So you need to know the basics of how you run code, how you run some loops and that sort of stuff but a lot of it is sort of ... a lot of it is reading code and understanding code firstly, so that you can implement other people's code. So if you want to build something a lot of the things you want to build have already been built in some way and are out there in terms of getting code for the things you want. So the first thing would be being able to read code, understand code and understand other people's code that you haven't written."

Transcript 4 "Everyone comes at different levels so I would advise the beginners to use python. But some people are good with R or C# and I have a few people who prefer using SQL as well. So it's just a range of different languages. I think it's useful to know multiple different ones because a lot of them come hand in hand and they all have their own advantages."

Transcript 11 " But yeah, it seems to be there's a lot of C sharp developers, C sharp employers rather, in the area as well as JavaScript employers and other things which is getting a little bit neglected."

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Design skills are in demand

Within the digital tech industry, a number of key design skills have been found to be a priority. Along with designers in general, the main design skills needed are in web design, graphic design, video and photo editing and digital creativity.

Transcript 9 “Yeah, well I guess the simple answer for us, I mean we primarily look for designers and in the digital space, it is a bit more ... I thought we have, you know, buckets of choice of people with with those kind of core, digital design skills. But in truth, it isn't... it isn't quite the case. But yeah, in digital design skills is quite tricky to find people. Certainly people that are up to speed with the most recent tools I'd say.”

Transcript 2 “Predominantly, a lot of the work we would do is web based, so web design and website optimisation. So, you have the physical website creation which needs a bit of creative flair, so you need sort of the artistic flair”

Transcript 5 “some of them are creative and doing video content and stuff so I need someone who is adept at final cut pro and all those things. Digitally knowing their camera skills and photoshop or whatever”

Data analysis skills are missing

Employers indicated that a range of different statistical analysis skills were of priority during the interviews. These skills include statistical analysis, abilities in data management, and abilities in data visualisation.

Transcript 4 “So do you find that your employees need statistical skills as well then. Person 2: Yep but they usually, I would say ... They've all got a range of skills, so a lot of them are working to the required level, but in terms of the analysis side, I would say a lot of them struggle with knowing what test to run. So, there's such a wide variety of ways you could actually do an analysis, and a lot of the coders find

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they've done all of this work and all of this coding but it's not actually relevant to what they wanted to test in the first place."

Transcript 2 "And obviously familiarity with databases such as SQL or excel and familiarity with CRMs and how to organise data and analyse data is going to become increasingly important for us as well."

Software proficiency is lacking

Businesses are requiring employees to be proficient in using the most up-to-date software used in the industry.

Transcript 5 "And also I'd want them to know the skills they would need for software. It's really important to be adept with the new and upcoming software that is being released and stuff. Because everything is digital and this business is pretty much digital and mostly remote. So, you know working at home and stuff you need to have the skill set to navigate you way through that."

Transcript 9 "I thought we have, you know, buckets of choice of people with with those kind of core, digital design skills. But in truth, it isn't... it isn't quite the case. But yeah, in digital design skills is quite tricky to find people. Certainly people that are up to speed with the most recent tools I'd say."

Business and marketing skills are required

Along with the extremely technical software development, programming and web design skill priorities, businesses are requiring more employees to have a business and marketing acumen.

Transcript 1 "Person 1: In these courses on computing skills and coding and whatever that would be, you're also looking for business and marketing, or a broader element to give you that breadth? Person 2: Yeah, absolutely, yeah"

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Transcript 6 "Person 1: So it's more the business skills is what you need as such.

Person 2: Yeah, that is probably the key area we are missing."

Communication and collaboration skills are universally required

Communication and collaboration/teamwork skills have been identified as extremely important non-technical skills in all roles by employers, and these skills tend to go hand in hand. Among programmers and developers especially, these skills are suggested to be lacking due to the feeling that people in these roles are too independent. Thus, it is important for education and training courses to be able to effectively train and develop these skills. It was suggested several times that group working and group assignments during educational courses could be an effective way of doing this.

Transcript 4 "Person 1: What sort of percentage of people coming to you need a good amount of development in working with people collaboratively. Person 2: I would say it more than half so probably about 60%. I think because of the nature of coding and stuff people are just used to being independent and doing it alone and solving everything by themselves independently. So, I feel like they're not really used to that communication."

Transcript 4 "So I just think implementing more tasks where everyone is allocated a different section or a different task. So that could help so that they kind of have to communicate with each other in order to complete it."

Client management skills are important, and employees lack experience in the area

Within the digital tech sector, businesses require employees to be able to deal with and manage clients on a regular basis, and this aspect can be common in a wide variety of roles such as programmers, marketers, and designers. This appears to be very important to businesses in Dorset as it was mentioned in the highest frequency. There is the feeling that their employees have not been given the access to develop these skills during education,

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and there is a need to solve this so that employees are more work ready once they leave education.

Transcript 6 "I think we're finding that the actual ability to manage multiple clients is what they're struggling with most. We find that people come in, especially if they're younger, they do struggle to be on top of the ball when it comes to juggling those different clients as well as deadlines that we have."

Transcript 13 "That's all they have to, this is what I'm saying, this is why they need that position within an agency, whether it's an apprenticeship or something like that and it helps them learn those skills, they come out of university and they are excellent designers, but they haven't got all of the skills, you know, client meetings, if you take them to a client meeting, they're not, you know, up to speed in that"

Problem-solving skills with the ability to use their own initiative

Employers need employees with a good level of problem-solving skills and the ability to use their own initiative to aid that problem-solving. These skills are non-technical in nature, but factor in strongly with many of the technical skills in the digital tech sector, particularly in programming.

Transcript 4 "Because in coding you'll make so many errors but it's knowing how to fix it and kind of do your own research and use your initiative. I think it's really important to have that skill and just to use your own initiative to fix your mistakes that you make in your code because making mistakes is inevitable."

Transcript 8 "I mean the main skills I guess problem solving and questioning. So you know, in a technical sense that, you know, that gets applied in programming languages and programming languages themselves, or frameworks built on them."

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1.2 Future Skill Needs

Solving non-technical skill deficits is as important as solving technical skill deficits

Employers feel that it is vital to focus on the development of both technical and non-technical skills to allow for success in the workplace. While technical skills are key, employers feel that non-technical skills are just as vital and are crucial to enable an employee to effectively utilise the technical skills they have. This is evidenced both in the quotations provided, and in the overall frequency counts of employers outlining specific technical or non-technical skill needs.

Transcript 6 “So that sounds like it is something that would really improve the quality of college courses and apprenticeships is having a more communicative aspect. Something that works with client management. Person 2: Yeah I think that’s it. You know there is a lot of training when it comes to, you know, once you leave you have the technical skills but actually there is a lot more than just technical skills when it comes to working with people. There are few jobs in marketing especially where you don’t have to talk to clients, and there doesn’t seem to be a lot of emphasis on that.”

Transcript 1 “One of the most difficult things actually is to get the people with the soft skills to work on their own or raise things and know when to raise things, but that probably comes with experience. It is difficult to put someone on a course and then expect them to come back, but with code you can sort of come back and say you have this certificate, but you know how do you interact with people?”

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2.0 Employer Perspectives on Challenges and Causes of Skills Deficits

Within this section, detailed are the expressed challenges towards upskilling that employers have faced, and these are areas employers have perceived as potential causes for the skills deficits they are facing.

2.1 Challenges and Causes

An abundance of self-taught employees

A recurring theme during interviews was the abundance of self-taught employees in the digital tech sector. From this, technical and non-technical skills development could have been hampered due to not having a formal qualification or hands-on work experience, thus a lack of fully developed skill sets to suit roles. This points to a need for further access to courses that develop the key skills.

Transcript 10 "It's been incredibly difficult to find devs who were not self taught and who can deliver on what they say they can deliver on. We've been burnt quite a few times with people who say they can come in and can do this but actually, in reality, they don't meet the quota or criteria."

Transcript 7 "And when it comes to pathways into learning to be a developer, learning to write code, what sort of options are out there at the moment? Person 2: yeah so the main sort of options are, mostly now being self taught online. So think of websites like Code Academy where you sort of get taught in steps, and you try out stuff, and you get coding tests which just help you sort of get the reps in and stuff."

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Formal qualifications still high in importance for many businesses

While many of the interviews indicated that experience is the most valuable factor when deciding on a candidate, there is still a desire from employers to see candidates who have completed formal qualifications or training courses in the key areas to evidence that skill base.

Transcript 1 "But there is sort of a minimum level of requirement, so have you worked with HTML, have you done any of the standard courses on it."

Transcript 11 "Person 1: when it comes to people that have been through college, what type of courses are they qualified in? Person 2: Yes, we tend to look at the computer science course or the computing course. It changes name, but it's basically the programming course that the colleges have"

Reduced talent pool in Dorset

A number of businesses held concerns around staff attrition, where they felt that it was increasingly difficult to retain talent in Dorset when in competition with larger cities, such as London.

Transcript 2 "One of the issues that we've had is geographically where we started the business. I think if we had started the business in a larger city when we started, I think we would have had access with more people who had a familiarity with that and we would have been building from a slightly higher ground level."

Transcript 10 "so we're competing with London quite a bit for jobs. So, well it comes to skills locally, they're extremely hard to find, especially development and the development area. So it's Dev(elopers)s"

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3.0 Employers' Perspectives on Preferred Solutions to Skill Deficits

This section details employers' perspectives and proposed solutions on how best to deal with the skill shortages and challenges they are facing.

3.1 Solutions

A need for specific college courses

Many businesses are interested in college courses which target the specific skill deficits being faced in the industry, some of which are not fully aware of the resources that are currently available to teach individuals those skills.

Transcript 1 "Well it is quite difficult, because what we tend to see, of seen when looking, is that you get a lot of people who have come out of universities who are older, who have that broad spectrum, so they've got a, for a want of a better word a generic IT degree, which is broad spectrum but is not quite what we are looking for."

Transcript 4 "Do you ever take people on that have learnt to code at college or in a non university setting? Person 2: As of yet we haven't but it would definitely be a consideration if someone could show that they had the required skills and just the quality of the assessment that we give them."

Transcript 5 "Person 1: If you could have a good quality course on the full adobe suite that would be helpful. Person 2: Yeah absolutely, absolutely. It would just give everyone that sort of sense of, okay we're not just teaching ourselves and hoping that this is right. Like it would be nice to come through someone who is actually trained."

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A lack of and need for more post-education avenues

Businesses feel that there is a lack of post-education avenues and work experience opportunities provided within the digital sector which is affecting the quality of employee's skills. Thus, being able to provide those avenues could present a viable solution to helping those who are coming from education to build those skills. An improvement in post education avenues and work experience availability may provide a smoother transition from education to work and improve work readiness, which many businesses stated was an issue with younger employees.

Transcript 6 "I think its obviously in Dorset, not London because I originally was a Londoner so I moved down. I think it's more the technical side to be honest because compared to London growing up, you're just so exposed to so many different courses and so many different avenues into the creative industry. But when it comes to other places where it's a little bit quieter'

Transcript 13 "If some of these, especially junior designers and graphic designers - Straight out of University, or Videographers and so on. If they could get into some of these apprenticeships, which isn't really commonplace in the industry, it would help them build and grow with that and then it's almost putting them in the it's how to put them in the shop window though as well, because a lot of the designers, all they'll do is come at university and they will just send off a job lot of CVS to local companies, but it's actually getting them in that shop front and putting them on that almost on the pedestal for where they need to be to be able to showcase what they do, rather than just right, a lot of the time you'll get CV through and it's completely the wrong time."

Transcript 11 "Do you find that people that come out of colleges tend to lack a bit of that work experience? Yeah. I'd say so."

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A need for college courses to integrate the development of key non-technical skills to improve work readiness

Given the demonstrable importance of solving skill deficits in non-technical skills, a possible solution outlined by businesses was for college courses to integrate the development of the key non-technical skills alongside that of the technical skills. Examples of this given during the interviews related to group-based tasks, communicative tasks, and mock client tasks. These ideas align with the concern around the lack of work readiness among new employees straight from education.

Transcript 13 "They're not things that you pick up yourself, so support and guidance with that, whether that is through an apprenticeship, whether that's something else that they bring in through the studies"

Transcript 11 "Those are what you look for and what you kind of value, but you struggle to find that in people who have come out of education? A little bit. Yeah. Particularly from sort of like the college level because I think they're just quite nervous. So even those skills don't really come across very well."

Increased engagement between employers and education providers

Employers during the interviews indicated that they would value building stronger engagement links between themselves and the education providers. From this, employers would be able to highlight their own specific skill needs to help build more specific education courses, and develop work experience opportunities within education so that new employees have the required skill sets.

Transcript 9 "I haven't been able to do it successfully yet, but I would love to have some presence at the university at some point."

Transcript 11 "maybe even just more engagement with employers and people in industry if they are going out and, you know, working alongside or work doing more"

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work experience, I guess having a bit more experience with employees and being like, okay, it's actually not scary to go to work and, you know, in offices. It's not a daunting environment. It's actually quite relaxed and chill, and I think that would go a long way."

4.0 Net Zero Findings

This section details findings related to employers' understanding on the transition to net zero, and what they know about what they need to do to achieve the transition and lower their carbon footprint.

Lack of knowledge on the transition to net-zero

There was a recurring theme suggesting that businesses in the digital tech and creative sector on what skills they need and what they need to do in order to meet the transition to net zero. Due to this, there were suggestions that there is a need for increased education for businesses that would provide the knowledge to help them meet the transition to net zero.

Transcript 2 "Just to clarify, you're not aware of how you would lower your carbon footprint as a business at present No. I could make stabs at the dark, but I don't know what would need to happen for that."

Transcript 3 "There is a lot of knowledge and readings out there for people on a personal level, but on a business level maybe more information on that and how to move towards that. I think there's only so much within my capacity that I know and that I can do, whereas if there was more guidance."

5.0 Business Needs and Recruitment Focusses

This section details recurring themes around specific needs and recruitment focuses of businesses that are not distinctly related to skill needs or solutions to skill deficits

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5.1 Business Needs

Smaller businesses require broader skill sets

Those interviewed who had businesses on the smaller side indicated that there was a need for employees to have broader skill sets to fulfil their needs. Unlike larger companies, smaller companies feel that they don't have the luxury of being able to employ new people to cover every specific area, therefore the employees they do hire need to be able to cover those different areas. For instance, developers and programmers need the skills in client management.

Transcript 1 "When looking at smaller companies as well you have a much wider role and remit. In my other role I work for a larger company and I'm much more silo'd, and I'm not particularly worrying about the marketing side of it, I'm not worried about the financial side of it. Therefore, when you've got somebody invested in a smaller company, they've got to at least have an awareness of all these things, I think it is a much broader skill set that you're looking for because it all feeds into the bottom line and where you're going for it."

Transcript 13 "Smaller companies from experience, it can be hard work because they don't have a marketing person or a communications person that is completely in that mindset of what you need to do and what they're after"

5.2 Recruitment Focusses

Experience is vital

Employers value candidates and employees having clear, demonstrable hands-on experience in carrying out their job and applying skills. Both when discussing recruitment focus and potential solutions to solve the skills deficit, a recurring theme was the importance of previous work experience opportunities which lends to a possible solution. Additionally, being able to demonstrate a clear portfolio of work gained from that previous

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experience has shown to be desirable. A lack of work experience is seen as a possible cause for the lack of skill development in key areas.

Transcript 4 "Person 1: It sounds like in that case ... the qualifications aren't necessarily a marker of they're ready to work it's more experience that matters. Person 2: Yep"

Transcript 1 "One of the most difficult things actually is to get the people with the soft skills to work on their own or raise things and know when to raise things, but that probably comes with experience. It is difficult to put someone on a course and then expect them to come back, but with code you can sort of come back and say you have this certificate, but you know how do you interact with people?"

Transcript 5 "It's sort of like a fine balance between their portfolio obviously and what they've done over the years of experience and their credentials and stuff"

Businesses value employee personal interest

When recruiting for roles, businesses value candidates having clear personal interests and passion for that role and sector, as they believe that this will lead them to be more willing to learn and adapt to new skills, while improving their overall work ethic. From this, there is a need to make the field more appealing to attract those people who have that personal interest.

Transcript 4 "Just the basics yeah. Because we like to know that people feel passionate. Because for me when I started, I had to teach myself a bit. So it's nice to know that people have done their own research to begin with and know a little about and just really have that passion and desire to learn."

Transcript 8 "But if it was me talking to sort of uni students then you know having a degree or whatever is fine, but what I'd be actually more concerned or interested in is seeing examples of their current work and you know like myself, you know I did a

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degree but I was already running way before that. So have they have they been you know trying to be a programmer for quite a while or they just sort of done their degrees, hopefully so they can tick a box and get a salary.”

Transcript 11 “that's another issue for us is that I think at [redacted] college there were eight students in the entire course. Relative to like a marketing course, we should have maybe 30 or 40 people. You're already starting with a narrowed down group of individuals that you can choose from. So maybe just making the field more exciting and more appealable. A wider range of people would be beneficial.

Conclusion

Overall, the themes generated based on the interviews have outlined a clear picture on the current landscape of skill needs, challenges, and desires held by employers in the digital technology and creative sector.

Firstly, there is a clear need to provide more support to employers to increase the talent pool within Dorset of individuals who have strong software development and programming skills to fill the gaps of workforces. The reduced availability of these skills has a limiting impact on employers' capacity to further develop and transition forwards.

Secondly, employers specified the significance of developing non-technical skills within learners to deal with the lack of those coming into the workplace.

Communication and collaboration skills were highlighted to be key, where these skills further support more hands-on non-technical skills of client management and interactions.

A further pressing issue expressed, was to reduce the number of employees coming through who are solely self-taught. Learners need to be provided with more access

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to specific college courses to more roundly develop the key technical and non-technical skills needed within workplaces. While self-taught online courses can be useful, it has been stated that it would be more beneficial for these skills to be taught on courses to get a more rounded development of hands-on skills and non-technical skills. Employers highly value candidates who have completed formal qualifications when recruiting for roles.

Furthermore, employers suggested a need for improved collaboration and engagement with the education sector. This could be collaboration in developing college courses that suit the particular needs of businesses in this sector to reduce skill gaps and shortages. This is an area that employers feel could significantly enhance the sector and provide the best possible development opportunities for learners to develop skills and excel in their careers.

Finally, it is clear that within this sector, knowledge levels are lacking on how to achieve the transition to net zero. There are needs for more education, awareness and guidance to be provided to employers within the digital technology and creative sector that can best support employers on dealing with the transition to net zero and reducing their carbon footprint.