

## DECEMBER MEETING NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

**Topic:** Digital Skills and work: supporting job seekers

**Date:** Wednesday 08 December 2021

**Time:** 15:00– 16:00, via Zoom

**Chair:** Julie Elliott MP, Chair of the APPG on Digital Skills

### Speakers:

- Alex Davies-Jones MP, Shadow Minister for Tech, Gambling & Digital Economy
- Bev White, Chief Executive, Harvey Nash Group
- Michaela Neild, Government Affairs and Public Policy Manager, Google
- Amy Caton Senior Manager, Digital Talent and Impact, BT
- Ken Gaines, Technical Adviser – Digital and IT Skills, City & Guilds
- Melanie Wilkes, Head of Research, Work Foundation

### Minutes

A representative from the Secretariat welcomed guests and introduced the APPG meeting on behalf of the Chair of the APPG **Julie Elliott MP**, who had other commitments that prevented her attending for the beginning of the meeting. The focus today was on the theme of digital skills and work. Even before the pandemic there was a digital skills gap. In 2019, the Industrial Strategy Council indicated that the most widespread example of under-skilling in the UK economy was in digital skills. An estimated 5 million workers predicted to be acutely under-skilled in digital by 2030. The Secretariat thanked the sponsors BT, Google and City and Guilds for facilitating the discussion and welcomed the speakers: Alex Davies-Jones MP, Bev White, Michaela Neild, Amy Caton, Ken Gaines, and Melanie Wilkes.

**Alex Davies-Jones MP** introduced herself as Shadow Minister for Tech, Gambling, and the Digital Economy. She outlined that the Covid pandemic has shone a light on the resilience of our people and economy, but also that there was some way to go in the digital skills divide. She argued for better digital skills, digital confidence and digital infrastructure and recognised that the Government had got this wrong in the past. The last digital strategy was published by the Government in 2014. She argued this demonstrated a lack of prioritisation of the current Government on this issue.

The strategy included a target of 90% of the population being online which has largely been met to tackle the reasons for digital inequalities at the root. 10 million people still lacked these digital skills. Digital illiteracy also left people excluded from things such as employment and those from lower income backgrounds are most likely to face digital exclusion. She argued that the pandemic had highlighted this.

Research from Lloyds cited cost as the reason for two thirds of digital exclusion. Around 2 million households struggled to afford internet. Current policy was disenfranchising one in ten people around the UK. She said we needed to make sure the infrastructure was there to ensure people could access those opportunities. CBI said that 40% of employers were struggling to get people into jobs due to the lack of digital skills. Geographical barriers, and divide across the UK, had been well documented. The Northeast of England had the highest proportion of digital exclusion in the country. For job seekers, the challenges faced were huge, particularly relating to access and accessing jobs in the local area. The priority must be towards improving the Nation's technological literacy.

The Labour Party had conducted a month-long consultation and had been engaging with a variety of issues to tackle the divide. The Shadow DCMS team had published the report which she would be building on in the coming months. She said Labour wanted to see empowered cities equipped with the tools and skills to thrive. They would treat tech as a public good, improving things such as libraries and community halls. She looked forward to engaging with everyone on the opportunities and potential for this.

**The Secretariat** thanked Alex for her remarks and introduced Bev White of the Harvey Nash Group.

**Bev White** introduced herself and said that technology was an issue very close to the heart of the Harvey Nash Group. They had been involved in this for over 30 years and had seen a fundamental shift in the use of technology and the accessibility to tech. In the past, this had been a minority specialist group, but we knew now that technology was pervasive, and nobody could get away from the grip of technology.

With crowd-based technology it was possible for a non tech person to build a system in a few days, previously a task which would have required a full team. Technology had become less about how you build it but how you used it. From a technology recruiters' perspective, they were seeing changes in the roles recruited for, and there were many different jobs that had emerged in the last 5 years. These were mostly focused on the use of tech rather than the building of tech. For example, chatbot manager, customer success analysts and robotics analysts. She said the question as a nation revolved around how we were arming ourselves with the right skills to compete on a global stage.

She then said that the UK seemed to have a love hate relationship with tech. In Engineering and STEM careers, for example, tech seemed to lag more than other countries. Germany, for example, produced 40% more graduates in STEM than in the UK. In Vietnam, the sector drew the largest number of applications than any other sector. The figures demonstrated that the UK did not hold careers in tech to the same high regard than in other countries, and the key was in a talent pipeline. The notion that computer science skills completely revolved around technology needing to be managed.

She said that the challenge for schools in the pandemic, was configuration and deployment, so the usability of tech. Connected with this was female participation in STEM. Studies they conducted, had shown that by age 15, only 4% of girls were interested in software development. But recent ONS figures showed that more women were participating in the sector. The promotion of flexible working had also shown a positive increase in female participation in the sector. She said this therefore demonstrates that we needed to change the conversation and perception of tech. Engineering was about ingenuity, and it started with how we shaped young minds in early education.

She also argued that apprenticeships and cross training around STEM was important. We needed to show people the diversity in technology roles and encourage wider learning. Companies like Google had been major participants in making this happen. She concluded by saying this was a never-ending job.

**The Secretariat** thanked Bev for her remarks and introduced Michaela Neild of Google.

**Michaela Neild** started by speaking about Google's mission, which was to organise information and make it universally accessible to everyone. This helped her to drive and position what they were doing in the sector. She said that if people were left behind in an increasingly digital economy, this would not be fulfilled. She asked how the tech community could prepare people to take advantages of these jobs. She highlighted two programmes for jobs seekers that Google were running.

Firstly, she outlined the Google Digital Garage programme, involving free digital skills training for adults. This included small businesses, job seekers and anyone else who wanted to learn. This programme had helped over 700,000 people since 2015. From research undertaken a few years ago, they found that 30% of people who had gone to the training had found a difference in employment state a couple of months later. She said "How to write a CV and Cover Letter" was one of the most popular courses, and that they also ran a "Find your careers goals" session as well.

Secondly, she outlined Google Careers Certificates, which was launched in March 2021. These involved online training courses designed to take somebody straight into an entry level job, such as IT support, user experience design, project management and data analytics. These were areas where Google saw that vacancies needed to be filled and that having a training programme would be beneficial. She concluded to say that Google had worked in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions to enable 9,000 people to take these for free. They also had partnerships with the Princes Trust, Camden, and Inco Academy. Their goal was to connect the thousands of graduates with employers.

Michaela concluded by introducing Amy Caton of BT.

**Amy Caton** thanked Michaela and said that BT are on board with the Google Careers Certificates programme. She outlined that she has been with the Reddit team which had helped a variety of programmes to help 18–24-year-olds to help them land jobs and thrive in careers. She said there were several tiers of digital skills that people need to enter, maintain and have fulfilling careers. Main skills included the ability to search and apply for jobs online.

BT has launched their “Our Skills for Tomorrow” programme, which had supported over 10 million people across the UK. Last week they pledged to help 25 million people by 2026. They were also working with Google to help them deliver Google Digital Garages and had supported over 300,000 small businesses and their employees. They also had “Get Mentored” and “Get Growing” programmes to support mentoring and SMEs as well.

Building on these foundations, BT wanted to focus on the specialist digital skills. Last week, BT launched their manifesto, which included the commitment to launch a diverse, digital talent movement to power the UK’s economy. Amy would be leading this work. This would be to support employees to develop their skills and bring in top tech talent into the business. She argued that we needed to start early and target those currently unemployed to pre-empt and prevent a digital skills divide.

She said that we needed to do more in demystifying data and digital roles, helping people understand what digital careers could look like and the wealth of opportunities available to them. The recent Youth Employment UK Youth Census report said that less than 15% of young people had a clear idea of what they wanted to do. There was scope for us to engage and educate people with digital roles. She said that therefore BT were going to be building on their partnership with Fast Futures, helping young people to develop digital skills for their future.

**The Secretariat** thanked Michaela and Amy for their remarks and passed over to Chair of the APPG, **Julie Elliot MP**.

**Julie Elliot MP** thanked The Secretariat and introduced Ken Gaines of City & Guilds.

**Ken Gaines** outlined one of the main goals of City & Guilds which was to help people get into jobs, stay in their jobs, and help them into their next career. They currently offer bursaries. In London, the bursaries often went to people who wanted to go into digital programmes but they are also aimed at other things as well.

He said there were very few jobs these days where you do not need digital skills. City & Guilds had tried to support those who traditionally had not needed digital skills, such as hair and beauty, plumbing and construction to understand where they could help their employees around the digital skills gap. Job roles in different industries often required some capabilities in digital skills.

They recognised there needs to be an investment in numeracy and literacy. He asked how we could use digital to do this. Literacy could be taught through emails and use of the internet. There were lots of skills people needed not just for work but for their everyday lives as well. They also did work around digital professionals as well, working with organisations such as the O Youth and Future Learn. He said programmes were starting to be charged for, and that they had taken over part of the Work Ready Programme, to make them free to anyone interested, particularly in careers such as IT Support and engineering networking.

He said that we needed to get people into these kinds of jobs to get people out of unemployment. City & Guilds would love to work with Google and BT to drive the agenda of getting people digitally competent to whatever level they wanted and needed to be. For example, he mentioned that a lot of what the Government expected you to do now was online, making it a necessary skill to have.

He mentioned that he helped people put together curriculums for digital skills. He was a member of the Chartered Institute of IT, and a founder member of the new Digital Divide Specialist Group. He had been the education and early careers spokesperson for Early Careers Group. He argued that it was about people stepping into their first jobs, not just young people. He concluded by saying that if we could get people to the skills they wanted and needed to have, then we could get them to the jobs that they wanted and needed.

**Julie Elliot MP** thanked Ken for his remarks and said that from her point of view it was about how they get people to do these jobs. She then introduced Melanie Wilkes of the Work Foundation.

**Melanie Wilkes** introduced herself as Head of Research for the Work Foundation, a think-tank for improving work in the UK that fell as part of the Lancaster University Management School. They ran a skills research programme, with recent projects focusing on the United for Work Skills Guarantee and the skills needed to transition to a net zero economy, as well as the shift to remote and hybrid work.

Last week, they launched a briefing for employer engagement in the skills system. She mentioned the recent FEY papers, announcing the Government's intention to put employers at the heart of engagement. She said that they knew that where engagement had worked well, it could ensure lifelong learning aligns with employment opportunities in a local area and improve chances for learning and development in local communities. She further said that employer engagement could be incredibly valuable. The Work Foundation welcomed the new proposals for Local Skills Improvement Plans as Strategic Development Funds were about taking a more proactive and strategic approach to this engagement.

They worked closely with colleges across the country to understand the lay of the land and they found that where engagement worked well it was often embedded within the college structure. This took many different forms, including when an individual from industry took an interest in college leadership scheme, such as governance or board level, or indeed leadership figures in training providers had a role in industry through Chambers of Commerce or Sector Bodies. They also found risks, including examples of provision that was incredibly narrow because they needed to cater for specific needs in a specific area. One challenge she highlighted was the ability to reach and engage with smaller businesses that would face specific barriers in their local area.

As well as changes happened at a local level, she said that it was essential that the Government's approach to accountability and funding digital education enables sustained, meaningful engagement between colleges and employers and among colleges. Under the current system, colleges were often driven to compete with one another, rather than collaborate. This could inhibit innovation and also make it difficult for employers to have a conversation about developing current workforce or about the future talent pipeline.

She said that the Work Foundation would like to see recognition of this development built into the Skills Fund. She would like to see greater accountability, and recognition in the range of skills needed, including the importance of high technical skills needed as well as entry level skills. She argued that digital skills are important for a range of people, from those whose first language was not English, for disabled learners, or single parents, or individuals who are perhaps a little further away from work. She outlined that the briefing included a couple of case studies and examples of best practice. She concluded to say that the Work Foundation was heavily focused on issues of insecurity, particularly those on Universal Credit (UC) to access skills. In the New Year they would be looking to hear from individuals on UC, as well as employers and education providers to tackle this.

**Julie Elliott MP** thanked Melanie and invited members of the meeting to ask questions. She said that Melanie talked about collaboration and competition between providers and colleges, which was something in various iterations of Government policy. Everyone seemed to be competing for the same people or pots of money and it was not a clear system. She asked Melanie what would make it easier for providers to continue to do what they do and for people to access digital skills?

**Melanie Wilkes** said that from the Work Foundation's sense, the first competition was a huge problem. For different colleges the extent of the problem varies. In Lancashire, they had heard of colleges working closely together. They found a series of opportunities that allowed providers to share interests, including funding opportunities at an EU and UK level, new pilots in local skills improvement plan and SES. In some areas you had providers located physically close together, and the nature of the provision they were offering means there was duplication. She said that this created poor outcomes for colleges, learners, and employers because innovation becomes risky. They know that you were going to get X number of learners in each year if you kept delivering certain courses, testing, and trying something new could be very difficult.

However, we knew that lots of providers were starting to collaborate and find ways around this, particularly providers who offered quite specialist education. One college they have been in contact with delivered land based and agriculture education, so they were talking about specialist knowledge that was very important for the UK's economy. In these industries, collaboration between providers is fundamental. We were seeing a funding set up that is short term and contingent on learner numbers, meaning that colleges were driven to compete fiercely for engagement of learners and also for employers operating in these areas.

**Ken Gaines** agreed with Melanie, particularly as he deals directly with colleges and training providers. To a certain extent he believes the problem was exacerbated by the technologically competent providers. There were large organisations that offered programmes online and can therefore reach out nationally. Where providers could offer through economies of scale, they could offer products cheaper, which then affected the local economies and providers. The money ended up in large places such as London or Durham. The culture of having more students in classrooms had led to bankruptcy in some cases.

**Julie Elliott MP** asked what more Government could do practically to help in this area.

**Ken Gaines** said that it could stop splitting the issue across different departments. Currently, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport, the Department for Education, and the Cabinet Office, all had different initiatives. He said that although it was claimed they communicate with each other, working together was a different story.

**Amy Caton** said that from a BT perspective, they were keen to see latest iterations and trials from the latest digital skills bootcamps, which they hoped to use over the next year. From speaking to colleagues in recruitment, BT were happy to build these into the plans, and possibly see if this as an alternative route into apprenticeships.

**Bev White** said that systemically she would love to see Government more connected. From the school's agenda, for example, to building skills in children, helping to open their eyes to the possibilities in the world of work, making it exciting and not daunting. She would like to help to connect businesses to schools to provide some of the capability that was not available in school's funding today. She said that we needed to start back here then making sure that each Government department was systemically connected to the next. The Harvey Nash Group was seeing young people coming out of schools completely underprepared for what was ahead of them. The things they were taught did not prepare them, which she said was unfair.

**Julie Elliott** said that if any Government delivers this it will be extraordinary. She said that nobody of any party seemed to be doing it, which was a problem across the board.

**Bev White** added that what the pandemic had shown us is that we could change things and that there must be collective will.

**Melanie Wilkes** said as an additional point to the question on what Government can do, Government departments needed to join up its offerings in different areas. What the Work Foundation has found that there is not a requirement that Local Skills Improvement Plans would involve DWP colleagues locally. In some areas this would be happening, in Lancashire there was already quite good engagement with Job Centre Plus locally, but this was not an expectation, and is not happening everywhere. She agreed this should be happening at Whitehall but also should be carried through to operational delivery.

**Julie Elliott MP** called attendee James Breacher to speak then excused herself for a Commons vote, handing back to the Secretariat to chair the remainder of the meeting.

**James Breacher** said that he thought part of the debate was around Universal Credit and that the Government had the Help to Claim Scheme to help people make better use of the Universal Credit. He mentioned that, particularly around access to devices, if people did not have these devices set up then they could not access the support in those situations. He argued this could be improved.

**The Secretariat** thanked the attendees for coming and panellists for their contributions and reminded those in attendance that the next meeting would be in the New Year, around mid-February 2022. Dates would be announced in due course.

The meeting closed at 4.00pm.