



WHITE PAPER

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# What are digital skills?

A comprehensive definition  
for modern organisations

skillsoft  trainingZONE

## **THINK ABOUT THESE THREE THINGS BEFORE READING THIS WHITEPAPER:**

### **1. A SHORT, SHARP DEFINITION OF DIGITAL SKILLS IS NOT SUFFICIENT.**

There are many definitions of digital skills, written by academics and industry commentators. These are useful in helping you develop a theoretical understanding, but to develop a definition of digital skills that works for your organisation, you need to start with a broader understanding of the types of digital skills required in the working world nowadays. These can then be mapped to organisational goals so you know what digital skills you need to succeed.

### **2. DIGITAL SKILLS GO FAR BEYOND THE TECHNOLOGY ITSELF.**

Before we begin building out a list of key digital skills, we should take a look at what 'digital' means. It's about technology, of course, but there's another dimension too. This dimension is the social, emotional and interpersonal effects of using technology alone and with other people. Soft skills are very important when it comes to digital technologies. You cannot just focus on the technology - you have to see the full picture.

### **3. THIS GUIDE IS A SHOPPING LIST TO HELP YOU BUILD YOUR OWN DEFINITION.**

The aim of this guide is to give you a large and diverse shopping list of digital skills so that you can pick and choose to create the ideal list that helps you meet your organisational goals, which can then be mapped to jobs. This is then your guide to digital skills that works for your organisation. We can't include every digital skill in this guide but what we will do is offer a broad selection of skills to give you a full view of everything that goes into the digital skills landscape.

## **YOUR SHOPPING LIST OF DIGITAL SKILLS**

We're trying to give you a comprehensive list, so you may notice some cross-over. This is fine at this stage. You'll fine-tune your selection when you map these skills against your organisation's needs.

### **1. FLUENCY IN INPUTTING INFORMATION DIGITALLY ON A RANGE OF DEVICES AND SOFTWARE PACKAGES**

Are you able to type fluently or use smartphones effectively so that the input process itself doesn't impede progress? What about using specific packages such as Excel or Google Sheets?

Note that we don't refer exclusively to speed here, because higher speeds typically correlate with a higher degree of errors. Fluency is a way of balancing out speed and errors. This is also about confidence and focus: if you have to focus on the input mechanism rather than the task at hand, it can make you more likely to make mistakes and less able to see the bigger picture.

### **2. MANIPULATING DATA INTO LESS COGNITIVELY-TAXING AND MORE UNDERSTANDABLE FORMS**

Are you able to digitally manipulate information and present it to others in a fluent way? This could mean a range of things, such as using the graphing functionality in Excel to turn data into pie charts, or putting together a very visual PowerPoint presentation to convey a complex narrative. This skill starts with a good understanding of stakeholders and their needs but the digital part is around understanding each software package and its features to be able to present information in the right form to stakeholders, particularly those who don't have time for long explanations.

### **3. CONFIDENCE MOVING BETWEEN DEVICES AND USING THEM EQUALLY**

Being digitally-savvy nowadays isn't only about using a computer. In any workforce, using mobile devices will be crucial to success, whether external, customer-facing success or collaboration with internal colleagues. Moving between devices, and using each one fluently, is an important skill. People who are very competent using computers, but scared of laptops or tablets, may miss out on new ways of working internally that could improve cross-functional performance or on new ways to engage with prospects and customers.

#### **4. REPRODUCING AND MANIPULATING DIFFERENT TYPES OF DIGITAL INFORMATION**

In the working world digital skills are often used to create something new, such as PowerPoint presentations, reports, flyers and more. This skill is very important: it's about being able to effectively (and legally/ethically; see below) combine different types of information from different sources into something new. This could include images, texts, tables, data and more, using a range of different software packages (locally-hosted, like PowerPoint, and cloud-based too).

#### **5. RESEARCH, ANALYSIS AND SEARCH SKILLS**

The internet is a minefield! These skills are about fluency in navigating the internet, knowing how to identify high-quality sources from low-quality sources, how to spot biased information and understanding how to get more information when you can't find what you need. This skill extends into cataloguing research in a range of packages, such as spreadsheets and databases. Being able to navigate different types of content, such as PDFs and forums, is important, as is using tools to find specialist information, such as academic journal databases.

#### **6. UNDERSTANDING HOW INFORMATION CAN BE EFFECTIVELY AND ETHICALLY USED AND MANIPULATED**

You can't just go on Google Images and use what's there without appropriate permission or copy and paste large chunks of text from other websites, but there is a lot of nuance to this skill. Are you able to take ideas from websites and use them in your own work with appropriate attribution? What about taking information and re-writing it in your own words again, with giving due credit to the originator of the ideas? Images are another thing too: if something's got a Creative Commons licence, what does that allow you to do? Knowledge of data rights and when/how to properly cite sources can be very empowering.

It allows people to be confident in the information they're disseminating and understand how they can build on existing knowledge through their own research.

Are you able to take ideas from websites and use them in your own work with appropriate attribution?

## **7. CONFIDENT AND COMPETENT TRANSACTING VIA DIGITAL CHANNELS WHILE BEING AWARE OF THE LIMITATIONS**

This is about understanding how transactions work via digital channels, how to check if a connection is secure and other factors that give confidence in the transaction and the third-party being transacted with. This is a key skill because digital transactions are fast-paced and often cheaper than via other channels so it puts businesses at a disadvantage if employees aren't comfortable transacting for goods and services online.

The other side of this skill is being aware of when something may be amiss, or how to mitigate against a problematic transaction (and what to do if it does occur, such as a screen freezing during payment).

## **8. EFFECTIVELY USING AND MANAGING DIGITAL TROUBLESHOOTING MEDIUMS**

Software packages, particularly cloud-based ones, will require troubleshooting at some point, and the price point of these packages often means support is delivered via ticketing systems or online chat. If employees aren't confident solving problems via these methods, problems can persist, potentially causing security issues or reducing the effectiveness of the software package at meeting organisational goals.

## **9. SETTING UP, MODIFYING AND PERSONALISING DIGITAL DEVICES AND SOFTWARE**

Are you able to personalise your devices to suit your human and work needs? For example, installing new apps to make you more efficient or removing email alerts to improve your wellbeing. To dive deeper, what about email extensions to manage your customer data more efficiently and increase the number of touchpoints with customers and prospects?

This digital skill is about both awareness and competence: knowing what is out there to improve productivity and wellbeing but also knowing how to install and configure it.

Securing systems is important, but human fallibility is a massive driver of crimes such as ransomware, making this skill absolutely crucial in hardening organisations to cybercrime.

## 10. POSITIVE, SCEPTICAL AND SAFE USE OF DIGITAL CHANNELS, DEVICES AND INFORMATION

Cybercrime is big business and can cost organisations financially and reputationally. Many don't recover from a significant breach. Securing systems is important, but human fallibility is a massive driver of crimes such as ransomware, making this skill absolutely crucial in hardening organisations to cybercrime. It's about being positive with your interactions, and open-minded, but sceptical of, for example, email attachments. It's about double-checking email addresses and URLs, using strong passwords and not writing them down, and replicating these skills across different devices and at different times.

## 11. AN AWARENESS OF HOW HUMAN BEINGS CONSUME CONTENT IN DIGITAL MEDIUMS

Understanding this is important because it allows employees to tailor their output to the digital world and achieve better outcomes from their online content. For example, research from the Nielsen Norman Group found that people read differently online to on paper: they are likely to 'scan' text rather than read it word-for-word, so when presenting information to people (e.g. via email), it shouldn't be written as you would write a letter or leaflet.

The same company found that online users also value certain qualities in the content they read, including the conciseness of the text, how scannable the layout is and the objectivity of the language.

## 12. FLUENCY IN PARTICIPATING IN SOCIAL CHANNELS

The workplace is increasingly social, with collaboration across teams and functional areas driven by social technologies.

But social technologies are only half the story: it's the active participation in social technologies that allows organisations to really leverage the benefits of collaboration and social working. This skill is about understanding how to contribute productively in collaboration spaces, being comfortable doing so authentically, using comments and ideas attributed to you publicly to develop a confident online 'personality' that conveys your areas of expertise across the organisation.



### **13. BEING ABLE TO MANAGE VIRTUAL INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

An increasingly globalised workforce means that people communicate more and more via digital channels, more regularly and across greater distances. A crucial skill for anyone working in modern organisations is the ability to build positive and trusting relationships across digital channels.

This can be challenging for several reasons, for example the asynchronous nature of digital communications, the need to positively interpret silence and give people the benefit of the doubt, the need to set expectations around response times and other deliverables to ensure matched expectations and growing, rather than reducing, trust.

### **14. AN UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT DIGITAL COLLABORATION LOOKS LIKE**

Digital collaboration is hard to imagine unless you've actually experienced it. It's important to have a realistic view to avoid mismatched expectations and drive value from collaboration for individuals, teams and organisations.

A realistic view of collaboration includes how the process works (how it's asynchronous, how you'll most likely need an ultimate decision-maker, how timeframes are crucial to avoid perfectionism), what software is available and how to get the best out of it and the type of language you use to avoid colleagues needing to come back to clarify points.

### **15. AN OPEN MIND TO FUTURE DIGITAL DEVELOPMENTS**

This is about approaching new technology and digital trends with an open mind. Are you comfortable with the context, history and trajectory of relevant technologies so that you don't instinctively view future digital change with scepticism or fear?

This perspective is important both operationally and strategically. Operationally, employees must be open to new generations of digital tools, or their work and performance could fall behind competitors. Strategically, fear of digital change can create a bias against it, which can make digital transformation and evolution more difficult, a dangerous place to be as new technologies transform the workplace.

Learning to use new technologies involves tinkering, but not everyone is comfortable with tinkering. A growth mindset and the ability to combine both experiential learning (tinkering) with formal guides are essential to learning how to use new technologies.

## **16. AN AWARENESS OF DIGITAL TRENDS IN YOUR (AND RELATED) DOMAINS**

Do you know what the future digital landscape is going to look like in your work domain and those around you? For example, if you're a social media manager, do you keep up-to-date on new analytics packages that could potentially reduce your overheads and automate manual processes? More broadly, do you know how digital developments affect your industry and therefore whether you need to take action? Are you aware of where you are in the technology take-up curve and where you'll have to take action to prevent falling behind? Because digital technologies are so disruptive, being unaware of key trends can make it hard to make future-proof business decisions.

## **17. COMFORTABLE WITH COMBINING EXPERIENTIAL AND FORMAL LEARNING FOR NEW TECHNOLOGIES**

Learning to use new technologies involves tinkering, but not everyone is comfortable with tinkering. A growth mindset and the ability to combine both experiential learning (tinkering) with formal guides are essential to learning how to use new technologies. A key part of this is being unafraid of 'messing up the computer.' Fear or uncertainty can stymie learning, reducing time-to-competency and could have knock-on effects on individual and team performance.

## **18. HOW TO BE DATA-DRIVEN (AND THE LIMITATIONS OF BEING DATA-DRIVEN)**

Being able to manipulate, organise and draw conclusions from data is one part of this skill, but there's also much to learn about how to present data to 'non-data' people in a more user-friendly form and knowing how to combine data with intuition.

Data can be dangerous if misread. Do you know how to combine data and intuition to create a more optimal decision-making process? Can you technically extract data and turn it into different forms for sharing internally? Finally, are you aware of how data can lead you astray if not managed and contextualised properly?



## **19. HOW AUTOMATION CAN HELP AND HINDER OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE**

In a world where competitive advantage comes down to how employees spend their time and how much value they add, automation is important because it can quickly increase efficiency and productivity by freeing up time. Lots of technologies are available. Zapier, for example, is a tool that allows individuals to automate actions when a specific event (a 'trigger') occurs, for example saving email addresses to a Google Sheet when a new email is received.

The other side of automation is understanding how it can affect the organisation and its products and taking steps to both leverage the positive sides and mitigate against the potential risks. This awareness is particularly important in strategic roles.

## **20. KNOW-HOW AND EXPERIENCE IN STOPPING TECHNOLOGY FROM CONTROLLING YOU**

Once comfortable with a set of technologies, particularly those that enable us to easily interact with others, it is easy to go overboard. Collaboration tools often support easy-to-use interfaces on our mobile devices, making the ability to communicate at all hours very tempting. Yet, even when working with colleagues that might be half a world away, it is important to set boundaries on technology use. Both the mind and body need a break from the everyday rigors of technology use at work and home.

Without this core skill, employees can fall prey to technology- induced burnout and frazzled-mind syndrome, both of which reduce performance over time. This skill is about both knowledge (i.e., how can I balance my use of collaboration technology with my need to accomplish other kinds of work or spend quality

time with my friends and family) and experience (implementing specific strategies for maintaining balance). A final part of this skill is having the confidence to make these strategies a habit in both personal and work life, such as only checking email three times a day or turning off access to devices after a certain hour.

## **DIGITAL SKILLS IN YOUR ORGANISATION: HOW TO USE THIS LIST**

This list of skills should give you a good overview of everything that goes into digital fluency. The next step is to prioritise skills that are most important to your organisation.

### **1. REFLECT ON THE BASIC DIGITAL SKILLS EVERY EMPLOYEE NEEDS**

There is a level of digital skills that every employee will need and defining this is important because this is first building block of your digital skills definition. This will definitely involve some of the core skills around security, scepticism and device use and may include collaborative skills, depending on the type of organisation you are. Or it could include competence with a tablet, or specific software packages that are crucial to how your organisation is run. This is about the lowest common denominator. Without these skills, employees can't really be a fully paid-up member of the organisation.

### **2. LOOK AT YOUR ORGANISATIONAL GOALS AND FUTURE PLANS AND MAP SKILLS AGAINST THEM**

Reflect on your organisation's short-to-medium term future to work out what digital skills are required for operational excellence in your current guise and to cope with upcoming challenges, opportunities and growth plans. Use our list to start your own list, then add in any software-specific packages that you use within your organisation. This could include CRMs, internal collaboration tools, intranets, HR systems and learning management systems. A strong list of digital skills for your organisation will always include general skills and package-specific competencies.

### **3. EVALUATE YOUR JOB ROLES, WORKFORCE AND DEFINE THE EXISTING DIGITAL SKILLS GAP**

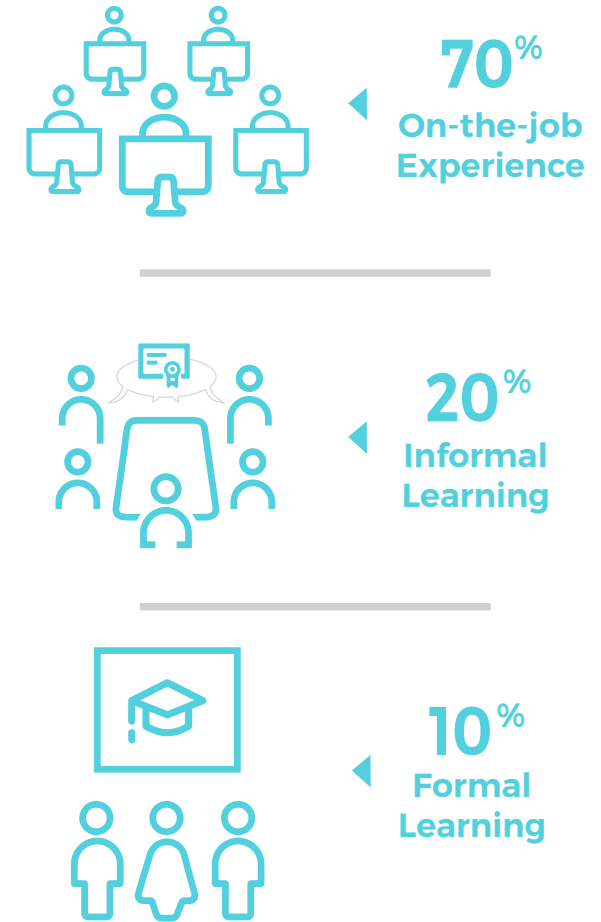
You need to be confident the job profiles you have across your organisation are attracting the right applicants with appropriate digital skills - getting this right can not only help with recruitment but also optimise onboarding, talent management and succession planning. The next step is to look at who you currently have in your organisation and map the level of digital skills based on what you've established you need above. You could do this at a functional level, at a team level or a job role-level.

#### 4. EVALUATE YOUR LEARNING PROVISION AND LEARNING GOALS AND MAKE APPROPRIATE CHANGES

If you've conducted step three above, you should know what needs to be done to raise the competence levels of employees in required digital skills. At this point you should consider if your learning provision is suitable for the task. A programme of formal training is not sufficient: many digital skills have varying degrees of competence and it's hard to design a training course that suits every delegate's existing levels of competence and raises them to a specific level. In addition, many digital skills require considerable experiential learning time (think 70:20:10).

Giving employees the tools they need to learn when they need to - making sure your learning provisions are mobile-enabled, available just-in-time and in bite-sized modules - is important here. Digital skills tend to be evolved over time, making micro-learning a core part of upskilling in this area. Ultimately, you need learning tools that are learner-centric, allowing employees to learn both experientially and through rich, targeted content.

This should also be combined with clarity on what level of digital skills is expected per job role. Unless employees are aware of 'what good looks like,' it's difficult to know where they are going when it comes to learning digital skills. Learning should always be aimed at developing competencies that help turn the dial on key organisational metrics.





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