

FACTSHEET

ESSENTIAL SKILLS AND WHY WE NEED THEM NOW

Even before COVID-19, business, Government and educators were raising concerns that the UK workforce lacked the skills needed to respond to the fast-changing nature of work, innovate and raise productivity.

The global coronavirus pandemic has catapulted us into a changed landscape where, overnight, employees have had to adopt remote working, pivot in their roles or adapt their skills to completely new industries. For young people in education, a dramatic shift to online learning and changes to final assessments are among the challenges that will impact most on those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

With estimates that unemployment has already risen to at least 2.5 millionⁱ and research showing that those who are already most disadvantaged are the hardest hitⁱⁱ, the UK must build the skills it needs for economic recovery while supporting people back to work and ensuring social mobility.

While the technical skills we need are expected to continue changing rapidly, the essential skills businesses have been calling for are likely to remain constant.

This factsheet sets out these essential skills and why they are the skills we need now to move quickly through recession and build back better – closing the disadvantage gap.

What are essential skills?

Essential skills are the skills we all need to thrive in education, work and life and are proving to be heavily required in a time of crisisⁱⁱⁱ. They are highly transferable skills like communication, problem solving and teamwork that are needed for almost



any job^{iv}. They are not innate, can be developed throughout our lives and can't be automated out^v.

The eight essential skills fall into four pairs:

- **Communication:** listening, speaking
- **Creative problem solving:** problem solving, creativity
- **Self-management:** staying positive, aiming high
- **Collaboration:** leadership, teamwork

Find out more about the Skills Builder Universal Framework and download the employer toolkit at: www.skillsbuilder.org/universal

Why are they needed now?

Amid huge uncertainty, businesses are not only trying to survive the COVID-19 crisis and its immediate economic impact but to plan for recovery. It's clear that 'business as usual' will not be the same again and companies are looking at how their operations will need to be reshaped and adapted over the coming months and years.

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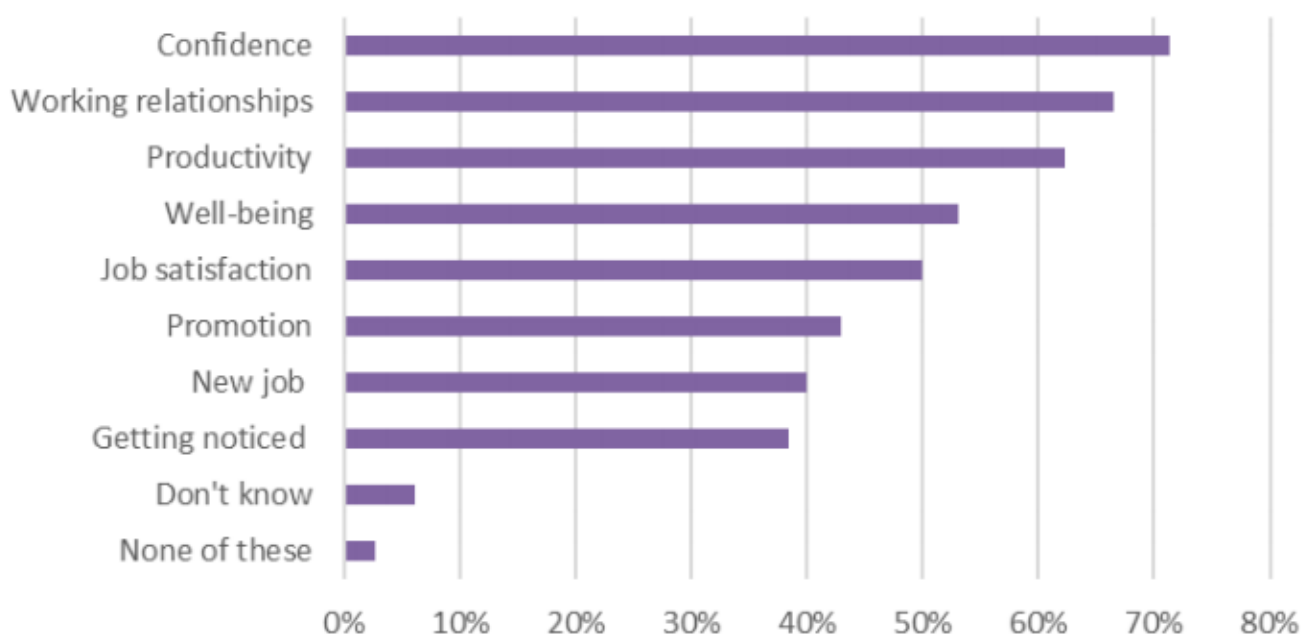
Even before the crisis, businesses were clear that young people were not leaving school with the essential skills that they need such as listening, problem solving and teamwork.

These skills are now even more important. They sit between basic skills (literacy, numeracy and basic digital) and technical skills. They enable flexibility and adaptability, support collaboration and provide a foundation for learning these job-specific skills^{vi}.

Business in the Community's research in 2019 showed that 86% of people agree that essential skills are important for them in life and work and 68% agreed that their workplace sees them as important.

It also identified the main benefits of employees having essential skills as confidence, improved working relationships and improved productivity^{vii}.

Benefits of employees having Essential Skills



Because these skills are highly valued by employers, they are also the key to unlocking the social mobility that businesses and Government recognise as needed for businesses to have competitive advantage^{viii}.

Essential skills and social mobility

As we face a global recession and high levels of unemployment, promoting and protecting social mobility in the job market over the coming months and years will be vital^{ix}.

The Social Mobility Commission identifies the benefits of socio-economic diversity as creativity, resourcefulness and the diversity of thinking needed for innovation^x.

“EMPLOYEES FROM LOWER SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS PERFORM AT LEAST AS WELL AS THEIR MORE ADVANTAGED PEERS, IF NOT BETTER.”
Social Mobility Commission 2020

However, people from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to have the opportunity to recognise, use and develop their essential skills.

We know that women, young people, BAME groups and people from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds will be most adversely impacted by COVID-19 across education and employment.

We need business to act now to ensure that these individuals can recognise, use and develop their essential skills so that we do not widen the disadvantage gap.

To face the challenges ahead employers, alongside educators and Government, must commit to recognising and developing essential skills both in their talent pipeline and in their existing workforce.

See KPMG Trailblazer story on page 4.

Employers must drive essential skills demand

There is a mismatch between how loudly business amplifies the need for essential skills and the action that business takes to ensure all individuals can recognise and develop their essential skills. Our 2019 survey showed that only 33% employees were asked about their essential skills at appraisal and only 43% at their latest job interview.

Just 33%

of employees were asked about their essential skills at appraisal

We need skills that will support us as we go from school to work, from entry-level to management roles and from a career in one industry to a career in another. Essential skills provide a common language on skills from education through to employment. Already being adopted by Boots, KPMG, Heathrow and Accenture, the Skills Builder Universal Framework for essential skills is a key tool for an economic recovery from COVID-19 that doesn't leave anyone behind.

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of employees were asked about their essential skills at their last job interview

TRAILBLAZER STORY: BOOTS UK AND EARLY CAREERS

Boots has always been at the heart of the community and has a supportive working culture. It recognises that people need skills that will support them as they move from school to work, from entry level to management roles and from a career in one industry to a career in another. In the face of COVID-19 and its longer-term impact, it sees essential skills as more important than ever.

Boots UK's HR Director, Nathan Clements, leads Business in the Community's Future Skills and Good Work Taskforce. He sees the Skills Builder Universal Framework as key to building a common language around essential skills from education through to employment. He says: *"This is a defining moment for UK Plc as we adapt to the changes brought about by the pandemic and consider the shape of business and society in the future. The eight essential skills of listening, speaking, problem solving, creativity, staying positive, aiming high, leadership and teamwork are the ultimate transferable skills. I urge business leaders to adopt these skills for hiring and developing their employees, and to promote their uptake in schools, colleges and universities across the country."*

As a Skills Builder trailblazer company, Boots UK is leading by example, incorporating the skills in apprenticeship recruitment and learning and development resources. It has included information for candidates, parents and teachers on the new apprenticeship hub on Boots.jobs; used these skills in their Optician Apprenticeship job description; updated recruitment and engagement packs, building the skills into surveys for candidates and line managers and briefed assessor-tutors on bringing the language to life in teaching resources and curriculum design. The team are also aligning the Skills Builder Universal Framework with the Boots Academy offer, developing bite-sized learning to meet different needs for skills at core, advanced and mastery levels.

TRAILBLAZER STORY: KPMG AND SOCIAL MOBILITY

KPMG sees social mobility as an integral part of the future of their business. They recognised through trusted sources like the Sutton Trust that students from more disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds had fewer opportunities to develop essential, non-academic skills valued by employers. The Skills Builder Universal Framework offers KPMG a structural solution to building essential skills and improving social mobility, with a focus on measurable impact.

The company first integrated the framework into its WorkReady initiative, which focuses on young people in the most disadvantaged parts of the country. Students engage with coding software and VR equipment in response to a business challenge while learning about the changing world of work and building skills in creativity, problem solving and teamwork. KPMG are now embedding essential skills across all their employability programmes, working with partner organisations to make sure the Skills Builder Universal Framework is threaded through their development and evaluation processes.

They also recognised that the eight essential skills mapped to key competencies KPMG was looking for in apprentices and graduates. As a Skills Builder Trailblazer they are trialling the framework with their Level 3 Business Administration apprentices using a workshop series that supports apprentices to:

- Explore what essential skills are and why they matter
- Reflect on their own essential skills, individually and with a peer
- Participate in a workshop with a focus on teamwork and speaking
- Develop their own plans about how they can continue to build their essential skills
- Agree an action plan for how they will boost their essential skills.

One of the key benefits they're seeing so far is an emerging consensus around a common language for talking about essential skills, with potential to deliver real impact for young people both inside and outside the organisation.

What's the role of educators and charities?

Hundreds of schools, colleges and universities are already using essential skills and the Skills Builder Universal Framework to support their students to develop the skills we need.

Employers are now joining the call for widespread adoption and use of the framework across the country. Educators and voluntary and community sector organisations of all sizes are encouraged to use the framework to improve employability, increase social mobility and help the UK to build back better from the current crisis.

We're calling on educators and the skills community to recognise and communicate the importance of essential skills to rebuilding our economy after COVID-19 with a focus on people and not leaving anyone behind. A shared language

on essential skills is important to both simplify and facilitate greater action to develop essential skills for all. The Skills Builder Universal Framework has been developed to provide this simple yet comprehensive framework for essential skills across education and employment.

What can employers do?

The Skills Builder Universal Framework, developed by the Essential Skills Taskforce, provides a common language on skills from the classroom to the boardroom. Already being adopted by Boots, KPMG and Tideway, it's a key tool for an economic recovery that doesn't leave anyone behind.

We are asking businesses to:

- Recognise essential skills among their workforce, using the common language of the Skills Builder Universal Framework.
- Develop essential skills in their current and future workforce using consistent language and steps from the Skills Builder Universal Framework.
- Promote essential skills as the #skillsweneed with their partners and stakeholders and sign up on our website to receive more information.

Who is the Essential Skills Taskforce? The Essential Skills Taskforce is made up of leading organisations from the education and employment sectors (Business in the Community, The Careers & Enterprise Company, CBI, CIPD, EY Foundation, Gatsby Foundation and the Skills Builder Partnership) that have agreed, for the first time, a universal framework for essential skills.

Get involved and find out more on Business in the Community's website:

www.bitc.org.uk/essential-skills

Use framework on the Skills Builder Partnership website: www.skillsbuilder.org/universal

“FOR THE FIRST TIME, THIS UNIVERSAL FRAMEWORK GIVES US A SHARED LANGUAGE AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING ACROSS EDUCATION AND ACROSS DIFFERENT WORKPLACES TO HELP EMPLOYERS TO GET THE BEST FROM THEIR WORKFORCE AND TO HELP PEOPLE TO BETTER MANAGE THE POINTS OF TRANSITION IN THEIR LIVES.”

Sir John Holman, Chair of the Essential Skills Taskforce

TRAILBLAZER STORY: HOW TIDEWAY IS DEVELOPING EMPLOYEE SKILLS THROUGH VOLUNTEERING

Tideway was already using Skills Builder with young participants on its STEM Engagement Programme in schools and could see participants building skills like problem solving and aiming high within a short timeframe. They were also trying to find a way to track development within their employees who were volunteering on the programme and the Skills Builder Universal Framework offered the perfect opportunity.

“There are so many different ways and options for collecting this information,” Education Manager Michelle Ansah said. *“The idea that there’s one framework that everyone will use is fantastic.”* Michelle and her colleague, Corporate Responsibility lead Georgia Boyd, developed a matrix that mapped the eight skills of the framework to all Tideway’s volunteering activities, indicating which steps – from 0 to 15 – they thought colleagues could achieve in each skill for every activity.

This is enabling them to communicate clearly with colleagues about the development opportunities provided by employee volunteering. Through surveying participants at the start, middle and end of the volunteering programme they will be able to see what essential skills they were able to develop.

Working with their HR and Learning and Development teams and their apprenticeship programme, they also plan to support colleagues with training to further develop these skills and to link the essential skills with the organisation’s appraisal system and progression opportunities. Tideway is the company delivering the Thames Tideway Tunnel – a 25km tunnel under London’s river that will prevent millions of tonnes of pollution going into the river every year.

Aiming to change the face of the construction industry by building a truly inclusive and diverse workplace, Tideway sees the importance of essential skills for the women, young people and other disadvantaged groups that will be hardest hit in a post-COVID-19 recession and is supporting employees and young people to recognise, use and develop their essential skills to close the disadvantage gap.

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^{viii} [Social Mobility Commission \(2020\) Socio-economic diversity and inclusion: employers' toolkit](#)

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^x See viii