Professional services staff digital experience insights survey 2020

UK further education (FE) survey findings

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Note: percentages may have totals that do not add up to 100%. This is due to rounding.
QUOTE FROM PROFESSIONAL SERVICES STAFF MEMBER:
“Communicate clearly about useful digital skills and innovations relevant to job roles (in layman terms).”

1,326 responses were FE/sixth form college professional services staff
19 different FE/sixth form colleges took part
Valuing all staff

Professional services staff fulfil a broad range of roles and responsibilities, yet what they have in common is the contribution they make to the overall digital experience of many. Our findings are a first step in understanding and valuing the full range of these contributions and the support staff need as they play their part in ensuring wider organisational success.

This year, 1,326 professional services staff from 19 UK FE and sixth form colleges took part in our professional services staff digital experience insights survey. The survey was conducted between October 2019 and June 2020.

The professional services staff survey findings for 2020 build on the rich picture obtained from our surveys of students¹ and teaching staff².

This year has been very different to others and for some professional services staff, this may have been their first experience of remote working, accessing essential systems from home and where support from colleagues may have been disrupted.

Key observations that stand out from the 2020 professional services staff survey findings are that:

- Despite overlapping responsibilities, the cultural differences between professional services staff and teaching staff make it even more important that all views are heard and that there is equity – a ‘stronger together’ approach will benefit all.
- As for teaching staff and students, context is important, it is just that the specific context may be different for professional services staff.
- Access to the right devices, software and systems is vital, as is support for skills development.

Professional services staff are motivated to use technology – many of the processes they manage rely on this. They perhaps use a more mandated range of technologies and operate in a less publicly ‘risky’ environment than teaching staff who may be encouraged to experiment more. Investing in their digital experience will pay larger dividends and enable them to better support students and teaching staff.

COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a unique factor this year. 30% of professional services staff who completed the survey did so before the 23 March 2020 and the move to off campus provision; 70% completed it on or after this date. This has allowed us to partition the data and provide an initial comparison, giving a brief summary where the differences were found to be statistically significant. It is important to remember that while the impact of COVID-19 may have influenced some responses in terms of perceptions and attitudes, opinions generally take longer to form so it would be methodologically unsound to assume that responses relate specifically to before or after 23 March 2020.

¹ Learner digital experience insights survey 2020: UK further education (FE) survey findings (digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/)
² Teaching staff digital experience insights survey 2020: UK further education (FE) survey findings (digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk/reports-and-briefings/our-reports/)
Theme one: you and your technology

Theme one explores what access to devices professional services staff have, both personally owned as well as those provided by their organisation. In theme one, we also look at use of, and support for use of, assistive technologies and how confident staff are in using technology.

Use of organisationally and personally owned devices for work

In terms of organisationally owned devices, a high percentage of staff used desktops. In ordinary circumstances this would not be a surprise, but COVID-19 and social distancing may mean that some of these devices were no longer available. Just over half used laptops but far fewer used tablets and smartphones. Worryingly, 6% of professional services staff said they had access to none of these devices for their work.

Some staff also used personally owned devices for their work – most notably laptops and smartphones. It is vital that staff have access to the organisationally owned devices they need for their role and that staff working across campuses or in multiple locations have access wherever they work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisationally owned</th>
<th>Personally owned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>71% – desktop</td>
<td>19% – desktop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55% – laptop</td>
<td>34% – laptop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16% – tablet</td>
<td>17% – tablet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20% – smartphone</td>
<td>54% – smartphone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6% – none of these</td>
<td>30% – none of these</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use of assistive technologies

Professional services staff were asked about their use of four specific assistive technologies: screen readers, dictation, alternative input devices and screen magnification. While 89% said that they didn’t use any of these named technologies they may have used others. With varied roles, some directly supporting others, it is vital that all staff have a knowledge and awareness of assistive technologies so they can promote the benefits more widely.

- 10% of professional services staff used at least one of four assistive technologies
- 73% of staff who used at least one of them said their organisation had offered support to do so
- Only 34% of all professional services staff said their organisation had offered support (irrespective of whether they used any of four named technologies)

How actively do professional services staff help others to develop their digital skills?

Sharing effective practice and learning from colleagues is established practice for many and a good way of building capacity and collaboration. 91% of professional services staff said they helped others at least sometimes. Encouraging more confident users to support others in developing their digital practices is cost effective, especially when directly linked to role and context.

- 35% – often
- 56% – sometimes
- 9% – never
QUOTE FROM PROFESSIONAL SERVICE STAFF MEMBER:
“During the lockdown the college has just assumed we have our own computers and adequate work environment to be able to operate a complete service to prospective and current students.”

Attitudes and confidence in using technology
The attitude of professional services staff in using technology was very positive, but more needs to be done to boost confidence.

Attitudes
- 96% said they either enjoyed trying out new and innovative technologies or were comfortable using mainstream technologies
- Only 4% preferred not to use technology unless they had to

Confidence
- 71% were either ‘very’ or ‘quite confident’ at trying out new technologies
- 19% gave a neutral response
- 10% were either ‘not very’ or ‘not at all’ confident
Theme two: technology at your organisation

The questions asked in theme two help us to understand how professional services staff experience the digital environment provided by their organisation. This includes the quality of organisational digital provision and support, access to essential services and systems and the opportunity to be involved in shaping their working digital environment.

Quality of organisational digital provision

Over half of professional services staff gave a positive rating for their organisation’s digital provision but responses to questions about specific aspects of organisational support and provision were less positive and are likely to impact on efficient working practices.

Software, hardware, and learning environment

- 65% – rated it as either ‘best imaginable’, ‘excellent’ or ‘good’
- 26% – average
- 9% – ‘poor’, ‘awful’ or ‘worst imaginable’

Access to essential systems and support

Lower than expected numbers of staff said they had access to:

- 85% – file storage and backup
- 73% – reliable on demand wifi
- 69% – online skills training resource

Lower than expected numbers of staff agreed they had access to:

- 68% – online systems and services from anywhere (25% neutral, 8% disagreed)
- 39% – support to use their own digital devices (45% neutral, 15% disagreed)

Working practices and collaboration

- 77% – agreed their organisation communicated effectively online (18% neutral, 5% disagreed)
- 57% – agreed their organisation provided a good online environment for collaboration (35% neutral, 8% disagreed)

Systems used at work

Not all professional services staff felt able to agree that the systems used at work were reliable, easy to navigate, well designed and/or up to date; high numbers gave neutral responses and many disagreed.

- 56% – reliable (30% neutral, 14% disagreed)
- 47% – easy to navigate (40% neutral, 13% disagreed)
- 38% – well designed (48% neutral, 14% disagreed)
- 42% - up to date (42% neutral, 16% disagreed)

Involving staff in decisions about digital services

- Only 26% agreed they had an opportunity to be involved
- 45% gave a neutral response
- 29% disagreed

Very few staff agreed that they had an opportunity to be involved in decisions about digital services. The low ratings given generally about organisational technology suggest that greater involvement from professional services staff would benefit all stakeholders.

QUOTE FROM PROFESSIONAL SERVICE STAFF MEMBER:

“Provide the equipment to use with the technology; for example, mobile devices rather than desktops for colleagues who work across campus and headsets so that Teams becomes the default communication platform for meetings and collaboration.”
Theme three: technology in your role

In theme three we discover more about the digital practices, tools and apps that professional services staff use and their frequency of use. We also find out how motivated they are to use technology.

Motivation to use technology in your role
The ratings are high with 88% of professional services staff having said they were either very or quite motivated.

- 45% – very motivated
- 43% – quite motivated
- 9% – neutral
- 2% – not very motivated
- 0% – not at all motivated

Job roles and responsibilities
The term ‘professional services staff’ covers a wide range of responsibilities as shown here:

- 18% taught students
- 40% supported students/staff with their digital skills
- 40% supported the use of digital resources
- 39% supported the use of digital systems
- 17% trialled technology innovation projects
- 36% none of these

Who supports you most to use technology in your work role?
- 63% – colleagues
- 22% – support staff
- 12% – online videos and resources
- 3% – friends and family

Useful digital tools and apps for work
845 responses from professional services staff were received. The top four most cited tools or apps were:

- Live video platforms like MS Teams and Zoom
- General productivity systems/suites (Microsoft applications, Office, Office 365, Google Suite, SharePoint)
- Some tools/apps more typically used by teaching staff which may indicate these staff also had a teaching role (Moodle, Classroom, VLEs, Kahoot)
- Design and creative tools were also referenced by a smaller number of staff

QUOTE FROM PROFESSIONAL SERVICE STAFF MEMBER:
“Communicate with us, see what our strengths are and acknowledge them, so we feel valued. Offer appropriate training, that way we can utilise the system properly.”
Theme four: developing your digital skills

Theme four is all about the opportunities and support professional services staff have to develop their digital skills and practice, safety and legal considerations, their own wellbeing and that of others.

Overall quality of organisational support to develop digital skills
The median and mean average response was ‘good’.

- 59% – rated it as either ‘excellent’, ‘best imaginable’ or ‘good’
- 28% – ‘average’
- 13% – ‘poor’, ‘awful’ or ‘worst imaginable’

Support and guidance for digital skills development
Responses to these multiple-choice questions were varied. Although the majority said they received support to develop their basic IT skills, less than half said their organisation provided guidance about the digital skills they needed in their job role. High numbers disagreed to statements on other aspects of guidance.

Support
The percentages who said their organisation offered support to develop specific digital skills were:

- 73% – develop their basic IT skills
- 54% – online team working
- 35% – use of specialist software
- 26% – creation of digital learning materials
- 17% – data analysis skills
- 15% – managing professional digital identity
- 7% – manage public web pages

Guidance

- 47% – organisation provided guidance about the digital skills they needed in their job role (37% neutral, 16% disagreed)
- 29% – had time to explore new digital tools and approaches (44% neutral, 27% disagreed)
- 24% – had the chance to assess their digital skills, for example, for career planning (48% neutral, 28% disagreed)
- Only 18% – received reward and recognition for the digital skills they developed (48% neutral, 35% disagreed)

Wellbeing, safety and legal considerations
Most professional services staff agreed they were informed about wellbeing and legal considerations, although more could be done to promote the health and wellbeing of staff as technology users. The percentages who agreed were:

- 87% – keeping learner data safe under GDPR (11% neutral, 2% disagreed)
- 81% – behaving safely and respectfully online (16% neutral, 3% disagreed)
- 71% – equality and accessibility legislation (24% neutral, 4% disagreed)
- 60% – their health and wellbeing as a technology user (30% neutral, 11% disagreed)
- 59% – digital copyright and licensing (32% neutral, 9% disagreed)
Discussing digital skills
It is encouraging to see that approximately half of professional services staff discussed digital skills development in four out of the six settings listed, but there is potential to improve this at the crucial states of recruitment, induction and appraisal. Worryingly, 11% said they didn’t discuss their digital skills development in any of these situations. Having these discussions is essential given the extent of technology used in most working practices, Digital discussions took place in the following settings:

- 54% in informal discussions with managers
- 48% in meetings with colleagues
- 48% at appraisals
- 47% in staff meetings/CPD sessions
- 44% when recruited
- 23% at induction/onboarding
- 11% none of these

What one thing should your organisation do to develop your digital skills?
A sample of the 794 responses showed that professional services staff asked for more:

- 31% training
- 13% time
- 9% CPD (longer term training rather than one-off sessions)
- 9% IT and specialist support
- 7% software/systems

QUOTE FROM PROFESSIONAL SERVICE STAFF MEMBER:
“Set up a programme that allows proper CPD time to learn and master new skills/training and establishes a proper progression route that potentially leads to rewards, eg recognition of achievement and upward progression on salary scale and job role.”
COVID-19: early signs of impact and change

We analysed the responses gathered from professional services staff to all questions both before and on/or after lockdown on 23 March to look for early signs of change and impact, however small. The percentage values shown in this section will differ from the values overall as we are viewing them at a granular level using subsets of the data. We found the following statistically significant differences in responses when comparing the responses before and on/or after 23 March, as well as some positive shifts in usage and attitudes:

**Theme one: you and your technology**

**Use of personally owned devices for work**

There was a rise in use of personal devices overall and a 15% reduction in those who said they used none:

- 21% rise – use of laptops
- 9% rise – use of smartphones
- 8% rise – use of tablets
- 5% rise – use of desktops

**Use of organisationally owned devices for work**

Use of organisationally owned laptops, smartphones and tablets rose while use of desktops reduced. The number who said they used none of these rose by 3%:

- 16% rise – use of laptops
- 10% rise – use of tablets
- 7% rise – use of smartphones, and a
- 14% reduction – use of desktops

**Theme two: technology at your organisation**

**Access to essential systems and support**

There were some notable positive shifts in agreement and neutral and/or disagree responses declined:

- 17% rise – access to online skills training resources
- 15% rise – access to reliable wifi
- 11% rise – ‘supports you to use your own digital devices’
- 10% rise – ‘let’s you access online systems and services from anywhere’

**Working practices and collaboration**

- 11% rise in ‘provides a good online environment for collaboration’

**Systems used at work**

- 15% more staff agreed that the systems they regularly used at work were reliable and there was a substantial drop in the number who disagreed
Theme three: technology in your work

Job roles and responsibilities
• 4% rise – roles involving trial technology innovation projects

Frequency of digital practices
More professional services staff worked online with others or provided online support on weekly or more frequently basis:
• 16% – worked online with others
• 16% – provided online support

The rating changes across answer options are more nuanced than shown in this summary. A more detailed breakdown is available in the full survey report which also includes a question by question analysis of findings from professional services staff in UK further and higher education.

Theme four: developing your digital skills

Organisational support for skills development
More staff were offered support during lockdown:
• 20% rise – online team working
• 8% rise – use of specialist software
• 7% rise – managing professional identity
• 6% rise – basic IT skills
• 5% rise – data analysis skills

Feeling well informed on wellbeing, safety and legal aspects of practice
There were positive shifts with more staff who agreed they were well informed:
• 6% rise – keeping student data safe under GDPR
• 12% rise – digital copyright and licensing
• 10% rise – equality and accessibility legislation
• 8% rise – behaving safely and respectfully online

Discussing digital skills
There was a rise in the number of professional services staff who said they had discussed their digital skills in four of the six settings (but a 6% reduction on discussions when recruited). 8% rise – at appraisals
• 8% rise – informally with managers
• 11% rise – meetings with colleagues
• 12% rise – in staff meetings/CPD sessions
Get involved

See the digital experience through the eyes of your students and staff

Sign up to take part in our 2020/21 surveys

The 2020/21 digital experience insights surveys for students, teaching staff, professional services staff and researchers are now open. There is no cost for FE colleges to participate, so if you are interested in participating in our surveys contact us at help@jisc.ac.uk putting ‘digital insights’ in the email subject line.

Find out more at:
digitalinsights.jisc.ac.uk

Read the full survey report which includes a question by question analysis of findings from teaching staff in UK further and higher education.

Contact your account manager

Let’s work together to transform your digital experience

https://Jisc.ac.uk/contact/your-account-manager
Shaping the digital future of FE and skills

With a focus on realising the potential of technology to benefit the further education sector now and into the future this research initiative, led by Jisc in partnership with the Association of Colleges (AoC), brings together college leaders, teachers, learners, sector bodies and edtech experts.

Phase one culminated in the production of the group’s first report including a series of recommendations designed to help realise the potential of technology to benefit the FE and skills sector. Phase two will build on the report’s recommendations, particularly focusing on sharing best practice, advice and guidance and carrying out further research into digital leadership and the development of guidelines for learner engagement online.

Join the conversation: https://www.jisc.ac.uk/shaping-the-digital-future-of-fe-and-skills

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Contributors:
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