

## **Discussion Report 2**

### **23rd MEETING - NATIONAL ECONOMIC FORUM: 4 DECEMBER 2019 DISCUSSION REPORT: Enhancing access to upskilling and retraining**

Host: Jamie Hepburn, Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills

Speaker / facilitator: Les Bayne, Managing Director, Accenture

Scribe: Jack Taylor, Future Skills Team, Scottish Government

#### **Summary**

This was a comprehensive discussion on how Scotland's skills system is currently performing and how it may be improved to provide a wider range of upskilling and retraining opportunities.

#### **Introduction and Background**

The Minister for Business, Fair Work and Skills began the session by outlining the importance of enhancing access to upskilling and retraining as one of the Future Skills Action Plan's four themes, and introducing facilitator Les Bayne.

#### **Topics discussed:**

##### **Introduction**

Les Bayne began the session by asking every delegate in the room to comment on what they felt were the stand out themes from the National Economic Forum so far. This prompted discussion on a wide-range of subjects including the perceived digital skills gap; the importance of inclusivity in the labour market; and the challenge of rurality in providing skills training. Two issues were particularly popular: the importance of public-private partnership in the design and delivery of skills training, and recognising the value in training workers at all levels of their careers and across a wide-range of professions.

Les outlined how Accenture was approaching these challenges and their growing recognition that the challenge should not be expressed as 'upskilling', but 'new-skilling'. He then asked delegates to continue to ponder the morning's discussions, but also changing economic needs and how skills may more effectively align with them. In particular, he reflected on the paradox of providing skills training in the most and least productive areas of the economy and how both could be effectively supported.

##### **What role should qualifications play?**

Considering the dynamics of the skills system and changing need across the economy, delegates discussed whether upskilling and retraining necessarily needed to result in a qualification, or whether the skills system could be more nimble were it less focused on certificated training.

It became clear that while specific, and easily quantifiable, technical skills were in demand, a growing number of employers sought less-easily codified skills such as enterprise, 'people skills' and creativity. While participants noted that these could be developed over time, the ability to judge them through an exam was open to dispute. In turn, it was suggested that higher-level meta-skills should instead be incorporated into more general skills training and normalised as an aspect of workplace development regardless of sector.

Similarly, delegates suggested that given individuals may cycle between multiple roles and industries during their career, skills training should be focused on the kind of skills that may enable them to do this. Again these were judged to be difficult to quantify, but undoubtedly of importance.

A number of delegates noted that the skills system's current constitution adds to confusion as to the importance of qualifications when delivering training: there is a perceived lack of signposting across the system and the economy. It was noted that a 'cultural shift' may be required to help employers understand the options available to them and enhance levels of support available for skills training whether formalised through a qualification or otherwise.

#### Which skills should be prioritised?

Discussions segued from qualifications into which specific skills should be prioritised and how to better balance understanding of and access to meta-skills training vis-à-vis more traditional technical training.

It was suggested that employers should take a greater lead in providing the latter with the former serving as a conduit to individuals recognising the necessity of retraining and upskilling at multiple points in their careers. In this sense, the skills system would seek to develop adaptive learners with employers providing the support necessary so that they are able to perform specific roles.

Other delegates, however, questioned whether this approach could have an adverse impact on older workers, and whether more credence should be given to short upskilling interventions that will have the greatest immediate effect. The apprenticeship model of cooperation between employers and Government was identified as an example of successful collaboration that could be reapplied elsewhere in the Scottish economy.

Meta-skills were widely recognised by employers as of growing importance. They were seen as critical not only to the successful application of new technologies, but an individual's ability to segue through multiple roles, industries and employers. It was noted that the work currently being undertaken by Skills Development Scotland to codify and promote meta-skills was vital to entrench them in the Scottish economy and to raise awareness of their importance among employers of all sizes.

#### Leadership and management

Delegates were asked to consider their own experiences and reflect on the support they had received in leadership and management. It was agreed that leadership

behaviour helps to drive organisational culture and is a powerful force in shaping success. A critical question is then, how are successful leaders trained?

The value of support networks and peer-to-peer networks was raised with the Institute of Directors' cross-sector leadership network identified as an example of good practice. Meta-skills were again identified as a potentially-significant factor in developing successful leaders.

### **Closing Comments**

Reflecting on the contributions, Les Bayne noted that collective recognition of both the critical role skills training would play in achieving economic growth in the years ahead and the necessity of flexibility in delivering a wider range of interventions during an individual's career. Meta-skills were an essential part of this and could help to drive the development of specific technical attributes.

He noted that leadership will be critical in driving change and that enhancing this was of great importance. He also noted that while industry must be central in leading and delivering change, Government was a critical partner in enhancing agility and ensuring flexibility across the skills system.

The Minister concluded by recognising the diversity of experience represented and the breadth of knowledge that delegates were able to bring to the discussion. He suggested that it was clear that changes were needed across the skills system and that the discussions taking place at the National Economic Forum would be valuable in informing this.

A culture change is beginning to percolate across Scotland with employers recognising the need to play a more active role in workforce planning and development. However, individuals also had a role to play in developing this agenda further and in helping to ensure that skills training supports inclusive economic growth for all.

He thanked delegates for their contribution.

**Scottish Government  
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