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Employer Insights from South Yorkshires Lifestyle, Leisure and Cultural Sectors Research Report

May 2025

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS SERIES.

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Acknowledgements: The research team would like to thank the employers who kindly gave their time, the providers who steered the research focus and helped avoid duplication with other activities and the chambers and business support specialists who provided willing businesses to speak to.

Management summary - headlines

One of the features of the South Yorkshire Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) is the development of a portfolio of knowledge and skills insights offering up to date intelligence on employer needs. This is a summary of findings from the third in a series of five employer insights undertaken as part of this work focusing on lifestyle, leisure and cultural businesses in South Yorkshire.

This report looks at skills now and in the future with a view to informing the valuable work of providers and those involved in the development and delivery of skills and training in South Yorkshire.

Lifestyle, Leisure and Cultural outlook and technology adoption

- This sector report covers lifestyle, leisure and cultural businesses including the sub-sectors of retail and hospitality, leisure, culture, tourism and sport. It has a very diverse range of career opportunities.
- Increased employee engagement and motivation is important in consumer facing industries as it results in an enhanced customer experience and ultimately improved business outcomes. Leadership training can help managers embed people-first values.
- Business priorities have been sharply influenced by the economic turbulence of the last five years resulting in some skills challenges and tight labour market. The sector has also experienced repositioning and diversification as a result of, for instance, new patterns of consumer behaviour and growth of the experiential market. The changes within the sector require leadership and management skills around commercial acumen, financial planning and structural transitions to support stabilisation, growth or diversification.
- Real-world work readiness and soft skills such as communication and organisation were placed at a premium as well as flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.
- Technical and higher-level qualifications will be required for roles such as sound technicians or musicians and well as management and leadership skills to oversee customer engagement and support new products, services or diversification.
- Digital technology is being used to enhance the customer experience but has yet to fully revolutionise operations. Front office staff are adopting new tools and processes and back-office teams using company systems that improve operational efficiency. This results in some demand for tailored foundational digital literacy training and familiarisation with new technologies supporting retraining and upskilling. This in turn will improve staff confidence and transitions into the sector. There is scope to promote awareness of cyber resilience measures and accreditations, typically via independent training providers.
- Customers are increasingly demanding green credentials resulting in firms adopting ‘top down’ green initiatives and an increase in sustainability activities. There is potential to promote and support good practice and accessible applied learning more widely and the tools to implement and demonstrate ethical and sustainable practice.
- By connecting employers with leading AI firms or those offering introductory AI training, businesses could be supported to access emerging platforms and technologies to improve efficiency without undermining personal interactions or connections. Employers would welcome easy to access masterclasses illustrating how AI could enhance back-office operations or service offers.

Lifestyle, Leisure and Cultural skills and talent pipeline

- There was a general receptiveness to (and use of) apprenticeships in a wide range of areas. Many consultees without apprentices said they would be open to the idea provided they could offer meaningful support and were in a financial position to do so. They would welcome advice on how they could benefit from an apprentice.
- Employers emphasised the importance of employability and essential skills and employer expectations within apprenticeship training and the workplace. Additional support such as mentoring and opportunities to practice and apply employability skills in the workplace would be beneficial.
- Employers discussed other concerns including the capacity to supervise apprenticeships, cost (especially smaller employers) and transport barriers. Some employers referenced their own lack of understanding about apprenticeships and provision available.
- Entry level training programmes should seek to overcome digital and IT literacy barriers, boosting confidence and addressing skills gaps.
- Employers reported a range of hard to fill vacancies both in industry specific roles and positions that support the business more widely. This was especially noticeable in shift work and kitchen roles, where the physical demands and low pay were contributory factors. Recruiting experienced managers in retail and hospitality was a challenge and firms increased pay and use of contractors to maintain customer service standards.
- Word of mouth, social media, and using external job sites are common recruitment routes. Local recruits are preferred, and trial shifts are used to assess capabilities and attitudes. There was an openness to promote diverse candidates with a range of skills and experience. Employers placed a premium on softer skills such as presentability and work readiness and a positive attitude as well as the potential fit within their teams.
- It was common for career progression conversations to be informal, without any specific policies, forms or frameworks. Though temporary positions are common, there may be an appetite to support employers to develop tailored, job specific career development frameworks which might in turn reduce turnover amongst longer term employees.
- Mandatory training such as first aid was delivered by external providers and generally many other training requirements were handled internally. There maybe scope to support employers in coaching or mentoring techniques.
- Many employers used the induction process as an opportunity to complete training and set expectations. Training providers could seek to support employers to embed training at regular intervals during career development.
- Flexible working is common including, compressed hours, autonomy over working hours and the ability to swap shift work. Where it was feasible, there were mixed views on home working.
- While not all employers had a formal or standardised method of supporting employee wellbeing, almost all described themselves as ‘open’ organisations with supportive teams. Mental wellbeing was highlighted as a key concern being addressed and there was an interest in mental health first aid and awareness activity. The sector is generally good at celebrating success both formally and informally and could offer good practice to other sectors.

Training the employees of tomorrow and offering the skills for today

- In respect to training challenges and barriers, smaller firms frequently cited resource and practical limitations, whereas larger firms were limited by overly generic corporate training. Cost and time are key barriers to more formalised training. There was a preference for modular, flexible and short format training that is easily accessible.

- Many firms consulted, especially smaller enterprises and those within retail and hospitality, had limited experience of engaging external providers for training purposes, preferring in-house delivery models.
- Employers found it hard to articulate their needs for more tailored or bespoke training resulting in a tendency to reuse and maintain relationships with existing providers. Training needs analysis might be well received. Some employers did not have a good understanding of the provider offer across the sub-region or the resource to find suitable training partners, suggesting the promotion of training provider offers makes sense.
- Businesses currently often recruited leaders from within through internal development and promotion. Leadership training, where it was offered, was typically undertaken in house.
- There was an openness in supporting early career leadership development, but cost and resource remains a barrier as well as awareness of how to access suitable support.
- Hospitality and retail focused CPD pathways for new and aspiring managers to complete in their own time would reduce strains on capacity and fill some of the leadership deficit apparent in the sector, especially where no structured training is offered.
- Adaptability and personalisation of content with real-life scenarios would make training better tailored to business needs. A few employers consulted would be willing to work more closely with training providers to develop sector specific content. Flexibility was also highlighted. Frequent but short modules and online skills delivery were popular so that employees could work around shifts and irregular working hours.
- Training for existing employees was offered in response to changing business needs including entry-level courses to enable employees to diversify their skills. Employers needed to keep up to date with regulations and new initiatives affecting retail and hospitality. On the job training remains popular. Many upskilling opportunities are informal and internal including shadowing and some respondents used online courses/modules or training platforms allowing remote, flexible learning.
- Employers offering practical services such as installations felt that VR/AR could be a useful training tool or capitalise on the demand for experiential activities. Others expressed reservations and the main adoption barriers were cost and time constraints. Offering financial support and introductory sessions would be needed to increase uptake.

Employer Engagement

- Except for low-income families, retiree returners and disability friendly recruitment employers don't all actively seek out those removed from the labour market, preferring merit-based employment based on values, attitude and skills. That said, some work with specialist organisations to support recruitment in this area and others would like to hear about overcoming the barriers to inclusive recruitment.
- Increasing the visibility of opportunities in schools and colleges is vital to inspiring to next generation. There was general concern that parts of the sector are undervalued and perceived overly negatively. Employers would be open to working with education providers to improve the image of the sector by providing positive case studies and success stories and co-designing careers materials, highlighting how it be enjoyable and rewarding. Open days, tours and taster events were suggested to give young people practical experience of working in the sector.
- Employers would welcome funding for skills, speaking to curriculum and course development leads, employing local people, offering placements/internships and masterclasses and helping with careers education such as with CVs, talks and short videos.

Preface

Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIP) place employers at the heart of local skills systems to help support and drive change. This change requires direct and dynamic insights and intelligence. This report is part of a portfolio of knowledge and skills activities designed to articulate and elevate the employer voice including podcasts, skills zones and skills teach-ins.

South Yorkshire LSIP background

Doncaster Chamber is the Employer Representative Body (ERB) for the South Yorkshire LSIP. They are collaborating with the two other Chambers of Commerce in South Yorkshire (Sheffield, and Barnsley and Rotherham), as well as the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, South Yorkshire College Group, universities, independent training providers and employers. The current LSIP was created in 2023 and runs until 2026, building on the 2021 South Yorkshire Trailblazer. LSIP is a strategic document concluding with 36 recommendations to improve understanding of employer needs and better align and inform the provider offer. These reflect the fact that employers, training and education providers have unique perspectives, but similar and complementary aims. This ensures post-16 education meets local employer priorities and demand. The Government's English Devolution white paper confirms that mayors will be given "joint ownership" of LSIPs alongside ERBs[1].

The Lifestyle, Leisure and Cultural Sector

This sector report covers retail and hospitality and leisure, culture and sport. This sector has a very diverse range of career opportunities. The retail and hospitality sector is a dynamic and customer-driven industry covering hospitality, catering, retail management, supply chain, and tourism services. Key career paths include: (a) Hospitality and catering – hotel management, restaurant operations, event planning, and food service (b) Retail management – overseeing store operations, customer service, and merchandising. As well as the supply chain and logistics, managing product distribution, warehouse operations, and inventory. (c) The food and beverage industry – culinary arts, beverage service, and quality control and (d) Travel and tourism – accommodation, leisure, and tourism experiences.

Leisure activities include culture and heritage (e.g. museums, galleries and heritage sites), leisure and entertainment (e.g. cinemas, bowling alleys, arcades, holiday camps, and theme parks), sports (including leisure sports and coaching, events, leisure centres etc) and the tourism sector (e.g. hotels, travel agencies, tour operators, attractions, and adventure tourism). For sport alone there are many career pathways from health, well-being and fitness to teaching, training and coaching and management.

Cultural industries embrace collections, combined arts, dance, libraries, literature, museums, music, theatre and the visual arts. They include industries and organisations offering cultural experiences, services and products. Typical career paths include: graphic designers, performers/artists, multi-media content creators, animators (for film, TV, or video games), fashion designers, photographers and web developers and art and creative directors.

[1] See FE week here

Report purpose and approach

This report is the third in a series to gain employer knowledge and understanding of local skills priorities. This will ensure the LSIP continues to be evidence-based and actionable, and education and training is responsive to employer and local labour market needs. It will help inform and influence curriculum development and employer engagement. The first reports on Manufacturing can be found here and on Construction here.

This work has been a collective effort between South Yorkshire Chambers, employers and providers. They collectively road tested the employer questionnaire and told the research team what questions and issues they would find most useful. The concept behind this employer insights series was to interview employers across the sub-region per sector, nominated by the chambers, local authority partners and business support specialists. This quarter the insights of Lifestyle, Leisure and Cultural firms were the focus. 34 employers listed in Annex one kindly contributed to this report during January to April 2025. They don't represent the whole sector and can only offer a snapshot of their requirements. The findings should be read with this caveat in mind.

Report Contents

There are four key parts to this report. The first part (Outlook, Chapter 1) looks at future priorities in light of changes to Lifestyle, Leisure and Cultural such as digitisation, decarbonisation and automation. Chapter 2 assesses current skills including apprenticeships, recruitment and skills gaps as well as the talent pipelines. Chapter 3 discusses training provision for both current and future employees. The final Chapter (4) reflects on employer engagement and collaboration and concludes with a summary of what more employers and providers might do to align, collaborate and work together.

Lifestyle, Leisure and Culture outlook and technology adoption

This chapter looks at why a people centred approach in consumer facing industries is important. It considers important future workforce skills and how might these affect employer investment in skills and their asks of providers. It concludes with an assessment of Artificial Intelligence and Automation.

People centred businesses

How deeply do South Yorkshire lifestyle, leisure and culture firms understand what their team members need to do their best work and feel they have a happy workplace culture? When asked 'are you a people centred business?" using a rating of one to ten, 80% of those who responded scored themselves an eight or higher. The respondents who scored themselves lower, cited seven.

"It's all about people, right from the top, from the directors and the owners. Ultimately, this is a business that relies on teamwork - it relies on people."

"In hospitality, we're people looking after people. We have automated and centralised many functions… and there's more that we will be able to, but there's certain core values, you can't take the human element out."

The people-orientated nature of the sector was felt to permeate into workplace cultures and practices. Strong internal relationships and team cohesion are considered key to resilience. This is most notable in hospitality where hotels operations are 24/7.

"One thing that is completely different to any industry is that we don't close. There's always someone in the building. Whether it's the first of January or the 25th of December, there's always somebody here. Because we are a small team…we're quite a family."

Employers emphasised the importance of creating healthy workplace cultures and paying attention to employee needs to best support their work. One provided an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent staff members and another cultural sector respondent talked about the conscious efforts they made to develop a strong workplace culture.

"People can have [overly positive] preconceptions about what the sector is when actually it's hard work, long hours and poorly paid. We're very focused on supporting our staff for those reasons, making it a nice work environment, being flexible, being accessible, being inclusive, all those lovely aspects that the arts and culture bring."

It was highlighted by retail and hospitality employers that people centred cultures, and local flexibility can be harder where there was a larger parent organisation. The different perspectives of those in and outside of management roles was noted. An increased focus on leadership training to embed people-first values and facilitating organisation wide consistency in culture was mentioned to help mitigate this challenge.

Future business priorities

The impacts of Covid, the UK's Exit from the EU and subsequent cost of living and energy price increases presented many challenges, most notably workforce and labour shortages. The historic reliance on a reliable experienced labour pool from the EU was partly at the expense of developing local talent:

"That dependence on a free-flowing workforce and having to adapt to that has been a challenge...it was easier for us to take on a Polish bartender with seven years' experience than take a 16-year-old that needed training and couldn't work behind the bar. It's actually exposed all the holes we have throughout our business managers that can't actually train, develop and manage people so it's partly our own making."

These skills shortages have been exacerbated, notably within retail and hospitality; by perceptions of the industry one lacking long term career prospects, in part a consequence of salary limitations.

"I think the entire hospitality industry struggles with quite similar challenges, it can be looked down on as not a career but more of a first job, or a stepping stone, whereas we've always tried to put it out there that people can build a career with us."

"Retail is still a traditionally poorly paid environment, and so the people who come into it, for some, it's their only option, and therefore they've not always got a passion for it."

Some feel the pandemic has contributed to a change in approaches to work, increasing disengagement.

"The younger workforce, their mindset is a massive challenge, because they're not used to working. They've grown up locked away in their bedroom unfortunately because of Covid. You can't train them on certain things."

The pandemic and cost of living crises along with rises in national minimum wage and insurance contributions have resulted in significant financial pressures. Labour costs, utilities and goods have all risen and consumers have less to spend on leisure and culture or changed their behaviour. For instance, cost of living and flexible working contribute to growing trend for 5pm table bookings[2] and there has been a growth in the experiential market.

"Certainly, the night-time economy is a lot more difficult. Just when you previously felt like a large part of our offer was for students, students now drink less than they used to."

"I think a lot of our guests and visitors, nationally and internationally, are now a lot more choosey about where they visit and spend their money."

These challenges have meant many growth ambitions have been tempered by maintaining profitability, financial stability and recovering to pre-covid business levels. For businesses looking to scale or expand, many turned to repositioning and diversification.

"It's having an offer that differentiates yourself from everyone else, because people will spend the money if they see the value. What I've noticed is there's been a change in USP from something very transactional, to a unique value proposition, which is very experiential. So, they're looking for value. They're not looking for a price."

For one employer this manifested itself in the form of new garden lodges to complement regular hotel accommodation, another expanded their offer to host events.

"Garden lodges. That is a big focus. There's a lot of work being done in terms of getting the site in position where we can start building those. And then the other one is a very rural

[2] 'A younger crowd': the rise of Britain's early-bird restaurant dining | Restaurants | The Guardian

boutique kind of hotel. That's a current focus, more of these lodge developments and garden suites."

"We're evolving a bit from our normal operations to being an event venue at the same time."

The changes within the sector require leadership and management skills around commercial acumen, financial planning and structural transitions to support stabilisation, growth or diversification.

Future skills and qualifications

1.1.1 Future Skills and Qualifications

Employers emphasised attitudes and willingness to work as well as customer service. Basic numeracy, literacy and digital skills are necessary for the handling and conducting of transactions and ease the gradual integration of technology. Employers really valued real-world work readiness and soft skills such as communication and organisation. Cultural businesses sought recruits with strong creativity and problem-solving skills.

"It's a customer service industry. It's the same kind of skills we just apply to slightly different experiences that the industry has survived on for hundreds of years, the ability to talk and listen to customers and respond to their needs."

Cultural industries required technical and higher-level qualifications for roles such as sound technicians or musicians. Other employers prioritised industry experience.

"In our industry, experience is more important. We have had staff before, that have done event management or have got hospitality qualifications. But it's one of those things where experience and attitude is worth so much more than a piece of paper that says they've got a certain qualification. Work based experience would be more valuable than a qualification."

The availability of these softer skills however, particularly in retail and hospitality settings, was felt to be in shorter supply. Employers felt younger generations, in part due to the pandemic and longstanding perceptions of the sector, lacked the enthusiasm or interpersonal skills held by more experienced staff. These skills were harder to embed through training.

"Some people that do really struggle with that. I particularly noticed this in the younger people that we employed, they struggled just with talking to colleagues amongst themselves... if you can't come in and say hello to a colleague that you work with every day, then how are you going to be able to give that service to customers? I suppose younger people grow up in more of a digital world, everything's on a screen, so they don't have to interact with people as much."

"Personal skills and interaction, I really do think that is something that seems to be lacking, and I've seen that decline over recent years."

A few employers did require specific skills outside of general customer service and soft skills. One cited the need for regional managers to support new services and diversification. Another retailer was seeking designers and sales staff to help with new product launches. Several leisure and cultural firms stressed the importance of management and leadership skills at all levels.

1.1.2 Digital Skills

Digitisation has expanded into all sectors and the lifestyle, leisure and cultural sectors are not untouched. As of September 2024, 2.71 billion people were shopping online worldwide, with

e-commerce constituting 20% of global retail sales the year prior[3]. For leisure and hospitality, over 70% of travellers now expect digital options such as contactless payments or self-service check-ins. 60% of hotels are reporting an increased investment in AI and IoT[4] to enhance guest experiences[5]. There is also growing interest in cyber resilience and risk management following recent high-profile breaches.

For South Yorkshire employers, digitisation is growing but has yet to fully revolutionise operations. Marketing and social media is increasingly important and online booking and scheduling systems are imperative for hotels and accommodation providers. Some employers have adopted digital workforce management systems and those in food service use QR codes and tablets for ordering.

"Over the last 12 months we've developed digital marketing - Facebook, Instagram etc."

"Our hotel property management system is online, and everything is pretty much is cloud based."

Within the retail and hospitality sub-sectors technological innovation often involves front office staff adopting new tools and processes. Back-office teams typically use company systems that improve operational efficiency including inventory tracking, sales and customer behaviour and automation. Staff are not generally required to possess advanced digital skills like coding or complex data analytical skills (firms tend to rely on in housing IT support and/or external software/IT providers. Employers do require a degree of basic digital fluency for staff in administrative and frontline roles, but many occupations have been largely unaffected by advances in technology. Younger generations tend to have good technological literacy.

"A lot of that nowadays you're getting usually younger people doing it, most of them are fairly literate with it anyway, because kids have grown up with iPads and phones, etc. They largely know how to use at least a front-end technology- there's nothing particularly complicated behind the scenes they'd ever need to get involved in."

"It does play a part 100%, but it's very basic. They just need to be literate."

Within leisure and culture firms did report some digital skills gaps as businesses struggle to keep pace with the adoption of new digital applications. Additionally, the digital skills required within these firms are often more advanced and harder to acquire. This includes skills like graphic design, image editing, motion design, and the ability to communicate effectively online using various digital platforms.

"The thing I find frustration in is the ability to adapt to digital innovation. We've got people really adept on Excel, but Excel is now like 20 years out of date, and generally how to structure a data set, or how to utilise data set, now it's how to make use of Power BI and other tools. I think that's a gap."

"That sort of multimedia exposure [is what we need] because of the nature of the work we do here, it's not just about making films. It's wider than that. It's the wider digital stuff."

Employers more broadly across the sector identified a generational divide in confidence, with older workers more likely to struggle with tech adoption in working practices. This also

[3] Hostinger, Ecommerce statistics 2025: key findings and shopping trends, 2025
[4] Internet of Things
[5] TechMagic, Digital Transformation in Hospitality Industry: A Comprehensive Guide for 2025, 2025

extended to businesses customer bases, with more digital points of sale for retail firms risking the loss of older generations of customer.

"We have had more mature people apply who have struggled with the new systems."

"The digital world has kind of been a blessing and a curse, I suppose, it depends on your customer market. A lot of the customers are the older generation. As a business, we're trying to move forward from a digital point of view, but then that's quite hard for our customer base."

Support from providers could address digital skills gaps. The provision of tailored foundational digital literacy training as well as familiarisation with new technologies to support the retraining, labour market returners and upskilling of older workers may help improve confidence and transitions into the sector. There may also be scope to promote awareness of cyber resilience measures and accreditations, typically the domain of independent training providers.

1.1.3 Green Skills

Despite the challenge of financial stability and recovering to pre-Covid levels; sustainability is still on the agenda. This is typically driven by consumer and customer demand. For instance customers booking venues or accommodation are taking keener interest in the carbon footprint and green credentials of prospective locations.

"We receive request for proposal services every year. All the large companies will come to us and say, we want to use your hotel. It used to be how much do you charge, and we'd give them a flat rate. Now it's how green are you? Now we have to demonstrate our green credentials."

"A lot of event bookers these days want to know the carbon footprint for each event."

Employers are adopting green initiatives and increasing their sustainability through a variety of means. Some employers utilise local providers for food and drink, and some have fitted solar panels and recycle organisational waste. Several firms have obtained green certifications, notably B-Corp status, indicating a business has been verified to meet high standards of social and environmental performance, transparency and accountability. Larger firms ensure they implement ethical practices, transparent supply chains, and have responsible waste management. Retailers are responding by implementing green initiatives, including sustainable packaging, energy efficiency measures, and reducing waste. For example, one 'fast-moving consumer goods' (FMCG) retailer consulted uses no plastic.

"We recycle all our food waste and a lot of our waste products from timber builds, etc, is all recycled. We use a lot of solar energy here; all our buildings are covered in solar panels. We do a lot of energy recycling and green engagement on site."

"The organization is B Corp accredited, so we are trying to intrinsically link everything we do to its impact, not just from an environmental perspective. It's ESG, is what we're doing benefiting anybody? Can we do it differently?."

While concerted efforts are being made, for most this achieved 'top-down' led by managers. Few organisations link green skills to recruitment or training strategies specifically and where they do, this can be at quite a superficial level or more often via management teams. There is certainly potential to promote good practice more widely across the workforce.

For some, sustainable practice involved using free range eggs or sustainably sourced flour which were considerably more expensive than non-sustainable alternatives and rely on

customers' propensity to pay. One hospitality company use flour from Wildfarmed, a company that focuses on regenerative agriculture. Their flour is grown to improve soil health, biodiversity, and carbon capture, contributing to a more sustainable food system. Further activity for some in this area would require additional resourcing or incentivisation.

“There's a lot of online [green] training. It's not very engaging, they'll just release a document. It's for our operations manager to read it, understand it, and implement it within a set deadline. There's kind of no room for that extra person to come in and say this is what you need to be doing, and this is how to do it. It's self-learning.”

"In terms of green [skills and sustainability] I think, fundamentally, the problem we have is that we're kind of in that middle ground where we're in quite comfortable, but we would have to make a big step to then take the business to another level, and we never took that step early enough."

Engaging with providers to deliver accessible applied learning on ESG principles for all levels within organisations could help businesses meet customer and regulatory demands. It could also upskill employees, raise awareness and highlight changing consumer expectations. The training that is required here is very applied in nature, giving people the tools to implement and demonstrate ethical and sustainable practice.

Automation and AI

There is an openness within South Yorkshire's lifestyle, leisure and culture sector to the adoption of AI and automation to improve efficiencies and streamline operations. The extent to which it has been implemented to date varies between industries. Within accommodation, retail and tourism services firms are trialling booking and self-check in and check-out systems and utilising Chat GPT and wider AI models to support in marketing activity, such as for responding to guest reviews.

“We use it a lot when we answer to reviews, because in hotels, we get about 200-300 reviews every month. So sometimes it's challenging to find the time to write a personal response to everybody and when we have different complaints.”

In the food and beverage sub-sector, payment methods and kiosk ordering are more frequently becoming automated, and one employer referenced the use of robot servers. One leisure operator had also trialled robotic mowers to support site upkeep.

“[I went out recently] and I got served by a robot at quite a high-end restaurant.”

“Robotic mowers…we've trialled a few of those, just to see what they are like and if it can save on man hours so time can be put elsewhere, rather than it being out cutting the grass which might take five hours or six hours a day.”

Whilst this an early foray for most into the applications of AI and automation, there was an acknowledgment of its potential. One employer saw long-term potential in robotics for cleaning and logistics, and another was exploring the use of automated chat features to improve the guest experience and support staff capacity.

“In the future will we see little robots going up and down hoovering? If I can have a robot vacuum walking up and down corridor, why would I bother paying a person to do it? You know, one day will you have robots which will clean rooms?.”

However, for some employers, especially smaller firms, there was still reticent to embed AI and automation. Businesses cited the importance of customer and in-person interactions and felt this would be eroded.

"It's a difficult one AI, from a customer service point of view, I don't think I would want AI talking to our customers, because it is a really personal service that we offer, and we want our customers to feel valued."

By connecting employers with leading AI firms or those offering introductory training, businesses could be supported to access emerging platforms and technologies to improve their efficiency without undermining personal interactions or connections. Employers would welcome easy to access masterclasses illustrating how AI could enhance back-office operations or service offers for instance in housekeeping, guest and customer experience or personalisation, or revenue management and pricing.

Lifestyle, leisure, and culture skills pipeline

This chapter looks at skills pipeline for the sector. It highlights a general receptiveness to apprenticeships but notes there have been some practical challenges experienced. Change management is explored especially in relation to digital adoption. Hard to fill vacancies and recruitment strategies are considered. Finally, this chapter focuses on staff development and career pathways and reflects on how hybrid working and well-being are typically approached.

Apprenticeships in the lifestyle, leisure and culture sectors

2.1.1 Using apprenticeships

Apprenticeships were provided in a wide range of areas including finance, catering, heritage and horticulture. Apprenticeships in areas such as business administration, marketing and maintenance were viewed positively. They offered valuable experience. They were offered at a range of levels including degree apprenticeships. Those at level two were more commonly focus on entry level roles in operational, back office and kitchen-based roles. Customer service and front of house apprentices were less common. For instance, one high street retailer valued previous experience over relevant qualifications and provided on the job training in stock control, customer service and cashier skills. Employers typically had a small number of apprentices and were working with local providers such as the colleges in Barnsley and Rotherham.

However, apprenticeships continue to be popular amongst employers of all sizes. Furthermore, many consultees without apprentices said they would be open to the idea provided they could offer meaningful support and were in a financial position to do so. They would welcome advice on how they could benefit from an apprentice.

"At the moment, we don't need that technical skill, but if we really want to do an [activity], we will absolutely need to get an apprentice."

Many apprentice graduates went on to accept full-time work with their employer.

"So that cost of them being here while they're doing it is actually offset, because you retain them for longer - they're more likely to be with you for the long term as well."

2.1.2 Barriers to apprenticeships

A handful of employers reported negative experiences with apprenticeships. One large hospitality business owner discussed the difficulty of managing apprentice expectations and one leisure business found it hard to full utilise their apprentice and offer meaningful, beneficial tasks. Another food and hospitality employer recruited an apprentice who failed to arrive on their first day and was frequently late. This emphasises the importance of employability and essential skills and employer expectations within apprenticeship training and the workplace This may require additional support such as mentoring and opportunities to practice and apply employability skills in the workplace.

Employers discussed other concerns. Some small employers struggled to find the bandwidth to offer a meaningful apprenticeship placement. Others explained that since Covid running their business had become more challenging and whilst they had supported apprentices in the past now felt unable to do so. Those operating on smaller profit margins or in their early

stage of growth were more cautious of offering apprenticeships, though not completely opposed.

In fast move consumer sectors like retailing and hospitality employers found it hard to supervise and guide apprentices and reconcile the fact that experienced staff were efficient and effective. Employers want to ensure they can offer the wider support an apprentice may require so it is a positive experience. They couldn't always see the benefits, were offered few financial incentives and recognised that larger firms were often better placed to provide support systems.

"So we need to be really effective, which means we don't, at this point, have the resource to train people up from really early in the career journeys, we need people that not only could handle their own but bring into play systems and improve what they're working in already."

One mobile retailer was concerned that an apprentice would be unable able to travel to appointments unless they owned a car. The travel time associated with working across Yorkshire could also make it difficult to facilitate regular working hours for the apprentice. Another hospitality business highlighted the remoteness of their location as a barrier to attracting apprentices, again stating that unless the apprentice is able to drive, they were unlikely to be able rely on public transport.

"I have to rely on very supportive parents if they are under the age of being able to drive, to be able to get them to [business], because the business hours just would not fit in with public transport or the reliability of public transport."

Some employers referenced how their own lack of understanding about apprenticeships and the visibility of provision was a barrier to taking on an apprentice. There was a gap mentioned in apprenticeships in one growing hospitality area – sour dough baking – the lead baker apprenticeship was thought to be too broad.

Recruitment and skills gaps

2.2.1 Effective change management strategies

Some employers experienced employees resistant to change in relation to new technology adoption. One retailer talked about an employee's inability to understand, operate, and manage various electronic payment methods and platforms effectively. Other mentioned resistance to IT training. A similar incident arose for a different retail specialising in art and creativity, with employees expressing resistance out of fear they may have their jobs replaced by AI.

"It's disguised as reluctance, but I think it is more just a thing of maybe worry, maybe insecurity, like not wanting to make themselves look less than capable. You know, these are people that are fantastic at what they do, and they'll get it done, but I don't think they like to admit that something can stump them."

"I think people are nervous about their jobs being lost, and they're nervous about losing that human connection. I think so the way we're overcoming it really is just … showing people where it will save them time, but how they're not going to lose their job."

Challenges with new digital systems were particularly common amongst older members of the workforce who were more often less familiar with technology. Providers should ensure that training materials are accessible to those who have lower level digital skills or less experience of them, by providing more tailored support or entry level training.

"The one who was a bit reluctant was [X], who was 82 years old… we asked [X], 'why haven't you done your training yet?' And he says, 'Well, I'm bit scared of breaking he was scared of breaking the computer'."

It is ultimately important that employers can accurately and confidently convey the reasons for delivering training and installing new systems and processes. Securing employee buy-in could result in increased training uptake and a more positive workplace culture. Explaining how the training will improve everyday tasks in a manner that is relatable and tailored to the individual job role will reduce resistance.

"I guess the main thing is, is just giving people a space to voice their opinions and make sure that they know that they're being listened to and that their opinions are valid."

Employers noted the importance of developing a shared vision and positive culture with their workforce to encourage and support change management.

"I think it's very much about celebrating success, making the team aware, always making teams strive for their own individual goals, by making sure that they've got they've got the information they need to improve and to develop and to move forward and to ultimately own the process that they're involved in."

2.2.2 Hard to fill vacancies

Employers reported a range of hard to fill vacancies both industry specific and roles that support the business more widely. Kitchen roles, especially chefs, were most frequently cited as difficult to recruit.

"Chefs are like gold dust in this part of the world."

Pay was highlighted as a key barrier to low recruitment in this area by two respondents, who felt that rising costs and wages could make it more difficult to employ high quality chefs. Employers also highlighted the physical demands and pressures of a busy kitchen as factors that could disincentivise applicants. It was acknowledged that were few ways to ease the physical demands of the job.

"You need to have certain characteristics to be stuck in our kitchen for a long time. That's probably our number one challenge, getting suitable kitchen staff because they need to be able to work in a certain way straight away."

Hotels discussed constant difficulties in recruiting a range of roles, including front of house, and back of house positions including cleaning and maintenance. This was attributed at least in part to the long and often unsociable hours required for hotel work.

"I think within a hotel, working unsociable hours - people just don't want to do it anymore. When you can make the same amount of money doing something else, and then you can be out with your friends by six o'clock."

Employers in both retail and hospitality discussed challenges in recruiting managers. Many applicants lacked the relevant experience to perform in the role.

"This vacancy [management], we did appoint somebody, and then they were offered another job, which they took… They might have offered more money. That's probably what they do when they struggle to fill things and maybe put the salary up a little bit make the package a little bit more appealing."

Swimming teachers were also referenced by two employers as hard to fill vacancies. In response to hard to fill vacancies some lifestyle, leisure, and culture organisations had been to 'drastically' increase salaries and work with the Job Centre Plus to offer training to increase the talent pool. One employer described how the lack of heritage skills (locally and nationally) meant they had to rely on expensive sub-contractors to ensure maintenance of their site is to a high standard.

2.2.3 Recruitment processes

Word of mouth, social media, and using external job sites are common recruitment pathways for the lifestyle, leisure, and culture sectors. Most businesses look to recruit locally, typically recruiting from local universities and college leavers. Job listings are often posted online, highlighting the importance of supporting people to develop their digital skills and access the technology needed to apply for roles.

"People would apply online first, and then there's an online assessment that they have to pass before they get to an interview in store. We would only ever see the candidates that have passed that online assessment."

Within hospitality, particularly in bar and kitchen work, trial shifts are used to assess capability and attitude, ensuring that the potential recruit can work to an expected standard upon being hired. It gives recruits the opportunity to use tills and operate the ordering system.

"The typical process on a site involves a face-to-face interview and something we call a 'day in the life', where we invite them in for a couple of hours, and we get them in the kitchen… At the end of the day, you've got to see how they conduct themselves in a kitchen, and you know, if they can hold themselves well."

Several employers had developed their own recruitment approaches since Covid and sought to introduce less standardised and more tailored recruitment processes to linked to job requirements and seniority. There was a genuine openness to promote diverse candidates with a range of skills and experience.

"It's about ensuring that we're not excluding anybody because of the personal lived experience. So to do with ability, physical ability, disability, or any sort of background, like their socio demographic backgrounds that we're not accidentally making people jump through hoops that they don't need to."

Interviews remain a common recruitment method, with most employers holding between one and two interviews for a role. Employers often want to get a sense of the person to make sure they will fit with the culture of the business and have the personality attributes to successfully interact with people and customers. In some roles where specific skills are required such as within kitchens, theatres, or music establishments, assessments can be part of the recruitment process. A second interview is typically more common for more senior positions. It is therefore important that providers continue to prepare people for this process by offering mock interviews and supporting people to develop their interview technique. However, over a third of employers discussed using a more informal "chat" to assess suitability, suggesting that this may be becoming a more common method of recruitment.

Though experience is important, employers in the lifestyle, leisure, and culture sectors really valued a positive attitude and sought to promote strong team cultures and values. These qualities were closed assessed during interviews and trial shifts. It was felt that finding an

individual who would fit in with current team and be open to learning new skills was preferable over an experienced individual whose values do not align.

"They come in, they do work, they see if they fit with us… so that gives them an opportunity as well, to come in and say 'okay, actually, I like being here, I like the atmosphere. I can progress with them."

Staff development and career pathways

It was common for career progression conversations to be informal, without any specific policies, forms or frameworks. The focus of these discussions is often regarding how comfortable an individual feels at work, any areas (in and out of work) that they may need support, and any training they might want to receive.

Difficulties emerged as the lifestyle, leisure, and culture sectors (especially in retail and hospitality) employ a lot of its staff on a casual basis, meaning that they may be working at multiple organisations or volunteering outside of their paid work. Establishing a suitable progression framework when the work required is more casual or demand driven is therefore a challenge. One employer highlighted, however, that clear development pathways and opportunities are vital to ensuring employee retention. Where staff appraisals were used by organisations the frequency ranged from monthly to yearly.

"…but career planning hasn't really been a feature. I mean, we do discuss what people would, you know what they would like to do in their role, but it's such a small place. Yeah, it gets a bit more organic. We'll go out of our way to sort of help people do the training they would like to do."

Though temporary positions are common, there may be an appetite to support employers to develop tailored, job specific career development frameworks to reduce turnover amongst longer term employees.

"It's generally a conversation with staff about 'are they comfortable? What do they need? Do they need anything from us?' We're not a very technical job, so in terms of sending them out to do training - it's not the kind of thing that they're after. It's more 'are they comfortable at work?"

Employers said mandatory training such as first aid was delivered by external providers and generally many other training requirements were handled internally such as 'soft skills'. Lifestyle, leisure, and culture organisations sometimes felt the nature and nuances of their work did not align with the 'standard' offer from training providers.

Mentoring opportunities were a common method of staff development, with employers highlighting the value of buddy schemes and/or shadowing whilst on the job. These forms of development can be easily embedded into a typical workday, meaning that the employee does not need to take time away from their shift to develop their skills and ask work-related questions. However, these more informal development pathways do not provide the opportunity to discuss concerns, or additional support needs as readily and a more formalised appraisal. Training providers could seek to develop tools and conversation guides to support mentors to discuss both role responsibilities as well as additional concerns that may be raised in a more traditional appraisal setting.

"When someone comes onto site they get a training plan, and they are taken through that plan by one of the managers, who will then buddy them with team members."

Formalised inductions were more common however, with many employers using the induction as an opportunity to complete training and set expectations. Inductions also offered employees the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the working environment and equipment, giving them the chance to develop their skills and confidence prior to becoming responsible for a shift or service. As such, more resource is typically placed into developing a stringent and thorough induction process as opposed to frequent appraisals. Training providers could seek to support employers to embed training at regular intervals during career development, to ensure that training materials are referred to frequently following induction as an employee progresses through their role.

"There's an induction and site walk around so everybody's familiar with the site. Then [name] goes into health and safety and risks, etc and then GDPR and so on and all that. That's your nine training programs."

Flexible and hybrid working

"One of the positives that we'd like to push about this industry is very much that it does offer quite a lot of flexibility for people. The ability to be able to work around children, the ability to be able to work around kind of non-traditional hours, is quite an appeal for a lot of our workforce."

Flexible working is common within lifestyle, leisure, and cultural industries. For example, compressed hours, autonomy over working hours where possible and the ability to swap shift work with colleagues were used to give employees more control over their working hours. Those working students discussed being especially flexible during exam periods. They understood that night shifts were often unfeasible for students, and they often required longer gaps between working days. Many allowed parents to take time away from the workplace to attend events such as nativity plays or sports days and/or work around their child's school hours. Providing employees worked their contracted weekly hours, some employers were less concerned when they were worked. This flexibility was it was felt increased staff retention. Working from home was seen as an attractive workplace benefit for many employees.

"From a creative point of view, I'm quite happy [for her to be] working at two o'clock in the morning, if she's inspired and she's working on something, and then adjusting the time accordingly."

"For the first time this year, they've allowed us to buy extra annual leave, its especially useful for working parents like me and something that I've made use of."

In retail and hospitality remote and hybrid working was not feasible where work needed to be carried out on site. For those working in back of house positions, such as marketing and HR, working from home was more common, although some employers, particularly those in hospitality expected all staff to attend in person. This enabled consistent and effective staff communication and collaboration, something that the employer felt would be lacking if the workforce were to become fully remote.

"I think the consensus here is that it's a people business - you get up, you put your suit on, you go into work."

In the creative sector home working was comment when employees were working on a deadline and needed time alone to focus. Concerns were raised around home working, monitoring output, staff wellbeing and productivity. There may be an appetite to develop skills and knowledge in managing flexible and hybrid remote employees to provide mutual trust

and transparency, help employees are able to balance their work and other commitments such as childcare. This will avoid confusion and lack of clarity of entitlements and standards.

"My theory was, if we had confident managers with confident objectives or evidence for productivity, then people could work from home more if they wanted. So that's why I put together this sort of hybrid working policy."

Employee wellbeing and celebrating success

While not all employers had a formal or standardised method of supporting employee wellbeing, almost described themselves as 'open' organisations with supportive teams, where employees would feel comfortable sharing any wellbeing concerns. This was especially true of family run and smaller businesses who felt that their pre-existing relationships subsequently led to an open and accepting workplace. Some managers in small organisations would welcome management insights to ensure they were well-equipped to manage concerns should they arise. This would ensure their employees receive the most suitable support following an open discussion about their wellbeing.

"We are very much open book … They're not afraid to say anything if they want to speak to us and they want some support. I've got experience in a lot of things, and my colleagues have got experience in life as well. It's not practices, but it's more of leading by example".

Mental wellness was highlighted as the key focus of employee wellbeing, more so than physical wellbeing or work-life balance. Since Covid, and amongst younger employees in particular, mental wellbeing was becoming an increasing priority. Some larger organisations provide access to 24/7 helplines and healthcare services. Smaller organisations typically offered less formalised methods to support workplace wellbeing including company meals out, additional days off each quarter to be used for wellbeing purposes, and interactive games for staff. Many of the organisations had staff trained as Mental Health First aiders.

"I'm actually a Mental Health First Aider myself and I really do enjoy that element of the business. I think it really gives you an insight into looking at how people perform, how you can get the best out of people, but also how you can support people when there are really, really difficult challenges and when there are problems in not just work, but in in personal lives as well."

Some employers would be interested in learning more about Mental Health First Aid Training.

"We've got an employee wellbeing line. So, if someone's going through a disciplinary, or they have a grievance or they're just having a hard time at home."

Celebrating success is also both formal and informal. Awards nominations and ceremonies are common, with larger chains often holding an annual award ceremony which includes those who have been nominated for awards within their local branch. Nominations are often chosen by colleagues, fostering a greater sense of teamwork and community. These awards sometimes came with financial incentives such as online shopping vouchers.

"I always find a good old bonus at the end of the month the best way to incentivize a team."

Less formal celebrations were used foster teamwork including afterwork drinks, days out, and Christmas and/or summer parties. Organisations, regardless of size, referenced day-to-day opportunities to celebrate success, such as emailed thank-you, passing on named customer feedback and general words of appreciation from both managers and colleagues. It was felt that not only did this enable the organisation to celebrate success.

“We have a company-wide group chat through our workforce management system, so whenever anyone gets promoted, or we have a really good day, or anything like that, the managers will always share the good news in there, which is always nice.”

“You can nominate the colleague based on what they've done, and how successful it was and then they will win a voucher - I think it's a £100 voucher for something.”

Training the employees of tomorrow and offering the skills for today

This chapter looks at employer approaches to training and leadership development and offers some insights for providers on training provision. It is a sector where flexible and tailored formats are preferred. Looking at skills within the workplace this chapter highlights the prevalence of on-the-job training. It concludes with a brief review of employer perspectives on immersive training environments where there is more awareness and support needed to ensure any benefits are realised.

Training models and provider engagement

3.1.1 Training models

Depending on the training required, the staff in question and in part the size of the business, Lifestyle, Leisure and Cultural firms adopted a variety of training models and implementation processes.

Most firms had strong onboarding and induction processes to embed new staff. Both online platform-based learning and in person coaching were used as well as buddy systems and checklists.

"We do an initial week's induction where we introduce new staff to our organisation, the role, and there is a lot of shadowing and showing them the different software packages."

"We have a really good, clear, induction for new people, which is really mapped out."

Larger businesses referenced long-term staff development and training pathways, and smaller businesses sought to provide broad, hands-on experience building overall staff competency.

"We've always had a culture of training and a culture of developing people, the majority of senior leadership team in our company have worked through the company... we focus on early-stage employee development."

"We do train everybody to do everything...everyone that comes here, if they spend two years with us, they should be able to walk into any sort of similar job and be a supervisor level- they will have done so many different things that they wouldn't normally get elsewhere."

For wider in-house training delivery large firms tend to have structured in house training teams and systems such as learning and development departments and brand-standard platforms. One company highlighted a newly developed capabilities and skills framework.

"We've just procured new software to manage training. We now have a capabilities and skills framework for every individual in the company."

"The majority is company branded and standard initiatives that we have to follow, there's a lot of online training."

Smaller employers in comparison more commonly rely on managers or senior team members to deliver training and some in some instances on a more ad-hoc basis when

needs are identified. This offered a very tailored approach and often employees would get exposure to many different parts of the business.

"At the minute, we're still quite old school. We have written guides and it's a bit more manual at this point, and it requires a trainer. So when someone comes into site, they get a training plan, and they are taken through that plan by one of the managers."

"We do quite a lot of training in house, but it's really direct. It's more targeted at what we need internally."

Externally procured training typically focused on compliance and more standard certification requirements such as food hygiene, fire safety and licensing.

"We've brought in somebody from outside to do fire extinguisher training…a few of us have done IOSH, which is about managing spaces safely, and that's external too."

"First aid training, like counter terrorism training, those kind of things we have routinely via external companies, and then the softer skills we do more internally."

In respect to training challenges and barriers, smaller firms more frequently cite resource and structure limitations, whereas large firms were sometimes limited by overly generic corporate training. Cost and time are key barriers to more formalised training. With preferences towards modular, flexible and short format training that is easily accessible (as a result of sector specific shift patterns and limited resource).

3.1.2 Communicating training requirements and skill needs

Due to the nature of the sector and the prior mentioned focus on soft skills and real-world readiness, most firms consulted had limited experience of engaging external providers for training purposes. Employers; particularly smaller enterprises and those within retail and hospitality; preferred to deliver training in house. This extended to provision that is more commonly outsourced such as HR functions.

"No, we don't use [external providers] for HR or anything like that, because I do that. I put the policies together, I put the documents together, and I just make sure that we're compliant-it's not needed. We're a small business independent business, so I can manage that."

Skills gaps are more commonly identified reactively, and businesses prefer to manage training internally to maintain oversight of content and delivery and resource is felt to be more effectively managed through an internal approach.

"[Re interest in working with providers] not really. I think it's just a nature of the business. I can see it working in other industries, but I think for our business, I couldn't see it working, as I'd still be the key person doing all the content, so it just give extra work for me, for someone else to get what I mean?."

For the employers who did utilise external training most were receptive to trialling different providers in relation to more generic offers around fire safety or website development. However, particularly for leisure and tourism focused enterprises, many had longstanding relations with providers who they used routinely. One employer relied on their strong relations with the Chamber of Commerce to find suitable provision and another sought support through the Growth Hub.

"If we're going to pay for outsourced training, we want to get the most of it. For the fire safety training we went through the Chamber of Commerce because they have their own team, they organised it for us as we're premium partners, I trusted they would deliver great training."

"Free expert consultancy in any area is always amazing. We've had support from the Growth Hub, and had advice from Business Sheffield, all of which came at no charge…repeated contact with someone who has expertise, and experience in other organisations and how they do things helped us look at how we do things and see it differently."

Employers found it hard to articulate their needs for more tailored or bespoke training resulting in a tendency to reuse and maintain relationships with existing providers. Training needs analysis might be well received. Some employers did not have a good understanding of the provider offer across the sub-region or the resource to find suitable training partners, suggesting the promotion of training provider offers makes sense.

"For certain things, like website development, for example, they're fairly standard across the board. You can sort of pick that up off the shelf, but in terms of tailoring something to our needs, that's probably a little bit harder to express what we need."

"We do have excellent training providers when it comes to certain brands that we work with, certain wine certain whiskeys, because that means a bit of training. You need to know what it tastes like. You need to know the background of it."

"If you've got a provider that's providing something for you and it's as you need it, why would you look elsewhere?"

New and intermediate leadership

New and intermediate leaders play a key role in organisational performance, and this has been recognised by the South Yorkshire LSIP. Recent studies found companies with strong middle management report up to 15% higher financial performance than those with weaker middle management, and 85% experience higher performance metrics[6].

Businesses often recruited leaders from within through internal development and promotion, with training- where it was offered- typically undertaken in house. Larger firms, particularly hotels and those within the leisure and tourism sub-sectors, have more developed and embedded processes including structured internal programmes and future leaders training.

"We put future leaders programme together- the level 5 managerial skills- which is led by our senior team for future leaders, and we've adapted it with a number of topics going through operational information to prepare them to be the senior team."

"One thing we're really good at here [at the hotel] is recruiting from within. A lot of people who have been here for a long time have gone up the ladder and progressed. For that, we have, we call it a personal development plan…it's just kind of like a step ladder."

There is some engagement with external providers or partners. Two firms consulted from the cultural industries referenced the use of both external training providers and collaborators within their sector for training and sharing of best practice.

For smaller employers however, often those operating within retail, early career leadership development (companywide) was less common and often leadership training was undertaken at an owner/director level as a model for wider team development.

"No, I use it. I go to training, do webinar, courses… so I do it myself, and I train myself and I have to do it [to pass on to the wider team]."

[6] C-Suite Strategy, The Dynamic Role of Middle Management in Modern Organizations, 2024

There was an openness in supporting early career leadership development, but cost and resource remains a barrier as well as awareness of how to access suitable support.

"I would be interested project management skills for some of my middle managers, I would be interested in leadership training…it's just a question of whether we can support that from a time perspective."

"Peer networks and mentoring would be potentially useful. I think when you're in an organization like this, you tend to get a bit siloed, and you've in your sort of perspective on things. Access to any sides to mentoring and an alternate perspective that would be beneficial, definitely."

Hospitality and retail focused CPD pathways for new and aspiring managers to complete in their own time would reduce strains on capacity and fill some of the leadership deficit apparent in the sector, especially where no structured training is offered.

How training providers can meet firms needs

Adaptability and personalisation of content would make training better tailored to business needs. One of the main reasons for delivering internal training is that they could mimic typically working days or scenarios, highlighting specific challenges and tasks an employee may encounter. External training providers were seen as more than capable of delivering generic training, such as fire safety. However subject specific training at present does not always match specific roles and responsibilities and operational constraints.

"Leading in a hospitality environment is really different to any other environment because you've got so many moving pieces that you need to balance. I think learning how to lead in that environment is not necessarily something you can learn from a generic [training]. I guess there will be some applicable principles, don't get me wrong… the ones that are out there at the minute aren't quite geared to what we need."

Some employers were open to working more closely with training providers to develop sector specific content, whilst others, especially more niche sectors such as some more experiential sub-sectors of the tourism industry, were content to continue to develop and deliver training internally.

"If it was industry specific, that would help, that would be more tempting to go for it."

Flexibility was also highlighted. Frequent but short modules and online skills delivery were popular to work around shifts and irregular working hours. Finding cover for shifts and roles was already a challenge, so off-site training which requires travel or long hours away from the workplace were not easy.

"Flexibility on delivery model. A bit of a hybrid so it's not all classroom based, as if we're taking people from front of house roles to sit in a classroom all day, it has to be backfilled."

Upskilling

Staff development and training needs and areas of interest were often identified during appraisals and performance reviews. Training for existing employees was offered in response to changing business needs including entry-level courses to enable employees to diversify their skill set.

"I work in sales but I'm also a receptionist. … There's always something more to do, and if you want to develop your skills or do something else, there's always someone to help you and show you the ropes."

One large employer felt employees who developed a wide variety of new skills had good job satisfaction levels. Conversely a different employer highlighted that high staff turnover was due the large number of students which made the decision to invest in skills development a difficult dilemma.

"What puts people like me off [upskilling] is obviously the transient workforce. Quite often the students, they're people who come and go. But I am definitely going to give the training to all the people who I think might stay at least for a year."

Upskilling, especially obtaining new skills that improve role performance and safety such as food allergen control in line with Natasha's Law, and sign language courses to facilitate D/deaf customers was also seen as important to improving the day-to-day running of the business in leisure and hospitality. Employers needed to keep up to date with regulations and new initiatives affecting retail and hospitality, such as schemes like Ask for Angela. They need to understand how to upskill staff in response where necessary.

On the job training remains the most popular form of training and continues to be the preferred method of training, in part due to the demands of working in a fast-paced and high-pressure environment and the significant role of managing customers. As with inductions and general training, many upskilling opportunities are informal and internal. People may shadow those in a different department or someone more senior to develop new and/or higher-level skills. This lower cost approach is preferred by many and avoids time away from the workplace. Some respondents did use online courses/modules or training platforms allowing remote, flexible learning.

"We spoke to that online provider and said, 'can you put something on there that covers [Natasha's Law]?' and they covered it. The module goes on, the staff log on, they look at it – done."

On the job training and VR/AR immersive environments

Some employers offering practical services such as installations felt that VR/AR could be a useful training tool or capitalise on the demand for experiential activities. Others expressed reservations that it would be the most appropriate employee training tool. Of the organisations who did express an interest in VR/AR, none were currently using it for staff training. The main adoption barriers were cost and time constraints. There were some concerns that VR/AR training my require people to take time out from their usual role to simulate an activity they could otherwise be experiencing in person. There was also a belief it would require an unsustainably large financial commitment. This was combined with general lack of awareness of how it could be effectively integrated into current activity. Offering financial support to help businesses embrace VR/AR along with introductory sessions would probably be needed to increase uptake.

"You've got loads of other considerations, like waste and customer needs… how much can you do?. They [kitchen staff] have to focus on the job, which is why we do it the way we do at the minute, where it's observation and then supervised physical practice."

"I could see the virtual reality stuff working. I know that there is interior design software there, so that that is another consideration as well."

Generational differences should be considered in relation to VR/AR adoption to ensure that the content is applicable to all levels of capability and familiarity. Employers thought younger employees were typically more comfortable with using and adapting to new technology and had a higher level of digital skills than some of their older counterparts.

"But usually younger people, most of them are fairly literate with it [technology] anyway, because kids have grown up with iPads and phones, etc. They largely know how to use at least front-end technology."

Employer Engagement

This final chapter looks at how South Yorkshire's lifestyle, leisure and cultural firms are inspiring the next generation and their willingness to work with those further from the labour market. It considers how they are partnering with providers and what more could be done. It concludes by showing there is an appetite for more engagement in learning and skills delivery and development.

Talent Pipeline

4.1.1 Working with those further from the labour market

The majority of employers do not actively seek out those removed from the labour market, preferring merit-based employment based on values, attitude and skills. That said, to ensure that jobs are accessible to all, employers would be keen to learn more about inclusive recruitment. Some are already connected to bodies including charities and their local Job Centre Plus that support those outside of the labour market. Others said they were actively working with those in low-income households to increase opportunities available for local people.

"I'm not closed off at all to the idea of offering someone a job. I think background can play some significance, but I think it's much more about the kind of person [you are]".

Several employers referenced working with people who are neurodiverse and/or have a disability. This is sometimes accommodated through charities such as the Victoria Cross Trust for veterans or working closely with statutory bodies to target those not in work. One employer discussed being partnered with a programme to support those with a physical and/or cognitive disability, providing both practical experience and the development of soft skills like confidence. Employers appreciated support from third parties in this area, in offering continued, holistic support to staff who may have additional needs. Larger organisations with a wider variety of available roles were often more able to facilitate employees or new recruits with diverse needs.

"We have such a diverse and wide-ranging set of roles here that we've never not been able to find a position for someone to go into to succeed".

Whilst employers are open to hiring individuals who are more removed from the labour market, they did have concerns about job readiness. Smaller businesses highlighted the need to employ people able to meet expectations and perform well immediately. A financial incentive such as a training budget or financial assistance covering additional support costs could result in employers feeling more willing and able to hire those more removed from the labour market.

"We need everybody who we employ to be really on point and working. It's not the type of business at the moment to be spending a lot of time on training somebody who is far away [from the labour market]".

The cohort least often engaged with was ex-offenders. For those working in bars or hotels, the frequent handling of money, personal possessions and personal data were highlighted as barriers to employing those who have previously been convicted of crime. For those offering in-person services, such as home installations or tutoring sessions, there were safeguarding

concerns. Greater awareness raising regarding employer responsibilities when hiring ex-offenders may be required if this is a policy objective.

"Unfortunately, due to GDPR reasons and so on, we're not sure if we're able to employ prison leavers due to the sensitive information we deal with in terms of car details, guest information, addresses, contact details".

Culture and leisure organisations frequently discussed working with retired people, stating that the opportunity to remain active and meet with people was a clear motivator for engagement amongst this cohort.

4.1.2 Inspiring the next generation

Employers highlighted the importance of engaging people in the sector whilst they are young, meaning increasing the visibility of opportunities in schools and colleges is vital to inspiring the next generation. There was general concern that the hospitality industry is undervalued. Hospitality and retail work especially is sometimes perceived overly negatively, with long hours seen as the norm. Employers would be open to working with education providers to improve the image of the sector by providing positive case studies and success stories, highlighting how it can be enjoyable and rewarding.

"Hospitality as an industry is not the most attractive industry in comparison to other industries. When people hear that you work in hospitality, they just see hard work, long hours and no personal life, which is not the case. It would be great if there was more awareness of the benefits of working in hospitality and the amazing opportunities".

"I think the thing about inspiring young people to raise their aspirations …. Most businesses are much more diverse and interesting than you might think from the outside, so we do a lot of work around that".

Employers highlighted the importance of meaningful encounters with young people and increased exposure to the opportunities within the sector. Employers discussed feeling disengaged from the aspirations of young people, uncertain how to market their sector to them. One employer felt work expectations held by younger people today differed in comparison to their own expectations when they started. They recognised they needed to develop a better understanding of what might motivate and inspire younger people to enter the sector. By working with schools to co-develop careers materials, employers felt they would be better able to connect with young people and their expectations.

"You go with a preconceived idea that you will sit in front of an engaged audience, and the reality was that none of them looked at you initially, so that then changed how I approached it. I was less interested in talking to them about me, and more in trying to understand where they were, and then, in doing that, offer them some insights into what [their] ambition is".

Some of the more creative sub-sectors such as music and art are viewed positively by young people, with employers confident that there will always be people interested in entering their workforce. However, they highlighted that the precariousness of work in the sector can be demotivating, leading to some young people being forced to pursue more stable roles.

"There's a degree of precariousness about [freelance work] and with however big we get; we can't be the whole of somebody's income".

Employers would be willing to attend careers events and talks in schools and colleges to share their experiences and 'a day in the life' stories. This would introduce new people to the

sector and increase awareness of opportunities beyond the roles that are traditionally thought of. Open days, tours and taster events were also suggested to give young people practical experience of working in the sector.

"I think I've done a few panels business panels - if Business Sheffield invite me to come and talk, I'm more than happy to do that".

4.1.3 Partnering with education and skills providers

Colleges in Sheffield, Doncaster and Rotherham were often used to support recruitment, especially on a casual basis for employers that run/support large events. Partnerships between employers and colleges have also resulted in work placements, apprenticeships and internships, giving young people the opportunity to access the sector and develop their skills. Recruiting from college and university job boards was seen as an efficient and low-cost way of filling job vacancies.

"I use the university students, and they've helped me out in the past, doing projects, doing marketing, doing events, stuff like that. The access is there but doesn't mean that we have to spend a lot of money, and then I'm always there coaching them behind the scenes".

However, some employers would like more consistency in engagement with colleges and clear points of liaison and consistent relationships over time (even when staff move on).

"I have a good relationship with the boss at [Place] College… but then what tends to happen is sometimes I have a meeting with [Name] and then it gets passed down to somebody in their team and they're just not [Name] and then things don't happen".

Partnering with skills providers was common regarding more niche provision such as horticulture which isn't typically offered by more mainstream education providers. The majority of employers engage with colleges and universities and would like to engage more frequently with schools.

Some concerns were raised regarding provision not accurately reflecting the sector's needs, resulting in recruits ill-equipped to meet the demands of a job. One hospitality employer stated that provision is overwhelmingly focused on fine-dining, meaning that the skills required to work in mid-market establishments are not covered. Another felt that hands-on, site-based experience was vital to developing the skills needed to fulfil roles in the sector.

"I think it's very hard for providers to actually look at what we do without visiting the resorts, without visiting the sites, without understanding the operation, to know exactly how to train people".

However, it was acknowledged that changing the curriculum to better meet their needs would be a challenge as colleges are required to meet exam board content requirements. That said, employers were enthusiastic about the prospect of working with education and skills providers, feeling that their contributions would influence and improve the skills landscape.

"From a personal point of view, I'd happily get involved with people and give my view on what is needed".

4.1.4 Sectoral and supply chain collaborations

As larger organisations were often part of a chain, skills gaps and training needs could often be filled by drawing on different parts of the business, head office or different departments

(i.e., clothing, food and customer service). Here collaboration between departments and cross-departmental training was common.

"On a hotel level, we don't have to go out of our way to contact somebody, because we're part of a very big chain who do this, and we have the people behind the scenes to do all of this for us".

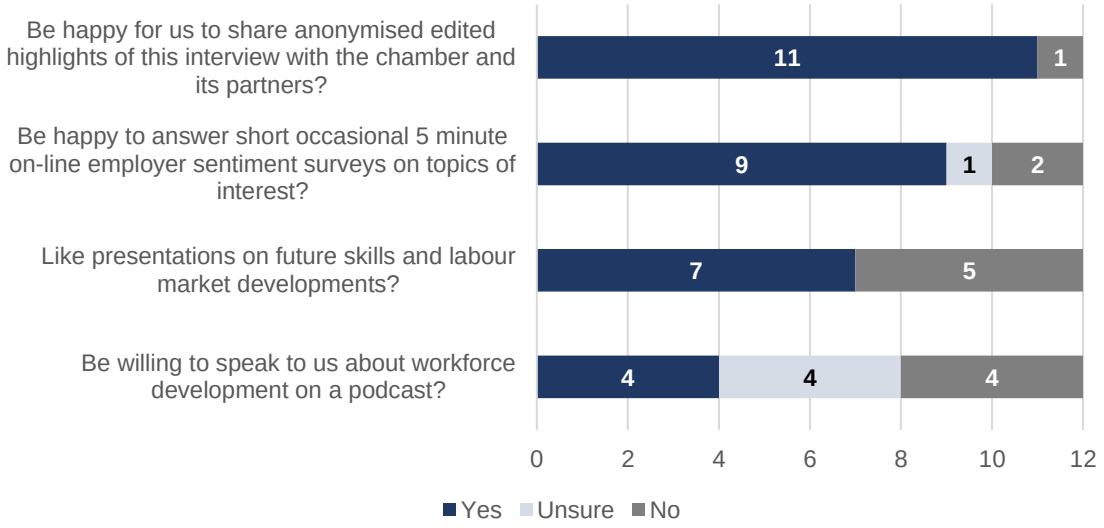
For smaller organisations, external collaboration with others in the sector was more common. One employer discussed using a local business as a 'sounding board' and example of good practice. Collaborations were informal and drew upon employee networks and business forums and events. Networking forums were especially common in the cultural sector with businesses often collaborating with one another to provide training opportunities.

"There's a producer that has got some money from the Arts Council to do some skills training with would be theater technicians…and he said, 'Can I bring them over to yours?' … we do things like that, but there's scope for much, much more".

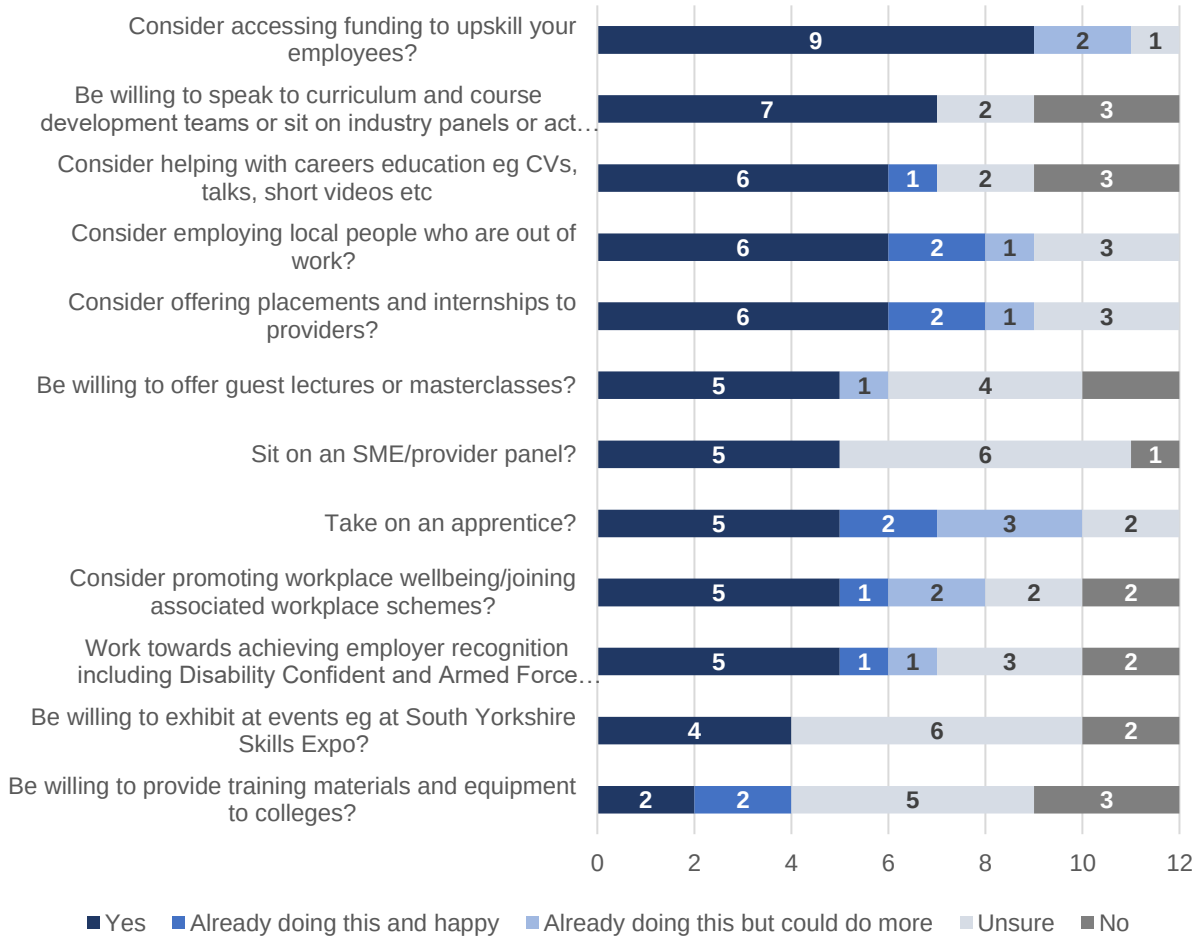
"They do have a forum where we can ask questions anonymously, and it'll be sent out to everybody to do a response. We have monthly meetings, which are on Teams, and then twice a year they'll have an in-person meeting".

Ongoing engagement

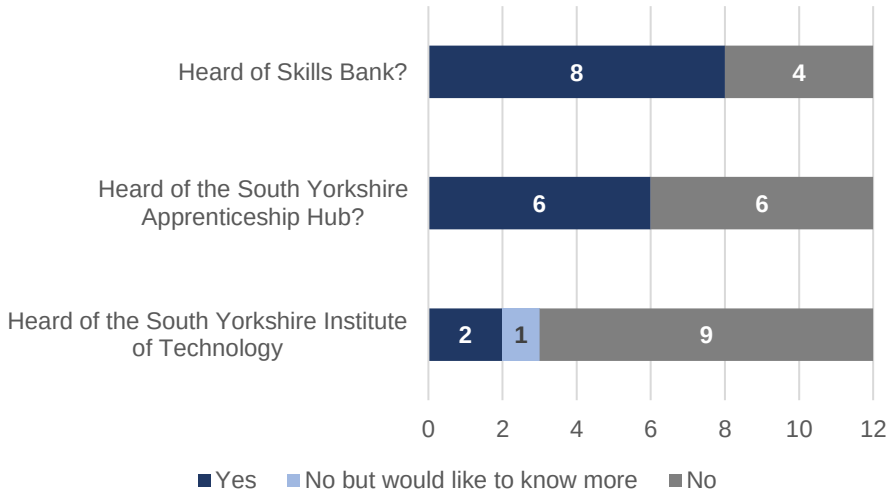
Employers were asked to fill in some supplementary questions to gauge their interest in further engagement in training and skills. Those that answered were open to presentations on future skills and labour market developments and to answer occasional sentiment surveys and almost all would share interview highlights. Not everyone feels comfortable about participating in podcasts.



Employers are open to considering accessing funding for skills, speaking to curriculum and course development leads, employing local people, offering placements/internships and masterclasses and helping with careers education such as with CVs, talks and short videos. Of the ten firms already utilising apprenticeships three would consider taking more on. There is an appetite to sit on an SME/provider panel and exhibit at events so.



The survey tested employer awareness of strategic skills' programmes and investments. There is reasonable knowledge of the South Yorkshire Apprenticeship Hub and Skills Bank however only two employers were aware of the South Yorkshire Institute of Technology.



Appendix one: consultees

- Amandas Blinds
- ArtSpace
- AS Music School
- Barnsley FC
- Birley Moor
- Blend Kitchen
- BPL
- Brook Leisure
- Cast
- Castle Park
- Club Doncaster
- Darts
- DCLT
- Elior
- Feast
- Flinn and Steel
- Gulliver's Fun
- Hilton Garden Inn Doncaster Racecourse
- IBIS Sheffield
- Kewgreen Hotels
- Lakeside Village
- Marmadukes
- Mount Pleasant Hotel
- Owston Hall
- Pale Blue Eyes
- Private Diners Club
- Rotherham Golf Club
- Sheffield Theatres
- Søstrene Grene
- Truffle Lodge
- Urban Burger
- Wentworth Woodhouse
- Yorkshire Sculpture Park
- Yorkshire Wildlife Park

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