

WALK THE BRIDGE TO UNDERSTAND THE DIVIDE

BY MICHELLE HOWIE

Technology is a landscape of jargon, trends and inter-generational mystery. It is also layered with inequality and inertia in the modern workplace. In order to bridge these divides, we have to understand the territory we're walking through.

"Invest in tech!"

"Boost your digital literacy!"

"Get ahead of the cloud-based crowd!"

"Grab young digital talent in a hot labour market!"

If you're reading this as a practitioner in the learning and development world in late 2022, some of these jargonistic statements are probably familiar. On the surface, they sound reasonable and logical.

Undeniably, technology has made its presence known in workplaces all over the world. In simple terms, we need a workforce that can optimise the use of technology in all sectors. The problem we face is that few New Zealand workplaces are lucky enough to scan the canteen and see such a ready workforce in their midst. Most workplaces are crying out for help in digitising their business – and gaps in their own peoples' skills are one of the biggest barriers they are facing.

Research indicates that one million New Zealand workers will require digital skills training for their jobs in the next year, representing 35% of the workforce. Cloud and cybersecurity skills are projected to be the top two most demanded digital skills by employers by 2025. The problem is: less than one third of organisations have a training plan in place.

According to Greg Davidson (Group Chief Executive Officer of Datacom), "The rapid evolution of technology combined with the mission-critical role it plays in the success of our country's economic future will continue to create high demand and short supply for skills."

That sounds like a dream for L&D doesn't it? Clearly documented demand and an identified gap in skills, with a big dose of heat in the system driving urgent calls for solutions. So what are the divides I'm talking about and why has there been a relatively sluggish response in workplaces?

THREE FEATURES OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Interestingly, despite being home to several world-leading tech companies, New Zealand is not performing well on the global stage for closing the digital divide.

The digital divide is defined as "the unequal access to digital technology, including smartphones, tablets, laptops, and the internet. The digital divide creates a division and inequality around access to information and resources".

The characteristics of the divide can range from geographic to socio-economic factors. Here are three illustrations of the divide in New Zealand.

01. Ask anyone who lives rurally how their broadband or fibre internet connection works and you'll receive a range of colourful responses. "Fibre?! You must

be dreaming!" or even "I gave up waiting and got a Starlink". This lack of access to technology affects our workforce. People might benefit from access to internet connectivity at their physical place of work. However, they are adversely disadvantaged by living in a rural area with connectivity, which makes the uptake of work-from-home opportunities and personal development activities impossible.

02. Between 2020 and 2021, New Zealand slipped down the charts from 24th to 36th in the world for the number of households with internet access. The truth is that other countries are working faster on connecting the last 10% to 15% of households with internet access issues. New Zealand's mobile tariffs also increased in the same period, driving us down in the affordability rankings from 18th to 32nd in the world. Linked to the cost of living crisis, lack of affordability affects overall connectivity.

03. With an ageing workforce and a 'digital native' young demographic following them into the workplace, there are divides to navigate on both cultural and generational levels. Many older workers feel under-trained and overwhelmed by the introduction of Industry 4.0 practices – and some employers are doing little to address this.

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

For a long time, New Zealand employers have languished in the L&D space, failing to fully seize the benefits of a well-designed training framework. The move to digitisation and the need for digital skills is nothing more than a new trend within a much broader, existing issue.

A report by the New Zealand Labour and Immigration Research Centre (within MBiE) identified that, "training was ultimately motivated by a desire to improve business performance, but individual training activities were also

MICHELLE HOWIE

driven by other reasons with more immediate and visible impacts. These included strong direction for the business, the need for technical skills, meeting legal requirements and the need for good systems and processes.”

So, we can see the higher purpose of training, but we will often default to a lesser driver such as compliance or ‘hot’ trends. In analysis, employers are often surprised to find that a majority of their budget goes to external training (and related costs) that generate low return on investment.

If employers really want to tackle digital skills, they will need the collaborative support of the L&D sector to help them map the gaps and select the right solutions, instead of rolling out more status quo training.

WAYS FORWARD TO BUILD THE BRIDGE

In closing, I offer my thoughts on where New Zealand employers might like to focus their efforts. Whilst many initiatives are ‘out there’, I feel the real opportunities are in-house. In a tightly-jammed labour market, the smart move is for employers to quickly create and promote learning pathways within their business to retain and upskill their own people.

The initiative I love the most has been dubbed the Waikato Wisdom Project, here in my region of New Zealand. In essence, the Waikato Wisdom Project is a mentoring framework that links older workers to newly-joined young employees. In New Zealand, we also call this *tuakana-teina* which loosely



translates to the learning relationship between someone older and someone younger.

The objective of the Waikato Wisdom Project is to foster informal, subtle knowledge transfer and mutual swapping of competencies between staff at the two ends of the working life spectrum. Whilst its pilot project in the manufacturing sector did not have a digital skills focus, it would be very simple for other industries to add this flavour, unlocking the potential of young people to pass on their digital literacy knowledge.

Wherever we work in the L&D sector, keeping a close handle on the technology landscape, its true training drivers—and its divides—is a well-advised use of time. This topic is here to stay.



MICHELLE HOWIE

Michelle Howie works with leaders, individuals, and organisations in New Zealand. As a facilitator and coach, Michelle creates spaces where people can hear their own voice and speak honestly. She is a writer, inflicting her words on innocent readers as she tries to make sense of the world. Behind all of Michelle’s work is a rock-solid knowledge that we are equipped to handle life – and that from this place of knowing, life can be lived with more ease, more laughter, more creativity and lots of practical action! For more information, visit: michellehowie.com or contact michelle@michellehowie.com.

FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Aotearoa’s Digital Priorities in 2022 (Tech Users Association (TUANZ), 2022) https://www.flipsnack.com/8657CC5569B/tuanz_digital-priorities-2022/full-view.html

Defining and Measuring Training Activity in New Zealand Workplaces (Labour and Immigration Research Centre, 2021) <https://thehub.swa.govt.nz/resources/defining-and-measuring-training-activity-in-new-zealand-workplaces/>

Digital Divide (Wikipedia) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_divide

Research Indicates NZ Workers Will Require Digital Skills Training For Their Jobs In The Next Year (Amazon Web Services, 2022) <https://www.hinz.org.nz/news/599731/research-indicates-nz-workers-will-require-digital-skills-training-for-their-jobs-in-the-next-year.htm>

Waikato Regional Workforce Plan 2022 (Waikato Regional Skills Leadership Groups, 2022) <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/assets/waikato-regional-workforce-plan.pdf>



BRING THE WORLD TO YOUR LEARNERS

BY TARAS LUBCZYK

With Virtual Reality, VR360 and Augmented Reality: Powerful In A Different Way To What You Might First Think