

ADVERTISING AND MARKETING



**Creative Industries
Policy and Evidence Centre**

Led by
 Newcastle University Business School

with
 RSA

Creative Industries Skills Audits

Creative Industries Skills Audits

ADVERTISING AND MARKETING

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About Work Advance

Work Advance undertakes research, analysis and evaluation to advance understanding of developments in the world of work. We drive practical improvements in policies, programmes and practices that support inclusive and sustainable growth; productive businesses and better management practices; a skilled, agile and healthy workforce; and stronger, more vibrant and cohesive local communities.

Through our networks, we provide research, policy and consultancy services to a range of partners, including businesses large and small, trade unions, professional bodies, policymakers and wider practitioners.

Work Advance adopts an approach that is client-centred. We aim to secure practical solutions through blended research and consultancy services, as well as strong stakeholder engagement and partnership, which brings value through evidence-based and expert insights into what works. We design and support the delivery of tailored programmes and initiatives to test and trial new innovations, including help with monitoring and evaluation to track results and impact.

For further information please visit: www.workadvance.co.uk

About the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre

The Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (Creative PEC) works to support the growth of the creative industries in the UK through the production of independent and authoritative evidence and policy advice.

Led by Newcastle University, with the Royal Society of Arts, and funded by the UKRI via the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Creative PEC comprises a core consortium of Newcastle University, Work Advance, the University of Sussex and the University of Sheffield.

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Executive summary

1 Skills shortages when recruiting: The picture today

The advertising and marketing industry is a significant economic driver. The sector has expanded strongly over the past decade, at a pace five times faster than the wider UK economy. While recent years have been marked by challenging trading conditions and industry restructuring, the sector is expected to expand strongly in future and is identified by the UK government as a 'frontier' industry.

Yet, new evidence from the Creative Employer Skills Survey 2025 suggests skills shortages are a significant challenge for the sector: one third of employers that had hired staff in the past two years report recruitment difficulties, caused mostly by candidates lacking the required skills or experience.

Skills shortages are most acute among experienced staff (five to ten years experience). Employers struggle to recruit a range of roles, including graphic and multimedia designers, advertising and marketing directors, public relations officers, and advertising and marketing executives as well as data and digital, client service and finance roles.

The breadth of skills required to operate in the sector appears a particular challenge. Employers suggest candidates lack key creative, design, data and digital skills. Skills to manage clients and industry knowledge is also an issue. Applicants for jobs also lack important transversal skills, such as team working, planning and organising, communication and creativity.

2 Current skills gaps in the existing workforce

Alongside the challenge of skills shortages when recruiting, advertising and marketing employers also point to skills deficiencies among their workforce. In 2025, skills gaps affected nearly one in four employers in the industry.

Sometimes these are a knock-on impact of hiring difficulties, and often they are transitory in nature (e.g. where staff are new to role). However, other more transformative factors are at play, with new technologies and platforms driving a shift in the skills needed in the workplace.

Industry employers and stakeholders suggest skills gaps affect experienced staff. The rapid pace of advancement in the advertising and marketing industry is seen as a key issue, with staff moving into more senior roles without the training necessary to develop important skills, particularly people management and leadership skills.

Workers are also reported to need stronger creative, design and digital skills; commercial skills, like client negotiation and management; project management skills, general business skills (e.g. accounting) and market insight – including for the advertising and media industries, key client markets and emerging green technology and sustainability sectors.

3 Jobs and skills priorities over the next three to five years

Employers in the advertising and marketing industry are ambitious for the future: around half of those surveyed expect to grow staff numbers in the next three to five years.

A range of roles are expected to be in growing demand in future: business development managers, public relations officers, marketing professionals, design roles and social media managers. But stakeholders raise concerns that fewer entry-level opportunities resulting from AI adoption risks choking off the talent pipeline and, in time, exacerbating skills shortages in mid-level positions.

The majority of employers expect a need to upgrade workforce skills in the years ahead, often because of new technology. This includes skills like creative and design, digital marketing, campaign strategy, and project, client and people management. Digital skills, including graphic design, multimedia production and data science, are also seen as key.

AI is expected to continue to drive transformation, creating a need for staff to work effectively alongside GenAI to deliver value for clients, and to develop new skills like GenAI engine optimisation (GEO). It is expected that greater weight will be given to 'human' skills like creative ideation, critical thinking and people skills.

Sustainability skills are also seen as growing in importance in order to achieve organisational goals, exploit commercial opportunities and meet the needs of clients.

4 Taking action to address skills challenges for the industry

More than 40% of advertising and marketing employers facing skills challenges suggest this is hindering their long-term growth or investment plans. Wider impacts include reduced delivery capacity, delays to innovation, increased workload of other staff and increased operating costs.

The vast majority are taking action in response, commonly by increasing workforce training. But while reported rates of training compare favourably with wider surveys, a minority provide off-the-job training.

Businesses report a range of practical and financial constraints to training. Challenging trading conditions and industry restructuring appear to be affecting take-up of training. Time for training is also an acute issue for the sector, particularly for mid-level talent.

Employers call for more financial support and more flexible forms of training. Greater flexibilities in the use of levy funds to support short courses is widely welcomed. But stakeholders point to the need for wider reforms to enable the industry to fully benefit from their levy contributions and stronger mechanisms for employers to directly shape provision relevant to the sector. Additional support for employers to adopt a more strategic approach to talent management is also seen as key to unlocking greater investment in skills in the years ahead.

1. Introduction to the Creative Industries Skills Audits

Throughout 2025, Creative PEC and Work Advance embarked on a series of UK-wide Skills Audits for the creative industries and its sub-sectors. A commitment in the Creative Industries Sector Plan and funded jointly by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and Creative Industries Council (CIC), the Skills Audits have sought to provide an evidence base to enable the creative industries to speak with a united voice on current and future skills needs, pressing skills shortages and gaps, and wider workforce issues.

The Skills Audits have been delivered in two phases:

Phase 1: Assessed the skills priorities across the creative industries as a whole;

Phase 2: Examined in greater depth the skills priorities of different creative sub-sectors.

This report is part of the suite of sub-sector skills audits produced during Phase 2, presenting the skills needs, challenges and priorities of the advertising and marketing industry. The research utilises the DCMS definition of the creative industries, which includes the following Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes for the sub sector:

70.21 Public relations and communication activities

73.11 Advertising agencies

73.12 Media representation

The analysis for the Audits is underpinned by an established labour market framework, covering issues of labour demand, occupational structure, current and future skills needs, and drivers of change (Foresight and Government Office for Science, 2016; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2019). The framework provides a structured way of thinking about the different dimensions of the labour market: skills supply and demand and the way in which they interact with one another.

The research team deployed a rigorous, five-stage approach to developing the Audits, including:

- **A rapid evidence review**, examining evidence on skills issues across the creative industries in different UK nations and sub-sectors, produced by government, industry stakeholders and the research community;
- **Secondary data analysis** of official government sources of labour market information (or 'top-down' LMI) to provide a robust, consistent and comparable baseline;

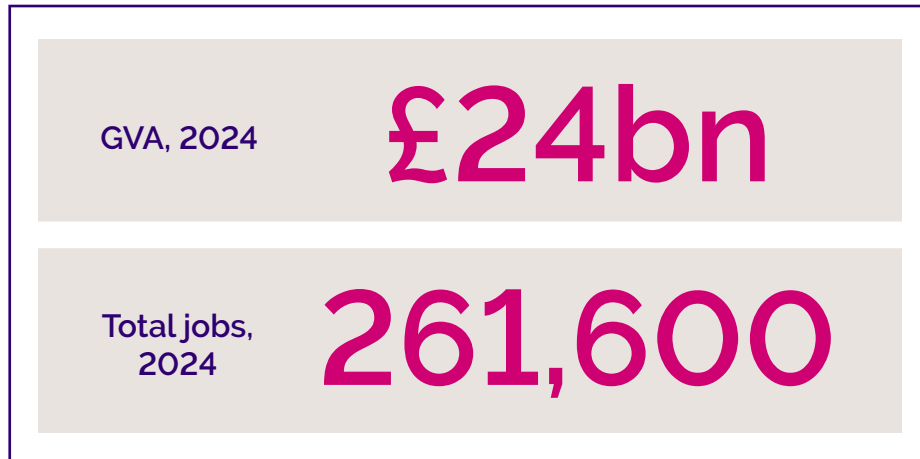
- **New primary research** – the Creative Employer Skills Survey (CESS) – including over 1,300 telephone interviews with employers across the creative industries to explore their perspectives on skills priorities, the talent pipeline, barriers and enablers to skills investment;
- **A series of roundtables** bringing together government, national and subnational creative agencies, trade bodies, unions, creative businesses and major cultural organisations and education providers to promote shared consensus on skills priorities; and
- **Reporting and dissemination**, including the production of the Creative Industries Skills Audit and a suite of 11 sub-sector Audits.

The Skills Audits have been overseen by a Project Board, comprised of the project funders, Skills England and members of the research consortium, and informed by a Steering Group which included representatives of government in each UK nation and every creative industries sub-sector.

Figure 1: Developing the Creative Industries Skills Audits



2. Sector profile and performance



The advertising and marketing industry – as defined by DCMS – encompasses advertising agencies, marketing firms, digital and media agencies and related services such as branding, market research and public relations. The sector is characterised by a mix of large global agencies and many small and medium-sized enterprises and micro-enterprises.

The sector is a significant economic driver: the UK advertising spend is projected to reach over £40bn by 2025 (Advertising Association, 2024b), and the UK is the world's second-largest exporter of advertising services (Advertising Association, 2024a).

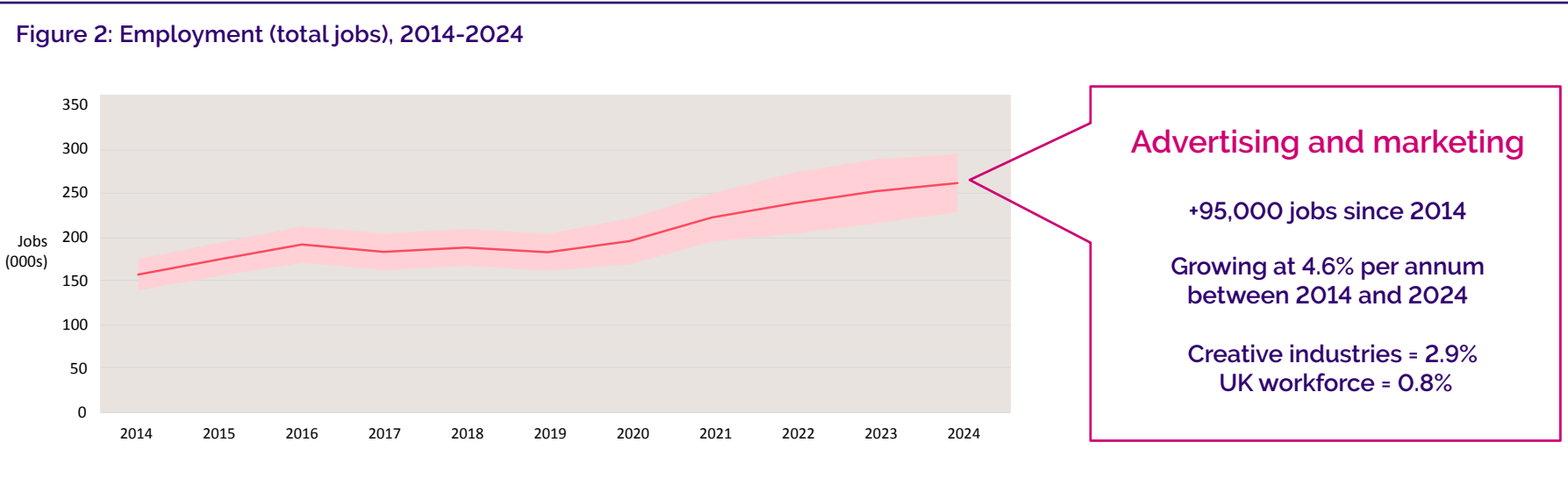
In 2024, the advertising and marketing industry directly contributed £24bn in gross value added (GVA) – equivalent to 17% of the economic output of the creative industries and around 1% of the UK economy (DCMS, 2025b). Further, the industry's total economic impact – including the supply chain, industries funded by advertising revenues and the sales uplift companies report from advertising spend – was estimated at £108.6bn in 2025 (Advertising Association, 2025a).

The sector has expanded rapidly over the past decade, driven by the digital revolution in media and commerce, the proliferation of online advertising channels and the UK's status as an international hub for advertising services.

In 2024, advertising and marketing supported 261,600 jobs –95,000 more jobs than ten years ago. With employment in the sub-sector expanding by 4.6% per annum on average between 2014 and 2024, jobs growth has been around five times that of the UK workforce (0.8%) and has also outpaced the wider creative industries average (2.9%).

The past two years have, however, been marked by more challenging trading conditions as a result of geopolitical uncertainty, taxation changes, inflationary pressures, subdued consumer confidence and weak domestic growth (Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA), 2025b). Substantial structural shift in the industry is also afoot as it responds to the economic climate and the advent of AI, with restructuring and consolidation resulting in major holding companies announcing substantial jobs cuts (Singh, 2025).

Despite this, the advertising and marketing Industry is expected to expand in the years ahead (IPA, 2025b) and the Creative Industries Sector Plan recognised the sector as one of four 'frontier industries' with highest growth potential (UK Government, 2025).



Source: DCMS (2025b, 2025c)

Notes: GVA is at current prices. GVA data for 2024 is provisional. Employment is total filled jobs, including second jobs and including both employees and self-employed workers in all occupations. The shaded confidence band represents the plausible range around the central estimate (95% confidence interval). It reflects the uncertainty in the data: when the band widens, the estimate is less precise; when it narrows, the estimate is more reliable. Growth rates are compound annual growth rate (CAGR).

3. Jobs and skills

Work in advertising and marketing is typically project-based, deadline-driven and client-focused. Like other parts of the creative industries, freelance work is common, with more than one in five (22%) of the sub-sector's workforce being self-employed, compared to 14% across the economy (DCMS, 2025a).

Those working in the advertising and marketing industry are also highly skilled. Nearly three quarters (73%) of the workforce hold a degree or equivalent qualification – a higher share than across the economy (43%) and also slightly higher than the creative industries average (69%) (DCMS, 2025c).

High skills also translate to high pay, with average hourly earnings around 25% higher among those working in advertising and marketing than the average across the UK economy (£19.21 and £15.18, respectively) (DCMS, 2024). Despite this, past research has raised concerns that wage growth has failed to keep pace with comparable industries, presenting challenges for both talent attraction and staff retention (Advertising Association, 2023).

Advertising and marketing encompasses a wide range of occupations, from highly creative roles to data-intensive technical roles, including:

- **Creative and content roles** (e.g. copywriters, art directors, graphic designers);
- **Client service and strategy roles** (e.g. account executives/managers, brand strategists);
- **Media and campaign planning roles** (e.g. media planners/buyers, pay-per-click/search engine optimisation [SEO] specialists, social media managers);

- **Data and analytics roles** (e.g. marketing analysts, data scientists, programmatic advertising specialists, customer relationship management/marketing technology experts); and
- **Project and production roles** (project managers, producers, marketing project coordinators).

Senior leadership roles (e.g. agency directors, chief marketing officers) shape strategy and coordinate these functions (IPA, n.d.).

Across all roles, workers require a blend of creative, technical and interpersonal skills. Creativity remains core for generating original ideas for campaigns, storytelling and designing compelling visuals or messages – as do strong communication skills, which are required to understand audience psychology and craft messages that resonate. Digital skills have become vitally important, including skills in digital marketing, market research, AI and machine learning, data science, cloud computing, content creation, animation and virtual reality/augmented reality development (Advertising Association, 2022). Transversal skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, stakeholder and project management, and teamwork, are also viewed as essential, as are strong management capabilities.

Despite the breadth of roles, it is clear that opportunities in the advertising and marketing industry are not equitably distributed. Jobs are heavily concentrated in London, which is home to many of the largest agencies and brand headquarters, as well as other urban centres across the UK (DCMS, 2025c; Spanier, 2020). Further, lack of workforce diversity continues to be a key challenge for the sector, with disabled people and those from working-class backgrounds significantly underrepresented in the workforce and women and people of colour less likely to hold senior positions and more likely to have lower wages than other groups (Advertising Association, IPA and ISBA, 2025; IPA, 2025a).

Figure 3: Employment status of the workforce, 2022-2024

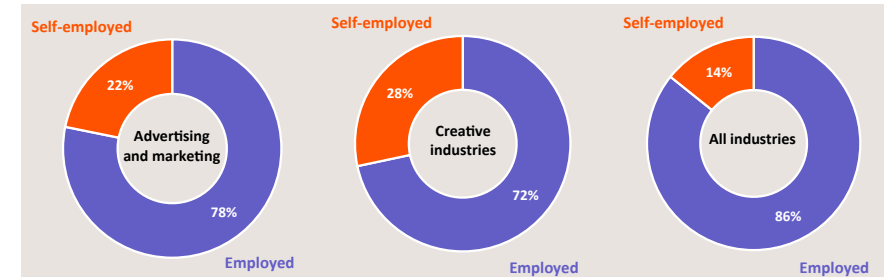


Figure 4: Workforce qualifications (% degree-qualified), 2022-2024

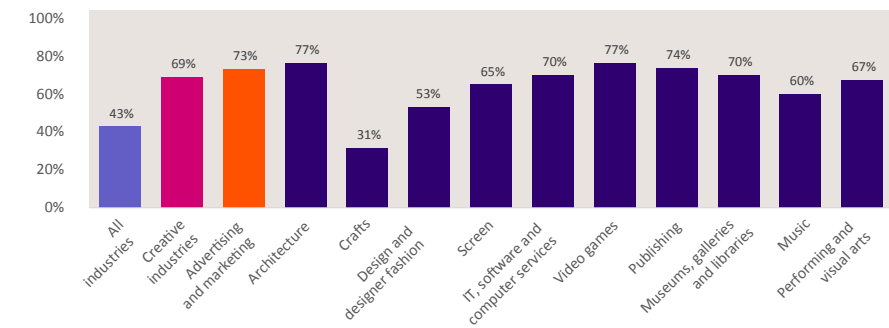
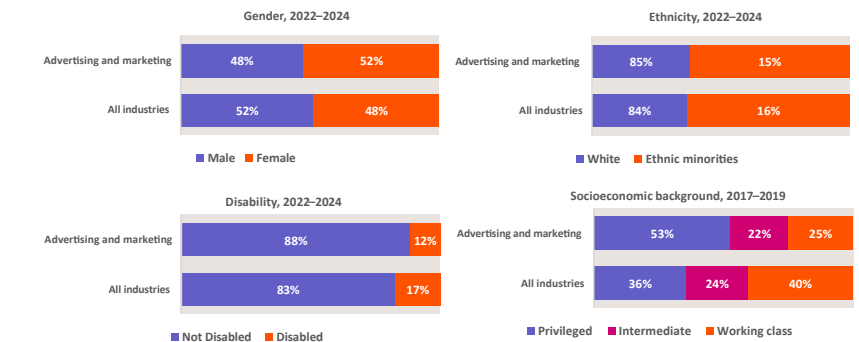


Figure 5: Workforce diversity



Source: Carey, Giles and O'Brien (2023); DCMS (2025a)

Notes: Data is based on a three-year pooled sample from the Office for National Statistics Annual Population Survey. Data for socioeconomic background is from the PEC Good Work Review – see Carey, Giles and O'Brien (2023) for further information on the definitions used.

4. Recruitment difficulties

Despite the challenging trading environment of the past few years, the CESS suggests that recruitment activity in the advertising and marketing industry has remained buoyant. Seven in ten (70%) of employers in the sector had recruited permanent staff, self-employed or freelance workers in the past two years, exceeding the trend seen across the creative industries (65%).

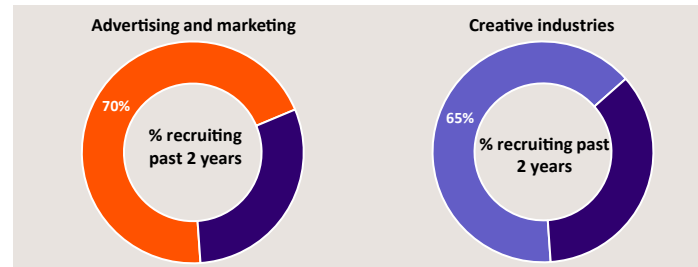
Employers used a range of recruitment methods, being more likely to advertise on their company website or to turn to recruitment consultants when hiring. Yet they were less likely to use online job platforms. However, the most common approach to finding candidates was via word of mouth, cited by nearly half (47%) of employers in advertising and marketing that had recruited.

Around three in ten (31%) of employers in the sub-sector reported vacancies were hard to fill, broadly in line with the creative industries average (32%).

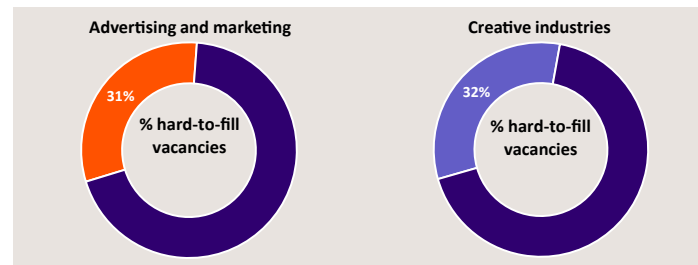
Recruitment difficulties were attributed to a range of issues. Candidates lacking the required skills was particularly problematic for employers in the advertising and marketing sub-sector (cited by 84% of employers with hard-to-fill vacancies, compared to 72% across the creative industries). A lack of candidates with the required work experience (64% vs 50%) and the desired attitude, motivation or personality (44% vs 20%) posed additional challenges for recruiters in the sub-sector.

Figure 6: Hiring and recruitment difficulties, 2025

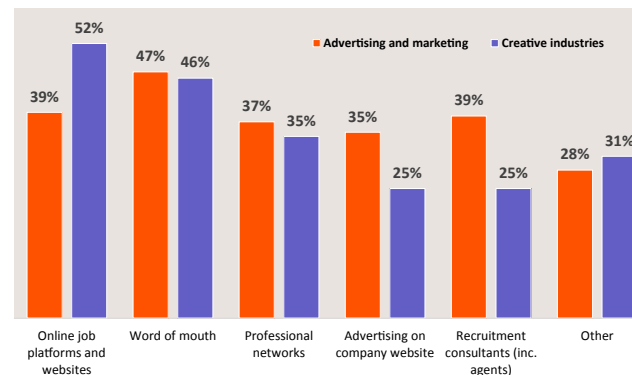
Q: Has this site recruited anyone, including any paid employees, agency staff, and self-employed or freelance workers, in the past two years?
Base = all establishments (n = 120)



Q: Did any of the vacancies you had at this site in the past two years prove hard to fill?
Base = establishments that have recruited in the past two years. (n=95)



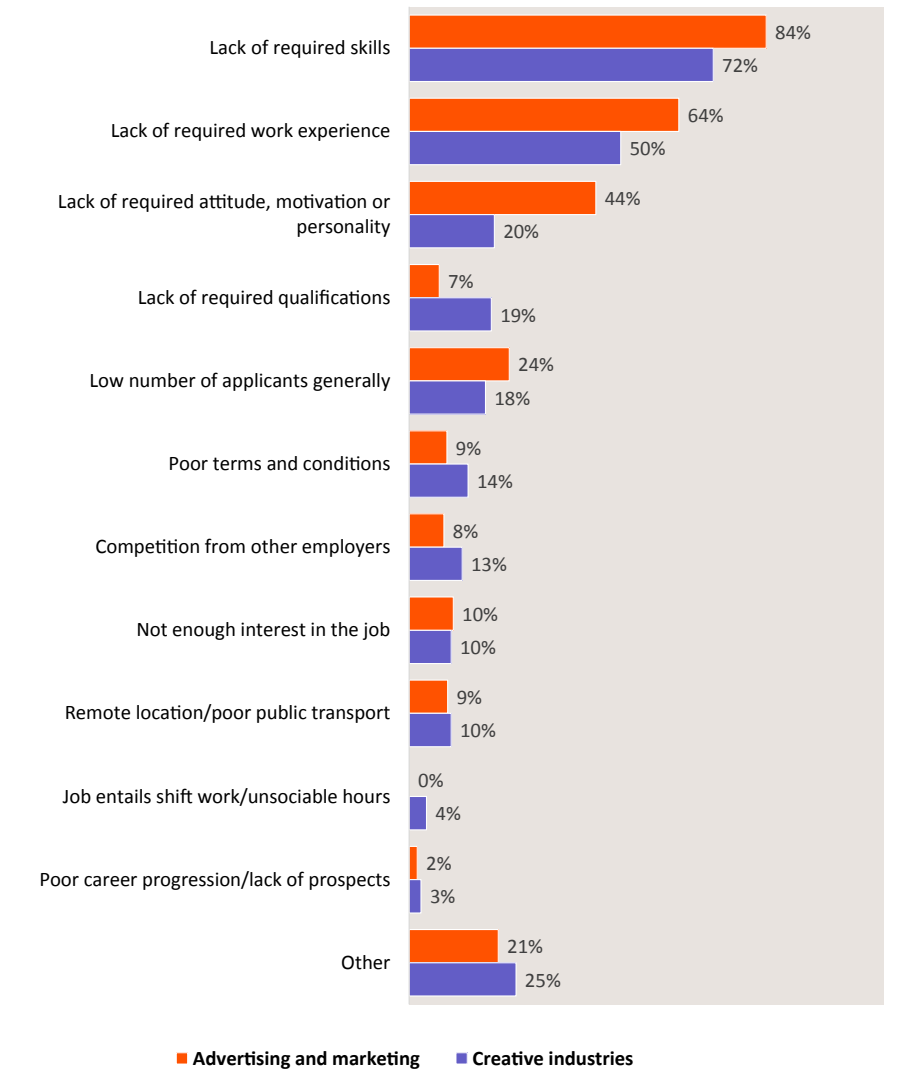
Q: What recruitment methods do you use to fill vacancies at this site?
Base = establishments that have recruited in the past two years. (n=95)



Source: CESS 2025

Figure 7: Main causes of recruitment difficulties, 2025

Q: What were the main causes of your vacancies for [occupation] being hard to fill?
Base = establishments with hard-to-fill vacancies (n = 31)



Source: CESS, 2025

5. Skills shortages

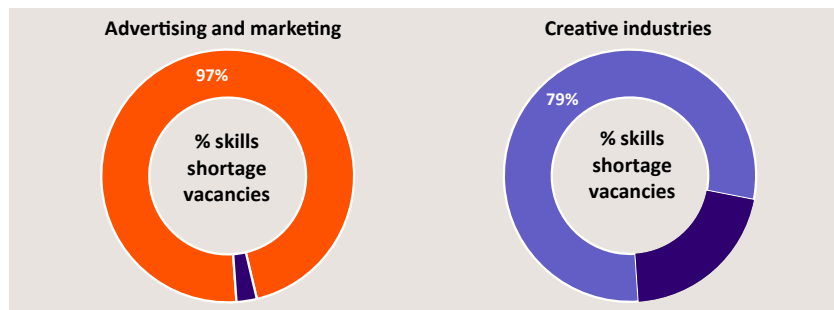
Indeed, when taken together, nearly all (97%) employers in the advertising and marketing industry that experienced recruitment difficulties pointed to candidates the lacking skills, qualifications or experience necessary for the role – a higher share than across the creative industries (79%).

The CESS also seeks to examine the occupations in which skills shortages are most acute. We find nearly three quarters (74%) of advertising and marketing employers facing skills shortages reported these are associated with vacancies for experienced workers (five to ten years into their careers) – among the highest share of any creative sub-sector. This resonated strongly with participants at the subsector roundtable, who pointed to growing evidence that recruitment of more junior roles had reduced in recent years, potentially reflecting the impact of AI (discussed further in Section 7).

Employers reported vacancies in a wide range of occupations were proving hard to fill. Graphic and multimedia designers topped the list – cited by

Figure 8: Hard-to-fill vacancies caused by skills shortages, 2025

Q: What were the main causes of your vacancies for [occupation] being hard to fill? = Lack of applicants with required skills, qualifications or experience
Base = establishments with hard-to-fill vacancies [n = 31]



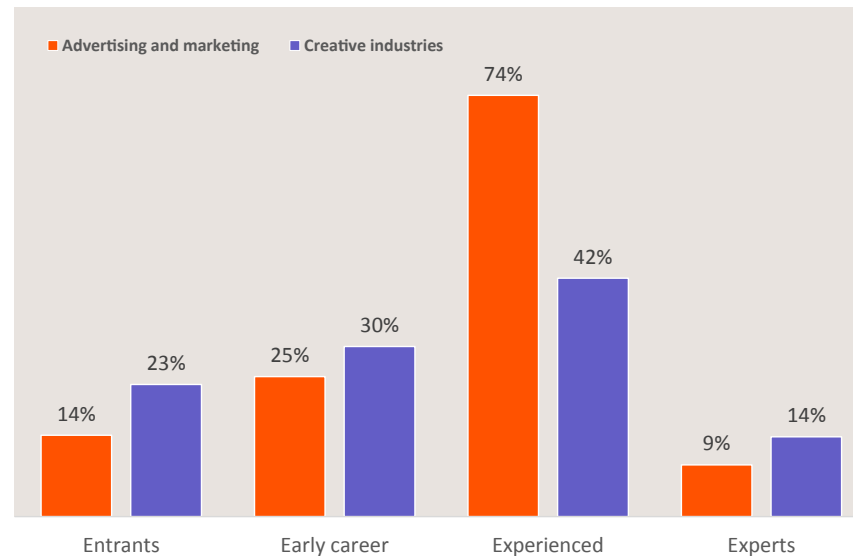
Source: CESS, 2025

around one third (32%) of employers facing recruitment difficulties. This was closely followed by advertising and marketing directors (28%), public relations officers (12%) and advertising and marketing executives (8%).

Echoing wider research (Advertising Association, 2023), data from CESS also suggests data and digital roles are difficult to recruit for, including building information modelling (BIM) and computer-aided design (CAD) technicians (3%), data analysts (2%) and web designers (2%). This is alongside client service roles and finance roles such as accounting clerks and bookkeepers (2%).

Figure 9: Seniority of roles with skills shortages, 2025

Q: How would you describe the level of experience or seniority of the candidates sought for [skills shortage occupation] vacancies?
Base = establishments with skills shortage vacancies [n = 29]

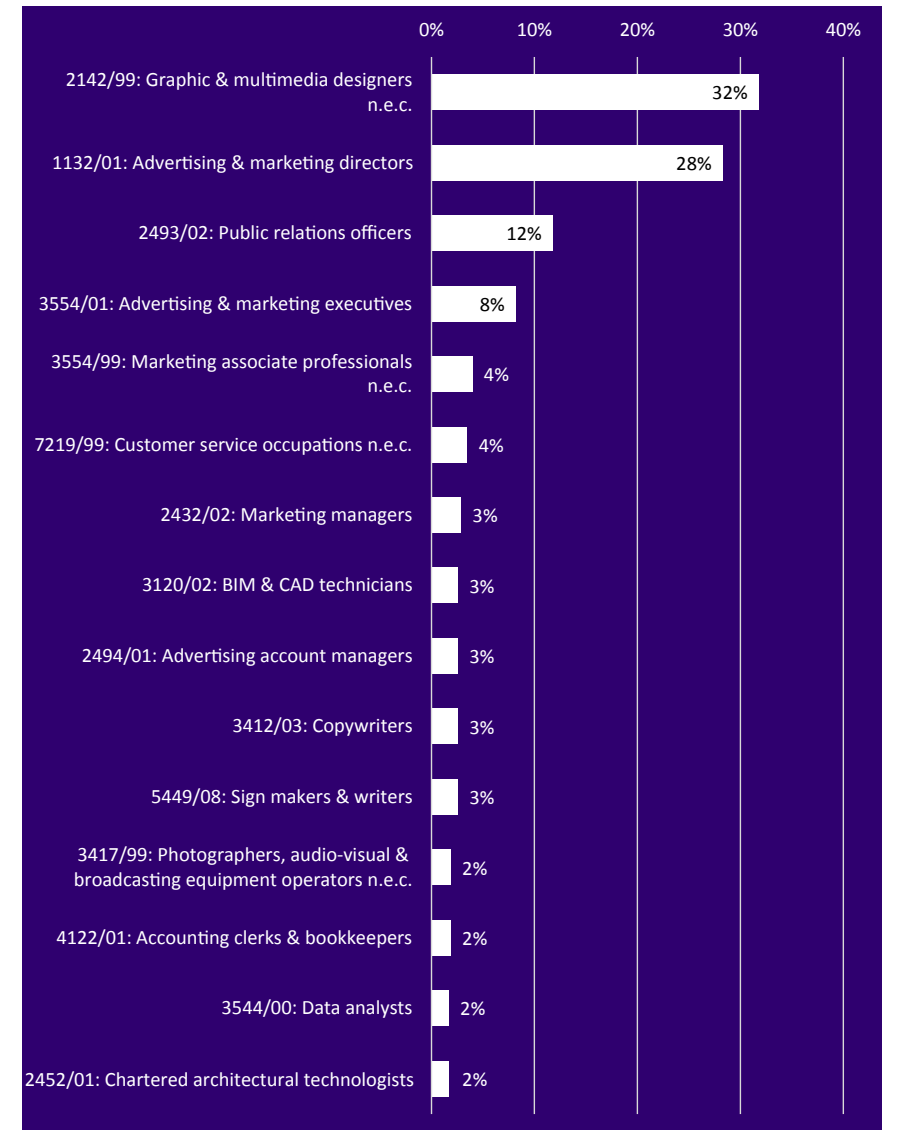


Source: CESS 2025

Notes: Estimates are based on a small sample size. This may result in less precise estimates, which should be used with caution.

Figure 10: Hard-to-fill occupations (six-digit Standard Occupational Classification [SOC]), 2025

Q: For which specific occupations did vacancies at this site prove hard to fill?
Top fifteen occupations cited; base = establishments with hard-to-fill vacancies [n = 25]



Source: CESS 2025

5. Skills shortages (continued)

CESS 2025 sought to explore the specialist or technical skills that employers find lacking among applicants.

In the advertising and marketing industry, skills shortages were very diverse, ranging from shortages in key creative skills like graphic design and copywriting to shortages in client management, media relations, data analysis and digital skills such as web development, digital marketing and social media.

Indeed, employers responding to the survey and those attending the sub-sector roundtable also highlighted the importance of candidates having knowledge of the industry and knowledge of different client markets, meaning that the skills required to operate effectively in roles in the advertising and marketing industry are very broad indeed.

Digital skills were also a critical concern, with 42% of advertising and marketing employers experiencing skills shortages, suggesting they struggle to find applicants with the IT skills they need.

Unsurprisingly given the occupational profile of hard-to-fill vacancies, employers most commonly reported graphic design and design engineering as lacking among candidates, and much more so in advertising and marketing than across the creative industries (21% vs 6%). Microsoft Office (16% vs 9%), animation (9% vs 2%) and multimedia production skills (9% vs 2%) were also more commonly reported skills shortages in the sub-sector.

Figure 11: Specialist skills shortages, 2025

Q: Have you found any specialist skills or knowledge needed to perform the role difficult to obtain from applicants for [skills shortage occupation] vacancies? If so, what specific specialist skills or knowledge have been lacking?

Base = establishments with skills shortage vacancies (n = 29)



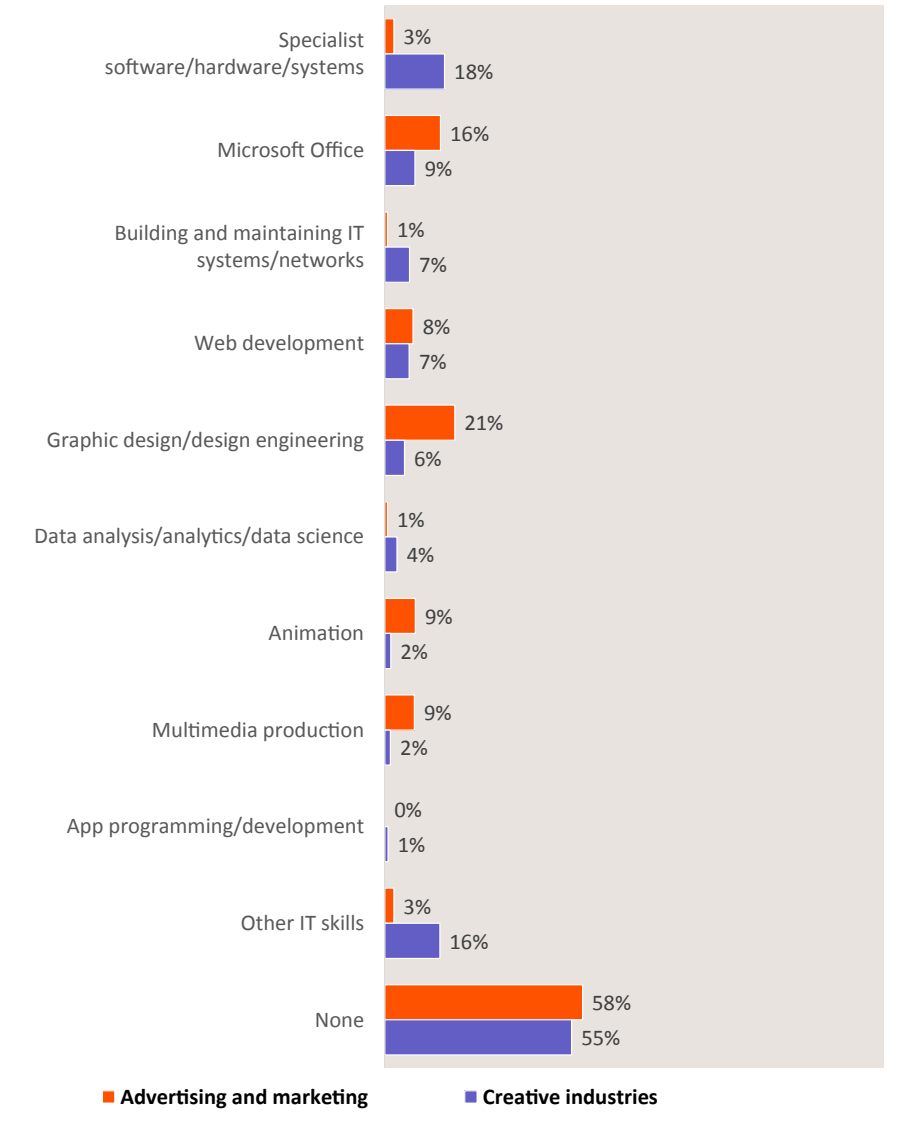
Source: CESS 2025

Notes: Estimates are based on a small sample size. This may result in less precise estimates, which should be used with caution.

Figure 12: Digital skills shortages, 2025

Q: Have you found any basic or advanced IT skills difficult to obtain from applicants for [skills shortage occupational] vacancies. If so, what specific IT skills have been lacking?

Base = establishments with skills shortage vacancies (n = 29)



Source: CESS 2025

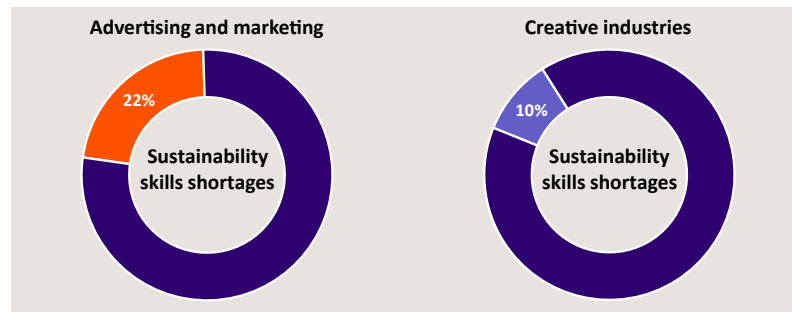
Notes: Estimates are based on a small sample size. This may result in less precise estimates, which should be used with caution.

5. Skills shortages (continued)

Figure 13: Sustainability skills shortages, 2025

Q: Were any of the skills you found difficult to obtain from applicants for [skills shortage occupation] vacancies related to wanting to be more sustainable or carbon-neutral? If so, what specific sustainability or 'green' skills have been lacking?

Base = establishments with skills shortage vacancies (n = 29)



The CESS also seeks to explore the extent to which the skills employers find lacking among candidates are linked to any sustainability goals.

In advertising and marketing, employers were twice as likely to identify sustainability or green skills shortages – cited by 22% of advertising and marketing employers with skills shortage vacancies compared to 10% across the creative industries. This relates to a need for general awareness on environmental concerns as well as specialist knowledge to meet the needs of clients in green technology and sustainability sectors.

Alongside technical and digital skills, candidates were also reported as lacking a range of core or 'transversal' skills.

Working with others was a particular concern for employers in advertising and marketing, where staff often work in multidisciplinary teams: 30% of employers pointed to skills shortages in this area, slightly higher than the creative industries average (27%).

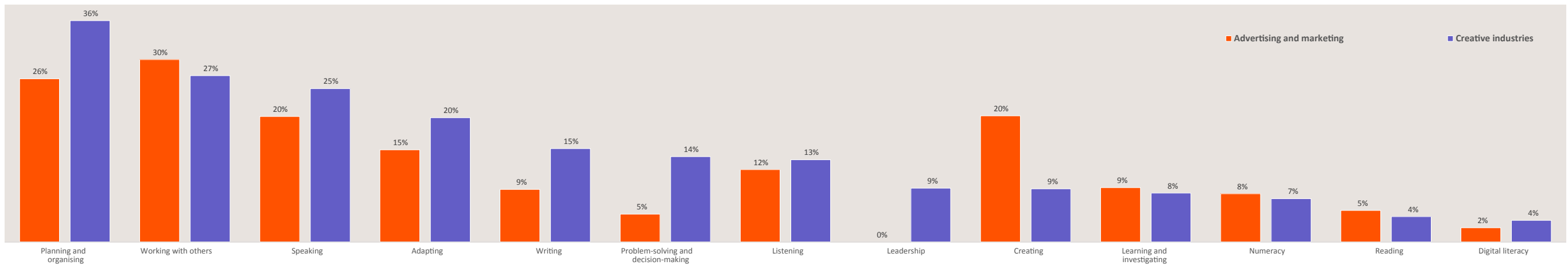
This was closely followed by planning and organising skills, reported by 26% of advertising and marketing employers experiencing skills shortages, compared to 36% across the creative industries.

Most notably, employers in advertising and marketing were twice as likely to suggest that candidates lacked 'creating' skills – developing original ideas, techniques or solutions through imagination, innovation and practical application. Indeed, 20% of employers in advertising and marketing that had skills shortage vacancies suggested candidates lack these skills, compared to 9% across the creative industries.

Figure 14: Core skills shortages, 2025

Q: Have you found any core or 'transversal' skills difficult to obtain from applicants for [skills shortage occupation] vacancies. If so, what specific core or transversal skills have been lacking?

Base = establishments with skills shortage vacancies (n = 29)



Source: CESS 2025

Notes: Responses are based on a small sample size. This may result in less precise estimates, which should be used with caution.

6. Skills gaps

When considering skills deficiencies among their current workforce, just over one in five (22%) employers in the advertising and marketing industry reported skills gaps – below the average across the creative industries (32%).

Employers reported a range of factors as contributing to skills deficiencies. In line with the findings of wider research (Giles, Carey and O'Brien, 2025), CESS 2025 suggests the most common causes of skills gaps are transitory. For example, 43% of advertising and marketing employers suggested staff are new to the role and 31% that staff training is currently only partially completed.

The skills shortages employers experience while hiring appear to be having a knock-on impact on the proficiency of the workforce, particularly

in the sub-sector, where 19% of employers suggested skills gaps are a consequence of difficulties recruiting staff with the required skills.

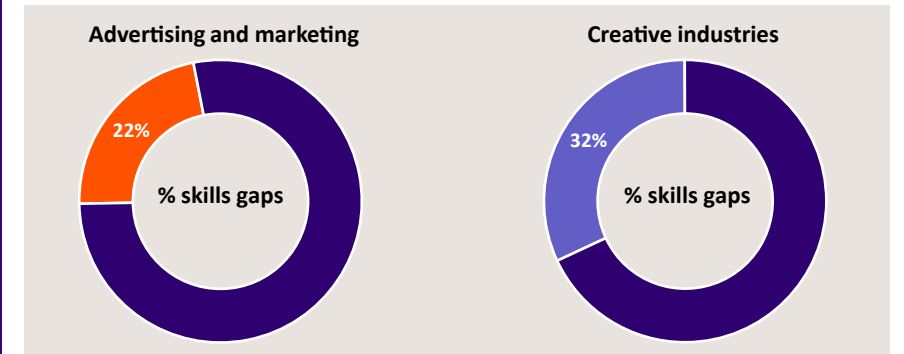
However, other more transformative factors are also at play, with 16% of employers in advertising and marketing attributing skills gaps to the introduction of new technology and 12% to the introduction of new working practices. When we look at the technologies driving a shift in the skills needed in the workplace, these are wide-ranging, including creative tools like Adobe InDesign, animation software, printing presses and AI.

This was echoed by participants at the subsector roundtable. Some discussed how the industry had evolved over the past decade with the advent of new platforms which heightened the need for specialist market knowledge, people skills to nurture client relationships and organisational skills to effectively manage more project-based work.

Figure 15: Skills gaps, 2025

Q: Thinking about your current workforce (including employees, agency staff, self-employed or freelance workers), approximately what percentage would you regard as fully proficient at their job? = <100%.

Base = all establishments (n = 120)



Source: CESS 2025

Figure 16: Main causes of skills gaps, 2025

Q: What are the main causes of staff in [skills gap occupation] not being fully proficient at their job?

Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 40)



Source: CESS 2025

6. Skills gaps (continued)

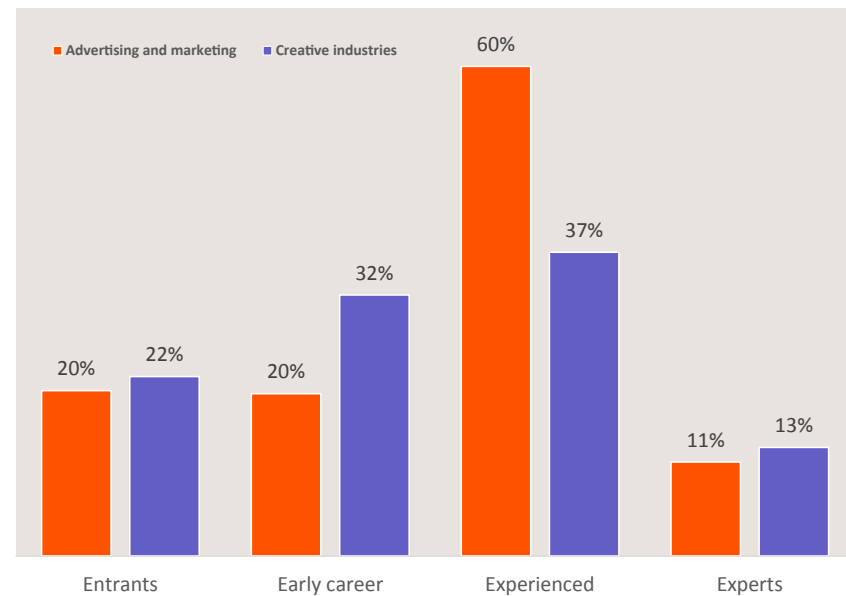
The majority (60%) of advertising and marketing employers suggested skills gaps affected experienced staff – significantly higher than the average across the creative industries (37%).

This echoes past research (Advertising Association 2023) and resonated strongly with participants at the subsector roundtable, who suggested that the pace of progression in the advertising and marketing industry is rapid and that advancement is not always accompanied by the training necessary to develop skills required in more senior roles – particularly people management skills.

Figure 17: Seniority of staff with skills deficiencies, 2025

Q: How would you describe the level of experience or seniority of the staff working as (skills gap occupation)?

Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 40)



Source: CESS 2025

That said, skills gaps also affect workers earlier in their careers. One in five (20%) employers in advertising and marketing that reported skills deficiencies suggested these related to both entrant and early-career roles.

CESS 2025 also enables us to examine the job roles most affected by skills gaps. Employers in advertising and marketing suggested staff in a range of roles have skills deficiencies. Advertising and marketing executives topped the list, cited by 13% of employers with skills gaps. This was closely followed by business and financial project management professionals (10%) and business sales executives (7%).

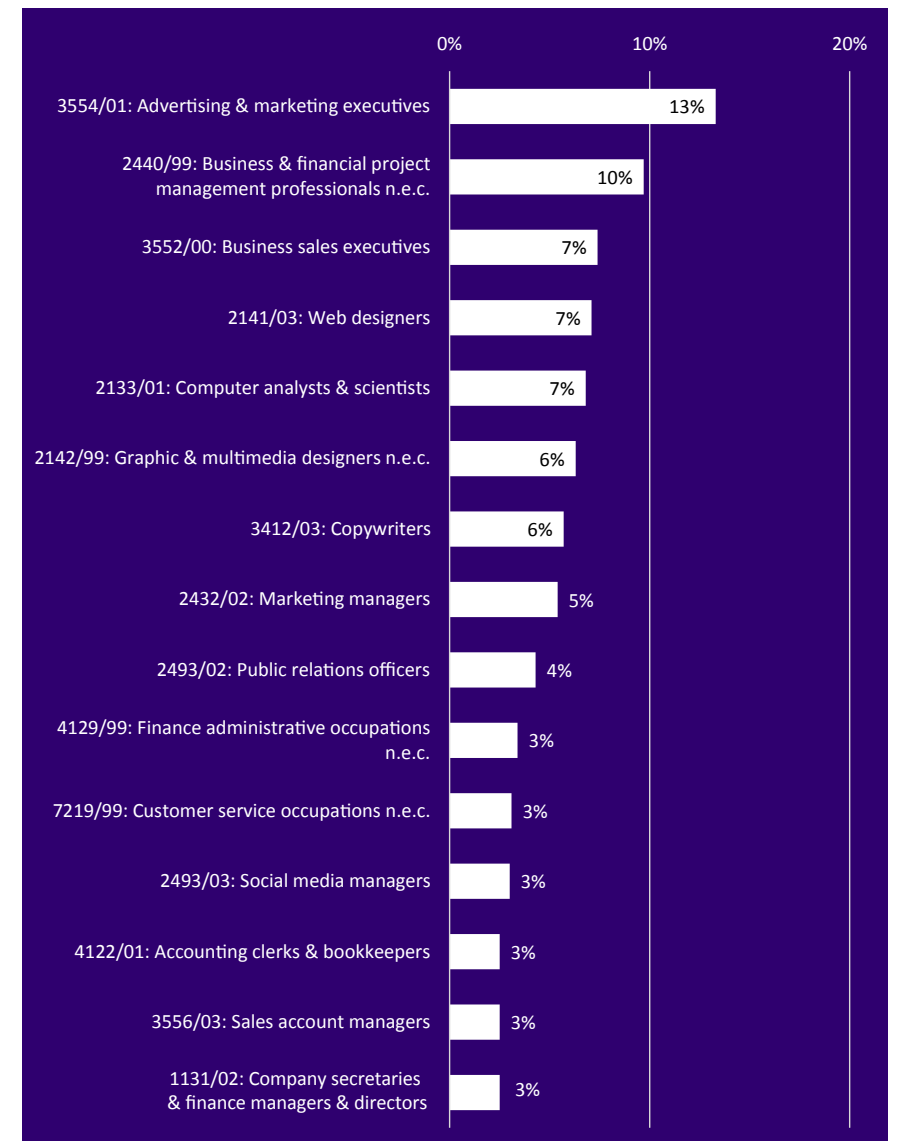
Those working in digital and design roles were also frequently reported as lacking full proficiency, potentially reflecting the need for ongoing upskilling to keep abreast of new technology. This included web designers (cited by 7% of employers with skills gaps), computer analysts and scientists (also 7%), graphic and multimedia designers (6%) and copywriters (6%).

However, skills gaps were not limited to sector-specific occupations; they were also reported to affect cross-cutting roles, such as finance administrative occupations, accounting clerks and bookkeepers, sales account managers and customer service occupations.

Figure 18: Skills gap occupations, 2025

Q: In which specific occupations are staff not fully proficient at their role?

Top fifteen occupations cited. Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 40)



Source: CESS 2025

6. Skills gaps (continued)

The types of skills that employers reported need improving among their staff closely mirror those lacking in candidates.

Past research has emphasised a need to strengthen specialist skills or knowledge needed to perform the role (Giles, Carey and O'Brien, 2025), and this was echoed by employers responding to the CESS.

A diverse range of skills gaps were identified, from technical skills aligned to the print and mailout process to creative skills like design, content creation and video production. With the rapid expansion and evolution of digital marketing, SEO and social media skills were also identified as needing improvement among the workforce. However, employers also pointed to commercial skills, including client negotiation and client service, as well as general business skills like accounting and better industry insight generally.

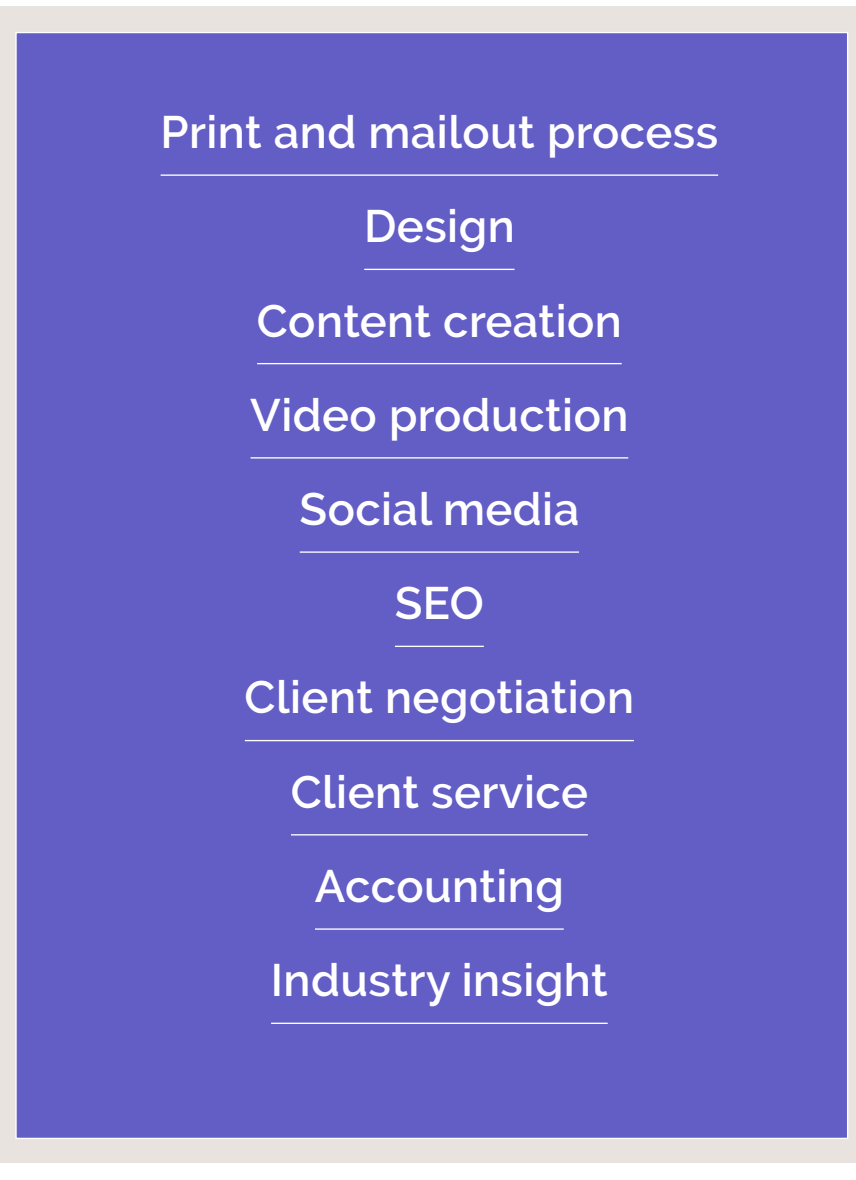
Digital skills gaps were also reported as an area of concern, by one in four (24%) employers with skills deficiencies (below the creative industries average of 33%).

Often this related to a need to improve Microsoft Office skills, reported by a significantly higher share of employers in advertising and marketing than employers across the creative industries (21% vs 13%). Web development skills were also a particular challenge for employers in the sub-sector, reported by around one in ten (9%) of those with skills gaps. This was closely followed by specialist software, hardware or systems (reported by 8%) and multimedia production skills (7%).

Figure 19: Specialist skills gaps, 2025

Q: Do any of your staff working as [skills gap occupation] lack full proficiency in terms of specialist skills or knowledge needed to perform the role? If so, what specific specialist skills or knowledge are they lacking full proficiency in?

Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 40)

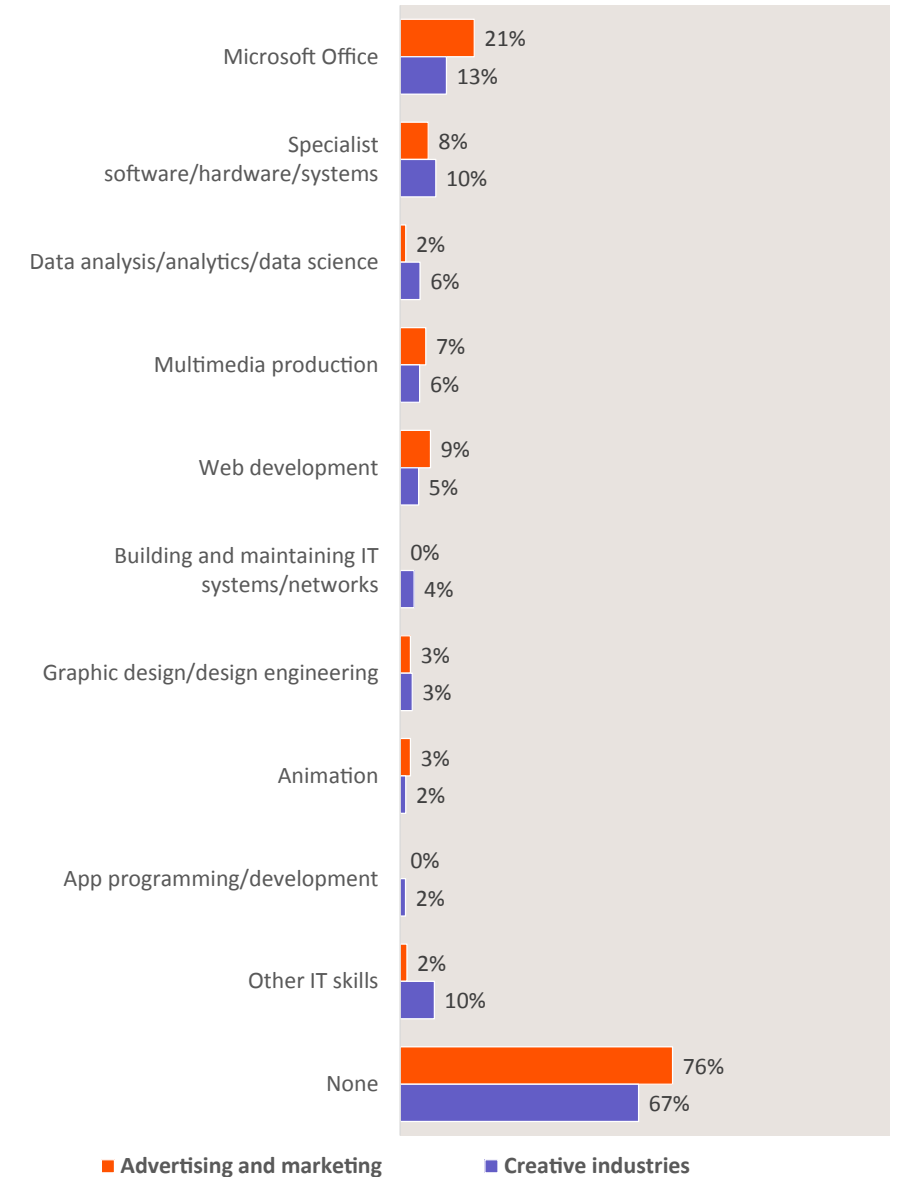


Source: CESS 2025

Figure 20: Digital skills gaps, 2025

Q: Do any of your staff working as [skills gap occupation] lack full proficiency in terms of basic or advanced IT skills? If so, what specific IT skills do you feel need improving?

Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 40)



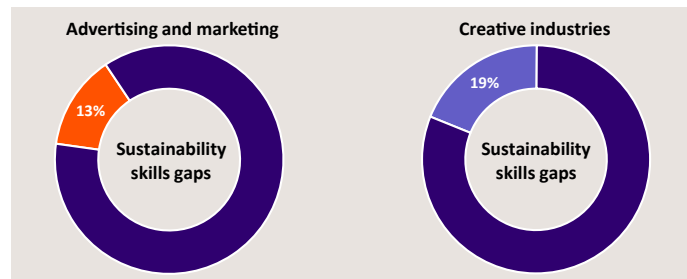
Source: CESS 2025

6. Skills gaps (continued)

Figure 21: Sustainability skills gaps, 2025

Q: Were any of the skills you mentioned needing improving among staff working as [skills gap occupation] related to wanting to be more sustainable or carbon-neutral? If so, what specific sustainability or 'green' skills are they lacking full proficiency in?

Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 40)



Employers in the advertising and marketing industry also suggested a need to improve the transversal skills of their workforce in a range of areas, and this was echoed by employers and stakeholders attending the sub-sector roundtable.

One third (33%) of advertising and marketing employers that reported skills deficiencies suggested workers needed to strengthen planning and organising skills – a significantly higher share than across the creative industries (cited by 25%) and likely reflecting the propensity for project-based work in the sector.

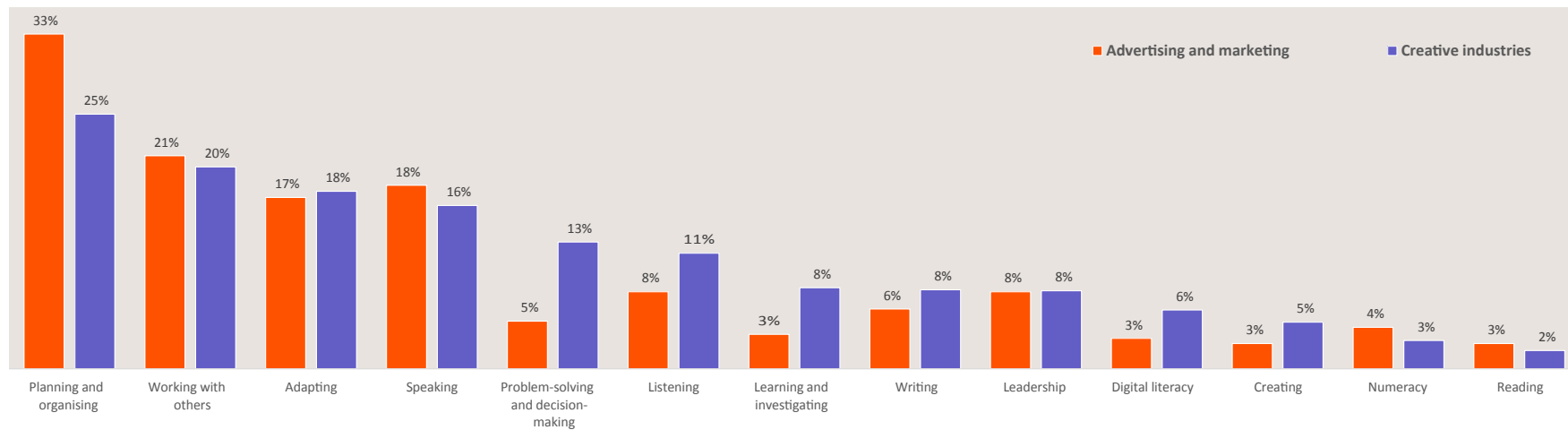
Stronger team working skills also ranked highly – cited by 21% of employers in advertising and marketing with skills gaps. This was closely followed by adaptability (cited by 17%) and verbal communication (18%). The Covid-19 pandemic was perceived to have had a significant impact on interpersonal skills, particularly among younger workers.

Nearly one in ten (8%) of advertising and marketing employers with skills gaps suggested workers needed stronger leadership skills. Management and leadership capability was also identified by roundtable participants as a key area of deficiency. Some suggested that while organisations often offered leadership development for the most senior staff, they sometimes lacked training to develop people management skills that become more vital as workers progress in their careers. Others emphasised barriers to training, particularly time constraints, which hinder workers' ability to participate in training even when it is available (see Section 8 for further discussion on barriers to training).

Figure 22: Core skills gaps, 2025

Q: Do any of your staff working as [skills gap occupation] lack full proficiency in terms of core or 'transversal' skills? If so, what specific core or transversal skills do you feel need improving?

Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 40)



Over one in ten employers in advertising and marketing suggested the need to upskill their workforce was related to sustainability goals. Of employers in the sub-sector that reported skills gaps, 13% pointed to a need to enhance their workforce's sustainability or 'green' skills – a slightly smaller share than across the creative industries (19%).

Looking in detail at the responses given by employers in advertising and marketing, sometimes this related to reducing paper usage (e.g. by minimising printing and working with digital copy) or minimising wastage from events.

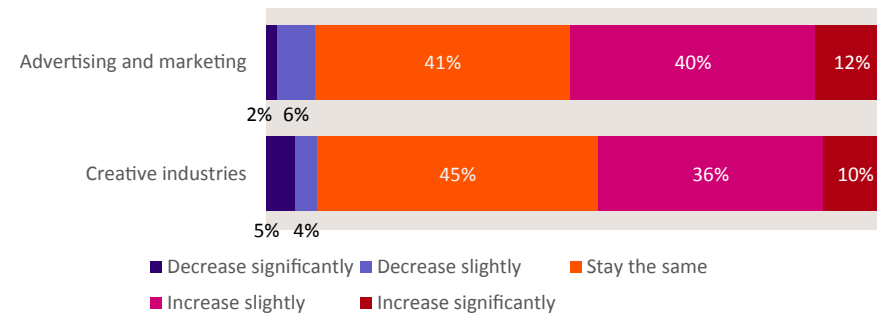
However, others emphasised the need for staff to be more aware of how their roles, and their business's advertising campaigns, impact sustainability and carbon mitigation, or for staff to be more 'up to speed' with clean fuels and energy transition in order to effectively support clients operating in these sectors.

7. Future jobs and skills needs

Figure 23: Employer expectations for employment in the next three to five years, 2025

Q: Over the next three to five years, how do you expect the number of staff (including employees, agency staff, self-employed or freelance workers) at this site to change?

Base = all establishments (n = 120)



Source: CESS 2025

CESS 2025 also seeks to explore employers' expectations for the future: whether they anticipate the need to increase levels of employment and whether they expect a need to upskill their workforce in the next three to five years.

Despite the challenging trading conditions and longer-term shifts in the industry being driven by AI, we find employers in advertising and marketing are ambitious for the future. Around half (52%) of those surveyed expected to increase staff numbers in the years ahead – higher than most other creative sub-sectors and above the creative industries average (46%).

Further, 89% of advertising and marketing employers that expect to expand staff numbers also anticipate a need to upgrade the skills of their workforce over the next three to five years. As for other parts of the creative industries, upskilling needs are predominantly driven by technological advancement and innovation.

More than three quarters (77%) of advertising and marketing employers that expect to expand their workforce also anticipate a need for staff to acquire new skills or knowledge as a result of new technologies or equipment, and 72% because of the development of new products and services.

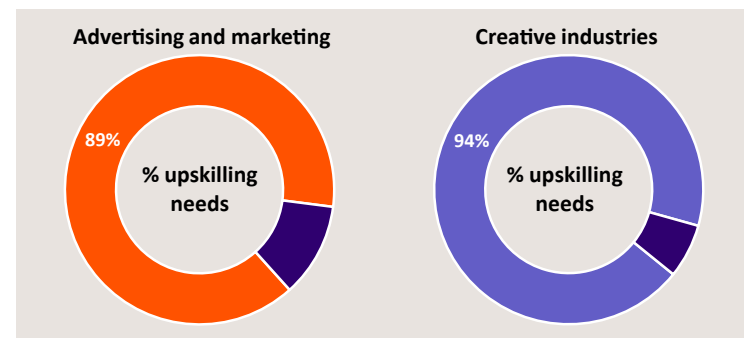
When examining the technologies driving a shift in the skills needed in advertising and marketing, we find internal system upgrades and new proprietary software, new or evolving creative software (design, editing, digital printing), management information systems, content platforms (including social media) and tracking technologies all feature.

However, the overwhelming majority of employers pointed to AI and the need for leaders and workers across their business to understand how to work with AI technologies safely, ethically and effectively. This echoes wider research (Advertising Association, IPA and ISBA, 2025; Major Players, 2025) and resonated strongly with roundtable attendees, who suggested AI is having a transformative effect on the industry.

Figure 24: Employer expectations for upskilling in next three to five years, 2025

Q: Over the next three to five years, do you expect that any staff at this site will need to acquire new skills or knowledge? ≠ 'None'

Base = establishments expecting to increase staff numbers in future (n = 65)

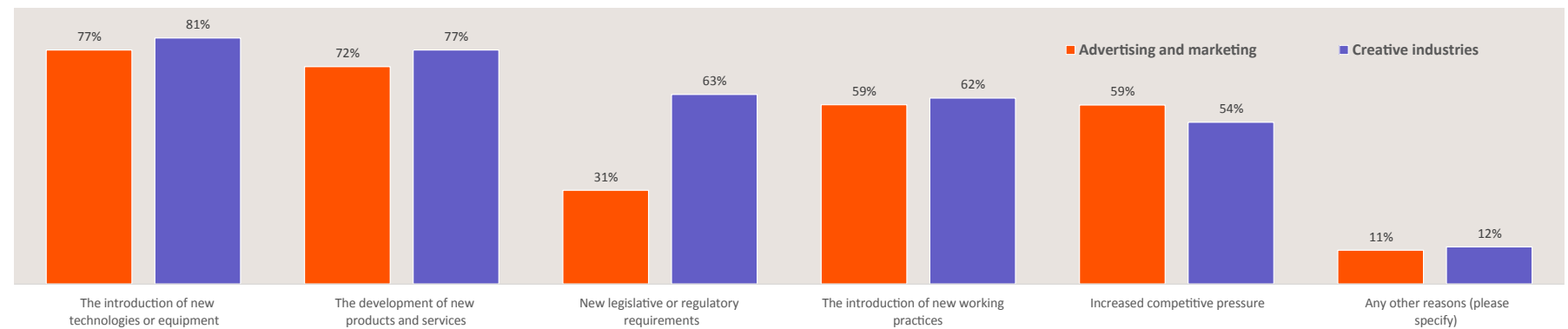


Source: CESS 2025

Figure 25: Main drivers of upskilling needs, 2025

Q: Over the next three to five years, do you expect that any staff at this site will need to acquire new skills or knowledge as a result of the following factors?

Base = establishments expecting to increase staff numbers in future (n = 65)



Source: CESS 2025

7. Future jobs and skills needs (continued)

CESS 2025 also examined the occupations expected to be in increasing demand and have upskilling needs in the years ahead.

The roles where employers anticipated a need to expand staff numbers included sales, accounts and business development manager occupations – cited by 21% of those employers anticipating a need to grow their workforce. This was closely followed by public relations officers (19%) and marketing associate professionals (15%). Design roles also featured heavily, with 15% of employers anticipating a need to recruit more graphic and multimedia designers and 8% anticipating that recruitment for other design occupations would increase; another 8% anticipated needing to recruit social media managers. Only a handful of employers pointed to a need to expand staff working in specialist data roles, which roundtable participants attributed to the success of industry efforts to enhance data literacy across the workforce.

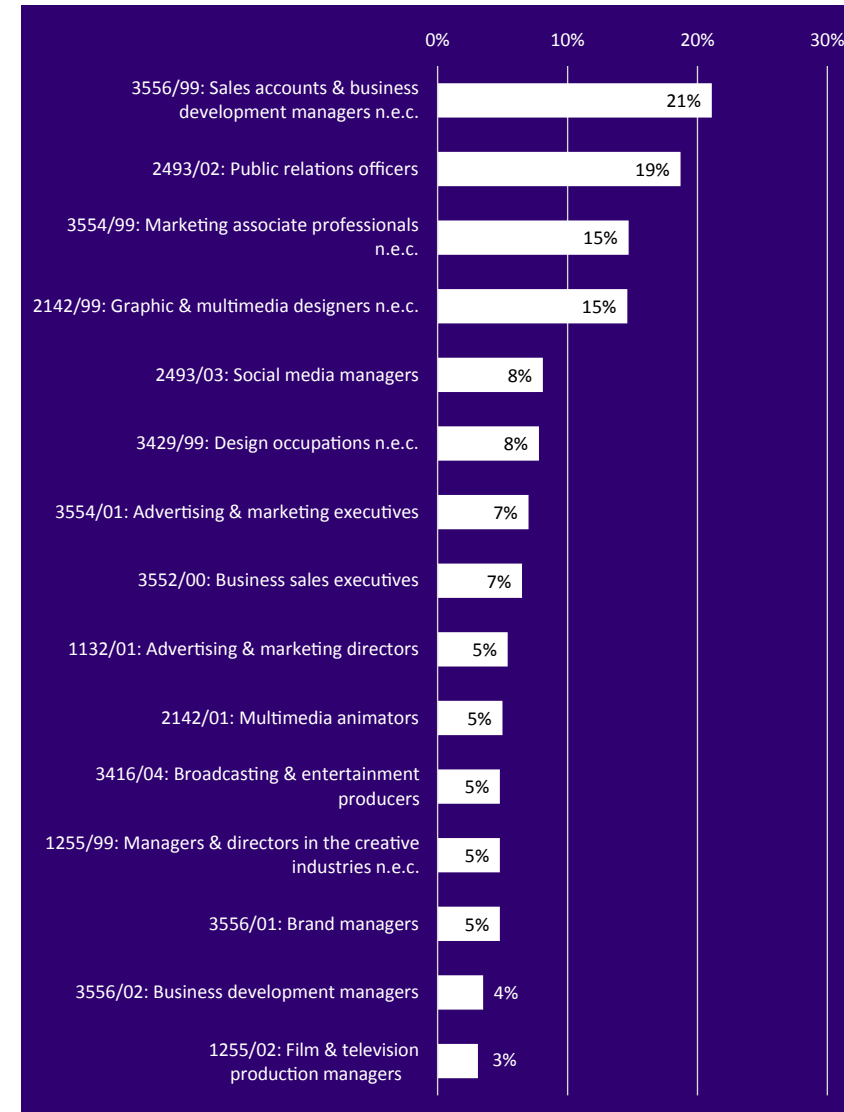
Discussion at the roundtable also raised concern that few of the occupations where employers expected to increase staff numbers were junior roles. There is widening debate in the industry about whether AI is displacing entry-level opportunities (Advertising Association, 2025b). Attendees confirmed that some tasks previously completed by junior workers are now being addressed using GenAI. While this might offer immediate cost and efficiency savings, stakeholders cautioned this was a short-term view, suggesting reducing entry-level opportunities risked choking off the talent pipeline into the industry, which, in time, would manifest as skills shortages in mid-level roles.

When looking at the list of occupations where employers anticipated a need for upskilling, design and digital roles tend to feature more highly, likely reflecting the impact of technology on the skills needs of those working within these occupations. For instance, one in five employers (20%) expected graphic and multimedia designers to need to acquire new skills or knowledge over the next three to five years. Similarly, more than one in ten (13%) anticipated that those working as multimedia animators will also need to upskill. However, many advertising and marketing employers pointed to the need to upgrade skills 'across the board'.

Figure 26: Occupations in demand in future, 2025

Q: In which specific occupations do you expect the number of staff to increase over the next three to five years?

Top fifteen occupations cited. Base = establishments expecting to increase staff numbers in future (n = 65)

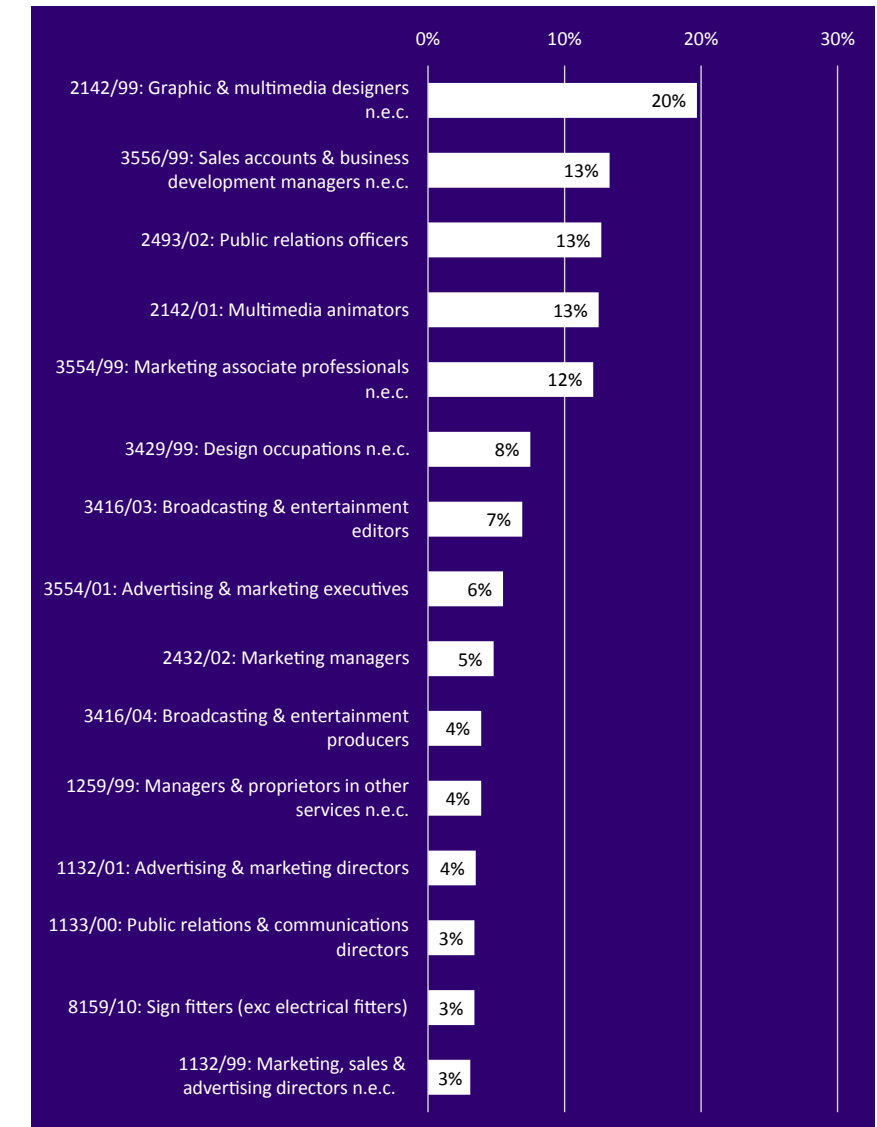


Source: CESS 2025

Figure 27: Occupations with upskilling needs, 2025

Q: In which specific occupations do you expect staff to have the greatest need to acquire new skills or knowledge over the next three to five years?

Top fifteen occupations cited. Base = establishments with upskilling needs (n = 59)



Source: CESS 2025

7. Future jobs and skills needs (continued)

Turning to the skills needed to operate effectively in these roles, employers identified a range of specialist skills or knowledge that they felt they would need to be strengthened in the years ahead. This included skills like creative and design, digital marketing, and campaign strategy as well as wider skills like project, client and people management and leadership skills.

Digital skills like programming and software development also featured. When asked specifically about digital skills needed in future, three quarters (75%) of advertising and marketing employers that anticipated a need to upskill their workforce pointed to digital skills as a key area for improvement – a higher proportion than across the creative industries (63%).

As for other creative employers, advertising and marketing firms most commonly reported a need to strengthen skills relating to specialist software, hardware or systems, cited by one in five (20%) of those anticipating a need to upskill their workforce. Employers in advertising and marketing were twice as likely to anticipate a need to upgrade graphic design/design engineering skills (cited by 16% vs 7% across the creative industries), multimedia production skills (12% vs 5%) and data analysis, analytics and data science skills (14% vs 7%). Roundtable participants did, however, suggest AI is increasingly able to manage data analysis tasks, meaning demand for these skills might shift in future towards effectively utilising this technology to deliver insights.

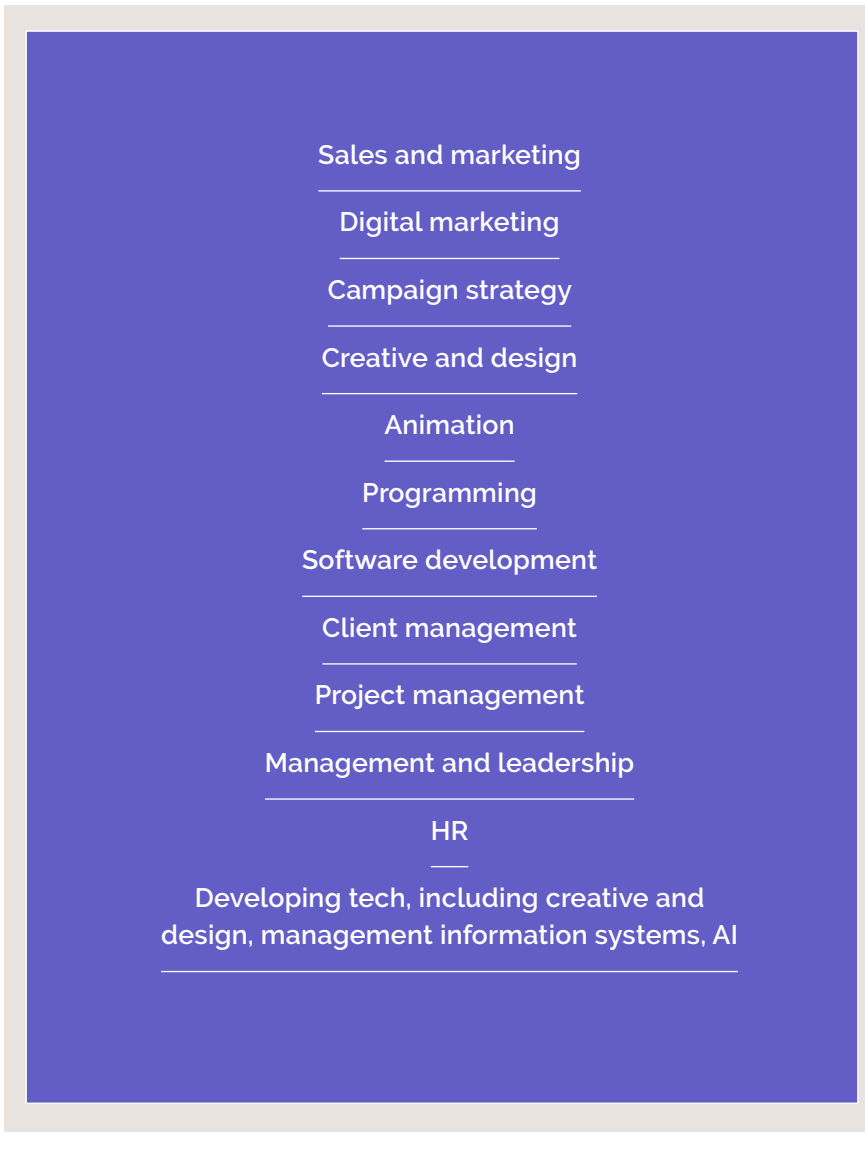
Half of employers in advertising and marketing pointed to a need to improve 'other' IT skills, and more often than not this concerned the skills to interact with and effectively utilise AI. This chimes with wider research and discussion at the sub-sector roundtable, with AI expected to continue to drive transformation in the skills needed in the industry (Advertising Association, IPA and ISBA, 2025; Major Players 2025). This included giving greater weight to creative ideation, alongside the application of these new technologies, to drive efficiencies and innovate, GEO replacing SEO and the need to sell to AI agents, and an erosion of the division between creative and client-facing roles, with business development expected to be a feature of all jobs.

Just one employer highlighted 'hacker awareness skills' as a priority for the future, although stakeholders consulted through this work suggested this likely reflected the fact the industry already had relatively well-developed capability in this area.

Figure 28: Specialist skills needs in next three to five years, 2025

Q: Which, if any, specialist skills or knowledge do you feel will need improving over the next three to five years?

Base = establishments with upskilling needs (n = 59)

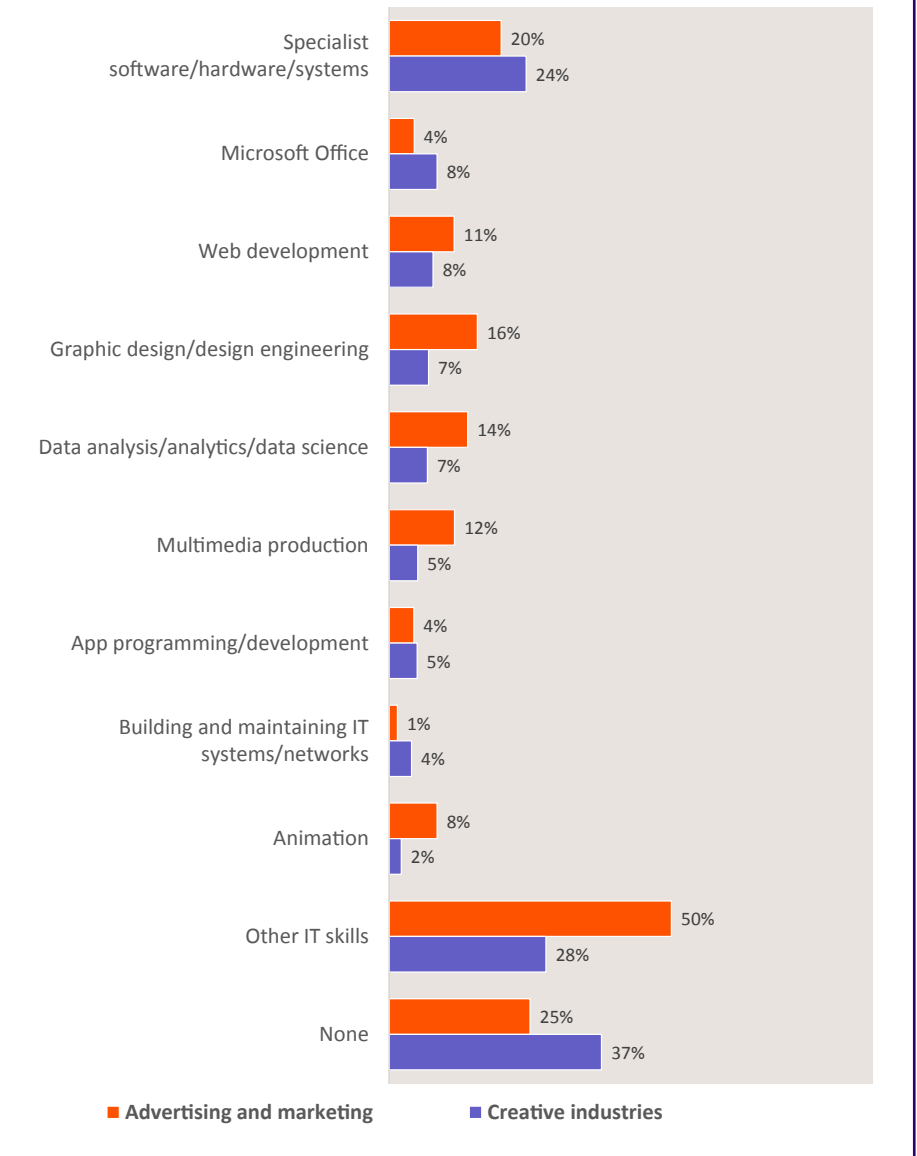


Source: CESS 2025

Figure 29: Digital skills needs in next three to five years, 2025

Q: Do you expect staff will need to acquire new IT skills over the next three to five years? If so, which specific IT skills do you feel will need improving?

Base = establishments with upskilling needs (n = 59)



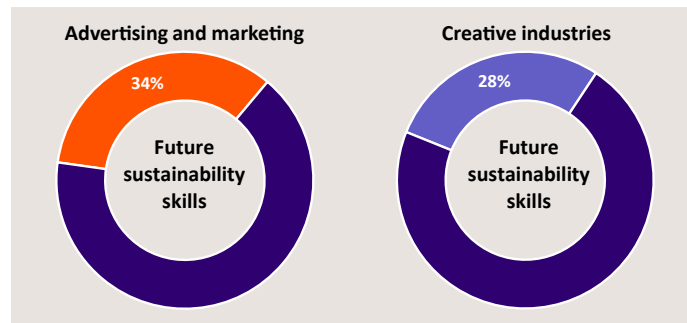
Source: CESS 2025

7. Future jobs and skills needs (continued)

Figure 30: Sustainability skills needs in next three to five years, 2025

Q: Are any of the skills you expect staff will need to acquire over the next three to five years related to wanting to be more sustainable or carbon-neutral? If so, what specific sustainability or 'green' skills will need improving?

Base = establishments with upskilling needs (n = 59)



Employers in the advertising and marketing industry also emphasised the importance of stronger transversal skills in future. Team working was viewed as particularly important – cited by 29% of employers that anticipated a need to upskill their workforce over the next five years – a slightly higher proportion than across the creative industries (25%). This was closely followed by planning and organising skills (25%) and verbal communication (21%). The need for stronger problem-solving and decision-making skills was also emphasised by employers (cited by 16% of employers that anticipated a need to upgrade staff skills).

Roundtable participants also highlighted how AI was placing greater weight on 'human' skills. For example, to design and execute effective campaigns, ad execs now need advanced critical thinking skills to understand how best to sell to AI agents increasingly used by customers to inform purchasing

decisions. With clients now able to use the technology to plan and buy their own media at relatively little cost, there was greater onus on the industry, and relatedly the workforce, to act in more of a consultancy capacity, working with clients to effectively utilise media to transform their business.

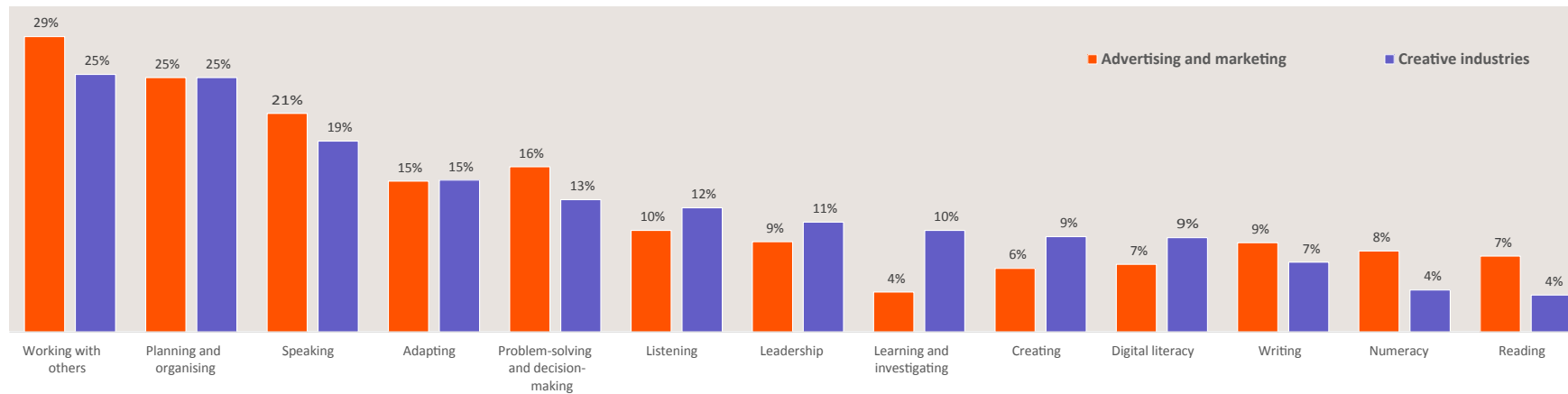
The ability of AI to handle many analytical tasks (data, report writing, consumer planning) was also seen to place greater weight on entry-level talent to 'have an opinion from the outset' in order to add value alongside tech, and to have well-developed people skills given they tended to be client-facing much earlier. However, wider research suggests that investment in AI is not being matched by investment in the skills needed to effectively utilise this technology (Major Players, 2025).

Sustainability skills are also expected to become more important in the years ahead. One third (34%) of advertising and marketing employers with upskilling needs suggested staff would need to acquire new skills or knowledge in order to meet organisational sustainability goals.

Figure 31: Core skills needs in next three to five years, 2025

Q: Which, if any, core or 'transversal' skills do you feel will need improving among your staff over the next three to five years?

Base = establishments with upskilling needs (n = 59)



Sometimes this related to environmental, social and governance reporting or certification sought by the business, including B Corp and industry certification such as Ad Net Zero. More widely, employers in advertising and marketing suggested staff would need greater awareness of the environmental impact of the products, systems and processes used within the business and how to enhance sustainability across all of these areas. Examples ranged from reducing printing/paper usage and recycling more, turning lights off, reducing the use of chemicals in the production process, choosing 'green' transport options and being more mindful of the energy use of technology (emails, AI, etc).

There was also a strong client orientation to many responses to this question, recognising the need for staff to strengthen their knowledge of sustainability issues, regulations and technologies. This was echoed by participants at the sub-sector roundtable, who suggested industry perspectives on sustainability were shifting from a moral imperative to a commercial opportunity.

8. Employer investment in skills

CESS 2025 also examines the impact of skills shortages and skills gaps (collectively referred to as ‘skills challenges’) on employers and any actions they are taking in response.

For the vast majority (74%) of advertising and marketing employers, skills challenges are having an impact on their business. Perhaps most concerning in the context of the government’s Growth Mission, around one third (32%) employers in the sub-sector that were facing skills challenges suggested these issues are hindering their long-term growth or investment plans. This is considerably higher than the average across the creative industries (19%).

However, skills challenges were reported as causing wider issues, including making it difficult to meet deadlines (cited by 34% with skills challenges), delaying innovation (32%), increasing the workload of other staff (34%), increasing operating costs (26%) and losing business to competitors (24%).

The majority of employers across the sub-sector were taking action in response. Often this involved increasing workforce training – cited by 64% of employers in advertising and marketing that were facing skills challenges, compared to 47% of employers across the creative industries. Employers in the sub-sector were also more likely to have increased advertising or recruitment spend (16%) or to have turned to new recruitment methods/ channels (18%).

35% of employers with skills challenges pointed to ‘other’ measures. These were wide-ranging, including strengthening the recruitment process, better supporting managers to address performance issues, developing careers and competence frameworks and continuing professional development plans, better matching staff to appropriate clients or projects and promoting informal learning (e.g. via lunch and learn sessions, panel talks, events).

Figure 32: Impact of skills challenges, 2025

Q: Thinking now about all occupations in which you have skills challenges – that is, either where you cannot recruit someone with the right skills or where the people doing these jobs do not have all the skills that they need – what impact are these skills issues having on this site?

Base = establishments with skills shortages or skills gaps (n = 58)

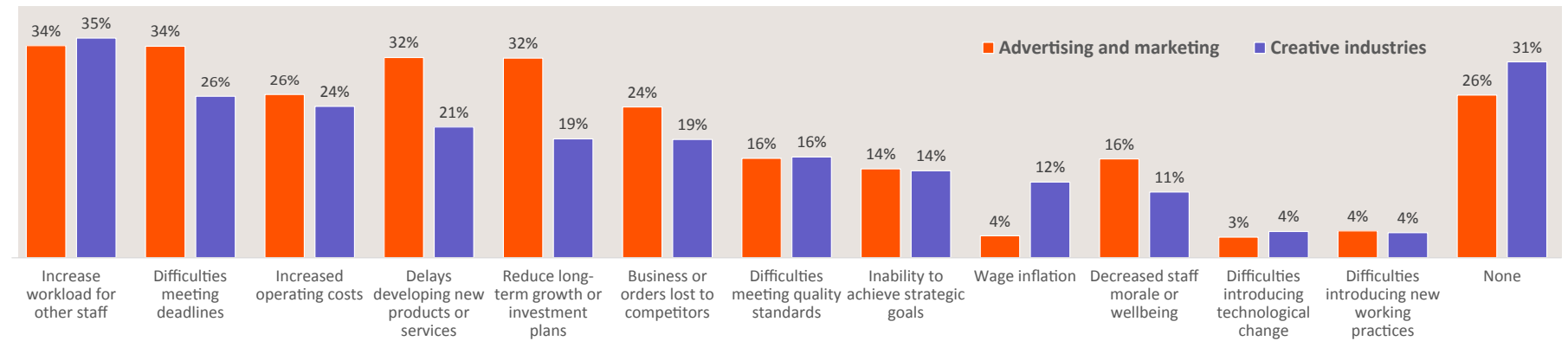
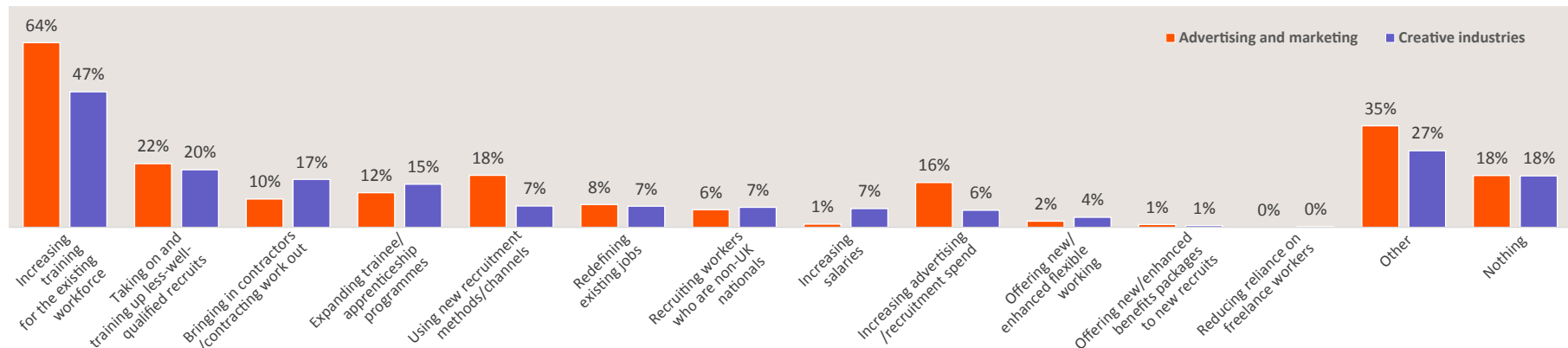


Figure 33: Response to skills challenges, 2025

Q: What, if anything, is your site doing to overcome these skills challenges?

Base = establishments with skills shortages or skills gaps (n = 58)



Source: CESS 2025

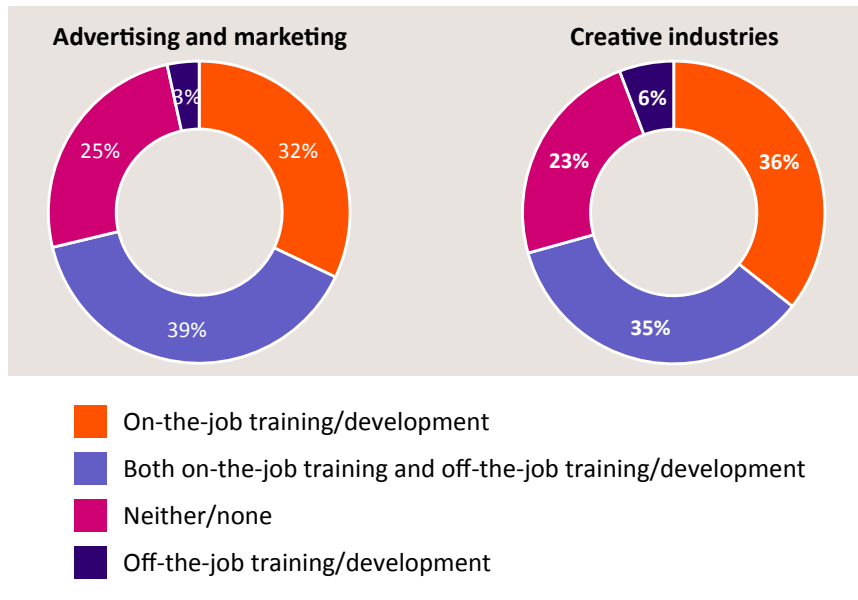
8. Employer investment in skills (continued)

CESS 2025 also looks more widely at training provision by creative employers over the past year. The survey finds that three quarters of employers in advertising and marketing (75%) and across the creative industries more widely (77%) had provided training for staff. This suggests higher levels of training than is indicated by wider surveys (e.g. see the Employer Skills Survey 2022 findings in Giles, Carey and O'Brien, 2025), potentially reflecting the wider definition, including training provided for self-employed or freelance workers.

Often training was either 'on the job', as provided by almost one third (32%) of advertising and marketing employers, or a blend of on- and off-the-job training (39%). Only a small proportion of employers in advertising and marketing and across the creative industries had provided only off-the-job training (3% and 6%, respectively).

Figure 34: Employer training provision, 2025

Q: What, if any, training has your organisation arranged or funded over the past twelve months?
Base = all establishments (n = 120)



Source: CESS 2025

When we examine barriers faced by employers in providing more, or indeed any, training for workers, practical financial and time constraints feature heavily.

Nearly one third (31%) of employers in advertising and marketing pointed to a lack of funds, and 16% suggested that external courses are too expensive – albeit below the creative industries average in both cases (36% and 18%, respectively). Stakeholders consulted through this work also suggested that challenging trading conditions and industry restructuring is affecting the take-up of industry training, particularly for mid-level staff, who are often most in need of upgrading the skills they developed in education.

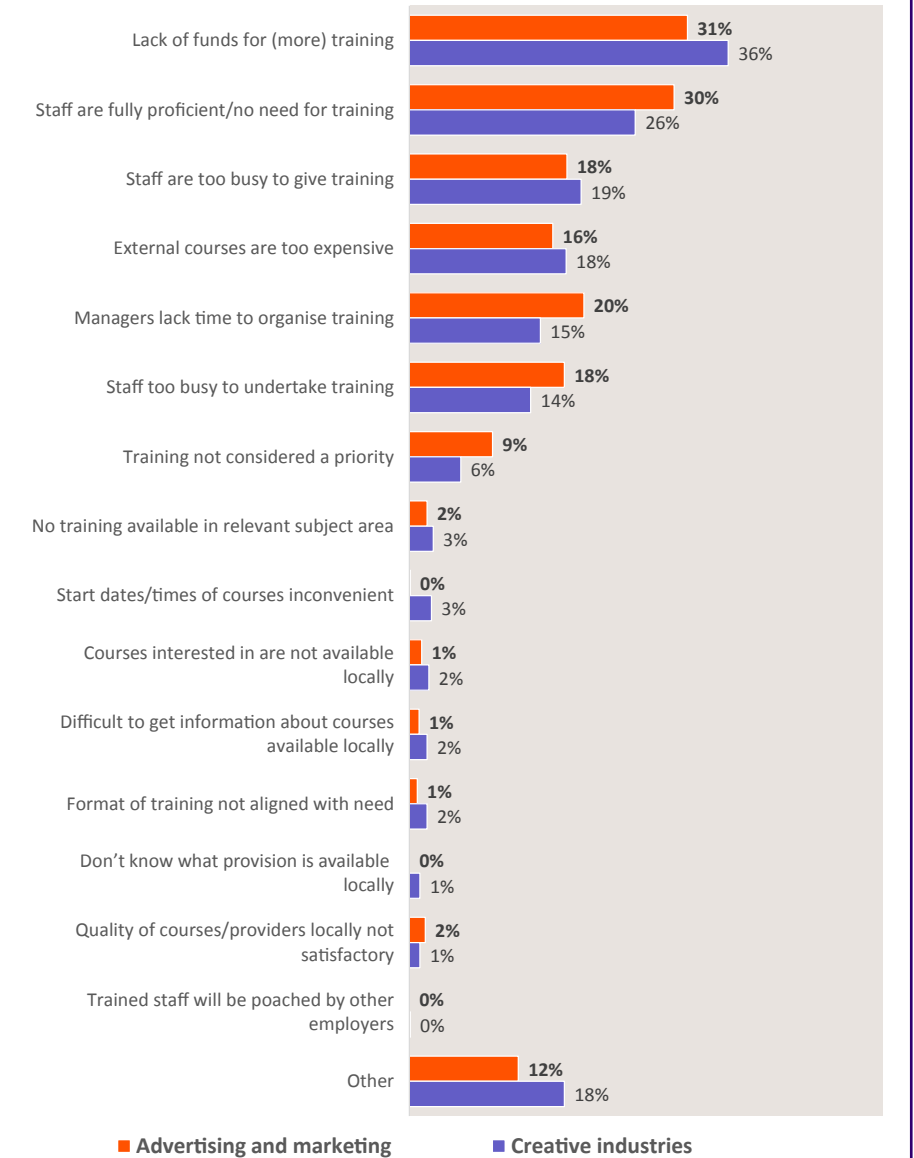
Time for training appears to be a particular challenge for employers in the sub-sector. One in five (20%) advertising and marketing employers suggested that managers lack time to organise training, compared to 15% across the creative industries. Further, 18% suggested that staff are too busy to give training and too busy to undertake training themselves. This was also highlighted by roundtable participants, who suggested that the pace the industry works at often makes it challenging for workers to take time out for development. Some felt that this particularly affects mid-career workers, who often take on the responsibilities of both junior workers and more senior leaders ('the squeezed middle').

Three in ten (30%) suggested that staff are fully proficient and have no need for training, but somewhat more concerningly, nearly one in ten (9%) suggested that training is not considered a priority for the business – higher than the creative industries average (6%).

Only a very small proportion of advertising and marketing employers pointed to a lack of training relevant to the subject area (2%) or raised concerns about the format of training (1%), quality (2%) or local availability (1%). This was, however, challenged by roundtable participants, who suggested courses are often overly generic, poor quality and not at the right level to address skills constraints. Others pointed to difficulties the industry faces in utilising Apprenticeship Levy funds as a key indication that skills provision is not well aligned to the needs of the sector (Advertising Association, 2025c).

Figure 35: Barriers to training provision, 2025

Q: What, if anything, prevents your organisation from offering (more) training for staff at this site?
Base = all establishments (n = 120)



Source: CESS 2025

8. Employer investment in skills (continued)

When considering the measures that would enable advertising and marketing employers to continue to invest in skills and training, a range of factors were considered important. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the barriers to training, employers frequently pointed to financial support, including subsidies towards the cost of training (cited by 61%) and tax relief on expenditure on staff training (49%).

Over two fifths (45%) of advertising and marketing employers called for more flexible forms of training. Roundtable participants responded positively to developments in the English skills system in this area, particularly the funding of short courses/modular training through the Growth and Skills Levy (HM Government, 2025). Past research suggests that the industry fails to fully spend its contribution to the Apprenticeship Levy (Advertising

Association, 2025c; IPA, 2025a), and there was strong support for greater flexibility in the use of levy funds.

Short courses addressing the specific applications of AI in the advertising and marketing industry were seen as an immediate opportunity for the sector to harness, not least given concerns that firms are not currently investing enough in the critical human skills needed to effectively utilise this new technology (Major Players, 2025). However, stakeholders cautioned against these courses being overly generic and instead called for customised training aligned to the needs of industry employers.

While funding short courses through the Growth and Skills Levy was welcomed, the advertising and marketing industry has called for wider reforms. This includes funding entry-level salaries through the levy, a

new accreditation system for modular training, faster standard updates, flexibility in the timing of gateway progression and end-point assessment, and permitting the use of levy funds to support industry-recognised training delivered by professional bodies. These changes were seen as vital to realising the untapped potential that Apprenticeships could offer the industry (Advertising Association, 2025c).

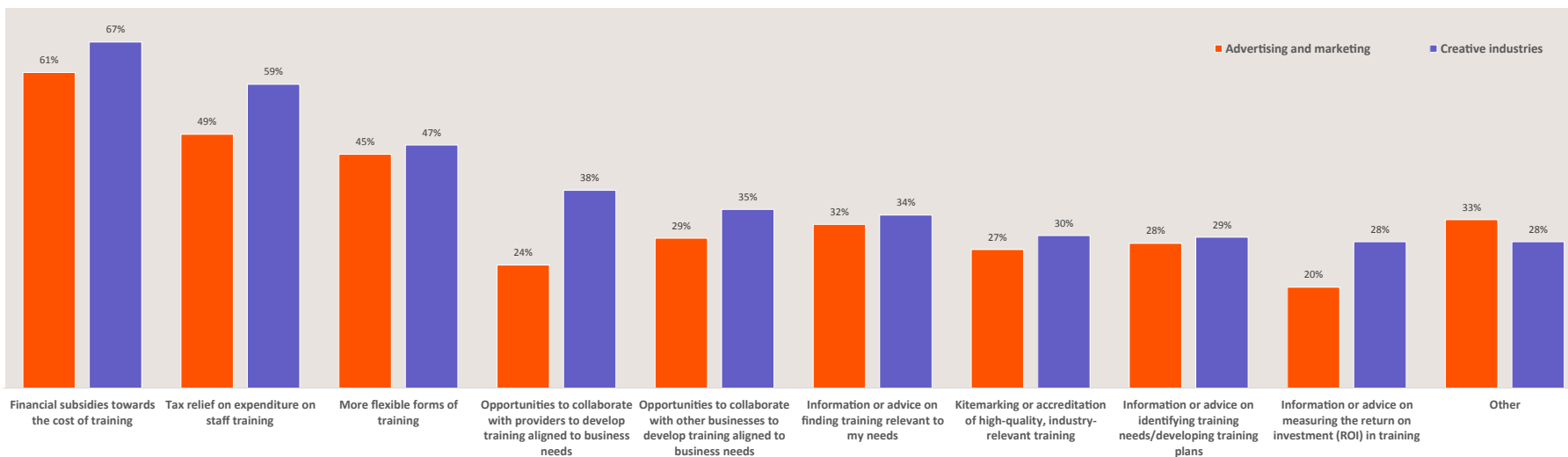
While there appeared to be less appetite for collaboration among employers in the advertising and marketing that responded to the survey, discussions at the sub-sector roundtable provided several examples of industry collaborating to develop skills programmes and invest in talent, including developing apprenticeship standards relevant to the industry (Advertising Association, 2025c). Industry membership bodies were also viewed as effective mechanisms for convening employers on key issues, such as AI.

However, participants suggested that engagement with the wider skills system through mechanisms like the apprenticeships trailblazers carries a very high time cost, progress is slow, and efforts are not necessarily concentrated on areas of pressing need. More widely, stakeholders engaged through the Skills Audit processes were keen to collaborate and work with providers to shape provision relevant to the industry. However, some suggested that the mechanisms to do this, particularly in a way that is meaningful and sufficiently agile, are unclear.

Finally, roundtable participants also highlighted the need for industry to adopt a more strategic approach to talent management. Some stressed this needed to be better connected to organisational objectives and encompass plans for succession and AI transformation. Others highlighted the need for this to be multidimensional, including developing the talent pipeline, bringing in external expertise where needed, and providing training to upskill the workforce. Employers responding to the survey were also interested in support in this area, with 28% seeking more information or advice to help them assess training needs and 32% seeking help to find relevant training. This suggests this might be a fertile area for further actions to unlock employer investment in skills.

Figure 36: Enablers of employer investment in training, 2025

Q: What measures would enable your organisation to offer (more) training in future?
Base = all establishments (n = 108)



Source: CESS 2025

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