

# DESIGN AND DESIGNER FASHION



**Creative Industries  
Policy and Evidence Centre**

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# Creative Industries Skills Audits

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## DESIGN AND DESIGNER FASHION

Executive summary	3
1. Introduction to the Creative Industries Skills Audits	4
2. Sector profile and performance	5
3. Jobs and skills	6
4. Recruitment difficulties	7
5. Skills shortages	8
6. Skills gaps	11
7. Future jobs and skills needs	15
8. Employer investment in skills	19
Bibliography	22

### 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](http://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 UK's design and designer fashion sector is a significant part of the UK economy, generating £4.1bn in gross value added (GVA) and accounting for 151,000 jobs in 2024. Internationally oriented, both with respect to its workforce and exports, the sector has nonetheless faced uneven employment growth over recent years, particularly during the period covering the UK's exit from the EU and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Almost one in three design and designer fashion employers who had hired in the last two years (including freelancers) reported recruitment difficulties, with the majority (72%) reporting that this was caused by candidates lacking the required skills.

In design and designer fashion, skills shortages were found to be most acute when recruiting for experienced roles (52%), with design occupations such as graphic and multimedia design, digital design, and product design most affected.

The skills shortages reported were wide-ranging, encompassing gaps related to sustainability as well as to the use of specialised software such as Adobe Creative Cloud, Figma and CLO 3D. Employers also highlighted core skills shortages in areas such as speaking, working with others, adapting, and planning and organising.

## 2 Current skills gaps in the existing workforce

Alongside the challenge of skills shortages when recruiting, design and designer fashion employers also pointed to skills deficiencies in their workforce. In 2025, skills gaps affected two in five employers in the sector.

We found a variety of factors contributing to these shortages. While some common factors are potentially transitory, such as workers not receiving the appropriate training, design and designer fashion employers were more likely to cite the introduction of new technology as a driver of skills gaps (30%) compared to the creative industries as a whole (23%).

Although skills gaps among experienced workers are a notable challenge, design and designer fashion employers also highlighted skills challenges in early-career and entrant roles. Similar to the trends seen in recruitment, graphic and multimedia design occupations were among the most affected, as were sales and retail assistants, reflecting the crucial role retail plays in parts of the design sector – particularly fashion.

The types of skills employers said needed improving in their existing workforce are similar to those lacking in prospective candidates. Concerns around specialist software were highlighted, as were issues related to sustainability, such as 'carbon literacy', 'sustainable design' and 'supply chain management'.

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

Design and designer fashion employers are ambitious about employment growth: 53% expected to grow staff numbers over the next three to five years. The vast majority of these employers also anticipated a need to upgrade the skills of their workforce in the years ahead, with 90% suggesting this will be driven by new technology.

Often this relates to maintaining up-to-date skills in specialist software, such as those listed previously. Overwhelmingly, however, respondents also highlighted needing to upskill in AI – both in terms of embedding AI into general business processes such as customer relationship management and also incorporating it into design processes in areas such as ideation, research, prototyping and image generation.

Sustainability skills are also a priority area for future upskilling in the sector: 41% of design employers that expect to expand staff numbers also anticipated needing to upskill with respect to sustainability or 'green' skills, compared to 28% across the creative industries. Many roundtable participants referenced the Design Council's (2025b) Skills for planet blueprint as a way to develop a shared competency framework for sustainability skills across the sector.

## 4 Taking action to address skills challenges for the industry

Skills challenges are having a significant impact on design and designer fashion employers: they were reported to cause higher operating costs, increase workload on other staff, and reduce long-term growth and investment plans. Employers in this industry were also more likely to report wage inflation as an impact (33%) compared to creative industries employers as a whole (12%).

The vast majority of design and designer fashion employers are taking some action to overcome these skills challenges. Almost a third have increased training for their existing workforce and brought in contract workers.

Still, employers in the sector highlighted a range of practical and financial constraints with regard to training. Almost half pointed to a lack of funds for training, while one in five highlighted that staff are too busy to give training. In addition, one in ten reported that staff are too busy to undertake it.

Design and designer fashion employers emphasised the need for more financial support and stronger collaboration between industry and educators. Industry stakeholders also highlighted the need for clear competency frameworks to guide upskilling, as well as prioritised support in areas such as sustainable design.

# 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 UK government's Creative Industries Sector Plan, and jointly funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Creative Industries Council (CIC), the Skills Audits have sought to provide an evidence base that will enable the creative industries to speak with a united voice on: current and future skill needs; pressing skills shortages, 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; and

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

This is one of the sub-sector reports and covers the design and designer fashion sector.

The sub-sectors highlighted in the Skills Audits deploy the DCMS definition of the creative industries. DCMS uses the following Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) code for the design and designer fashion sub-sector:

**74.10** Specialised design activities

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 (Government Office for Science, 2016; OECD, 2019). The framework

provides a structured way of thinking about the different dimensions of the labour market in terms of skills supply and demand and the way in which they interact with one another (e.g. driving mismatches, shortages and gaps).

The Skills Audits have adopted a five-stage approach:

- **A rapid evidence review** involving high-level review of evidence on skills issues across the creative industries and synthesising skills research in the different UK nations, including from trade bodies and other industry stakeholders;
- **Secondary data analysis** of official, national ('top-down') sources of labour market information to provide a robust, consistent and comparable baseline of employment and skills issues;
- **New primary research** involving the Creative Employer Skills Survey (CESS) which included over 1300 telephone interviews with establishments of over two employees to explore their perspectives on skills priorities, the skills system and talent pipeline;

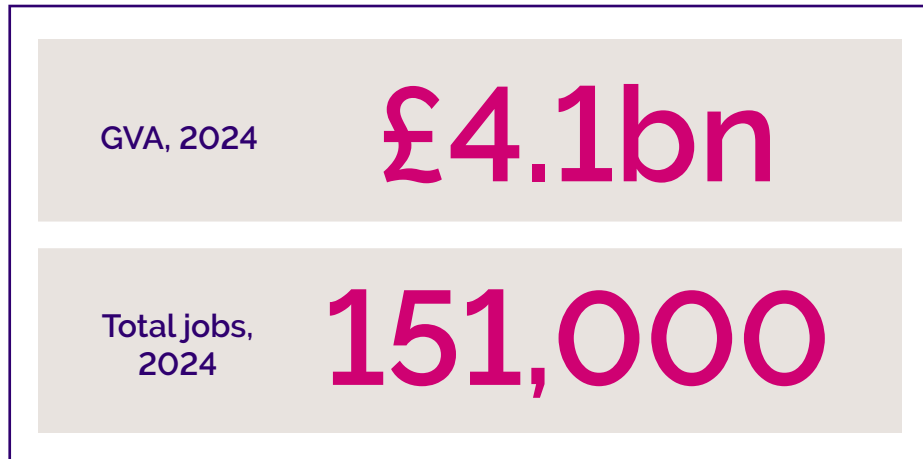
- **A series of stakeholder roundtables** to contextualise the findings and identify and promote shared consensus on skills priorities; these involved representatives from government, national and subnational creative agencies, trade bodies, unions, creative businesses, major cultural organisations, and training/education providers; and
- **Reporting and dissemination** to draw the findings together and use them to enhance policy developments.

The Skills Audits have been overseen by a Project Board comprised of the project funders and members of the research consortium. Day-to-day delivery has been shaped by a Steering Group including representatives from the governments across the UK, as well as industry stakeholders and training providers.

Figure 1: Developing the Creative Industries Skills Audits



## 2. Sector profile and performance



**The design and designer fashion sector is a significant part of the UK’s creative industries. Encompassing fashion and industrial design, as well as graphics, digital and brand agencies, and interior design, the sector generated £4.1bn in GVA in 2024. It also accounted for 151,000 jobs, or around 6% of the creative industries workforce (DCMS, 2024).**

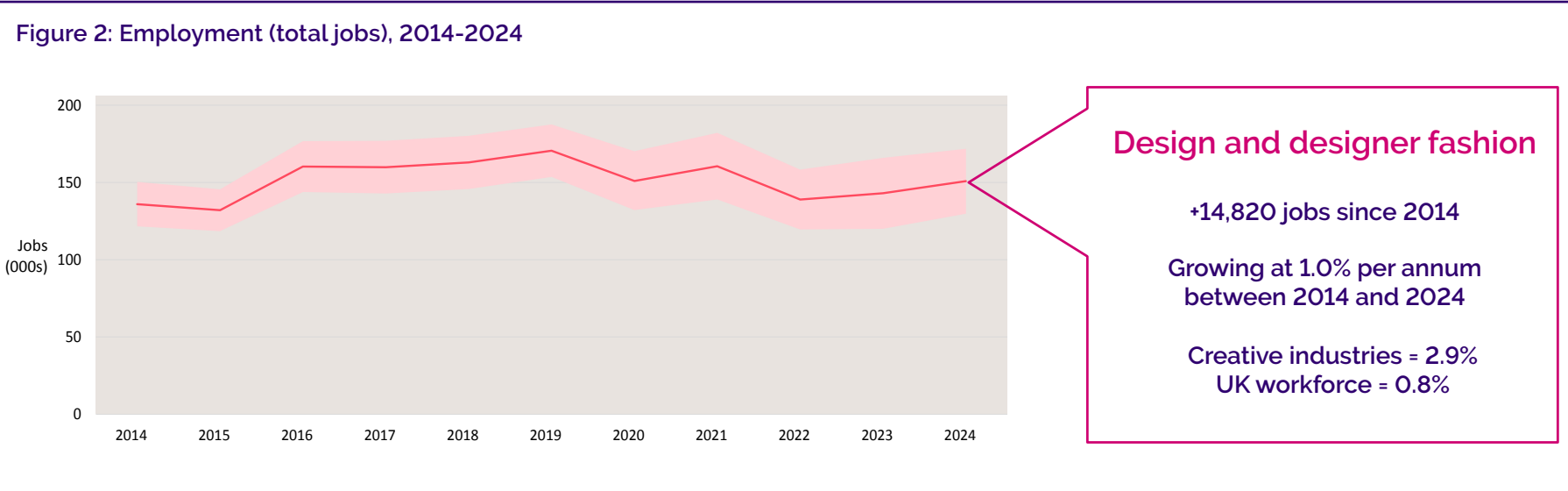
In addition, designers are embedded across other sectors – including other creative sub-sectors – through in-house design and digital teams, as discussed in our main report. For example, a study of the UK’s design economy by the Design Council, which includes a broader set of occupations and industries in its definition of the design sector, estimates that 77% of designers work in non-design industries (Design Council,

2023). This report looks specifically at the workforce in the UK’s design and designer fashion sector as defined by DCMS. It does not include the many designers who also work in other parts of the creative industries and wider economy.

As with other sectors of the creative industries, design and designer fashion comprises a particularly high proportion of microbusinesses with 0–9 employees: 96% of design businesses are microbusinesses, compared to 89% of all UK firms (DCMS, 2024). The sector is also internationally oriented, both with respect to its exports and its reliance on international workers. Notably, 14% of the people working in the sector are non-UK nationals, with the majority coming from the EU (Maioli et al., 2025).

Over the last decade, the average annual employment growth rate has been greater for design and designer fashion (1.0%) than for all industries (0.8%), but less than for the creative industries as a whole (2.9%) (DCMS, 2024).

Growth rates have also been uneven over the period. Between 2013 and 2016, employment in the design sector grew more rapidly than for all industries and the creative industries. However, the sector also experienced rates of decline between 2019–2020 and 2021–2022, potentially reflecting the impacts of Covid-19 and Brexit on the design and designer fashion workforce (Design Council, 2023; UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023).



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

**In line with other parts of the creative industries, work in the design and designer fashion sub-sector is often project-driven or commission-led (Carey, Giles and O'Brien, 2023). Design agencies will often specialise in a particular aspect of design – for instance, the design of commercial retail space, branding or experience design – or in servicing particular parts of the economy, such as healthcare. Consistent with this, levels of self-employment are particularly high in the design and designer fashion sub-sector, at 62% of workers. This is over double the proportion of self-employed workers in the creative industries as a whole (28%) and more than four times the level found in the UK workforce overall (14%).**

The design and designer fashion sub-sector is also more qualified than the UK workforce overall, with over half of workers (53%) holding a degree or equivalent qualification, although this remains below the proportion found in all creative industries (69%).

Previous research has also highlighted the extent to which higher education qualifications are more likely to be held by those in design occupations. For instance, a study commissioned by The Sutton Trust found that 86% of graphic designers have a creative undergraduate degree, as do 73% of those working as product, clothing or related designers (Holt-White et al., 2024).

The design and designer fashion sub-sector also comprises a broad range of occupations. These include design roles in disciplines such as interior design, product and industrial design, digital design, fashion design, and jewellery and accessories, as well as technical and production roles such as sewing machinists and milliners. In addition, the sector includes marketing and commercial roles such as advertising and marketing executives as well as sales assistants for companies selling products directly to consumers.

Importantly, the occupational profile varies across the different parts of the design and designer fashion sub-sector, given the often-specialised nature of design businesses. For instance, the needs of an interior design agency will diverge significantly from a digital brand and marketing agency. This is also reflected in the growing number of job roles and functions we see in the sector, several of which are not yet well captured in official statistics. For example, roundtable participants emphasised the importance of service design roles, which remain poorly understood by candidates and are not reflected in official occupation codes.

As has been highlighted by broader research, the design and designer fashion sector faces challenges with respect to equality, diversity and inclusion. For instance, data from the Labour Force Survey (2022–2024) found that people from working-class backgrounds are underrepresented in the sector compared to the UK workforce overall. Research from sector bodies has also highlighted increased inequalities in representation at senior leadership levels (Design Council, 2023; MBS Group and British Fashion Council, 2023).

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

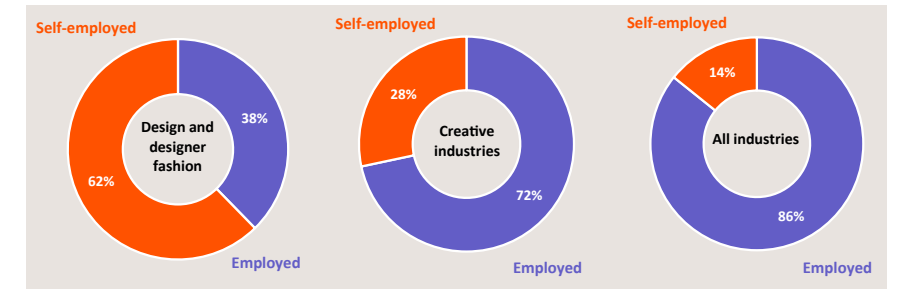


Figure 4: Workforce qualifications (% degree-qualified), 2022–2024

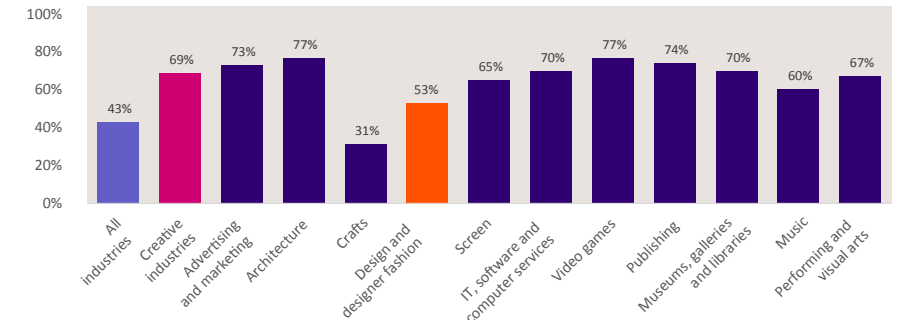
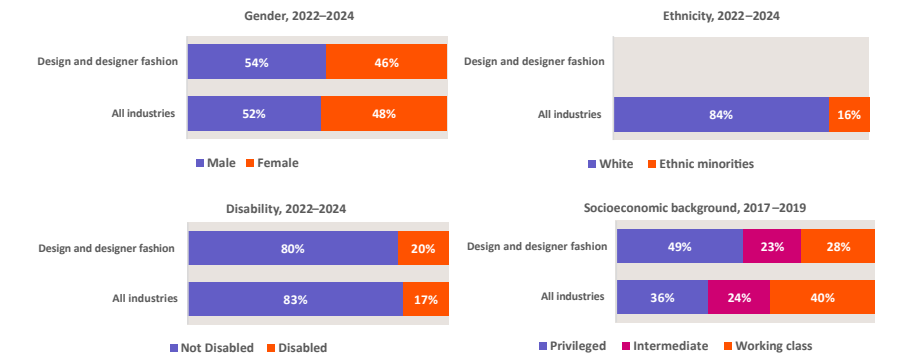


Figure 5: Workforce diversity



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

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

# 4. Recruitment difficulties

The CESS 2025 examined where design employers' skills demands cannot be met, starting with an assessment of the hiring and recruitment difficulties faced by these businesses. The survey found that a significant proportion of employers in the design and designer fashion sector had recruited in the past two years, including agency staff and freelancers (80%). This rate was higher than levels across all creative industries (65%), potentially reflecting the particularly high prevalence of project-based work and use of freelancers and agency staff in the sector.

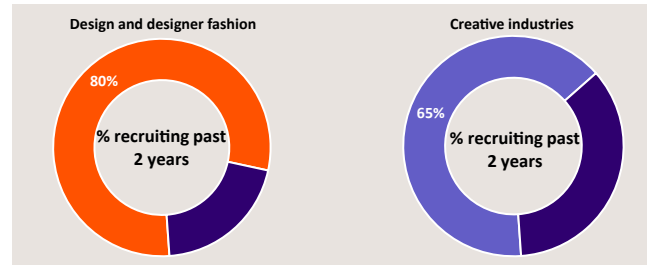
There were parallels in the recruitment methods used by design and designer fashion employers with those found across the creative industries, with word of mouth, online job platforms and websites, and professional networks being the most popular pathways. In contrast to the wider creative industries, word of mouth was the most popular recruitment method in the design sector, with 48% of businesses having used it in the last two years.

The proportion of design and designer fashion employers with hard-to-fill vacancies was slightly below that found across the creative industries (28% vs 32%) but remained high. The main causes of recruitment difficulties reported in the survey largely mirror those found in all creative industries, with lack of required skills being the most common reason given, consistent with recent research on the fashion and textile sector (UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023). In addition, the design sector was slightly more likely to report issues around poor terms and conditions (21% vs 14%) and poor career progression (9% vs 3%).

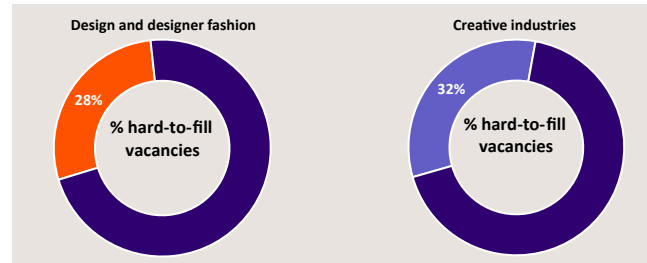
In the roundtables, participants also highlighted issues related to candidates having higher salary expectations, desiring greater work flexibility and being selective about the types of client they want to work for.

Figure 6: Hiring and recruitment difficulties, 2025

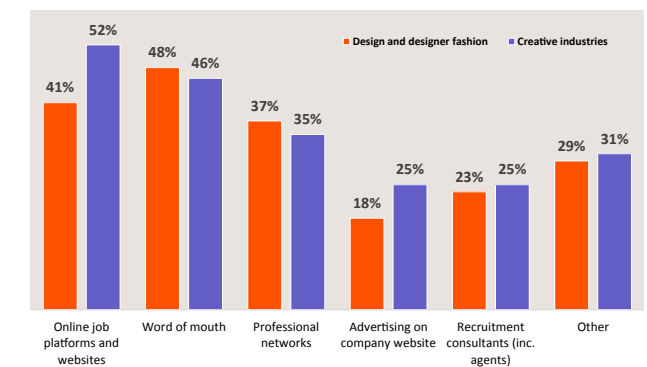
Q: Has this site recruited anyone, including any paid employees, agency staff, and self-employed or freelance workers, in the past two years?  
Base = all establishments (n = 128)



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 = 106)



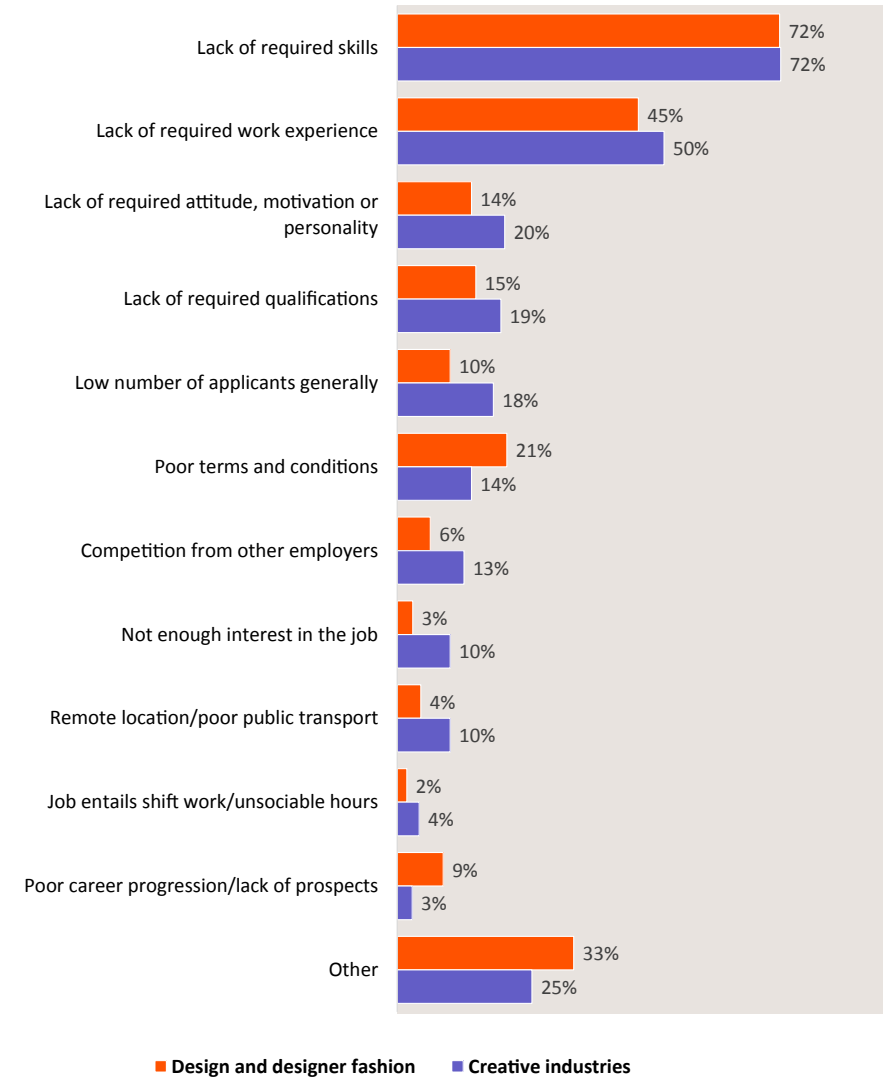
Q: What recruitment methods do you use to fill vacancies at this site?  
Base = establishments that have recruited in the past two years (n = 106)



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 = 40)



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.

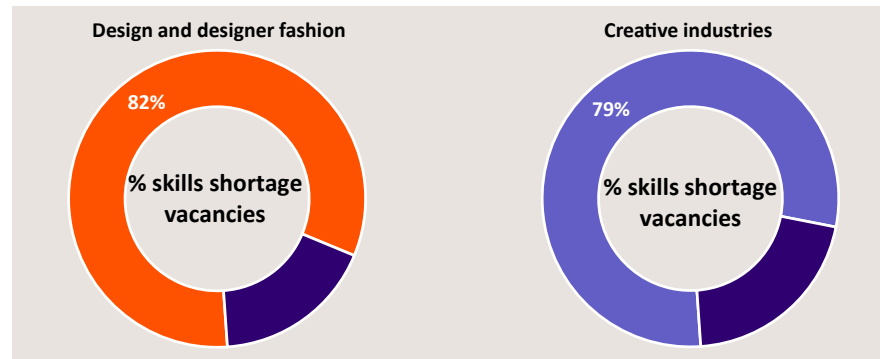
# 5. Skills shortages

The survey also showed that skills shortages are the main causes of hard-to-fill vacancies, with 82% of design and designer fashion employers reporting that their vacancies proved hard to fill for skills reasons. This was higher than the levels reported in all creative industries (79%), consistent with separate analysis by DCMS of data from the UK's Employer Skills Survey in 2022 (DCMS, 2025d).

The majority of design and designer fashion employers who reported finding it difficult to fill roles due to skills shortages were looking for experienced (52%) and expert (19%) workers, higher than the levels found across the creative industries. A significantly smaller share reported skills shortages among new entrants compared to the creative industries (14% vs 23%).

**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 = 40)



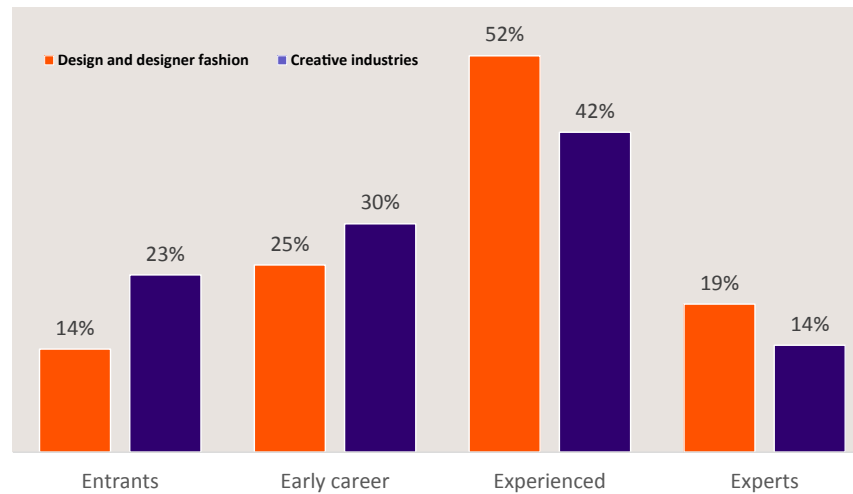
Source: CESS, 2025

Design and designer fashion employers reported that a wide range of occupations were proving hard to fill, including both traditionally 'creative' and 'non-creative' occupations. Consistent with previous research (DCMS, 2025d), this was a noted issue for graphic and multimedia designers (21%), particularly for roles like 'senior creative designer', 'graphic artworker', 'digital brand designer' and 'digital designer'. In addition, advertising and marketing executives – encompassing design strategists and designers working in agencies focused on brand and experience design – were affected (9%), as well as industrial and product designers (7%) – particularly for roles like 'product developer'.

However, this also applied to technical and more general business occupations, such as milliners (7%), business administrators (6%) and sewing machinists (5%).

**Figure 9: Seniority of roles with skills shortages, 2025**

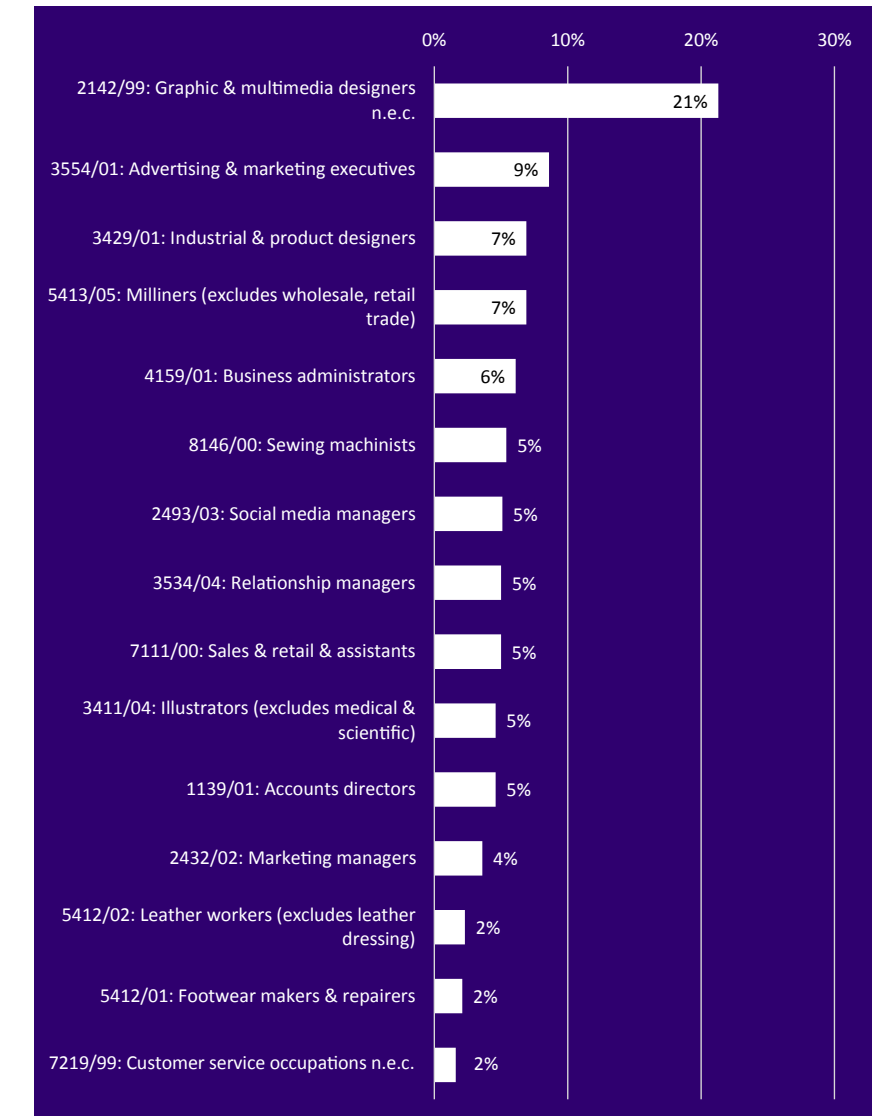
Q: How would you describe the level of experience or seniority of the candidates sought for [skills shortage occupation] vacancies?  
Base = establishments with skills shortage vacancies (n = 34)



Source: CESS 2025

**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 = 40)



Source: CESS 2025

Notes: n.e.c.: not elsewhere classified

## 5. Skills shortages (continued)

The creative industries rely heavily on digital skills. Previous research has highlighted the acute challenges creative employers face in accessing digital and technical skills, especially advanced or specialist skills (Giles, Carey and O'Brien, 2025) – this is equally true for design and designer fashion. The CESS therefore sought to identify the main digital skills that employers have struggled to recruit for.

Surprisingly, given the extent to which digital skills are used across the design sector, the survey found that digital skills shortages in design and designer fashion were less acute compared to the creative industries average. Overall, 90% of design and designer fashion employers reported that it was not difficult to obtain basic or advanced IT skills from applicants for roles marked by skills shortages, compared to 55% for all creative industries (the detailed data has not been presented due to a low sample base). With digital tools and software used extensively in the design and designer fashion sector, this may suggest that employers do not struggle to find workers with relevant digital skills.

Nonetheless, employers did highlight specialist skills shortages related to the use of AI tools in the design process, as well as to general business operations. In addition, roundtable participants pointed to consistent skills

shortages with regard to specialist software such as Adobe Creative Cloud, Figma, SketchUp and CLO 3D. Participants noted that new software or software updates also created a continual requirement for workers to upskill.

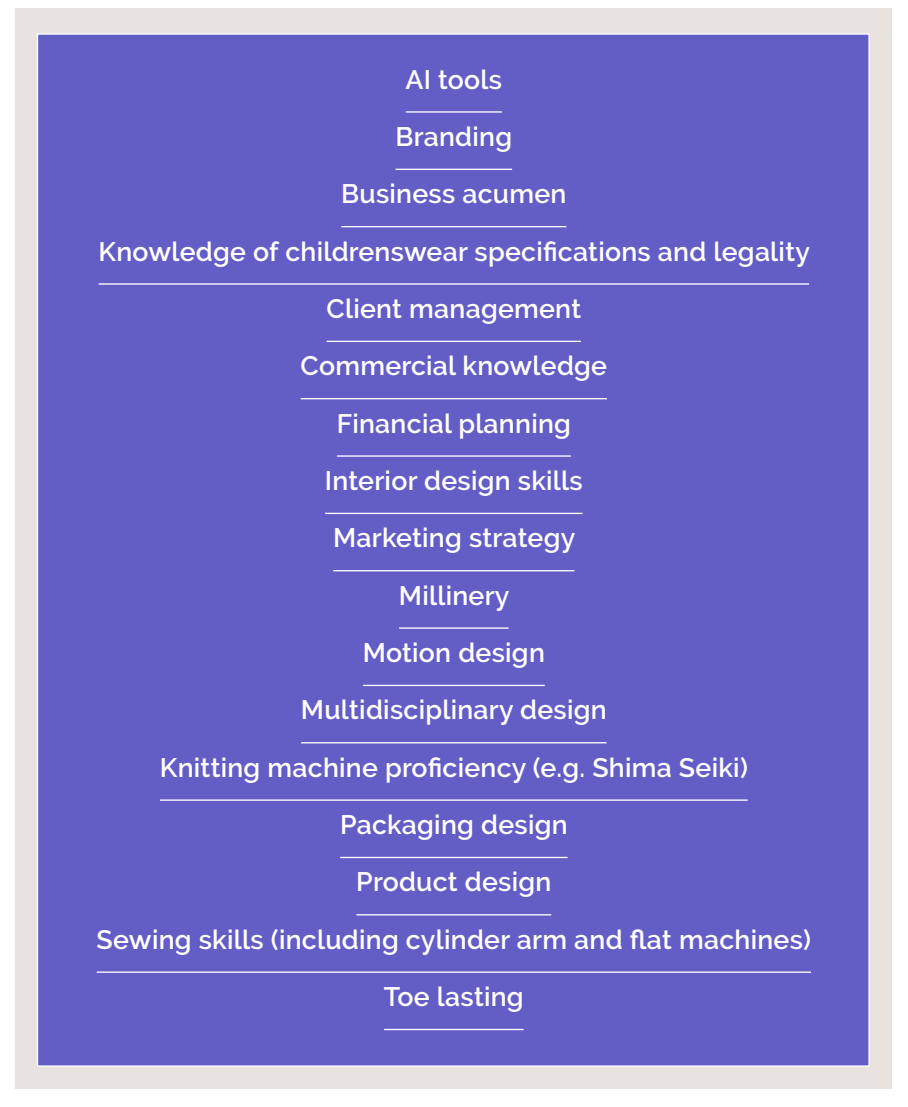
The survey also asked respondents to identify other specialist skills that design and designer fashion employers struggle to recruit for. Consistent with broader research (Skills Development Scotland, 2024), respondents highlighted a range of skills related to: branding and marketing; understanding of requirements and specifications for specialist products such as childrenswear; specialist design skills in areas like product, packaging and interior design; and specialist technical and production skills regarding specific machinery or production practices.

As we discuss on the next page, recent research has also highlighted specialist skills shortages in the sector related to sustainable design – be it minimising the negative environmental impact of a new product or service, designing for positive environmental benefit, or working within the growing market for repair, reuse and resale (UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023; Design Council, 2024; Conner-Crabb et al, 2025).

**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 = 34)



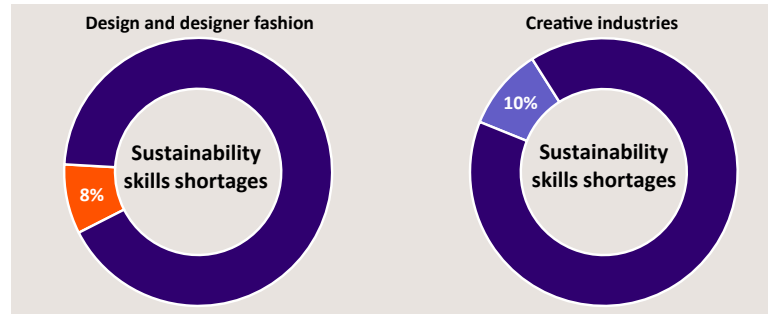
Source: CESS 2025

## 5. Skills shortages (continued)

**Figure 12: 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 = 34)



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.

In an increasingly automated economy characterised by technological change and disruption, employers prize transversal or 'core' skills, which are applicable across roles. In line with previous research (Giles, Carey and O'Brien, 2025), the core skills reportedly most difficult to find for design employers are: speaking (40%), working with others (31%), adapting (22%), and planning and organising (21%). While this reflects trends seen across the creative industries, a far higher share of design employers pointed to difficulties with speaking, listening and creating skills.

The high proportion of freelancers and microbusinesses in the design and designer fashion sub-sector means that workers often need to be multiskilled and capable of delivering several work functions for the business. Survey respondents and participants in the skills audit roundtables highlighted the importance of developing core business and financial management and administration skills alongside a commercial

mindset across occupations in the sector. Others also highlighted the importance of continual learning and investigating, often necessitated by client work that requires knowledge of a new design challenge or market.

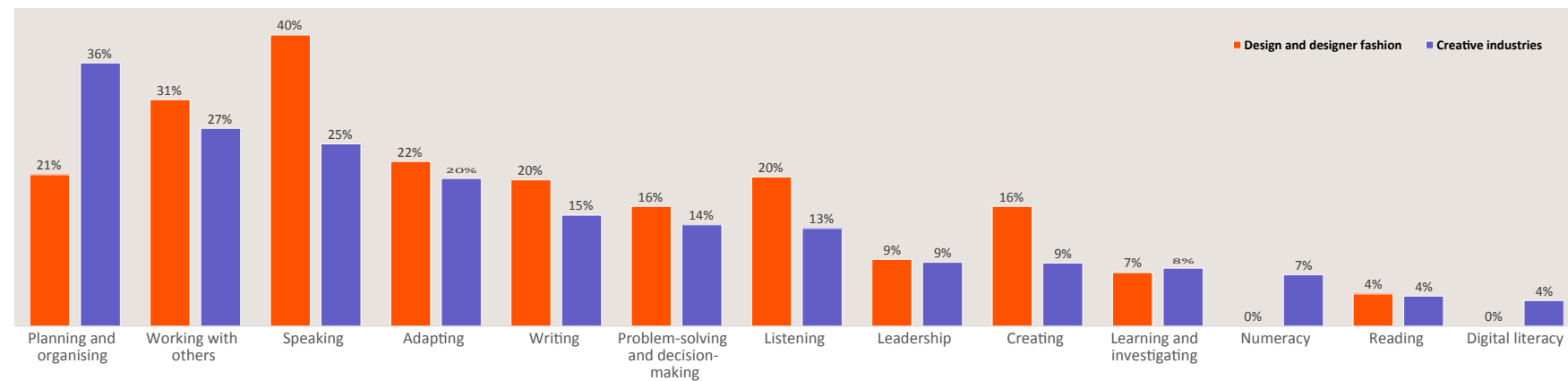
The CESS also provided information about difficulties finding 'green' skills related to environmental sustainability and decarbonisation. Previous research using data from the UK Innovation Survey highlighted that design and designer fashion businesses are more likely to be engaged in innovations for environmental benefit than the UK average (Nana-Cheraa and Roper, 2025). While this may suggest that there would be more design businesses reporting challenges obtaining 'green skills', the levels of sustainability skills shortages in design and designer fashion reported through the CESS 2025 are broadly similar to levels across the creative industries (at 8% vs 10%, respectively). These cover skills such as carbon measurement, life-cycle assessment, circular design and carbon literacy. Roundtable participants also highlighted the importance of skills aligned with the Design Council's (2025b) *Skills for planet blueprint*, as well as 'systems thinking' and 'co-production methodologies'. Furthermore, sector research has pointed to the need to upskill roles related to the growing resale and reuse market, including in repair and recycling practices (Connor-Crabb et al., 2025).

The CESS 2025 provided an employer perspective on the skills it is challenging to obtain from applicants; workers may have a different view on skills shortages. Interestingly, a survey of over 1,000 designers from the Design Council in 2024 on worker perceptions of 'green skills' found that only 43% of respondents rated themselves as 'proficient' or 'expert' in designing for environmental benefit (Design Council, 2024).

**Figure 13: 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 = 34)



Source: CESS 2025

# 6. Skills gaps

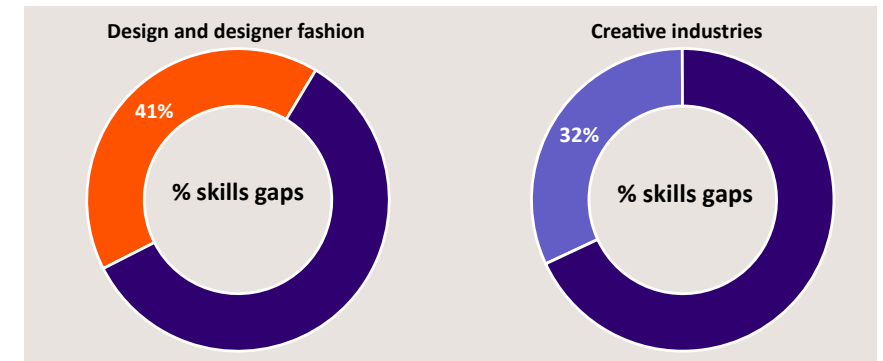
**Skills gaps refer to where employers have skills deficiencies within their current workforce. According to the CESS 2025, 41% of design and designer fashion employers are experiencing skills gaps, a significantly higher proportion than found across the creative industries (at 32%). While skills gaps appear more prevalent here than in previous research using the Employers Skills Survey (2022) – for example, Giles et al. (2025) report just 11% of design employers experiencing skills gaps – this potentially reflects the broader assessment of the workforce provided by the CESS. Indeed, this survey captures agency staff and self-employed and freelance workers alongside in-house employees when reviewing the existence of skills gaps.**

The CESS pointed to a variety of factors contributing to skills gaps in the sector. Consistent with broader research (UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023), the most common factors for design and designer fashion are: having not received appropriate training (36%), the worker being new to the role (32%) or the introduction of new technology (30%). While some of these are transitory issues which will be addressed over time, others, such as the lack of training, may indicate more persistent issues. Notably, past research has highlighted that rates of participation in job-related training in the design sector are some of the lowest seen in the economy (Carey, Giles and O'Brien, 2023). Other reasons highlighted include a lack of relevant prior work experience and commercial acumen.

**Figure 14: 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 = 128)

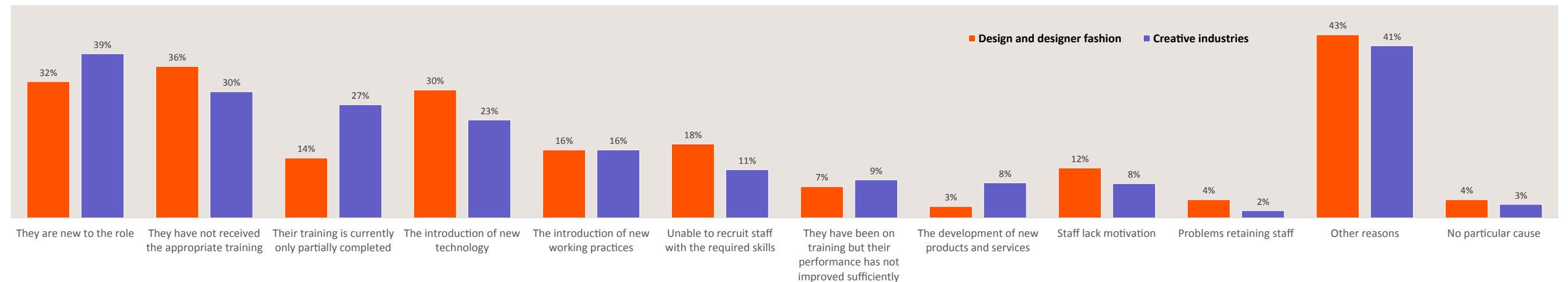


Source: CESS 2025

**Figure 15: 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 = 52)



Source: CESS 2025

## 6. Skills gaps (continued)

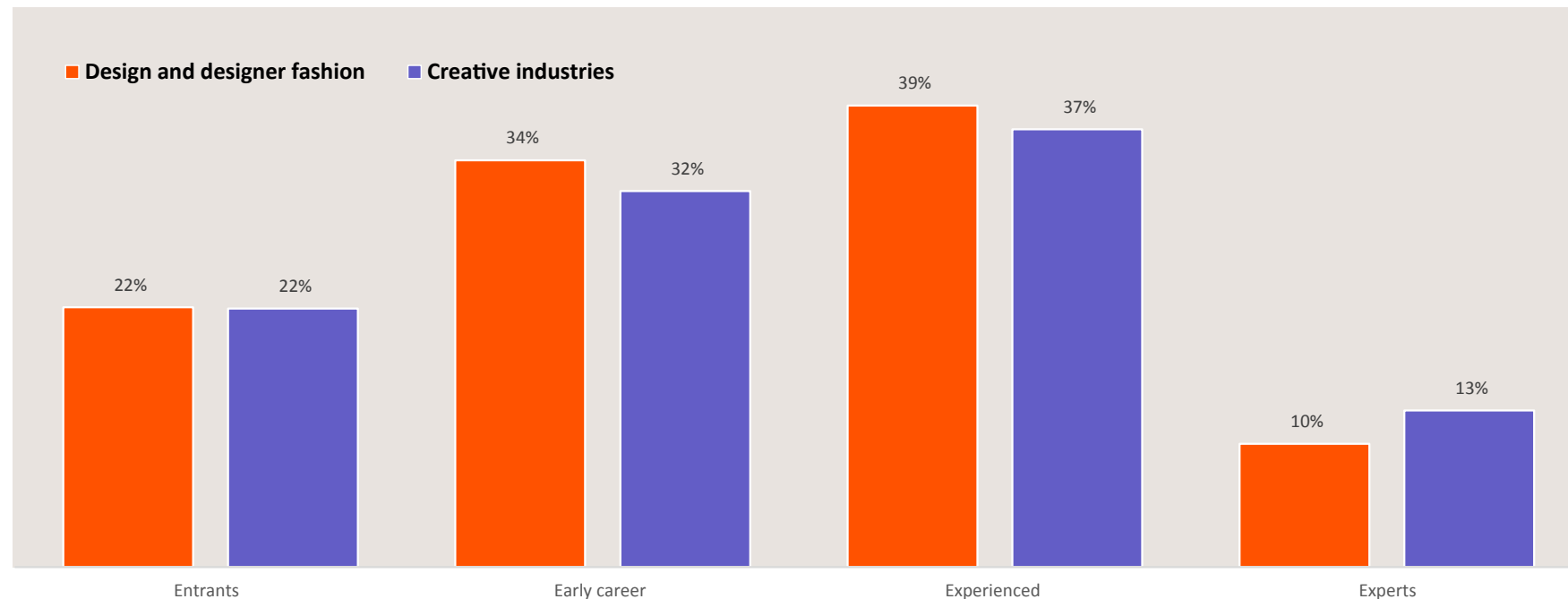
When considering the level of seniority of staff working in roles with skills gaps, responses from design and designer fashion employers largely mirror those found across the creative industries. The largest share of skills gaps was found in experienced roles (39%), slightly above that in the creative industries (37%). That said, a significant proportion of skills gaps were also found in entry-level and early-career roles (at 22% and 34%, respectively).

The CESS also indicated the nature of roles where skills gaps are most common. These include a broad range of creative, technical and

commercially oriented roles in the sector. The most common skills gap occupation was graphic and multimedia designers n.e.c (17%). This includes roles like junior and senior designers and digital designers. Alongside this, rates were high for sales and retail assistants (14%), which also includes sales managers. In addition, roles such as computer analysts and scientists (12%) appear on the top three list, with respondents particularly highlighting skills related to the use of AI.

**Figure 16: Seniority of staff with skills deficiencies, 2025**

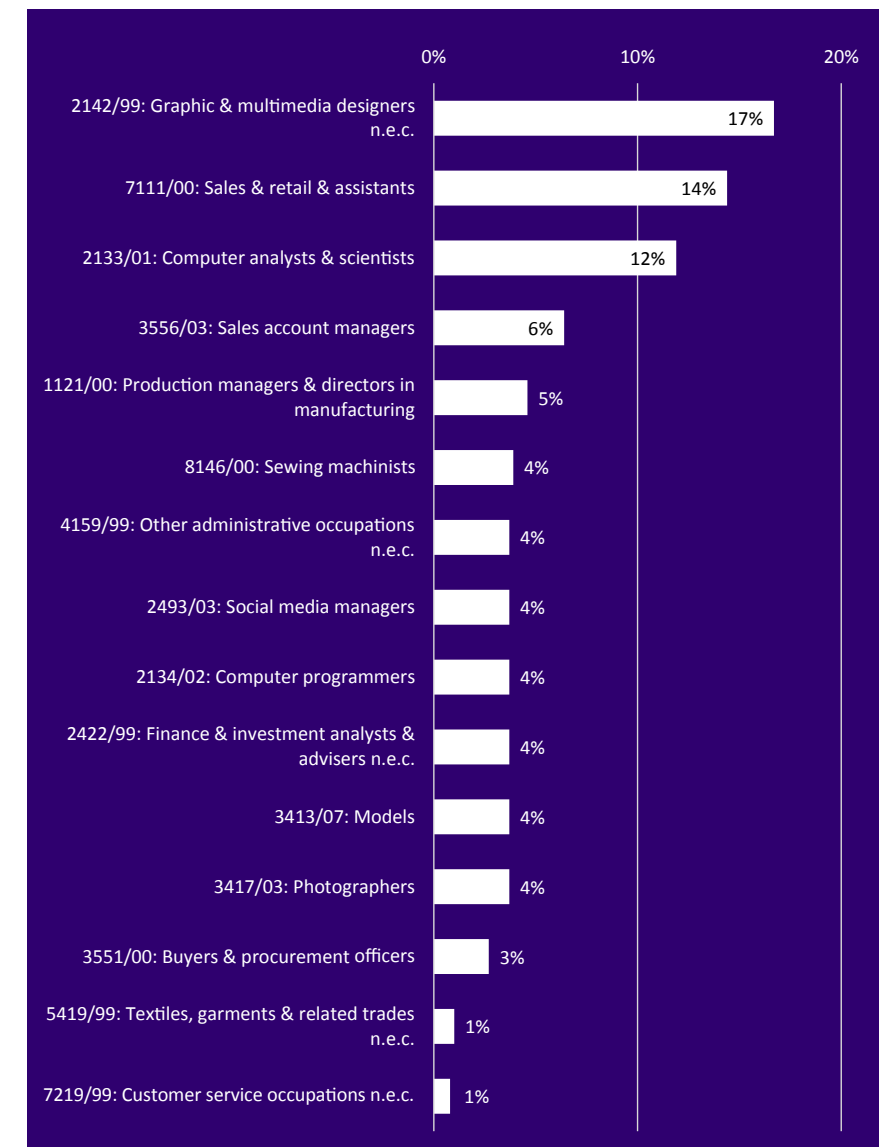
*Q: How would you describe the level of experience or seniority of the staff working as [skills gap occupation]?*  
Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 52)



Source: CESS 2025

**Figure 17: 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 = 52)



Source: CESS 2025

Notes: n.e.c.: not elsewhere classified

## 6. Skills gaps (continued)

As with skills shortages, a key priority has been to understand digital skills gaps across employers' existing workforces, given their critical importance to the creative industries. In contrast to our findings on digital skills shortages, design and designer fashion employers were less likely to report that those working in skills gap occupations were fully proficient in basic and specialist IT skills than across the creative industries (62% vs 67%).

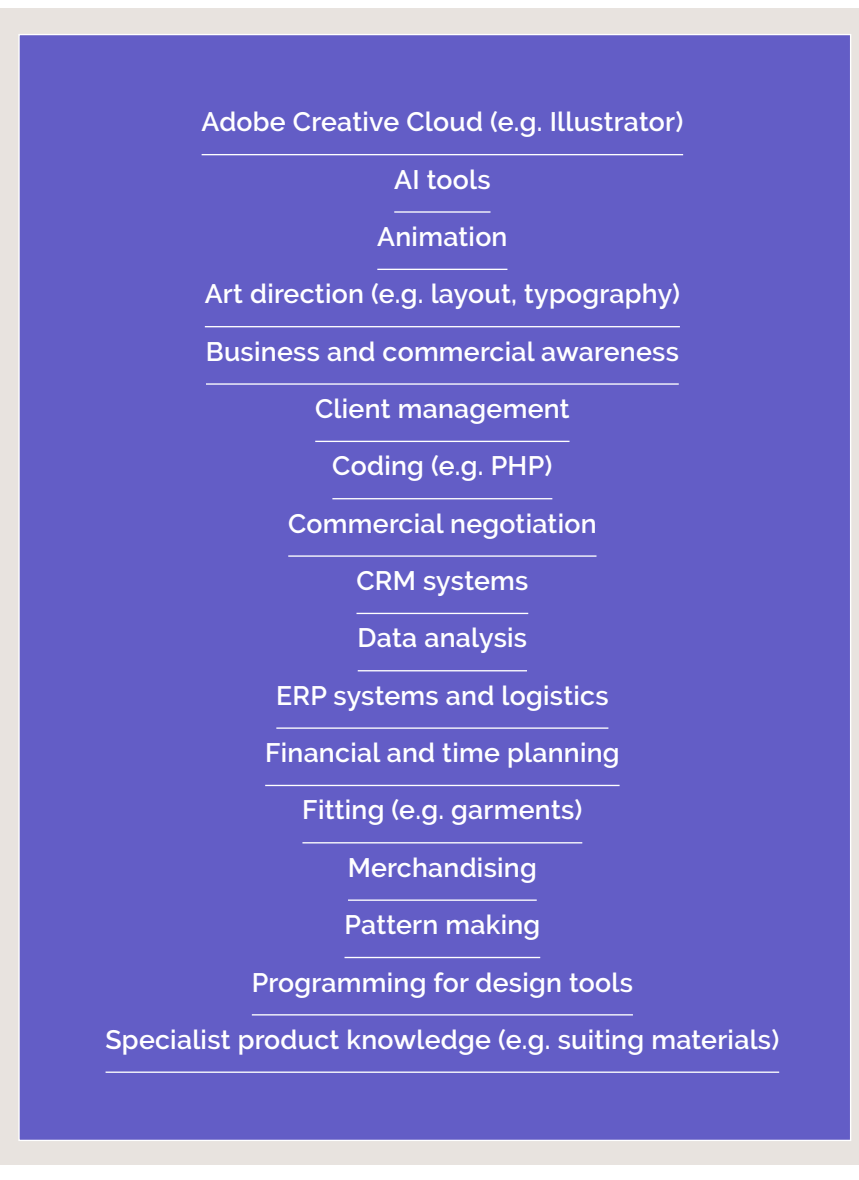
The most commonly cited digital skills gaps for design and designer fashion involved the use of specialist software, hardware or systems (16%), multimedia production (14%) and Microsoft Office (12%). Design employers were more likely to report digital skills gaps in all these areas, as well as in animation and graphic design/design engineering, than for the creative industries overall.

This reflects the extent to which the sector relies on digital tools in the design of new products, clothing and digital content such as graphics, animations and webpages. For instance, respondents highlighted the need for staff to improve their skills and knowledge related to specific software packages like Adobe Creative Cloud, Figma and CLO 3D. In addition, they highlighted skills gaps around customer relationship management (CRM) and enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems.

Alongside digital skills gaps, respondents pointed to a lack of other technical or specialist skills. These vary significantly depending on the activities of the design business; however, common areas highlighted relate to supply chain management, data analytics and coding skills, as well as up-to-date understanding of regulation relevant to the products or services provided by the business.

**Figure 18: Specialist skills gaps, 2025**

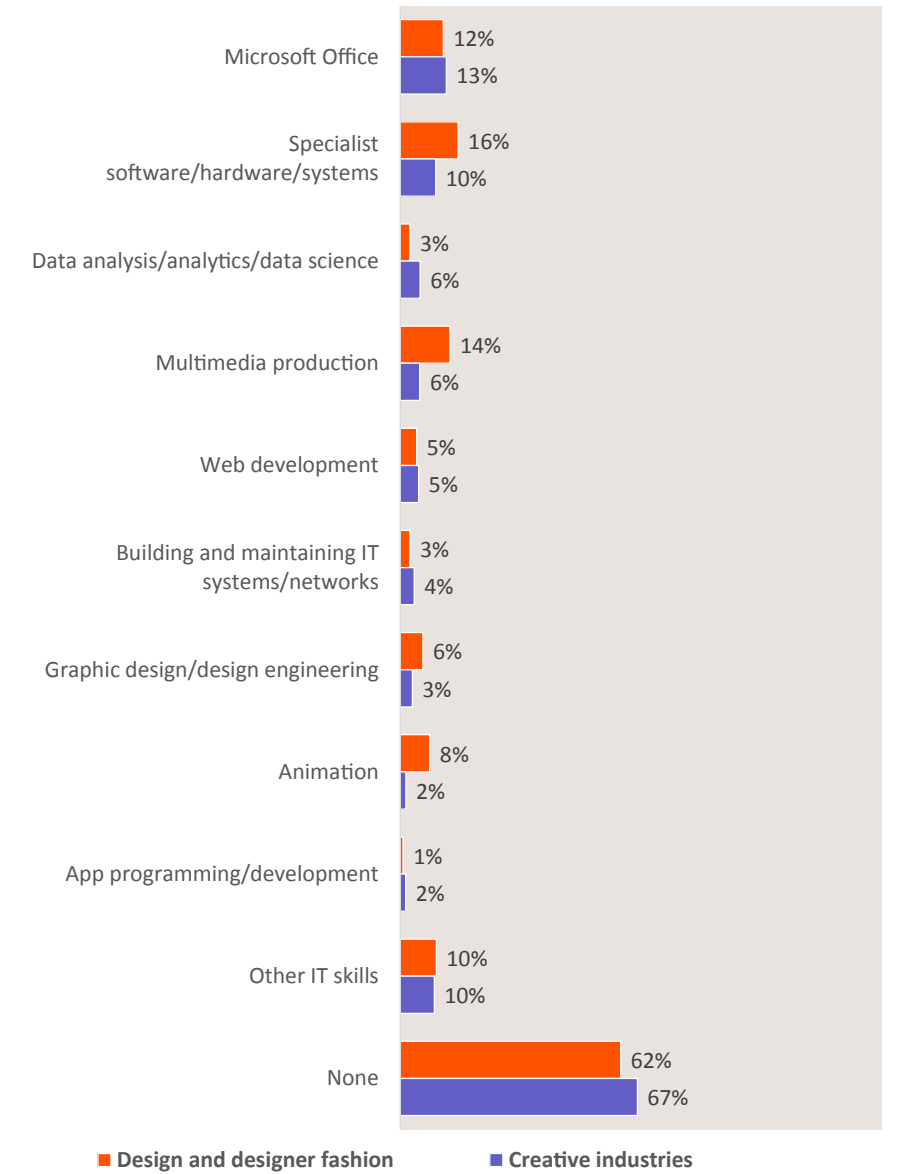
*Q: Do any of your staff working as [skills gap occupation] lack full proficiency in terms of specialist skills or knowledge needed to perform the role? If so, what specific specialist skills or knowledge are they lacking full proficiency in?*  
Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 52)



Source: CESS 2025

**Figure 19: 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 = 52)



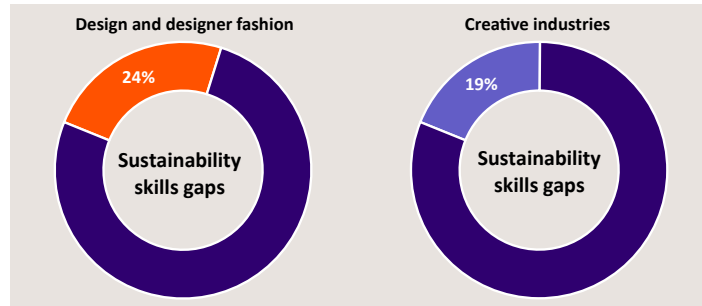
Source: CESS 2025

## 6. Skills gaps (continued)

**Figure 20: 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 = 52)



Consistent with trends across the creative industries, design and designer fashion employers found various transferable or 'core' skills deficient in their existing workforce. These most commonly involved: adapting (38%), planning and organising (30%), working with others (24%), and listening (17%). In all cases, these deficiencies were reported at higher levels in design and designer fashion than across all creative industries, with design employers significantly more likely to report 'adapting' as a skills gap.

Roundtable participants also highlighted that a key skills gap for the sector is the ability to continuously learn and develop new skills and knowledge as a core part of the design process. This is consistent with 15% of design employers reporting this as a skills gap in the survey, compared with 8% for the creative industries overall.

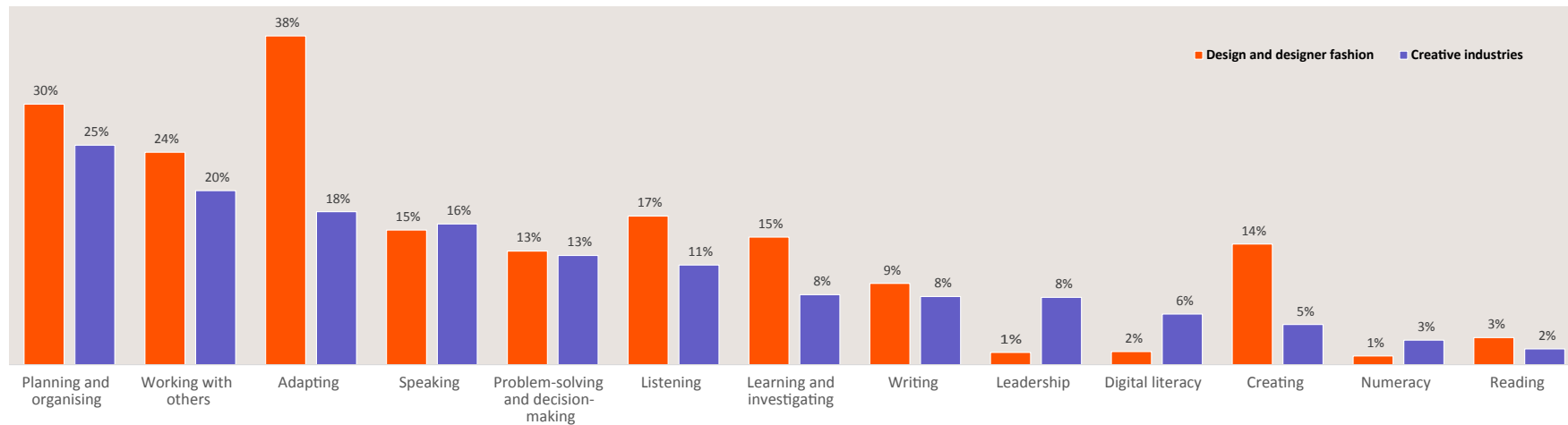
Just like with digital skills, we found a higher proportion of employers highlighting skills gaps around environmental sustainability and decarbonisation in their existing workforce compared to skills shortages: 24% of design and designer fashion employers reported sustainability skills gaps (vs 19% across the creative industries). Broader research has demonstrated the extent to which sustainability is a growing concern and focus for design and designer fashion business models (Nana-Cheraa and Roper, 2025; Design Council, 2025a; Schneider, 2023) and so this higher proportion is not surprising. Survey respondents highlighted sustainability skills gaps in areas including 'carbon literacy', 'sustainable web and product design' and 'supply chain management', which have also been highlighted by research on the sector (e.g. see UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023; Design Council, 2025b).

The higher level of sustainability skills gaps in the design and designer fashion sector compared to the average for the creative industries is consistent with broader research highlighting the 'green skills gap' for the sector. Given their smaller size on average, in many design businesses there is no dedicated 'sustainability' role in the organisation, requiring designers and other occupations to hold business-relevant green skills. A recent survey of 1068 designers in the UK by the Design Council found that only 46% of respondents perceived themselves to be proficient or expert in designing for environmental benefit, with this rate decreasing even further for freelancers – only 34% reported proficiency or expertise in designing for environmental benefit (Design Council, 2024).

**Figure 21: 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?*

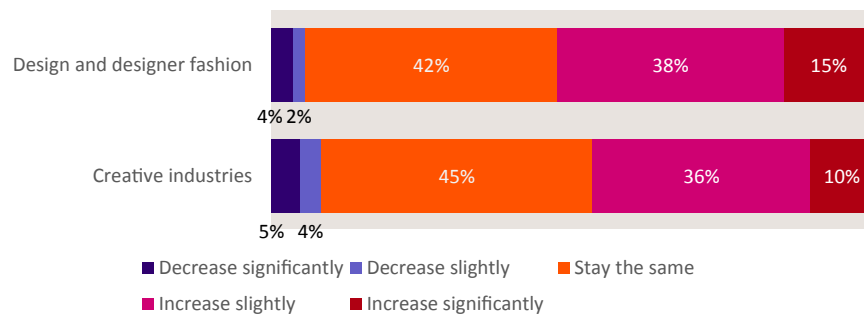
Base = establishments with skills gaps (n = 52)



# 7. Future jobs and skills needs

**Figure 22: 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 = 128)



Source: CESS 2025

**The survey asked about employers' expectations for the future and whether they anticipate the need to increase levels of employment and/or upskill their workforce in the next three to five years. The results point to a fairly high degree of ambition in the creative industries, and especially in the design and designer fashion sector.**

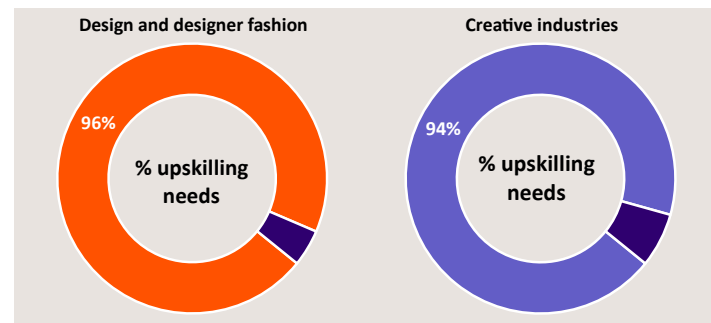
The majority (53%) of design and designer fashion employers reported expecting to increase their number of staff (including freelancers and agency staff), higher than the percentage seen across the creative industries (46%). Furthermore, the vast majority (96%) of design and designer fashion firms that expect to grow staff numbers also anticipate a need to upgrade the skills of their workforce over the next three to five years.

A closer examination of the main drivers of upskilling needs identified by employers shows considerable focus on technological advancement and innovation. This is seen through many citing the introduction of new technologies or equipment, particularly new developments in AI and their impact on business practices and workflows (90%), the development of new products and services (76%), and the introduction of new working practices (63%). The introduction of new legislative or regulatory requirements was reported less frequently than across the wider creative industries (51% vs 63%) but still at significant rates. Many respondents also highlighted that they anticipated new AI tools such as Midjourney and ChatGPT would require them to upskill their workforce.

Roundtable participants highlighted that this disruption is not entirely new, with tools like Canva and Affinity already having had an effect on the sector. At the same time, they asserted that in some parts of the sector there is a growing premium for 'human-generated' design.

**Figure 23: Employer expectations for upskilling in next three to five years, 2025**

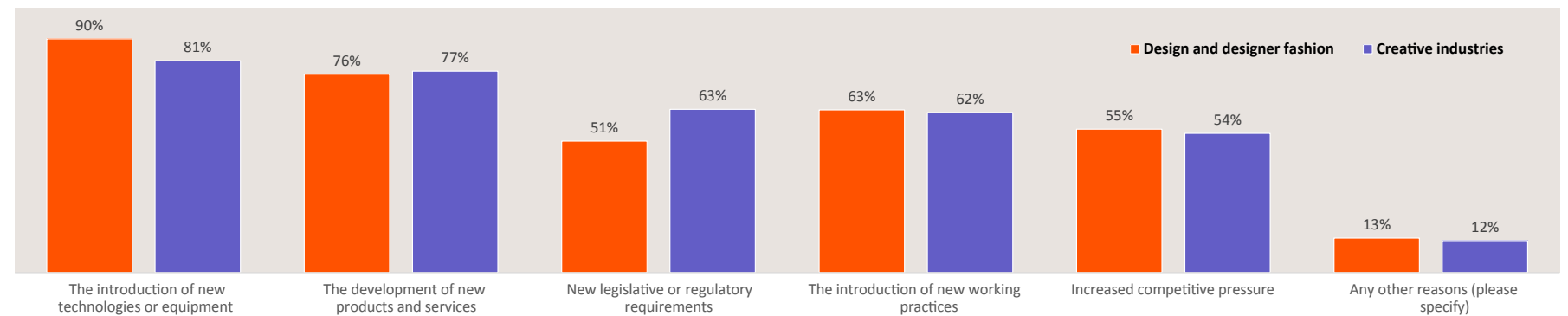
*Q: Over the next three to five years, do you expect that any staff at this site will need to acquire new skills or knowledge? ≠ 'None'*  
Base = establishments expecting to increase staff numbers in future (n = 63)



Source: CESS 2025

**Figure 24: 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 with upskilling needs (n = 63)



Source: CESS 2025

## 7. Future jobs and skills needs (continued)

Alongside looking at drivers of skills needs, the CESS 2025 looked at the nature of new roles that employers expect to require in the next three to five years.

Figure 25 presents the existing roles employers believe are likely to grow and increase in demand in future. The most common occupations identified were graphic and multimedia designers (25%), web designers (10%), clothing and fashion designers (9%), and industrial and product designers (9%), highlighting the importance of creative roles in the future workforce. However, more general business support roles were also seen as likely to increase in the next three to five years, including sales and retail assistants (6%) and sales account managers (5%), which are particularly important to specific parts of the sector (British Fashion Council and Oxford Economics, 2022).

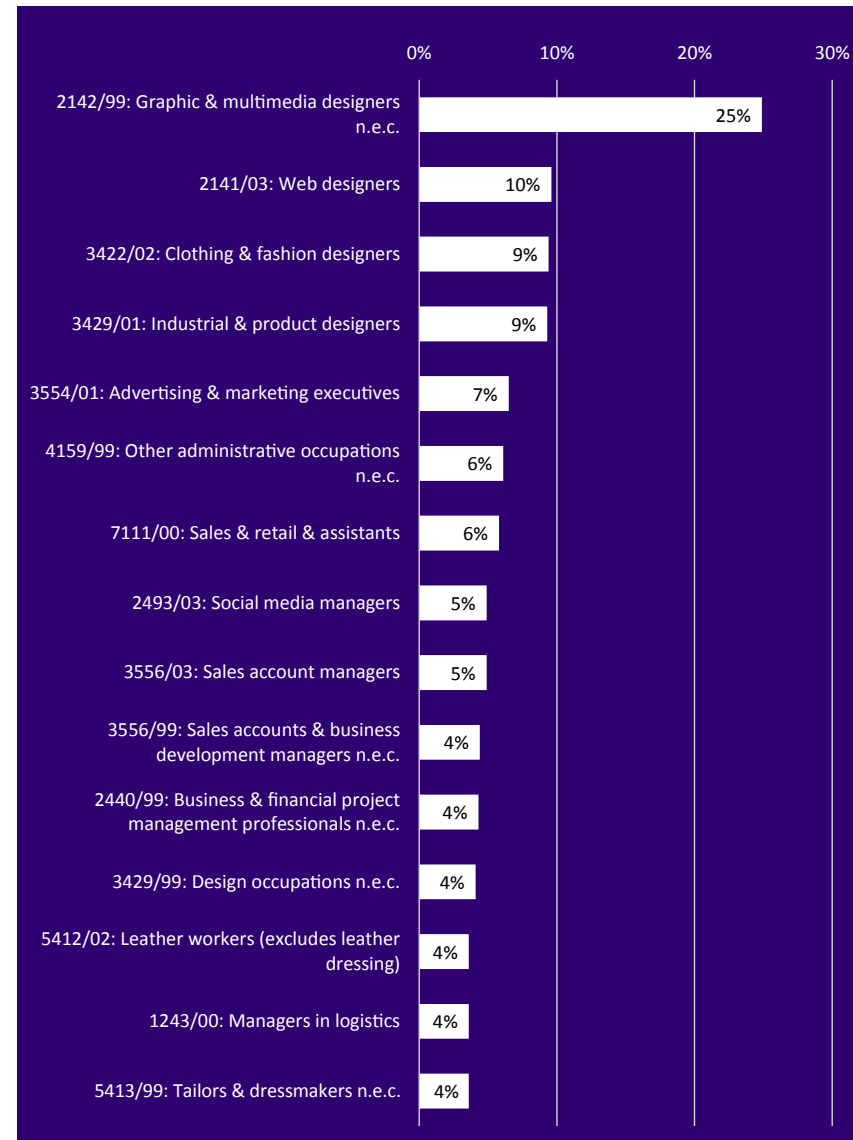
In addition, the survey asked employers which occupations staff will have the greatest need to acquire new knowledge or skills for. We found some variation on this front, with the most common roles cited including graphic and multimedia designers (29%), managers and directors in the creative industries (9%), and advertising and marketing executives (7%). It is notable that, with respect to occupations with upskilling needs, employers cited a particularly high proportion of managerial-level and highly skilled creative occupations.

A limitation of the survey is that it did not allow us to examine newer occupation types for which SOCs do not yet exist. For instance, the Design Council has previously highlighted the extent to which service designers are not represented in existing SOC codes (Design Council, 2022), a point that was also raised by participants of the roundtables that accompanied the survey.

**Figure 25: 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 that expect staff numbers to increase (n = 63)



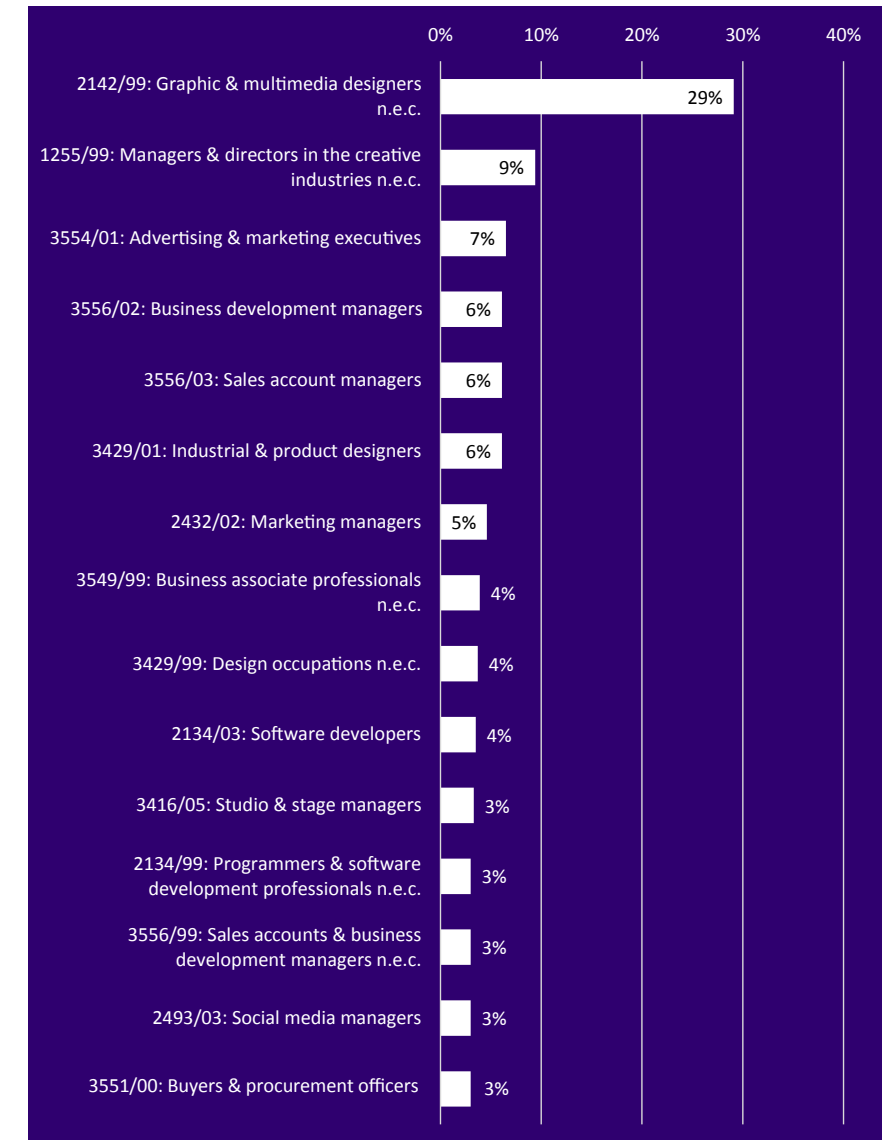
Source: CESS 2025

n.e.c. Not Elsewhere Classified

**Figure 26: 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 = 61)



Source: CESS 2025

n.e.c. Not Elsewhere Classified

## 7. Future jobs and skills needs (continued)

The CESS 2025 asked design employers about the main skills they anticipate staff will need to acquire in the future, while also enabling comparison between the design and designer fashion sector and all creative industries. The results indicate the main specialist skills or knowledge design employers think their workforce will need to continue to perform their roles in future.

As with broader skills deficiencies, a critical challenge for creative industries employers lies in keeping digital skills up to date, especially advanced and specialist skills.

While design employers were more likely than all creative industries employers to report that they do not expect staff to need to acquire new IT skills over the next few years (50% vs 37%), we nonetheless found several key digital skills design employers anticipate needing their staff to acquire in the future.

These tend to be domain-specific, relating to the use of digital technologies to support the production of design products and services, as well as the production of digital content, be it graphics, illustrations or multimedia. The most commonly cited digital skills needs involve specialist software/hardware (21%), graphic design/design engineering (15%), multimedia production (10%) and animation (6%). Participants particularly highlighted upskilling needs related to software packages such as Adobe Creative Cloud, Figma, CLO 3D, Vectorworks, and other motion graphics and film editing software.

Overwhelmingly, employers highlighted the need for upskilling with respect to generative AI, particularly software like ChatGPT and image generation programmes like Midjourney. Design and designer fashion employers also pointed to the need for increased understanding of AI and how it can be integrated into workflows to improve productivity at management and leadership levels.

**Figure 27: 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 = 61)

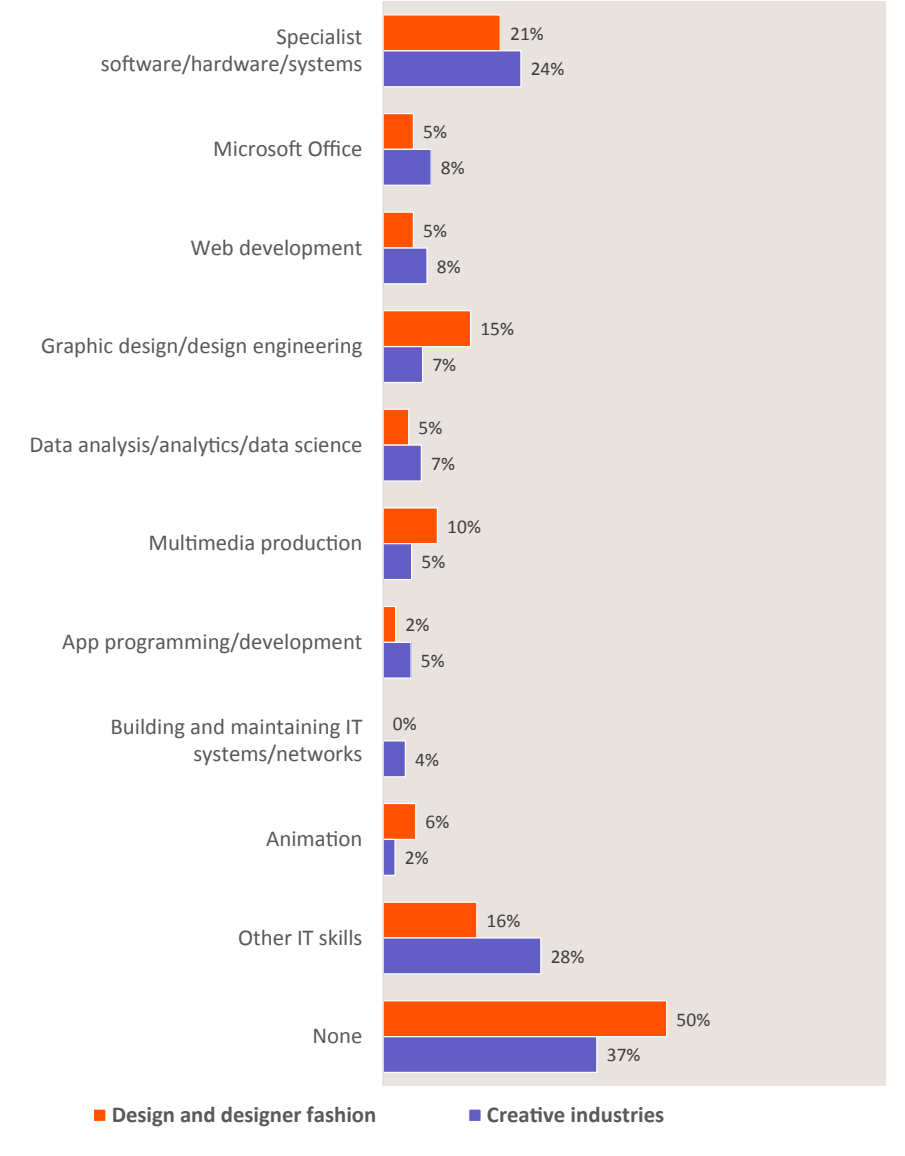


Source: CESS 2025

**Figure 28: 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 = 61)



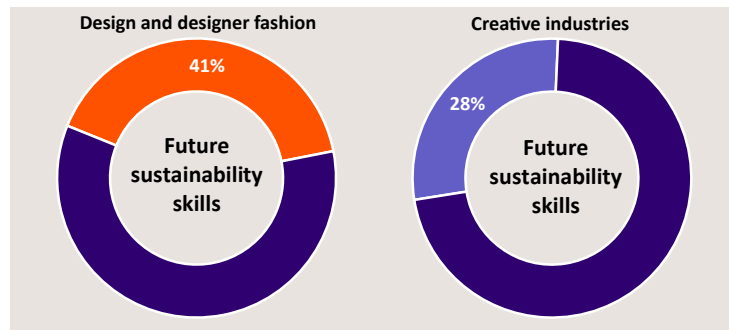
Source: CESS 2025

## 7. Future jobs and skills needs (continued)

**Figure 29: 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 = 61)



Design and designer fashion employers also highlighted a range of transversal or 'core' skills that will need to be acquired in the next three to five years. These correspond to currently identified skills gaps, with the most commonly cited being adapting (28%), working with others (24%), listening (24%) and speaking (21%).

Alongside skills related to communication and collaborative working, design and designer fashion employers were also more likely to report future skills needs related to learning and investigating (17%), leadership (16%) and creating (16%) compared to the creative industries as a whole.

Given that employers in this sub-sector are more likely than the creative industries overall to report new technologies as drivers of upskilling needs, it is notable that employers in this sector are far more likely than all creative industries employers to highlight core skills associated with adapting, learning and creating.

Climate change is one of several megatrends shaping the creative industries and workers across the sector are expected to need to acquire new sustainability and carbon-neutral skills in the next three to five years. A higher level of design and designer fashion employers (41%) that expect to grow staff numbers also anticipate a need to upgrade sustainability or green skills in the future, higher than creative industries employers overall (28%). This is unsurprising, given growing regulatory pressure across key markets for UK design and designer fashion as well as growing demand for sustainable design and fashion, including the resale, repair and reuse market (Schneider, 2023).

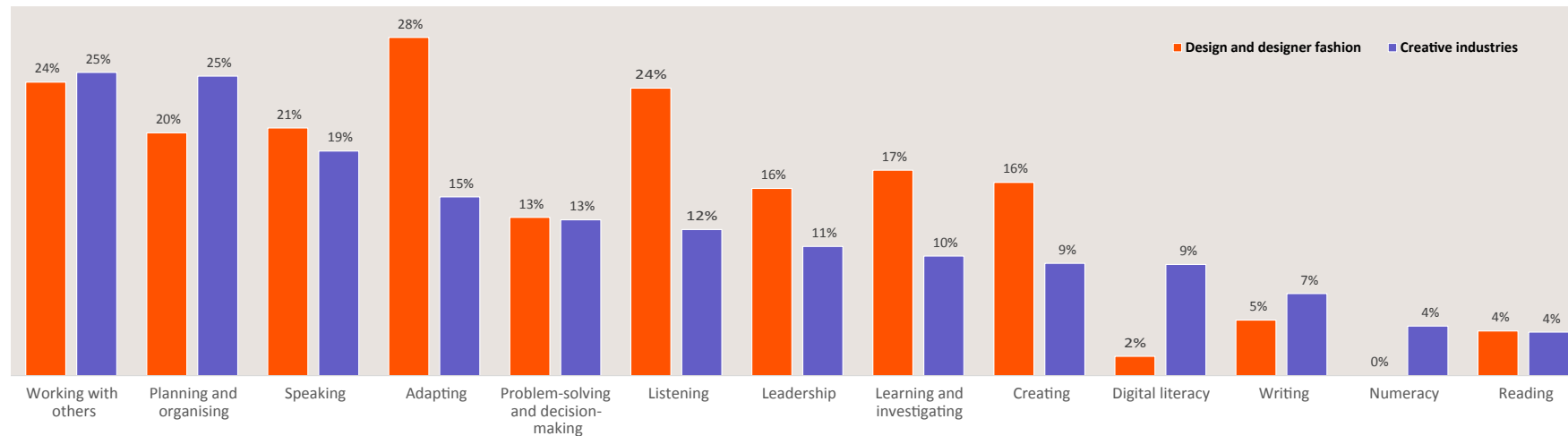
Roundtable participants further highlighted the growing demand for 'design for planet skills' which require traditional knowledge of sustainability design and circular economy principles alongside understanding of systems thinking and collaboration.

In the design and designer fashion sector, there have also been growing efforts to disclose and address the environmental footprint of the sector's supply chains, such as through the Fashion Transparency Index. In addition, new sustainability standards and regulations apply to designed products and services, such as extended producer responsibility in the UK. Increased consumer interest in sustainability and reuse have also encouraged new innovations and business models relying on sustainable practices (Schneider, 2023). Research by the Design Council found that 71% of designers expect demand for green design skills to increase over the next three years (Design Council, 2024), with the UK Fashion and Textiles Association also highlighting lack of knowledge and skills being a key barrier to increasing sustainable practices in the fashion and textiles sector (UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023).

**Figure 30: 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 = 61)



# 8. Employer investment in skills

Skills challenges are having an acute impact on employers in the design and designer fashion sector. The most commonly cited impacts of skills challenges for the sector were: increased operating costs (50%), which were reported at over twice the rate for all creative industries; increased workload for other staff (36%); reduced long term growth or investment plans (36%); difficulties meeting deadlines (33%); and wage inflation (33%). Wider research has also highlighted the negative impact skills challenges are estimated to be having on companies' profitability and ability to meet growing demand in areas like sustainable design (Design Council, 2024; UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023).

Despite this, the vast majority of design and designer fashion employers are taking some action to overcome skills challenges, with only 14% of design employers reporting they were doing nothing (compared to 18% across all creative industries). Design and designer fashion employers were also significantly more likely to bring in contractors compared to all creative industries (30% vs 17%).

With respect to upskilling and retaining their existing workforce, design employers were more likely than the creative industries as a whole to redefine existing jobs (13% vs 7%) and increase salaries (12% vs 7%). They were also significantly less likely to increase training for the existing workforce (32% vs 47%) or to expand trainee/apprenticeship programmes (7% vs 15%). Respondents also highlighted other activities they undertook to address challenges, such as providing mentorship and peer-learning opportunities. Others reported that they and their teams were working longer hours.

Figure 31: 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 = 74)

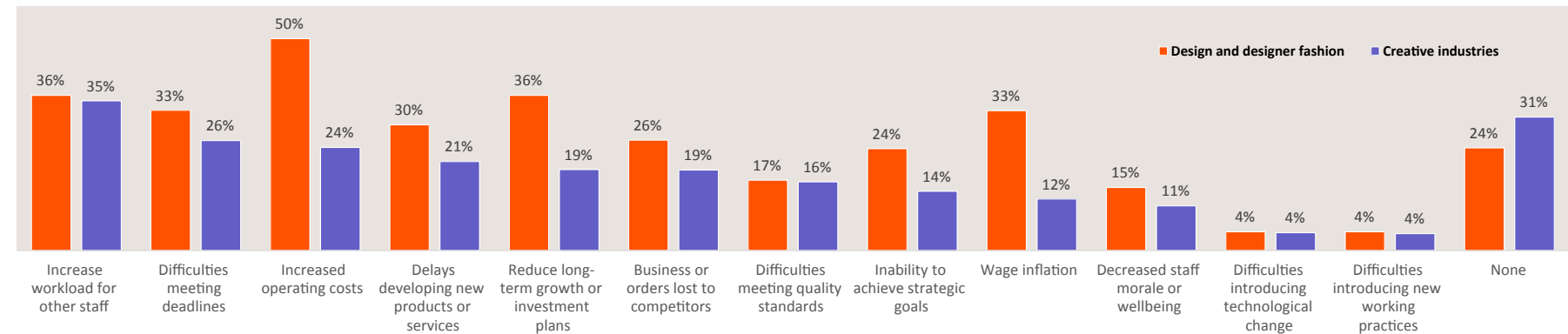
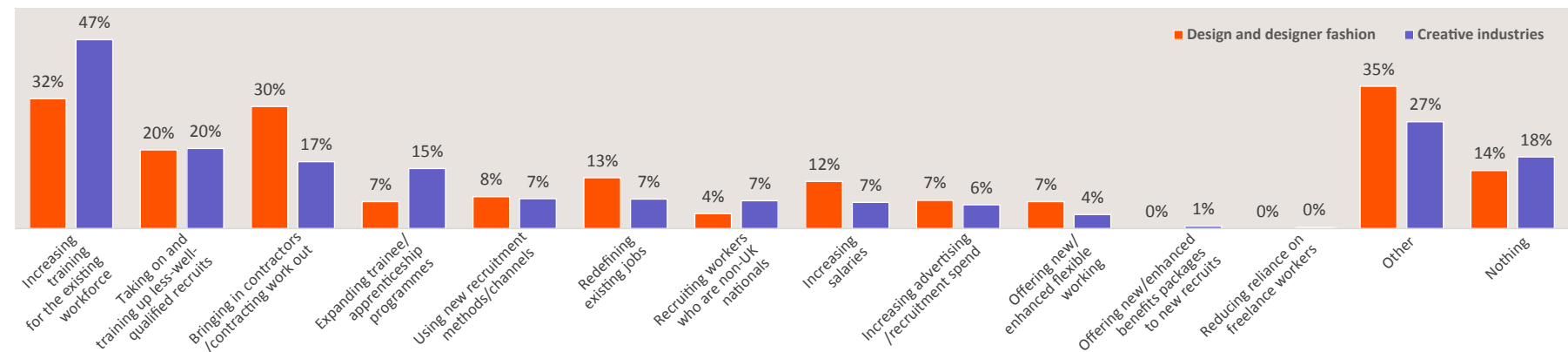


Figure 32: Response to skills challenges, 2025

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

Base = establishments with skills shortages or skills gaps (n = 74)



Source: CESS 2025

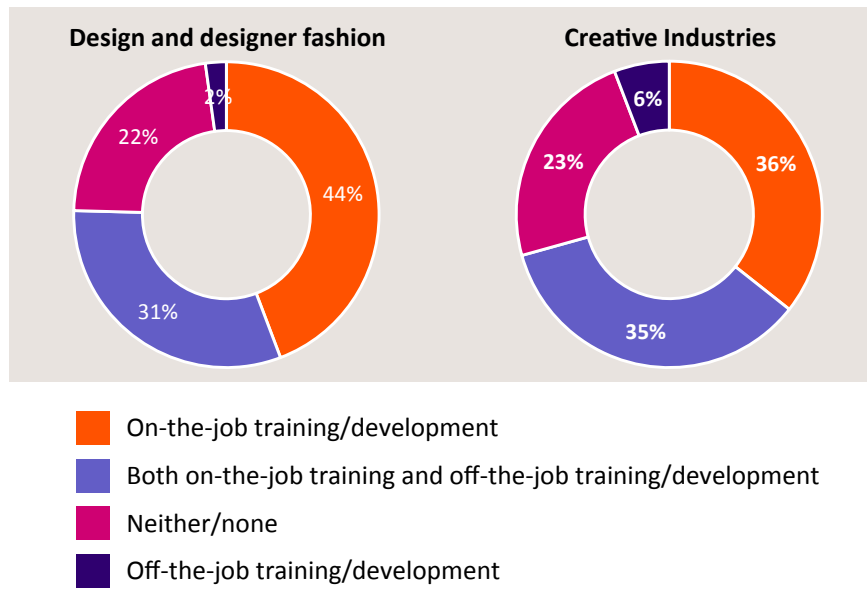
## 8. Employer investment in skills (continued)

In reflecting on the skills challenges employers are facing and the anticipated need to develop new skills in the years ahead, an important question is whether creative industries employers are investing sufficiently in up- and reskilling their workforce.

The CESS 2025 provided an indication of the provision of training arranged or funded by design and designer fashion employers relative to the creative industries over the last twelve months. The figures summarised here include training not only for employees but also for agency staff and self-employed or freelance workers, although it does not allow us to disaggregate findings for these different types of workers.

**Figure 33: Employer training provision, 2025**

*Q: What, if any, training has your organisation arranged or funded over the past twelve months?*  
Base = all establishments (n = 128)



Source: CESS 2025

Positively, the survey data pointed to higher levels of training according to this broader definition than indicated elsewhere (e.g. see the Employer Skills Survey 2022, discussed in Giles, Carey and O'Brien, 2025, and Carey, Giles and O'Brien, 2023). Indeed, around four fifths of firms in the design and designer fashion sector (78%) reported providing some kind of development – a similar share to that found in the creative industries overall.

The most common type of training arranged was on-the-job training (44%), which was seen at higher levels compared to the creative industries as a whole (36%). Notably, a significant proportion of employers (31%) also organised a mix of on-the-job and off-the-job training.

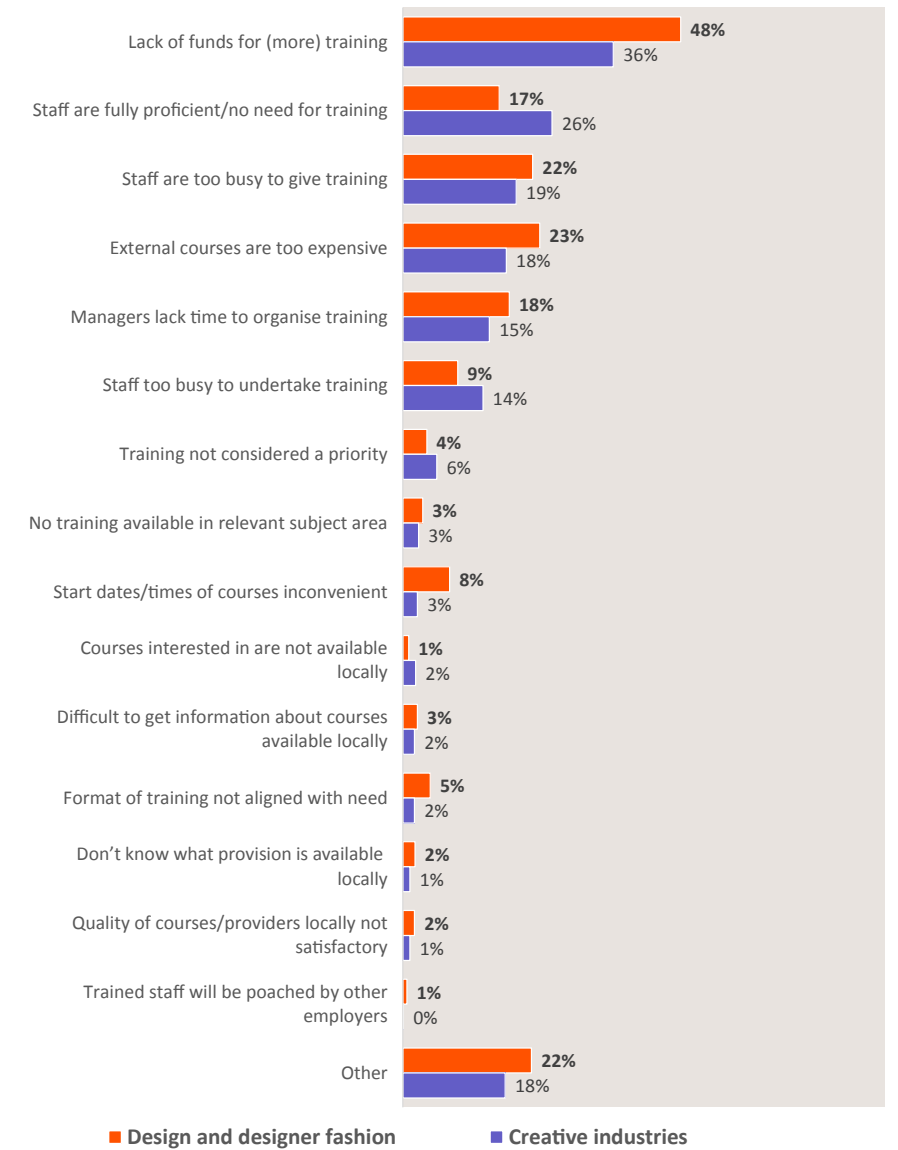
A closer examination of barriers to providing more training for staff highlights specific obstacles inhibiting provision. The most commonly cited barriers for design and designer fashion employers were lack of funds (48%), external courses being too expensive (23%) and staff being too busy to give training (22%). These obstacles were more prevalent for design and designer fashion firms than for the creative industries overall.

In addition, the survey highlighted issues around existing provision not meeting industry needs, as has been noted in broader research (UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023). Design and designer fashion employers were more likely to say that the start dates/times of courses are inconvenient and that the format of the training is not aligned with their needs compared to the creative industries average.

Roundtable participants further pointed to the need for stronger partnerships between industry and educators to align skills provision with business needs. In addition, they called for clearer competency frameworks for the different parts of the sector, which could clearly set out the skills needed at each level and outline how employers could acquire them.

**Figure 34: 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 = 128)



Source: CESS 2025

## 8. Employer investment in skills (continued)

Although the CESS 2025 pointed to higher levels of training in the sector than suggested by previous research, in the context of considerable future upskilling needs, it is important that employers within the design and designer fashion sector are supported to continue investing in the skills of their workforce. This is particularly crucial given the negative impacts employers report as a result of skills challenges, as well as the high proportion of microbusinesses and self-employed workers in the sector.

When considering the measures that would enable design and designer fashion employers to continue to invest in skills and training, a range of factors were cited. Unsurprisingly, given the predominance of financial and cost-related barriers identified, tax relief on expenditure on staff (85%) and

financial subsidies (81%) towards the cost of training were by far the most commonly cited measures, consistent with recommendations made by sector bodies like the UK Fashion and Textiles Association (UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023) and the All-Party Parliamentary Design and Innovation Group (2018). Roundtable participants also highlighted opportunities to reform R&D tax relief to cover training costs, as well as opportunities public procurement might offer in terms of encouraging employers to take on apprentices and provide upskilling opportunities.

Design and designer fashion employers also highlighted the importance of strengthening opportunities to collaborate with other industries and training providers to align skills development with industry needs, consistent with

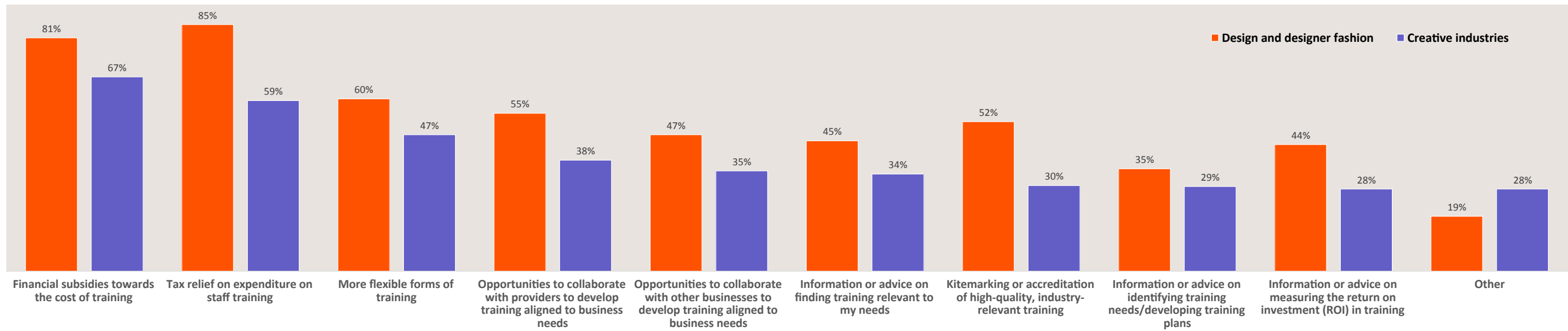
previous calls by sector bodies (Design Council, 2025a; UKFT and Oxford Economics, 2023). Indeed, initiatives like the Design Council's Design for Planet and the British Fashion Council's Institute of Positive Fashion demonstrate the importance of strengthened collaboration between industry and sector training providers.

Notably, design and designer fashion employers were more likely to report that all specified measures would enable their organisation to offer more training compared to the creative industries as a whole, suggesting a particularly high level of demand for support from this sector.

**Figure 35: Enablers of employer investment in training, 2025**

*Q: What measures would enable your organisation to offer (more) training in future?*

Base = all establishments (n = 128)



Source: CESS 2025

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