

Microsoft warns of growing ICT skills gap

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Millions of Europeans face being locked out of the jobs market in five years time due to their lack of ICT knowledge, according to a new report which claims 90% of jobs will require computer skills.

Background:

Finding employees with the right skills has become a major issue for employers in Europe. Business leaders have pointed to the growing "skills mismatch", with four million vacancies going unfilled last year because the 18 million unemployed Europeans did not have the qualifications required to take up the available positions.

Language and ICT skills are seen as areas where the European workforce needs to improve. At the European Business Summit in Brussels in March 2009, corporate lobbyists called for a 'European Skills Pact' which would see unemployed workers retrained to equip them for the workplace of the future.

A report from business school INSEAD said Europeans' ability to compete in the global knowledge economy was hampered by a lack of skills and mobility. The INSEAD report was sponsored by Shell and Microsoft, two firms that have been pushing for greater support for retraining.

The vast majority of vacancies across almost all sectors will demand computer literacy as a minimum requirement by 2015, sparking fears that those who lose their jobs during the current recession will become permanently unemployable.

The study of 13 European countries published yesterday (1 December), sponsored by Microsoft and carried out by research firm IDC, found that 58% of employers believe the education sector is not doing enough to prepare young for the modern workplace.

Training for advanced ICT skills will grow significantly over the next three to five years, according to the report, which highlights the importance of certification for ICT professionals.

In addition, it says the majority of the workforce will need their skills updated if they are to use technology to enhance productivity.

'On-the-job' training may not be enough

Marianne Kolding, vice-president of European Services Research at IDC, said a higher proportion of jobs in Central and Eastern Europe currently require no ICT skills at all. However, she said these countries will catch up with Western Europe over the next five years.

This, said Kolding, illustrates the need for investment in training the workforce but she expressed scepticism about the true value of 'on-site' and 'on-the-job' training, suggesting professional educators are best-placed to teach new skills.

She added that while the younger generation are adept at working with user-friendly gadgets, they often do not have a fundamental understanding of how these technologies work.

There is also significant concern that the competition posed by emerging Asian economies will put serious pressure on the higher-end of Europe's ICT sector due to the volume of engineering graduates being churned out by India and China.

"ICT undergraduates need to enter the workforce with much stronger business understanding and soft skills, as well as knowledge of leading edge technology such as cloud computing and Web 2.0," Kolding said.

The research is based on interviews with business leaders in several sectors, and a web-based survey of almost 1,400 employers across Europe. The participants were drawn primarily from organisations with fewer than 500 employees.