

Why it's important we boost access to coding training in disadvantaged communities

It cannot be overstated how much the pandemic has changed the way we work. Over the past two years, businesses across all sectors have radically adapted their working practices to keep up with a digital-first economy.

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These developments propelled the UK tech industry into a period of remarkable growth and record years of investment. However, amid the success of soaring numbers of new startups and the emergence of innovative and creative tech, the pandemic accentuated a pre-existing problem - a growing digital skills gap.

In recent years, employers have been struggling to plug skills gaps amongst their workforce and to fill vacancies that require digital competency. A report by *Learning and Work Institute* revealed that one in four (23%) employers say that their current workforce lack the basic digital skills that they need, rising to 37% for roles that required advanced digital skills, such as coding.

Certainly, coding has emerged as one of the most in-demand skills in recent years, yet recruiters are facing a shortage of talent. Meanwhile, the cost-of-living crisis is exacerbating another longstanding issue: that potential coders within disadvantaged communities are being left behind, leaving many feeling that a career in coding would be out of reach.

If we are going to fix the skills gaps, then a concerted effort to make coding training accessible to all will almost certainly be required.

Barriers to advanced tech skills

Clearly, there is a stark disconnect between what employers are looking for and the attributes the public possesses. But for would-be coders in disadvantaged communities, the problems lie deeper.

For example, lack of internet access in low-income households is a huge disadvantage for potential coders. In one study, the *Office for National Statistics* found that only 51% of households earning between £6,000-10,000 had home internet access, compared with 99% of households with an income of over £40,000. When considering how essential online connectivity is to the way we learn, gain new workplace skills, and generally conduct our daily lives, it becomes very clear where knowledge gaps first appear.

Further to this, anyone looking to pick up new digital skills has a distinct advantage if they have access to their own devices. According to *Catch 22*, in lower income groups, one in five (21%) of households with children have no access to an appropriate device. Learning to code becomes challenging without a suitable laptop or computer, especially because many coding courses now require coursework or are entirely online.

Of course, specialist fee-paying coding courses are also out of the question. There are a plethora of courses promising to take trainees from beginner to programmer in a matter of a few months. However, these qualifications often come with a heavy enrolment fee, putting them out of touch for individuals that do not have thousands of pounds to spare.

Which points to the one of underlying problems. Not only are certain technologies and courses unavailable to people from low-income

backgrounds, but there is a lack of clear engagement to point them towards the options that are available.

Clearer pathways

As mentioned, this is an exciting time for the tech industry, and this growth must be capitalised on by giving disadvantaged groups the opportunity to enter digital careers – that often include higher salaries and career advancement opportunities – in an effort to balance inequality. To make this happen, they need to know that a career in advanced tech is a possibility.

As such, it's now more important than ever that employers, local councils, and skills providers cooperate to improve direct engagement in these communities; highlighting pathways into tech that are accessible for all. This includes promoting coding classes more effectively, with local authorities and support groups advertising the advantages of programmes like digital bootcamps.

It goes without saying that these courses need to be affordable and practical to access. Importantly, companies and job-seeking services should help people who are looking to learn new coding skills by pointing them in the direction of appropriate courses and assisting them with the enrolment process – especially important within groups such as refugees where many do not use English as their first language.

For example, CodeYourFuture, working with West Midlands Combined Authority, is running free coding bootcamps targeted at those from disadvantaged and marginalised communities. But providing training is just the first step – employer engagement is crucial. Whether upskilling existing staff or creating career pathways by offering job interviews, apprenticeships or guidance to those who graduate from skills bootcamps (and other courses), is essential in bridging the skills gaps.

The digital skills gap is getting wider, and if the progress of a prospering digital economy is to continue, then the skills shortage must be addressed. This cannot happen if training opportunities aren't made accessible to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. It cuts millions adrift. With better connections between employers, training providers, and the people in these communities, more opportunities can be created to help more people begin their career in coding.

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