

Technology

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Headlines

- The use of technology, and in particular IT, is now commonplace within Asset Skills industries.
- Technology has a number of benefits, often leading to higher levels of efficiency and productivity. It also plays an important role in communication across Asset Skills industries.
- New technology can be expensive and often requires further investment in the training of staff. It is likely that companies in the facilities management and property industries will gain a better return on investment in technology than other industries such as cleaning due to the role it plays in day-to-day activities.

Asset Skills is one of 22 Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) licensed by Government. Each SSC has responsibility for improving the skills of workers in its particular industries.

Asset Skills covers facilities management, housing, property and planning, cleaning and parking. Businesses in these industries share the goal of ensuring the environment in which we work, live and play is developed, managed and maintained to the benefit of all.

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Technology plays a crucial role in the vast majority of industries across the UK and its importance is growing all the time. Technological change has been highlighted as a driver of change for businesses¹ and this paper examines the role that technology plays within Asset Skills industries. It focuses on issues such as the impact technology has had on working practices, the problems it has solved for employers and staff, and the skills demands that it has created.

Examples of technology used within Asset Skills industries

The use of technology, and in particular IT, is now commonplace across Asset Skills industries. However, the nature of the technology used differs across the industries, reflecting the differing demands of employees and consumers in their particular area.

Those working within the facilities management industry rely heavily on mobile technologies such as blackberries and mobile phones to communicate as employees are often spread between sites and occupy a variety of office-based and mobile roles. According to

research there has been a rise in the number of people using mobile technologies to communicate - a 22% increase compared to the previous year². The Intranet, in conjunction with facilities management helpdesks, are other examples of technologies used to help workers in the industry to communicate, both with each other, and with internal customers. Evidence suggests that a growing proportion of facilities management companies are making it possible for people to access their helpdesks through the intranet (see Figure 1), enabling them to save significant resources.

Facility Management Software is also available to businesses within the industry. It is designed to help in the administration and maintenance of buildings. It is often used by administrators for tasks such as monitoring important pieces of equipment, as well as keeping track of maintenance operations, health and safety legislation and even playing a role in security.

Employees in the housing sector also use mobile working solutions and there

¹Skills for Jobs: Today and Tomorrow, UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010

²UK wide Sector Skills Assessment, Asset Skills, 2010



is evidence that some housing providers are beginning to use social media to communicate with a new audience³.

Within the property industry, estate agents in particular are now increasingly reliant on technology to market their property portfolio, which they do through the internet, while the virtual estate and letting agents that are beginning to appear are entirely reliant on the web. Other technologies are also important to others in the industry, for example, town planners use specific software or geographical information systems in their daily activities, making a good grasp of IT essential. Surveyors also often opt for modern technologies in their work which enable them to complete tasks far quicker than tried and tested methods, saving them valuable time.

The use of technology in cleaning is limited when compared with other Asset Skills industries. IT is important for those in senior roles when it comes to tasks such as managing contracts; however it is not essential for the majority of

roles. Cleaners often do not have access to a computer and so are not contactable by e-mail as the majority of workers in other industries are. While they may access a computer from time to time (usually in bigger organisations) the focus tends to be more on learning rather than their specific job.

The benefits of using technology

Technology allows companies within the Asset Skills footprint to provide more detailed and accurate information and work at greater speed, which can lead to an increase in productivity as well as a rise in profitability.

Surveyors are often required to make the most of the latest technology as it is important for them to be able to complete a task quickly and accurately. Tried and tested methods often prove to be time consuming and lead to certain jobs having to be completed more than once. A change in working practices that new technology in this area has led to is seen in the fact that many surveyors now use a portable electronic laser system to measure a building rather than a tape measure. Even when they

are not undertaking surveys nearly all surveyors use laptops and blackberries when communicating with clients and contractors⁴. Mobile technologies such as a blackberry can also play an important role when it comes to health and safety. Cleaners and estate agents for example are often required to work alone, and ensuring that any risks associated with this are minimised is vitally important. Location logging is one method that is used to ensure the security of cleaners that are working unsociable hours. This can bring wider benefits for employers, as it helps to cut down on issues associated with lone workers such as low productivity, absenteeism and high staff turnover.

Improving working practices through the introduction of new technologies can also have significant benefits financially – a major reason why the benefits technology can offer are important to all Asset Skills industries. The housing sector, with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister committed, in response to the Gershon review⁵, to achieving savings of £274 million, £550 million and

£835 million over the next three years. The introduction of new technologies, such as electronic mobile working solutions may prove to be an important part of this, with evidence suggesting that such systems can deliver savings of as much as 20%⁶. Significant time and money can also be saved through the reduction in the amount of travel that is required. With the aid of technology it is possible to speak with employees and customers through methods such as video conferencing rather than face to face meetings. It has been reported that virtual meetings are on the increase in the facilities management industry with travel budgets at an all time low as a result of the recession⁷.

The Drawbacks of Technology

Whilst technology can increase efficiency and help a business run more effectively there are some potential drawbacks that also need to be considered carefully by businesses. Investing in technology is often expensive with equipment having to be purchased and training and development required once it is in place. Indeed, this has been cited as a major reason why cleaning

³Housing Technology, September 2009

⁴Sector Skills Assessment for the Property Industry, Asset Skills, 2010

⁵Releasing resources to the front line: Independent review of public sector efficiency, Sir Peter Gershon, July 2004

⁶New housing management technology, Building Talk, January 2009

⁷www.fm-world.co.uk – The show can go on... (April 2010)

companies, that are having to operate within increasingly tight budgets, are now struggling to invest in this area⁸. The introduction of new technologies into an industry often leads to a change in working practices. Evidence suggests that this has a particular impact on management, with people employed in senior positions requiring training to use it effectively⁹. Another example of the skills gaps created by technology is seen in the facilities management industry where the growth of intelligent buildings (linked to the design of energy efficient systems) is expected to increase the demand for enhanced IT skills¹⁰. As a result, initially, technology can create skills gaps – gaps which require further investment from employers and businesses to be filled.

Social media

The use of social networking sites such as facebook and twitter has grown hugely in recent years and organisations are now becoming increasingly aware of the potential they offer as an additional communication channel with consumers. Many believe social media encourages a greater depth of communication,

leading to more interaction with consumers. It has been noted that, for housing providers for example, it offers the opportunity to engage with younger tenants, as existing channels of communication such as telephone and email are less attractive to them¹¹.

The use of social media within Asset Skills industries is still in its infancy. The social media operations of most housing providers for example are run by a small number of enthusiastic staff¹². It is also not without its challenges – calculating just how successfully messages are being communicated can be difficult and is often simply measured by the number of followers an organisation or individual has. However, social media also boasts a number of benefits – it doesn't require a great deal of maintenance or the investment of a lot of time and money, and, as organisations become more aware of its potential to help them communicate, it is likely that its importance and influence will grow in future.

Return on investment

In the current economic climate many businesses are having to think carefully about how they

can cut costs and save money, so an investment in technology has to have clear benefits.

According to recent research small businesses spent 15% of their budget on new technology during 2009. Research has also suggested that those investing more than 20% of their budget on technology were more likely to have increased their customer base than those that spent less¹².

In order for technology to provide a good return on investment businesses need to identify the gaps in their business which they need it to fill. For example, estate agents may have to decide if a better website to attract new customers would be more useful than a CRM system for client retention purposes.

Financially, technology can provide a strong return on investment through the impact it has on efficiency and productivity. For example, evidence suggests that mobile working solutions can deliver benefits of as much as 20%¹⁴. It can also provide a positive return for employers in other areas, with the role it plays in improving communication, cutting down on travel costs, as well as other issues such as



absenteeism and low productivity amongst lone workers - a significant factor amongst estate agents and cleaners. However, technology changes quickly with IT systems in particular rapidly going out of date. As a result, businesses may have to invest in new technologies or IT systems several times, meaning that such systems need to demonstrate a higher or faster rate of return than an investment in other areas.

It is difficult to put a financial value on many of the benefits brought about by the introduction of technology, or indeed the true extent to which it has a positive impact on the retention of certain groups of employees, such as lone workers. Within the Asset Skills industries technology is often more valuable to those working in facilities management and property than those working in cleaning due to the role it plays in day-to-day activities. Deciding if technology will provide a

⁸ Survey data on the impact of the minimum wage – CSSA Submission to the Low Pay Commission, CSSA, October 2009

⁹ UK wide Sector Skills Assessment, Asset Skills, 2010

¹⁰ Sector Skills Assessment for the Property Industry, Asset Skills, 2010

¹¹ Housing Technology, September 2009

¹² Housing Technology, September 2009

¹³ www.managementtoday.co.uk – April 2010

¹⁴ New housing management technology, Building Talk, January 2009



good return on investment is a decision a business needs to consider carefully, taking into account the long term as well as short term benefits that such an investment would offer.

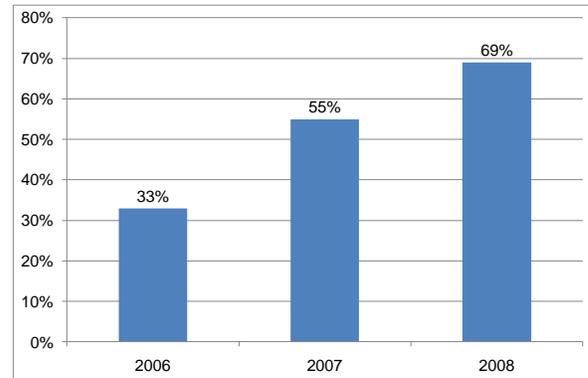
The Future

It is likely that information as well as communication technologies will continue to reduce space and time and have an increasing impact on employer choices¹⁵. Technology may have a key role to play in helping Asset Skills industries keep up to date with changing legislation and demands, such as those associated with a development towards a low carbon economy. It is also likely that technology will lead to a change in working patterns with people choosing to work more flexible hours from different locations.

As companies are forced to work within increasingly tight budgets and competition gets more intense technology could play an important role in helping businesses offer high quality services to their customers which mark them out from their competitors.

According to research, technological innovation is among the top factors required to tackle tough competition in the facilities management industry¹⁶. However, whilst technology may grow in importance in future it is unlikely that it will ever replace the need for people and the services that only they can deliver. Relationships with customers and the intelligence provided by staff is likely to remain key to the success of businesses.

Figure 1: Intranet enablement of the facilities management helpdesk



Source: Facilities Management Journal, 2009

Conclusions

- The role played by technology within Asset Skills industries is a varied one. For example, it is used to improve communication in the facilities management industry whilst the property industry is particularly reliant on IT to market its products and services.
- The benefits of technology can often go beyond increasing efficiency and productivity. It can also play a key role in helping lone workers feel safer at work, often boosting morale and reducing absenteeism and staff turnover.
- Technology – particularly IT – is a necessity in many businesses, however, in some instances, the extent to which it provides a good return on investment is difficult to accurately assess. Significant benefits tend to be long term rather than short term due to the amount of training and development that is often required.
- The use of social media is likely to grow in the coming years as it offers the potential to communicate with hard to reach groups and often only requires a minimum amount of investment and maintenance, which is vital for companies having to work within increasingly tight budgets.

¹⁵Skills for Jobs: Today and Tomorrow, UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2010

¹⁶ European Integrated Facilities Management Markets, Frost and Sullivan, 2009