Publishers Association

Publishing skills report

June 2023

Survey context and method

Skills gaps and shortages in the creative industries have been discussed for many years. Creative UK argue that '*skills and workforce shortages are a critical barrier to growth*'. Workforce development (e.g. supporting freelancers) and boosting the education and skills pipeline are strategic priorities for Creative UK. A recent, 2023 report by the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee calls on government to take action to meet huge demand in the creative industries for employees with a mix of digital and technical skills. However, the majority of discussions look at the creative industries as a whole, not the specific sub-sectors within it, and roles within those industries.

The Publishers Association had heard anecdotally about skills shortages and gaps in the publishing sector, but did not have a comprehensive picture of the sector. In order to understand the issues facing different types of publishers specifically (Consumer, Education and Academic publishers), we undertook a survey of Publishers Association members. All 170 members were sent a secure online survey to complete in late 2022. The survey was sent to one contact at each publisher and each organisation was permitted to fill the survey in once.

Overall, 25 member organisations completed the survey (a c.15% response rate), and this report outlines the findings. We aim to repeat this survey in late 2023 to engage more members and to see how, if anything, the skills gaps and issues surrounding them has changed. The survey will inform our engagement with government, the sector, and other stakeholders to secure action on delivering the skills that publishers need.

Key findings

The key findings from this research are:

1. The average number of vacancies publishers currently have in their organisation ranges from one through to 83.

2. 52% of those who have vacancies said they are proving difficult to fill. The roles which are proving difficult tend to be in technology, IT, core/central functions such as finance and marketing where they compete with other sectors, and specialist sales roles for the types of books they sell e.g. education in schools.

3. The main cause of hard-to-fill vacancies is the low number of people applying, with 45% selecting the option 'low number of applicants generally'. 30% selected 'low number of applicants with the required skill set', whilst 25% selected 'lack of experience the company demands'.

4. The main IT skills selected by respondents as being the most difficult to find among applicants are 'data analysis/analytics/data science skills' which 67% selected. Following this were a third selecting each of 'advanced Microsoft Office skills' and 'artificial intelligence and machine learning skills'.

5. 78% selected that they find 'ability to manage own time and prioritise own tasks' as lacking, by far the biggest soft skill selected. A third then selected 'persuading or influencing others'.

6. The biggest consequence to the organisation of these unfilled vacancies is 'increase workload for other staff' (80%). For almost half (47%) it has created a 'delay in producing new publications' and caused publishers to have to 'outsource work'.

7. There is a vast range of activity which respondents' organisations are undertaking to overcome the difficulties in finding candidates. 'Increasing training given to your existing workforce' comes out joint top at 60% indicating that there is a focus on upskilling staff. The same number selected that they are 'offering flexibility for remote/hybrid working'.

8. Overall, 60% of respondents said they were optimistic about filling skills gaps over the next five years and specifically, 27% said they were 'very' optimistic. At the other end of the scale, nobody said they were not at all optimistic and only 20% said they were 'not very' optimistic.

Analysis and next steps

1. The UK's flourishing publishing industry contributes £6.9 billion to the UK economy and supports 70,000 jobs across the country. It is one of the largest and most resilient of the UK's creative industries, which, as a whole, have grown at twice the speed of the UK economy average since 2011. UK publishing underpins other creative industries' global success, achieves over half its sales in exports, and is the number one global book exporter.

2. In this context, the evidence that over half of UK publishers are finding vacancies hard to fill is of concern. The past growth and future success of UK publishing relies on the talent, skills, and commitment of its workforce. It is imperative that publishers can reach and recruit diverse candidates with the rights skills, at the right time.

3. On the basis of survey data and wider evidence from publishers, we can make the following observations and recommendations:

   a. The existence of skills gaps has been reported across the creative industries in recent years and so **it is unsurprising to find evidence in publishing specifically.** The Publishers Association and the publishing industry should engage with research from across the creative industries to identify next steps.

   b. In line with the wider creative industries, **publishers face particular skills gaps in technology and IT, especially in emerging areas such as data analytics and AI.** The government's AI National Strategy, updated in December 2022 and referencing research by Microsoft and Ipsos MORI, found 69% of AI job vacancies are hard to fill.. These challenges are only likely to grow with the increasing digitisation of more aspects of businesses across all sectors. Publishers should engage with government and the education sector to secure the delivery of both creative and technical skills, especially in ways that equip people to use both together. University AI centres for doctoral training may offer particularly promising areas for partnership. Further research with members may be necessary to explore what support they need e.g. a couple of 4-person focus groups.

   c. Recruitment challenges exist where **publishers are competing with other sector on core skills such as marketing and finance.** The sector supports new initiatives, such as OpenBooks, which promote awareness of a wide range of publishing careers. Some respondents called for greater industry-wide and government campaigns on this issue. Efforts to ensure the industry appeals to candidates with transferable skills are also important, such as offering flexible working and ethical business aims.

d. With a **lack of sufficient applicants (especially those with sufficient skills)** a key driver of skills gaps**,** it is vital that publishing is seen as a welcoming and inclusive industry. Publishers' commitment to increase diversity and inclusion through the <u>Inclusivity Action Plan</u> is welcome and all publishers are encouraged to sign-up. This should help attract diverse talent from under-represented regions and groups.

e. Publishers know they have an important **role in nurturing talent and skills,** with 60% tackling gaps by increasing training for their existing workforce. There's also an openness to recruiting for potential rather than experience, a willingness to invest in professional qualifications and sector-specific training in-house, and interest in entry-level initiatives, such as work experience and apprenticeships. 123 people have undertaken the new <u>Publishing Assistant Apprenticeship</u> and there are plans to expand it to higher Level 4 study.

f. Finally, the sector and government must be alive to **emerging and future skills gaps**. Respondents foresaw increased need in areas such as technology skills, media skills (to enable books to be adapted to other formats), and sustainability.

Publishers taking part

Respondents were asked a series of questions relating to their organisation in order for us to understand more about the sample achieved in the survey. Overall, although a higher response rate would have been helpful, a good cross section of publishers took part in the survey in terms of sector, turnover and size.

Figure 1 shows the range of sectors respondents primarily operate in. When asked which sector their organisation primarily operates in, the sector most represented in the survey was Consumer (53%), followed by Academic (20%) and finally, Education (20%). Those who said 'Other' were made up of those who said they operated primarily across a range of these three sectors.
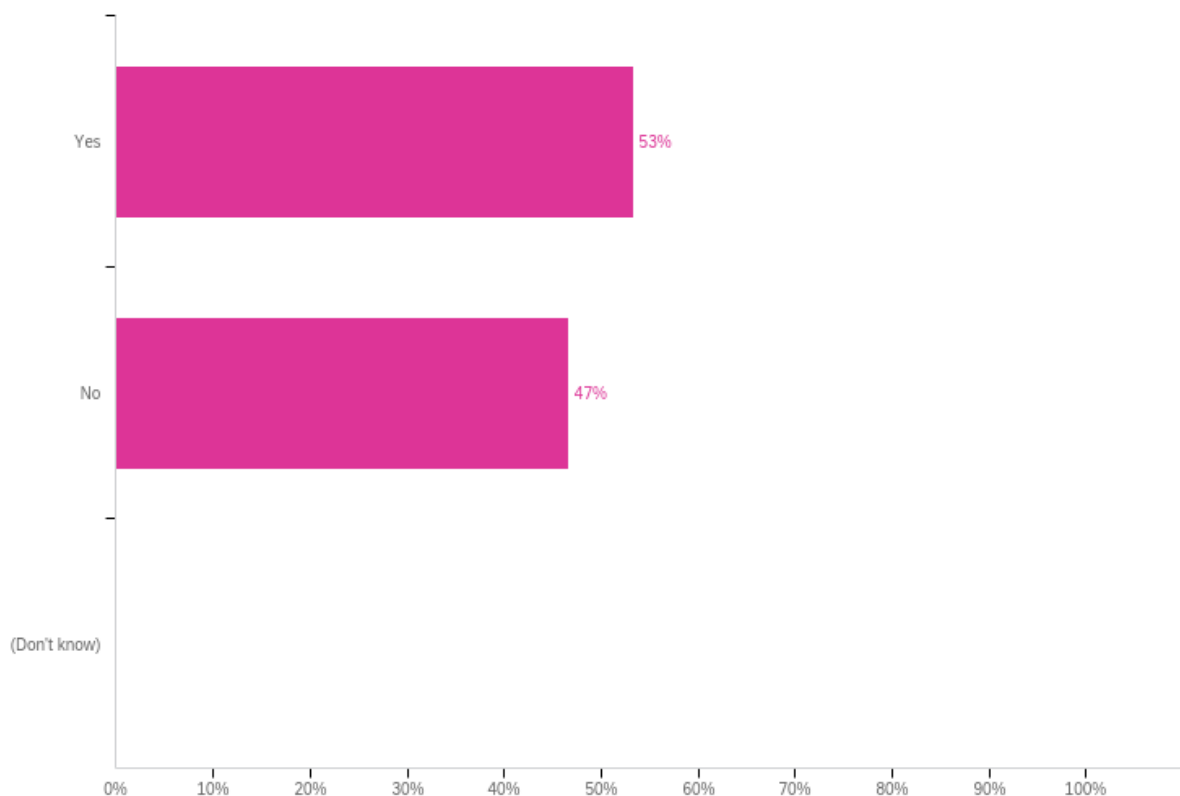
Figure 1: Which sector do you primarily operate in?
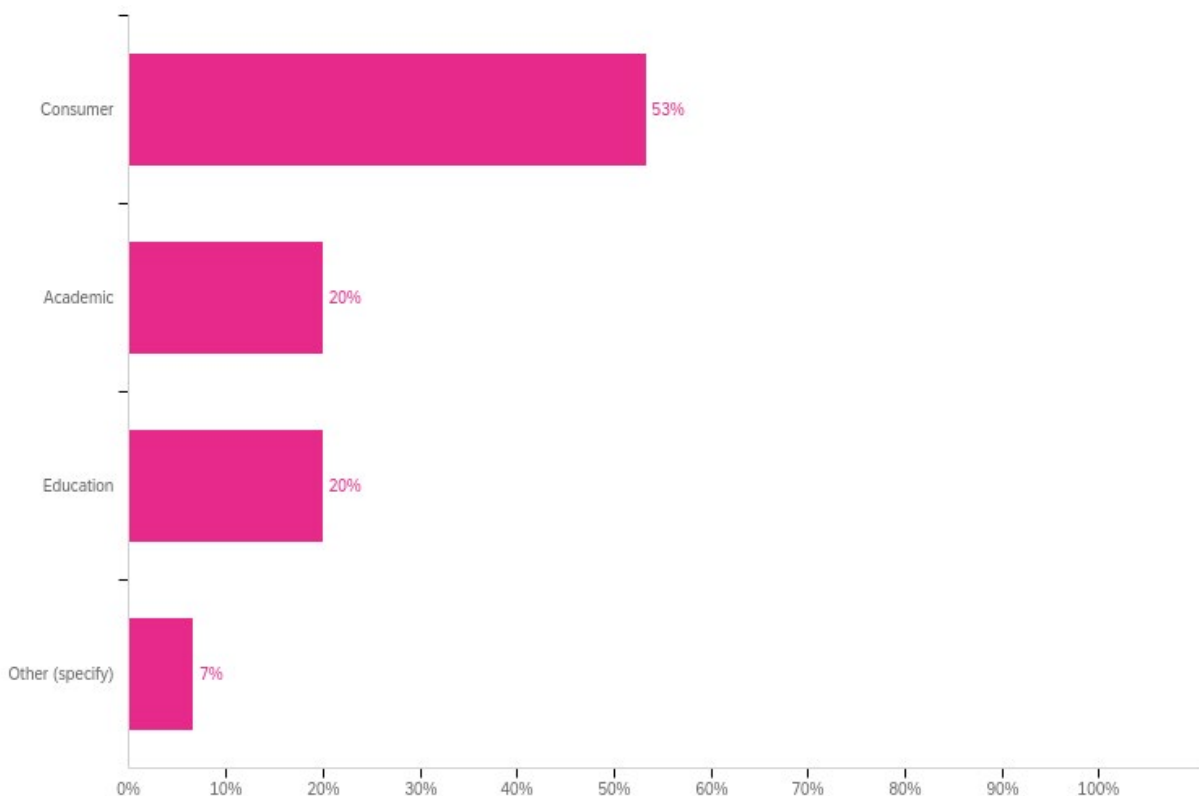
Figure 2 below shows the annual turnover of the organisations who took part in the survey.
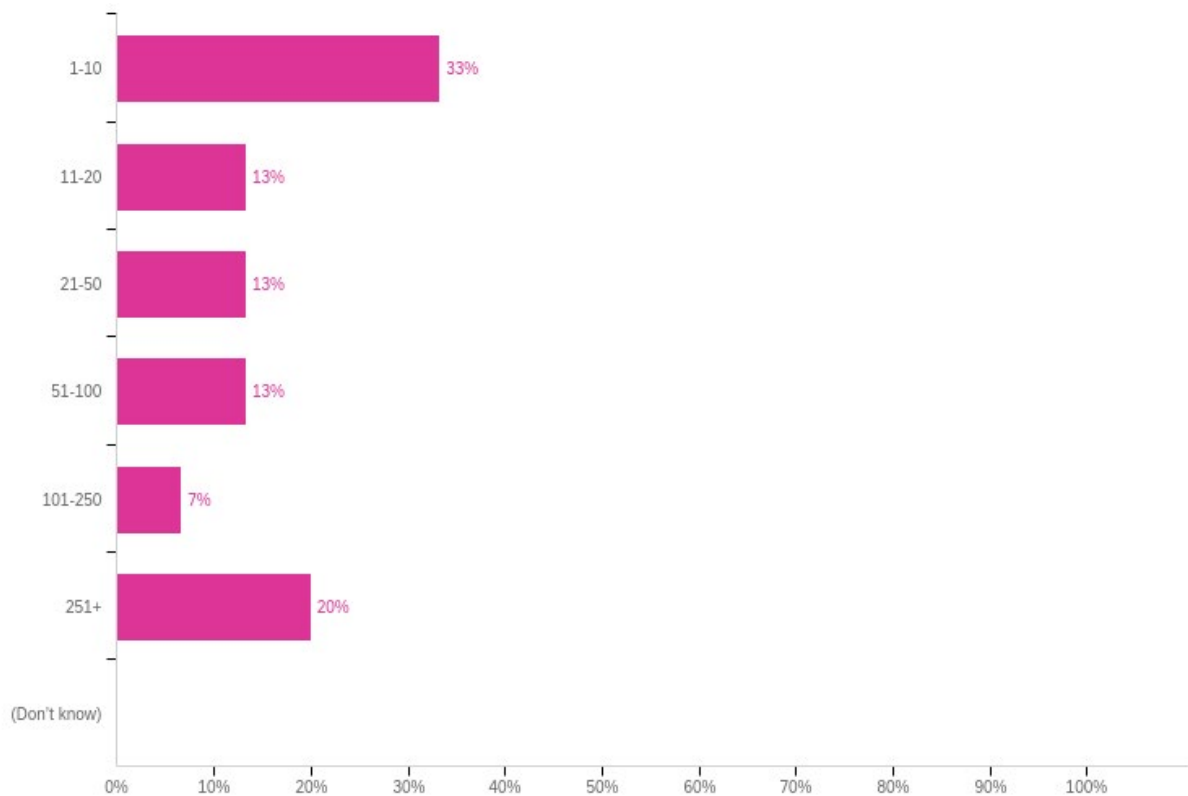
Figure 2: Is your annual turnover above £2.5 million?

In terms of annual turnover, 53% of organisations who took part had a turnover of over £2.5 million whilst 47% had a turnover less than this.

Respondents were asked how many people their organisation employs in the UK, as Figure 3 shows.

**Figure 3: How many people does your organisation employ in the UK?**

There was a good spread of size in terms of how many are employed in the UK. A third of respondents said that their organisation employs between 1-10 employees in the UK, a further 26% had between 11 and 50, 20% had 51-250 and 20% over 251 employees in the UK.

Main findings

In order to establish the overall skills gap, respondents were firstly asked a series of questions about recent recruitment in their organisation.

Figure 4: Has your organisation recruited anyone in the last 12 months?
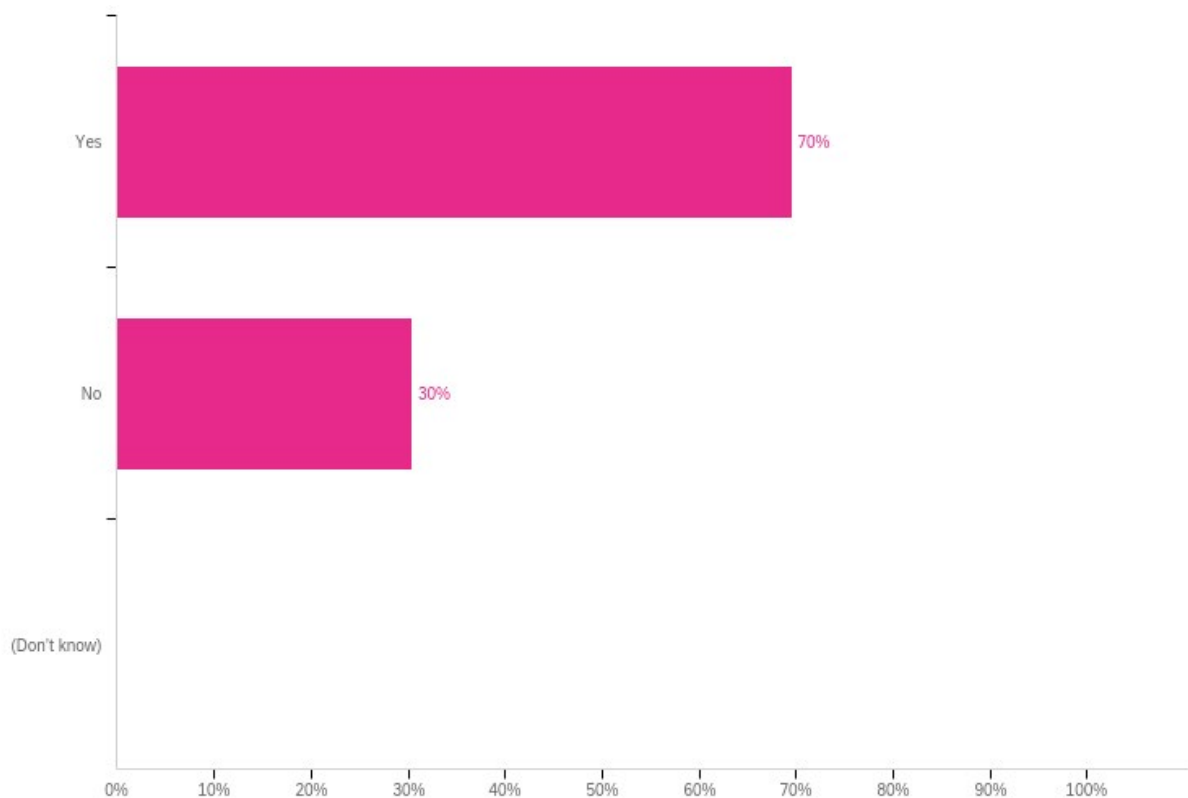
The majority of respondents (70%) have recruited into their organisation in the last 12 months, and when asked how many vacancies they currently have in their organisation this ranged from one through to 83.

In terms of the vacancies that organisations currently have to fill, the word cloud in Figure 5 shows broadly what these roles are.

Figure 5: In which specific occupations do you currently have vacancies in your organisation?


A range of occupations are currently available with many focussed around sales, marketing and publicity. IT, publishing operations, and warehouse staff are also mentioned.

In terms of whether vacancies are proving difficult to fill, 52% of those who have vacancies said that they are. The roles which are proving difficult to fill are varied and are slightly different to the ones that respondents said they had available (see Figure 5 above). When asked which roles are proving difficult to fill the focus is more around technology, IT, core/central function roles where they are competing with other sectors, and specialist sales roles for the types of books they sell e.g. school-level education.

To understand more about this, respondents were asked what the main causes are in having a hard to fill vacancy, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: What are the main causes of having a hard to fill vacancy?
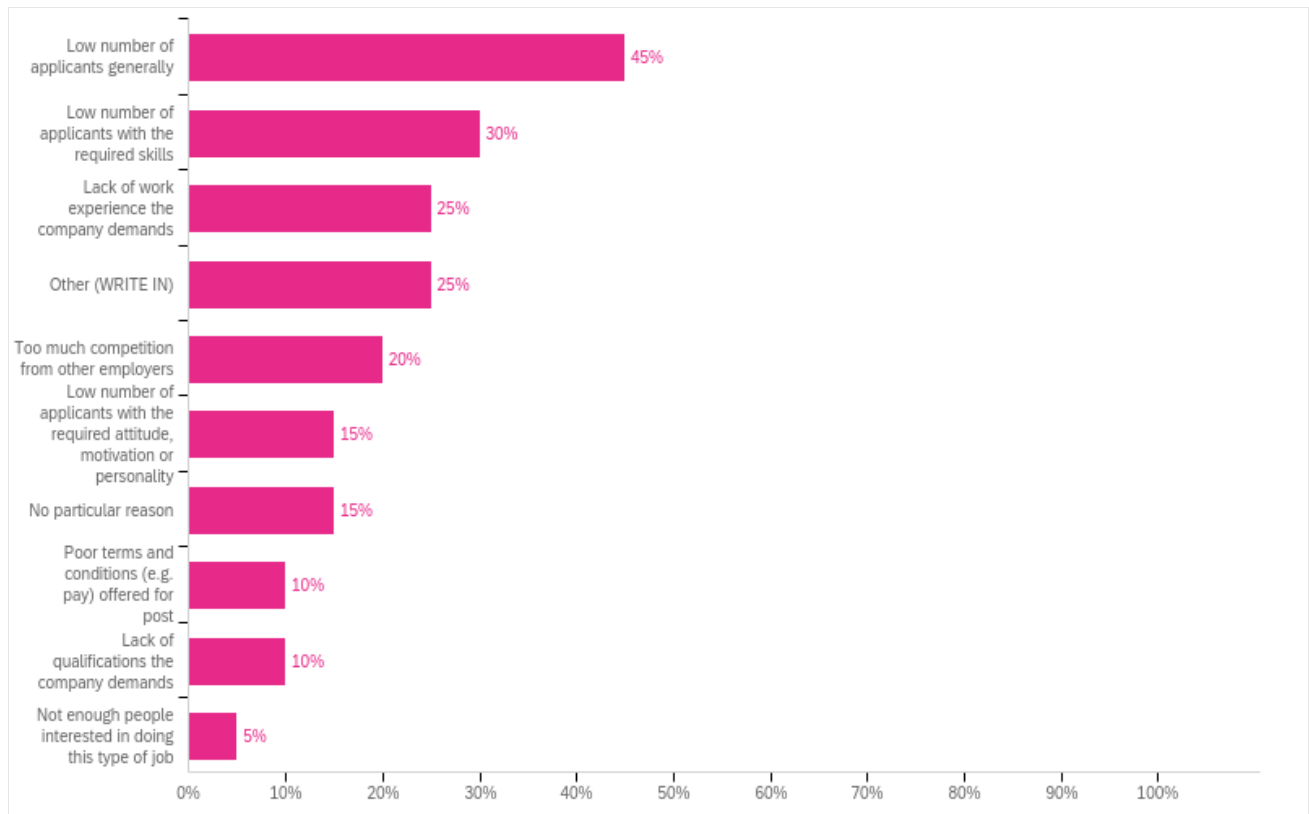
The main cause of having a hard to fill vacancy is simply the number of people applying for the vacancy, with 45% selecting the option 'low number of applicants generally'. This may be for a number of reasons including the lower levels of unemployment in the UK currently meaning the pool of applicants is smaller, individuals not applying in the first place because they don't have the skills or another reason. 30% selected 'low number of applicants with the required skills', whilst 25% selected 'lack of experience the company demands'. For 20% it was about 'too much competition from other employers'. All other issues mentioned were 15% or lower.

When asked to tell us the order of most difficult to least difficult, ranking them one to five, 'low number of applicants generally' and 'low number of applicants with the required skills' again came out top.

Figure 7: Which, if any, of the following have been lacking amongst those applying for vacancies?
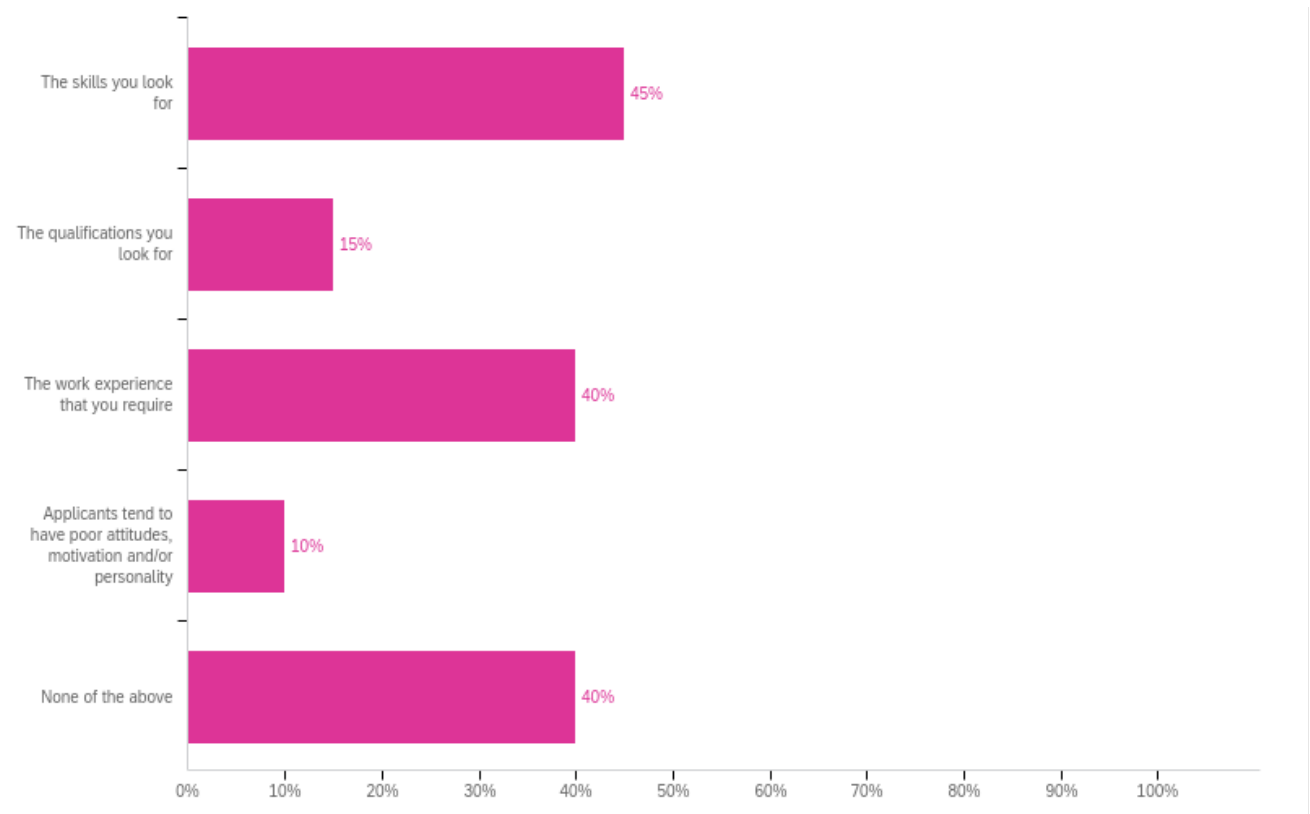

When shown a list and asked which, if any, has been lacking amongst those applying for vacancies, as with the previous questions, it was about lack of skills, particularly 'the skills you look for' (45%) followed by 'the work experience that you require' (40%), although 40% did say that the reason was none of those listed, suggesting further qualitative research may be helpful.

As a follow up, respondents were asked to state the order of most difficult to least difficult, ranking them one to five. On this, 'the work experience you require' came out top, followed by 'the skills you look for'.

Those who said they had had skills lacking in those applying for jobs were shown a list and asked if any of the statements regarding skills gaps applied. Figure 8 below shows the results to this question.

Figure 8: Now thinking about skills you have had difficulty finding amongst candidates, please select all that apply
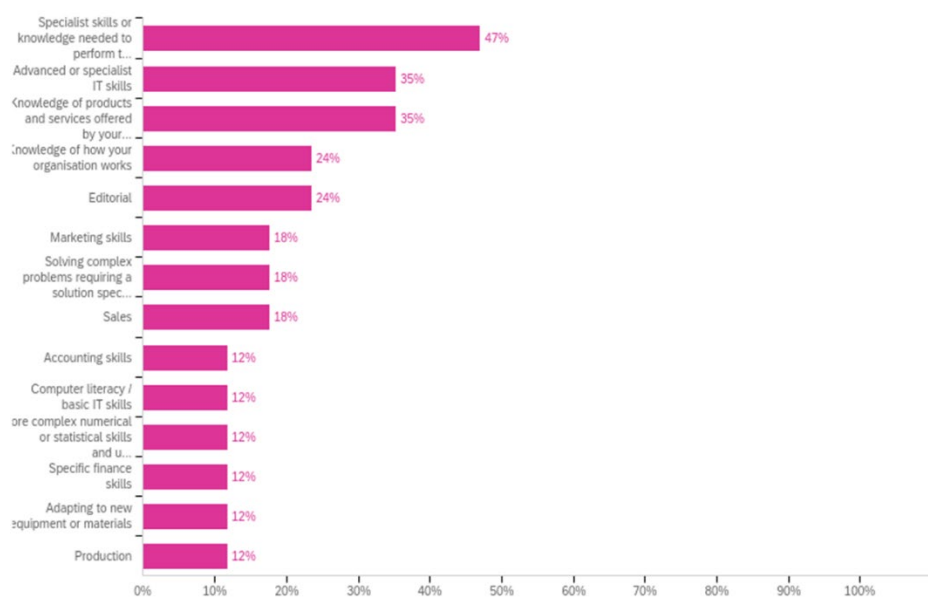
'Specialist skills or knowledge needed to perform the role' came out as the main difficulty, with 47% selecting this. Just over a third (35%) respectively selected 'advanced or specialist IT skills' and 'knowledge of products or services offered by your organisation'. There was then a drop off to around a quarter (24%) selecting 'knowledge of how your organisation works' and 'Editorial'. All other reasons were selected by fewer than a fifth of respondents.

For those who previously said that IT skills were difficult to obtain from applicants they were asked which specific IT skills have been lacking, and Figure 9 shows the results to this.

Figure 9: You mentioned that you have found IT skills difficult to obtain from applicants. What specific IT skills have been lacking? Please select all that apply.
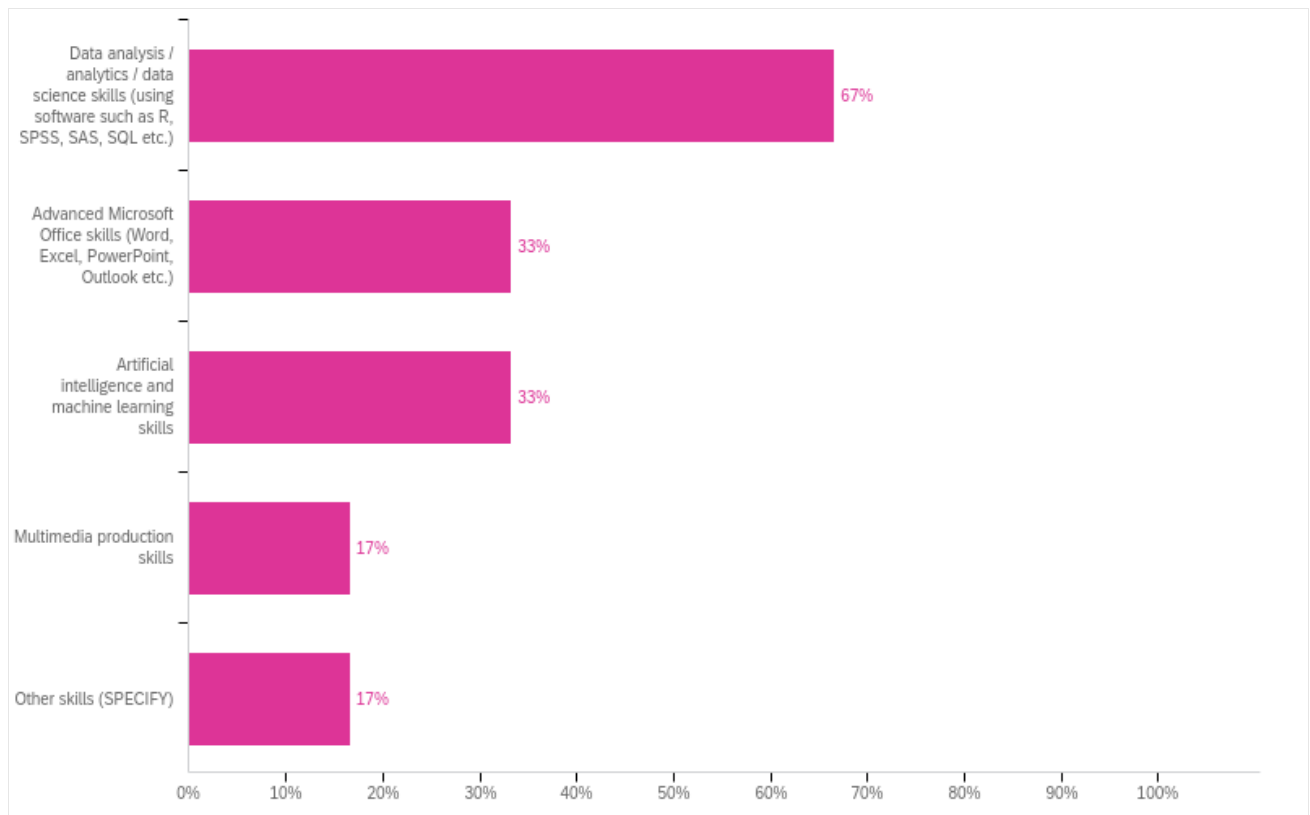
The main IT skills selected by respondents as being the most difficult to obtain from applicants are 'data analysis/analytics/data science skills' which 67% selected. Following this were a third selecting each of 'advanced Microsoft Office skills' and 'artificial intelligence and machine learning skills'.

As well as understanding the job-related skills that are lacking, it is also important to understand any issues around 'softer' skills. Figure 10 below shows which soft skills have been lacking in applicants.

Figure 10: Turning now to skills relating to dealing with other people. Have you found any of the following skills difficult to find in applicants? Please select all that apply.
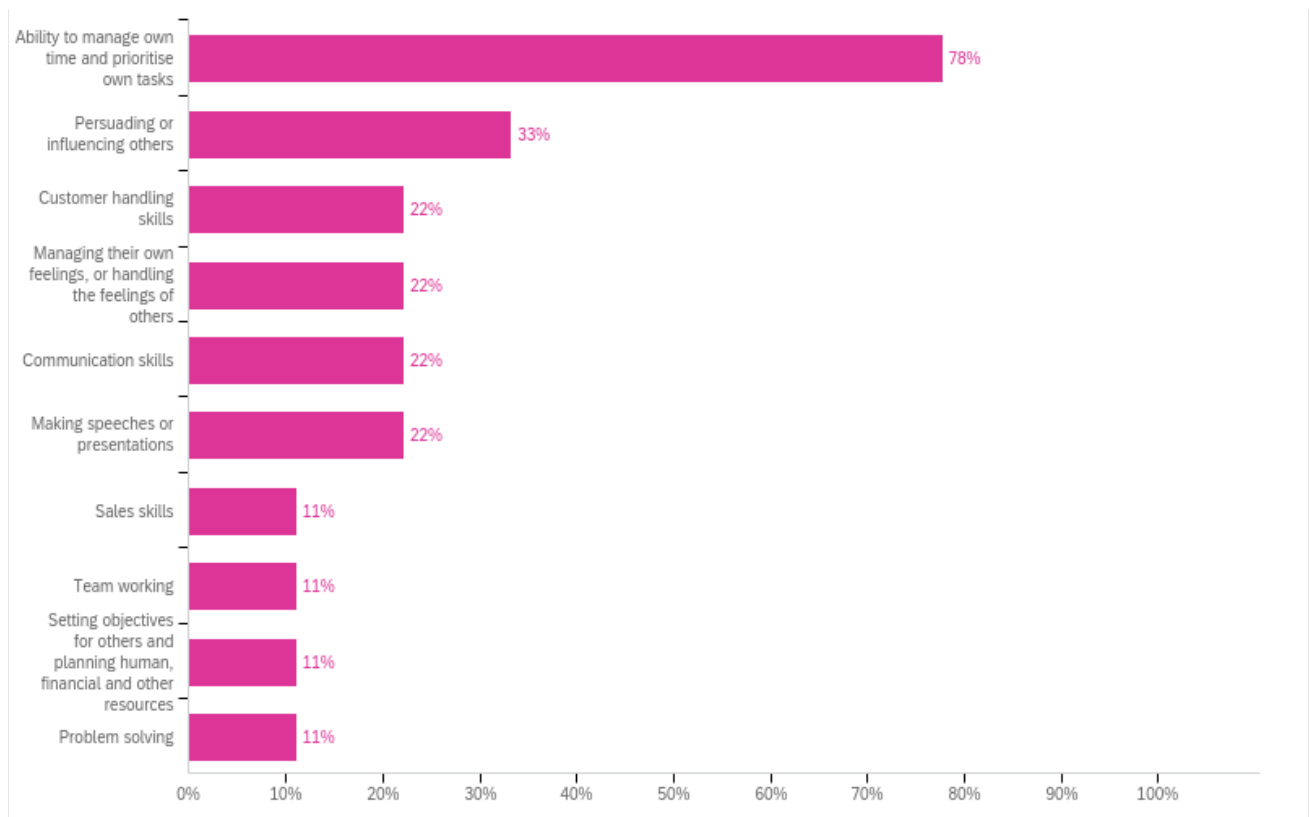
78% selected that they have found 'ability to manage own time and prioritise own tasks' as lacking in applicants, by far the biggest skill shortage selected. A third then selected 'persuading or influencing others' with just over a fifth (22%) selecting 'customer handling skills', 'managing their own feelings or handling the feelings of others', 'communication skills', and 'making speeches or presentations'.

To understand the consequences of the hard-to-fill vacancies, respondents were asked what impact they were having on their organisation. Figure 11 below shows the results to this question.

Figure 11: Thinking now about all occupations in which you have hard-to-fill vacancies, are hard-to-fill vacancies causing your organisation to… Please select all that apply
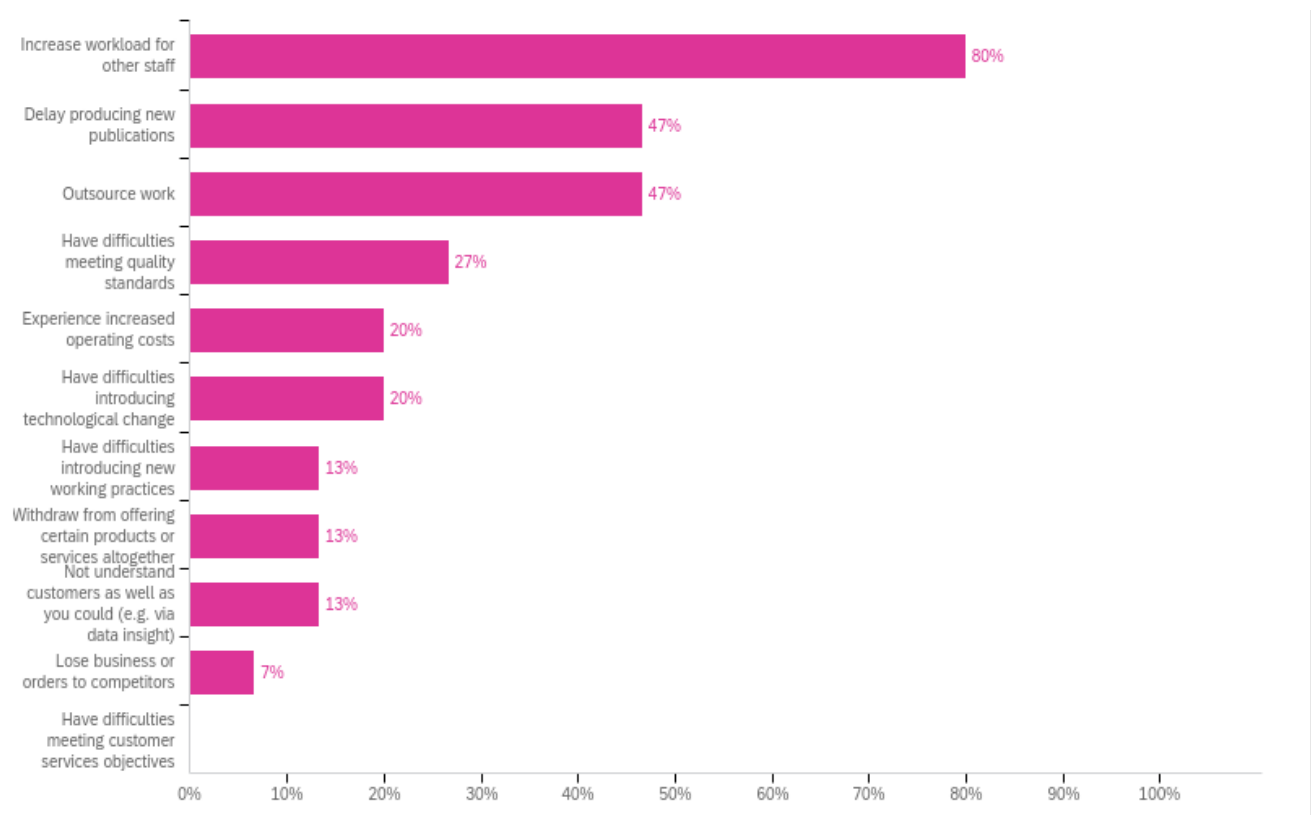

By far the biggest consequence to the organisation is 'increase workload for other staff' (80%). For almost half (47%) it has created a 'delay in producing new publications' and publishers having to 'outsource work'. For just over a quarter (27%) it has resulted in 'difficulties meeting quality standards'. For one in five it has resulted in 'experiencing increased operating costs' and 'having difficulties introducing technological change'.

The impact on organisations of these lack of skills is therefore large and varied, with implications across various aspects of the business.

In terms of the future, we then asked respondents what their organisation is doing to overcome the difficulties finding candidates to fill these hard-to-fill vacancies. Figure 12 below shows the results.

Figure 12: What, if anything, is your organisation doing to overcome the difficulties that you are having finding candidates to fill these hard-to-fill vacancies? Please select all that apply
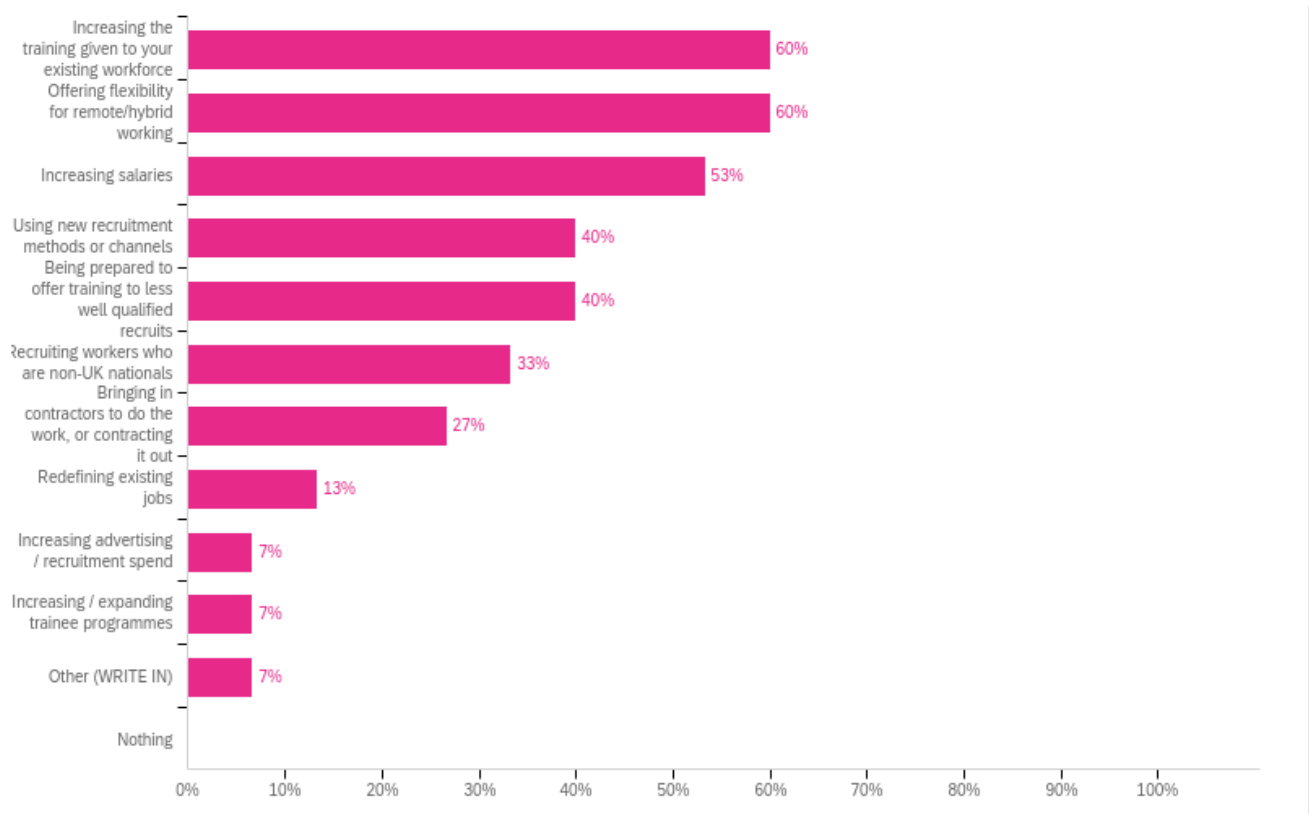
There is a vast range of activity which respondents' organisations are undertaking to overcome the difficulties in finding candidates. 'Increasing training given to your existing workforce' comes out joint top at 60%, indicating that there is a focus on upskilling staff. The same number selected that they are 'offering flexibility for remote/hybrid working'. For over half (53%) they are increasing salaries.

For some (40%) it is about 'using new recruitment methods or channels' and 'being prepared to offer training to less qualified recruits'. No respondents are doing nothing about the situation.

Figure 13: How concerned would you say your organisation is about skill levels in your current workforce?
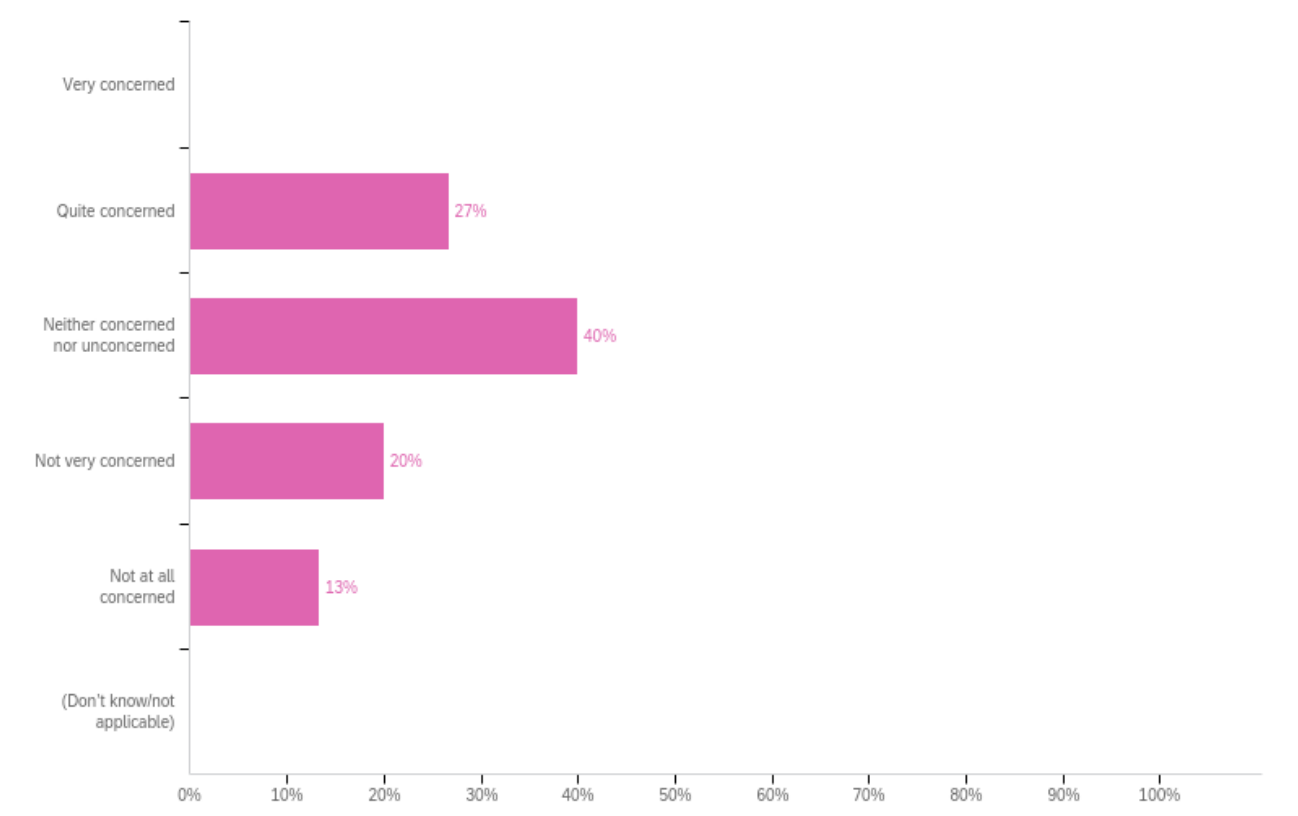
When asked how concerned their organisation is about the skills in their current workforce, nobody said they were 'very' concerned. However, 27% were 'quite' concerned with this and only 13% were 'not at all' concerned with this.

There has been very little change in levels of concern since before the pandemic, as Figure 14 below shows very similar results when asked about that period.

Figure 14: How would you have described your organisation's overall level of concern about skills in your workforce pre the pandemic i.e. at the start of 2020?
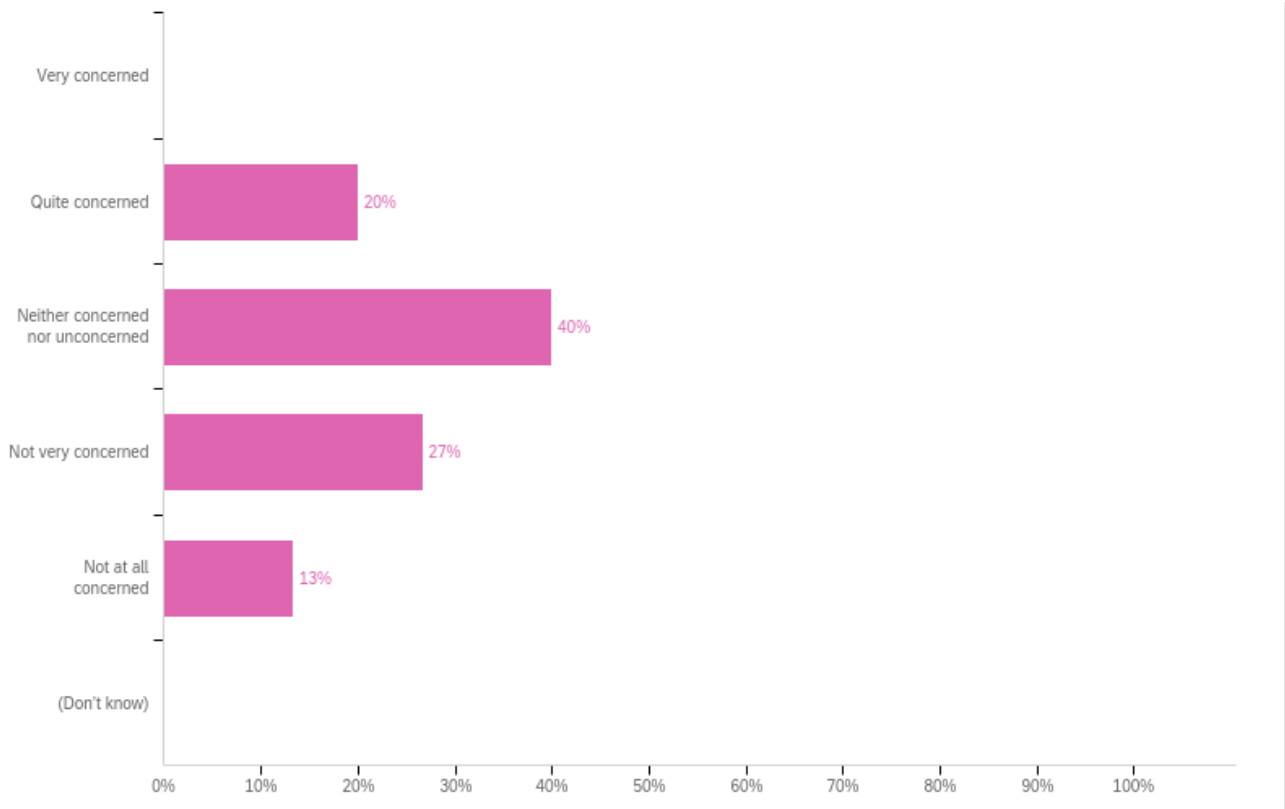
Despite some of the issues raised in this report, there does however seem to be some optimism about the future, as demonstrated in Figure 15 below.

Figure 15: And how optimistic would you say you are about filling skills gaps over the next 5 years?
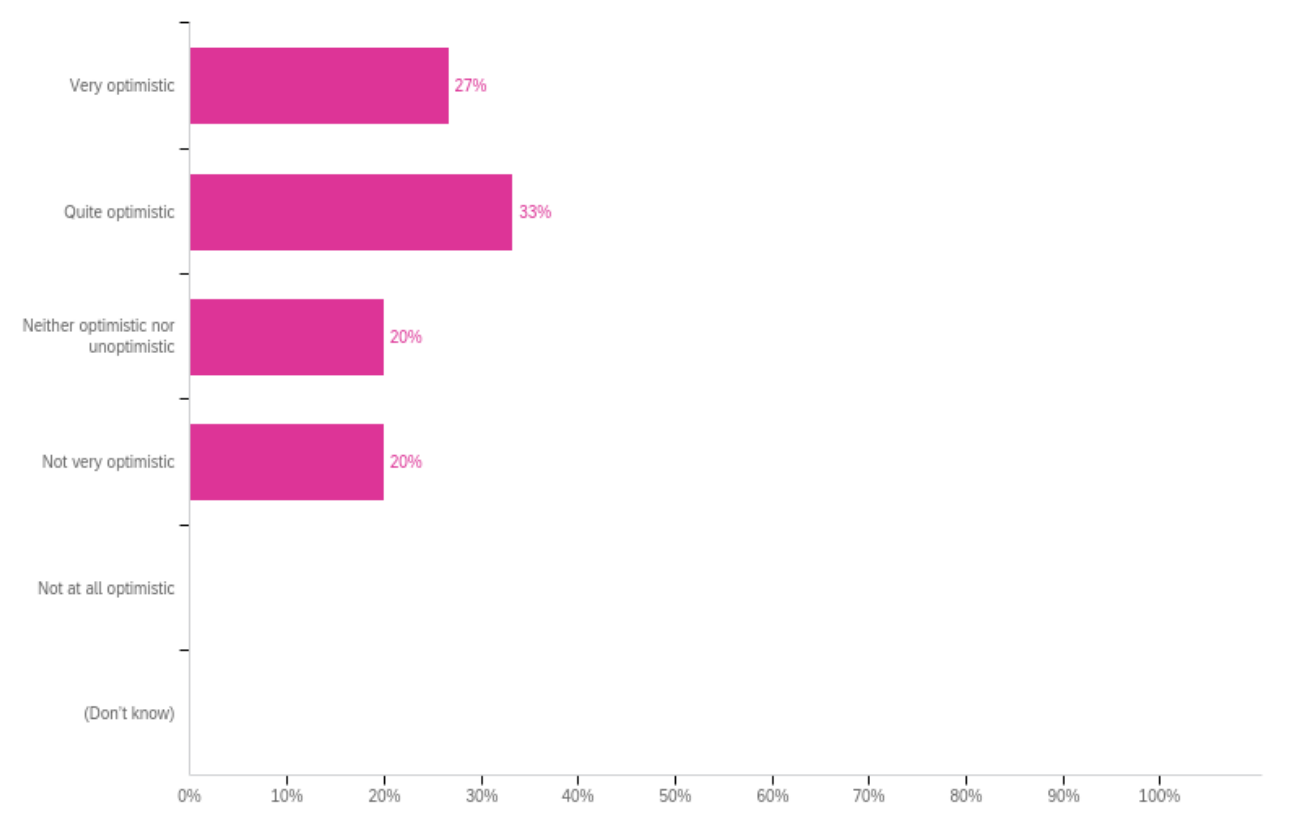
Overall, 60% of respondents said they are optimistic about filling skills gaps over the next five years and specifically, 27% said they are 'very' optimistic. At the other end of the scale, nobody said they were 'not at all' optimistic and only 20% said they were 'not very' optimistic.

Respondents were then asked an open-ended question about what if anything their organisation is doing to help fill the skills gap. Amongst those who gave responses, some of the quotes were:

1. *'In-house training.'*
2. *'…working on a plan to increase awareness about non-traditional publishing roles.'*
3. *'Training, internal progression, thinking outside the box – recruiting for potential not necessarily experience.'*
4. *'Better communications to potential applicants, better support and training to hiring managers, better external networks to support our diversity objectives.'*
5. *'Provide funding for professional qualification training e.g. CIM certification for marketers or Publishing Training Centre courses for editorial.'*
6. *'Provide internal training on subjects such as contracts, copyright etc.'*

Respondents were then asked if they had any suggestions for government, the education and training sectors or the Publishers Association that would help to fill skill gaps and strengthen the skills pipeline. Below are some of the quotes given by respondents:

1. *'An industry-wide campaign to showcase why publishing is a great place to work for roles in tech, finance and digital marketing i.e. hard to recruit for roles. Which also dispels the myths that you need to be a book lover and avid reader to enjoy and have a successful career in publishing.'*

2. *'Post-pandemic – to find ways to give work experience, shadowing and insights – specifically for the 14–20 age group that were prevented from gaining experience first-hand due to lockdowns so that they can see a career in publishing.'*

3. *'More mentoring and match-funding for trainee schemes that support companies and charities that are running outreach programmes to attract people with diverse backgrounds – publishing still remains an option for those from privileged backgrounds.'*

4. *'It would be helpful if apprenticeships in publishing as well as business were affordable to small and micro businesses. At the moment I have several candidates for apprenticeships but in reality cannot afford to train them through traditional pathways.'*

5. *'In educational publishing it would help enormously if government understood the skills required to produce good effective teaching materials'*

6. *'We have had to work on collaborative projects with those with teaching skills but not publishing skills. Generally we have found that there is little understanding or appreciation of the skills of publishing which makes it difficult to ensure the quality of the project.'*

7. *'More support for in-house training would really help us.'*

Finally, respondents were asked what skills gaps they see emerging in the next 5 to 10 years for their organisation. The following are some of the quotes given by respondents:

1. *'Digital marketing and tech.'*

2. *'Maybe more technology skills gaps, maybe finance.'*

3. *'Adaptability – individuals that can use technology better to market, promote and sell books.'*

4. *'Media skills that see publishing as content production that can be adapted for other entertainment formats (TV, film, radio, podcasts) – and working with authors in that way.'*

5. *'Leadership – on leading remote, flexible teams.'*

6. *'Creative entrepreneurship – to spot and seize opportunities on what readers want.'*

7. *'Environmentally conscious decision making e.g. sustainable production skills.'*

8. *'Editorial and sales. The rigor of editorial skills is being lost. And the whole sales environment is changing rapidly and we need staff who can meet the requirements of this new model. The old traditional models of book sales are being overtaken by more of a need to deal direct with your customers, particularly in a digital environment, and to have a sales approach that is more customer and service focused and more integrated with marketing.'*

9. *'Need greater flexibility in working practises to attract people.'*