Developing Digital Leadership Skills in Construction SMEs

Final Report August 2022

A programme managed by
Gloucestershire Construction Training Group

FUNDED BY citb

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02 Project Overview

Introduction

This is the final report for the Developing Digital Leadership Skills in Construction SMEs project designed and delivered by Gloucestershire Construction Training Group and funded by the CITB.

Project Overview 200 Words for the CITB website

Developing Digital Leadership Skills in Construction SMEs was a pragmatic programme designed to provide owners and managers of construction SMEs with the skills to increase the use of digital solutions to improve business performance. It was managed by Gloucestershire Construction Training Group and funded by the CITB.

The programme focused on removing or streamlining repetitive, time-consuming and error-prone tasks. A series of events was held between February 2020 and May 2022, each exploring a barrier to digital adoption: managing culture change and overcoming resistance; raising awareness of the solutions available; evaluating the wider business benefits; designing new ways of working and implementation.

The delivery model included Digital Boardrooms, where delegates explored the challenges to digital adoption. Each online event included peer activities which allowed the participants the opportunity to discuss the challenges they face and to explore and share practical solutions.

Digital Focus Groups followed the same format, exploring how a digital solution might improve key processes, such as managing health and safety or collecting data from construction sites. Digital Discover Sessions explored specific solutions such as estimating software, time sheets and data collection.

These events were well attended and generated high levels of peer interaction.

Project launch Leeds
November 2019

03 Project Funding/Duration

Funding Gloucestershire Construction Training Group received £48,000 from the CITB.

A further £20,650 was provided by the project partners and supporters.

Payments were made quarterly throughout the project.

Duration The project duration was 24 months.

November 2019	April 2020	
May 2020	December 2020	Project Closed
January 2021	June 2022	

Marketing 2019

Final digital event May 2022

04 Partners

Partners

Harbour Render Systems
BM Babbage
Severnside Scaffolding
AMPM247 LTD
Barnwood Construction
Growth Hub (LEP/Gloucestershire University)
UK Digital Retail Innovation Centre (UK:DRIC)
Jewell Facitltation and Digital Citizens became part of delivery team

Partners Overview

Most of the original partners were construction SMEs who were also members of Gloucestershire Construction Training Group. Their role was to provide venues for events, act as hosts and demonstrate the technology that they were using. They formed the core of the first cohorts.

The move to online removed this requirement. At the same time, the priorities of these company managers re-focused on dealing with the impact of Covid.

When the programme relaunched, their involvement changed. Their role became one of:

- Providing guidance
- Participating in events
- Contributing to the discussions
- Attending as observers
- Supporting marketing efforts
- Providing feedback

The role of the Growth Hub (LEP / University of Gloucestershire) also changed, as they re-focused on providing Covid business support, as directed by central Government. They returned at the end of the project to provide a meeting space.

The UK Digital Retail Innovation Centre (UK:DRIC) were invited to become partners to share intelligence about digital adoption in another sector. Despite a well publicised launch however, they were not financially sound and soon ceased to operate.

05 Events and Participation

Events and Participation

Events

Throughout the course of this project, we delivered twenty-eight individual events: two in person, and the remainder online.

Two events were cancelled due to the CITB's temporary closure of the project; a further event was cancelled because of low SME take-up.

Despite the challenges of moving online and the many difficulties facing the industry, the level of participation was strong.

Phase	Time period	Events planned	Events held	Notes
1	February 2020	1	1	The launch event before the project moved online
2	April - May 2020	3	1	One event held online due to COVID; others cancelled when the CITB paused funding.
3	Feb - July 2021	12	12	
4	Oct 2021 - Jan 2022	8	7	One cancelled, low SME participation
5	April - May 2022	7	7	
Total		31	28	

Participation

The bookings listed do not include those who booked via LinkedIn or requested access by email.

The revised programme achieved good levels of partition with many owners and managers of construction SMEs attending a series of events.

Considering the challenges faced by the sector this shows the value of the programme.

Eventbrite bookings Phase 1, 2 and 3	449
Bookings via Cheltenham Business Show	26
Eventbrite bookings Phase 4 & 5	228
Total	703
Average bookings (Events)	25
Typical attendance Phase 1, 2 and 3	12 to 20
Typical attendance Phase 4 & 5	8 to 15

06 Schedule of Events

Improving Performance with Digital - Developing Digital Leadership in Construction SMEs – 26 Feb 2020
Improving Business Performance with Digital - Getting Started - 21 April 2020
Improving Business Performance with Digital - Evaluating the Benefits - 28 April 2020
Improving Business Performance with Digital - Developing A Digital Culture -12 May 2020
Digital Focus Group: Managing HR in construction SMEs - 12 February 2021
How do you evaluate the benefits of digital solutions in construction SMEs? - 26 February 2021
Digital Focus Group: Managing time and attendance in construction SMEs - 12 March 2021
Digital Discovery Session - Exploring a range of digital solutions - 16 March 2021
Creating a digital culture: Overcoming resistance to change in construction - 26 March 2021
Digital Focus Group: Managing Health and Safety in construction SMEs - 16 April 2021
Digital Discovery Session - Exploring MS 365 in Construction SMEs - 20 April 2021
Managing the implementation of digital solutions in construction SMEs - 30 April 2021
Digital Discovery Session 3: Exploring a range of digital solutions - 18 May 2021
Providing workplace learning in construction SMEs - 19 May 2021
Designing New Digital Ways of Working In Construction - 18 June 2021
Using Digital Solutions to Improve Quality in Construction - 20 July 2021
The business case for digital adoption in construction SMEs - 15 October 2021
Streamlining and removing site-based processes in construction SMEs - 26 October 2021
How do you evaluate the benefits of digital solutions in construction SMEs? - 5 November 2021
Creating a digital culture in construction: Overcoming resistance to change - 26 November 2021
Estimating in construction SMEs - 30 November 2021
Managing the implementation of digital solutions in construction SMEs - 10 December 2021
Designing new digital ways of working in construction - 14 January 2022
Microsoft Office 365 and its use in construction - 28 January 2022
How do construction SMEs find and fund digital tools to improve efficiency? - 1 April 2022
Making time and finding support for digital adoption in construction SMEs - 8 April 2022
Creating short and medium-term plans for digital adoption in construction - 26 April 2022
How do construction SMEs develop the skills to support digital adoption? - 6 May 2022
Using digital solutions to manage Health & Safety in construction SMEs - 10 May 2022
Exploring digital data collection in construction SMEs, incl timesheets - 20 May 2022
Developing digital leadership skills in construction SMEs: a F2F workshop - 24 May 2022

Developing Digital Leadership Skills in Construction SMEs

Improving business performance by adopting digital solutions

O7a Delivery Model

The project delivery model and six learning outcomes were outlined in a six page marketing document. The move online necessitated some modifications to the programme, however the core activities remained in place.

O7b Delivery Model

Planned Delivery Model

Digital Boardrooms

Owners and managers of construction companies form a small group and attend a series of face-to-face meetings as outlined opposite. These meetings are known as Digital Boardrooms and are facilitated by digital and change experts. Each group will hold a minimum of six Digital Boardrooms during the programme.

Each meeting will include:
• peer to peer discussions about business improvement opportunities and possible solutions
• support and guidance from experts in digital solutions and business change

Digital Focus Groups

Digital Focus Groups provide an opportunity for managers in one discipline from different companies to come together for an in-depth exploration of how digital tools could be used to increase the efficiency of a specific business function or process.

Actual Delivery Model

Digital Boardrooms

Due to Covid, Digital Boardrooms were moved online. The face-to-face discussions were replaced with a range of online activities completed in breakout rooms.

Instead of local contractors, the audience was now made up of participants from across the UK.

The impact of Covid on businesses brought about a change in the nature of Digital Boardrooms: cohorts progressing together evolved into participants who attended selected events.

Digital Focus Groups

Digital Focus Group meetings were held throughout the duration of the project. Again, resources were created to support these events. Moving online removed the collaborative 'next steps' that had been included in the original plan.
These events added value to the project.

Observations include:

• The awareness of the available solutions remains low
• Some delegates were very conservative in their wish to streamline existing processes
• These events were well attended, with good participation
• Some events did not attract as many 'subject experts' as had been expected eg Health and Safety Managers

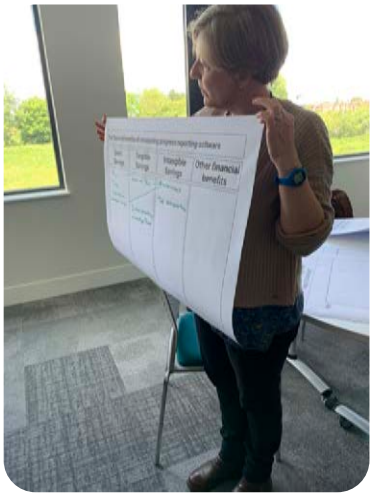
During the programme, we took the decision to merge Digital Focus Groups with Digital Discovery Sessions.

O7c Delivery Model

Planned Model	Actual Model
Digital Discovery Sessions *Digital Discovery Sessions provide an opportunity for an in-depth look at a range of digital products and solutions, both generic and those designed specifically for the construction sector. These events are open to all.*	**Digital Discovery Sessions** The Digital Discovery Sessions had moved online, with guest speakers presenting digital solutions. We included breakout session activities to split up what would otherwise have been two hours of uninterrupted Zoom presentations.
Action Plans *Actions Plans are tasks to be completed between Digital Boardrooms. The purpose of the Action Plans is to take the learning from the Digital Boardrooms and Discovery Sessions and use it to deliver tangible outcomes.*	**Action Plans** The original intention of encouraging employers to develop business improvement or digital adoption Action Plans was derailed by the move to online delivery. This was due to the move away from closed cohorts, shorter events (half day sessions became two hours online) and the impact of Covid on the industry which made it difficult for employers to commit to an action plan.
Online Resources *We are providing a range of online resources, including information about digital products and services, vlogs, podcasts and case studies, with forums to enable discussion about digital issues. Many of these resources are public.*	**Online Resources** The change in the programme moved the focus to designing and marketing the online events which reduced the sharing of resources. GCTG will continue to share information about digital solutions. See Collaborative Site and Digital Solutions Wiki

Facilitated Sessions

Using a facilitator unconnected to either the construction or technology sectors proved very beneficial and is highly recommended.



Raising Awareness

We were pleased with the support provided by suppliers of digital solutions. The challenge for our sector is to encourage suppliers to promote their solution's features and how they might benefit a construction company.

Suppliers, in our experience, are too keen to recount the story of their business, rather than selling the product benefits.

Delegate Participation

The vast majority of the delivery took place via peer discussion.

It is pleasing to report the extent to which participants were willing to take part in these activities.

O8a Programme Content

Planned Content	Actual Activity
Identifying Business Opportunities *Central to this programme is helping organisations identify opportunities to remove or streamline time-consuming, repetitive and error-prone tasks. We will achieve this by encouraging managers to map and review their processes and tasks.*	**Identifying Business Opportunities** Each event included a session on identifying business opportunities. Typically, this entailed asking what solutions were already in place and what tasks had been considered for improvement.
Exploring Digital Solutions *A lack of awareness of the solutions available may be a key factor in low digital adoption. Throughout this programme, there will be opportunities to explore both construction specific and generic software, from major applications to free apps.*	**Exploring Digital Solutions** We endeavoured, throughout the programme, to raise awareness of the solutions available. This took the form of presentations by solution providers, and delegates sharing their own knowledge and experience of the tools available. See Digital Solutions Wiki
Evaluating The Benefits *Making a valid business case for change can be challenging as the benefits of a digital solution may not be obvious or can be intangible. This programme includes guidance and information about how to evaluate the benefits and sell them to your organisation.*	**Evaluating The Benefits** The 'Evaluation' session was delivered four times using a range of peer activities. This is a topic that will continue to require support since large numbers of contractors do not fully understand the business benefits of introducing digital solutions.

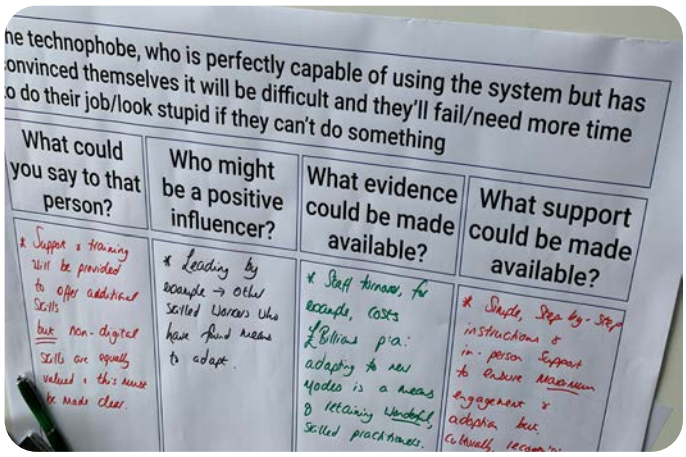
A lack of knowledge about the solutions available and a lack of awareness of the wider business benefits are major barriers to digital adoption by construction SMEs.

O8b Programme Content

Planned Content	Actual Activity
Managing Cultural Change *We will explore how managers can overcome the barriers to digital adoption. This may be convincing the senior management team to support change or removing end-user resistance, helping organisations develop a culture where digital is the norm.*	**Managing Cultural Change** Managing culture change was a major part of this programme and key to increasing digital adoption in construction. This topic was explored four times. The people barrier activity was well received.
Planning Implementation *Many digital projects fail to deliver the expected improvements because of poor implementation. To avoid this we have included information about managing the introduction of new ways of working such as the pace of change and how the system will be used.*	**Planning Implementation** The implementation sessions generated some interesting debates and opinions on the pace of implementation and who should be involved. We believe that these peer discussions will prove to have helped participants to introduce new ways of working that will bring the expected business outcomes.
Technical Considerations *This is not a digital skills or an IT training course but it will include information to raise the awareness of technical issues.* *Participants will be able to create a checklist for further research, such as software licensing, ongoing cost, service agreements and cybersecurity.*	**Technical Considerations** Reducing the session length resulted in less time to explore the technical aspects. However there appeared to be good awareness that these issues do need to be considered.

During many of the events, we asked participants which processes they wished to improve. In general we were surprised by the lack of a desire for business improvement. It would appear that many managers are content with having a plethora of spreadsheets or accept that some processes are inefficient.

O8c Example Content



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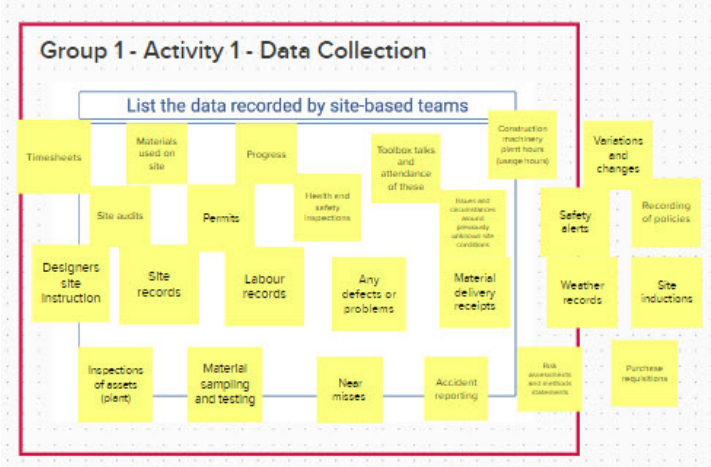
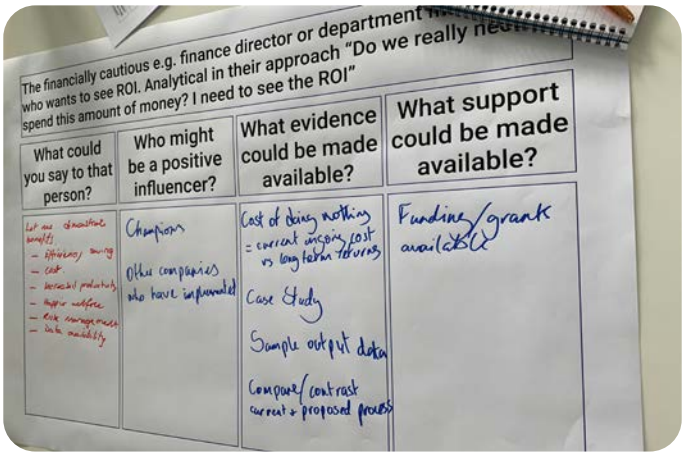
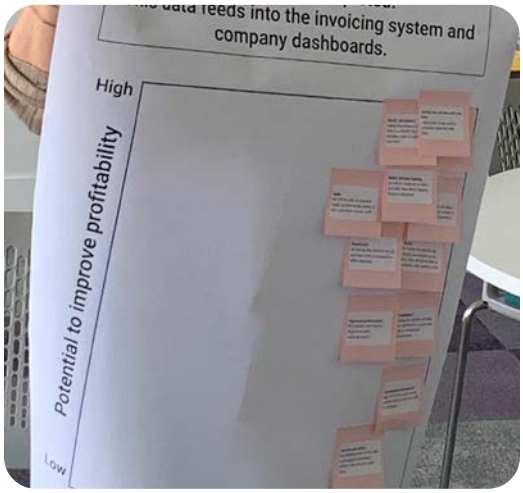






O9a Products

Products

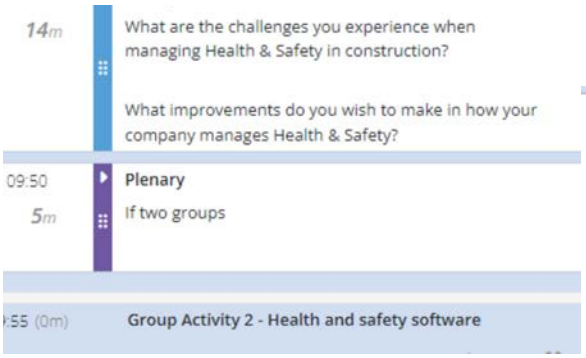
This was not a traditional training course but a collection of peer activities and presentations.

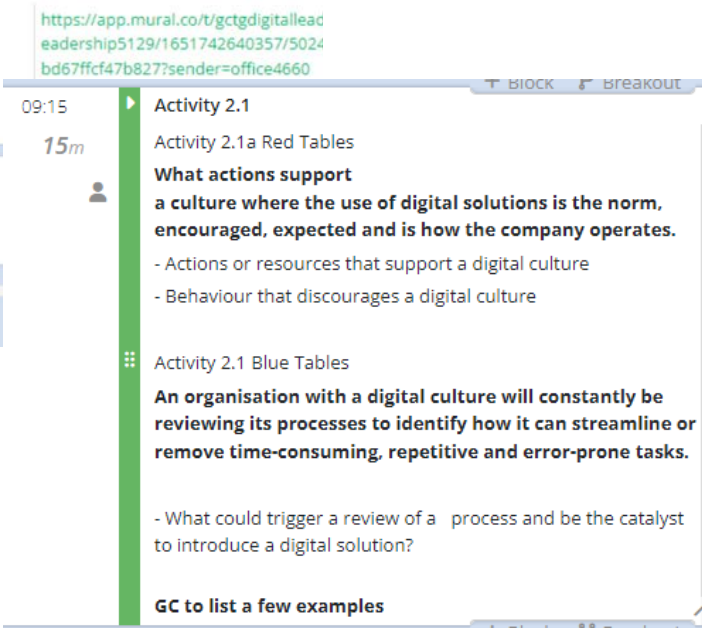
To encourage open and honest discussions we decided not to record these sessions. This allowed delegates to explain the internal challenges they face when introducing new ways of working.

The outcome of this approach is that there is no traditional training material that could be delivered as a course. However, the session plans and group activities have been saved.

Session Plans

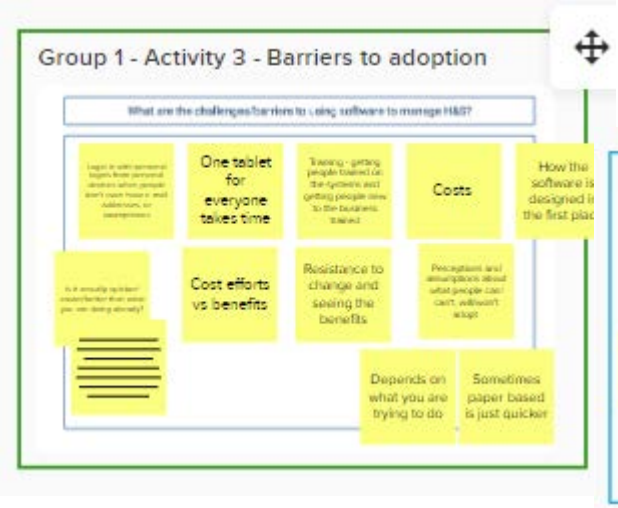
The session plans have been saved and could be adapted for future events

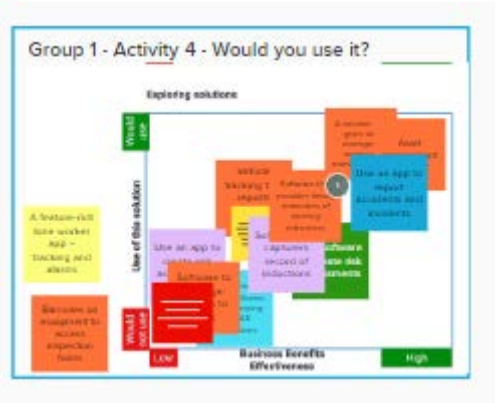


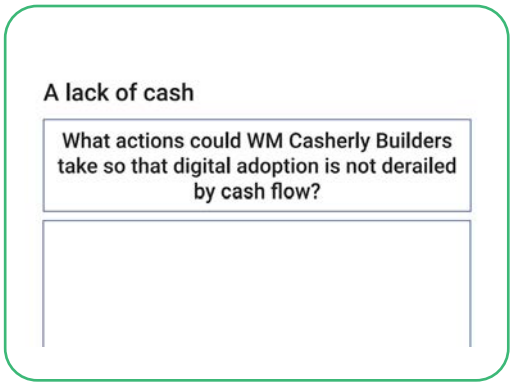


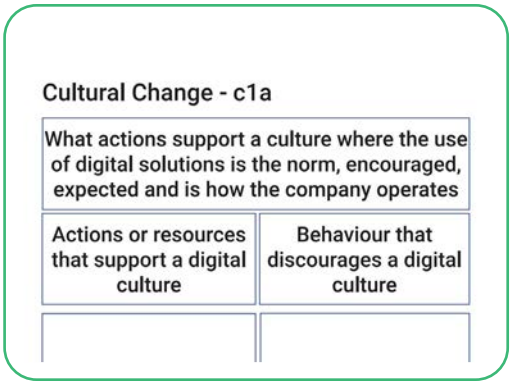
O9b Products

Peer Activities The peer activities have been saved and could be adapted for future programmes









Accessing Resources To enquire about access to the session plans and peer activities please email info@gctraining.group

10 Other Activities

Collaborative Site

The original plan included a collaborative workspace. Each cohort would have access to resources online and would be able to continue the discussions and ask questions between events.

We selected Ning as a suitable platform and populated it with information. The intention, at each face-to-face event, was to use the site as the resource library, which would hopefully encourage activity between meetings.

The move online, however changed the way that delegates interacted with resources. Working with individuals who attended only selected online events made it harder to create a trusted community.

The additional resources required to design, market and deliver the online events reduced the time available to update the Ning site. Approving access to the site and monitoring activity created additional administration, resulting in the site being closed.

We would however consider using a collaborative site for a future project.

Digital Solution Wiki

One of the barriers to digital adoption by construction SMEs is a lack of awareness of the solutions available. We discussed this issue with the Digital Construction Skills Team who created a guide to digital tools.

We explored the possibility of creating a wiki of digital solutions that could be shared with employers. After setting up a test site, however it became clear that this would be a project in its own right. The number of solutions continues to grow and maintaining the wiki would have been a drain on resources. It had also not formed part of the original application.

CITB Skills and Training Funding

To assist companies wishing to apply for Skills and Training funding to support digital adoption, we created a guidance document.

11 Digital Skills

Digital Skills

There is a clear need to support the industry in the development of the digital skills required to improve business efficiency. Industry reports frequently highlight the need for digital skills, whilst organisations' strategic plans routinely state their intent to provide training.

'Digital skills' mean different things to different groups, however and we believe it would be helpful if organisations stated specifically which digital skills are required or will be supported.

For the digital skills events, we created a matrix of the digital skills training required.

Digital Leader	The skills and knowledge required to increase digital adoption in construction
Digital Bystander or Onlooker	Non-users who require an awareness of digital solutions. For example managers, students and apprentices
Digital Technician	The skills and knowledge to configure solutions
Digital Practitioner	The skills and knowledge required by main users who manage and control digital solutions
Digital User	The skills and knowledge required by end users. Including technical and typical usage
Digital Trainer Digital Champion	The skills and knowledge required by those supporting digital adoption

12 Training Group Support

Reaching SMEs

One of the objectives of this commission was to engage with the 'hard to reach' construction SMEs – the smaller and medium sized companies that do not routinely attend industry events.

When the Gloucestershire Construction Training Group programme moved online, we shared news about the events with other Training Groups, inviting them to market the programme to their members.

This resulted in a number of bookings and during the second half of the project we included questions about Training Group membership within the booking process. This generated the following data:

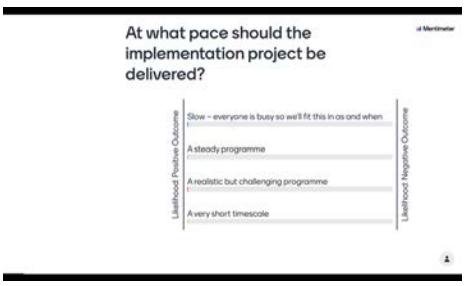
Bookings By Members of a CITB Training Group

% of bookings by organisations who are members of a CITB Training Group	45%
Number of Training Groups Represented	45
Approx. % of Local Training Groups	75+%

Notes: This data is based on bookings made since April 2021 as in the first three phases we did not record if delegates were members of a CITB Training Group.

Recommendation

This response clearly demonstrates that Training Groups can be the conduit to reach construction SMEs. We recommend that the CITB makes much more use of Training Groups to disseminate information.



13 Delivery By Training Groups

Delivery by CITB Funded Training Groups

At the pre-contract meeting between the CITB and Gloucestershire Construction Training Group, the CITB were keen that one of the outcomes of this project would be future delivery by CITB funded Training Groups.

The issue of how these activities would be funded was discussed and the outcome for the GCTG project was changed to be the availability of resources.

Following the changes to the CITB team and the review of the role of Training Groups, it has not been made clear if this is still the ambition.

Peer Activities

One option might be for Training Groups to run one or two Digital Leadership activities during a members' meeting. These do not require any digital technical know-how as they are peer activities.

Topics include cultural change, overcoming people barriers, evaluation, lack of cash or time and managing implementation.

Gloucestershire Construction Training Group would make the outline of the activities available.

Cultural Change - c1a

What actions support a culture where the use of digital solutions is the norm, encouraged, expected and is how the company operates	
Actions or resources that support a digital culture	Behaviour that discourages a digital culture

A lack of cash

What actions could WM Casherly Builders take so that digital adoption is not derailed by cash flow?

14a Observations

The role of digital solution suppliers/ providers.

It became clear that there is still work to do to raise awareness of the range of digital solutions available. Several of the suppliers involved in this project expressed surprise at the low level of knowledge amongst construction employers.

This may help to explain why they often promote the virtues of their business, rather than focusing on the benefits and other key information. Suppliers need to appeal to delegates' primary interests, namely

- What each solution can do
- How it might benefit a construction SME

Pause in Funding

The detrimental effect of the CITB's pause in funding was well documented at the time, so we will not repeat the same points here.

However, the blanket closure of the majority of CITB commissions was disappointing. The phrases 'make hay while the sun shines' and 'strike while the iron's hot' come to mind.

Never has there been a greater opportunity to engage with the sector on the use of technology. Closing the Gloucestershire Construction Training Group project saved the CITB just £2k per month, when it could have used this as an opportunity to increase activity.

The delegates who had booked the newly designed online events were lost and, when the programme subsequently relaunched, additional resources were required.

In addition, and despite assurances to the contrary, the piecemeal way in which the projects were closed was disappointing.

14b Observations

The Role of Technical Advisors

When the application was made, it was assumed that there would be a role for digital technical advisors. As content was developed for online events however, it became clear that the support requirement was less on technical aspects, but rather on matters of culture and process.

For example, suggestions from the technical experts included designing completely radical new ways of working. Whilst this might be a practical approach for a small minority of companies, it would turn off the majority. It certainly would not encourage the adoption of digital solutions for the purpose of streamlining everyday activities.

Similarly, technical support/advice from the corporate sector suggested that companies create a new position at senior level to manage data and digital adoption. This approach, whilst it might be beneficial in some cases, is unlikely to be adopted by our target audience.

Professional Facilitation

From the beginning of the project, we decided to use the services of a professional facilitator. This proved to be a very positive move which offered a variety of benefits:

- Clarity of focus when designing questions/group activities
- Impartiality
- Inclusion (encouraging full participation)
- A non-judgemental approach
- Timekeeping!
- Design of activities

Verdict: we would recommend the use of a professional facilitator.

15 Outcome

Success

- **Attendance (delegate numbers)**
- **Reaching the target audience – SMEs**
- **The high quality of peer-to-peer conversations**
- **The willingness of participants to share information**
- **Positive delegate feedback**
- **The support provided by Training Groups**

Challenges

Moving from face-to-face cohorts to online meetings removed the opportunity for valuable one-to-one conversations about developing digital action plans.

The primary focus for most construction managers was on limiting the impact of Covid on their business. This made it difficult for them to commit to other development plans.

Designing and managing the online events demanded more time. This had the effect of reducing the resources available for follow up activities between meetings and events.

The final quarter proved to be one of the most challenging. The industry was facing an array of challenges: full order books, shortages of labour and materials, and high inflation. The quarter also included an unusually high number of public holidays.

Long-term impact

Measuring impact is a challenge.

We may never know if a strategy to overcome resistance to change has enabled the adoption of a digital solution or if a new way of working has been introduced. However, we have received positive feedback about the benefits of the programme.

At the time of writing this report construction SMEs are facing significant challenges caused by labour shortages, high levels of inflation and spiralling energy costs. With this in mind, we have delayed sending an impact survey to participants. The survey was not part of the original application.

16a Recommendations

The following recommendations are in no particular order.

Marketing

The responsibility for marketing the project clearly lies with the provider.

For future projects, however it would be highly beneficial to have some guidance from the CITB social media team and a support agreement in place.

CITB Skills and Training Funding

It may be helpful if the guidance for Skills and Training applications included more examples illustrating how it might be used to support digital adoption.

The CITB may consider aligning the digital-related skills that are identified in strategic documents with the criteria for skills and training funding. For example, the sector needs Data Analysis but as this is not a people-related management skill it appears to be excluded from funding.

Piggy Backing

One way of keeping digital adoption front of mind might be to include a 'digital' topic within CITB employer events. We would suggest that they focus on technology required by SMEs and avoid headline-grabbing topics, such as Digital Twins or Blockchain.

It was good to see that the national meeting of CITB funded Training Groups included a digital topic. However Digital Twins, despite being well presented, was an odd choice for a group representing SMEs.

Training Groups as a Conduit

We recommend that the CITB make greater use of Training Groups as a means to engage with SMEs.

16b Recommendations

Widening the Appeal

Suggestions for future digital adoption commissions.

Based on participant feedback, it is evident that for many businesses, digital adoption remains low and a further project would be beneficial to the industry.

To overcome the barriers to 'digital', an alternative approach could be a commission focusing on Productivity and Efficiency, with the digital elements deeply embedded. A programme based on health and fitness might include diet, lifestyle including smoking, drinking and the amount of sleep plus exercise including the use of gym equipment (equivalent to digital tools)

A similar programme could be developed around Improving Business Performance. By focusing on the many facets of performance, it could attract the interest of those who believe that digital is not for them, or who consider it too 'difficult'.

We believe that adopting a broader business focus would have wider appeal.

Digital Skills Training

When a CITB strategy or policy document commits to supporting the development of digital skills we reommend that there is some clarity regarding the target audience.

See Digital Skills section.

16c Recommendations

Content

Suggested content to be included in a future commision to support digital adoption by SMEs.

Lack of time

One of the main barriers to digital adoption remains a lack of time – actual or perceived. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, SMEs need help with improving how they find the time for business development.

Awareness of the Solutions Available

It became clear throughout this project that there is a general lack of awareness of the solutions available. This is a challenge since generic overviews of digital solutions may not encourage adoption. Promoting actual solutions may therefore be a challenge for organisations such as the CITB. Any new support programme should focus on delivering an appreciation of solutions that enable improvements in business performance.

It may be helpful if future support included working with digital suppliers to help them articulate the business benefits.

Understanding of the Business Benefits

Linked to the awareness of available solutions is a lack of understanding of the wider benefits of digital adoption. Any new support programme should explain the indirect and non-tangible benefits of digital adoption.

Cost of Adoption

Any new support programme should include guidance on how to remove cost as a barrier.

16d Recommendations

Delivery

Recommendations regarding the delivery of future projects to support digital adoption by SMEs.

Not 100% E-Learning

It may be tempting to use a digital solution to solve a digital problem. E-learning may be appropriate for up-and-coming managers in larger companies and owners/managers from SMEs who have an appetite to increase digital adoption.

However, for busy owners/managers who are unsure of the benefits of introducing digital solutions, a support programme that relies totally on e-learning may not be appropriate. A sense of 'offering swimming lessons from a pontoon' comes to mind.

Micro-Learning

There is an appetite for bite-sized information such as videos. This is how many people learn and we recommend that future support programmes include this approach as part of the package.

Peer Involvement

From the experience of the GCTG project, we recommend an element of peer involvement in any future project.

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