



COVID-19: The impact on skills in tourism and hospitality in Northern Ireland

June 2020

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Written in June 2020 by Sabina Enback, Senior Researcher. Findings based on survey responses from 376 employers across the Northern Ireland hospitality and tourism industry. For more information or to access supporting infographics visit www.people1st.co.uk/HATS-network

To assess the impact of the current COVID-19 pandemic on the needs of the tourism and hospitality industry in Northern Ireland, the hospitality and tourism skills network (HATS) in collaboration with People 1st International surveyed 376 employers across the sector.

Summary

With the majority of businesses experiencing a negative economic impact of COVID-19 it is crucial that these receive appropriate government support. The industry is advocating for **enhanced grants and loans** being made available and that self-employed people are taken into consideration. It is also crucial to bear in mind the wider infrastructure when looking at support measures as for instance, **internet connectivity** in rural areas have made it more difficult to work remotely during the pandemic.

Businesses also report a negative impact on **mental health** due to stress relating to COVID-19 and the **lack of social support** correlating with social distancing measures. This presents an opportunity for the industry to join forces to look at what social support can be offered remotely to businesses and staff.

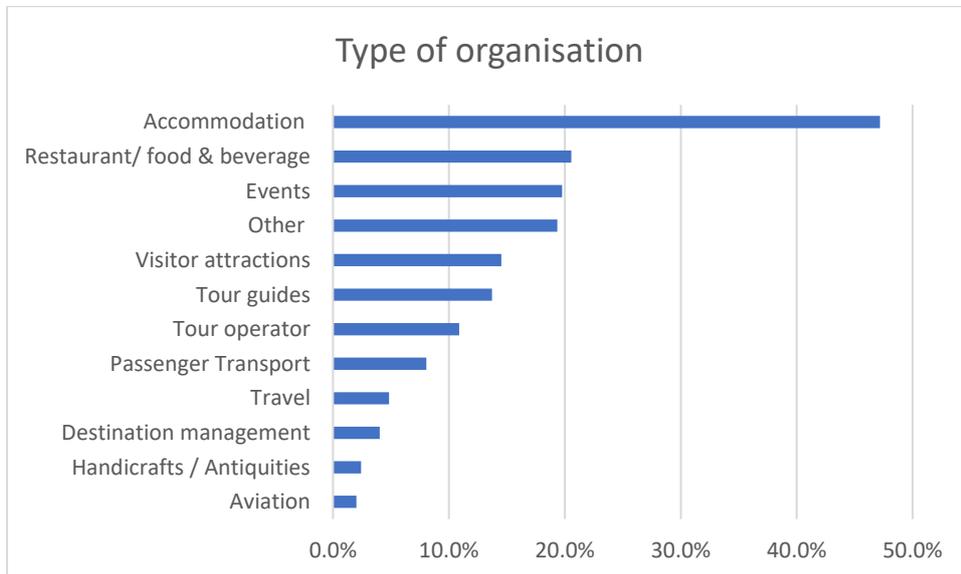
With only 40.8% of businesses having a contingency plan in place it is evident that the pandemic has taken the industry by surprise and there is a need for **clear guidance on sector specific hygiene and security measures** required upon re-opening. To help raise consumer confidence in returning to industry establishments it is recommended that a **publicly recognisable symbol** is developed which identifies businesses with staff trained in critical hygiene control and social distancing measures.

Key roles across the industry were identified as those needed to reinvigorate businesses struggling due to the pandemic such as **Business Development** roles and **Marketing/PR** professions. For smaller organisations which might lack the budget to hire such roles, it will be important to acquire some of the skills and knowledge these roles hold, such as social media skills, awareness of booking platforms as well as prospecting and presenting skills.

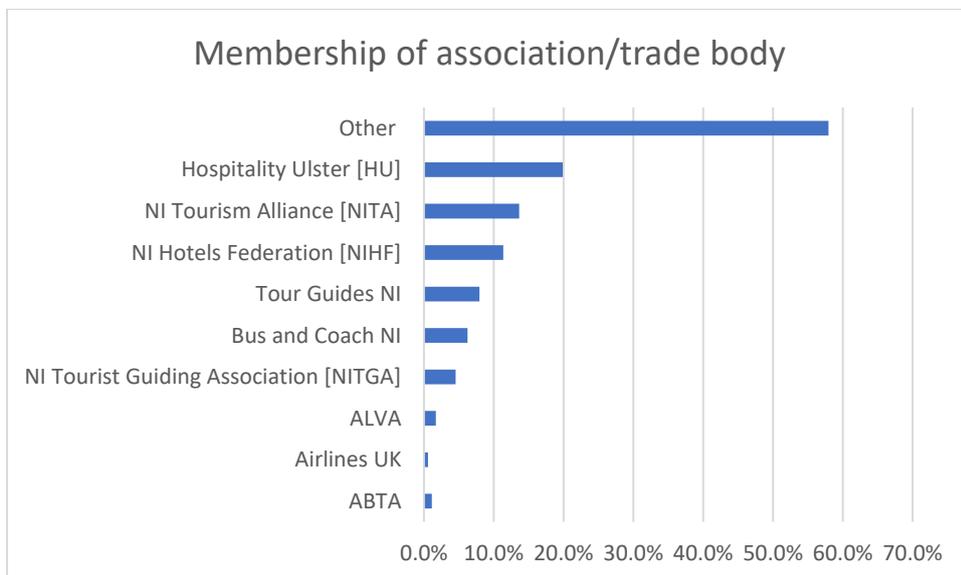
Critical skills in relation to the pandemic relate to **social distancing, infection control and hygiene** as well softer skills such as being aware of **changing needs, actively looking for ways to help** and **managing uncertainty**. This means that employees will need to receive training encompassing **protection measures** relating to the pandemic as well **enhanced customer service skills**. Staff will also need to be enabled to take initiative and make decisions.

Respondent profiles

The majority of respondents labelled their businesses as providing accommodation (47.2%) followed by the restaurant/F&B subsector (20.6%) and events (19.8%).



19.9% of respondents are members of Hospitality Ulster, 13.6% of NI Tourism Alliance and 11.4% of NI Hotels Federation.



On average respondents employ 56 staff, however employee levels varied greatly with some respondents being self-employed to others representing large-scale organisations with over 1,000 staff. Respondents report an **average of 8.6 employees** per organisation having been made redundant however this again varied greatly across the respondents with most not having made any redundancies to some organisations having made great numbers of staff redundant.

At this stage, **furloughing staff** has been the temporary solution for many of the respondents. Those normally utilising freelance workers, seasonal workers and contractors report not being able to do so at the moment.

"One furloughed. All 50 freelance artists are without work."

Survey respondent

Impact of COVID-19

The vast majority of respondents (88.1%) report the pandemic having a negative impact on themselves in that some experience lack of income and work; others have seen a reduction in pay whilst having to work the same amount. Respondents also worry about **redundancies** and the **poor access to digital equipment** and internet connection which makes it difficult for some to work remotely, especially in rural areas. In addition, several respondents state that the pandemic has had a negative impact on their **mental health**.

"As a leader in our business the impacts are: we have had to furlough 95% of our workforce therefore there is increased workload on smaller number of people who are working from home; working hard in partnership with other agencies towards rebuilding the business of tourism; challenge of keeping employees motivated and engaged whilst trying to rebuild business and ensure mental health is looked after. Restrictions on IT and equipment in the home working environment is another challenge."

Survey respondent

"We own and live in a B&B. If we cannot bring in an income, we could lose our home."

Survey respondent

"Left worried sick and physically ill as to how to keep museum going. Being an independent museum, we get no help or support from government. "

Survey respondent

Many respondents (68.9%) also report on the impact the pandemic has had on their staff, stating that **employees are feeling anxious**, with their mental and physical wellbeing affected. Staff have also experienced **loss of earnings** and are **lacking the social interaction** that comes with working on-site.

“Staff want to be working. Being out of work / furloughed is having a negative impact on their mental health and the financial wellbeing.”

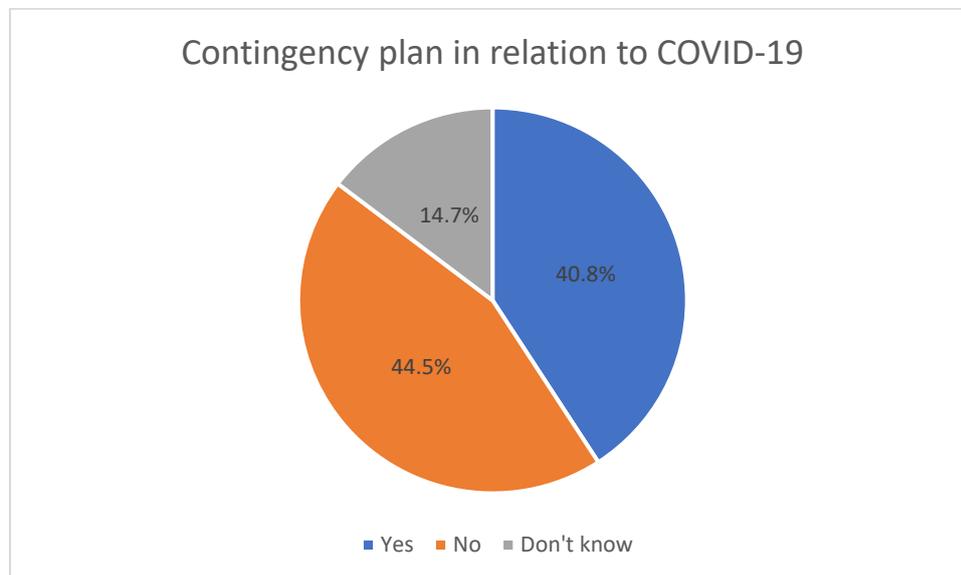
Survey respondent

“All on furloughed 80% of wages. No interaction. No development - although some training through HU flow system. No on-the-ground experience for newer staff.”

Survey respondent

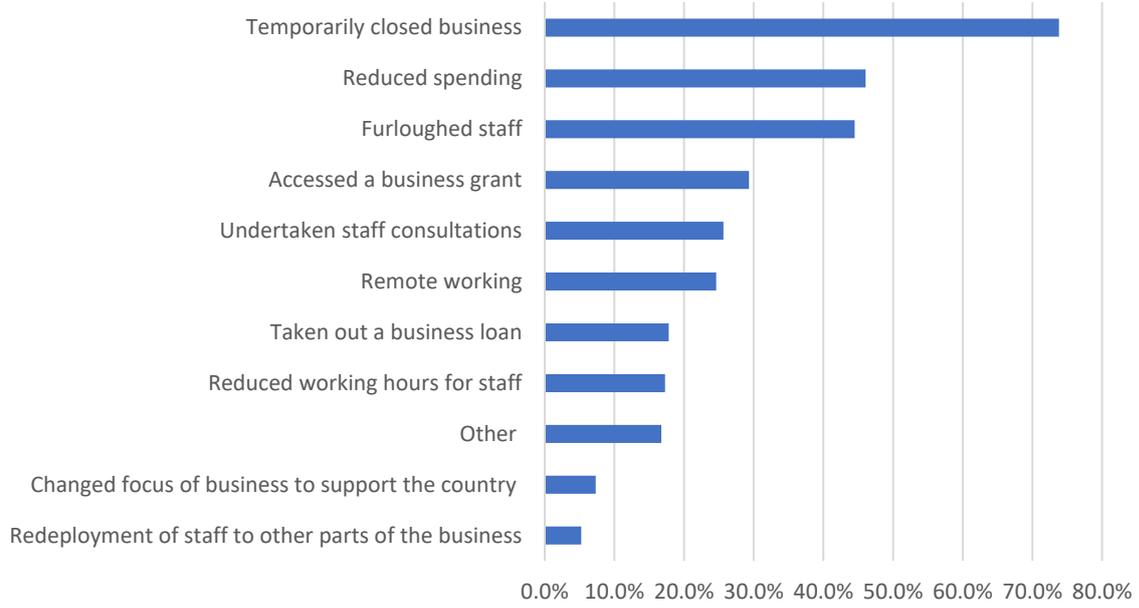
Resilience measures

40.8% of organisations report having a **contingency plan in place** in relation to COVID-19 with 44.5% having no plan in place.



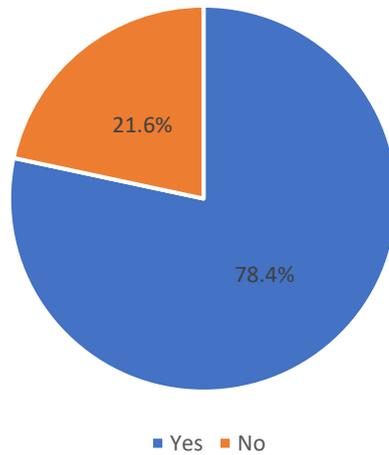
Results indicate a variety of measures having been implemented to cope with the current crises. Most have temporarily **closed their businesses** (73.8%) followed by **reduced spending** (46.1%) and **furloughing of staff** (44.5%). A few respondents are looking at altering the focus of their business such as developing a camp/caravan site for the staycation market and offering take-away services for food.

Measures put in place as a result of COVID-19



41.6% of respondents state that they **can work remotely** with the vast majority being able to **take part in virtual/online meetings**.

Ability to take part in virtual/online meetings



The main obstacles in responding to the crisis is **lack of funding** and **access to financial support**, the **reduction in revenue** streams and **unclear government guidance** and lack of timelines in relation to social distancing measures. Many respondents report on being unable to plan for their future when they are left in the dark in regard to when their businesses are allowed to re-open.

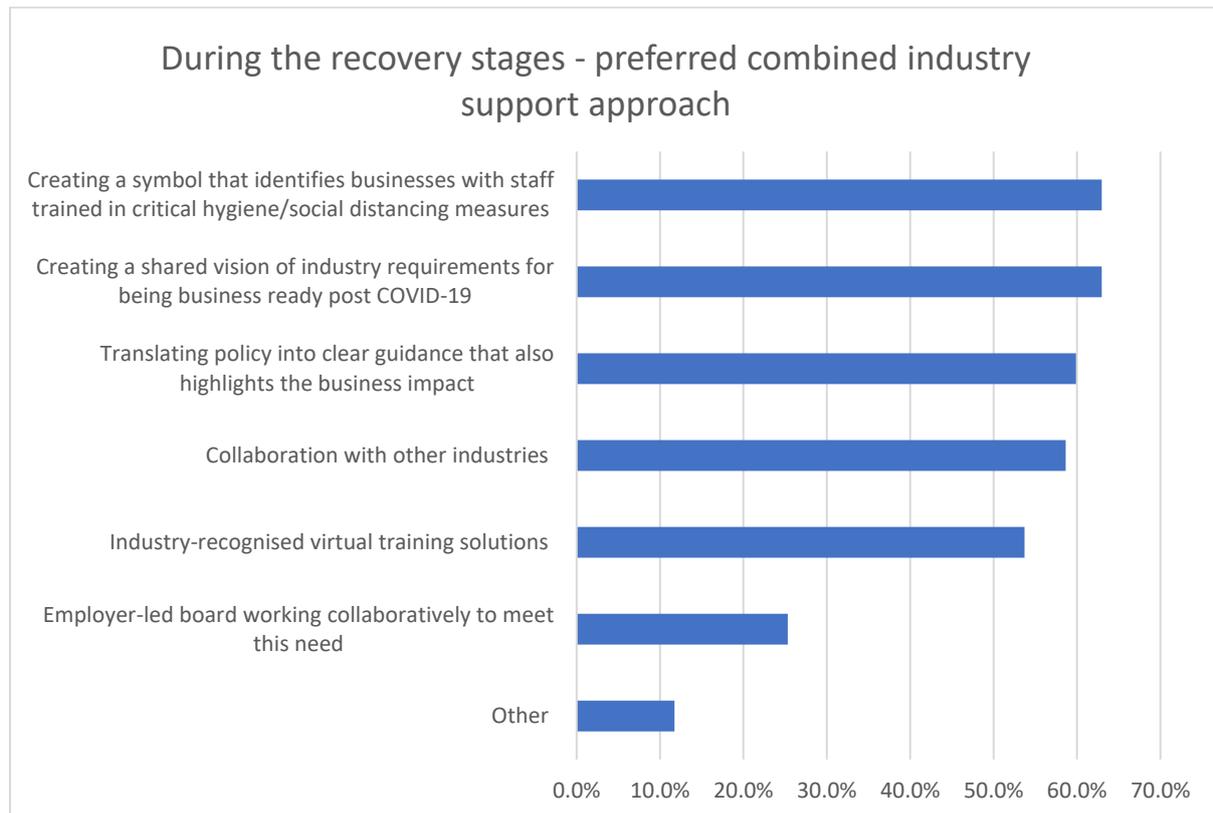
“Still waiting on 10K rates payment - and also waiting on Bank of Ireland to be part of the loan scheme so we can access money - nothing so far and have lost 55% of our annual turnover being closed and being closed for the foreseeable future.”

Survey respondent

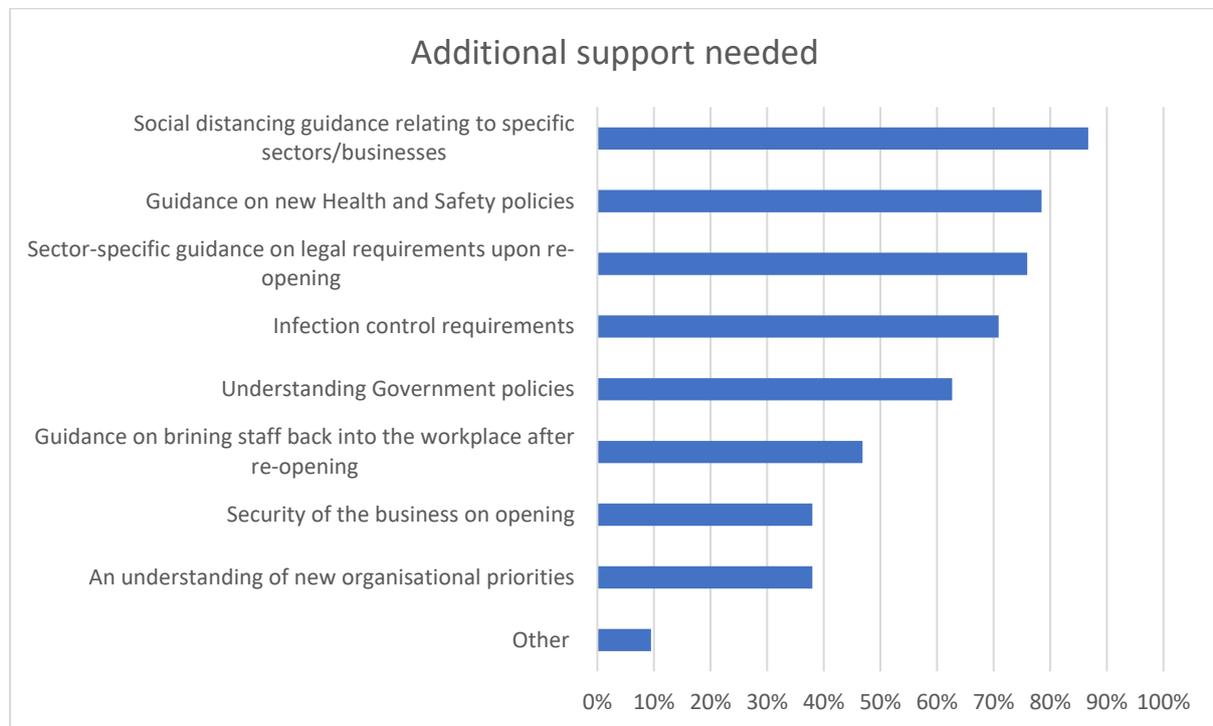
“Cruise ship travel on hold indefinitely. French & German tourists may have to quarantine before allowed to enter UK. How to socially distance while giving a coach tour or walking tour. Visitor attractions closed. How will visiting groups be able to access public toilets, hand sanitisation - this will take up a lot of time and there are often not enough facilities.”

Survey respondent

During the recovery stages, respondents would like to see the creation of a publicly recognisable symbol that **identifies businesses with staff trained in critical hygiene control** and social distancing measures. This would help to raise consumer confidence in returning to industry establishments. Other support required is the creation of a **shared vision of industry requirements** for being business-ready post COVID-19, as well as the **translation of policy into clear guidance** that also highlights the business impact.



Additional support required by the industry relates to **guidance on social distancing** for specific sectors/businesses, **Health & Safety policies** as well as **legal requirements** for each sector upon re-opening.

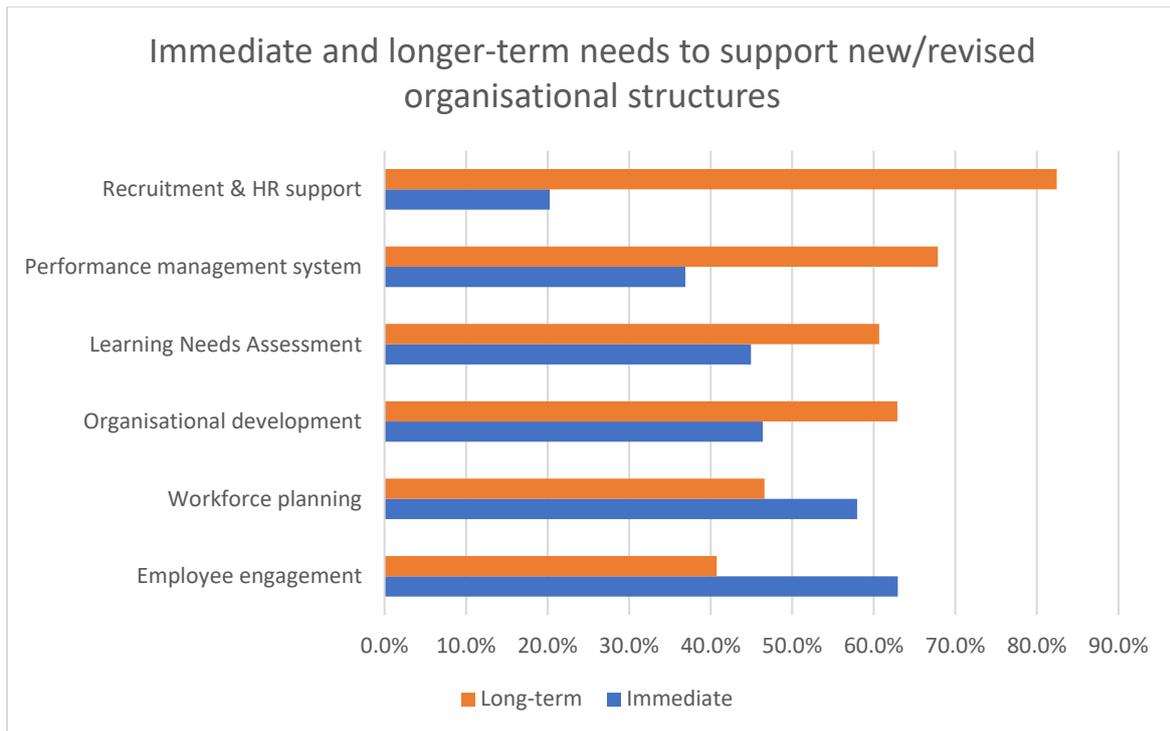


Impact on HR and Learning & Development

31.7% of respondents foresee **changes in organisational structures** as a result of the pandemic such as implementing **redundancies**, increasing **remote working** which mean the potential to hire international staff and streamlining with smaller teams with more flexibility to **multi-task across departments**. Some respondents do state that the uncertainty of the situation makes it rather difficult to plan for the future.

To support **immediate needs** in relation to new or revised organisational structures, respondents require assistance with employee engagement (63%) followed by workforce planning (58%) and organisational development (46.4%).

To aid with **longer-term needs**, respondents would like help with recruitment and HR support (82.4%) followed by performance management systems (67.9%) and organisational development (62.9%).



Perhaps surprisingly, the pandemic has only had a **marginal negative impact** on respondents' wider HR/L&D teams (13.8%) with respondents citing reduced training budget, increased workload, shrinking skill pool and general uncertainty contributing to the negative effect.

“Increased workload, having to deal with more mental health issues and employee queries regarding furlough, administration of the furlough process, updating and implementing new employee procedures relating to social distancing and health monitoring etc; dealing with redundancy and restructure.”

Survey respondent

The current situation has also had a negative effect on skills and talent. 27.6% of respondents state that **employee skills have deteriorated** or disappeared completely, with the latter being due to loss of staff.

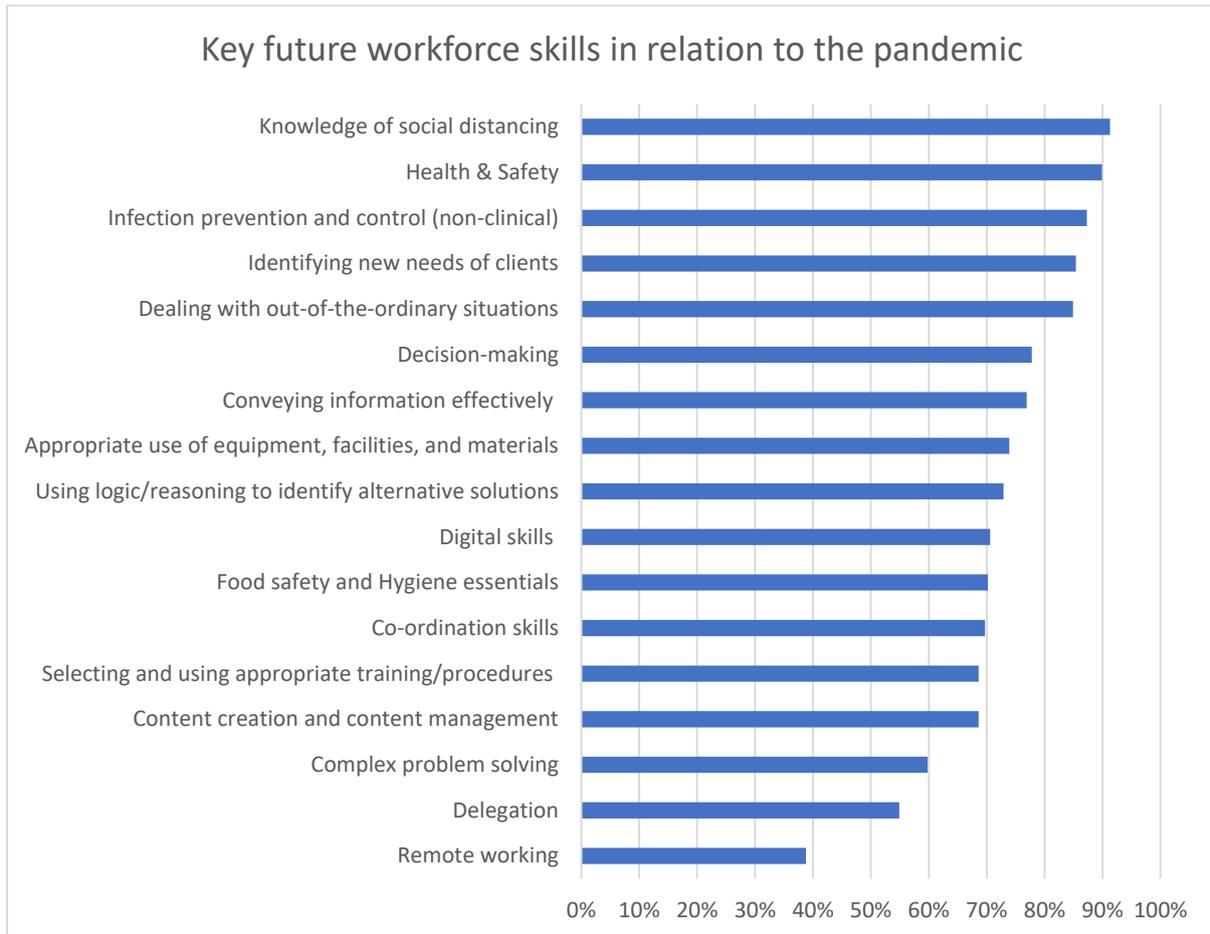
“Unless we can keep our staff and key freelancers, many years of contacts, experience and skills will be lost across all aspects of the business - programming, marketing, communications, operations, volunteer management and administration.”

Survey respondent

Key roles across the industry were generally identified as those particularly needed to reinvigorate businesses struggling due to the pandemic such as **Business Development** roles and **Marketing/PR** professions. Many of the subsectors also reported chefs and general managers to be critical to their business. Backoffice functions such as administrators and finance officers were also deemed important roles.

Accommodation	Restaurants/F&B	Tour Guides / Tour Operators	Handicraft / Antiquities	Passenger Transport
Chef Marketing/PR Officer IT/web building Cleaner Security officer	Chef Manager Marketing/PR Officer Kitchen staff Cleaner	Marketing/PR Officer Business Development Officer Tour Guide Administrator Finance Officer	Marketing/PR Officer Manager Boat Captain Ground staff	Driver Coach driver Marketing/PR Officer Maintenance Operator Cleaner
Visitor Attractions	Destination Management	Travel	Aviation	Events
Marketing/PR Officer Business Development Officer Cleaner Tour Guide HR Officer	Marketing/PR Officer Business Development Officer Cleaner Event Manager Administrator	Marketing/PR Officer Business Development Officer Driver Administrator	Marketing/PR Officer Reservations Officer Administrator Finance Officer	Marketing/PR Officer Business Development Officer HR Officer Chef Event Manager

Due to the pandemic, staff will require new sets of skills, particularly in relation to **social distancing, infection control** and **hygiene** but also in terms of taking the initiative to identify new needs of clients, deal with out of the ordinary situations as well as making decisions. This means that employees will need to receive training encompassing protection measures relating to the pandemic. Employers will also need to ensure that staff are trusted and equipped to **take initiative** and **make relevant decisions**.



The most critical skills relating to resilience and culture change are being aware of **changing customer behaviours** and needs, actively **looking for ways to help people** as well as **managing own or others uncertainty**. This means that staff need to be trained in enhanced customer service skills and being enabled to again, take initiative and make decisions.



Recommendations

Resilience of the tourism and hospitality industry in the aftermath of COVID-19 is key to the recovery of this important economic sector. Several short-term recommendations are emerging as critical factors to consider as employers plan to re-emerge and open their doors:

- **Follow the government guidance for safe operating practice and ensure staff are trained in social distancing measures, new workplace standards and infection prevention and hygiene control.** Staff need to be empowered to use their initiative and make decisions when faced with new situations and managing evolving needs of customers. To do this effectively, staff need to understand why certain things are different so they can best apply this knowledge with confidence.
- **Use the new [Professional Standard for Service Operators](#) to make sure training meets the industry-recognised standard.** The free-to-use guidance acts as a checklist and clearly outlines the skills, knowledge and behaviours required. Training to meet this standard is now available and [WorldHost 2020](#) is an example of how a 60-minute online course with assessment can give employers the assurance and evidence that their staff are equipped with the skills required to deliver exceptional service while operating in a safe environment.
- **Invest in technology.** It is important to work out how technology can be adapted to support the business. Websites, apps, bookings processes, protecting customer data, reporting and tracking physical customer contact if new cases of COVID-19 are reported, in order to alert other customers and colleagues are all important. In addition, there are many new digital solutions which can allocate space to customers to adhere to social distancing and ensure customers only spend a defined amount of time in the premises. Ordering, paying, queuing for toilet facilities and providing feedback on service can also be facilitated through remote-based solutions.
- **Consider alternative shift patterns.** Rotating Team A and Team B or more teams in order to be able to isolate employees who only work together on shifts if new cases arise means businesses can continue to keep operating.
- **Work closely with industry trade associations.** To achieve a shared vision for the industry, which is led by standards, employers must work closely with their industry association for effective two-way communication with central/local government.
- **Recognise the importance of digital, green and social skills.** Social skills will be even more important to the reputation of how well businesses meet changing customer needs. This, coupled with the adaptation of technology to support the business, means

staff will need to hold related digital skills to help ensure a sustainable future for the business. Green skills and knowledge will be even more crucial in the future and research by the [Next Tourism Generation alliance](#) shows that consumers are more aware and conscientious about where and why they chose to spend their time and money. With new business practice regarding disposable non-consumables, businesses need to communicate changes and why this is important to staff, customers and the environment. Empowering staff with this knowledge to reassure and emotionally connect with customers is crucial in demonstrating the force for good businesses are now embracing.

- **Raise consumer confidence.** When communities and destinations collaborate and work effectively at a local level to enforce national guidelines then public confidence will be restored. Giving customers assurance that front-facing teams are equipped to keep them safe will be critical beyond the pandemic. The [WorldHost 2020 badge](#) is an example of a symbol that investment in personal protection and social safety measures are in place – demonstrating great practice post COVID-19, addressing fears, expectations and building consumer confidence.
- **Don't underestimate the importance of communication.** The power of loyalty, emotional connection and appreciation from staff and customers about the impact and importance of the changes made to sustain a safe environment for everyone needs to be captured. There is a new sense of belonging and a cultural shift in how important this is to people who might have experienced anxiety from isolation and have been unable to work or socialise with friends or family. This needs to be factored into the workplace, to keep colleagues and customers up to date, informed and included.
- **Empower managers.** Managers need to be empowered to steer the business through disruption to normality and stay on course for survival. Their resilience will reduce the anxiety and stress the workforce are experiencing from loss of earnings, lack of social interaction and an uncertain future. Managers are now responsible for monitoring and managing risks associated with keeping a business safe from new cases of COVID-19 as businesses need an audit trail and proof of compliance to new operating standards. Monitoring performance will be more critical now than ever. Ensuring managers are equipped with critical thinking, decision-making and problem-solving skills will be important in meeting changing customer needs and managing uncertainty.
- **Value the greatest asset.** Regardless of business size, people are the greatest asset. Those who have chosen to work in hospitality, retail, travel and aviation at every level are the key to the economic recovery of this sector. People make the difference and employers who have treated and trained their people well during this time will recover quicker and stronger, with a brighter future. Key to this is to share best practice.

About People 1st International

People 1st International is an industry-led skills expert.

We support businesses in the UK and internationally to build, develop and retain skilled workforces.

We're a trusted partner to employers, industry bodies, skills organisations, donor funders, NGOs investment banks and governments, with over 50 years' experience in skills development and technical vocational education and training.

Our practical, employer-led solutions are created in response to industry needs, using our unparalleled insight into the current and future skills priorities. We're passionate about transforming skills and our experts work collaboratively with industry, governments and stakeholders to provide tailored support and facilitate responsive solutions to workforce challenges.

www.people1st.co.uk | info@people1st.co.uk



About HATS

The HATS employer-led network, which formed in 2019, brings together a diverse mix of employers from across the hospitality and tourism sector in Northern Ireland alongside industry associations and key delivery partners from government and education to collectively address issues around sector image, attractiveness and skills development into and within the sector.

www.people1st.co.uk/HATS-network | info@hatsnetwork.co.uk

