

# NTG ALLIANCE

## COUNTRY INTERVIEW REPORT

### IRELAND

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EXTRA



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**Background:** A general overview of the Next Tourism Generation Alliance project, and the number of interview participants per subsector in this country report.

The **Next Tourism Generation Alliance (NTG)** is the first European partnership for improving a collaborative and productive relationship between education and industry, funded by European Union. The NTG Alliance has partners from 8 countries (Spain, UK, Hungary, Netherlands, Italy, Bulgaria, Germany, Ireland), and will provide employees, employers, entrepreneurs, teachers, trainers and students with a set of Core NTG modules in digital, green and social skills.

Goals of the NTG Alliance are:

- To establish a Blueprint Strategy for Sectoral Skills Development in Tourism to respond to the fast changing and increasing skills gaps in digital, green and social skills sets;
- To define a scalable mechanism and model for sustainable and digital curricula between the industry and education providers at regional, national and European level;
- To create transformative cooperation in five key tourism sub-sectors: hospitality, food and beverage operations, travel agencies and tour operators, visitor attractions and destination management;
- To develop, deliver and test Next Tourism Generation (NTG) Skills Products for professionals, trainers, students, university tourism departments, local authorities, companies to respond to the fast changing and increasing skills gaps in digital, green and social skills sets.

Should you wish to know more about the Next Tourism Generation Alliance project, please visit [www.nexttourismgeneration.eu](http://www.nexttourismgeneration.eu)

For getting involved in the project (as a community member, affiliate partner or associate partner), please visit [nexttourismgeneration.eu/contact/](http://nexttourismgeneration.eu/contact/)

### Sample

Number of respondents interviewed for this report:	33
• Tour operators / travel agencies:	7
• Destination management organizations:	6
• Attractions:	7
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**Theme 1: NTG Skills Sets:** A summary of respondents' ideas of *current skills needs* (green, social, digital), *current shortage of skills*, *current training provision*.

## **Tour operators / travel agents - current skills needs, skills shortages, current (access to) training provision in relation to skills sets:**

### **Social/Soft Skills**

The tour operators and travel agents interviewed all placed most emphasis on social skills; 'this business is about people'. Person to person service is a skill set that is much sought after; the ability to interact with others in work terms, in groups, and person-to-person in a customer service context are highly prized. Basic skills such as listening 'to be able to read between the lines' and telephone techniques were mentioned; these were skills that it was felt could be trained for, or taught. Communicating with other people 'the ability to hold a conversation with customers...be able to initiate a conversation' were the most desired skills. Empathy with a variety of customers was thought to be a very important skill for employees to develop. The ability to network within the industry and among customers 'is a crucial part of the business'.

Companies like employees to have their 'own travel experience' as it 'helps them provide better, more credible, customer service'; they 'need to have travelled' (Tour Operator 7). A basic knowledge of geography is regarded as useful. Languages 'can be helpful, especially with corporate clients', but are not regarded as essential, 'people know they are coming on an English tour'. 'Cultural understanding' or awareness is desirable both with regard to work colleagues and customers.

A 'can do' attitude and 'a critical approach' (does this make sense to the customer, does it look right) is important. In this business, there is a need to be able to multi-task and time manage. Negotiation skills were mentioned as being useful. On an individual staff basis, developing a commercial awareness, specifically the ability to sell, is very important for progression within the business; it can be hard to get people with this skill set.

Some travel agencies and tour operators are very specialist with regard to the market segments they serve. If somebody has good experience with one agency this does not mean that they would be able to move to another agency without reskilling; 'just because they have worked for another travel company does not mean that they can work with our customers'. A good cultural fit between the employee and the company is important.

Currently training is provided through 'shadowing' or bringing in consultants (for example for telephone technique) from outside. Product learning through resources within the companies' takes place before interaction with customers is allowed. Short courses provided by the Irish Travel Agents Association (ITAA) are popular.

Management soft skills were emphasised by one of the larger Tour Operators:

‘And as the HR Director I suppose you know you read horror stories all the time about companies expanding, people growing, and it goes wrong. So I would be very conscious first of all of foundations. And building your business on strong foundations and really who is responsible for the career development of our people?’ (Travel Sector Interviewee 5)

Social skills are extremely important to employers in the Tour Operator/Travel Agent sector in Ireland.

### **Digital Skills**

Digital skills are embedded in the skill set required for working in a travel agency or tour operator. Currently Amadeus and Galileo are the Global Distribution Systems (GDS) in use in the travel and tourism sector in Ireland. Tourplan is used by tour operators. External consultants and short courses provided by the owners of the systems are used to train staff. The constant system updates can be disruptive; there is a need to prioritise training. Employers like employees to come with some knowledge of the main GDS systems; they need to see this on a CV. Some employers mentioned they would like employees to come with International Air Transport Association (IATA) certification.

XML links and bespoke in house systems also need to be mastered. ‘Fear of the phone is an issue’ and so many technical apps are now available (can do everything by phone).

Some companies need staff with web design skills. Digital marketing is becoming more important. One company reports setting KPIs for staff, ‘X number of Facebook posts etc.’. Pinterest and Instagram were both mentioned. With regard to social media, the following skills were highlighted: content management/creation and writing, social media marketing, graphic design skills and GDPR.

One large employer in the travel agent/tour operator sector would like employees to not just have a social media presence, but also the skills to sell through their social media network; ‘to push through their network’. Overall, at a basic level, employees ‘need to be comfortable sitting in front of a PC’. They need basic Word, PowerPoint and Excel; most companies will provide further training in these areas.

Talking specifically about smaller companies, it was remarked ‘And that is the thing that springs out, some people are very clever, some small businesses are very clever in using it, and very cleverly even more so than the bigger ones who tend to just you know put a few ads on and go with that’ (Travel Sector Interviewee 3).

### **Green Skills**

Discussion around green skills in the travel agent/tour operator sector brought up the issues of ‘green office’, ‘green destinations’ and sustainability.

If being ‘green’ made commercial sense these companies are open to it. It was remarked that the systems help in achieving ‘a paperless office’, although this was thought to be difficult in ‘the travel business’.

One company explained that they no longer mail documents to customers but that this was a problem for older customers. One of the largest Irish companies reported that they had employed a consultant to help them achieve one of the industry standards awards for ‘green companies’. This involves considering ‘alternative ways of doing things’. Another company in the group has Gold certification from EcoTourism Ireland. All staff in this company undergo ‘Leave no Trace’ training. They also have staff members trained as trainers of the ‘Leave No Trace Programme’

‘Green’ is considered to be ‘a big issue for US tour operators’; there is a need to be consistent with the perception of Ireland as green. Carbon footprint, coach drivers’ water and waste, were mentioned as areas where small changes could be made.

There is an awareness of sustainability, particularly the importance of using local suppliers. Even those companies who are not currently involved in sustainability training are aware of sustainability.

Overall, green issues are not currently a priority for the smaller companies in the sector but there was appreciation of the need to be ‘green aware’.

### **Training Notes**

Companies provide a variety of in-house training and bring in external trainers for specific purposes e.g. sales and reservations. There are some notable differences between how smaller and larger companies approach training:

‘Yes well I guess because we are smaller as well so it's slightly different in here you know than in a bigger company. You know you kind of go through the stages I am not sure if I started in a bigger place you know you do have that level that you go through in a smaller company. People are more likely to voice an opinion but I think it's again it is an important skill that kind of you know level of critical thinking that they come in that they can look at a project and you know not be afraid to voice you know their opinion. So I think that is good but I think it's definitely one they need you know yes...’ (Travel Sector Interviewee 3)

Smaller companies are more likely to purchase external training, as this is more economical; resources are an issue when considering training. Larger travel companies were more likely to have a full time person dedicated to HR and training. All companies provide support to staff learning Microsoft packages.

Buddy systems and shadowing are used as training approaches by companies of all sizes. Larger companies generally have a dedicated training person. Cross training, to deal with the peaks and troughs of the business, is employed by many companies. The opinion is that ‘training portals will need more effort’. Some companies sponsor staff development up Master’s level. Social events are used to build staff confidence and teamwork.

## **Destination Management - current skills needs, skills shortages, current (access to) training provision in relation to skills sets:**

### **Social/Soft Skills**

Social/soft skills were highlighted by participants as the most important skills to have for those working in destination management. Soft skills were seen as hugely important because, as highlighted by Destination Management Interviewee 5: ‘tourism is a personal business; you have to relate to individual clients and they trust you to deliver a product [so] good customer relation skills are essential’.

Similarly, interviewees noted that interactions with local people are very important in influencing a visitor’s view of a destination. Some participants noted that because soft skills are so important, recruiters in the industry often focus on hiring people with the right social skills as they can train new recruits in the hard/technical skills that they need:

Soft skills were described as: customer service skills including communication skills, multicultural awareness, diversity awareness, friendliness, and attention to detail; leadership skills including management capability, social influence and strategic planning; teamwork skills including networking, relationship building, co-operation and communication with co-workers; and personal management skills such as flexibility and emotional intelligence. There was also a focus on sales and marketing skills and several participants highlighted the need for communicating and marketing the ‘story’ of a destination to visitors in an effective way. Interestingly, foreign language skills were not seen as important by most destination managers interviewed, as there was a feeling that visitors did not expect to be spoken to in their native language. However, this view was not shared by all. Event management skills were mentioned by one participant as an area where they had skills needs.

Meeting or exceeding visitor expectations was seen as very important and it was highlighted by all participants that visitors to Ireland usually expect a warm welcome and friendliness. Because there are so many touchpoints for visitors in any destination e.g. retail, accommodation, food and transport providers, several participants noted the importance of visitors having good interactions with local people across all of these touchpoints in order to meet or exceed their expectations.

In summary, interviewees agreed that social/soft skills are the most important skills in the industry: [industry] are willing to teach them the technical skills or invest in those but actually it's the social skills that are more important in the tourism and hospitality sector’ (Destination Management Interviewee 6). Nevertheless, respondents did not feel that there are major skills gaps currently. Thus, there was general acknowledgement that soft skills generally do exist within the industry but need an ongoing focus and some improvement.

## Digital Skills

Several digital skills needs were highlighted by participants including social media skills, website development and management, video, augmented reality, data analytics and software skills. There was general agreement that there are a number of digital skills gaps in destination management.

There was a mix of responses related to the need for in-house digital skills relating to social media and web development. Several participants noted that they outsource web page development and their digital marketing. Others noted that they have specialist teams or individuals (sometimes part-time) in-house, who manage digital media, develop the website and manage website content. However, the latter approach was sometimes challenging as companies in the IT sector often have better pay and conditions than those in the tourism sector, making it difficult for destination development organisations/authorities to attract staff: ‘The digital skills is a big area and the challenge for us actually is that even we are actually out now recruiting at this point but we can't compete with private sector.’ (Destination Management Interviewee 6)

In the industry in general, a dearth of key digital skills was noted and there was general acknowledgement that individuals often do not have the skills to engage effectively with social media. There can be a lack of awareness of which social media platforms are the most appropriate and staff often are lacking skills in building and editing content. As highlighted by one participant, it can be difficult as a non-marketing professional to ‘get the tone of voice right’ (Destination Management Interviewee 1). Similarly, the skills to develop a social media strategy are important, but are sometimes lacking. One participant noted that small businesses in particular, often struggle with digital skills.

Data analytics was an area which was also mentioned as an important area where there are current skills gaps. Participants recognised that visitors generate a large amount of data, for example, in their online behaviour with regard to a destination. Collecting and analysing that data effectively can help destination managers to develop and market a destination: “what new skills do we need to bring in? .. analytics, because we need the inside data to inform how we are going to move forward.” (Destination Management Interviewee 5)

However, it was acknowledged that many do not collect such information and those that do often do not know how to analyse it effectively. Additionally, with regard to destination marketing, videography skills were noted by some interviewees as needed, but often lacking.

The skills to use software such as Microsoft Office, financial software, CRM software and accommodation booking software were highlighted as key skills in certain areas of destination management. Participants also suggested that an awareness of new technologies can be important. Augmented reality and Apps were both mentioned briefly.

## Green Skills

There was some uncertainty among participants as to whether green skills or green knowledge was required. There was also less general awareness about what sort of green/environmental skills are key skills as compared to participants’ awareness of social and digital skills. Participants also found it more difficult to identify the skills gaps. Some participants noted that that green/environmental skills ‘are not

my area' (Destination Management Interviewee 1) and noted that the skills in this area were specialist skills only needed in particular departments. This highlights a need for greater ownership and recognition of the importance of these skills broadly across the sector and across each destination. It was highlighted that often green and environmental skills are not given priority by destination managers or by tourism businesses in a destination, especially when involvement in green initiatives may have a negative financial impact, even if only in the short term.

Nevertheless, there were also some participants who were well informed about, and played a part in, various green initiatives occurring within the destination. These included recycling and reusing materials in events, reducing plastic use, reducing paper use, being aware of the carbon footprint of facilities and developing more eco-friendly tourism experiences and products: 'We already have a passive building in the [visitor attraction] that we designed - that was converting a brown field site into a green site giving ten hectares there back to nature' (Destination Management Interviewee 5).

Some participants spoke about the community aspect of sustainability rather than focusing solely on green/environmental skills and discussed initiatives such as developing an awareness of local foods as well as creating and marketing food 'stories' focusing on the provenance of food. One respondent described their destination sustainability framework which incorporates visitors, industry, community and environment.

There was general acknowledgement that changing people's behaviour can be difficult and that two factors could be helpful in this regard. Firstly, pressure from visitors for destination managers and stakeholders within a destination to develop sustainable practices and secondly, pressure from the government in the form of policy development and application.

### **Notes on Training**

Different types of training were described by participants and the type of training that works best is dependent on a combination of the skills in question, availability of staff to engage with training, individual staff needs and what works well at a particular point in time for the destination management agency.

first of all it depends on the needs that we are trying to address and secondly you would be looking at the training options ... and it can depend on the person's availability (Destination Management Interviewee 5).

Much of the training was done on-the-job, but specific skills needs can be met in particular ways including off-site delivery of workshops or training sessions by external providers e.g. Failte Ireland, 3rd level colleges and county councils, on-site delivery by external providers e.g. private training companies, online training platforms for digital training e.g. Udemy, and in-house training programmes.

One participant described an initiative in which the destination management agency is involved. The Irish government runs Community Employment Schemes to encourage unemployed individuals to return to work through skills development and the participant highlighted that a number of individuals are currently undergoing skills development in hospitality through that scheme.

## **Attractions - current skills needs, skills shortages, current (access to) training provision in relation to skills sets:**

### **Social/Soft Skills**

Interviewees noted that social skills/soft skills are a very important skill requirement in the visitor attractions sub sector. Three key themes emerged from the interviews regarding social skills: customer service and customer relationship skills, basic communication skills and storytelling, i.e. the ability to engage with visitors and create a unique experience through storytelling.

Key customer service skills mentioned included: understanding customer needs, dealing with diverse customers, having a flexible/positive attitude, the ability to adapt to the needs of different audiences, the ability to communicate with people from different backgrounds, basic customer care, listening skills and the ‘human’ element of the visit, i.e. providing visitors with a warm welcome. One interviewee argued that: ‘we’re all about visitors so it’s all about people and people skills’.

Key communication skills, including working with others/colleagues, that were highlighted by respondents included: face-to-face/oral and written communication in the workplace, personal confidence, conflict management, networking skills, conducting meetings, negotiation skills (evaluating and working with external partners), team working with colleagues, dignity on the workplace and developing a positive and flexible attitude.

Finally, storytelling and site interpretation was noted by most participants. For example, the ability of tour guides to engage with customers and tell the story of the attraction, the people and the place. One respondent noted that ‘visitors want experiences that they cannot find anywhere else’ and ‘are interested in people rather than the site’ (Visitor Attraction 7). The ability to tell a story and provide a unique experience was therefore important. One participant highlighted that their attraction employs a theatre director to train staff in storytelling, to build their confidence and skills in storytelling.

Language skills were not highlighted as being necessary, however, one respondent noted that ‘the basics would be nice’ (Visitor Attraction 7), for example, providing a welcome in a different language.

### **Digital Skills**

The findings suggest that key current digital skills include:

- Digital marketing activities
- Social media marketing and management
- Management of online booking systems

- Website content management (i.e. ability to change/edit content including photographs and videos)
- Basic digital skills, for example, excel, word processing, WordPress and Microsoft office skills.

To a lesser extent, ensuring GDPR compliance and data analytics was highlighted, i.e. reporting and gaining audience insights using data analysis tools was also an important current skill requirement.

### **Green Skills**

Overall, general green practices and efficiencies were noted and some attractions highlighted that being environmentally friendly is a core concept of the company. This is becoming increasingly important.

Three key issues emerged regarding green skills. First, recycling was noted by most attractions as being important for staff to use and to understand the process and type of recycling policy adopted in the attraction. Many of the attractions noted that their staff are good at recycling. One participant noted that they do not have a ‘zero waste’ policy but they are active in, for example, recycling and the collection of rainwater to flush toilets. Many attractions appear to be quite active in recycling and other green initiatives, i.e. using energy saving light bulbs and thus, employees require some knowledge of these issues.

Second, waste management was a significant issue raised by participants, for example, food waste, water usage and reducing waste. Initiatives to reduce waste was seen as an important current issue in visitor attractions. One participant noted that a skill gap is knowing how to develop green skills further, for example, for marketing purposes and supply chain management.

Conservation and the protection of the integrity of the building/attraction was also an important issue raised by participants. Many of the attractions are listed buildings and this was highlighted as an important green/sustainability issue. Many need to make informed decisions regarding the protection of their collections, for example, the choice of lighting systems. Some attractions mentioned that employees need skills in reading these systems and/or an understanding of site conservation. Additionally, some provide an educational piece/awareness of green products that they use for their employees.

### **Notes on Training**

For social skills participants highlighted that training is primarily ‘on the job’. Staff are typically trained in basic/soft skills, for example, customer services skills and understanding tours, when they start. This is provided by management. Participants noted that ‘upskilling’ is very important and in house training is offered to build specific social skills. They also highlighted that effective training methods include real experience and practice because, ‘by doing you learn more’ and training should be ‘not theoretical but practical’ (Visitor Attraction 8). Visitor attractions mentioned that in house training is often provided by management. Some mentioned that external guest speakers are brought in to provide insights, for example, a visit from a 5 star hotel to share their experiences in good customer service.

Participants argued that languages are lacking but no guides give a full tour in a specific language, i.e. French. For most attractions and museums, translation is provided in interactive areas via the use of technology. Some companies highlighted that they offer tuition online to develop their language skills but this is not a requirement. For many attractions, employees are encouraged to take online language classes, if this is of interest to the employee, but it is not mandatory.

Most training provided by visitor attractions is for social skills, there is little training provided in green skills with the exception of museums with collections and/or a listed building. Respondents noted that for green skills, it is best to do research (find out about green initiative) and go and do it, for example, the ‘every can counts’ European initiative.

Visitor attractions use private training companies or specific training needs, for example, training employees how to edit websites and manage social media. Off site/external training can be a challenge, particularly for the small attractions as they have a very small core staff. A more flexible approach to training would be welcomed, for example, blended learning, local or evening time.

Fáilte Ireland (national tourism authority) provide workshops, for example, customer service. Many of the attractions interviewed avail of this training for their employees. The Heritage Council also provides training in environmental monitoring of running a museum, i.e. training to manage and protect museum collections. This type of training is important for attractions with collections and/or a listed building.

Overall, training provided is ad hoc and tailor-made; it largely depends on what the attraction requires. Current training provided includes:

- In house training provided by management
- External training i.e. Failte Ireland
- Online training
- In house, facilitated by an external company.

### **Food & beverage - current skills needs, skills shortages, current (access to) training provision in relation to skills sets:**

#### **Social/Soft Skills**

The food and beverage participants placed most emphasis on soft/social skills. Social skills that are of particular importance for the industry currently and in the future include: communication skills, listening skills, the ability to read and understand body language (i.e. understand and pre-empt customer behaviour), good eye contact, team building skills, be able to engage with customers and cultural awareness.

Communication skills are important, for example, managing dissatisfied customers and difficult situations. Additionally there needs to be consistency in communication, i.e. providing good customer service and consistency in the ‘meet and greet’. Most participants noted that employees need to have a good attitude and a good personality; these are the most important attributes, staff need to be ‘a people person’ and ‘people buy into people, not the product’ (Food and Beverage 6). This sector highlighted

that acquiring staff is a challenge as many employees see working in the industry as more of a temporary job than a career.

Due to the possible influx of people seeking jobs in the Irish industry, cultural awareness and communication will also be important in the future.

While languages are beneficial, respondents did not feel that languages are a requirement as international customers do not require or expect staff to speak their language.

Staff need to be able to identify what customers need, i.e. some will want ‘a bit of banter’ and others might not. One participant stressed that the interaction skills are currently not there and another highlighted that the industry needs to concentrate on face-to-face interaction. Overall, some staff lack the softer skills and there is a shortage of basic communication skills in the industry.

### **Digital Skills**

Food and beverage employers stressed that staff in general are quite ‘tech savvy’ and have good knowledge of how to engage with different social media platforms. The skills to manage social media content are important, however, for some, SM is not important as marketing is centrally controlled for the franchise. The use of social media may differ depending on the size of the business. The interviews highlighted that staff need skills to choose technology based on an understanding of what is most appropriate for the business, i.e. an understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of technologies and SM platforms.

Important digital skills include the ability to use the till system, place orders using technology, hand write orders and manage stock sheets. Employees need to be computer literate and therefore, companies need to invest time to learning these basic digital skills, i.e. managing e-mails, a calendar, social media and Skype.

### **Green Skills**

An awareness of green/sustainability issues is important to businesses and it is something that they communicate to staff. No particular green skills are required but an openness and awareness of green practices and initiatives is important. Companies like employees to have an awareness of green issues and initiatives.

Discussion highlighted that companies are developing their green practices, for example, they practice portion control to avoid food waste, use biodegradable straws and have reduced their use of plastic. Some highlighted menu design, for example, focusing on vegetables and fruit in an attempt to minimise their carbon footprint and reducing offsets by planting trees. Food waste is an important issue; reducing portions and managing waste is an important issue now and in the future. Most businesses stressed that they are focusing on developing green/sustainability skills and attempt to ‘instil a bit more’ into staff as ‘it is the right thing to do’.

### **Notes on Training**

Current training for some businesses is provided and controlled centrally by the franchisor. For others, there is no formal training provided, staff learn skills on the job primarily from other staff, i.e. senior staff. Smaller companies stressed that they are not large enough to bring someone in to provide training. One participant highlighted that while training is currently offered, it is not provided in the right way, for example, courses on social media or waste management are very generic and thus, people cannot apply to their own business. Training methods need to include one-to-one training and tailor made courses to be beneficial and understand specific needs.

### **Accommodation providers - current skills needs, skills shortages, current (access to) training provision in relation to skills sets:**

#### **Social/Soft Skills**

In general, participants emphasised the importance of soft skills, identifying them as ‘the most important’ skills (Accommodation Interviewee 1). They explained that the quality of service and customer satisfaction ‘is determined by the experience that customers have’, and their experience with front line staff impacts directly on this (Accommodation Interviewee 1). Good communication and interpersonal skills were considered to be essential, as the ‘meet and greet’ side of the business is ‘hugely important’ (Accommodation Interviewee 6). The ability to communicate with both guests and with other staff in a positive and consistent manner was considered key as ‘guests have so many interactions with so many different people ... their experience should be universally positive’ (Accommodation Interviewee 2). One respondent explained that it is the ‘old-fashioned stuff’ that is important i.e. putting the customer in the centre of everything, the ability to provide a warm welcome and engage in conversation with guests (Accommodation Interviewee 2). Knowing the business is essential to this, as staff needed to be able to provide information about the tourism experiences for guests. In an Irish context, respondents explained, interpersonal skills are particularly significant as ‘Ireland is renowned for its positive people interaction and providing a warm welcome ... therefore it is important for guest expectations ... to be met’ (Accommodation Interviewee 2) . A key informant interview confirmed that while job specifications are still ‘quite generic in the industry’, a lot of employers focus on a cultural fit between the client and the candidate and soft skills are considered to be particularly important (Accommodation Interviewee 4).

Emotional intelligence, leadership, management and cultural diversity skills were considered essential. Participants explained that there is often a focus on developing digital skills but leadership and communication skills are more important. Concerning the need for language skills, only one participant considered these to be important, explaining that the organisation makes a conscious effort to employ staff from different backgrounds to ensure that they have a broad range of languages and cultural awareness (Accommodation Interviewee 3). In general, however, the need for language skills was not considered a key requirement but rather an extra benefit, as one participant explained ‘a lot of people ... can speak English’, therefore, there is no expectation or requirement for staff to have languages (Accommodation Interviewee 1). Another explained that languages were not necessary ‘in Ireland’ as guests expect to speak english (Accommodation Interviewee 4). There was no evidence of training being provided in languages skills.

Key soft skills included:

- General communication and interpersonal skills
- Customer service skills
- Resilience
- Emotional intelligence
- Time management
- Cultural diversity awareness
- Understanding ‘the business’ and their role in the business
- Team- work and team-building skills
- Leadership skills
- Management skills

### **Digital Skills**

Participants explained that the digital skills needed depended very much on staff members’ roles in the company. Higher level digital skills were thought to be needed for head office staff, while managers needed to learn how to use more up to date digital communication tools to communicate with staff, e.g. Whatsapp, and to move away from work schedules printed on paper. Concerning social media and web design, in many instances, these were outsourced and organisations explained that they do not have a need for these skills in-house. One participant explained that they ‘absolutely’ want to ‘keep that out of the house’ as she feels that there is enough work for staff to do without having to engage and manage social media also (Accommodation Interviewee 1). Another explained that staff do not need digital training as the owners manage the digital side of the business, and are currently managing their entire booking and marketing online (Accommodation Interviewee 6). This approach has been very successful enabling them to engage with ‘people from all over the world’ and ‘has opened up a whole new world for them’ (Accommodation Interviewee 6). Their skills development in digital were self-taught and they explained that they post selectively, rather than regularly, which works well for them. However, despite the fact that SM management was outsourced in many instances, in general, respondents recognised a need for staff to understand how SM works and how to engage with it correctly. In particular, one respondent explained that a key gap was how to use SM media appropriately in a business context, he felt that while many people entering the industry were ‘tech savvy’ they do not necessarily know how to use these skills appropriately in a professional setting (Accommodation Interviewee 2).

Key digital skills included:

- Microsoft office skills
- CRM systems: Opera
- Managing booking & sales channels
- Social media content management – an awareness and understanding of different social media platforms and their potential use
- Higher level digital skills for Head office staff e.g. for communicating with staff and for rostering
- Data analytics.

## Green Skills

Overall, there was a general awareness among accommodation providers of the need to be more sustainable and to have greener practices. However, the focus tended to be on meeting regulations rather than ‘doing the right thing’ (Accommodation Interviewee 2). For those few where sustainability was at the core of their business, this was primarily customer driven, as their customer base tend to assess accommodation on their green criteria. These participants tended to have staff members with responsibility for developing green initiatives and had the necessary skills for doing so. As part of their drive to be more sustainable, some had introduced internal awards for green/environmental skills to try to encourage more of a focus on these. Larger accommodation providers tended to have particular roles associated with environmental management, for example, one participant explained how this area ‘was the remit of the maintenance manager’ and when hiring staff for this position, skills in resource and energy management were essential (Accommodation Interviewee 3).

For others, particularly for some smaller businesses or for those where the customer base are less aware or concerned with environmental issues, the businesses tended to be ‘less focused’ on this area, as one respondent explained, ‘it’s not high in our customers thinking so it’s not high in ours’ (Accommodation Interviewee 2). The businesses in general however have adopted a number of green practices including, for example: recycling, managing water usage, using more efficient lighting and local suppliers when possible. Again, the main reasons for implementing these initiatives tended to be based on meeting regulatory requirements or generating efficiencies. For some living in an area where ‘water is a scarce resource’ (Accommodation Interviewee 6) and where they are trying to develop more sustainable approaches to water management underpins their approach to environmental issues, this participant explained that ‘there needs to be an awareness on the premises where people don’t do stupid things’ (Accommodation Interviewee 6). Some participants explained how eco labels are something that they are considering looking into but that they have not yet done so, again primarily because this is not something that is important to their customer base .

Regardless of the extent to which they are currently adopting sustainable practices, there was general agreement that employees need some knowledge of how to counteract environmental issues, ‘from a very basic level of thinking about it the whole way through’ the organisation (Accommodation 6) . Developing awareness and skills in this area was something that participants felt would be important going forward, in particular with regard to how green practices can generate efficiencies for the business, as Accommodation interviewee 6 explained ‘when it’s not your own you know, when it’s a company property it doesn’t matter you know, you become more wasteful in your work environment than you do in your home environment’, therefore creating awareness of their actions was important. Participants clarified that not all employees needed training in these skills and they were more likely to provide training to a small number of staff, these staff members would then have responsibility to develop in-house initiatives to involve and train other staff.

Key green skills included:

- Food waste management
- Waste and water management
- Laundry – use of chemicals etc
- Sourcing products
- Sustainable energy/water.

## Notes on Training

Concerning training in soft skills, participants felt that ‘people already have this skill set but need to have it polished’ (Accommodation Interviewee 5). Many felt that on the job training was the best approach to this type of skills development and explained that managers also need a skill set to be in a position to develop these skills in staff. In general, participants provide induction for new staff and in many cases these staff ‘shadow’ senior staff members for further training. In several instances, staff, in particular management, are supported by the organisation in undertaking further training when needed (e.g. time management skills). One large accommodation provider has developed their own on-line training programme for staff, and also uses external training for more senior staff such as one day development courses (Accommodation Interviewee 2). They also work closely with IBEC (Business and Employer Association) to avail of their training courses. They are currently running a programme called the ‘Grow’ programme for managers and supervisors. The programme was developed with an external agency and aims to support staff in managing themselves and their own careers. The idea, the participant explained, is to make staff think about their activities in the business, the implications of what they do for others etc.

In general, there was a preference for on-site training that allows for interaction between staff members, rather than on-line or off-site training. One participant explained that while they sometimes bring in external providers, most training is undertaken in-house and on the job. The participant noted that on-the job training is often more beneficial because staff are using the skills day to day and are less likely to forget them, which they explained ‘can be a danger with once-off training’ (Accommodation Interviewee 1). ‘A mix’ of training was thought to be good, on-line training was considered good for basic knowledge but participants in general felt that there is a lot of value in face-to-face training which enables staff to meet other people, to share knowledge and to learn from their peers. A blended learning approach was thought by some participants to have merit, as it facilitates the convenience of on-line and face-to-face learning. Other training courses that were of interest included Fáilte Ireland’s CPD training workshops.

For digital skills, organisations tend to train staff on their own internal systems on how to use the internal PMS for example. They provide in-house training on these systems and do not tend to look for digital skills when interviewing for new staff, although having these skills may be considered a benefit.

Concerning training in green skills, this is predominantly done in-house and is generally provided for staff within specific departments e.g. facilities management. One participant noted that the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland is a good resource for them.

**Theme 2: The future of tourism: A summary of respondents' ideas of tourism and the tourism industry in general and his/her company in particular in ten years' time (2030).**

### **Tour operators / travel agents: what will tourism and the industry look like around 2030?**

A variety of responses were given to the inquiry 'What will tourism and the industry look like around 2030?'. Some participants focussed on their own particular market views, others spoke of general business trends that are likely to impact their businesses.

Diversification into the future was highlighted as an issue for some companies. The Chinese market is perceived to have significant potential and it was voiced that there would be the opportunity to build repeat business

Product development, in particular targeting a younger demographic with shorter, more intense tours is seen as a possibility for the American market. Niche marketing is regarded as very important. The development of food trails is seen as a likely response to market demand for experience based products.

Among the business trends spoken about is a move to more content driven marketing. It was remarked that blogging will become more influential. Good use of social media 'will allow the smaller company to be as good as the larger company...we are continually watching what our competitors are doing-some are very inventive'. However, there will be ongoing reluctance among older customers to do business online; customers are looking for trouble free holidays. An understanding of customer service will be particularly important; 'you are there to make life easy for the customer'. Industry will need to be resilient in the face of the economy and legislation (e.g. the VAT increase). Marketing skills in a general sense and understanding the product (through experience), and being able to sell it are essential skills. The building of relationships is very important.

In terms of staff, work ethic will be important; 'this is not a hard industry to learn but there is a need to work hard and have a passion for it'. Staff will want more choice; it is not about a job but a career. There is a need to build in proper appraisal systems. Industry needs to get involved with third level education. More employees will work from home. The example was given of 'a few years ago there were 15 travel counsellors, now there are something like 250 working from home'. Staff like the freedom.

### **Destination Management: what will tourism and the industry look like around 2030?**

Participants highlighted key trends that they believe will impact on skills needs and development. Predicted growth in the tourism industry is seen as highly impactful: 'But looking forward so just looking backwards the last seven years there has been significant growth and looking forward then you know the World Tourism Organisation our own marketing reviews suggest for the next ten years we are going to achieve significant growth again. Because tourism internationally is going to grow and based on just the conservative projections you know we will need probably between forty and sixty thousand

new people in tourism hospitality over the next ten years. Again every other sector, we are almost at full employment so in terms of the skills required then we have got to look at, ok how is the industry moving forward’ (Destination Management Interviewee 6)

Respondents felt that there will likely be an increase in visitor numbers from emerging markets such as the Chinese market. Accordingly, although such growth will provide opportunity, staff in the sector will have to develop more multicultural skills in order to understand and meet the diverse needs of new visitors. Difficulties with meeting the needs of higher numbers of tourists were outlined by a number of participants who noted that over-tourism can accompany such growth. This will require a strategic approach on the part of destination managers to minimise negative impacts on the environment with the result that these managers will need the relevant skills. Potential strategies outlined by a destination manager include promoting niche activities, spreading visitors over the year and protecting sensitive sites. The same participant noted that sustainability is a key objective in the coming years and that skills in all three areas in digital, green and social skills are needed to ensure this sustainability. Difficulties in finding staff to meet the needs of increased visitor numbers was also highlighted as a potential future issue, especially in rural areas with high emigration rates.

Other participants predicted that a growing focus on environmental issues and increased use of technology are trends that will impact on future skills needs. Technology was viewed as playing an increasingly important role in marketing, although there was acknowledgement that the digital marketing landscape will change as consumers push back against their personal digital space being invaded. There was general agreement that social skills will still be the most important skills in the sector in 2030, even with a predicted increase in digital communication: ‘There is always a danger that we become too dependent on the digital and the electronic media and you know methods of imparting information you know a personal experience is still vitally important will remain so’ (Destination Management Interviewee 5)

An increasing focus on destinations and on bespoke experiences were also highlighted as probable future directions that the tourism industry will take. Collaboration between businesses was therefore viewed as something that will become more important in the coming decade. Similarly, an emphasis by tourism providers on the ‘local story’ (Destination Management Interviewee 2) which will include elements such as local food was something that was seen as needing support in terms of skills development.

There was also a view that the bottom line and return on investment will remain important to industry stakeholders. Therefore, skills such as revenue management and the ability to use technology to ensure efficiencies were also highlighted by some participants.

### **Attractions: what will tourism and the industry look like around 2030?**

A key trend to impact visitor attractions include attractions taking back previously outsourced or franchised restaurants and this will increase the requirement for skills development in this area, for example, customer service.

In relation to future visitor markets, an increase in the Chinese market and North American markets were highlighted as being a key change in future market demand and a decrease in some other traditional

markets, i.e. the UK (due to Brexit). Participants did not feel that there would be a change in the European market and visitor profile.

Participants highlighted that environmental issues will become more important, particularly environmental management and skills will be required in these areas. Participants highlighted that green/sustainability issues will grow in importance through the introduction of legislation that will need to be adhered to.

The importance of customer relationship management skills was strongly emphasised, for example, ‘people will remember how you made them feel’ (Visitor Attraction 8) and visitors will want to remember having fun with tour guides and bar staff. Offering truly memorable experience will grow in importance. The visitor experience and customer facing role will therefore be of particularly important for visitor attractions. Soft skills will continue to remain important in the industry. The industry is moving away from a place of lecture to ‘a place to engage in conversation’ (Visitor Attraction 6). Therefore, engaging with customers will be important, for example, customer relationships and storytelling of people and place associated with the attraction.

Content production was noted as being a growing area, for example, video content and social media content. Data analytics was also highlighted as an increasingly important area for skill development as employees will need to engage in better and deeper data gathering and analysis. There could also be more of a focus on marketing and commercialisation; they will have a more joined up front of house presence.

Key features in the future for visitor attractions included:

- Visitor attractions becoming more ‘inclusive’ and ‘open’
- New markets, i.e. North America
- Customers moving to online booking
- A cashless society
- A need to sustain and develop the visitor experience
- Green issues becoming more of a focus.

### **Food & beverage: what will tourism and the industry look like around 2030?**

The ability to manage a multicultural workforce will be increasingly important in the food and beverage sector. Additionally, tourism will continue to grow and a key impact will be increasing business from the Asian market. The growth of this market and other new markets will require multi-cultural awareness and also knowledge of a greater variety of foods.

Participants highlighted that green issues will continue to grow in importance and that the industry will need to take this more seriously. Staff will need to become more environmentally aware, particularly in terms of recycling, reducing waste and reducing the carbon footprint of the business.

Businesses interviewed placed emphasis on the shortage of chefs and to a lesser extent, front of house and good bar people. Some highlighted the need to develop conduits for local tourism knowledge: waiters, taxi drivers and sales people.

Robotics is seen as something that may develop in the future, for example, the floor and guest will become more automated.

There was a general consensus that restaurants will change, i.e. more home delivery and the industry will be very niche going forward. For example, ‘regional food will become more important and more mainstream’ (Food and Beverage 6). Staff will need to be able to tell the story of food and culture and interaction with the customer will be the most important skill. Unique experiences from smaller companies will become more important.

There was agreement that future staff will want a more flexible work environment that facilitates their needs.

### **Accommodation providers: what will tourism and the industry look like around 2030?**

Generally, participants felt that the industry and their businesses would continue to grow, but did not feel that the visitor profile was likely to change. While some businesses were planning on increasing their market share and on targeting emerging markets such as the Chinese market, others felt that these markets were unlikely to have any major impact in the near future. For some, a key issue for concern is Brexit and the uncertainties surrounding this, for them increasing market share in other markets in particular in Europe, America and Canada, was particularly important. One participant explained how the environment would become more competitive (particularly in Europe) and businesses will need to ‘constantly raise their game’. The consumer as a key driver of change was a recurrent theme, particularly in terms of a continued demand for more individualised experiences, a need to provide authentic and high quality experiences, and decisions concerning technology adoption.

A greater use of technology, particularly in the area of self-service technology, was identified by participants as a key future trend. However, they felt strongly that achieving a balance between technology and face-to-face interactions would be critical. Participants explained that in the future soft skills are likely to be the biggest challenge as those entering the industry are very ‘tech savvy’ however, they are not as proficient with the softer skills as traditional staff and this will be a key gap (Accommodation Interviewee 6). The basic ability to be polite, friendly and helpful to customers will remain the same and, as claimed by one participant, there will be a demand for more flexible staff (Accommodation Interviewee 4).

Generating efficiencies was also a theme, as one participant explained; any adoption around technology, eco labels etc. ‘is likely to be undertaken from the perspective of developing efficiencies and streamlining systems’ (Accommodation Interviewee 2). There was also general agreement that the industry will have to focus more on sustainability as green practices will become increasingly important.

**Theme 3: Digital skills. A summary of the digital skills rated as the most important in ten years' time by interview participants.**

**The participants working at tour operators / travel agents consider the following digital skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

Technology is important to companies in this sector and most have dedicated personnel. Technical change will be even faster, more efficient. Immediacy will be an issue; there will be a need information in real time. 'Everything is becoming paperless', with the help of the systems. More automated systems will be used and there will be an emphasis on the employee as a 'seller' rather than on their knowledge of putting the package together.

Social media skills will be increasingly important. Social media marketing, knowing how to 'represent the company well', will be essential. Particular skills include content creation and management, YouTube skills, social media channel management (practical knowledge, not just knowing the channels exist), and proficiency in Google Adwords. Apps are thought to be very important for corporate clients.

Overall staff will need to be comfortable with a range of technologies, to be 'tech 'savvy'. Mention was made of Excel pivot tables, presentation skills, and SQL.

**The respondents working at destination management organizations consider the following digital skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

Social media skills were mentioned by all participants as key skills that will be needed in the future. Developing and managing social media content for marketing purposes was seen as something that will become more important in the future and it was highlighted that a more targeted form of digital marketing will become more common over the coming decade. Some participants also mentioned management of website content and cloud based systems.

Managing data analytics was also seen as a skill that will grow in importance in destination management as companies/agencies increase their activities in data gathering and analysis in order to identify and exploit trends. Skills in using relevant software programmes, both existing and new, in areas such as revenue management, booking and managing intermediaries were mentioned. Having the technology skills to manage efficiencies was also seen as something that will become increasingly important and automation was mentioned in this regard, although none of the participants felt that robotics would be a large feature of the tourism industry of the future.

Knowledge and awareness of technology were highlighted as important. In other words, participants felt that in the future it will be important to not only have the skills to engage with technology, but also to be aware of emerging technologies and their potential use. Participants noted that the digital platforms currently being used in the industry are likely to have changed considerably in 10 years and that lifelong digital learning skills will be key as employees will have to keep themselves abreast of these changes. On the other hand, several respondents highlighted that they outsource some digital activities and that this will continue into the future, reducing the need for in-house digital skills.

It was noted that although digital skills will grow in importance, that it is difficult for the tourism industry to compete with the tech industry for staff as pay and conditions are usually better in the technology sector. Strategies to attract staff will therefore be needed.

**The respondents working at attractions consider the following digital skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

Visitor attractions emphasised a number of important future digital skills. Social media marketing was highlighted as being 'crucial' by respondents. For example, the ability for employees to manage content and make decisions about which social media platforms to use. Participants also highlighted that digital marketing will continue to grow in importance in the future..

Some participants do not see their attraction using technologies like AV and AR in the future and highlighted that they are not going to 'automate anymore'. Other participants stated that they are in the early stages of AV and AR use, i.e. for interpretation and this could therefore, become an important digital skill in the future. The interviews also emphasised that AR interpretation is typically developed outside of the attraction and their employees will need skills on working with this technology in the future to develop the story. Some attractions were 'anti tech', for example, they want to provide more personal experiences rather than digital experiences of their visitor attraction. However for others, i.e. art galleries, digital technology is seem to enhance the experience. Therefore, future skills may differ between different types of visitor attractions.

The use of digital systems to price depending on demand was stressed, i.e. day/month/seasonal pricing (flexible pricing). This was highlighted by participants as being a skill that will need to be developed in the future. Additionally, data analytics and content production was emphasised, particularly a need to tailor make their approach to analytics. Automated services and online booking will increase in the future, therefore, an understating of these systems will be important for employees.

Some of the visitor attractions highlighted that graphic design and visual design will be an important future skill and this should be paired effectively with social skills, for example, for employees to tell the story of the attraction.

Other key future digital trends identified included:

- The need to understand and evaluate technology; employees will need to be able to determine the appropriateness and effectiveness of different technologies.
- Identify technology for particular purposes, i.e. interpretation.
- The ability to work with external partners to develop technology solutions.

The importance of social skills was emphasised. Participants highlighted that social skills will be important in the future and this is a skill that needs to be addressed, for example, 'millennials are very technology driven, they can adapt quickly, but social interaction is a problem' (Visitor Attraction 7). Participants stressed that while digital skills will be important in the future, employees will have a good grasp at these skills and it is the social skills that will be more important.

**The respondents working in the accommodation sector consider the following digital skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

A key theme was that the need for staff to be able to understand and use technology would become 'more and more of an important skill set' and new entrants would need to be 'tech savvy' (Accommodation Interviewee 4). General IT skills combined with the ability to assess and balance the use of technology with customers' needs and wants would become increasingly important. More personalised customer experiences will mean that customers will be able to create their own profile and highlight their own preferences, so interpretation and analysis of these preferences will be key skills needed. With regard to social media, respondents felt that the popularity of specific platforms will change over time and there will be a need for staff to be aware of this, to understand different social media platforms and their uses. In general, participants felt that while the website is an important digital resource, external expertise would always be required for website development and this was unlikely to change, however some felt that the ability to edit and manage the content would be a useful skill. Communications technology for internal communication and the skills to use these technologies were also mentioned as essential. In-house training on internal systems would continue and in general, the following key skills were considered important:

- General IT skills
- Understanding technology and the efficiencies it can bring to the business e.g. automating roles through artificial intelligence
- Ability to assess and balance the use of technology with customers' needs and wants
- Managing social media content and being aware of the implications of putting content online
- Data analytics – understanding how to access and use this data
- Managing sales & booking channels
- Skills to ensure efficient use of new systems e.g. on-line check in
- SM development and managing content
- Recruitment software
- Website content management
- Revenue management: fluency and accuracy with figures

**The respondents working in the food & beverage sector consider the following digital skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

Key digital skills for the future include: a good understanding of technologies available and how best to use them, the ability to use cloud based operating systems and staff will need to be able to use mobile technology and develop appropriate social media platforms. Website and social media content management were also mentioned. For smaller companies, digital marketing skills will be important, to communicate their brand.

Food and beverage employers did not see AR, VR or AI as having a major impact on the sector. While trends and potential adoption in the industry is acknowledged, the focus on people skills will be more important. Proficiency in the use of laptops, iPads and other mobile devices is stressed and a good understanding of internet security and GDPR will be required. The interviews highlighted that staff will need to understand the importance of keeping information safe and secure while also understanding and complying with legislation in this area.

**Theme 4: Environmental management ('green') skills. A summary of the environmental management skills rated as the most important in ten years' time by interview participants.**

**The respondents working at tour operators / travel agents consider the following environmental management skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

Overall, environmental management issues are not high on the agenda of managers in the tour operators/travel agents sector. Some managers directly reported 'Not really an issue', 'not a future issue/consideration', or, as a result of the nature of their business 'don't feel that this was an area that we need skills in now or in the future'.

What is desired are skills in Crisis Management, the ability to cope with challenges: Weather, political, industrial relations issues ('300 people stuck in France, how do we get them home?').

Two companies mentioned that environmental understanding and awareness could be used to create efficiencies and competitive advantage for the company

**The respondents working at destination management organizations consider the following environmental management skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

Most participants acknowledged that green and environmental management skills are not a priority for them currently but that it is likely that they will become increasingly important. There was a recognition that protecting the environment is beneficial from a bottom line perspective: 'because we don't have the big hotels and we won't have warm beaches or we don't have those kind of facilities, our main facility is our hills, our environment, our walking, our cliffs, our beaches. And for kids and because it's a lot of families that come here, you know we want to be able to do things like rock pool safaris and kind of things like that and show people the nature' (Destination Management Interviewee 3)

There were a number of areas mentioned as likely areas where skills development will be needed. These included awareness of environmentally-friendly practices and sustainable transport. Additionally, having the skills to develop new tourism initiatives with low carbon footprints was mentioned by several participants: 'climate change is a big issue not just it's like critical to the survival of mankind and the world as we know it so it's important that we are all conscious of it. I think visitors like to see that everybody, especially in the hospitality industry, play their part in this whole move towards the zero emissions, low carbon footprint, sustainability' (Destination Management Interviewee 5)

Similarly, generating efficiencies through environmentally-friendly resource management was seen as a skill set that will have increasing importance into the future: 'we have committed to making everything, anything used in events to be either recyclable, or reusable' (Destination Management Interviewee 1)

It was highlighted that to ensure that sustainable practices become more of a focus, that government policy in the area is needed. Currently there is a lack of awareness in the sector on what constitutes sustainable practice and that gap will have to be filled.

**The respondents working at attractions consider the following environmental management skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

There was a consensus that green skills and environmental management skills will become more important in the future and that attractions are reactive in response to legislation and customer feedback. Furthermore, participants highlighted that in the future, attractions will need to change their company/organisational culture regarding environmental issues. A need to educate visitors regarding green initiatives was also emphasised.

The following key skills were highlighted as being most important in the future:

- Waste, water and food management (reduction of waste)
- Recycling
- Supply chain management , with a focus on environmental issues
- Environmental management of heritage sites and listed buildings
- Resource management and opportunities for developing efficiencies and cost savings
- General awareness of green issues
- Environmental monitoring
- Skills in terms of sustainability and growing visitor numbers
- Understanding of green initiatives, for example, water reduction, power reduction, composting and food waste guidelines.

**The respondents working in the accommodation sector consider the following environmental management skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

Overall, participants felt that a greater focus on green skills was needed, and was going to become increasingly important. There were already a number of trends evident such as a move to more reusable materials, and this will increase with a greater need for businesses to be more environmentally aware. A key driver of this would be the customer, and a failure to meet their environmental requirements, one participants explained, may in the future result in businesses losing customers. Some participants felt that sustainability can be 'a win-win for both guests and the industry as the environment can be protected and at the same time, the hotel saves costs' (Accommodation Interviewee 2). This was important because, 'the guest and the business have to win from whatever the initiative is, otherwise you won't sustain it, it'll be a fad.' (Accommodation Interviewee 5). Skills from this perspective tended to equate to knowledge of sustainable practices and thinking about all aspects of sustainability and how this could benefit the customer, but in particular would create efficiencies for the business. Some participants explained that they would need upskilling if they wanted to become a green certified business, something they may consider in the future.

In terms of training, participants again suggested that only some members of staff may need training ‘maybe a chef, a few of the kitchen team, some of the managers, the housekeeping manager maybe’ and then ‘they could implement it down through the rest of the staff’ (Accommodation Interviewee 1). While another explained that the ‘ability to put in policies and procedures at a group level and then one individual will drive the efficiencies’ was how they anticipated would be required (Accommodation Interviewee 4)

Skills that would be of interest include:

- Resource management
- Recycling & waste management
- Environmental practices for generating efficiencies and cost savings for the business
- Supply chain management
- Awareness of regulatory requirements
- Ability to pass on skills and knowledge to additional staff

**The respondents working in the food & beverage sector consider the following environmental management skills as the most important in ten years’ time:**

Companies will want employees to have an awareness of green issues, supply chain management, skills in reducing and managing waste (food waste and packaging) and skills in relation to creating efficiencies i.e. lighting. One participant highlighted that Brexit will have an impact in terms of landfill in Northern Ireland.

**Theme 5: Social skills.** A summary of the social skills (i.e., personal-, communication/cultural-, and diversity skills) rated as the most important in ten years' time by interview participants.

**The respondents working at tour operators / travel agents consider the following social skills (i.e., personal-, communication/cultural-, and diversity skills) as the most important in ten years' time:**

The individual social skills that will be most important in ten years time include interpersonal skills, empathy, the ability to understand the needs of customers-to provide customer service, to deal with diversity, to be flexible, and to self manage. The ability to attend events and network will be important. Writing skills will be in demand. Managers will have to be able to team-build and lead.

Employees will have to demonstrate passion for the business, and show initiative. Employers were at pains to emphasise that the business requires staff members to be committed to the business. Employees need to have a passion for travel and they need to go to the destinations and travel; companies have familiarisation trips to help with this. Employees need to be able to recommend and be confident in what they are selling (this is important now and in the future). In terms of personality, the sector will need 'the same networked, organised person'.

Good customer service, 'and follow up' will be essential. Relationships are very important. This area of social skills will enable the business to remain competitive. Having cultural understanding is becoming more of an expected social skill. Product knowledge is very important, 'Staff all need to know the offering (product)'. Languages are likely to focus more on Asian languages.

**The respondents working at destination management organizations consider social skills (i.e., personal-, communication/cultural-, and diversity skills) as the most important in ten years' time:**

All participants noted that social skills are core skills for individuals working in the tourism sector and that this will not change, despite the increasing importance of technology. Indeed, it was highlighted that social skills will become even more important, as evidenced in the World Economic Forum Future Jobs Report. Even with increasing visitor digital engagement, human interactions will always remain at the core of the tourism industry, especially with regard to more individually tailored tourism experiences. No new skills needs were mentioned by participants and the consensus was that the skills that are currently important will remain so. These include:

- Communication skills
- Collaboration skills
- Networking skills
- Customer care
- Cultural awareness
- Ability to deal with conflict
- Negotiation and Sales skills

**The respondents working at attractions consider the following social skills (i.e., personal-, communication/cultural-, and diversity skills) as the most important in ten years' time:**

Visitor attractions highlighted social skills as being the most important skill to develop in the future, for example, 'we're all about visitors so it's all about people skills'. Participants emphasised that the importance of soft skills would not change in the next ten years, these skills will always be important, now and in the future. Participants stressed that the personality of employees is and will be very important in the future and their ability to work with people from different backgrounds.

Key future social skills identified included:

- Communication skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Team building skills
- Customer service skills, i.e. front office and tour guiding
- Basic marketing skills
- Verbal and written communication
- Having a 'can do' and positive attitude
- People management
- Ability to use and act on their own initiative
- Multicultural awareness and understanding
- Problem solving skills
- Conflict resolution
- Customer relationship management
- Selling skills
- Disability awareness
- Working with new markets, i.e. Indian and Chinese markets.

Participants also placed importance on the skill of 'storytelling' for tour guides. For example, the ability to tell a story to visitors and enhance the visitor experience. This includes interpretation of the building, the history of the attraction, the story of the people that work at the attraction and live in the area. Additionally, the ability to 'read the audience' and adapt the story depending on the group was also highlighted as being important. One participant noted that employees with a background/skills in performance or comedy would be an advantage in the future. Another stressed that visitor attractions are moving away from a model of giving information to individuals to guiding someone on their visit and this will require more staff on the ground in the future to guide visitors.

**The respondents working in the accommodation sector consider the following social skills (i.e., personal-, communication/cultural-, and diversity skills) skills as the most important in ten years' time:**

The continued and increasing importance of social and soft skills was emphasised. Participants explained that the increasing use of technology (e.g. self-service check-in) and resulting decrease in face-to-face contact would mean that the quality of personal experiences with guests would become even more important, and the interaction would have to be 'universally excellent' (Accommodation Interviewee 2). Resilience and flexibility were also important and likely to be increasingly so, and businesses would continue to hire people for their inter-personal skills and personality. A good understanding of the hospitality business, the importance of customer service and their role in this, was of central importance as was the need for excellent communication skills. Languages were not considered a key skill that was needed but rather a 'benefit' this was unlikely to change into the future, as 'English is the predominant language ... even though we are becoming more diverse ...' (Accommodation Interviewee 2).

Key soft & social skills include:

- Communication skills
- Problem solving skills
- People management
- Negotiation skills
- Client relationship management skills
- Self-managers - ability to take responsibility and initiative
- Team-working skills
- Self-improvement skills
- Questioning mind – not accepting the status quo but balancing this with the ability to assess the situation
- Decision making skills
- Cultural awareness and understanding
- Diversity management
- Positive attitude
- Resilience & flexibility

**The respondents working in the food & beverage sector consider the following social skills (i.e., personal-, communication/cultural-, and diversity skills) as the most important in ten years' time:**

The most important social skills in ten years' time will include customer service skills, communication and listening skills, service skills, team building, problem solving, leadership, flexibility, multicultural

awareness, creativity, knowledge of dietary needs and an awareness of the employee’s position in the company and the implications of this.

Participants see social skills, human interaction and customer service skills of particular importance in the future. As one noted ‘if employees have these skills, they can quickly master the other skills’.

The service and communications skills of chefs, producers and waiters will be particularly important as they will need to be able to tell the story of where the ingredients came from as ‘anyone can cook but understanding the produce is important’.

**EXTRA.** A summary of relevant additional comments by interview participants.

#### **Tour operators / travel agents:**

Basic social skills were seen as the most important skill set for people hoping to pursue a career in this sector; commercial awareness and sales skills were mentioned in this context. Digital skills, particularly experience with GDS systems, were emphasised. While there was a general appreciation of the importance of green awareness, it seems that investment in this type of training would be largely in response to customer demands.

#### **Food and Beverage:**

A number of key issues emerged from the interviews regarding the food and beverage sector: the need for improved social skills in the sector (particularly front of house roles), communication and knowledge of ingredients by producers, chefs and waiters, waste management (particularly food waste), the lack of chefs in the industry and the difficulty in finding staff. Acquiring staff could be a big problem/challenge as many employees see working in the industry as a temporary job rather than a career.

#### **Attractions:**

Social skills were the most important skill set to develop in the future. Key issues included customer relationship management, verbal communication, interpersonal skills and customer service skills. The interviews highlighted the importance of storytelling, customer engagement and providing a unique visitor experience. While participants stressed the importance of digital and green skills, it was the social skills that they placed most emphasis on, particularly in terms of current skill gaps. Overall, participants emphasised that employees (current and future workforce), particularly millennials, have a good grasp at digital skills, feel comfortable using technology and developing their digital knowledge, however, it is the social/soft skills that require attention.

#### **Destination Management:**

Social skills were seen as the key skill set for and these skills are set to remain at the core of the sector in the coming decade, even with the introduction of more digital interactions with visitors. Multicultural awareness was seen as more important than language skills, which were not afforded high importance by participants, possibly because most visitors speak English.

Challenges in the industry were mentioned by some participants in the context of barriers to skills development. The high turnover rate in the industry was highlighted as particularly problematic as employers find it difficult to justify investment in employee skills development as they may not see a return on that investment. Paradoxically, if the investment is made, it is likely that staff will stay longer. The high turnover rate was attributed to a number of factors including low pay and poor conditions, although it was also acknowledged that there are distinct advantages to working in the sector including

the easy of entry, fast-track into management positions, transferable skills development and opportunities for travel. It was highlighted that any initiative focused on developing skills must acknowledge the complexity of the context of the industry and must go beyond simply supplying training schemes. Recruitment and retention must also be taken into account as well as the often negative view of the sector from both within and outside and attempts must be made to address those.

### **Accommodation providers:**

Soft skills were stressed as key, and participants felt that their importance would continue to grow. The growth of digital communications and in particular the use of social media would mean that customer touch points would be increasingly important. The need for digital skills, in particular the need for staff to understand different technologies and their implications for the business were considered essential. While many organisations currently outsource social media management, skills in this area will become increasingly important, specifically skills in relation to determining the most appropriate social media platforms and how to engage with customers on these in a professional manner. With regard to green skills, in general there was an awareness that these would become more important particularly with regard to achieving efficiencies for the business.

The need for the industry to be seen in a more positive light was mentioned by a number of participants. Currently, participants felt that there was a negative perception of the industry and this is resulting in high turnover rates, which poses huge challenges for businesses. Additionally, participants spoke of the need for employees to really understand the business including the ‘facts and figures’, and to be flexible in terms of their roles and responsibilities (Accommodation Interviewee 4).