

You are here: [Blogs](#)

# To close the skills gap, start by closing the gender gap

Friday, 2 February 2018 | [2 comments](#)

[Analysis](#) of the OECD's most recent PISA test - which measures the skills and knowledge of 15-year-olds in 72 countries - has found that girls are better at collaborative problem-solving than boys. In the UK, the gender performance gap was even [larger than the OECD average](#). Considered to be the global benchmark in educational achievement, the triannual PISA survey measured collaborative problem-solving for the first time in 2015.

These results have implications for the workforce of the future. As AI and automation become increasingly pervasive, 'soft skills', including collaborative problem-solving, [will be in growing demand](#). This includes the IT sector, where communication, problem-solving and collaboration are the 'most valued' soft skills according to a [recent report](#) by ManpowerGroup, the staffing firm.

Yet for employers in tech, problem-solving skills are also the [hardest to find](#) - and the 'soft skills' gap is not the



Emma  
Sutherland

## You might also like...



Updating  
digital  
skills:  
How can

only challenge facing the industry. Across giants such as ebay, Facebook and Twitter, females [occupy less than a quarter of tech jobs](#). The cause of this gender divide has been widely debated, with many pointing to the culture of tech workplaces and role of unconscious bias.

If the PISA results are anything to go by, tech companies might solve their skills gap by closing their gender gap. To create a pipeline of female hires, they need to break down the barriers that limit women's access to tech.

[Social Builder](#), which we interviewed for [Readie's](#) upcoming report on approaches to digital skills provision, is a French social start-up which aims to increase women's participation in the IT industry. It suggests that to attract women, both digital training providers and companies need to combat sexism and foster organisational cultures where women can thrive. Social Builder's recent [survey](#) found that seven in ten women had experienced sexism whilst completing a tech training programme. This will need to change if the tech industry wants to plug its problem-solving deficit.

The PISA results also have implications for learning. Director for Education and Skills at the OECD, Andreas Schleicher, [says](#) that schools "need to become better at preparing students to live and work in a world in which most people will need to collaborate with people from different cultures, and appreciate a range of ideas and perspectives". Lower-performing students, particularly boys, may need help to catch up, and Nesta's [Solved! report](#) found that teachers also need support to develop collaborative problem-solving resources. Policymakers will undoubtedly debate how schools can best teach social skills, bridge the gender gap, and learn from high-performers such as [Singapore, Japan and Estonia](#).

For those leaving school before these changes become a reality, the PISA results highlight the need to build soft skills through lifelong learning opportunities beyond the

companies, individuals and policymakers prepare for the future of work?



Spotlight on digital skills: Poland



Startup.gov – digital innovation for policymakers



Digital Pulse 2017: Which Europeans are most open to trying new technologies?

schooling years. We cannot rely on schools to equip everyone with the collaborative problem-solving skills that will serve them in the workplaces of the future, and further education and training need to respond to this. An upcoming report by Readie identifies the importance of including 'soft skills' training in digital upskilling programmes for adults. [Nesta](#) has previously highlighted that higher education organisations need support to track the effectiveness of their approaches to collaborative problem-solving.

---

**"Humans are going to find meaningful work if they can do the things that machines can't do well, and that's higher-order thinking - critical, creative, innovative, imaginative thinking."**  
**[Ed Hess, Professor Business Administration, University of Virginia](#)**

---

The future workforce will rely on a whole suite of 'non technical' skills such as creativity - soon to be [tested by PISA](#) - and collaborative problem-solving. But, to achieve a fulfilled, prosperous and diverse labour market, we need to close the gender gap in the tech sector, where women with in-demand soft - and technical - skills are grossly underrepresented. Today's 15 year-olds, regardless of gender, need effective pathways and training that will not only develop their soft skills, but also enable them to get the jobs they want and that meet the needs of the fast evolving labour market.