



RESEARCH REPORT

FOCUS GROUP - MANAGERS IE



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KEY FINDINGS OF FOCUS GROUPS CONDUCTED WITH MANAGERS WITHIN THE ADMINISTRATIVE, EDUCATIONAL AND ECONOMIC SECTORS

Focus groups are an essential tool in shaping educational and training programs, offering in- depth insights directly from stakeholders. This approach has proven especially valuable in developing targeted Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs.

The comprehensive findings from recent focus groups will play a crucial role in designing a VET program which will focus on boosting skills and competencies in the administrative, educational, and economic sectors.

This report summarises the outcomes of three focus groups, each consisting of 10 managers from various companies and organisations across the administrative, educational, and economic sectors. The purpose of these focus groups was to identify the essential skills, experience, and qualifications required in the job market for these sectors.

The insights gathered will serve as the foundation for developing a Vocational Education and Training (VET) program tailored to meet the needs of these industries.

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Methodology

The data derived from these focus groups addresses real-world challenges and opportunities, ultimately fostering a more skilled and adaptable workforce.

A focus group is a qualitative research method used to gather in-depth insights and opinions from a diverse group of participants about a specific topic or issue. Typically consisting of 6 to 12 participants, focus groups are moderated by a facilitator who guides the discussion according to a set of questions.

This research method was selected to stimulate creative thinking and brainstorming. Participants often build on each other's ideas, which can lead to the generation of new concepts or solutions that might not emerge from individual interviews or surveys.

By bringing together a group of participants with similar characteristics or experiences, focus groups can help identify trends, patterns, and common themes that might be missed in more quantitative research methods.

Participant selection

As part of the research, we have selected managers across Ireland and recruited 30 participants in total who are managers within administrative, educational, and economic sectors.

This allowed to create 3 focus groups containing 10 participants each with each focus group lasting 4 hours in total. Each participant was given an invite and a set of questions.

Focus group invite

Dear Participant,

We are pleased to invite you to participate in our focus group, which focuses on identifying the necessary skills in the job market in the administrative, educational, and economic sectors.

We are interested in the opinions of managers regarding the skills, experience, and qualifications that are crucial for effective work in these sectors.

Our goal is to gather a diverse group of managers representing different companies and organisations in the administrative, educational, and economic sectors to gain a broad perspective on the required competencies and market trends.

During the focus group, we will ask you to share your experiences, opinions, and observations regarding the necessary skills. The discussion will be conducted in a friendly atmosphere, and your knowledge and perspective will be extremely valuable to our research.

A report will be produced in 3 languages based on the research, to which you will have access. It will serve as a basis for a VET program that we will develop for employees as part of the project.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Thank you for your interest in our research, and we look forward to your participation in our focus group.

Focus Group Questions

Each focus group contained the following questions:

1. What technical skills do you believe are most sought after in these industries?
2. In your opinion, are there any specific soft skills that are key to the success of employees in these sectors? If so, what are they?
3. What professional or educational experience is preferred when hiring for these industries?
4. Are there any new trends or technologies that are influencing the required competencies in these sectors? If so, what are they?
5. What interpersonal skills are particularly important in these industries?
6. Are there any specific certifications or courses that are highly regarded in these sectors? If so, what are they?
7. What time management and organisational skills are important for employees in these industries?
8. What analytical and problem-solving skills are important in these sectors?

9. Are there any communication skills that are key for employees in these industries? If so, what are they?
10. Are there any specific requirements regarding knowledge of computer programs or technological tools in these industries? If so, what are they?

Conducting the Focus Group

An experienced facilitator was appointed for each session who can effectively guide the discussion, keep participants engaged, and manage group dynamics.

Each 4-hour session started with a brief introduction outlining the purpose, objectives, and format of the discussion and the facilitator took notes from the focus groups which were in turn used to produce the key findings in this report.

Key findings based on the question set

After conducting the focus groups with managers in the administrative, educational, and economic sectors, we have identified 10 key findings which offer valuable insights regarding the necessary skills and qualifications for effective work in these industries.

Key Finding 1

Technical Skills: Across all three groups, there was a strong emphasis on the need for technical skills specific to each sector:

- **Administrative Sector:** Proficiency in advanced Excel, data management software, and enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems were highlighted as essential.
- **Educational Sector:** Skills in digital pedagogy, familiarity with e-learning platforms, and competency in using digital assessment tools were considered crucial.
- **Economic Sector:** Financial modelling, statistical analysis, and the ability to use specialised software like MATLAB, R, and STATA were frequently mentioned.

Key Finding 2

Soft Skills: Soft skills were universally recognised as critical for success in all sectors:

- **Communication Skills:** Clear and effective communication was deemed vital. This includes both written and verbal communication skills, especially in collaborative settings.
- **Adaptability and Flexibility:** Given the rapidly changing job market, the ability to adapt to new technologies and methods was highlighted as a key trait.
- **Teamwork and Collaboration:** The ability to work well in diverse teams was emphasised, especially in project-based work environments.

Key Finding 3

Professional/Educational Experience:

- **Administrative Sector:** Experience in project management and administrative roles, often supported by certifications such as PMP (Project Management Professional) or a degree in Business Administration.
- **Educational Sector:** A background in teaching or educational administration, with a preference for candidates who have experience with curriculum development.

- **Economic Sector:** Previous roles in financial analysis, economic research, or consulting, along with qualifications like CFA (Chartered Financial Analyst).

Key Finding 4

Emerging Trends and Technologies: Participants identified several trends and technological advancements influencing the required competencies:

- **Administrative Sector:** Increasing importance of digital transformation and automation tools.
- **Educational Sector:** Growth in the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning for personalised education.
- **Economic Sector:** Use of big data and analytics in economic forecasting and decision making.

Key Finding 5

Interpersonal Skills: Communication skills were recognised as key in all sectors, as well as conflict resolution, particularly important in the educational sector where stakeholder management is a daily requirement.

Key Finding 6

Certifications and Courses: Certifications in data analysis (e.g., Microsoft Certified: Data Analyst), project management (e.g., PMP), and financial management (e.g., CFA) were noted as highly valuable across sectors. Additional courses were also important in showing desire to learn and adapt.

Key Finding 7

Time Management and Organisational Skills:

Prioritisation and delegation were seen as essential skills highlighted by participants in managing workload efficiently, especially in administrative roles. Also, goal setting and planning were said to be crucial for long-term project success.

Key Finding 8

Analytical and Problem-Solving Skills: The ability to analyse complex data and make informed decisions was underscored as a core competency, especially in the economic sector.

Key Finding 9

Communication Skills: Emphasis was placed on skills such as negotiation, presentation, conflict management, and public speaking, particularly for managerial roles.

Key Finding 10

Computer Programs and Technological Tools:

Proficiency in tools like Microsoft Office Suite, Google Workspace, and specialized software for education, which changed depending on the institution, or QuickBooks for financial management, was identified as necessary across sectors. Excel was seen as a very important tool.

These findings will inform the development of a VET (Vocational Education and Training) program designed to enhance the skills and competencies of employees in the administrative, educational, and economic sectors. Thank you to all the managers who participated in the focus groups and contributed to this valuable research.

Expanded Discussion and Focus Group Results

The focus groups conducted with managers in the administrative, educational, and economic sectors provided further insights into the necessary skills and qualifications for effective work in these industries.

Technical Skills: Proficiency in advanced Excel and data management software systems were highlighted as essential in the administrative sector. Basic Excel proficiency was mentioned in the educational sector, and high proficiency in the economic sector. In the educational sector, skills in digital pedagogy, familiarity with e-learning platforms, and competency in using digital assessment tools were considered crucial. For the economic sector, financial modelling, statistical analysis, and the ability to use specialised software were frequently mentioned.

Soft Skills: Soft skills were universally recognised as critical for success across all sectors, even more so than hard skills as managers believed these could be easily taught. Clear and effective communication, both written and verbal, was deemed vital, particularly in collaborative settings.

Adaptability and flexibility were highlighted as key traits, given the rapidly changing job market and the need to adjust to new technologies and methods. Additionally, the ability to work well in diverse teams was emphasised, especially in project-based work environments where teamwork and collaboration are essential, as well as creativity when it comes to problem-solving.

Professional/Educational Experience: In the administrative sector, experience was said to be preferably supported often supported by relevant certifications or trainings, with a bachelor or master degree in Business Administration highly valued. In the educational sector, a background in teaching is essential, and managers prefer candidates with experience in curriculum development. The economic sector emphasizes previous roles in financial analysis, economic research, or consulting, with qualifications like CFA (Chartered Financial Analyst) being particularly advantageous, or other courses from CFA Society Ireland.

Trends and Technologies: Managers identified several emerging trends and technological advancements influencing the required competencies in various sectors. In the administrative sector, there is an increasing emphasis on digital transformation and automation tools. The educational sector is seeing growth in the use of artificial intelligence and machine learning for personalised education. In the economic sector, the use of big data and analytics is becoming more prominent in economic forecasting and decision-making processes.

Interpersonal skills: Communication skills were mentioned every time, which included conflict resolution and active listening, with both stakeholder and teams.

Certifications and Courses: Certifications in data analysis (e.g., Microsoft Certified: Data Analyst), project management (e.g., PMP), and financial management (e.g., CFA) were considered highly valuable across sectors. Completing additional courses also demonstrated a strong desire to learn and adapt, especially when it came to linking them to future market trends and soft skills such as big data analysis or public speaking skills, often by accredited bodies such as colleges or universities.

Time Management and Organisational Skills:

Managers highlighted prioritisation and delegation as essential skills for managing workload efficiently, in particular for other managerial or leadership roles. This was evident the most in administrative roles, but mentioned in other sectors too, when discussing long-term project success.

Analytical and Problem-Solving Skills: Analytical and problem-solving skills were underscored as core competencies, particularly in the economic sector, where the ability to analyse complex data and make informed decisions is essential. Problem-solving skills were more frequently mentioned in the educational sector due to unique student needs and large groups, and analytical skills more frequently mentioned in the administrative sector due to the necessary attention to detail.

Communication Skills: Managers explained the need for clear and concise written and verbal communication, especially in the difference in online and in-person communication. Active listening and presentation skills were identified as important for effective communication with stakeholders and team members. Managers emphasised that they also appreciate a personal plan for improving the communication skills.

Computer Programs and Technological Tools:

Proficiency in computer programs and technological tools such as Microsoft Office Suite, Google Workspace, and specialized software relevant to the specific institution, was identified as necessary across sectors. Excel, in particular, was highlighted as a very important tool in all sectors, but most important in administrative and economic, and only as desirable in educational sectors.

As a result of the focus group the managers from each sector; administrative, educational and economic have identified specific sought after technical skills by managers.

The results have been broken down into each sector:

Administrative Sector:

- Project Management Software Proficiency - Ability to use tools like Microsoft365, or calendar apps.
- Advanced Excel Skills - Expertise in data analysis, pivot tables, and complex formulas.
- Database Management - Knowledge of SQL, Oracle, or Microsoft Access.
- Document Management Systems - Familiarity with tools like SharePoint, Adobe, or DocuSign.
- Cybersecurity Awareness - Understanding of basic cybersecurity principles and practices, as well as laws surrounding it such as GDPR.
- Financial Software Proficiency - Knowledge of QuickBooks, Oracle, AccountsIQ, or other financial management software.
- Technical Writing - Ability to create clear and concise documentation and reports.
- Collaboration Tools - Skills in using platforms like Microsoft Teams, or Zoom for remote work or meetings.

Educational Sector:

- Learning Management Systems (LMS) - Proficiency in platforms like Canvas, Blackboard, or BrightSpace.
- Educational Software and Tools - Familiarity with tools like Kahoot!, Quizlet, or Pobble365.
- Data Analysis for Educational Outcomes - Skills in using statistical software to analyze student performance data.
- Instructional Design - Knowledge of creating engaging and effective courses.
- Classroom Technology Integration - Proficiency in using smart boards, projectors, tablets and other tech.
- Assistive Technology - Understanding of tools that support diverse learning needs, like speech-to-text software.
- Digital Content Creation - Ability to create multimedia content such as videos and interactive materials for educational purposes.

Economic Sector:

- Financial Modelling and Analysis - Skills in creating and interpreting financial models using tools like Excel or specialised software.
- Economic Data Analysis - Proficiency in analysing economic data using statistical tools and software.
- Market Research Techniques - Knowledge of methodologies for gathering and analysing market data.
- Forecasting Techniques - Skills in predictive modelling and forecasting economic trends.
- Risk Management - Understanding of tools and techniques for assessing and managing financial risks.
- Data Visualisation - Ability to create compelling and informative visual representations of data, using variety of graphs and imagery.
- Regulatory Compliance - Knowledge of economic regulations and compliance tools relevant to the industry, in both Ireland and the EU. Knowledge of specific directives such as CSRD is desirable.
- Economic Policy Analysis - Skills in evaluating and analysing the impact of economic policies using relevant software and methodologies.

These skills are highly sought after as they align with the needs and technological advancements within each respective sector. Even though there are many similarities between industries, such as desire for Microsoft Office proficiency, companies and industries often have specific requirements and systems. This shows how important soft skills are, to quickly learn and apply new systems to the working environment.

The managers further identified specific sought after soft skills within administrative, educational and economic sectors.

The results identified 10 key soft skills:

1. **Problem-Solving:** Necessary for troubleshooting issues with software, optimising workflows, or resolving data discrepancies, as well as when working on diverse projects.
2. **Communication Skills:** Essential for clearly explaining technical concepts, presenting data insights, and collaborating with team members and stakeholders, both within the work environment and internationally.

3. Adaptability: Important for adjusting to new technologies and systems; changes in software tools; and evolving educational and economic policies, laws, directives and best-practice. A forward thinking mindset was seen as a necessity.

4. Critical Thinking: Important analysing and presenting data, making informed decisions, and evaluating the effectiveness of various tools and methodologies.

5. Time Management: Key for efficiently managing multiple projects, deadlines, and balancing technical tasks with administrative or strategic responsibilities. Also seen as an important skills for those who carry out hybrid-work.

6. Attention to Detail: Ensures accuracy in data analysis, financial modelling, dealing with monetary procedures, and when using complex software tools, in particular in the administrative and economic sector.

7. **Creativity:** Was seen as extremely valuable for developing engaging educational content, in particular to cater for students with diverse needs and learning styles, but also necessary for innovative solutions to administrative challenges.

8. **Collaboration and team-work:** Was seen as more valuable than independent work due to the cross-functional nature of teams. Due to the increased use of internet-based communication, both online and in-person teamwork skills are essential.

9. **Active listening:** The ability to listen carefully and pick out important information from spoken content whilst analysing body language and tone of voice of the speaker, was seen as particularly important in the administrative and educational sectors, to show attentiveness to the client or student.

10. **Integrity:** Key especially for management or leadership roles. Following necessary administration processes, adhering to high ethical standards of the contract, and carrying out work with due diligence was highlighted as important in all sectors.

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive findings from the focus groups conducted with managers in the administrative, educational, and economic sectors, here are ten recommendations to guide the development of a Vocational Education and Training (VET) program:

Offer Dedicated Training Programmes: Incorporate training focusing on advanced Excel functions, CRM systems, and ERP systems.

Ensure Legal Compliance: Incorporate modules and trainings on basic cybersecurity principles to ensure awareness and preparedness, as well as any other legal aspects employees should be aware of, such as GDPR, The Waste Directive, CSRD, or any other industry specific legal aspects.

Offer Instructional Design Workshops: Develop workshops on designing effective online courses and trainings, as well key aspects of interactive content 'know-hows' which can be used by educational or economic sectors.

Dedicated Communication Skills Training: Have a dedicated component for communication training, focusing on both verbal and written skills, including presentation and negotiation techniques, as well as the difference in in-person and online meeting communication.

Time Management and Organisational Skills

Workshops: Explain how to make best use of your calendar, the importance of work-life balance, prioritisation strategies for different employee positions, and project planning.

Expand on Employee Creativity: Encourage creative thinking through brainstorming sessions and problem-solving workshops.

Design teams based on strengths: To ensure smooth collaboration between teams and employees, include a strengths analysis or Belbin's Team Role Test to show employees their preferred team role, to boost individual as well as team performance.

Explain Risk Management: Introduce theoretical and practical knowledge on risk management, and its common application to all sectors, as well as sector specific risk management knowledge and systems.

Introduce dedicated problem-solving techniques:

Include a dedicated resource for common problem troubleshooting using methods such as 6 hats technique. Furthermore, the program should emphasise the advantages of dedicated problem-solving team meetings.

Emphasize Soft Skills Development: Design components of the VET program to enhance critical soft skills such as active listening, teamwork, problem-solving, and time management. Include interactive workshops, role-playing exercises, and teamwork projects to cultivate these skills.

By implementing these recommendations, the VET program can effectively address the skill gaps identified in the focus groups, equipping participants with both the technical and soft skills necessary to thrive in their respective sectors.



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