



Five questions for

Cath Cant



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Cath heads up the Personal and Professional Learning Team in DWP's Capability Directorate.

As a Centre of Expertise for personal and professional learning her team develops and enhances the DWP Capability Strategy and offer, including leadership and digital capability, to support DWP people in developing the skills they need to excel in their roles and serve customers better.

What's going to be the skills gap or challenge that everyone's going to be talking about during 2024?

I'd say digital literacy; giving people the digital confidence and capability they need to do their jobs. In our case, we want our people to be able to make use of all the digital tools available to them. We also need to incorporate digital technologies into everything we do on our customer frontline. Making this more of a self-service offering will then allow our staff to focus on the vulnerable customers who need more help.

However, providing people with all the skills they need is a never-ending task. It's like chasing the end of the rainbow because we're constantly adding new products and tools that people need to get comfortable with. We also have to bear in mind the demographics of DWP. We've got a lot of older staff (baby boomers and Gen X-ers) who, according to our research, struggle a bit more with adapting to new technology. That's just another reason why it's such a major consideration for us.

Other important areas for us this year include data analysis, adaptability to change and innovation. To build on the One Big Thing initiative, we need to improve how we can use data to drive better decision making. We need leaders who can lay out a transformational vision and take people with them on that change journey. And, as with any government department, we need to innovate; to keep looking for new ways of doing

things. On top of that, there's also empathy. We're intent on delivering a more empathetic customer service, perhaps even using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to help us be better at spotting conversational triggers and responding accordingly.

All of these require new or refreshed skills and behaviours – but I'd still say the digital skills need is the most pressing one. We expect a lot of our people. If you think about a DWP telephony agent; they might be trying to empathetically deal with a vulnerable customer within a certain amount of time while taking all the relevant notes. That's really difficult. Ideally, we could use AI to do more of the heavy lifting in that process, allowing our people to focus on doing the right thing. That's why, for me, improving digital skill levels is the priority.



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And what are the skills gaps currently flying under the radar – i.e. that you feel aren't (yet) getting the attention they deserve?

Sustainability. That's not necessarily a skill but what I mean is educating our people about our environmental impact. There are some staggering stats in circulation about the scale of the Civil Service carbon footprint. It's clearly an area where we need to do more.

Resilience as well. As mentioned before, I think we do expect a lot from our people, especially people on the frontline. It can be a challenging environment to work in, so we can do more to help people learn how to be even more resilient and to protect their wellbeing.



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As a buyer of workplace learning, what do you hope 2024 will bring you? What do you hope to achieve?

More of the same, really, in terms of the blended learning offer we now have. An organisation of our size could never rely solely on externally sourced learning. We just haven't got that sort of budget. That's why we also need to invest heavily in our own in-house learning capability. I think we've done that well so far. We've got a blend of learning that can be tailored to our latest needs and is always available in a timely fashion.

Think back to my example of the telephony agent. When they first start that job, that person needs training in how to stay safe and how to handle challenging calls. They need that training promptly because, without it, they can't go on the customer service frontline. Therefore, the more people we recruit, the more important it is that we're able to immediately provide them with that training.

Clearly, we'd always like more budget but I think we manage and prioritise what we do have very sensibly. There's a good blend of activity that works really well for us, so I'm just keen to see that continue over the coming year.





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What do you think will be the single biggest challenge your workplace learning programmes will face this year?

Making sure that our people can easily access the learning opportunities that are available to them. There's a lot going on right now – which can make it hard to navigate the learning offer. There's our DWP activity, the Government Curriculum and various Government Skills initiatives, for example. All these things are layered on top of one another, which can lead to a proliferation of intranet sites, hubs and portals.

We get a lot of enquiries from people saying that they want to do a piece of learning but they don't know where to find it. My fear is that, if people struggle to find what they need, some

will simply give up and don't bother. Or, worse still, they go away and find or develop something of their own.

Thankfully, we've got Synergy coming soon, our new enterprise resource platform which is going to provide us with some of the functionality of a learning management system. That should make life easier – while I'd also hope that increased use of AI will allow us to create more tailored, bespoke learning journeys.

Given the power, what one thing would you love to change about the way workplace learning is delivered right now?

I'd like to see people given the time, space and support needed to learn properly and encouraged to take accountability for their own learning. I think this ties into another challenge we face though; getting line managers to recognise the value of L&D.

I've seen examples of people being engaged with some online learning when their line manager then interrupts them, taking them away to do something else. That suggests they don't really see the value in that online learning, so we need to change that attitude. At the other end of the spectrum, I've also seen learning positioned as almost being mandatory (when it wasn't) in order to boost attendance figures; a case of hitting a target but missing the point. If we want to change this aspect of how workplace learning is delivered, we've still got work to do to change some ingrained behaviours.



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