

The Importance of Generic Skills to the Health Sector

A briefing paper examining the link between skills priorities
for the sector and evidence of generic skills gaps

1 Introduction

There is a wealth of data across the health sector relating to the types of skills gaps and skills shortage vacancies¹ that employers are experiencing. The existing UK wide skills survey highlights gaps in a number of generic skills areas, such as communication skills and team working. These generic skills are distinct from technical and job specific skills, and are necessary for roles right across the health sector, regardless of service area, specialty or grade.

Given the technical nature of many of the roles within the health sector there has, to date, been little exploration of the importance of generic skills and how they relate to dealing with patients, overcoming organisational challenges, and clinical issues around diagnosis. This report identifies what these generic skills look like in the sector, how skills deficiencies can impact on the sector and evidence of how addressing deficiencies in these generic skills could improve performance.

Team working, customer handling and communication (either written or oral) have been a consistent area of skills gaps in historic and current skills surveys², while problem solving is increasingly being identified by health sector employers as a skills gap. There is some evidence from the UK Employer Skills Survey 2011 that gaps in management skills in the health sector are no more prevalent than in the rest of the economy; however management and leadership have a profound impact on the way in which employees' skills are utilised and developed and management is therefore also seen as a priority.

Given the wide spread of roles utilising generic skills within the sector it is not surprising that these non-technical skills rank higher than job-specific skills when examining gaps in skills. There are of course many challenges for employers and employees in the health sector in effectively utilising generic skills. These are created by the way in which the sector operates and the nature of the services being provided. These may include:

- The need to work with many different teams frequently composed of people from different disciplines and professional groups and sometimes across many different organisations.
- The 24 hour nature of the health service means that for many employees their 'team' will change constantly as not everyone will be working the same shift patterns.
- The need to convey complex, sometimes very emotive, information in a way that can be easily understood and is appropriate to the knowledge and skills of a diverse range of listeners or readers.
- The need to provide services to a range of patients, some of whom may not be easily able to communicate their needs as a result of physical illness, mental health issues or learning difficulties.

This briefing paper is drawn from evidence contained within a full research report examining the nature and impact of skills gaps in the health sector and the latest Sector Skills Assessment for the health sector. These reports are available from the Research and Labour Market Intelligence team at Skills for Health; contact details are available at the end of this briefing.

¹ Skills gaps are said to exist at an establishment when the employer indicates that staff at the establishment are not fully proficient in their jobs. Skills shortage vacancies are defined as hard to fill vacancies where the employer is having difficulty recruiting as there are a low number of applicants with the required skills, experience, or qualifications required.

² Separate skills surveys have historically been conducted in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In 2011 a UK wide Skills survey was conducted by UKCES.

1.1 Evidence from Skills Surveys

Skills gaps occur in an establishment when the employer indicates that staff are not full proficient in their jobs. The number of skills gaps refers to the number of staff not fully proficient in the skillset needed for their role. These can be expressed as a percentage of employers reporting skills gaps and the percentage of the total workforce with skills gaps.

Health sector employers report skills gaps more than employers in the economy as a whole, and this has been the case in each skills survey since 2004. The UK Employer Skills Survey 2011³ (UKESS 11) shows that 19 per cent of establishments in the health sector reported skills gaps within their workforce compared with 13 per cent in the whole economy.

An estimated 5% of employees in the health sector (102,000 staff) are said to lack the required skills needed for their role. At a national level a significantly lower proportion of employers in the health sector in Northern Ireland (9%) reported skills gaps in their workforce compared to the other parts of the UK. The highest proportion of health sector employers reporting skills gaps was found in Scotland and Wales (21% and 24% respectively).

At the employee level the nation experiencing the lowest proportion of employees with skills gaps is Wales (2%) closely followed by Northern Ireland (3%). Scotland has the highest estimated proportion of employees with skills gaps with an estimated 6% of the total workforce affected.

In 2011, health sector employer identified the following areas of generic skills gaps:

- team working skills (cited by 52% of employers with skills gaps)
- customer handling skills (47%)
- written communication skills (44%)
- strategic management skills (35%)
- problem solving skills (28%)

With the exception of 'problem solving skills' all of the above skills deficiencies were higher in the health sector than in the whole economy. Other areas where skills gaps were higher in the health sector than the whole economy included 'basic computer literacy/using IT' and 'office admin skills'.

³ UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2012); UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2011: UK Results.

2 The generic skills gaps in practice

2.1 Skills gaps inter-relationships

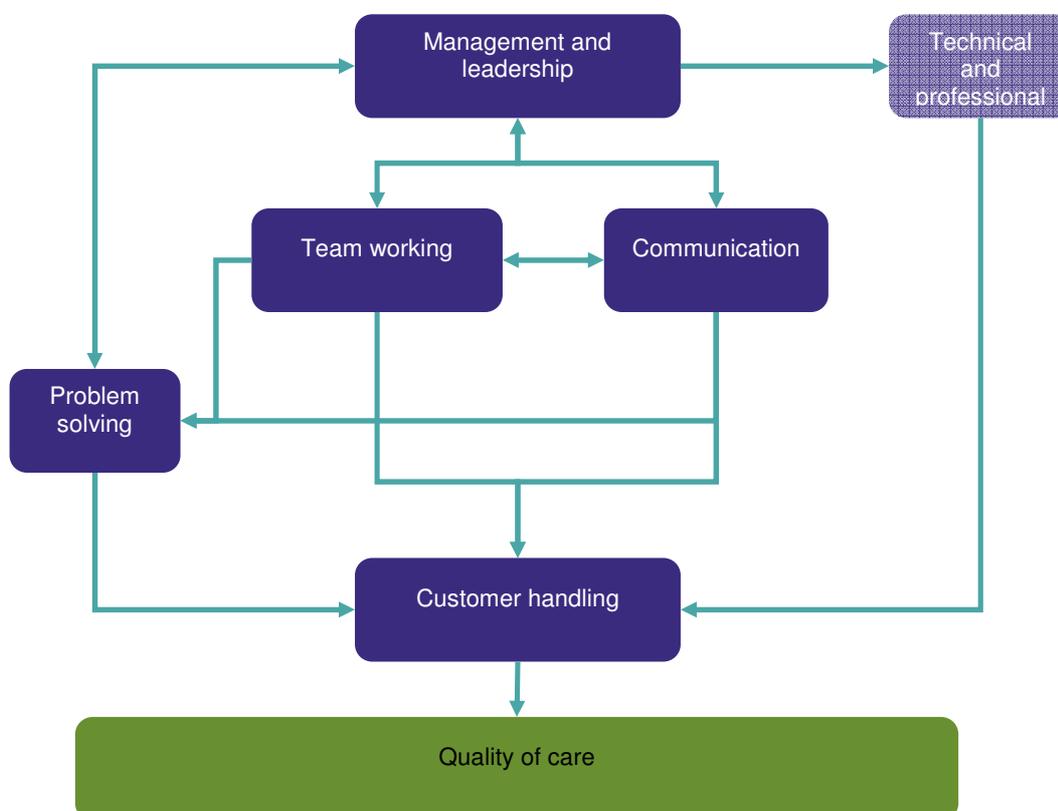
There are very strong connections between many of the generic skills highlighted as skills gaps. In this report we present each of the skills separately however these inter-relationships are implicit and important to consider alongside the evidence presented for each skill.

These relationships, and the associated hierarchy, are shown in Figure 1. The arrows indicate dependency: for example management and leadership rely on and facilitate good communication and, while technical and professional skills are needed for good customer handling, the reverse is not necessarily true.

Management and leadership influence all of the listed skills and strongly depend upon the other generic skills, especially team working and communication. Communication and teamwork are highly interdependent while the generic and specific skills all contribute to customer handling skills and, in turn, impact upon quality of care.

Despite not being a focus of this report, technical, professional and job-specific skills are included in the diagram to show how the main skills gaps highlighted by employers relate to one another.

Figure 1: Skills gaps: hierarchy and interrelationships



The range of generic skills identified as lacking in the workforce within the health sector are presented below. What is clear from the evidence available is that when there is a large scale failure in any of the generic skills identified the impact on quality or patient safety can be catastrophic. There is also evidence that there would be positive impacts for employers if they addressed the generic skills gaps that they have identified within their workforce.

Teamworking – (cited by 52% of employers with skills gaps)

What do the skills look like in the health sector?	Evidence of the potential impact of skills deficiencies?	What evidence is there that improving the skills level will have a positive impact on the organisation?
<p>Staff in the health sector work within a number of teams: with colleagues, with external organisations, and with communities. The need for effective team working is implicit in every role within the sector</p>	<p>There are clear examples of poor team working within the health sector resulting in catastrophic errors, inquiry reports such as in the Victoria Climbié case and the Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry highlights poor inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary teamwork as contributing factors to what went wrong.</p>	<p>The results from the Health Care Team Effectiveness project described by Borrill et al (2001) showed that primary healthcare teams that demonstrate the characteristics of strong teams provided higher quality patient care, introduce more innovations to improve quality of patient care and have team members with higher levels of wellbeing. The quality of teamwork is directly and positively related to quality of patient care and innovation in healthcare and there is evidence that increasing team working can deliver lower mortality rates.</p>

Communication – (written communication cited by 44% of employers with skills gaps)

What do the skills look like in the health sector?	Evidence of the potential impact of skills deficiencies?	What evidence is there that improving the skills level will have a positive impact on the organisation?
<p>In the health sector, most of the communication between practitioners and clients is oral, and usually one-to-one. Practitioners must listen well if they are to be effective, and good communicators will check their own understanding of the issues and reflect what the client is telling them.</p> <p>Written communication skills are also vital to the health sector: to document diagnoses and treatments in patient notes, to log numerical information such as temperature and blood pressure readings, to convey information between practitioners (in the same and in different organisations), to make referrals for treatment, and to communicate with patients about their treatment.</p>	<p>The Francis Report of the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust inquiry (2010) strikingly demonstrates the consequences of poor communication, both written and oral. Throughout the report, poor communication is cited for a number of the trust's shortcomings. It documents communication failings, some of which are associated with poor management of process and procedures, poor handovers, the inability of patients to gain information from the clinical teams and staff failing to listen to patients and relatives.</p>	<p>It is clear that good oral communication skills are a fundamental part of the practitioner-client relationship, since they can put the client at ease, provide comfort or reassurance, demonstrate respect, and provide information in a way that the client can understand and will remember. It contributes to improved care through ensuring all team members understand the patient's diagnosis and treatment.</p> <p>Hamilton and Martin (2007) state that good communication skills between nurses and patients can help reduce pain and increase recovery rates by improving information about diagnosis, prognosis, care and treatment. Von Fragstein et al (2008) claim that effective communication 'is as important to good practice as clinical knowledge and practical skills.'</p>

Customer handling – (cited by 47% of employers with skills gaps)

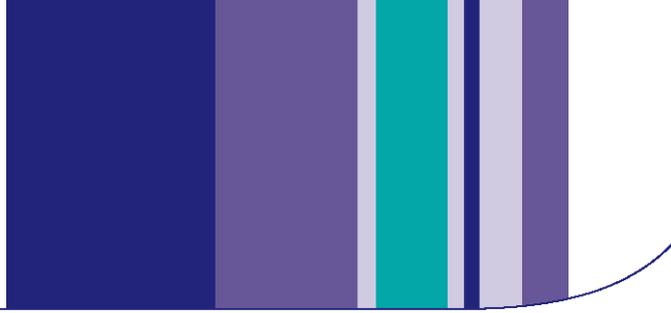
What do the skills look like in the health sector?	Evidence of the potential impact of skills deficiencies?	What evidence is there that improving the skills level will have a positive impact on the organisation?
<p>In the context of healthcare, we understand the term 'customer handling' to relate to the interactions between clients (or patients) and care providers and the ways in which clients' care needs are met. Good customer handling requires good communication, teamwork and management, to provide clients with a positive experience.</p> <p>The sector is also becoming more commercial and, arguably, therefore requires a greater focus on customer handling going forward.</p> <p>For private providers the imperative is clear – a good customer experience brings repeat business, as well as a good reputation and new business. For the public sector too there is pressure to improve the experience of patients, not least through the drive for increased choice and the expansion of the free market in the public health sector to the extent that poor services can be allowed to fail.</p>	<p>Data from the Care Quality Commission's Inpatient Survey 2010 survey show some of the ways in which a lack of good client handling can affect patients. The survey found, for example, that 29 per cent of patients felt they weren't always given enough privacy when discussing their condition or treatment.</p> <p>Data on written complaints in the NHS 2010-11 shows that the second highest percentage of total complaints (12.2 per cent) concerned the attitude of staff.</p>	<p>Improved client handling skills could reduce complaints in across the sector and improve the reputation of providers.</p> <p>The Institute of Customer Service (2011) highlights that survey and case study research show that managers in both the public and private sectors are convinced of the monetary value of investing in good customer service. Many of the organisations involved in the study sought to improve their profits through giving more decision-making responsibility to front-line staff; this greatly improved customer perception, loyalty and ultimately profit.</p> <p>In the health sector the return or profit can be 'measured' in terms of improved quality of care – and perhaps in terms of the efficiency with which those improvements are delivered. Again, the link between the two may be hard to prove, outputs are difficult to quantify as well as being hard to link back to inputs such as improved customer service. However, we can see how giving greater autonomy to those dealing directly with clients is likely to improve the client experience of their care, for example through nurses making decisions rather than waiting for doctors, or through receptionists having the ability to respond to requests.</p>

Problem solving – (cited by 28% of employers with skills gaps)

What do the skills look like in the health sector?	Evidence of the potential impact of skills deficiencies?	What evidence is there that improving the skills level will have a positive impact on the organisation?
<p>Managers and health professionals need problem solving skills for patient care as well as for managing teams and health care functions. In general, the problem solving process is described fairly consistently in the literature. Solving problems requires being systematic, decisive, having self-awareness and being inquisitive (Altun 2003), as well as skills of analysis and creativity. Further skills are required when you consider group problem-solving techniques, such as reaching consensus, the advocate method (where small groups work on parts of the problem), and brainstorming. These group-centred techniques also draw on the teamwork, management and communication skills highlighted earlier.</p>	<p>The breakdown of the problem solving process can therefore result in a number of negative outcomes for patients. For example if alternative solutions are poorly appraised or some options are not considered, patients may not be given the most appropriate treatment. Failure to gather sufficient relevant information from a patient may give a practitioner an incomplete picture of a patient's condition and lead to a misdiagnosis. Despite the evidence that problem solving skills gaps are increasing, there is little specific references to the direct impact of these gaps.</p>	<p>Existing research (Truscott 2010) promotes the view that practitioners benefit from having confidence in their problem-solving ability, and understanding the problem solving process. This view is supported by work by Terzioglu (2005) who found that nurse managers perceived (although they were not asked to demonstrate) that they were better at problem solving than their less experienced colleagues. These findings have an intuitive feel to them: practitioners with experience and applied knowledge build confidence in their ability to solve problems. This confidence, allied with their experience, may help them to better analyse problems and generate solutions. They can reflect on practice and provide constructive challenges to colleagues.</p>

Management and Leadership – (strategic management cited by 35% of employers with skills gaps)

What do the skills look like in the sector?	Evidence of the potential impact of skills deficiencies?	What evidence is there that improving the skills level will have a positive impact on the organisation?
<p>Skills for Health have already carried out a great deal of work on the importance of management and leadership within the health sector.</p> <p>Management and leadership within the current healthcare context, which sets ever-increasing demand against spending restraint provides a challenge for many organisations within the sector.</p> <p>A key role of management is to identify priorities and harness the expertise of the workforce using the available skills, knowledge and creativity. Managers must create effective teams and steer them correctly.</p> <p>Management require effective communication, which means hearing and responding to staff as well as directing and inspiring them.</p> <p>One specific challenge for healthcare organisations highlighted by commentators is the need to harness and build the skills of both clinical and non-clinical staff to drive, implement and manage changes to the NHS and the wider healthcare market.</p>	<p>The Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust inquiry highlighted management failings at a strategic level as well as a more operational level. According to the Health care Commission the strategic leadership at the hospital was focused on financial matters and the transformation into a foundation trust at the expense of quality of care in A&E and other services which were short-staffed and disorganised. They also highlighted problems with the way nursing teams were managed and a lack of senior nursing staff providing leadership and ensuring high standards of care were achieved.</p>	<p>There is evidence that management and leadership has a profound effect on the quality of care within the health sector and that poor management and leadership can be a 'key stumbling block' to health delivery (Pillay (2010)). It is easy to see how a skilled workforce could be ineffective without good management and organisations. Clarke and Jochum (2008) note how skills gaps in management and leadership in the third sector have more impact on performance than other skills. Without good management and leadership a skilled workforce could be ineffective due to being disorganised, demotivated and not putting their skills to best use.</p> <p>Effective management and leadership across the health sector will oversee a step-change in productivity and performance over the medium term.</p> <p>There is a need for managers to develop skills in evaluation and impact knowledge of how their services can make an impact on health and well-being across the sector. This will include articulating the return on investment and the social return on investment of activities.</p> <p>Organisations will also need to ensure that they have skills in place to capture, interpret and model workforce data across all staff groups. The need to make greater efficiencies in the sector may heighten the future demand for these skills.</p>



3 Final Remarks

The evidence discussed within this briefing shows the extent to which the skills gaps in the health sector, highlighted in UK Employer Skills Survey 2011 are related to one another. It is impossible to discuss management and leadership or customer handling without exploring teamwork and communication at the same time. The evidence also shows how fundamental the general skills are to providing good health care, and the sometimes devastating consequences of these generic skills, such as poor communication or teamwork.

Technical, professional and job-specific skills, which are also highlighted by the skills survey as a key skills gap in the health sector, are clearly fundamental to good quality care. However, if the generic skills are lacking, patients' experience of care is likely to be poor. It is therefore essential that the gaps in these generic skills are identified and addressed by employers.

The UK Sector Skills Assessment for the health sector highlights that these generic skills will demand constant attention by employers as the sector seeks to provide high quality healthcare, across wider multidisciplinary teams, in the context of fewer resources. The impact of improving the patient experience through a greater focus on customer care, improved team working and communication skills could become ever more important as all parts of the health sector, public private and voluntary compete for the rights to deliver services.

Future trends across the sector, including the move to non-traditional health outlets, a greater emphasis on self-care, the utilisation of web-based communication and an ever increasingly complex landscape in respect of organisations providing services will all have important implications for how the use of generic skills will evolve in the future.

The priorities for the sector outlined in the UK Sector Skills Assessment include developing management and leadership skills and addressing generic skills issues within the existing workforce. Without specific attention to these areas other key skills priorities for the sector could be more difficult to deliver. These include the development and implementation of new roles, particularly at the intermediate skills level and the need to develop health skills for non-health specialists including community, friends and relatives of patients.

Employers across the sector will have to raise the profile of the generic skills by seeking to embed them better in the professional training and development of staff. The health service rightly values and rewards the high-level technical skills that are so necessary for high quality care; however, the best practitioners possess technical skills complemented by excellent teamwork and communication skills, the most technically skilled are not necessarily the best managers or leaders, but have the skills necessary to organise, inspire and bring out the skills of others, and the most proficient specialists understand that most individual clients need the services from a range of different disciplines. Only a combination of technical and generic skills can fully serve the complex health needs of the population.

To find out more about the research we are undertaking on skills gaps and skills utilisation in the health sector please visit the Skills for Health website www.skillsforhealth.org.uk or contact the research team at LMI@skillsforhealth.org.uk

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