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The Digital Marketing Skills Gap

Many students who are interested in a career in digital marketing may be discouraged from pursuing jobs in this sector because of the often incorrect assumption that a deep technical knowledge is needed to succeed as a digital marketer. This might be true for some roles that require different degrees of technical skill. However, there are many roles in this field that are suitable for those with skills in management, marketing, and creative arts. It is also the case that as digital technologies develop, there are several emerging roles that operate across different department functions. In these instances businesses are interested in the willingness and ability to learn, combined with an enthusiasm for digital activity. Finding the right person for the right role is important, however there is a gap between the skills that are required and the number of individuals who possess those skills.

The digital marketing skills gap

The digital marketing skills gap refers to the inability of employers to find qualified people to perform a digital marketing role. The UK government has found that in the labour market there is a shortage in suitable digital skills for digital jobs (Department for Business and Innovation Skills, 2016). A digital marketing skills gap has implications for a country. Not having the right people to perform the jobs that are needed will hinder economic growth at a micro (e.g. young graduates cannot find jobs as they don't have the skills that companies need), a meso (e.g. companies cannot grow as much as they could) and a macro level (e.g. the whole economy does not reach its full potential).

The contribution of digital skills to the performance of the economy is substantial, particularly in the United Kingdom. According to a report commissioned by the UK Parliament (2016), the UK digital industries grew two and a half times as fast as the whole economy between 2003 and 2013 and comprised 7.5%, or £113 billion, of the UK's gross value added (GVA) as of 2013. In addition, the estimated turnover of digital tech industries in 2014 was £161 billion, and there are 1.56 million jobs in the digital tech economy, of which 41% are in traditionally non-digital industries. In terms of remuneration, digital jobs also tend to be better paid than the average salary. In fact, the average advertised salary in digital jobs is just under £50,000, which is 36% higher than the national average (House of Commons, 2016).

There is considerable debate about whether such thing as a 'skills gap' exists, or whether employers are becoming so demanding that finding potential recruits is impossible (Cappelli, 2012). Nevertheless employers are keen to hire people with the right digital marketing skills, and several surveys indicate that they are struggling to find them (Department for Business and Innovation Skills, 2016).

The digital marketer model

A search for digital marketing roles using any recruitment website will show that several jobs require a combination of marketing management and technical skills (Figure 11.1). The depth of this knowledge will depend on the type of functions. Having sufficient technical skills has been identified as important in both academia and marketing practice (Schlee and Harich, 2010; Digital Hub, 2008). After all, professionals in digital marketing roles are expected to be able to implement the different strategies that they create.

Royle and Laing (2014) developed a *digital marketer model* to show that digital marketing roles can be placed on a spectrum with technical skills at one extreme and marketing management skills at the other. In addition to technical knowledge and the ability to strategically integrate digital tools into a wider marketing strategy, digital marketers are also expected to be proficient at other more 'generic' business managerial skills. These include the ability to conduct research to understand and react to changes in the environment, to deal with clients appropriately, and to have sufficient commercial awareness and communication skills. We are going to look at each of the different functional areas along this spectrum in more detail in each of the following sections.

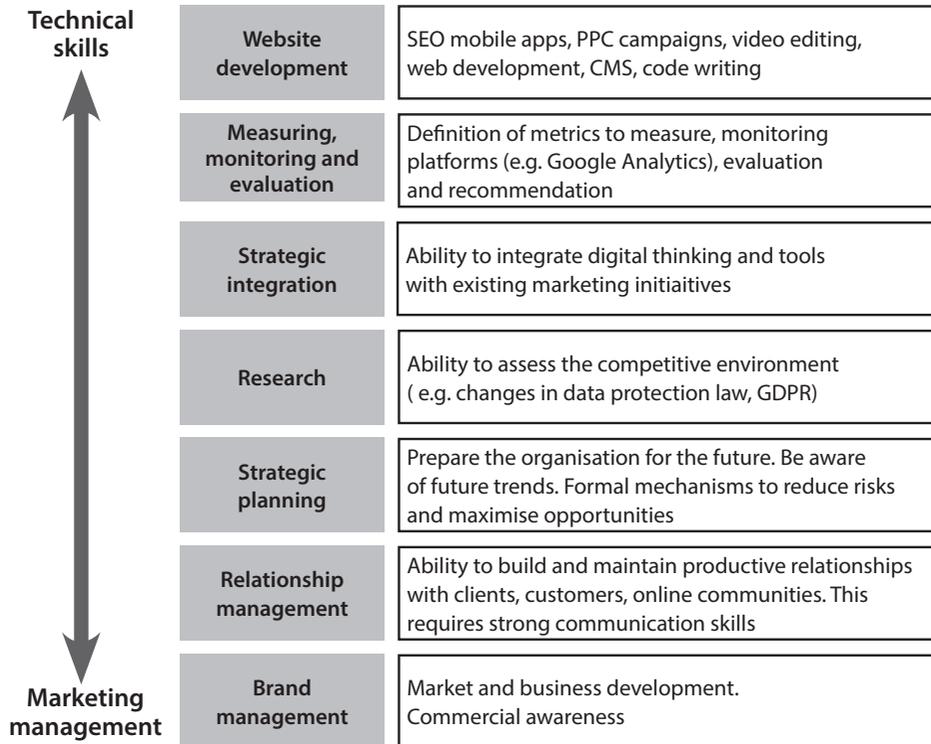


Figure 11.1: Digital marketer model. Adapted from Royle and Laing (2014).

■ Website development functions

Some basic understanding of how a website works is valuable. Such knowledge might include how to code and being able to develop a website from scratch; however this kind of deep technical understanding is usually not required for all positions. Overall, some understanding of what is “under the hood” of a website is needed, so that digital marketers can communicate with other technical roles in a meaningful way, particularly when implementing digital strategy. For larger companies there may be a specialist department which are responsible for the technical operation of the website (Peterson, 2004). In the context of SMEs, there are several platforms that allow marketers to develop websites with little coding knowledge (e.g. wix.com, Wordpress).

Website development includes being able to implement search engine optimisation (SEO) and pay-per-click campaigns (PPC). SEO refers to the techniques aimed at ranking digital content at the top of search results when users conduct relevant searches. PPC or keyword advertising campaigns involve bidding to appear at the top results. SEO specialists would be