

# **Bridging the Digital Marketing Skills Gap:** How to Win the War for Top Talent



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## INTRODUCTION

The war for top talent has never been fiercer across a multitude of sectors and industries in the UK. However, the challenges faced in marketing – predominantly in the digital arena – have become particularly pronounced in recent years. A shortage of candidates, aligned with rapid and seismic technological change in the industry, has conspired to create the perfect storm. This situation is posing a real problem to hiring managers and talent teams: a skills gap across multiple levels and sectors.

The primary purpose of this white paper is to explore where skills gaps exist and what's driving them, and offer practical tips and solutions when recruiting for roles in the sector. It's important to note that in analysing the current landscape, the authors of this document are realistic about what can be achieved within their scope. Comprehensively bridging a skills gap requires a truly holistic approach spanning areas which fall outside the remit of this white paper: government reforms, educational initiatives and comprehensive investment in training and development.

We should be clear from the outset that the situation is not entirely bleak. Whilst outlining the challenges being faced in the sector, this white paper argues that there really is top digital talent out in the marketplace. That being said, finding and hiring this talent is one thing, retaining, nurturing and developing it is another. Therefore, alongside outlining the scale of the skills gap, we will explain best practice attraction and retention strategies. Particularly in the digital and marketing sectors.

## CONTRIBUTORS

This white paper has been produced by Michael Page, and Page Executive in conjunction with the Chartered Institute of Marketing and Target Internet. Primary research was carried out in early 2018, with findings discussed at an MP/PE Marketing round table seminar, attended by marketing directors from a broad range of sectors, in London in June 2018.

The three primary stakeholders who have contributed to the white paper are:



**Mark Lawson-Jones, Business Director, Page Executive**

Mark is responsible for general management executive appointments at board level and specialises in marketing and commercial functions.

He has 12 years of recruitment experience and his focus is on main board and senior management level appointments across consumer, B2B, technology and pharmaceutical sectors. His client base includes both UK and multi-national businesses and those ranging from privately held, owner driven businesses, through to quoted companies and private equity-backed organisations.



**Daniel Rowles, CEO, Target Internet**

Daniel has been working in Digital Marketing for the past 19 years, with extensive experience working both client side and within the agency environment. He is a course director for the CIM, a certified Google Squared trainer and a lecturer at Imperial College and Cranfield School of Management.



**Gemma Butler, Director of Marketing, CIM**

Gemma is the marketing director at the Chartered Institute of Marketing. Experienced in both corporate and not-for-profit organisations, she spent over 16 years in leading corporates specialising in proposition development and buying. In her current role leading the marketing department at CIM, Gemma brings strong commercial and strategic experience and is part of the senior management team.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The wheels of change never stop moving within digital and marketing. In fact, these wheels of change are what has driven innovation and thought leadership in the sector for decades. That being said, recent shifts in the marketplace have accelerated change at an almost unprecedented rate. Whilst the growth of technology creates huge opportunities for reaching consumers and growing businesses, it also brings with it challenges of keeping pace with regards to skills. Whilst the headlines are dominated by news of AI and automation and the workplace of the future, it is clear that the current workforce is still getting to grips with technology and tactics that have been in the marketplace for many years. From programmatic buying and SEO to data science and analytics, there are still huge skills gaps within digital and marketing teams - and too few people to fill them. Significant changes in legislation, such as GDPR have also served to widen the gap, particularly around CRM and email marketing.

In order to explore the drivers and impacts of this gap, specialist training agency, Target Internet, published its Digital Marketing Skills Benchmark (DMSB) in May 2018. The first study of its type, the DMSB looks at the skills needed for a wide range of industries and levels of seniority. The benchmark assessed the skills of nearly 5,000 individuals, identifying skills gaps and areas where decisive action is needed for businesses in this space to thrive.

The full report can be read by [clicking here](#), but key findings include:



### **Analytics skills gap**

Analytics skills have been found to be in short supply across industries. However, the likelihood of an individual having a working knowledge and understanding of the key principles decreased the more senior they were. The result of this is that senior employees can struggle to ask for the right information and perhaps more worryingly, not know how to interpret reports they are given, and fail to communicate with their more senior stakeholders.

*DR: "The analytics skills gap is a huge problem given that a lot of marketing, particularly around digital, seems to be very ad hoc. If we're going to move to a more strategic planning model based on data, then that skills gap needs to be fixed."*



### **Content marketing skills gap**

According to the study, content marketing is a generally well understood in principle, but the working knowledge of how to apply it is lacking across industries and seniority levels. Given that content has evolved from simply being a marketing buzzword, to existing as a core function for many marketing teams, it is key that the discipline is better understood moving forward.

*DR: "Everyone has been talking about content marketing for the last four or five years, and many marketing teams have indeed embraced it. But, worryingly, nobody seems to know anything about content marketing. Brands are producing content, but they don't necessarily understand the user journey. They don't necessarily understand search engine optimisation and they are not really deploying advanced tactics around social media."*



### **Junior team members missing core marketing knowledge**

It was found that those in more junior roles did not have knowledge of core marketing principles. Although their more technical digital knowledge was generally better than those in more senior roles, they did not have the underpinning core marketing knowledge.

The report also highlights that those in more senior roles lacked technical and practical working knowledge of subjects like SEO, content marketing, social media and display advertising. Although they wouldn't be expected to apply these in practice, a working knowledge would allow for better strategic planning and internal communication.

*DR: "In some cases, people in junior roles have more advanced digital skills from a tactical point of view. However, they don't understand the fundamentals of marketing, and they haven't been educated in the fundamentals of marketing at all – even very core concepts."*



### **SEO is still a mystery to most people**

Across all seniority levels and most industries, SEO knowledge was at a low level for almost all of those surveyed. Universally, it is very misunderstood, despite being a cornerstone of discoverability in the digital space, particularly around content.

*DR: "One of the things we were able to do with the DMSB was not only understand whether people understood, but also whether they were misunderstanding it to the point they were getting their campaigns wrong. Lots of people answered the SEO questions incorrectly. They thought they understood it, but didn't – which is very telling."*



## Marketing teams have over-relied on email marketing

In every industry and level of individual seniority, gaps in email marketing skills were universally found to be most prominent. When this data was overlaid on the ever-growing levels of email marketing and the diminishing response rates of email campaigns, it was clear that there has been an over-reliance on generic email campaigns. This is especially pertinent at a time when the industry is moving away from volume-based approach to programmes built on personalisation and relevance. Further, when combined with a generally low level of knowledge in digital strategy, analytics and content marketing, email campaigns are also not being carried out as effectively as possible.

*DR: "In a post-GDPR world, where most of us have been forced to reduce the size of our email databases, email marketing is getting harder to do. The situation has only served to highlight the over-reliance there has been on this type of marketing over the years."*



## There's a black hole of knowledge around programmatic and display

Similar to SEO, programmatic advertising was almost universally not understood across roles and industries. Interestingly, rather than skipping questions in the DMSB on programmatic due to a lack of knowledge, many individuals simply replied to questions incorrectly and were clearly confused about the topic.

*DR: "Programmatic was by far the biggest black hole, in terms of people just not really understanding what programmatic advertising is. That's quite reflective in terms of practical experience where programmatic is being used a little bit as 'smoke and mirrors' by quite a few agencies. There's a lot of talk of programmatic advertising, but few seem to have a clue about what it is."*



## Strategic planning techniques missing

Even at senior levels, there was little evidence to suggest that techniques such as personas and user journey planning were known, meaning that much strategic planning could be flawed or at least not customer-centric.

*DR: "The skills gap in this area doesn't paint a fantastic picture – in fact, it paints quite a worrying picture. What's interesting to me is anecdotally this has been going on for some time. We've been saying this for years now, that there is a digital skills gap and we need to do something about it. But actually from my perspective, this has been carrying on, and I think also things are moving at an increasing pace."*



## Soft skills are lacking

Along with gaps in technical skills sets being identified, there is an acceptance that many in the digital space are lacking soft skills, particularly at the junior level. Being able to operate a software programme or marketing tactic is one thing, but knowing how to secure stakeholder buy-in and present the results is entirely another.

*Seminar attendee, Marketing Director: "I really struggle to recruit for soft skills and still struggle with people I've already recruited. When I think about the recruitment process, I don't care that someone is a 'digital ninja' if they turn up for an interview in a pair of baggy jeans and look like they have spilt their lunch down their front. I just don't want to talk to you, I don't even want to get you in the door."*

## METHODOLOGY

Nearly 5,000 individuals (4,872) were asked a series of questions on 12 core digital marketing related topics, taken from a bank of questions on each topic, testing both tactical and strategic knowledge. These questions were weighted according to difficulty/level of specialism, and a percentage score was calculated out of a possible 100%. The benchmark was tested in a range of commercial organisations before being made more broadly available. This was to make sure the results aligned with the reality of an individual's skills. Questions are regularly updated to reflect the latest industry best practice and are aligned with the Chartered Institute of Marketing professional standards and qualifications.

## SOLUTION

As mentioned in the Problem Statement, it is important to first understand that there is no quick-fix or one-size-fits-all solution. Truly bridging the skills gap involves a collective effort across commerce, politics and education to assess where gaps are appearing and how they can be addressed. However, this white paper argues that there are some key steps that all digital and marketing teams can take to address the issues highlighted in the short and medium term.



## Identifying which skills are really needed

GB: "Organisations need to step back and look at their actual structure, they need to define what the role of marketing is and then look at what structure they need to support that. So many organisations are recruiting for roles that they have very little understanding of. Ultimately do they really need them? With the ongoing pace of technological, consumer and behavioural change, being able to understand the journey and then strategically adapt, and operationally adapt – is really key moving forward."



## Deciding on an optimal organisational structure

GB: "We've had a lot of conversations around how there are blurred lines now with organisations - what is the role of marketing? Does digital sit in IT? Does digital sit within marketing? Does social sit within customer services or does it sit with marketing? I can think of an example within an organisation where a marketing department had to fight to take two people out of IT in order to work on their front-end website. It took three months for marketing to win the argument because IT were adamant they sat within their department."



## Ensuring ongoing learning is a priority

GB: "We have to teach the people that are currently in our workforce that they need a broader range of skills, particularly digital skills. With the overall pace of change, no one can sit on their current skills set anymore. It's been like that for some time, but I think it's getting more and more critical. As part of our research, we've spoken to several high-level business CMOs, and they had some interesting views around this. There is a view that whilst AI will take over the statistical data modelling side of marketing, marketers and businesses will need to grow their skills around the strategy and deployment of the data. Analytical skills are becoming ever more critical moving forward and there is an absolute need for commercial understanding and also a need to understand that marketing plays a critical role within business. Marketing should essentially own the customer journey and the customer experience because we understand what's happening in the market; the competitors and how people are behaving, and it's important this is brought to the fore."



## Focusing on soft skills development

DR: "I think educationally there's a problem going on. Because from an education standpoint, we're ticking all the boxes at the tactical skills stage, we're ticking the boxes at the strategic planning skills, we're trying to bridge the gap between IT and Marketing. What we're not doing well is training people in soft skills. This is important when you consider that the digital world is driven by change. Take stakeholder management – that is rarely on the syllabus for those training in digital or marketing disciplines. This is critical as stakeholder management is needed at all levels within marketing and digital."



## Ignoring the perceived wisdom around celebrating failure

Seminar attendee, Marketing Director: "I don't buy into all this nonsense about organisations needing to celebrate failure. I do think that people under 35 are really poor at owning mistakes on things which haven't worked. My concern is the strategic thinking in those junior roles – distinguishing between what's urgent and what's important, and actually, that's where I have very little confidence. I look at what the marketing team are doing and I get quite irritable with them due to the metrics that they give me. In a way, I know it's irritating for them, because I don't look at how they are making decisions and have confidence that they are using the resources they have got in a really smart way."



## Filling skills gaps with a thorough recruitment strategy

When good talent is scarce, it's important to get your recruitment process right.

ML-J: "From a recruitment strategy point of view, you need to understand candidate's push factors for leaving their current employer and pull factors to join your organisation. With narrow talent pools to select from, it is helpful to clearly understand your pull factors and highlight these to potential candidates."

"When a candidate is joining your organisation, particularly if they have a three-month notice period, it's critical that you're engaging them through this period – perhaps through lunches, meetings, coffees, meet the team etc. On the run up to them joining, you should facilitate them by making the mental and emotional attachment to your organisation, and removing this from their current employer. Through the notice period, strong candidates can receive a number of counter offers and have seeds of doubt about leaving put in front of them by an existing employer. Not having your preferred candidate join you is not only a huge disappointment, but is costly from the time and money invested in a recruitment process, and may also have an impact on your business if you are missing a vital skill set."

"Before starting a recruitment process, once you've identified there is, or about to be, a gap in the team, work backwards from when you need someone to join. You need to calculate the time to source candidates. Be it through a recruitment agency/headhunter, LinkedIn, network or directly approaching the market, the interview process and candidate notice period. For senior roles, it is not uncommon from starting a search to the candidate joining, it could be five to six months taking into account the normal three month notice period."

"Interviews are definitely something that's very important. You need to use interviews as a dual tool, from reviewing a candidate's competencies and team fit to selling the opportunity and business. People often want to join an organisation for a new challenge, so think about your pull factors that need highlighting. It is also important to give constructive feedback for successful and unsuccessful candidates. It can be tempting not to do this, but this can have a negative impact on your employer branding – not least because you may meet the candidate again at a later date."

"You may also need to challenge some of your customary recruitment approaches to adapt to changing workforce needs and how you attract leading talent. For example, have you got the job spec and candidate profile right? Have you adequately considered diversity and inclusion – gender, age and disability? Does this meet your needs to have a balanced leadership and/or marketing team? Is your recruitment approach appropriate to attract a wider pool of candidates so that you have a shortlist of choice to find the best person?"

"Finally, salary is quite a hot topic at the moment, so be realistic about your budget compared to the market and be aware of what your chosen candidate is currently earning. Under offering people just doesn't work. There is the perception by some, that there are lots of people that are unemployed, and thus it will be easy to get people in. In certain areas, particularly marketing that just doesn't happen."

## Retaining top talent once you have found it

As mentioned in the problem statement, finding talent is a key challenge when there is a skills gap, but retaining talent once you have hired it is arguably even more important.

*ML-J: "We sent a survey out to round about 1,700 people and asked them why they stay in their jobs and why they leave. Understanding these factors can help to combat some of the issues and there were five key ones."*

1

### Direction of the business

If they are not happy with that, they will get frustrated and leave.

2

### 2. Poor job satisfaction

When we are interviewing people, they will often say that they are not getting the personal or career satisfaction that they are seeking.

3

### The lack of challenge

The challenge being: what is it that they are trying to do in the role and take forward?

4

### No career progression

People at all career levels typically want to feel like their career is progressing – so if they have hit a dead end, or aren't learning anything, it can be natural to start thinking that the best option is to move on.

5

### Money

Starting off on this, we assumed that money would be quite high up, but money is very much at the bottom of the pile and is only one of many considerations.

## CONCLUSION

There is no overnight fix when it comes to dealing with a skills gap. There are numerous push and pull factors at play, many long-standing, and it would be foolhardy to seek a one-size-fits-all solution. It is certainly important to remember that the skills gap is not something that employers should fix alone. There are huge economic advantages to the Government investing in digital training and education, and some of it has been identified within its UK Digital Strategy 2017. Whilst its recommendations are already being implemented at primary and secondary level in schools, with coding classes and web-based learning now the norm, it is clear that there is a gap developing amongst adults – those who are too old to have received these skills as standard in their education.

In developing a solution, it is important to first understand where the key gaps are. The assessments which formed the core of this white paper are an exercise that an organisation of any size can conduct on any scale. If you don't know what is missing, it is very difficult to go and find it. Having a robust recruitment strategy, as outlined by Mark Lawson Jones, is also essential – and this includes ensuring that no stone is unturned when it comes to finding talent.

Finally, it should be remembered that retention is just as important as recruitment – keeping your skilled staff motivated and happy is just as key as finding them in the first place. What's clear is that the war for top talent in digital and marketing is only set to rage on as the pace of technological change continues to accelerate, and the true effects of legislation such as GDPR come into play.

For a confidential discussion about your skills gaps and effective recruitment, contact:

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