



2021  
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2025

# Transforming Business through **Talent**

*Statement of Strategy 2021-2025*





## *Looking to the Future*

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At Skillnet Ireland we are building a world class enterprise-led organisation to help prepare businesses and workers for the future of work. We are ambitious for Ireland. We are ambitious for Irish business.

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# Minister's Foreword



The creation of a single Department encompassing further and higher education, research, innovation and science has brought with it a deeper strategic consideration for the role of further and higher education in the lives of our citizens, a renewed focus on research and innovation, and it puts in place the structure for an enhanced policy direction for the sector at large. Coming into existence at a time when lives have been disrupted like never before by the Covid-19 pandemic, this new Department and our agencies have a key responsibility to help people get back on track in the short term and prepared for the future in the long term.

Our shared mission is to be the driver of a vibrant sector which produces individuals who are equipped with the skills that they need to progress in the way that they want to, in a way that meets the needs of our evolving economy, and that contributes to an inclusive society.

I believe there is an exciting opportunity to intensify collaboration between my Department and the enterprise sector. This puts the work of Skillnet Ireland centre stage, an agency that operates through deep collaboration with employers, giving voice to the needs of enterprise and coordinating agile and high-impact responses across the training and education system.

“Transforming Business through Talent” is an innovative and expansive strategy, built around the themes of workforce design, people development and strategic innovation. Its targets are clear and

ambitious. It is designed to help address the big challenges we face like Covid-19, Brexit and Climate Change while helping our businesses and workers prepare for the future world of work, meet the demands of digital transformation and drive innovation amongst our SMEs.

I am conscious too of the important role that Skillnet Ireland plays in the innovation ecosystem in Ireland, by promoting industry and academia collaborations to address future skills, and producing valuable industry insights and research. With research and innovation an important component of my Department's responsibilities, I welcome the strategic emphasis that Skillnet Ireland is giving to this agenda over the coming years.

I look forward to working with Skillnet Ireland and its enterprise partners on the implementation of this ambitious strategy.

**Minister Simon Harris TD**  
*Department of Further and Higher Education,  
Research, Innovation and Science*

## Accelerating our Ambitions

We are mindful that we introduce this strategy in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is having a profound global impact on societies, economies, workers and the ways in which businesses operate. Certain sectors, particularly those providing customer-facing services, will not offer their pre-Covid-19 employment potential for some time giving rise to job displacement, skills mismatches and high unemployment levels. There are ongoing operational challenges as businesses adapt to provide a safe environment for their employees and customers. Workers are learning how to complete new tasks remotely, enabled by digital communication and collaboration tools, yet many activities and organisations do not lend themselves to distance working. A future of work largely defined by an increased prevalence of Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation and digital adoption was always anticipated. However, it is now clear that Covid-19 has accelerated the pace of the digital transformation with fundamental implications for work organisation and service delivery.

In the context of the dramatic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, lifelong learning has never been more relevant and will be a driving force as we enter a period of significant disruption that will require all of us to adapt and learn new skills. The future, although challenging, offers an opportunity to transition and transform businesses, build new business models or reengineer existing ones, and for those within the workforce to build new skills.

## A joint introduction from



**Brendan McGinty**  
*Chairperson*



**Paul Healy**  
*Chief Executive*

**Extend our reach**

We will extend the reach of our programmes over the next five years, supporting **100,000** workers every year from our current baseline of **70,000**

The graphic features a woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark blue blazer over a white shirt, smiling. To her right is a large blue circle containing the text. A trail of green dots of varying sizes curves around the bottom and left side of the graphic.

## Challenges for Businesses

In addition to the impact of Covid-19, there are several pressing challenges for businesses in Ireland, not least of which are new complexities posed by Brexit.

The issue of small and medium enterprise (SME) productivity is a growing priority area with several national and international reports expressing concern around the productivity levels within our indigenous SMEs, an issue that has been compounded by Covid-19. We must intensify the focus on upskilling and management development initiatives that drive growth and innovation in SMEs.

Global competition for private investment has intensified over recent years. Combined with this, extensive remote working is democratising access to a virtual workplace which presents both risks and opportunities to globally distributed business models. In the face of these challenges we must continue to boost all the pillars of Ireland's Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) proposition, with a particular focus on talent.

Achieving balanced development between the urban centres and the regions is a key policy objective of Government and nurturing a thriving regional talent base goes to the heart of this challenge.

Finally, to the most pressing issue of our time, climate change and the implications for businesses, as Ireland transitions to a low-carbon and environmentally sustainable economy, and the talent demanded to enable this shift.



# Supporting Enterprise and Labour Market Policy

Skillnet Ireland, together with our partners, are delivering substantive actions across the priority areas referenced above. These include the major cross-government strategies such as the National Action Plan in Response to Covid-19, the National Skills Strategy, Brexit Readiness Action Plan, Future Jobs Ireland, Enterprise 2025, National Competitiveness plans, along with various actions arising from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. We are also delivering upon actions across key sectoral strategies, including: Technology Skills 2022, Finance for Ireland 2025 (including Sustainable Finance), Foodwise 2025, National Cyber Security Strategy, National Space Enterprise Strategy and Regional Development Plans.

We have increased our engagement with the EU Commission, supporting the development of several EU policy frameworks in the arena of skills for industry and the digital transformation. The Skillnet Ireland enterprise-led model has resonated at EU level and is highlighted as a best practice model in a number of the EU Commission's publications. The Commission recently published its *Skills Agenda for Sustainable Competitiveness, Social Fairness and Resilience Report*. Skillnet Ireland is well positioned to contribute to objectives under the EU Skills Agenda through participation in EU funded programmes over the coming years.

## Contributing to Policy

Over the next five years, Skillnet Ireland will use its industry insights to contribute to a greater extent to both the formation and the implementation of enterprise and labour market policy.

## Doubling Investment in 5 years

By the end of 2025, Skillnet Ireland will have increased its investment in the Irish workforce to **€100 million** annually, from the current base of €52 million.

# Investing in Our Workforce

Meeting the objectives of this *Statement of Strategy* is predicated on Skillnet Ireland developing an increased funding base. Currently, Skillnet Ireland operates on the basis of two income sources:

- 1) **Contributions from businesses participating in Skillnet Ireland programmes, and;**
- 2) **Allocations from the employer-funded National Training Fund (NTF).**

In 2019, employers contributed over €22 million to the cost of Skillnet Ireland programmes, with every €100 of exchequer investment in the Training Networks Programme attracting a further €117 in private investment. Our ability to leverage private sector investment to this extent is a compelling element of the Skillnet Ireland model and cost-sharing with employers is a principle the agency is fundamentally committed to.

The National Training Fund (NTF) reform programme is also central to this *Statement of Strategy*. As recommended under the NTF reforms, Skillnet Ireland is giving businesses and employers a direct voice in determining NTF priorities and we look forward to working with colleagues in Government to further advance this objective over the coming years.

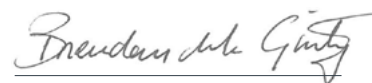
# Stakeholder Consultation & Strategic Themes

This Statement of Strategy is informed by an extensive multi-stakeholder consultation spanning government, state agencies, industry bodies, worker representatives and the general public. Consultations were conducted in 2019 and again in 2020 to take account of the impact of Covid-19. Three strategic themes were highlighted through the consultation process:

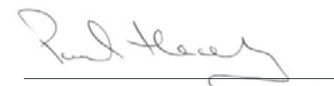
- 1) **Workforce Design**
- 2) **People Development**
- 3) **Strategic Innovation**

Over the coming five years Skillnet Ireland will direct its activities to these strategic themes, the definitions of which are introduced on page 10, with the enabling plans that will underpin each strategic theme presented on pages 12 to 17.

We look forward to working with all our stakeholders in the successful implementation of this strategy over the next five years.



**Brendan McGinty**  
Chairperson



**Paul Healy**  
Chief Executive

# Strategic Goals

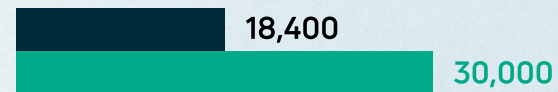
## Our Mission Statement

“Helping businesses in Ireland to be the best they can be, through innovative and enterprise-driven people development”.

## Ambition 2021-2025

● Baseline      ● 2025 Annual Target

### Businesses Supported



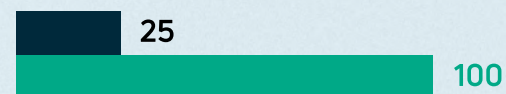
### Workers Supported



### Total Investment



### Innovation Themed Projects & Proposals





## Strategic Goals 2021-2025

What we aim to achieve:

- We will extend our reach by developing new operating models. We will support 30,000 businesses annually by year-end 2025, from our current baseline of 18,400.
- By the end of 2025, Skillnet Ireland will provide supports to 100,000 workers annually, from our current baseline of 70,000.
- Use our deep industry insights to contribute to a greater extent to the formation and the implementation of Government policy.
- By the end of 2025, Skillnet Ireland will have increased to €100 million its annual investment in the Irish workforce, from a baseline of €52 million.
- We will achieve a fourfold increase in innovation themed workforce development projects delivered annually from our current baseline of 25.
- Affirm our position as an enterprise support agency, with the core activities of the organisation directed towards the strategic themes of Workforce Design, People Development and Strategic Innovation.
- Drive continuous improvement in our operations so they are more customer centric and better integrated. We will address bureaucratic barriers and introduce greater digitalisation of processes where necessary, so that we can enhance supports to our partners.

# Strategic Themes

Over the next five years Skillnet Ireland will be guided by three strategic themes:



The themes are rooted in feedback articulated by stakeholders via the extensive consultations that underpinned the formulation of this Statement of Strategy. The strategic themes will be delivered upon through clear and ambitious action, with enabling plans designed to ensure Skillnet Ireland makes the optimum contribution to the productivity and innovation of businesses in Ireland.

Both the strategic themes and the enabling plans of this Statement of Strategy have been carefully aligned with the aims highlighted in Government policy as it relates to enterprise and workforce development.

The future, although challenging, offers an opportunity to transition and transform businesses, build new models or reengineer existing ones, and for the workforce to build new skills.

Theme  
1

## Workforce Design

### *Which means...*

Workforce design is the process of analysing the workforce, determining its future needs, and identifying the gap that exists between what the organisation needs now and what it will need in the future. The need to have the right people with the right skills and tools, in the right roles at the right time is more critical now than ever. Workforce design is essential to keep enterprise ahead of the curve, building human capital and capacity at a sectoral and regional level.

Theme  
2

## People Development

### *Which means...*

As working environments become more complex and greater agility is needed, developing people is an essential strategy to achieve business goals. People development activities help businesses to improve through talent development and enables workers to learn and to grow. It results in better business outcomes, improved staff engagement and greater career opportunities for workers.

Theme  
3

## Strategic Innovation

### *Which means...*

We are living in an age of unparalleled technological disruption and business transformation. Strategic innovation is at the core of how enterprises manage change and adopt to changing circumstances. Strategic innovation places businesses ahead of the curve by boosting creativity, ideation and productivity and helps workers adapt to the new world of work by future proofing their skills.

# *Enabling* **Plans**

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## *Strategic Theme 1* **Workforce Design**

### *We will:*

- Ensure that our activities continue to focus on the delivery of talent to key labour market sectors, addressing defined talent shortages vital for economic growth and competitiveness.
- Pilot workforce design schemes in targeted sectors, planning for the people capabilities of today and the workforce of the future.
- Place a specific emphasis on supporting sectors where jobs have been lost or seriously impacted as a result of Covid-19, technological disruption and climate action.
- Help businesses to lead and manage in a virtual workplace and enable impactful virtual learning.

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- Introduce further measures to assist under-represented groups in the workforce, including female and young entrepreneurs and those disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 crisis.
  - Provide management development programmes and other supports that enable enterprises, and SMEs in particular, to plan for the future.
  - Boost the operational resilience of businesses so they can better absorb future economic shocks, through management development and upskilling.
  - Invest in the promotion of workforce design in order to engage enterprises that are not planning or investing sufficiently in their workforce and are vulnerable to market changes and economic shocks.
  - Support the talent demands for building a low-carbon and sustainable economy through our enterprise-driven climate action upskilling initiative.
  - Provide thought leadership in the arena of workforce design, sharing research, industry insights and best practices across our stakeholders and Government.

# *Enabling* **Plans**

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## *Strategic Theme 2* **People Development**

*We will:*

- Place an increased emphasis and investment on the promotion of the benefits of people development, to encourage businesses that are not investing sufficiently in their teams to do so.
- Continue to facilitate people development activities that are:
  - Optimised for maximum transfer of learning
  - Flexible, blended and straightforward for employed learners to access
  - Highly integrated with work, enhancing the employability for the individual
- Develop learning supports that are tailored to the world of virtual working and of 'time-poor' businesses and workers.



- Increase the provision of programmes that enhance the uniquely human skills, and that promote self-directed learning - the cornerstones of career development.
- Increase our focus on staff upskilling and management development initiatives that drive productivity, growth and innovation in SMEs.
- Embed and support high-impact workforce learning and development strategies and best practices, to enhance opportunities for engaging professional development experiences and career mobility.
- Make lifelong learning more accessible with the adoption of micro-credentialing and digital badge technology, designed through collaborations between enterprise and the education sector.
- Promote the value of lifelong learning for our national competitiveness, and engage enterprises and workers in workforce development initiatives.
- Plan, resource and invest in learning technologies, including AR/VR, to make technology a key agent to encourage workforce development, productivity and innovation.
- Provide thought leadership in the arena of learning and development by sharing: research, industry insights and best practices across our stakeholders and government.

# *Enabling* **Plans**

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## *Strategic Theme 3* **Strategic Innovation**

### *We will:*

- Enhance our role as a coordinating body, facilitating cutting edge collaborations between businesses, industry bodies and the training and education ecosystem.
- Build on our experience of productive collaborations between enterprise and the training and education ecosystem, increasing fourfold innovation themed workforce development projects delivered over the period of this strategy.
- Prioritise initiatives that address the digital skills gap, preparing business for the digital transformation and maximising the use of technology to improve both the productivity and innovation capacity of businesses.



- Target innovation funding at strategically important areas of commercial opportunity and where Ireland can sustain a competitive talent edge.
- Bring greater clarity to the debate on the future of work through the dissemination of accessible and sector-specific industry knowledge, as well as the development of actionable insights. Over the next five years, we will contribute to a greater extent to the formulation and implementation of policy.
- Promote the development and uptake of advanced learning technologies including AR/VR immersive learning technologies, AI based learning and virtual/robotic tuition.
- Enhance the methodologies for evaluating the performance and impact of Skillnet Ireland supported programmes, so that their contribution is measured both in terms of efficiency and effectiveness.
- Coordinate closely with other agencies to help ensure we have a coherent, joined-up innovation ecosystem for enterprise. Responsive to emerging opportunities, delivering enhanced impact through the creation and application of knowledge.

# *Powering* **Enterprises**

Helping businesses  
in Ireland to be the  
best they can be



## Workforce Design



### *The Future of Cx in Ireland*

Ireland is a centre of excellence for global customer experience (Cx), a sector that is seeing significant transformation due to the increased adoption of AI and automation. In collaboration with Skillnet Ireland and the University of Limerick, **ICBE Advanced Productivity Skillnet** undertook research to advance our understanding of these trends and what they mean for future skills in this sector of strategic national interest. Our research found that Ireland's Cx sector benefits from highly skilled workers, that are agile, and with a capacity to apply their talents across multiple industry sectors. New programmes subsequently developed by Skillnet Ireland and our partners are providing career transition pathways for workers in roles vulnerable to digital transformation in Cx, opening doors to the richer knowledge-based roles required post automation.



### *Global Leadership in Data Science*

Rapid advances in Big Data, data-enabled technologies and artificial intelligence are creating both challenges and opportunities for Ireland's data science industry. A new industry-driven PhD in Data Science emerged from a multi stakeholder collaboration between Skillnet Ireland, Science Foundation Ireland, University of Limerick, Maynooth University, University College Dublin, together with industry partners and companies. Skillnet Ireland and **Technology Ireland ICT Skillnet** are leading the industry engagement component, a cornerstone of the initiative. The programme will be instrumental in making Ireland a world leader in the field of data science.



### *Rapid Reskilling through Enterprise*

**Skills Connect** is helping workers severely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic to reskill quickly and prepare for roles in sectors offering strong employment opportunities. Skills Connect is multi-sectoral in its reach, spanning technology, agri-food, medtech, logistics, energy efficiency, law, cybersecurity and Cx. Together with innovative upskilling and reskilling programmes, Skills Connect is providing valuable work placements, on-the-job mentoring and other career supports for workers, all delivered in close collaboration with over 300 companies nationwide. Employers are also grasping the opportunities presented by Skills Connect, enabling new growth by providing immediate access to skilled workers.

## People Development



### *Leading on Digitalisation in Manufacturing*

Skillnet Ireland, in partnership with the **Irish Medtech Skillnet** and Limerick Institute of Technology have developed Ireland's first MEng in Digitalisation of Manufacturing. The programme builds on Ireland's international reputation in advanced manufacturing excellence by equipping workers with cutting edge skills in robotics, data analytics, machine learning, cyber-physical systems, and the digitalisation of production. Designed specifically for experienced workers in the sector, the programme is developing 'Digital Champions' capable of mastering the integration of systems, the analysis of data, and the identification of value-add opportunities for the manufacturing enterprises where they are employed.



### *A Safe Care Environment: Infection Prevention and Control*

Skillnet Ireland in collaboration with **Leading Healthcare Providers Skillnet** and University College Cork School of Public Health, have developed a bespoke Postgraduate Certificate in Infection Prevention and Control - a direct response to mitigating the future spread of Covid-19 in Ireland's private nursing home sector. This programme is a powerful example of rapid collaboration and is providing a timely boost to the sector's capacity to implement progressive infection prevention and control strategies. Given the increasing demand for talent in the healthcare sector overall, this specialised online programme is also providing valuable career progression opportunities to frontline healthcare professionals.



### *Technology-Enabled Professional Development*

Skillnet Ireland, in partnership with **Law Society Finuas Skillnet** have developed an innovative Learning Management Hub designed to rapidly address the skills and management challenges facing the legal profession. Within six months of the Hub going live, over 13,000 solicitors had participated in LegalED Talks, an interactive online series that addresses issues such as emergency legislation related to the Covid-19 pandemic, wage subsidisation legislation, business support initiatives, cybersecurity, management development and business transformation. Focused on best practice in online programme design, this award winning Skillnet continues to demonstrate its leadership in technology-enabled professional development.

## Strategic Innovation



### *The Triple Helix*

Collaborations between academia, industry and government that foster economic and social development are known as the triple helix model of innovation. Skillnet Ireland has excelled in triple helix collaborations, solving complex industry challenges and addressing future skills gaps. Skillnet Ireland with **Technology Ireland ICT Skillnet** developed a series of industry-led Masters in AI, Blockchain and Internet of Things through partnerships with the university sector and Ireland's tech industry. For enterprise, these strategic collaborations allow businesses to future-proof and grow. For workers, they gain specialist expertise and greater career mobility. For academia, this extensive access to companies enables ideas sharing and capacity to meet industry needs with cutting edge new programmes.



### *Seizing the Future: Sustainable Finance in Ireland*

Through the support of Skillnet Ireland, the **Sustainable Finance Skillnet** with Deloitte developed a 'Deep Dive Skills Report' for this rapidly emerging sector. It found that intense growth in sustainable finance presents a major shift in the required skillsets, a challenge spanning the full international financial services sector in Ireland. The report signalled the extent of the skills gap that exists, leading to a series of substantial actions with new industry-led specialised programmes underway and more in development. As climate change continues to pose the greatest challenge to the global environment and economies, this research has provided the blueprint to build Ireland's specialist talent in sustainable finance, supporting ESG and the goal of sustainable global growth.



### *Accreditation of the Future: Micro-Credentialing*

As the world of work changes, we must embrace new and creative approaches to workforce development and accreditation. Digital badges developed in partnership with industry present a quantum leap in both capturing, and giving value to, the learning and knowledge garnered in the workplace. Building on extensive micro-credentialing research and a deep competence in accrediting programmes for the food and drink industry, **Taste4Success Skillnet** in collaboration with University College Cork developed Ireland's first digital badge for the food sector. The initiative has showcased the immense potential that micro-credentials offer as a leading-edge learning technology to all industry sectors, and the opportunity to make lifelong learning more accessible and engaging for workers.



## *Acknowledgements*

Gratitude is owed to the stakeholders of Skillnet Ireland and to their representatives on the Board of Skillnet Ireland for their assistance in the preparation of this Statement of Strategy. These are: Ibec, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, Chambers Ireland, the Construction Industry Federation and the Small Firms Association.

Ireland's enterprise base is fortunate to be effectively served by well organised trade associations, chambers of commerce, industry clusters and enterprise-led regional development associations. These bodies form the core of Skillnet Ireland, and we wish to acknowledge their time and guidance in formulating this strategy. We wish also to acknowledge the commitment of the 70 Skillnet Network Steering Groups, Promoters and Network Managers - industry leaders who give their time, energy and expertise in service of their sectors and regions.

We greatly appreciate the support we receive from Government, particularly Ministers and colleagues at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. We wish also to thank colleagues in the Department of Business Enterprise and Innovation, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, SOLAS and the Higher Education Institutes for their contributions to this strategy.



Transforming Business  
through **Talent**

*Statement of Strategy* 2021-2025





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