



Future Skills for PES Counsellors

Skills needs for Public Employment Services

A Delphi study exploring current practice and future skills needs

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Please note that the English version of this document is the official one. The French, Spanish and German versions were produced through machine translation and subsequently reviewed by team members. They have not been subject to professional language review.



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Preface by the International Labour Organization (ILO)

Public Employment Services (PES) are essential labour market institutions. Their effectiveness depends not only on mandates, systems, service design and digital tools, but also on the staff working directly with jobseekers (and increasingly the work-able inactive), workers and employers on a daily basis. This report makes a valuable contribution to global discourse in an area that remains too often under-examined: the skills, knowledge, professional development and working conditions of PES counsellors.

Labour markets are undergoing profound transformations driven by mega trends including digitalization, demographic shifts and climate transitions, resulting in evolving employer needs, changing forms of work and increasing pressures related to skills gaps and mismatches. These dynamics are also contributing to rising inequality and economic volatility. In this context, PES counsellors play a central role in supporting jobseekers, discouraged and disadvantaged groups, workers and employers to navigate change, respond to shocks and manage transitions across the life course, requiring continuous adaptation of skills, tools and approaches.

As a global network of PES, the World Association of Public Employment Services plays an important role in fostering exchange, peer learning and reflection on these issues. This report contributes to that effort by bringing forward insights and perspectives from across different contexts.

The findings provide useful insights into how the role of PES counsellors is evolving. They point to increasing recognition of counselling as a skilled function, requiring more structured approaches to recruitment, training, ongoing professional development and institutional support. At the same time, the findings highlight the need for continued attention to how counsellors are supported in practice, including through clearer professional pathways, relevant training and appropriate working conditions. While more research might be needed to contextualize practices to regional and income status, this report paints a global picture, providing indicative policy directions.

The findings corroborate and support the provisions of the ILO's Employment Service Convention, 1948 (No. 88), which emphasises the importance of ensuring qualified and well-trained staff, stability in their functions and safeguards to ensure the integrity and impartiality of service delivery. These principles remain highly relevant to efforts to strengthen and professionalize PES systems today and in the foreseeable future.

The report offers a useful contribution to ongoing reflection on how PES can be equipped to respond to current and future challenges. It underscores that investing in PES counsellors is an important component of strengthening labour market institutions and supporting pathways to full, productive and freely chosen employment and decent work.

Dorothea Schmidt-Klau

Chief, Employment Labour Markets and Youth Branch, EMPLOYMENT Department

Contents

About this report	7
Acknowledgments	7
The project and research team	7
Executive summary	9
The changing nature of work	9
Findings.....	10
Conclusions and areas for further development.....	12
1 Introduction	13
1.1 Introduction to the project, rationale and partners	14
1.2 About the report	15
2 The changing nature of work and skills needs	16
2.1 Mega-trends and the ‘future of work’	16
2.2 Debating the impact on skills needs	17
2.3 The role of PES in responding to labour market change	20
3 The research	21
3.1 Purpose	21
3.2 The Delphi method	21
3.3 Ethics.....	21
3.4 Identification of experts	22
3.5 Exploring and reporting expert consensus	23
4 Expert opinions on the skills needs of PES counsellors	24
4.1 Tasks undertaken by PES counsellors.....	24
4.1.1 Current tasks.....	24
4.1.2 Future tasks for PES counsellors	25
4.1.3 Summary of change	26
4.2 Skills and competencies of PES counsellors.....	27
4.2.1 Current skills.....	27
4.2.2 Future skills for PES counsellors	28
4.2.3 Summary of change	29
4.3 Knowledge of PES counsellors	30
4.3.1 Current knowledge areas	30
4.3.2 Future knowledge areas for PES counsellors.....	31

4.3.3	Summary of change	32
4.4	Qualifications of PES counsellors.....	32
4.4.1	Current qualifications	32
4.4.2	Future qualifications for PES counsellors	34
4.4.3	Summary of change	34
4.5	Recruitment and retention	34
4.6	Capacity of PES to deliver the changes required	36
5	Expert Consensus	38
5.1	Statement for stage three confirmation of expert consensus.....	38
5.2	Stage three results.....	39
6	Conclusions and areas for development	41
6.1	Summary of the research	41
6.2	Areas for development.....	41
6.2.1	Deloitte – Use case: Workforce transformation strategies in practice	44
	References	46

Table of figures

Figure 1: Typology of PES services adapted from the ILO (2021)	14
Figure 2: Categorisation of new workforce skill needs according to the ILO, OECD, WEF	19
Figure 3: Expert responses by stage	23
Figure 4: Summary of current tasks undertaken by PES Counsellors (stage two)	25
Figure 5: Importance of tasks in the next 10 Years (Stage 2)	26
Figure 6: Summary of current skills and competences necessary for PES counsellors (Stage 2)	28
Figure 7: Importance of skills and competences in the next 10 Years (Stage 2)	29
Figure 8: Summary of current knowledge areas required by PES counsellors (stage two)	30
Figure 9: Importance of areas of knowledge in the next 10 Years (Stage 2)	32
Figure 10: Current qualification requirements for frontline PES practitioners	33
Figure 11: Future qualification requirements for PES counsellors	34
Figure 12: Challenges with attracting and retaining suitable PES Counsellors	36
Figure 13: PES capacity to change delivery model and provide for changing staff skills and knowledge requirements (Stage 2)	37
Figure 14: Summary of tasks, skills and knowledge	38

Boxes

Box 1: Commonly identified mega-trends	16
Box 2: Statement of Future skill needs of PES Counsellors	38

About this report

This study was commissioned and coordinated by the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES), in partnership with the International Centre for Guidance Studies (University of Derby, UK) and the Department of Politics at the University of Manchester (UK), with Deloitte providing supporting input of case study examples.

The study explores experts' opinions on the skills and skills needs of frontline PES Counsellors. For the purposes of this study, we have defined experts as either senior staff involved in the leadership of national or regional PES, academics or other national or international consultants.

The study uses a Delphi methodology as this provides a systematic approach to establishing where a consensus exists amongst an expert community.

Acknowledgments

The research team is very grateful for the leadership and project management provided by the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES) and for the technical input and collaboration offered by the Deloitte Global Human Services team.

At WAPES, Ms Amandine Moignard, Executive Secretary of WAPES, approved the project and supported its governance and delivery from the Secretariat. Ms Nicole Clobes, and Ms Emma Monster managed and delivered the project on behalf of WAPES, including overall coordination, conceptual development, questionnaire design, stakeholder engagement, and the organisation and logistics. They also provided an essential sounding board for contextualising and interpreting the findings in light of public employment service practice.

At Deloitte, Mr Josh Hjartarson, Global Leader for Human Services (Deloitte Canada); Ms Alia Kamlani, Global Leader for Labour Market Activation (Deloitte Canada); and Ms Marie Serrano, Global Chief of Staff for Human Services (Deloitte Portugal), supported questionnaire drafting and provided input on global leading practices and trends to help inform this paper.

We extend our sincere thanks to the public employment service experts and to all WAPES members who contributed their time, expertise and candid insights. Their generosity in sharing experience and perspectives underpins this study, and the research would not have been possible without their participation.

The project and research team

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¹ <https://adventuresincareerdevelopment.wordpress.com/>

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Ms Nicole Clobes, MA, currently a seconded Consultant to WAPES from the German Federal Employment Agency, served as a key contributor to the project. Since beginning her career in 2016, Ms Clobes has worked in both counselling service and managerial roles in the PES sector. She has co-authored and led major international publications, including the *World of PES* project, in collaboration with Dr. Alexander Nunn, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Ms Emma Monster, MA, is a Junior Consultant at WAPES, seconded from the Dutch Public Employment Service, UWV. She previously worked as a researcher and advisor to UWV's Social-Medical Affairs division, where she authored a paper on strategic collaboration in job counsellors' teams. Recently, she has been involved in creating the WAPES G7 Working Paper on Demographic Change, as well as the upcoming WAPES International Working Group Paper on Digitalisation and AI.

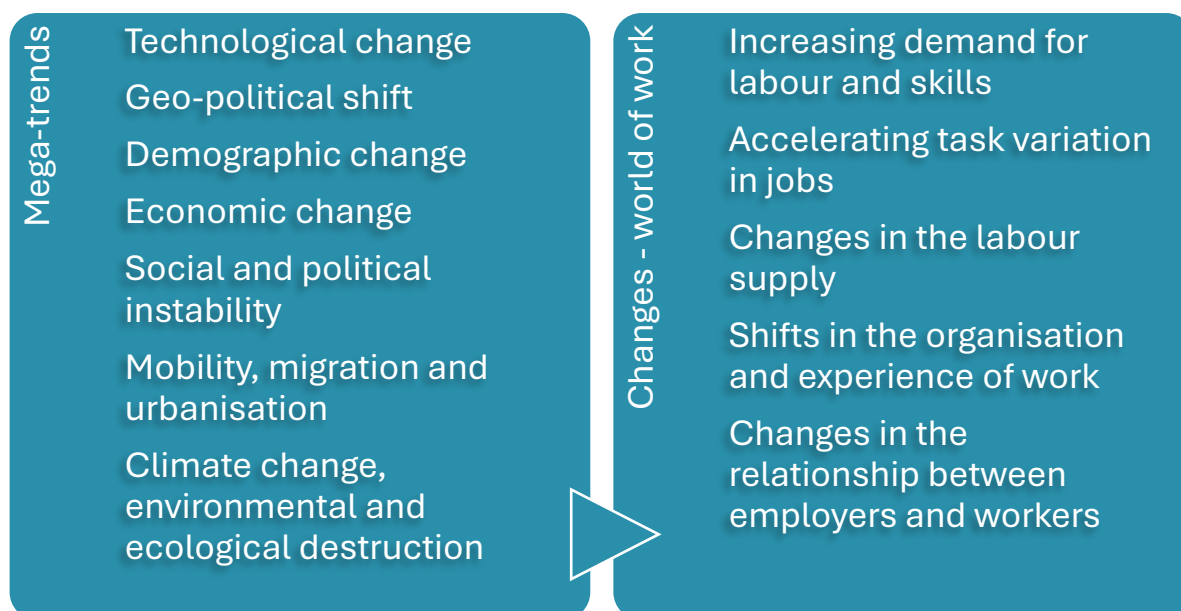
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Executive summary

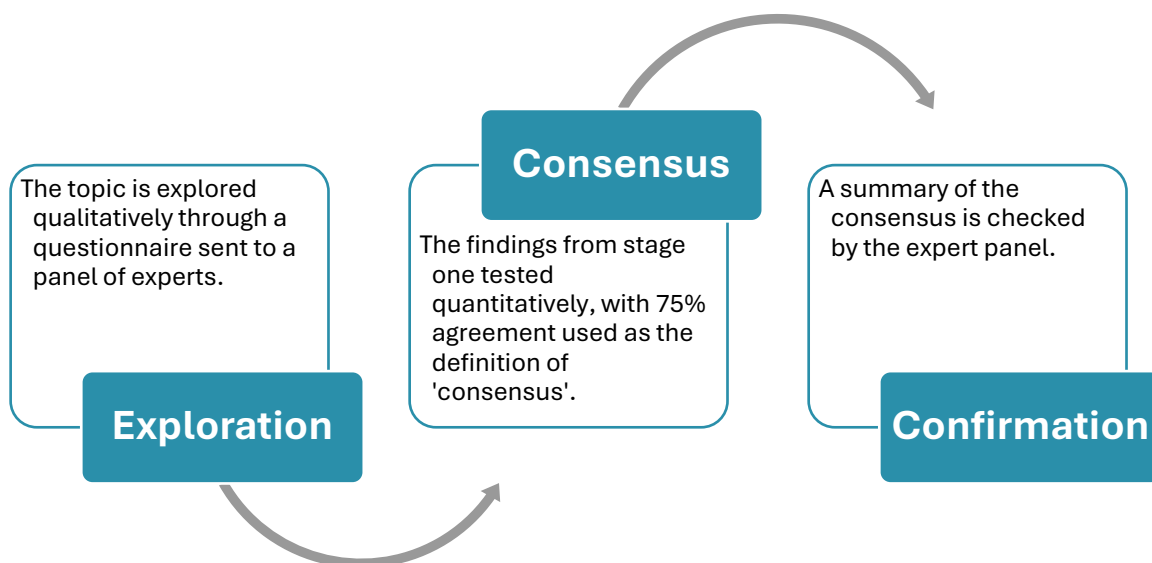
This report explores the skills and knowledge needs of PES counsellors. PES play an important role in the labour markets of most countries supporting jobseekers, employers and the implementation of labour market policy. The effectiveness of PES depends on the frontline professionals who provide guidance and support directly to users, including the tasks they undertake and the skills and knowledge they draw on in practice. This study therefore focuses on the work of PES counsellors and how their role is changing.

The changing nature of work

Discussions about PES, and the skills PES counsellors require, take place in the context of wider debates about the future of work. The report argues that the following ‘mega-trends’ are shaping the future of the working world.



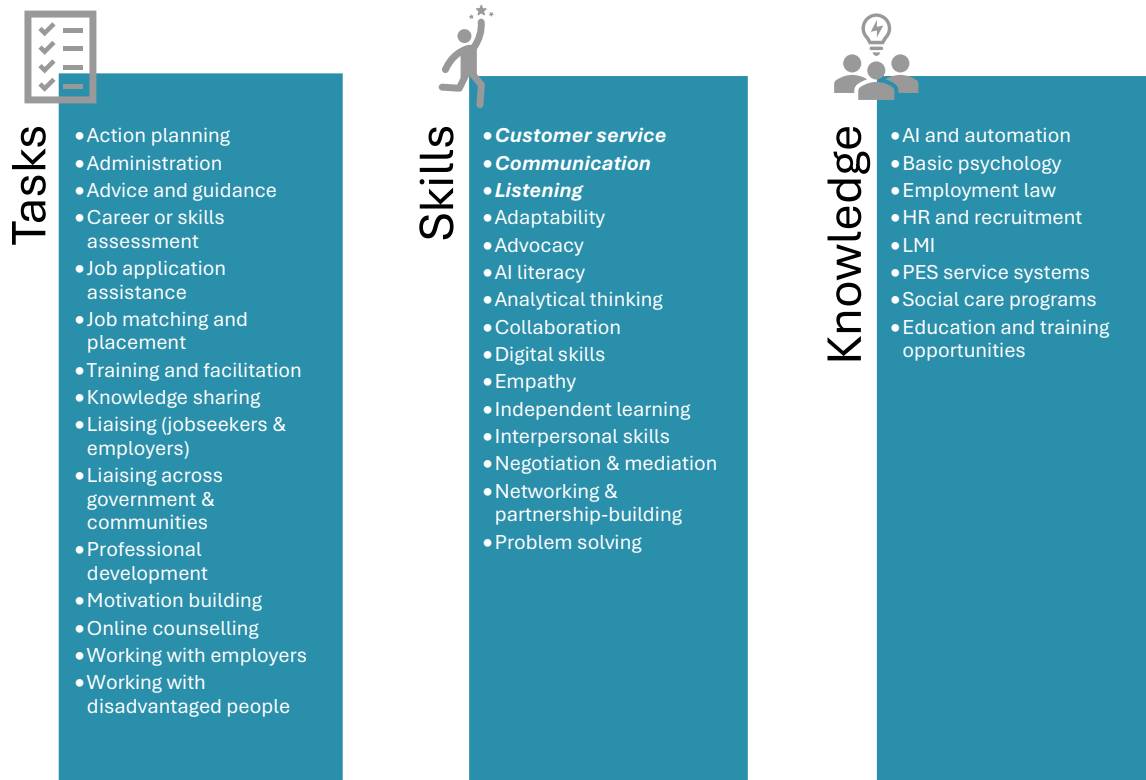
All of these shifts suggest a significant and evolving role for PES and their counsellors who deliver services day to day.



The project received responses from experts in 52 countries (in Stage 1), 31 countries (in Stage 2) and 26 countries (in Stage 3).

Findings

The research revealed a consensus that the work of frontline PES employees is critical to the effective functioning of a PES. Participants in the study agreed that counselling is a skilled role, requiring careful recruitment, structured initial training, and ongoing continuing professional development. The study identified a consensus on the core tasks that PES counsellors should perform, and on the skills and knowledge required to carry out these tasks effectively. Items highlighted in bold indicate areas where there was consensus that they are 'very important'.



Looking ahead, the study suggests that the current range of tasks carried out by PES counsellors will remain important in the future. Within this overall picture of continuity, administrative work is expected to become relatively less central, while direct work with jobseekers is likely to increase, particularly in relation to jobseekers facing disadvantage or complex barriers to employment.

Participants also anticipated that the full set of identified skills will remain important in the future. In addition, PES counsellors are expected to strengthen their digital capability, including developing practical AI literacy that can be applied in day-to-day service delivery. Skills most often highlighted as remaining or becoming ‘very important’ included collaboration and teamwork, listening skills, communication skills, and adaptability. Taken together, these shifts point towards a role that will require a broader skills profile, and stronger proficiency across many of the core skill areas.

The knowledge requirements associated with the role are also expected to expand. In particular ‘mental health challenges and available services’ was identified as an additional area of knowledge that is likely to become increasingly important for PES counsellors.

PES counsellors also require appropriate qualifications to support safe and effective practice. At present there is no clear consensus about the level or specificity of such qualifications beyond a recognition that they should be at least at the level of secondary education. There is however an anticipation that in the future the requirement for qualifications is likely to increase both in terms of the level required and the extent to which qualifications are tailored to PES counselling practice.

There was consensus that many PES experience challenges in recruiting and retaining staff, but there was no consensus about what the key drivers of these difficulties are. Participants pointed to factors such as competition with the private sector and the breadth of skills required for frontline roles. However, these explanations did not reach consensus across countries, reflecting variation in labour market conditions, resourcing and institutional context.

Participants also agreed that PES generally have the capacity to strengthen and develop the skills and knowledge of their staff in response to changing needs. By contrast, major changes in the delivery model of PES were seen as more difficult to implement and more likely to require sustained organisational effort and investment.

Conclusions and areas for further development

The research indicates a high level of international consensus on the tasks, skills and knowledge required by PES counsellors. However, it also identifies several areas where further development and additional work would be valuable. The report highlights the following areas.

1. Recognise the role of the PES practitioner.

- The level of consensus around the core tasks, skills and knowledge of PES counsellors should provide the basis for further recognition, practice sharing and professionalisation.

2. Professionalise the role.

- PES counsellors are engaged in a complex and high-level range of tasks which need skills and knowledge. This strengthens calls for the professionalisation of the role.

3. Explore greater specialisation and variation in professional levels.

- The breadth of tasks which are included in PES counsellor role raises the question as to whether there is a need to create more structure to the profession both in terms of role specialisation and level.

4. Improve the quality of PES working conditions.

- Experts were concerned about the recruitment and retention of PES counsellors and there were clear indications that the quality of PES work is often low.

5. Develop PES' capacity to respond to the future of work.

- Given the level of wider change that many experts anticipate in the labour market, it is likely that PES will need to enhance their capacity to develop their delivery models.

6. Explore and implement AI-influenced service changes with care.

- As AI enabled services begin to become adopted by PES there needs to be care in the process of positioning these technologies in which PES counsellors should be consulted so the changes benefit from their experience and expertise.

7. Undertake further research on PES practice.

- There are important open questions about the tasks, skills, knowledge, qualifications, recruitment and retention and management and development of the PES counsellor role.

1 Introduction

Public Employment Services (PES) are operating in a rapidly changing labour market shaped by digitalisation, shifting employer needs, and increasing complexity among jobseekers. These changes place new demands on PES counsellors, whose day-to-day work is central to service quality and labour market outcomes. This report examines the current and emerging tasks, skills and knowledge required for PES counselling, and considers what this implies for workforce development, training and professional standards. To set the scene, the following section outlines the role of PES within active labour market policy and the range of services they provide worldwide.

Once largely confined to high-income countries, PES are now widespread globally.¹ PES are a core component of labour market institutions and often play a central role in the delivery of active labour market policies (ALMP). ALMPs are broad in scope and include a range of interventions to support jobseekers to move into employment and employers to fill vacancies. They include placement and related services (usually delivered directly by PES), training, employment incentives (of different kinds), direct job creation, and sheltered employment. PES in different countries have varying responsibilities and may deliver, coordinate or support the implementation of a range of ALMPs, depending on their mandate and institutional setting. There is now a substantial evidence base on ALMP effectiveness², which suggests that such interventions can be effective, while also emphasising the importance of policy and institutional design, adequate resources, and alignment with other institutions in determining effectiveness. Job search support and placement by PES are often highlighted as an effective and comparatively cost-effective form of ALMP.³ PES and the services that they provide are critical for ensuring the effective functioning of local labour markets and give governments practical tools that they can use to support economic growth, full employment and decent work. While PES are structured differently in every country, they exist to help match supply and demand on the labour market.

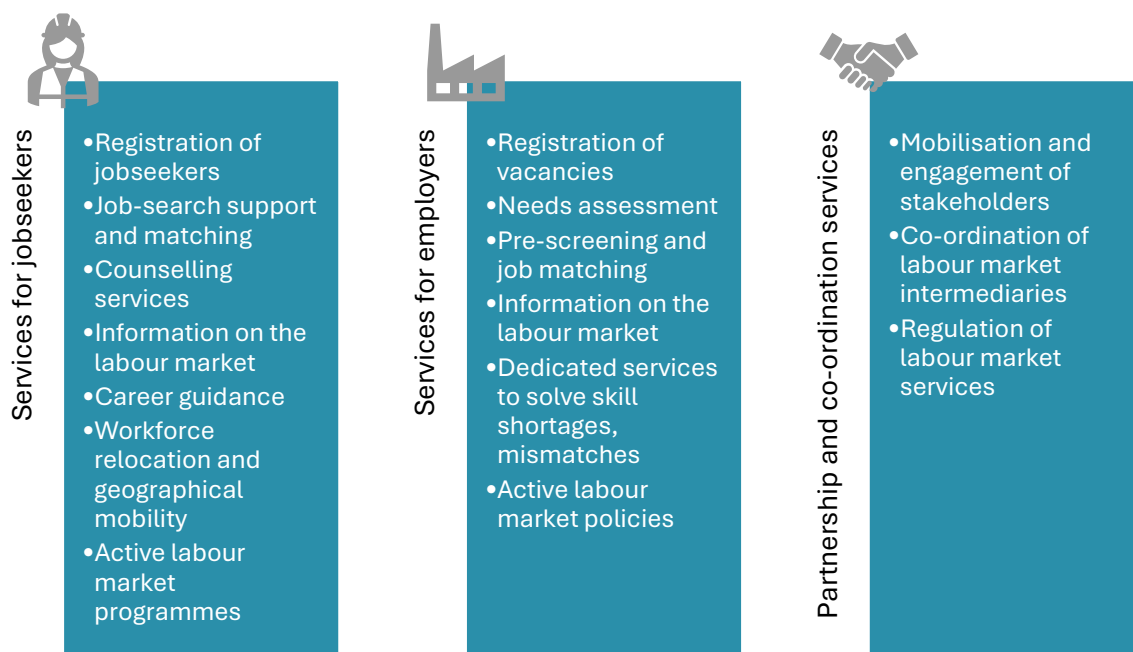
The ILO Employment Service Convention, 1948 (No. 88), provides the principal international normative framework for PES. It calls for the maintenance of a free PES and defines its essential duty as ensuring, in cooperation where necessary with other public and private bodies, the best possible organisation of the employment market as an integral part of the national programme for the achievement and maintenance of full employment and the development and use of productive resources.⁴

Unemployed jobseekers are typically a core group of service users for PES, with PES being key public institutions used to support transitions from unemployment to employment and reduce reliance on welfare benefits (where they exist) overtime.⁵ However, many PES also serve employed workers, for example by supporting their job search, access to lifelong learning and/or progression towards 'decent work' with better pay, conditions and access to social protection.⁶ This is a key role where there are concerns about the quality of employment or sustainability of sectors or occupations. Importantly, PES might also support people who are not technically employed or unemployed but are outside of the labour market because barriers prevent them from job search or being available for work (e.g. child or other care barriers). A key issue here is in supporting people to move between forms of work such as between unpaid caring responsibilities and paid employment. Finally, PES can also act on the demand side of the labour market, working with employers and sectoral bodies to ensure that skills and labour are available where they are needed.⁷

The services provided by PES include information and labour market guidance, placement and matching services, referral to skills training, and a range of active support services, including career guidance and other forms of employment advice and support.⁸ The International Labour Organization (ILO) has developed a typology of the services that PES commonly provide (see Figure 1).⁹

In most countries, the range of services and specialisms offered by PES has expanded over recent decades, as PES are asked to deliver an increasingly wide set of policy objectives. These have included supporting workers during COVID-19, dealing with economic downturns, addressing youth unemployment, and supporting the integration of migrant workers.¹⁰ It is particularly notable that many more countries outside of Europe and the OECD now have PES and other ALMPs and that in these countries they operate an expanding range of services. Furthermore, PES services have increasingly become multi-modal, with services delivered face-to-face, by telephone and online, both within PES offices and through partner organisations such as employers, trade unions and community actors.

Figure 1: Typology of PES services adapted from the ILO (2021)



All the activities undertaken by PES depend on the staff who deliver these services. This report focuses on PES counsellors, who provide direct support to jobseekers and employers. They are typically the main point of contact for in-person services, telephone support and online channels. The study asks expert participants what skills PES counsellors need to perform their role effectively, and how these requirements are expected to change in the future.

1.1 Introduction to the project, rationale and partners

This project was initiated in response to three interlinked contextual factors:

1. **The global spread of PES, particularly outside Europe and OECD member countries.** While many PES now aim to offer a broad range of services, they do so with very different levels of resourcing and capacity.¹¹
2. **The breadth and complexity of the services that PES deliver.** As Figure 1 suggests, PES provide a wide range of services. In some well-resourced PES systems, these functions can be disaggregated across different staff groups and specialised roles. In other contexts, PES counsellors may be responsible for delivering most services and supporting a wide range of PES service customers. Even where specialisation is possible and counsellors work primarily with jobseekers (and in some cases specific groups of jobseekers only) or employers, the role still involves diverse and often demanding challenges. Counsellors frequently work with people at difficult points in their lives when financial insecurity and family pressures are acute. Counsellors also operate in changing labour market conditions (addressing crises and declining or emerging sectors) and equally need to serve employers. The role can involve elements of support work and advocacy, alongside persuasion and motivation, analytical work to understand local labour market dynamics, and the completion of complex administrative processes. Overall, PES counselling is a complex, multifaceted and challenging role.
3. **Wider ‘mega-trends’, including economic, demographic, technological and climate-related change, are expected to reshape employer demand, job opportunities and the need for employment to sustain living standards, creating new and evolving challenges for PES** (see Section 2). If PES are to respond effectively, the tasks, skills, and knowledge required of counsellors are also likely to evolve over time in response to these contextual changes.

These three factors suggest that the skills required by PES counsellors are complex and crucial, may sometimes be undervalued or overlooked (a sentiment that is reinforced in the study findings), and are likely to evolve in response to the changing environment in which PES operate.

Initial consultation with the members of the World Association of Public Employment Services at the biennial World Congress in Abidjan, Côte d’Ivoire¹² and with PES at the Deloitte annual global ALMP conference in Paris, both in 2025¹³, indicated strong interest in exploring these issues more in depth. In particular, stakeholders highlighted the value of identifying likely patterns of change in the skills needed for PES counsellors. This report is a direct response to that interest.

1.2 About the report

This report sets out the findings of the research project. Following this introductory section, Section 2 provides the background and context for the study. Section 3 describes the project approach, including the Delphi methodology used. Section 4 presents the findings, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data collected during the study. Section 5 summarises the areas of expert consensus established through the Delphi process. Finally, Section 6 discusses the implications of the findings and sets out conclusions and recommendations.

For clarity, the term ‘PES counsellors’ is used throughout the report to describe frontline PES staff delivering direct services to jobseekers and/or employers, regardless of the job title used in different systems.

2 The changing nature of work and skills needs

2.1 Mega-trends and the ‘future of work’

A range of global structural changes is widely understood to be reshaping labour markets and influencing the future of work. These changes are often described as ‘mega-trends’. The term has been in circulation for more than three decades and is now widely used in policy and research discussions, especially among international organisations and policy consultancies.¹⁴ Looking across this literature, Box 1 summarises commonly cited mega-trends, which are generally regarded as interrelated and co-evolving, rather than operating as independent forces.

Box 1: Commonly identified mega-trends¹⁵

Climate change, environmental and ecological destruction - the impacts of human activity on environmental systems, including climate change, biodiversity loss and wider ecological damage.

Technological change – accelerating digitalisation, the growth of online platforms and social media, and the increasing role of automation and Artificial Intelligence across the workforce and labour markets.

Geo-political shifts – movement towards a more multi-polar international order as patterns of economic growth shift, alongside changes of global competition, security threats and the possibility of increased uncertainty and conflict.

Demographic change – population ageing in Europe and OECD countries, alongside younger populations in parts of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South East Asia (the youth bulge). These shifts may contribute to differing patterns of growth and population contraction, and to migration pressures.

Economic change – intensified global competition and shifts in sectoral importance driven by technological and climate-related change tend to increase the importance of some commodities (including critical minerals) and of key networks such as trade, supply chains and payment systems; and uneven growth patterns across regions.

Mobility, migration and urbanisation – continued urbanisation with internal and international labour migration influenced by climate change, demographic, and political pressures.

Social and political instability – potential increase in social tension and political volatility in response to disruption, uncertainty and impacts created by these trends.

These mega-trends are expected to impact the future of work and careers. In some articulations of these mega-trends, ‘the changing world of work’ is advanced as a mega-trend in and of itself and as something that governments will need to actively respond to.¹⁶ In summary, the mega-trends literature sees the impact on work as including:

- **changing employer demand for labour and skills** as mega-trends shift economic activity between occupations, sectors and places and affect pay (including distributional factors);
- **ongoing, and possibly accelerating, task variation within jobs, occupations and careers** creating a demand for a growth of on-the-job and in-career training;

- **changing labour supply** as mega-trends affect household decision making over spatial mobility, education, training and employment aspirations, including different impacts on social groups (e.g. by place, ethnicity, gender etc);
- **shifts in the organisation and experience of work** including interactions between workers, customers, collaborators and machines;
- **changes in the relationship between employers and workers**, with an ongoing weakening of the psychological contract and increasing precarity, perhaps challenged by calls for further regulation in pursuit of decent work.

The net effect of these changes might be net-job growth, but also significant disruption caused by sectoral and occupational change.¹⁷ There are also concerns that these trends will create stagnant job quality and persistent or growing labour market inequalities as well as general unmet demand for formal employment among some social groups.¹⁸

2.2 Debating the impact on skills needs

In this context, skill needs are widely expected to change. A broad consensus suggests that skill requirements are already shifting, driven by changes in the skills required within existing occupations, changes in employment levels across occupations, the evolution of occupations themselves (including obsolescence, transformation or convergence), shifts between different forms of work (e.g. employment, self-employment, volunteering and self-provisioning), and wider shifts in the sectoral composition of economies.

Pre-employment education and training, alongside ongoing workforce development, can help protect individuals from some of the more negative impacts associated with these changes. Career guidance and other forms of employment advice can also play an important role by supporting individuals to make informed choices about occupations and sectors, as well as about training and qualifications, that can help them access work, progress, or move between roles as circumstances change.¹⁹ At a workforce level, investment in relevant skills can help smooth transitions generated by mega-trends.²⁰ As one illustration of this focus, the World Economic Forum (WEF) *Future of Jobs* reports, based on data from substantial global employers, have repeatedly suggested that 40% or more of the skills possessed by the current workforce will be ‘transformed or outdated’ over the succeeding five year period.²¹ The same respondents also identify skill gaps as a major barrier to organisational change.

Again, there is a high-level policy consensus about the nature of these changing skills needs. Three recent reports are illustrative (see Figure 2):

- The WEF respondents also summarise the types of skills they view as essential in this changing environment including analytical skills, technical skills in IT networks, and cybersecurity, as well as general technological literacy. They also highlight flexibility and the ability to learn new skills as essential.
- A recent OECD report summarises the types of (‘21st Century’) skills likely to be in demand in this context. It distinguishes between core information processing skills and ancillary skills, including additional hard analytical and technical skills, as well as social and emotional skills and personal characteristics that support learning and work.²² The most recent survey of Adult Skills in the OECDs²³ also raises concern that some of these

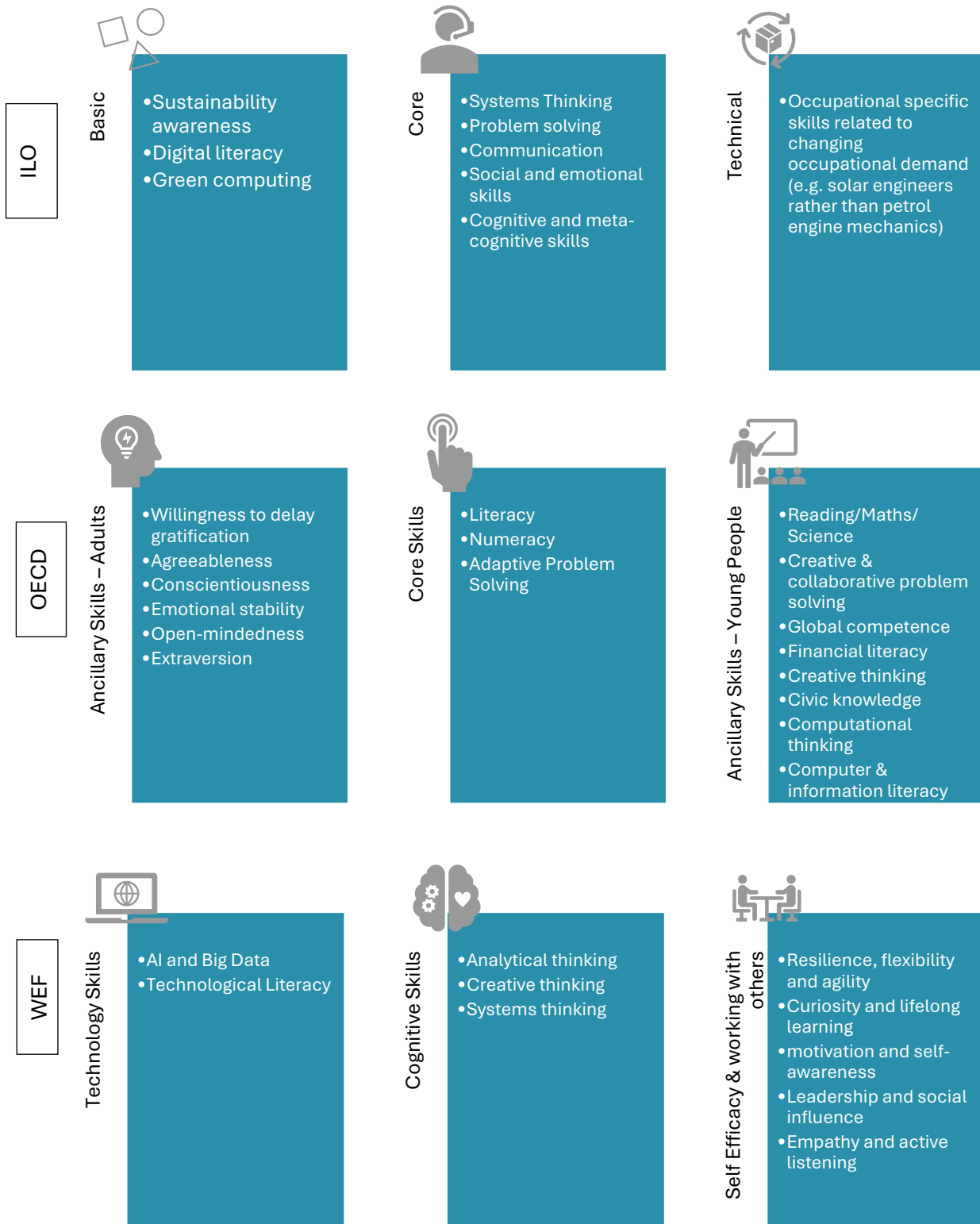
skills may be under pressure or in decline, and that skills acquisition is still significantly determined by socio-economic and ethnic background, reinforcing inequalities.

- ILO research on changing skill requirements linked to the green and digital transition suggests that all workers will need basic literacy, numeracy and technology awareness, core transferable skills (including systems thinking, problem-solving and communication, social and emotional skills and cognitive and metacognitive skills). In addition, many occupations are expected to require new or updated technical skills that are specific to particular roles and sectors.²⁴

Despite this broad international consensus, some more research-based commentaries urge a need for caution about ‘future skills’ forecasting. Some scholars argue²⁵ that the consensus around ‘future skills’ is based on a narrow empirical evidence base and repeat self-citation among international organisations and consultancies which contributes to an impression that the underpinning evidence base is broader than it actually is. Others²⁶ suggest that the continuous nature of commentary on the ‘future of work’ creates an over-emphasis on change versus continuity and over-estimates the pace of change. The consequence of this might be to under-estimate what is already known about skills needs and how to help people acquire the skills that they will actually need. From this perspective, change is open ended and socially constructed rather than immutable. In short, the impacts driven by mega-trends are not fixed outcomes, but developments that can be questioned, discussed, and shaped in the public interest.

These debates are important when assessing research on skill requirements in particular sectors or occupations, including the focus of this report. On the one hand, influential ‘future skills’ narratives can shape perceptions and expectations of future skills needs, especially among the experts targeted for this research, who are often a key audience for reports by international organisations and consultancies. On the other hand, because future skills needs are contested and context-dependent, it is important to pay close attention to both change and continuity and to interpret anticipated shifts with appropriate care.

Figure 2: Categorisation of new workforce skill needs according to the ILO, OECD, WEF



2.3 The role of PES in responding to labour market change

Labour markets are becoming more dynamic as they are shaped by the mega-trends discussed above. This places new and evolving demands on PES, given their role in supporting individuals and employers to successfully engage with the labour market. To respond successfully, PES counsellors need a clear understanding of how the labour market is changing, alongside the skills and capabilities required to help customers to respond to these new requirements.

PES and their counsellors therefore need to be able to communicate where change is likely, while balancing this with an understanding of existing labour market demand and a recognition that many existing labour market practices will continue. If change is overestimated, and treated as inevitable, PES may place disproportionate emphasis on individual adaptation to employer needs, rather than also recognising that labour market demand can be influenced and shaped through policy choices, institutional design and collective social priorities.

There is growing interest in how PES operate to help jobseekers find work and employers fill vacancies. Some researchers have argued that PES reforms in recent decades have at times been overly disciplinary and place disproportionate responsibilities on individuals.²⁷ In contrast, there is increasing interest now on how PES can operate in a more inclusive and supportive manner whilst helping to bring about social and business benefits. This has included the promotion of inclusive governance and an increased emphasis on the PES role in reducing inequalities (within and between households), helping employers and workers to negotiate labour market transitions and the realities of working life.²⁸ If PES are to contribute to key international goals such as ‘inclusive growth’, ‘sustainable development’ and ‘decent work’ policymakers will need to incentivise them to:

- establish an effective and evidence-based understanding of labour market change and continuity in the context of mega-trends;
- understand how change and continuity will shape *demand* and *supply* of PES services. This includes how technology might be used to create new services, means of access and generate organisational efficiencies. PES will also need to play a role in shaping trends in support of normative goals like decent work in the wider labour market and in their role as an employer;
- develop new strategies at an organisational level, including workforce organisation to ensure that organisational strategies are broken down into tasks at occupational level, ensuring effective delivery; and
- upskill their PES counsellors and ensure effective recruitment and retention activities to ensure the workforce has the skills, competencies, values and knowledge necessary to achieve these objectives.

The current research project addresses each of these issues, but places particular emphasis focused on the final area: the roles of PES counsellors and the associated competencies, skills and training needs.

3 The research

3.1 Purpose

This study explores expert views on the current and emerging skills and knowledge required by PES counsellors. For the purposes of this study, experts are defined as senior staff involved in the leadership of national or regional PES, academics or other national or international consultants with relevant expertise.

3.2 The Delphi method

A Delphi methodology was used to investigate the expert perspectives in a structured and systematic way. The term Delphi references the Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece, which was associated with a source of wisdom and prophecy visited for advice. Consulting the Oracle was banned by Emperor Theodosius in the 4th century AD (!), but the Delphi method was developed to summarise expert insights in the mid-twentieth century. The modern Delphi method harnesses collective expert opinion to provide insights and forecasting.

The Delphi methodology provides a systematic approach to establishing where a consensus exists amongst an expert community.²⁹ Delphi studies are typically organised over three stages:³⁰

1. **Exploration.** The topic for the Delphi is identified and explored through the literature. This is then used to develop an open questionnaire which is disseminated to a panel of experts.
2. **Consensus.** The findings from Stage one are used to identify a series of statements on which the panel are invited to indicate their agreement through a second questionnaire. This is usually achieved by asking for agreement on a 5-point Likert scale and then setting a cut-off for the percentage agreeing (scoring 4 or 5 on the scale). The threshold for consensus is variously set from 50% to 97% with a median of 75%, which is what we have adopted in this study.³¹
3. **Confirmation.** Data from stage two are reviewed to identify which statements command consensus. This is then developed into a summary narrative which the panel is asked to approve or amend. This summary narrative is presented in Chapter 5 alongside responses at the confirmation stage.

For this study, international PES experts (comprising representatives of government ministries, leaders of national or regional PES, academics from universities, research or technical institutes, and representatives from national or international non-governmental organisations) were approached to provide their views on the skills and competencies needed by PES counsellors and to consider how these skills might change and develop in 10 years.

3.3 Ethics

Ethics approval was obtained from Leeds Trinity University for stage one of the research prior to commencing the project and subsequent stages were undertaken within the ethics process at the University of Manchester.³² Participants were approached by email and provided with a Plain Language Statement outlining the project and what involvement would entail. The email contained a link to the first survey, and the landing page also included the Plain Language Statement. The Plain Language Statement and the survey instruments were available in either

English, Spanish, French or German. Participants gave explicit consent at the beginning of the first survey and were able to withdraw thereafter.

In the first stage, experts were asked to indicate at the end of the survey whether they would be willing to take part in subsequent stages of the Delphi Study. Given their consent, experts were taken to a separate web page to leave contact details to facilitate follow-up in subsequent stages.

3.4 Identification of experts

Expert participants were identified and invited through a combination of professional networks and a structured outreach process led by the project team, including the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES). WAPES contributed directly to the identification and recruitment of participants through its global member network and communications channels. As a result, a substantial proportion of participating experts were WAPES members, reflecting WAPES' role as a convening platform for senior leaders in national and regional PES.

In parallel, relevant academic literature on skills needs in PES was reviewed and authors of key publications were invited to participate. During the first Delphi stage, participating experts were also invited to nominate additional individuals with relevant knowledge and experience from their professional networks.

Participants were drawn from the following groups:

- representatives of government ministries;
- leaders of national or regional PES;
- academics from universities, research or technical institutes; and
- representatives from national or international non-governmental organisations.

In stage one, 186 responses were received from across 52 countries. Of these, 113 responses came from the German PES, primarily from the German Federal Employment Service and were mostly answered by senior experts in regional PES structures. Given the scale of this national cluster steps were taken to reduce the risk that the overall findings would be disproportionately shaped by one country context.

To keep the cross-country balance, the number of German responses was capped at the level of the next most represented country. In stage one, the next highest was Canada where there 8 responses received, and in stage two it was Cyprus with 4 responses. Additional German responses were excluded from the main analysis using a random number generator to determine inclusion and exclusion. To recognise the time and contributions of German participants, a separate summary of the full German dataset was produced and shared with WAPES for internal use.

The regional breakdown of responses included in the analysis for each stage is summarised in Figure 3. Stage one responses represented 52 countries, while in stage two responses represented 31 countries. While the responses over-represent Europe, the following sample does represent a wide spectrum of global opinions. The volume of data is insufficient for systematic regional comparisons to be attempted, however where possible we have explored regional differences and these will be set out in the finding section (chapter 4).

Figure 3: Expert responses by stage

Which world region(s) does your expertise relate to?	Stage one	Stage two	Stage three
Africa	17	7	7
Asia	4	3	1
Europe	47	24	39
Latin America and the Caribbean	2	1	0
North America	9	3	2
Oceania	1	0	0
Multiple regions/Missing	2	5	10
Grand Total	82	43	59

3.5 Exploring and reporting expert consensus

Responses in stage one were collected through open-text questions. Following stage two, the qualitative responses were coded to identify recurring themes in the data. After review and coding by the research and project team, a synthesis was produced which distinguished between skills, tasks and knowledge areas. A threshold was applied to ensure that all items included in the stage two confirmation questionnaire were mentioned at least 5 times in the responses from stage one.

In stage two, expert views are reported using a 75% threshold for achieving consensus, consistent with common practice in Delphi studies (see Section 3.2). Two levels of consensus are reported:

- A higher level, where 75% or more of participants rate a statement as being ‘very’ important or ‘Much’ more important (when assessing future change).
- A lower level, where 75% or more of participants agree that the statement/factor is important or more important.

In stage three, a summary statement was presented from the results of the previous stage (see Chapter 5). This was then used to explore formal confirmation of the results of the exercise.

4 Expert opinions on the skills needs of PES counsellors

This chapter sets out the findings of the study. It begins by examining the tasks that PES counsellors are expected to perform, before turning to the skills and knowledge required to carry out these tasks effectively. It then considers the qualifications needed for PES counselling, and the capacity of PES to respond to changing demands.

4.1 Tasks undertaken by PES counsellors

4.1.1 Current tasks

During stage one, experts identified a wide range of tasks that they expected PES counsellors undertake. Examples included the following (which are direct verbatim quotations from expert responses):

Completing administrative registration for jobseekers. Support jobseekers in completing their professional profile by asking open-ended, exploratory questions and assisting with entering information on profiling systems. Engage jobseekers in active job search efforts and provide them with relevant job offers. Assist them during individual or group interviews to manage their integration process. Train jobseekers in CV writing, interview preparation, and digital job-search tools.

Engaging with jobseekers referred centrally. Building relationships with jobseekers to establish trust and enable a supportive guidance and counselling process. Using an adult guidance approach including using counselling skills to assess individual needs, to develop a clear guidance plan.

Providing job search/ career development services. Assessing eligibility for programs. Developing and administering return to work action plans for individuals eligible for funding. Supporting employers to post job ads and develop wage subsidy agreements.

Expert responses in stage one.

These insights were coded into a standardised list and presented back to participants in stage two. Experts were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree to the following tasks formed an important part of the current work of PES counsellors. The list of tasks presented in stage two is set out below:

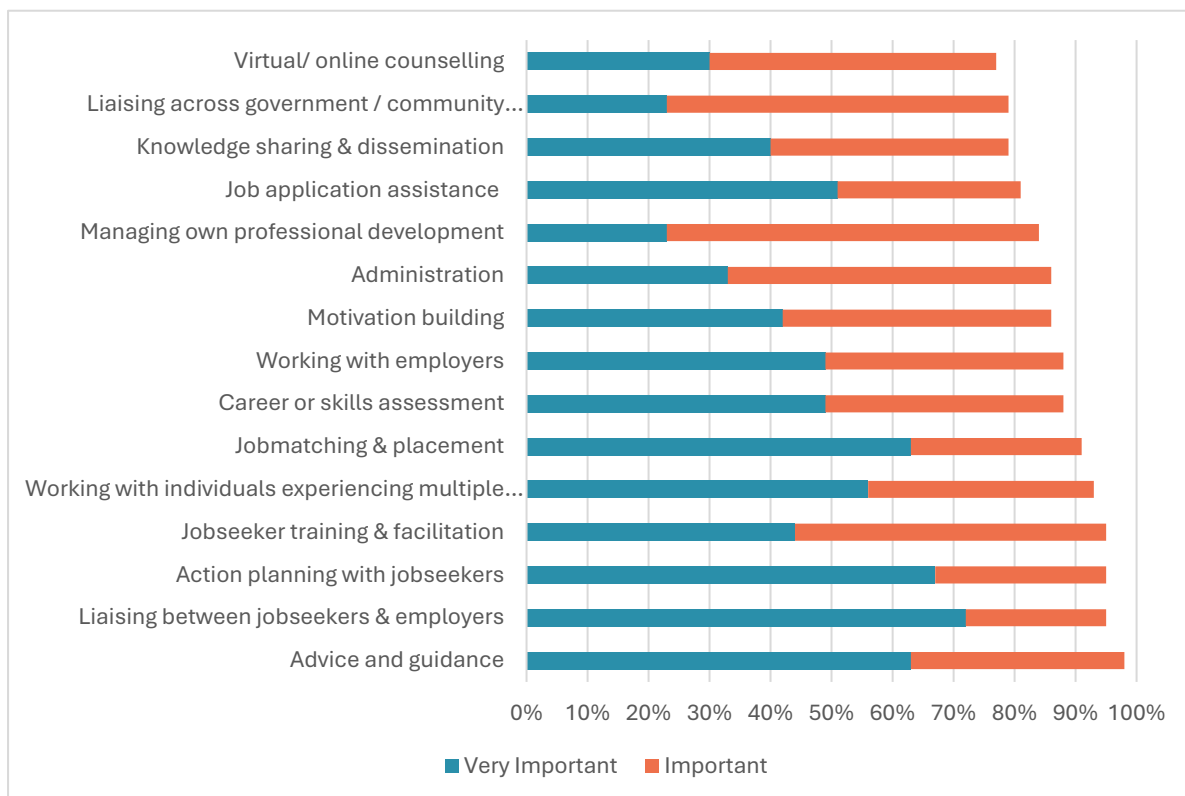
- Action planning with jobseekers;
- Administration (e.g. benefit processing, writing counselling reports, booking measure programs, customer profiling etc.);
- Advice and guidance;
- Career or skills assessment;
- Job application assistance (CVs, cover letters, interviews);
- Job matching and placement;
- Jobseeker training and facilitation;
- Knowledge sharing and dissemination;
- Liaising between jobseekers and employers;
- Liaising across government / community structures and programs;
- Managing own professional development;

- Motivation building;
- Virtual / online counselling;
- Working with employers; and
- Working with individuals experiencing multiple disadvantage.

In stage two, all tasks were rated as important for PES Counsellors, with each receiving more than 75% support as either ‘important’ or ‘very important’ (meeting the lower consensus threshold). However, none of these tasks reached the higher threshold of consensus (i.e. where 75% of the experts had identified them as ‘very important’).

Amongst the highest-ranked tasks overall, activities associated with supporting jobseekers were most prominent. These included providing ‘*Advice and Guidance*’, ‘*Liaising between jobseekers and employers*’, ‘*Action planning with jobseekers*’, ‘*Jobseeker training and facilitation*’, ‘*Working with individuals with multiple disadvantage*’ and ‘*Job matching and placement*’: with more than 90% of experts saying these were important or very important. ‘*Managing own professional development*’ was ranked relatively lower, as was liaising with external organisations. Administrative tasks were also ranked lower than it might be expected. ‘*Job application assistance*’ and ‘*Working with employers*’ were also ranked lower than expected, although in many PES systems employer engagement and jobseeker counselling are handled by separate roles, which may help to explain these results.

Figure 4: Summary of current tasks undertaken by PES Counsellors (stage two)



Source: Question 2: Please indicate how important you currently believe the following tasks are to PES Counsellors in PES, Base: 43.

4.1.2 Future tasks for PES counsellors

In addition, experts were also asked to comment on how the task profile of PES counsellors is expected to change in the future (ten years time). Comments were made as followed:

As online hiring processes and virtual consultations become more common, staff will need to manage digital platforms, conduct video-based coaching, and support virtual recruitment events.

Career coaching and motivational interviewing will get more focus.

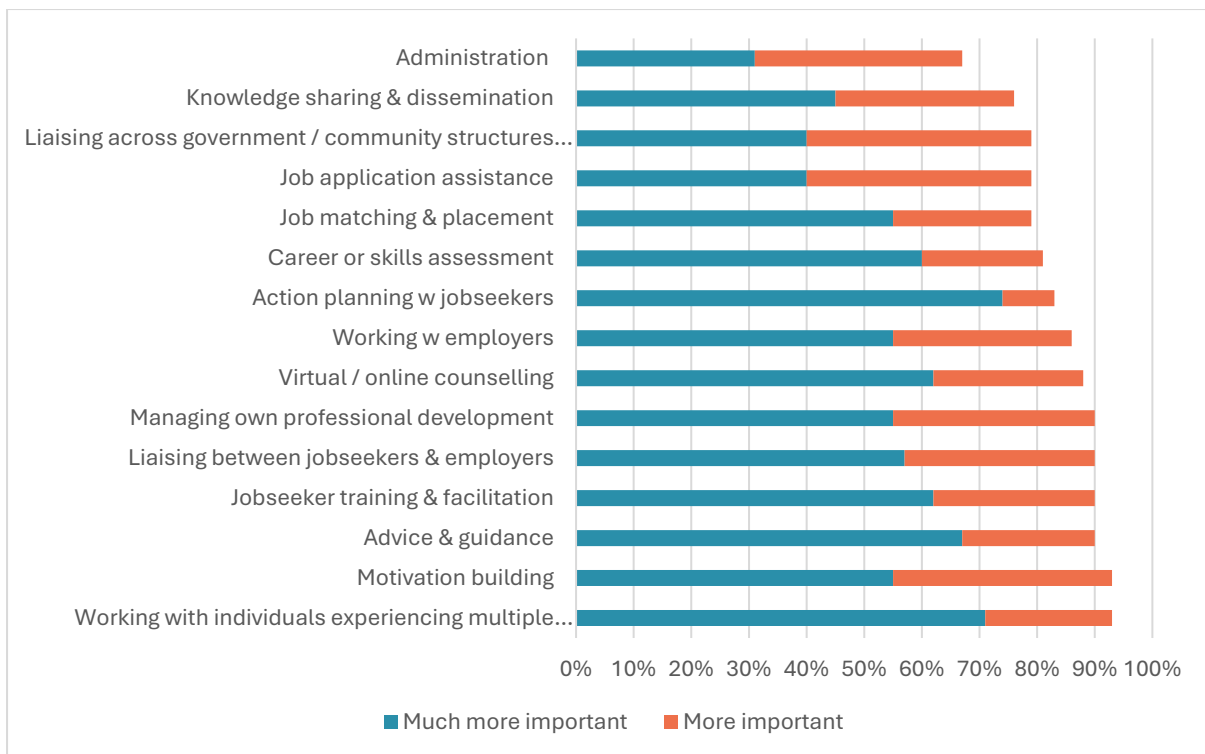
Simple and standardized tasks are being automated through digitalization and the use of AI. Advising applicants and placing them in ... suitable positions remains the responsibility of employees.

Expert responses in stage one.

Again, almost all of the prompted tasks met the lower consensus threshold. ‘Administration’ was the only task that did not achieve consensus, which may reflect an expectation that routine administration will be increasingly automated over time. However, none of the tasks reached the higher threshold for consensus.

The main change relates to shifts in the ranking of tasks. These shifts suggest greater anticipated emphasis on working with jobseekers facing multiple disadvantage, supporting motivation and engagement, and PES counsellors managing their own professional development.

Figure 5: Importance of tasks in the next 10 Years (Stage 2)



Source: Question 5: Please indicate what you believe will be the change in importance for the following tasks for PES Counsellors in PES in 10 years. Base: 42.

4.1.3 Summary of change

- Administration is expected to become relatively less important over the next ten years, potentially reflecting an assumption that some routine processes will be automated.
- Working with jobseekers is important now and is expected to remain so. However, participants anticipated that it may increase in importance over time, particularly where

jobseekers face multiple disadvantage. This also suggests that supporting motivation and engagement may become a more significant task for PES counsellors' work.

- Finally, PES counsellors are expected to need to place greater emphasis on managing their own development in the future.

4.2 Skills and competencies of PES counsellors

4.2.1 Current skills

During stage one, experts identified a wide range of skills that they expected to see PES Counsellors possess. Examples included the following:

Communication skills (clear and empathetic communication; active listening to build trust). Motivational and Coaching skills (encouraging, coaching techniques). Teamwork skills, Collaboration and Networking (working with different partners in case management is key to creating holistic support pathways). Digital Literacy (proficient in digital tools, to, among other aspects, also assist [customers] with virtual job search).

Excellent communication skills are a must; ability to teach and help job seekers understand skills needed to gain and maintain employment. Being a continuous learner and up to date on labour market trends. Helping folks understand skills for success and that they are more than just a resume. Help people connect with resources needed in multiple areas as folks need to be as good as possible in all areas of life in order to succeed at work.

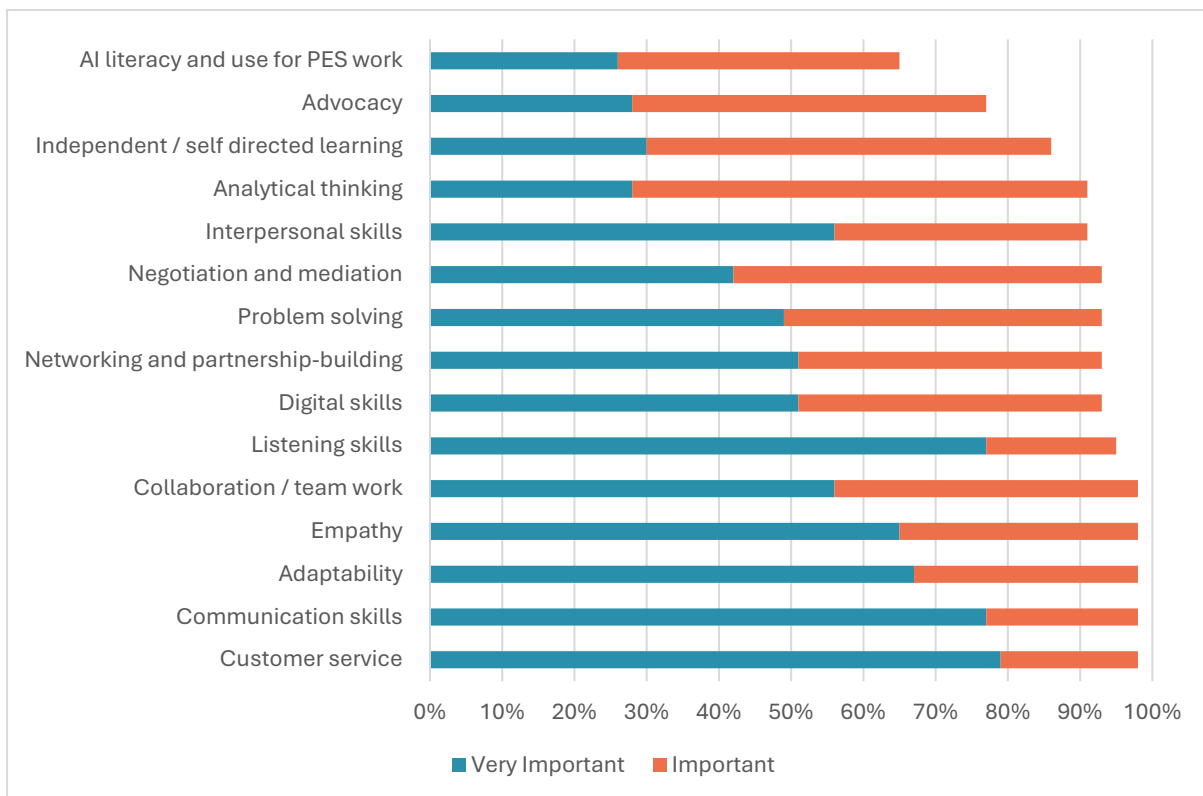
Expert responses in stage one.

The full list of skills and competences, identified from the 81 stage one responses and included in the stage two confirmation questionnaire, is set below:

- Adaptability;
- Advocacy;
- AI literacy and use for PES work;
- Analytical thinking;
- Collaboration / teaming;
- Communication skills;
- Customer Service;
- Digital skills;
- Empathy;
- Independent / self-directed learning;
- Interpersonal skills;
- Listening skills;
- Negotiation and mediation;
- Networking and partnership-building (e.g., employers, cross-agency); and
- Problem solving.

Stage two participants were asked to rate the importance of each skill for current practice using a five-point Likert scale running from 'very important' to 'not important at all'. Figure 6 shows the results, ordered by the proportion who rated each skill as 'important' or 'very Important'. It shows consensus at the lower threshold for all items except for 'AI literacy'. Nearly all skills listed received more than 90% support as 'important', other than 'Independent/self-directed learning' and 'Advocacy'. A smaller selection achieved consensus at the higher threshold: 'Listening skills', 'Communication skills' and 'Customer Service'.

Figure 6: Summary of current skills and competences necessary for PES counsellors (Stage 2)



Source: Question 1: Please indicate how important you currently believe the following skills and competences are to PES Counsellors in PES. Base: 43.

The skills receiving the strongest support were customer service and communication skills, highlighting the importance of effective engagement with service users, including jobseekers and employers. Empathy and listening skills also ranked highly. By contrast, while still rated as important, cognitive competences such as problem-solving and analytical skills ranked as less important. Internal collaboration was seen as relatively important. However, it is notable that networking and partnership building, negotiation and mediation and advocacy were ranked relatively lower, despite policy emphasis in many countries –particularly in Europe - on PES working with a range of partners in an ‘ecosystem’ approach.

4.2.2 Future skills for PES counsellors

Expert participants were also asked to describe expected changes in skills requirements of PES counsellors in the future (ten years’ time). Comments received in stage one included the following:

Over the next 10 years, the skills and competencies required for frontline staff are expected to evolve significantly in response to ongoing labour market changes, digitalization, and the adoption of AI.

Emotional intelligence skills will only grow stronger. The ability to understand and support clients, especially vulnerable groups for whom technology may pose additional challenges, will be required.

Most of the skills and competencies that are already being used, will remain necessary. Communication and interpersonal skills such as active listening, empathy, encouragement

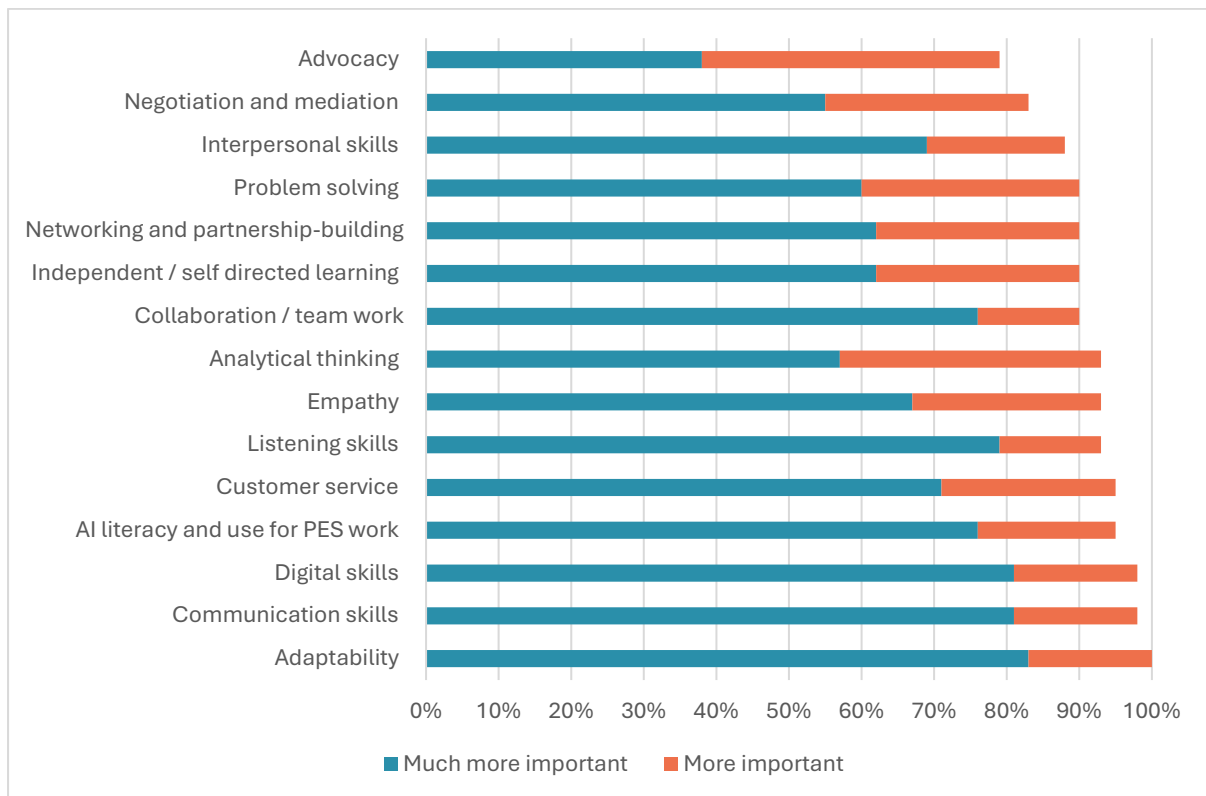
and rapport building will always be necessary when providing these kind of services.

Expert responses in stage one.

During stage two, consensus was reached for all of the skills and competences listed, with each receiving support as ‘important’ or ‘very important’ from more than three quarters of respondents (see Figure 7). Several skills also met consensus at the higher threshold level: collaboration and teamworking, AI literacy, listening skills, digital skills, communication skills and adaptability.

However, the ranked importance of skills did change when experts considered future requirements. Adaptability was ranked as the most important skills, and both digital skills and AI literacy increased in relative importance. Independent/self-directed learning and analytical skills were also expected to become more important. By contrast, customer service, listening skills and empathy declined in relative importance, although they continued to be rated as important overall.

Figure 7: Importance of skills and competences in the next 10 Years (Stage 2)



Source: Question 4: Please indicate what you believe will be the change in importance for the following skills and competences for PES counsellors in 10 years. Base: 42.

Across these responses, the pattern of consensus is broadly aligned to the international discussion on ‘future skills’ (see Section 2.2). However, it is not possible to determine the extent to which these findings reflect the influence of broader “future skills” narratives, as opposed to being driven primarily by participants’ direct experience and expertise within PES.

4.2.3 Summary of change

- Ongoing technological change means that PES counsellors will need more AI/Digital/Analytical skills in the future. To respond effectively, PES counsellors are also

likely to need stronger adaptability and a greater capacity for independent, self-directed learning.

- However, it is important to remember that there is strong support from experts for the idea that customer service, communication, listening and empathy as important now, and anticipated to remain important in the future.
- While wider public debate about AI and technological change appears to be influencing the expectation of experts about future skills needs in PES, this should not be interpreted as implying that interpersonal skills and communication skills will become less important as experts continue to rate these skills highly (and indeed more highly than AI skills).

4.3 Knowledge of PES counsellors

4.3.1 Current knowledge areas

In stage one, experts identified several areas where they felt that knowledge was required for PES counsellors to successfully undertake their roles, such as:

Frontline staff in PES generally require a minimum of a ... degree in social sciences, HR, or guidance, strong interpersonal and support skills, and a good understanding of the job market and digital tools. Experience in integration or social work is often an asset.

Staff use their knowledge of the labour market to provide up-to-date job postings, company information, and even accompany client] to interviews to support successful placement.

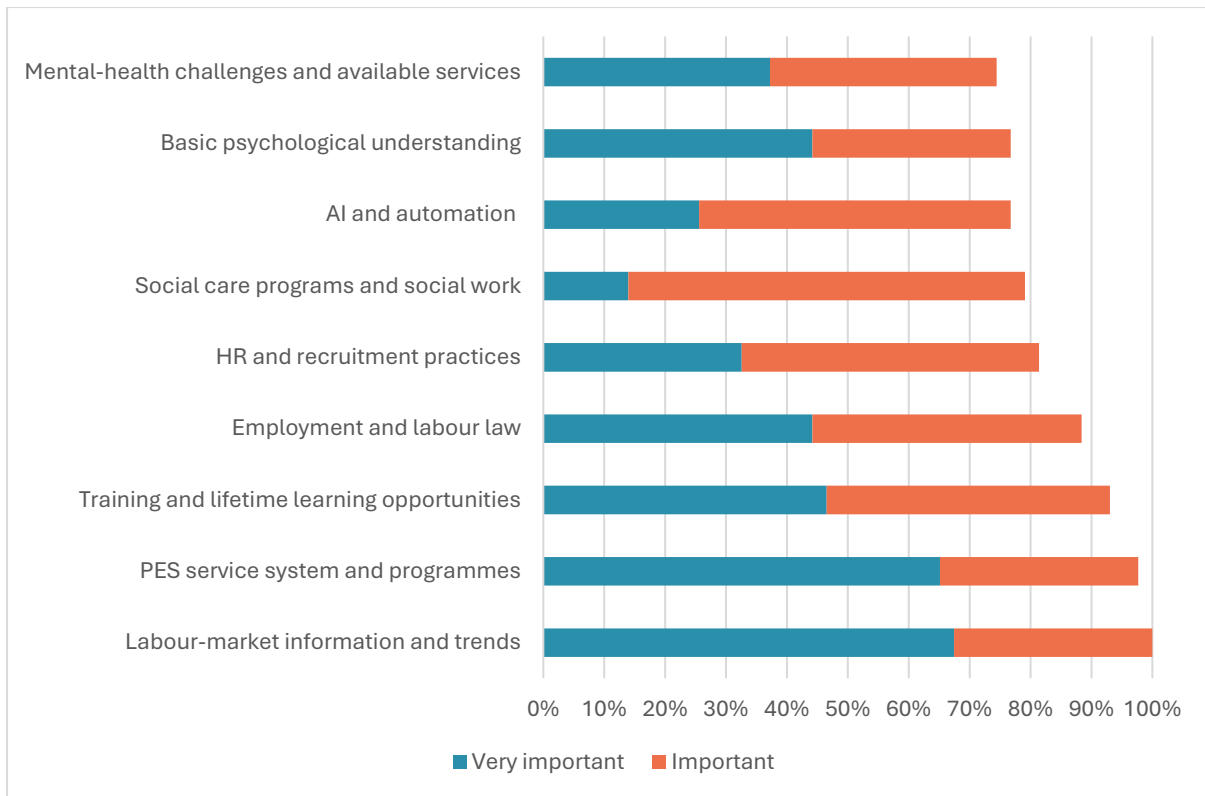
Expert responses in stage one.

These responses were coded into a list of items which were presented back to the experts in stage two:

- AI and automation (impacts on occupations and employers);
- Basic psychological understanding;
- Employment and labour law;
- HR and recruitment practices;
- Labour-market information and trends;
- Mental-health challenges and available services;
- PES service systems and programmes;
- Social case programs and social work; and
- Training and lifelong learning opportunities.

None of these items reached the higher consensus threshold (see Figure 8). However, eight of the nine items met the lower threshold, with “mental health challenges and available services” narrowly missing consensus by one percentage point. Overall, there was strong agreement on the core knowledge areas required for PES counsellors. More than 90% of respondents agreed that this should include labour market information and trends, knowledge of PES services, and training and lifelong learning opportunities. A slightly lower, but still clear, level of agreement was also found for employment and labour law, HR and recruitment practice, social care programmes and social work, AI and automation, and basic psychological understanding.

Figure 8: Summary of current knowledge areas required by PES counsellors (stage two)



Source: Question 3: Please indicate how important you currently believe the following areas of knowledge are to PES counsellors in PES. Base: 43.

4.3.2 Future knowledge areas for PES counsellors

Experts also noted areas of knowledge they believed would gain importance in ten years' time:

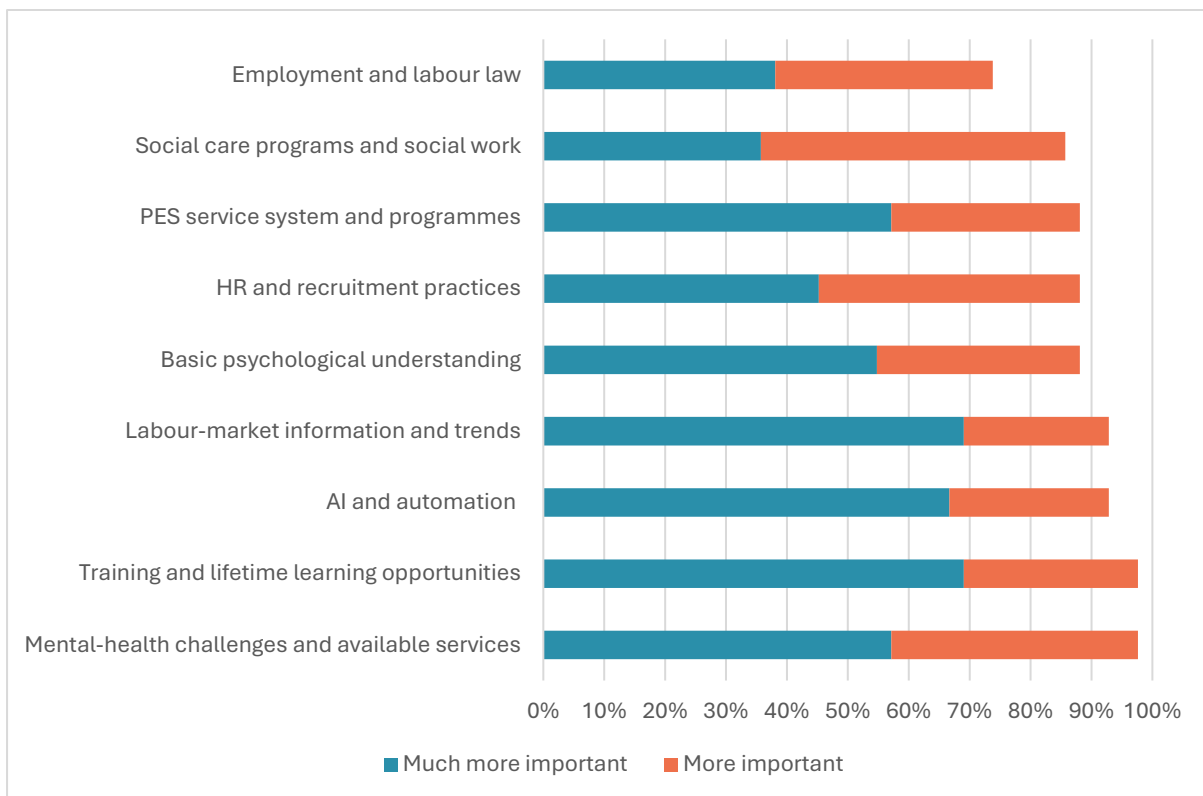
They will need to be more aware of digitalisation and AI. They will need to have better coaching skills, better understanding of trauma management, better knowledge of the wider support networks, better partnership working.

Expert responses in stage one.

Again, none of the items achieved the higher consensus threshold. However, all but one met the lower threshold, with knowledge of employment and labour law missing out (see Figure 9). The strongest consensus emerged around the greater importance of mental health challenges and services, training and lifelong learning opportunities, AI and automation and labour market information and trends.

Only very slightly lower, but still clear, consensus was present in relation to basic psychological understanding, HR and recruitment practices, PES Services and social care programmes and social work. The largest upward shifts in relative ranking related to mental health challenges and services, basic psychological understanding and AI and automation.

Figure 9: Importance of areas of knowledge in the next 10 Years (Stage 2)



Source: Question 6: Please indicate what you believe will be the change in importance for the following areas of knowledge for PES Counsellors in PES in 10 years. Base: 42.

4.3.3 Summary of change

- Overall, experts reached consensus on the knowledge required by PES Counsellors now and those expected to be important in the future.
- Current knowledge requirements were most strongly focused on core aspects of PES services such as labour market trends, PES services and wider training opportunities.
- Consensus also emerged on the knowledge required for PES Counsellors in the future. The increased prominence of knowledge of mental health challenges and available services, and AI, may reflect both wider public discussion on the significance of AI and an increasing emphasis on jobseekers faced with additional barriers to labour market participation.

4.4 Qualifications of PES counsellors

4.4.1 Current qualifications

Stage one respondents provided a range of views on the qualifications considered appropriate for PES counsellors.

A higher university or college education is usually required, most often in the field of social sciences: psychology, sociology, social work, public administration, economics, human resource management.

Completed training (e.g. high school diploma or vocational training), ideally with professional experience and participation in the internal basic training (basic and specialist modules).

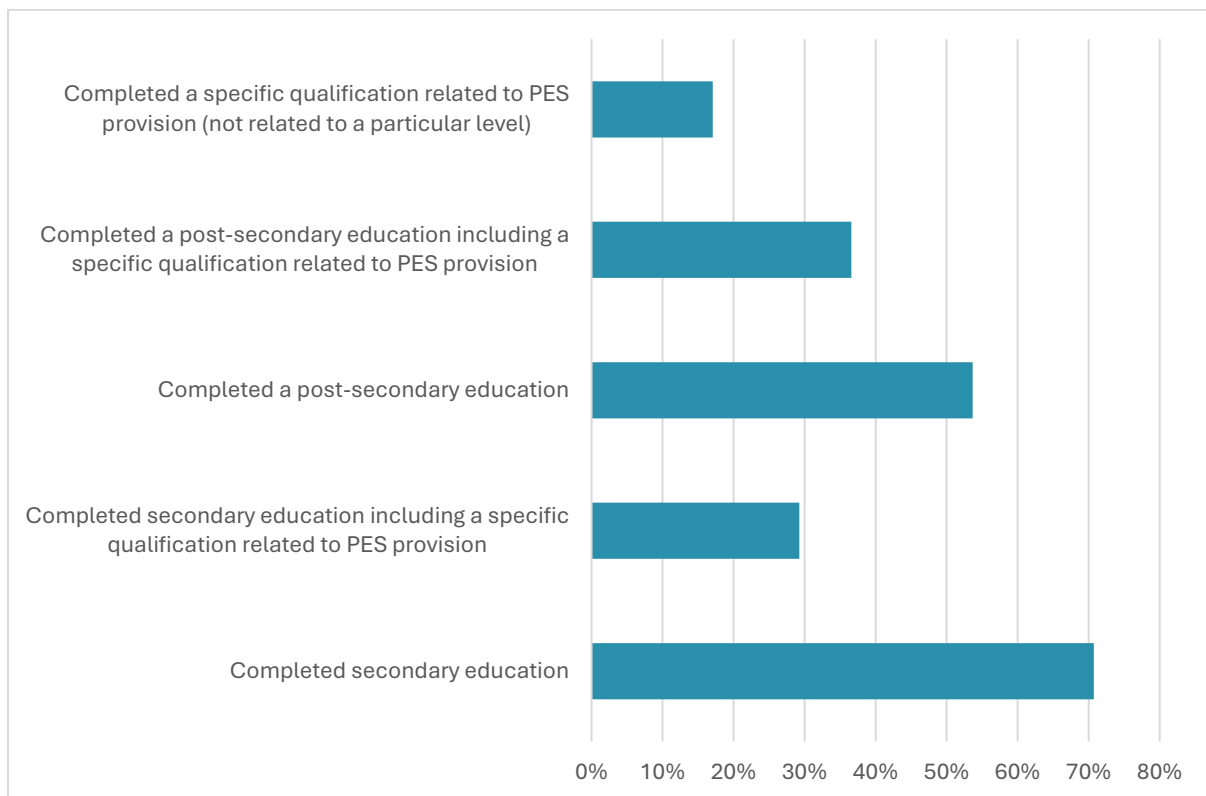
Expert responses in stage one.

These comments were synthesised into a framework focusing on the level of qualifications that PES Counsellors should hold. The full list of items exploring qualifications, is set below:

- Completed secondary education
- Completed secondary education including a specific qualification related to PES provision
- Completed a post-secondary education
- Completed a post-secondary education including a specific qualification related to PES provision
- Completed a specific qualification related to PES provision (not related to a particular level)

There was a clear consensus (93% agreement) that PES Counsellors should have a qualification, and that it should be at least at secondary level. However, there was no consensus on the specific level required beyond this, or on whether a PES-specific qualification should be mandatory. Given the global variation in policy and practice, this pattern is not unexpected. For example, the recent World of PES survey, which had respondents from 78 PES in 74 countries, suggested that around half of PES globally require ‘university level’ qualifications, while around half the respondents indicated to require lower-level.³³

Figure 10: Current qualification requirements for frontline PES practitioners

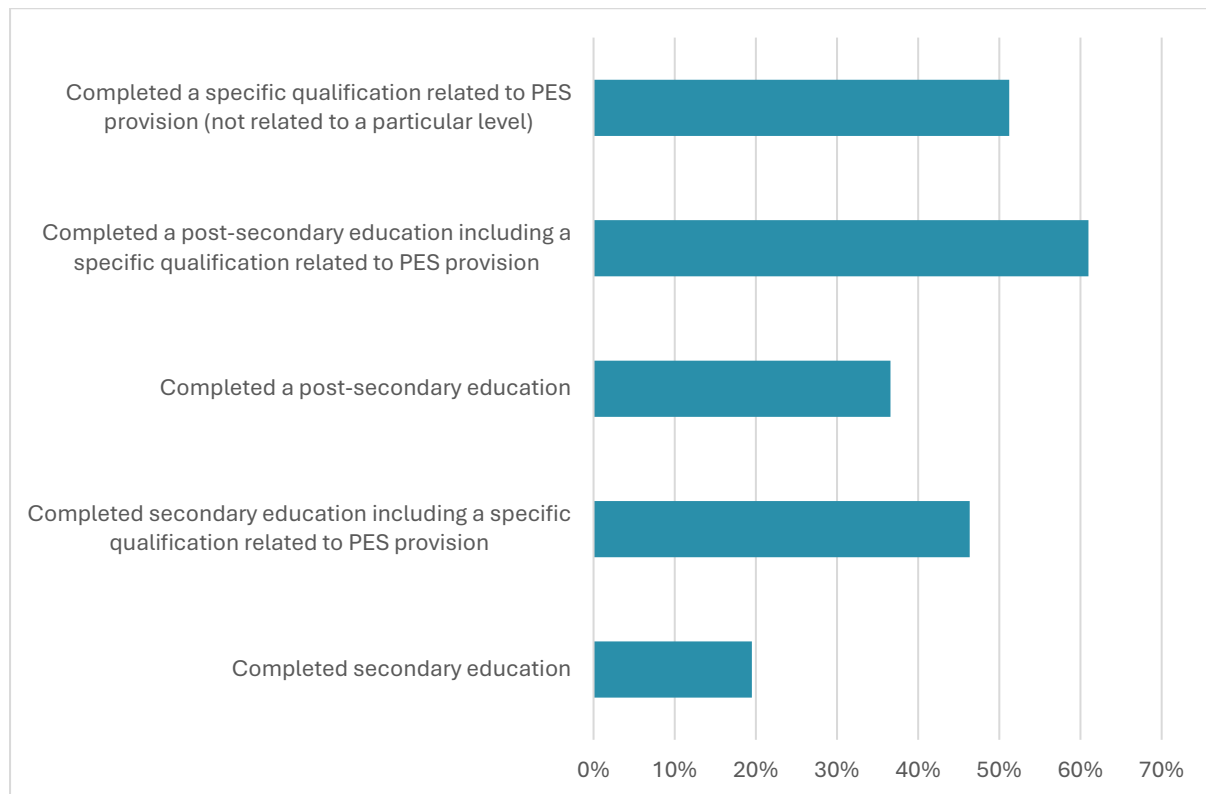


Source: Question 8: Which qualifications are currently required for PES Counsellors? Base 41.

4.4.2 Future qualifications for PES counsellors

Respondents were then asked what level of qualifications of qualification PES counsellors are likely to need in the future. Again, there was consensus (85%) that PES counsellors should hold a qualification, but no clear consensus on the precise level these qualifications should be to PES practice. However, in comparison with current practice there was a suggestion that qualifications should be at higher levels and that there should be greater role-specificity. This reinforces the view that PES counselling is likely to become more professionalised over time.

Figure 11: Future qualification requirements for PES counsellors



Source: Question 8: Which qualifications should PES Counsellors ideally have? Base 41.

4.4.3 Summary of change

- There is a consensus that qualifications are required for PES counsellors, but there was no consensus about the nature, specificity or level of these qualifications.
- Looking ahead, the level and specificity of the qualifications required for PES counsellors is expected to increase, but there is no global consensus on an ideal qualification standard.

4.5 Recruitment and retention

In stage one the experts highlighted several factors that they felt made it difficult to recruit and retain PES counsellors:

The position is not well-paid. Moreover, it demands a lot of empathy, emotional skills and soft abilities but the compensation is poor. Frontline Staff often highlights the need of clinical

supervision, which is not fulfilled. It is easy for counsellors to be burnt out, even if he is an expert and knows the methods to prevent it.

Attracting and retaining personnel is complex due to the constantly increasing demands for service quality. The variety of services offered is growing, and the range of tools available is expanding. However, the working environment and technological innovations in administration are not keeping pace. Equally important is the need for fair compensation, given the substantial workload and the expectations for achieving results and receiving feedback from those seeking consultations.

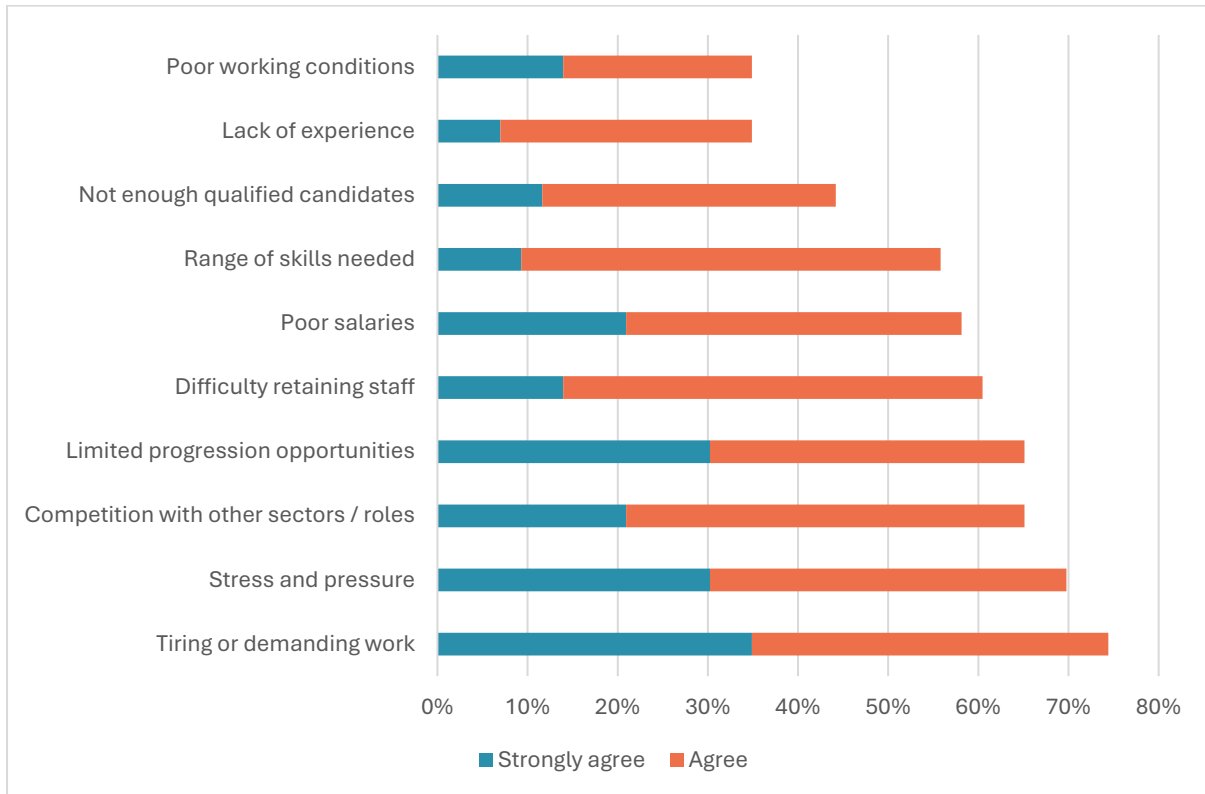
Expert responses in stage one.

These responses were coded into the categories below and presented back to experts in stage two.

- Competition with other sectors / roles
- Difficulty retaining staff
- Lack of experience
- Limited progression opportunities
- Not enough qualified candidates
- Poor salaries
- Poor working conditions
- Range of skills needed
- Stress and pressure
- Tiring or demanding work

While there was strong overall agreement that recruitment and retention are affected by identifiable factors (95% of respondents selected at least one factor), no single factor reached the 75% consensus threshold. ‘Tiring or demanding work’ came closest, narrowly missing the threshold at 74%.

Figure 12: Challenges with attracting and retaining suitable PES Counsellors



Source: Question 9: Please rate the extent to which the following factors make it difficult to attract or retain suitable PES Counsellors. Base 43.

The strongest areas of agreement related to the demanding nature of the role (including tiring work and high levels of stress and pressure), competition with other sectors, and constraints on the lack of the ability to offer decent work (limited progression and poor salaries). Taken together these findings suggest that strengthening PES capacity cannot solely rely on training and development. A broader approach to professionalising PES counselling roles is also needed, including measures to improve job quality and make roles more sustainable and attractive. This conclusion is reached based on the fact that respondents gave higher priority to issues of work quality than to issues of skills, knowledge and training.

4.6 Capacity of PES to deliver the changes required

A majority (65%) of experts reported that the PES that they were most familiar with would be capable of making changes to its overall delivery model over the next ten years. However, this level of agreement does not meet the threshold and therefore cannot be treated as a consensus. This may indicate that major structural change to delivery models is seen as being more difficult to achieve than a workforce-focused approach centred on training and development.

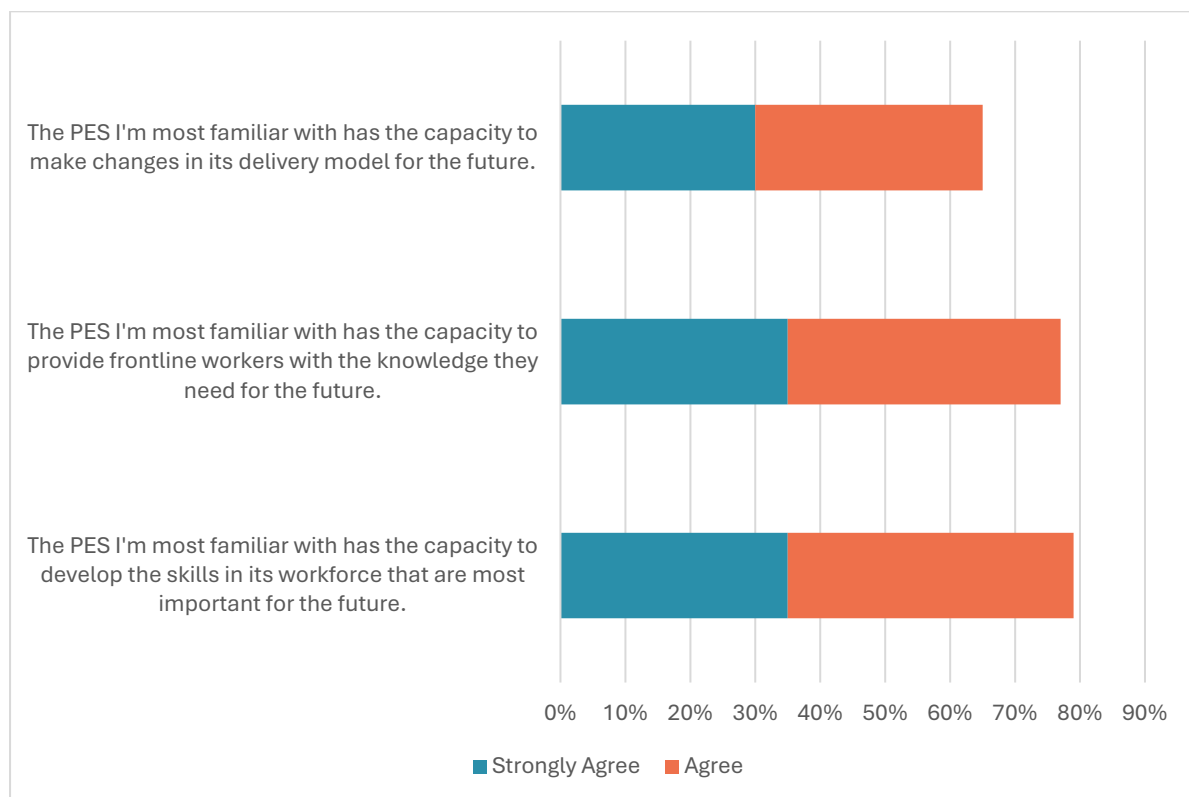
Consensus did emerge on the capacity of PES to support PES Counsellors with developing their skills (79% agreement) and knowledge (77% agreement) over the next 10 years. Across world

regions, there was relatively little variance. However, experts reflecting on European PES were less confident than those in other regions, despite European PES generally having higher levels of resourcing than many PES in other regions, including in parts of Africa. This may be a commentary on the current policy context, with many European PES already having invested in substantial reforms over recently years and perhaps less likely to commit to further reforms.

This evidence is crucial for identifying next steps. The purpose of this research was to identify anticipated changes in the tasks, skills and knowledge required for PES counselling, as a foundation for considering how PES globally can support one another in responding to change, including through training and capacity development. The findings point to a potentially mixed picture, particularly when considered alongside wider evidence on variation in PES resourcing across regions.

Experts anticipated change in the tasks, skills and knowledge required of PES counsellors. At the same time, there was also consensus that PES are likely to have the capacity to support counsellors with training and develop their skills and knowledge. However, there was less consensus on the capacity of PES in changing organisational delivery models beyond the training and development of their staff. Well-resourced PES are understood as having the capability and capacity to deliver change, including for their employees. This raises the important question about what kinds of change are viewed as feasible, and under what conditions, across different PES contexts. Further research may therefore be helpful to explore how capacity constraints operate in practice, and how they vary across regions and institutional settings.

Figure 13: PES capacity to change delivery model and provide for changing staff skills and knowledge requirements (Stage 2)



Source: Question 7: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding organisational capacity. Base: 43.

5 Expert Consensus

5.1 Statement for stage three confirmation of expert consensus

The Delphi process typically results in a short consensus statement which summarises areas of agreement amongst experts on a particular topic. Experts in the study reached consensus on the skills needs of PES Counsellors as follows:

Box 2: Statement of Future skill needs of PES Counsellors

The work of PES counsellors is critical to the effective functioning of a public employment service, and therefore to achieving labour market goals. It is a highly skilled job involving a diverse range of tasks, skills and knowledge, which requires the selection of appropriate staff and training and continuing professional development. The study found a consensus on the tasks that PES counsellors should do and the skills and knowledge that they need to do the job (see Figure 14). The items highlighted in bold are those where there is a consensus that they are ‘very important’.

Figure 14: Summary of tasks, skills and knowledge

Tasks	Skills	Knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action planning • Administration • Advice and guidance • Career or skills assessment • Job application assistance • Job matching and placement • Training and facilitation • Knowledge sharing • Liaising (jobseekers & employers) • Liaising across government & communities • Professional development • Motivation building • Online counselling • Working with employers Working with disadvantaged people disadvantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer service • Communication • Listening • Adaptability • Advocacy • AI literacy • Analytical thinking • Collaboration • Digital skills • Empathy • Independent learning • Interpersonal skills • Negotiation & mediation • Networking & partnership-building • Problem solving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AI and automation • Basic psychology • Employment law • HR and recruitment • LMI • PES service systems • Social care programs • Education and training opportunities

PES counsellors undertake a wide range of important tasks. These include the provision of services direct to jobseekers such as advice and guidance, virtual counselling, motivation building, career assessment, action planning, job matching and placement, job application assistance, training and facilitation. Jobseekers have very diverse needs and PES counsellors need to be able to work with service users experiencing acute personal challenges and/or multiple forms of disadvantage as well as more mainstream customers. PES counsellors also work directly with employers, liaising between jobseekers and employers and with government, public, private and community actors. Finally, PES counsellors are involved in several organisational roles such as administration, knowledge sharing and ensuring their own professional development.

Looking into the future, it is anticipated that the current range of PES tasks continue to be important. Within this overall picture of consistency in tasks, administration is expected to become relatively less important, while the need to work directly with jobseekers and disadvantaged jobseekers in particular is likely to increase. PES counsellors may also have more responsibility for their own professional development in the future.

Undertaking this wide array of tasks requires substantial breadth and levels of skill. Given this, it is very important that PES Counsellors have skills in customer service, communication and that they are good listeners capable of empathy with, and advocacy on behalf of, their service users. This emphasis on people extends to general teamwork and inter-personal skills and the ability to negotiate and mediate as well as work effectively in external partnerships. It is also important that they demonstrate core analytical skills and are able to use digital tools effectively. Finally, they need to adapt to change, by being independent learners.

Looking to the future, all these skills are anticipated to continue to be important. In addition, PES counsellors are anticipated to need to develop a literacy with AI that they can deploy in their work in PES, with this area being identified as very important. In addition, it will be very important that future PES counsellors are adaptable, have good communication and listening skills as well as strong digital skills and an ability to collaborate and work effectively in teams. This suggests that overall, the role is likely to require a slightly wider range of skills and at a higher level in the future.

Alongside the skills required by PES counsellors, it is also important for them to have knowledge in a range of areas. Again, anticipated future change is focussed on a broadening of the knowledge required for frontline PES work. Knowledge of mental-health challenges and available services, training and lifetime learning opportunities, AI and automation and labour-market information and trends are seen as particularly important. A consensus also existed on having a basic psychological understanding, knowledge of HR and recruitment practice, and the services offered by PES and wider sources of support such as social care programmes and social work.

PES counsellors need some qualifications to support their practice and document their prior skills. At present there is no consensus about the level or specificity of such qualifications beyond a recognition that they should be at least at the level of secondary education. There is however an anticipation that in the future the requirement for qualifications is likely to increase both in terms of the level required and the specificity of such qualifications to PES work.

There was a consensus that PES often have difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, but no consensus about what the key drivers for this are.

There was a consensus that PES have the capacity to develop the skills and knowledge of their staff in line with the changing needs of the future. Major shifts in the delivery model of PES were seen as more challenging.

5.2 Stage three results

In stage three, the condensed statement above (Box 2) was sent to all respondents who consented in previous stages. They were asked two simple questions: whether they agreed with the statement and for any further comments. 59 responses were received from a range of regions (see Figure 3). The statement received universal consensus (all respondents agreed).

Open text responses also generally reinforced the content in the statement. These comments suggested specific support for the complexity of the PES counsellor role, the need for an understanding of labour market change and that these roles require people with higher level skills and qualifications. There was also support for the need for responsiveness to changing IT requirements. There were two qualitative responses that indicated support for additional content related to employer engagement and vacancy promotion. The comments did not result in any further changes to the statement as the issues they raise are all already covered in the statement. However, they do provide more granular insights that might be useful in practice.

6 Conclusions and areas for development

6.1 Summary of the research

The research shows a high degree of international consensus on the tasks, skills and knowledge required of PES counsellors. The breadth and complexity of the role is also notable. PES counsellors require strong interpersonal skills, an ability to work with jobseekers (including very vulnerable people), employers and stakeholders. An understanding of the systems within which their customers and stakeholders operate is also important, alongside strong knowledge of labour market conditions, skills and training provision, and wider social systems, including relevant support services.

Looking ahead, experts anticipate more continuity than change in the skills that they think are likely to be important for PES counsellors. As expected, the ability to work with new technologies is likely to become more important, with digital and AI skills increasingly becoming a core part of the skills set of PES Counsellors. However, the existing range of skills and knowledge is expected to remain essential and, in many areas, to grow importance in the future.

The emphasis placed on a wide range of skills and knowledge suggests that experts view counselling as a highly professional role. This is reinforced by the view that a formal qualification is necessary and is likely to become more important over time. This is well aligned with the requirements of the *C88 - Employment Service Convention, 1948* which emphasises the importance of training and continuity of PES staff.³⁴ At the same time, many experts expressed concerns about recruitment and retention of PES counsellors. Taken together, these findings suggest that current approaches to organising and supporting PES counsellors may not be sufficient if PES are to respond effectively to the key challenges outlined in chapter 2.

6.2 Areas for development

Based on this research, there are several areas where the global PES community could usefully focus effort as this work is taken forward.

- **Recognise and strengthen the role of PES counsellors.** At the outset of the study, it was not clear whether the role of the PES counsellors was sufficiently consistent across countries and could be treated as a broadly comparable occupation. However, the findings of this study demonstrate a strong level of consensus around the core tasks, skills and knowledge of PES Counsellors. This level of commonality provides a basis for greater recognition of the role, further practice sharing, and continued professionalisation.
- **Professionalise the role.** Experts agreed that PES counsellors carry out a complex set of tasks and therefore require a broad and demanding mix of skills and knowledge. While the overall role is expected to remain broadly stable, there are several areas where additional competence is likely to be required, strengthening the professionalisation of the role. A key priority will be to develop greater clarity around qualification, training pathways and experience requirements needed for the PES counselling role.
- **Explore greater specialisation and clearer professional levels.** The breadth of tasks, skills and knowledge identified in this study is striking. Expectations ranged from

administration, to training, to coaching, mentoring and counselling as well as more strategic roles with employers and policymakers. This raises a practical question about whether these expectations are best addressed through a single, broadly defined counsellor role, or whether service quality and workforce sustainability would benefit from a greater professional structure. Such a structure may include both roles of different levels and with different foci. In practice, many PES already have forms of professional specialisation which may have been minimised by the focus on the category of ‘PES counsellor’ in this report. Nonetheless, the evidence here about the breadth and nature of the tasks, skills and knowledge required of PES counsellors suggests that some degree of specialisation is likely to be valuable, alongside a broader professionalisation of the counsellor and associated roles. This also implies care over the allocation of staff to more specialised roles. The same people are unlikely to excel at tasks as different as coaching (e.g. empathy, listening, social skills), employer engagement (e.g. networking, persuading) and data analysis (e.g. use of IT, AI and other technical tools).

- **Improve the quality of PES work.** Experts were concerned about the recruitment and retention of PES Counsellors. While experts did not reach a consensus about what are the reasons for these problems, there were clear indications that the quality of PES work is often low, with practitioners stressed, overworked, under-paid and lacking opportunities for progression. Addressing these issues about work quality need to be part of a broader approach to professionalise the area.
- **Develop PES’ capacity to respond to the future of work.** While experts are optimistic about PES’s capacity to upskill practitioners, they are less confident that they have the capability to transform their delivery model. Given the level of wider change that many commentators anticipate in the labour market, this may be a problem waiting to happen. While the upskilling and professionalisation of PES Counsellors is both valuable and desirable it is unlikely to be sufficient without wider changes in policy and delivery. There would be value in further discussion about these issues.
- **Explore and implement AI-influenced service changes with care.** The results here and from wider research³⁵ suggest that many PES are already experimenting with AI enabled services and others are developing these approaches. The research suggests that while experts view this as an important part of the future of PES, they are keen to view this in the context of a broadly human-centred services. Consequently, the introduction of AI needs to be undertaken with care, starting with a clear understanding of how policy is driving the change and positioning new AI technologies as enablers (rather than as drivers). Moreover, as AI use cases are developed, PES counsellors should be consulted so that changes benefit from their experience and expertise and they are able to understand new tasks, services and processes. AI adoption will generate new skills needs and PES will need to develop comprehensive AI skills frameworks and pathways that are role-specific and use-case specific. The development of these skills frameworks and pathways should be integral to AI implementation plans. Finally, AI adoption should be undertaken with a view to ensuring data security and avoiding over-dependence on technology providers which lock PES into reform pathways or dependent future development.
- **Undertake further research on PES practice.** Finally, further research is needed which can drill down into the issues that we have raised more deeply. There are important open

questions about the detail of tasks, skills, knowledge, qualifications, recruitment and retention and management and development of the frontline PES practitioner role. An illustrative example is that while experts thought PES administration would become less important and AI skills would become more important, the precise nature of the change in tasks, skills and knowledge driven by this linked shift are not fully clear. Moreover, our research has gathered the perspectives of experts and service leaders, but we have yet to hear from practitioners, policymakers, employers or service users. Further research in all these areas would be useful, as would more contextually situated work exploring the issues in different parts of the world and types of countries and systems.

6.2.1 Deloitte – Use case: Workforce transformation strategies in practice

The following use case section complements the research findings by illustrating how workforce transformation strategies are being approached in practice. While the Delphi study identifies areas of consensus and future development needs, the examples below provide selected practice-based illustrations of how PES and related organisations are responding to similar challenges around upskilling, professionalisation, technology adoption and change management.

There is growing recognition among PES of the need to invest in upskilling and reskilling their workers to meet the evolving demands of the job, and to embed modern tools, AI and technology more effectively, to support new service delivery models. As a result, some PES are investing directly in strategies to strengthen their workforce capabilities and support adaptation. In several contexts, these initiatives are accompanied by change management and communications efforts to support workers through these transitions. While approaches vary across contexts, the examples below illustrate selected examples observed globally.

The examples in this section are anonymised and draw on Deloitte’s sectoral expertise and experience working with public employment and human services organisations. They are presented as illustrative examples and are not intended to identify, rank, or formally evaluate individual PES organisations.

1. Selected example: Professionalisation of employer engagement

PES are establishing employer engagement as a core organisational capability, bolstering skills to support more targeted employer outreach, structured employer meetings, and sustainment of long-term employer relationships.

For example, a regional PES piloted a structured employer engagement training programme for frontline counsellors and management teams contracted to deliver career and employment services, with the aim to support a shift toward a more strategic, partnership-based model.

Delivered in partnership with a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provider, the programme combined short digital modules, live sessions, and coaching, with a strong focus on practical application. It equipped counsellors and management with tools to target employers, structure interactions, and sustain relationships beyond transactional vacancy-filling.

The pilot reached over 500 participants across the provider network and achieved high completion rates (over 80%). Learners reported increased confidence in engaging employers, expanding employer networks, and supporting more sustainable job placements. Early evidence also indicates improved consistency of practice, supported by shared tools and frameworks.

Throughout the pilot, multiple adjustments to the programme delivery were made to better support learners. Improvements included added flexibility in the cohort design and clear engagement requirements to better manage learners’ capacity, well-timed prompts to ensure sustained engagement, and the assignment of Learning Leads as single points of contacts for progress reporting and accountability.

2. Selected example: PES workforce development organization

PES are establishing dedicated internal training structures and learning pathways to support continuous, on-the-job upskilling of their workforce.

For example, one PES serving both PES staff and external partners (e.g. local authorities, NGOs, inclusion actors), aimed at building shared capabilities across the employment ecosystem.

It offers multi-format learning modules (e-learning, microlearning, and in-person training) co-developed with frontline practitioners, covering topics such as understanding client barriers, building trust, employer engagement and job matching, and implementation of PES policies and reforms.

The platform also integrates social learning features such as peer-to-peer exchange and user-generated content (e.g., playlists), fostering community-building and the diffusion of innovation across the ecosystem. Over 40,000 professionals are now benefiting from more than 160 training modules.

Implementation required addressing diverse learner profiles, uneven digital maturity, and the absence of a shared competency framework across all partners in the ecosystem. Ensuring adoption at scale required sustained communication, manager engagement, and continuous content updates were essential to remain relevant in a fast-evolving policy and regulatory context.

Balancing large-scale delivery with the level of customisation expected by frontline professionals was an ongoing challenge, requiring iterative governance and strong feedback loops.

3. Selected example: Embedded digital upskilling and adoption strategies

PES are complementing formal training with targeted organisational strategies and practical supports for effective and sustained adoption of new digital and AI-enabled delivery models and tools.

For example, one PES has complemented AI-enablement training for their staff with an ongoing adoption programme. It included brainstorm sessions, frequent lunch-and-learns, microlearnings on mobile apps, a chat channel with subject matter experts available to answer questions and share best practices, and a series of awareness-building communications (e.g., newsletters, prompt examples).

Another PES has paired the rollout of AI-enabled tools with a structured governance approach: the PES introduced clear principles positioning AI as a decision-support tool, engaged PES staff throughout the deployment of tools, and established counsellor feedback loops to continuously refine tools and practices and strengthen counsellor ownership over time.

In another PES, a group of digital champions - counsellors and supervisors - was established to test and refine the new digital delivery model prior to scaling. Ongoing pilot activities and results were regularly communicated across the organisation, and the digital champions supported the onboarding and adoption of the model by the broader division when scaling.

Both jurisdictions undertook a phased implementation approach, allowing for progressive integration of digital tools and adaptation of working practices.

*These examples illustrate that effective PES counsellor upskilling and PES workforce transformation combines structured capability-building, embedded learning systems, and intentional change management to support adoption at scale.*³⁶

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³⁶ Disclaimer

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