MA EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN PRACTICE

THE DIGITAL SKILLS SCHOOL LEADERS NEED

"The future of education will be increasingly digital – whether that's remote teaching, on-screen parents' evenings or online safeguarding. So how can aspiring school leaders ensure that they have the necessary digital skills to succeed?

What makes a good leader? It's a question that always sparks debate and divides opinion within education circles, but, at the same time, it is one that generates responses that will remain consistent from one generation to the next.

Integrity, authenticity, these are traits that could just as easily be applied to the great headteachers of today or those who ran schools 100 years ago. But as schools adopt new technology, and students spend increasing amounts of time online, what additional skills do school leaders need to enable them to keep pace with a rapidly evolving, digital landscape?

In this edition, senior editor Simon Lock meets Tom Campbell, interim CEO at E-ACT academy trust, and biology teacher and teaching and learning ambassador Jake Harrison to ask what digital skills today's leaders really need.

While Tom has been in education for 20 years and has led two large trusts, Jake is currently studying for an MA in educational leadership in practice and will begin his first leadership role in September. For two leaders, both at different stages of their careers, the digital world that schools operate within presents a wealth of opportunity but also considerable challenges.

SCHOOL LEADERSHIP: THE DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

"There have clearly [been] changes in terms of teaching and learning, and the digitisation of the curriculum", says Campbell. "But from a leadership perspective, if I think back to the early 2000s, when I was teaching, I couldn't imagine how reliant we've become on technology."

In his current role, Campbell looks after 28 academies across England, so he has experienced first-hand just how much of an impact digital initiatives and tools can have on large numbers of young people.

"If we take safeguarding as one example, I can't imagine leading an effective safeguarding strategy without the likes of CPOMS [software]. If you take something as fundamental as safeguarding and imagine how we might do that without the use of technology and digital tools, it's quite scary," he says.

For Campbell, new digital tools and initiatives don't necessarily have to come from the top down. In fact, it is often in the classroom where new ways of working originate.

"I really think teachers set the pace by saying, 'This is what we can do in our classrooms; these are the tools that we require to collaborate more effectively,'" he explains. "And it's certainly been a challenge to me, as a trust leader, to keep pace with that, so that it's not the trust or the infrastructure that slowing down innovation. The intention is to enable that innovation, that flexibility and experimentation."

For Harrison, who is halfway through his master's and on his way to becoming a head of hall in September, there are things that those who are new to leadership can bring to the sector.

A DIGITAL-FIRST GENERATION

"I think there will definitely be things that the next generation of leaders can bring, partly because of the experience they've had with Covid, but also because when they've been through university they have been exposed to more technology.

"The more exposure you have, the more confident you feel with it and the more willing you are to try things out."

In terms of the essential skills required, Campbell explains that for him there are two vital things tomorrow's leaders need to think about.

"I think leaders have to carefully consider what their communication strategy is and how digital informs that - whether that's Twitter or whether it's how you communicate with staff," he says. "The other one is project management skills. In a trust of 3,000 employees, if there's a new strategy or initiative, that requires a high level of advanced leadership management competency."

For Harrison, while an overview of digital developments clearly has its place, he sees the mentality of the leader as being the most fundamental quality.

"Part of being in education is that you see the value of learning, and obviously you are promoting that to your students. But part of that is modelling it yourself. Digital literacy is the next big thing that a lot of teachers are learning and if you have the mindset of, 'I'm looking to learn,' then it seems a lot less intimidating."

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