

CLOSING THE GAP:

Addressing Malta's skills shortage

With 875 unfilled vacancies in the local iGaming market in 2019, where is Malta falling short? And will the after-effects of the coronavirus pandemic make it harder to close the gap? **Martina Said** catches up with industry experts to find out.

In 2019, the total employment generated by the Maltese gaming industry – which includes activities in and ones associated with the sector – totalled 11,747 full-time jobs, approximately 4.8 per cent of the total employment figure. The figures, published by the Malta Gaming Authority (MGA) in its 2019 annual report, reveal a consistent upward trend in employment in online and land-based firms licensed by the MGA over the past six years – from under 4,000 full-time jobs in 2014 to more than 7,400 by 2019.

The encouraging figures reflect the well-known growth of the local iGaming sector in recent years, but, parallel to this, is the issue of the shortage of skilled workers needed for the industry to continue growing. The MGA report states that, at the end of 2019, there were 875 unfilled vacancies, an increase of 19.5 per cent compared to the previous year.

Since then, much has changed beyond the confines of the gaming sector. The COVID-19 pandemic struck, threatening the livelihoods of many businesses and employees, while making others busier than they were before. Some sectors had to let go of staff; others needed to recruit. Where did the gaming sector lie on this spectrum?

Ivan Filletti, Chief Operations Officer at Gaming Malta, a non-profit entity tasked with promoting Malta as the home of gaming excellence, refers to a survey conducted in April by the MGA in the thick of the COVID-19 storm. The survey set out to assess the impact of the pandemic on the gaming sector and it “revealed that the majority of operators within the different distinct sectors (B2C/B2B) do not plan to change employment levels at this stage,” Mr Filletti explains. “This decision is, however, subject to a high degree of uncertainty, implying that employment within the sector is sensitive to the outcomes of the

pandemic and the support measures taken by the Government. The share of respondents planning a temporary closure of business is negligible.”

Addressing the existing skills gap in the sector, Mr Filletti says it is certainly no secret that the industry is on a constant search for experienced workers. “Attracting talent has become one of the top priorities for the industry. From recent surveys we conducted with our licensees, we know that most of the vacancies were at the operational level that could typically be filled by those just leaving formal education.”

He adds that, notwithstanding this, the industry is becoming more selective in terms of its human resource requirements concerning qualifications and experience. “There are now around 290 companies based in Malta and all of them compete for the best talent and for candidates with the right attitude and cultural fit. This is something very specific to the gaming industry – companies have their own cultural values which they tend to strongly uphold.”

However, he adds that not all jobs within the gaming industry are sector specific. Companies require individuals with skills that are also required by other industries, in the areas of technology, legal, compliance, finance and HR. “Career opportunities also await candidates who come from different sectors. In fact, surveys have shown us that sourcing talent from firms in another industry is practised by 20 per cent of the companies.”

Ben Pace Lehner, Co-Founder and Director at Broadwing Recruitment and the Nuovo Job Board, asserts that, from his company's day-to-day →



Ivan Filletti,
GamingMalta

Photo by Alan Carville

← experiences recruiting for the iGaming sector, he corroborates the MGA's findings on skills shortages, most notably the lack of good developers and other tech talent in Malta, as well as STEM skills.

"I would, however, like to see further statistics related to language-specific roles that I believe make up a significant portion of the operational marketing roles, consisting of native-speaking content writers, customer care agents, affiliate managers and account managers. The demand for languages also applies to live game presenters or dealers – a role which is always in demand and often has a high staff turnover rate."

Mr Pace Lehner adds that further studies should be carried out in relation to the sourcing and relocation of international talent to Malta, while uncovering the number of foreign employees that are leaving Malta and why. "For example, when looking for STEM candidates, Sweden is a hotbed after having invested heavily in new schools and institutions focusing on those skills. Ukraine can be considered a close second for tech talent. This is the only way companies can overcome this hurdle and operate in specific markets, or open new ones such as Japan and Korea." →

Highlighting a change in demand for specific roles within the industry in recent months, Mr Pace Lehner says, with the global spotlight on Malta and much stricter AML procedures, he has noticed a significant increase in demand for experienced candidates in compliance and AML, with fierce competition over the best candidates.

"On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has also caused a shift in Malta's employment market, which has balanced the previously heavily biased employee's market in most industries and sectors other than iGaming, which still faces strong competition when sourcing the best candidates," he asserts. →



Ben Pace Lehner,
Broadwing Recruitment
and Nuovo Job Board

Zooming in on the impacts of the pandemic on the iGaming sector's human resources, Natasha Gowans, Communications Consultant at the iGaming European Network (iGen), an association of iGaming companies based in Malta and operating on the European and international markets, believes the industry has been able to maintain the status quo well so far. "We don't think the iGaming industry has been affected the same way other industries have because our industry is essentially online. This meant that most companies already had the correct roles and infrastructure in place to work remotely."

There have been a few exceptions, however. "The customer service team is used to being in the office to answer phones, and sports traders too are more comfortable working from the office so they can use big screens. Both teams work day and night shifts, so they aren't used to working from home. Most other teams, however, would be – all they need is a laptop and mobile to set themselves up. Also, wherever there were shortages in the set-up, companies invested right at the beginning and are now maintaining for business continuity in case this happens again."

Across many other sectors, several companies made tough calls and let go of staff to save their business. In the iGaming sector, too, redundancies have been reported, albeit whether this was due to the the pandemic is unclear. Does Ms Gowans think a time could come when the industry experiences similar struggles to maintain its large number of human resources?


"I don't think we will see mass redundancies in the sector directly due to the pandemic. The sector has been resistant to that because most of its services are digital – we are not running physical casinos and do not have concerns of spreading the virus in brick and mortar operations," she explains. "Customers use the services of gaming companies from home, so there hasn't been much of an impact in this respect. The worst affected are those who work in sports betting, because many big matches have been cancelled. However, from what we can see, this is temporary."

As an industry, Ms Gowans says companies have adapted well. "Many gaming companies are used to building their culture around being in the office, face-to-face work, after-work activities and so on. They will now need to rethink that and come up with innovative ways to maintain the feeling of camaraderie and teamwork without necessarily being in the →



Natasha Gowans,
iGaming European Network

Addressing the impact of the pandemic on the recruitment industry, Mr Pace Lehner says this was “major” and classified as an ‘Annex A’ sector by Malta Enterprise. “Within a week of the outbreak in Malta, we started to receive feedback from clients putting roles on hold due to the uncertainty. Over the following three weeks things slowed down drastically. Companies needed to make quick decisions to safeguard the health of their businesses and employees.”

Mr Pace Lehner believes, however, that despite its fair share of ups and downs – namely the major negative impact on sports betting and a  rise in Esports, online casinos, bingo and poker – the iGaming sector handled the fallout from the pandemic well and adapted staff in most departments and roles, other than live game presenters, to work remotely. “As the number of new active cases started to decrease and Malta acclimatised to a new normal, iGaming companies were the first to kick off their recruitment efforts, which has been a challenge due to the need for expatriate workers who haven’t been able to relocate to Malta or get their work permits processed.”

Coming out on the other side of this pandemic calls for widespread adjustment across all economic sectors, and Mr Pace Lehner strongly urges employers to make remote working a part of the new norm, by implementing a hybrid approach and roster system that can offer the best of both worlds. This, he explains, has the potential to increase performance through flexibility and independence gained through remote working, as well as the collaborative and creative energy from a face-to-face physical environment.

“A shift of this nature will require more resources within IT departments that will now also be responsible for assisting with the set-up of home offices and the management or support of remote working tools, while maintaining a high level of availability and security,” he concludes. “I also anticipate additional workload on HR departments due to additional policies and requirements. In the same way, the demand for team and project leaders should also increase with larger teams being split up for more efficient and effective communication and management when working remotely.” **iGC**

office. Also, recruitment hasn’t stopped during this time – companies have hired without meeting recruits in-person, and new employees have joined companies without seeing the office. There are ways to adjust, and some of these measures might stick around in the future.”

As an operator within the gaming sector, Alexia Frendo, HR Lead at online gaming business Kindred Group, says the jobs market within the industry has been challenging and, for a long time, the gaming sector has suffered from bad press. “As a tech company, we are fighting for the same talent as Microsoft, Google and Spotify, and it is tough. We have seen a global drop in recruitment over the past few months and it will be interesting to see where gaming sits in terms of its attractiveness to people who potentially wouldn’t have considered a career in gaming previously.”

Ms Frendo maintains that, for Kindred, not much has changed in terms of issues, contact and interaction with the company’s human resources. However, some new and unforeseen challenges have arisen.

“Employees who left to their home country before the pandemic are now unable to return. Beyond that, some parents are finding it difficult to work and cope with their kids at home,” she asserts. “To this end, we are giving extensive tips and offering further support when it comes to coping and adjusting to the situation. I believe we have succeeded at caring for each other as colleagues and as fellow humans.”

Another challenge, which has been cited by many who transferred their operations to working remotely is the need to be constantly present and motivate the team. “Whatever you do, in the short term it will become boring and one would have to reinvent the wheel,” says Ms Frendo. “On the other hand, it is an opportunity to practice the value of innovation, whereby management has to find ways to engage and reach out to every single employee, such as through virtual coffee breaks, online Friday drinks and challenges of any shape and form.”



Alexia Frendo,
Kindred Group