



# Labour Market Intelligence: Refresh – 2023



## Snapshot report for Northern Ireland

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**Pye Tait Consulting**  
[info@pyetait.com](mailto:info@pyetait.com)  
[www.pyetait.com](http://www.pyetait.com)



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A report prepared by:

**Pye Tait Consulting**

Registered in England, Company No: 04001365, VAT No: 755 8312 14

Postal address: Royal House, 110 Station Parade, Harrogate, North Yorkshire, HG1 1EP

Tel: 01423 509 433

Registered office address: 5 Merus Court, Meridian Business Park, Leicester, LE19 1RJ

email (enquiries related to this report): [n.charleton@pyetait.com](mailto:n.charleton@pyetait.com)

email (general enquiries): [info@pyetait.com](mailto:info@pyetait.com)

website: [www.pyetait.com](http://www.pyetait.com)

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

The Electrotechnical Skills Partnership (TESP) commissioned Pye Tait Consulting, an independent research agency, to refresh labour market intelligence (LMI) that was undertaken in 2018/19 (with some additions in 2020 via a mini-LMI study) to understand the current skills requirements to work within the electrotechnical sector. The main report from 2018/19 provided a detailed overview of the electrotechnical sector, its workforce, skills needs, and the training and development typically undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

The electrotechnical sector continues to be at the forefront of a rapidly-evolving revolution in how we use technology – with increased demand for digital communication, energy conservation, electric vehicle charging, and renewable energy solutions with a particular focus on the electrification of heat (such as heat pumps) in buildings. The underlying driver for most of this development is the Net Zero agenda.

The overarching aim of this research is to update the previous LMI work to ensure accurate and up-to-date intelligence, building upon 2018/19 and 2020 research findings. The findings will provide TESP with renewed/up-to-date data that can be used to inform the development or update of a future labour force strategy.

### 1.2 Methodology

The study involved three core strands of research:

- desk research,
- a telephone survey of 467 employers, and
- follow-up interviews with 12 employers.

The survey questionnaire was designed to be similar to that used in 2018/19 and 2020 to enable longitudinal comparison.

### 1.3 About this report

The major output from this study is a UK-level report that outlines trends in the sector over the past few years. It provides a detailed insight into the state of the electrotechnical sector in terms of its workforce size, demography, and skills needs/challenges.

In addition, a series of twelve regional reports (one per English region and per devolved nation) will succinctly present the key findings from the research for TESP's regional managers to take forward in their work. This is the report for Northern Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> TESP, 2019, Labour market intelligence research

The findings contained in this report are derived from the telephone survey of employers. Of the 467 total respondents, 25 are based in Northern Ireland.

Findings are based on a small sample of businesses in the region, resulting in a larger margin of error than the main report, meaning findings should not be interpreted quantitatively as being necessarily representative of the region. From a qualitative standpoint the results will, however, be valuable indications of the local situation.

Note that charts and tables presented in this report may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

## 1.4 Respondent profile

Over three-quarters (19, 76%) are micro firms employing fewer than 10 staff, a fifth are small firms (five, 20%) with 10 to 49 staff, and the remainder (one, 4%) is a medium firm employing between 50 and 249 staff. The average (mean) size of company in terms of staff is nine, while the most common (modal) size is two staff. These figures include both PAYE direct staff and ‘others’ such as self-employed. Discounting the latter group, the average (mean) size is eight, and the most common (modal) size is one.

The age spread of workers in Northern Ireland, compared to the UK as a whole, is slight more focused on the 25 to 49 age band than workers aged 50+ – see Table 1.

**Table 1 Age profile of respondents: UK and Northern Ireland**

Age	UK-wide	Northern Ireland
16 to 18	6%	6%
19 to 24	14%	14%
25 to 49	50%	56%
50 to 64	26%	21%
65+	4%	4%

Base: 467 (UK) and 25 (Northern Ireland) respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

The workforce of surveyed respondents in the region is reported by respondents as being 72% UK citizens, almost one quarter (24%) being Irish, and the remainder being EU (non-Irish) – this is a much higher proportion of Irish workers than the UK as a whole (2%).

Six in ten (60%) undertake new fit commercial work, and three quarters (76%) undertake commercial repair and maintenance work. Around a half work in the domestic sector – repair (52%), and over two fifths in new fit (44%).

From a list of pre-defined activities, surveyed respondents most commonly undertake low voltage maintenance and repair work (96%) or low voltage electrical installation (92%). The next most common activities are emergency lighting systems (40%) and fire detection and alarm systems (40%).

## 1.5 Sector size

ONS SOC code data indicate there are 8,300 individuals (conf %: 2,300) working in the region in the SOC2020 code 5241: Electricians and electrical fitters.<sup>2</sup> However, it should be noted that ONS has identified an issue in the collection of occupation data affecting the accuracy of some detailed occupations and the data derived from the them, and urge caution in interpreting data. Nevertheless, based on an estimated proportion of those with electrotechnical skills who may operate at different skill levels, the overall total of electrotechnical-skilled workers in the region is 10,700 ± 2,300.

Further detail and considerations for how these figures are derived are outlined in the accompanying UK-wide report.

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<sup>2</sup> Annual Population Survey, ONS, Jan to Dec 2022. Conf is presented as the standard error as a percentage of the figure.

## 2. Recruitment

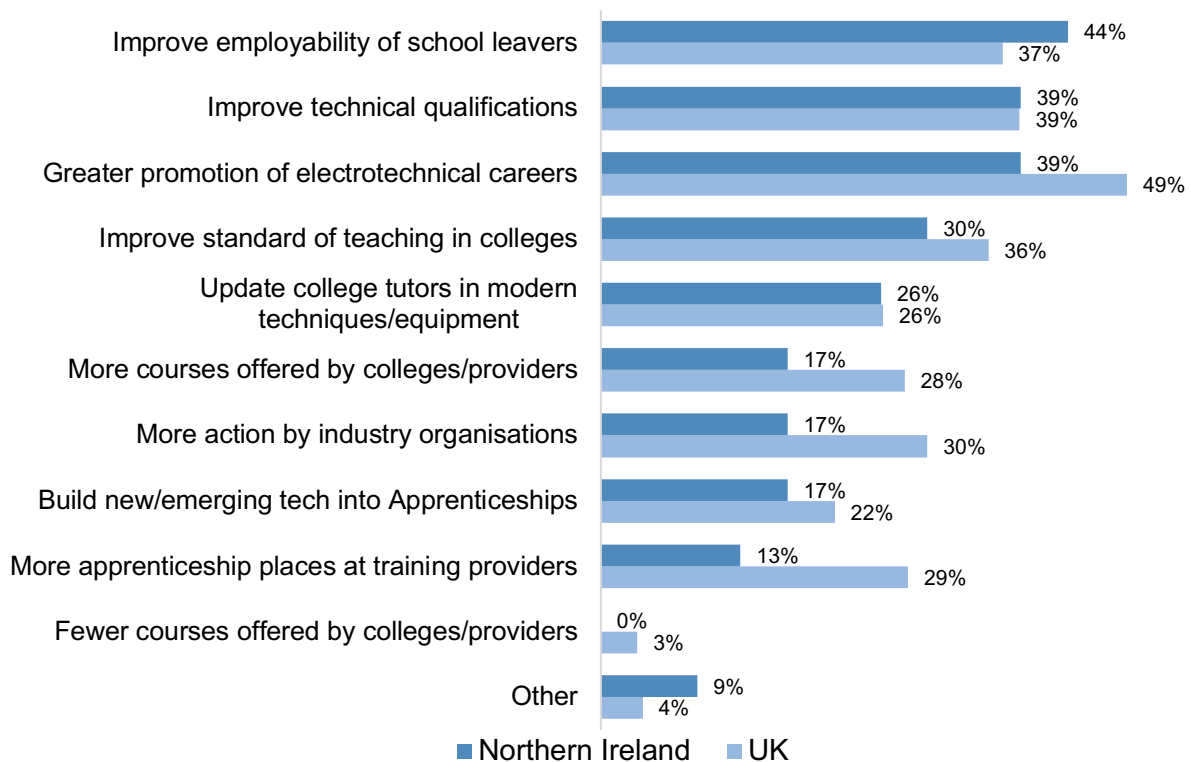
Surveyed employers most commonly report advertising to recruit skilled workers over the past 12 months (seven roles advertised), followed by apprentices/trainees (six) and project personnel (one). Of these, employers say all skilled and apprentice/trainee roles were hard to fill.

In terms of the employment basis, as compared to pre-COVID-19, two fifths of employers (40%) are 'more likely' to recruit using a PAYE directly employed approach while around three quarters are neither more nor less likely to use an employment agency (75%) or to loan labour between companies (74%).

The main perceived actions required to tackle recruitment problems and skills shortages in the region include (see Figure 1):

- improving employability of school leavers (mentioned by 44% vs 37% in UK as a whole), and
- improving technical qualifications (39% vs 39%), and
- greater promotion of electrotechnical careers (39% vs 49%).

**Figure 1 Perceived actions required to tackle recruitment problems – UK vs Northern Ireland**



Base: 441 (UK) and 23 (Northern Ireland) respondents (multiple responses permitted).  
Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

### 3. Skills needs of the electrotechnical sector

#### 3.1 Electrotechnical qualifications

Respondents in Northern Ireland have a more optimistic view of training and a similar view of qualifications and preparedness of job applicants compared to the UK as a whole – see Table 2.

**Table 2 Views on qualifications – agreement levels UK wide and Northern Ireland**

	UK-wide	Northern Ireland
Job applicants typically have the skills we require of them to do the job well	58%	56%
Currently available qualifications fully reflect the demands of the job today	59%	60%
We are able to find suitable training in our area when we need it	69%	84%

Base variable: 460 to 462 (UK) and 25 (Northern Ireland) respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

#### 3.2 Current and future skills needs

Employers were asked to comment on their business’s current and future demand for a variety of technical skills. The results for the UK as a whole, and for Northern Ireland are presented in Table 3. It should be noted that, for the two sets of ‘current demand’ columns, three options were available to respondents (‘not needed right now’, ‘needed and we have this skill’, and ‘needed but we don’t have in the business’), but that the ‘not needed right now’ responses are omitted for clarity.

A discussion of the findings is presented in the main UK-wide report.

**Table 3 Current and future demand for technical skills – UK vs Northern Ireland**

Skill	Current demand – UK-wide		Current demand – Northern Ireland		Needed in 3 years – UK-wide	Needed in 3 years – Northern Ireland
	Needed and have skill	Needed but don't have skill	Needed and have skill	Needed but don't have skill		
Building Automatic Control Systems (BACS) design, installation & maintenance	16%	0.6%	24%	-	20%	29%
Direct electrical heating systems (e.g. storage heaters, UFH) design and installation	23%	0.6%	24%	-	38%	29%
Electric vehicle charging equipment (EVCE) installation	34%	2%	30%	10%	39%	40%
Electrical - High Voltage	35%	2%	32%	-	37%	45%
Electrical - Low Voltage	89%	1%	96%	-	88%	91%
Electrical Design	67%	2%	64%	-	69%	67%
Electrical Energy Storage Systems (EESS) design & installation	31%	2%	18%	-	39%	29%
Emergency lighting, installation & servicing	63%	0.5%	44%	-	64%	47%
Energy efficiency services including lighting and lamp replacement services, power factor correction etc.	45%	0.6%	18%	-	47%	35%
Fire detection and alarm system installation and servicing	51%	0.5%	53%	-	52%	50%
Heat pump installation and design	25%	2%	18%	-	31%	24%
Installation & maintenance of temporary and stand-by generator sets	28%	1%	18%	-	30%	29%
Installation of technologies associated with Smart-Buildings	20%	3%	33%	-	36%	29%
Installation, servicing & maintenance of security systems including intruder/controlled access and CCTV	46%	0.8%	58%	-	44%	58%

Lighting systems installation & maintenance including Highway and Street lighting	47%	0.6%	33%	-	49%	41%
Lightning protection systems design & installation	46%	0.9%	35%	-	50%	35%
Renewable energy systems design & installation	32%	6%	38%	6%	44%	53%

Employers were asked a similar question in relation to their current and future demand for a variety of generic skills. The results for the UK as a whole, and for Northern Ireland are presented in Table 4. It should be noted that, for the two sets of ‘current demand’ columns, three options were available to respondents (‘not needed right now’, ‘needed and we have this skill’, and ‘needed but we don’t have in the business’), but that the ‘not needed right now’ responses are omitted for clarity.

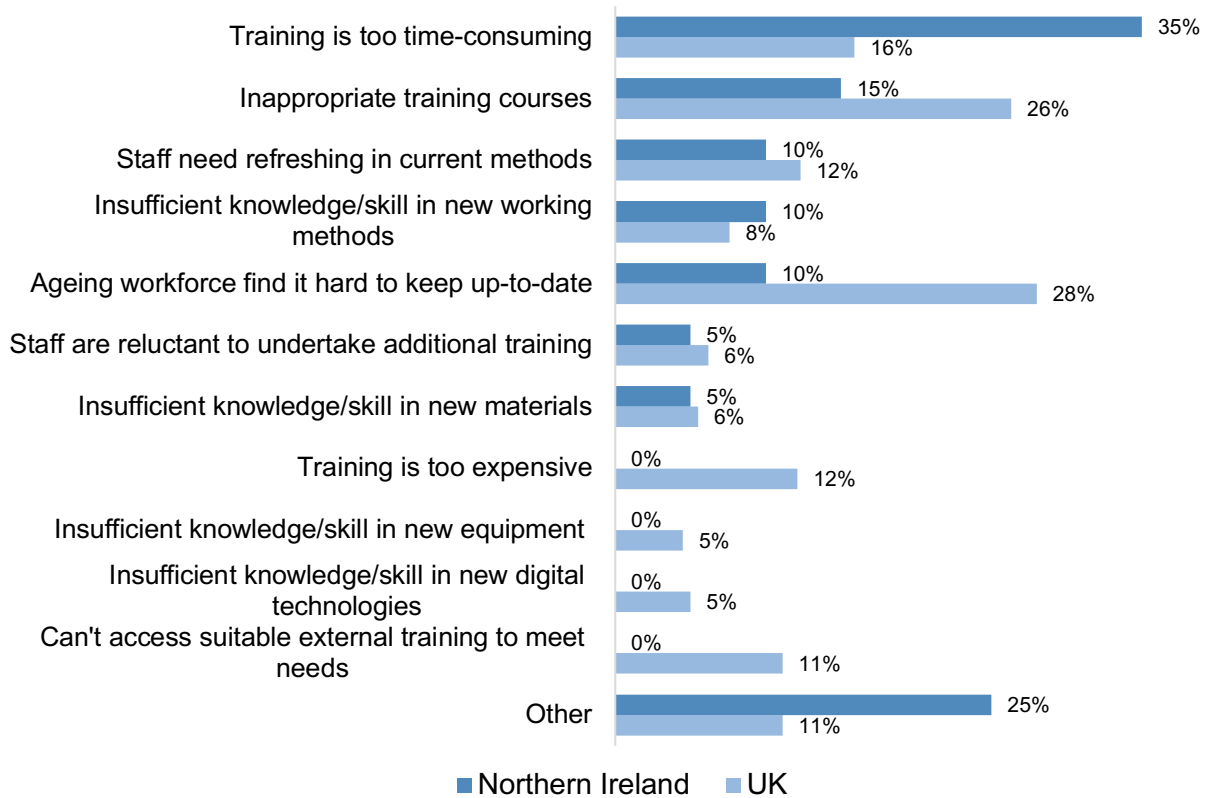
**Table 4 Current and future demand for generic skills – UK vs Northern Ireland**

Skill	Current demand – UK-wide		Current demand – Northern Ireland		Needed in 3 years – UK-wide	Needed in 3 years – Northern Ireland
	Needed and have skill	Needed but don’t have skill	Needed and have skill	Needed but don’t have skill		
Management and leadership	97%	0.4%	100%	-	93%	100%
Maths	96%	-	96%	-	93%	100%
Problem solving	97%	0.4%	100%	-	94%	100%
Project and time management	95%	0.7%	100%	-	93%	100%
Spoken English	97%	-	96%	-	94%	100%
Team working and communication	98%	0.2%	100%	-	94%	100%
Written English	98%	-	100%	-	94%	100%
Client engagement	94%	2%	96%	-	93%	96%
Digital literacy (e.g. using the cloud / other platforms)	78%	7%	86%	-	94%	88%

The main perceived reasons for skills deficiencies in the region include (see Figure 2):

- training is too time-consuming (mentioned by 35% vs 16% in UK as a whole), and
- inappropriate training courses (15% vs 26%).

**Figure 2 Perceived reasons for skills deficiencies**



Base: 422 (UK) and 20 (Northern Ireland) respondents (multiple responses permitted).  
Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

## 4. Future of the electrotechnical sector

### 4.1 Take-up of technology

The main perceived issues that organisations in the region face in adopting new technologies and processes include (see Figure 3):

- a lack of readily available training courses (mentioned by 8% vs 11% in UK as a whole),
- a lack of finance/resources (8% vs 18%), and
- not seeing it as relevant to business (8% vs 4%).

**Figure 3 Perceived challenges in adopting new technologies - UK vs Northern Ireland**



Base: 456 (UK) and 33 (Northern Ireland) respondents (multiple responses permitted).  
Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

There appears to be a slightly lower level of concern in Northern Ireland compared to the wider UK, but still at a substantial level, that sector-wide take-up of new technology and processes is relatively modest (28% agree or strongly agree, vs 40% in UK) – Table 5.

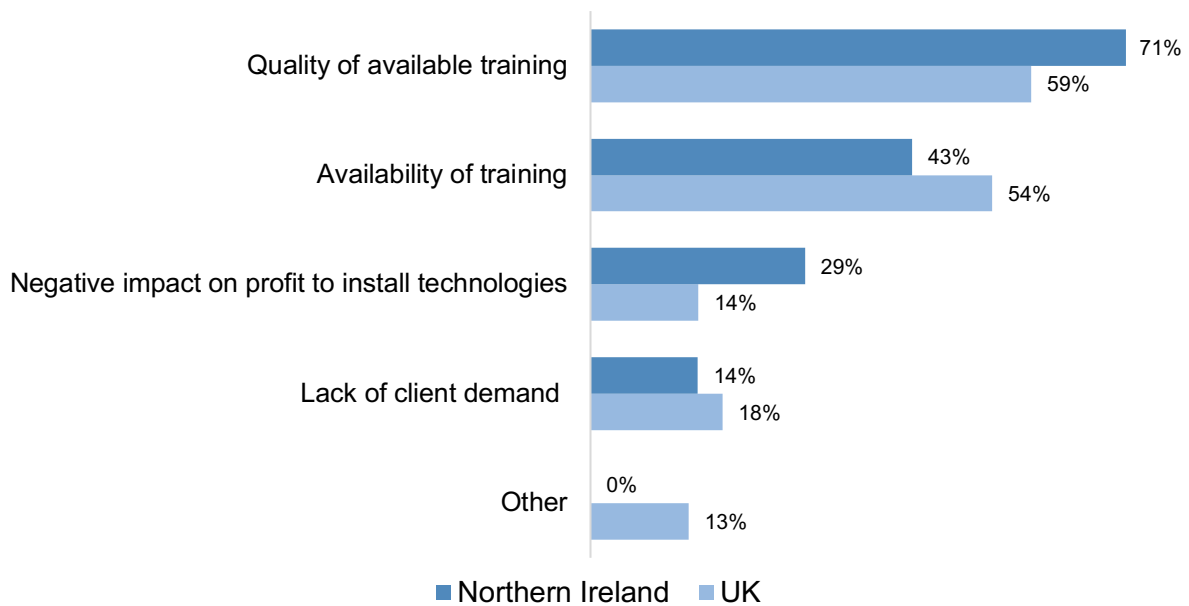
**Table 5 Sector-wide take-up of new technology is relatively modest – UK vs Northern Ireland**

	UK-wide	Northern Ireland
Strongly agree	9%	8%
Agree	31%	20%
Disagree	60%	72%
Strongly disagree	0.5%	-

Base: 399 (UK) and 25 (Northern Ireland) respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

Those agreeing or strongly agreeing were asked why they believe take-up has been relatively modest. Reasons generally reflect those of the wider UK with the most common reason being the quality of available training (71%) – Figure 4 (NB: small sample size).

**Figure 4 Perceived reasons for modest take-up of technology – UK vs Northern Ireland**



Base: 153 (UK) and 7 (Northern Ireland) respondents (multiple responses permitted).  
Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

## 4.2 Workforce projection

Companies anticipate that, in five years’ time, they will employ a slightly lower average of staff – 10 staff (compared to nine now). This includes both PAYE direct staff and ‘others’ such as self-employed. Discounting the latter group, the future average (mean) size is anticipated to be nine (compared to eight now), indicating a slight expansion in company size anticipated in the future for the region.

Compared to the UK as a whole, anticipated increase in demand for personnel in the region in the next two to three years is lower for all relevant roles – see Table 6. While most surveyed employers believe demand will remain steady, approximately equal proportions believe demand will increase or decrease for each role, except qualified electricians and apprentices where demand is anticipated to increase more than decrease.

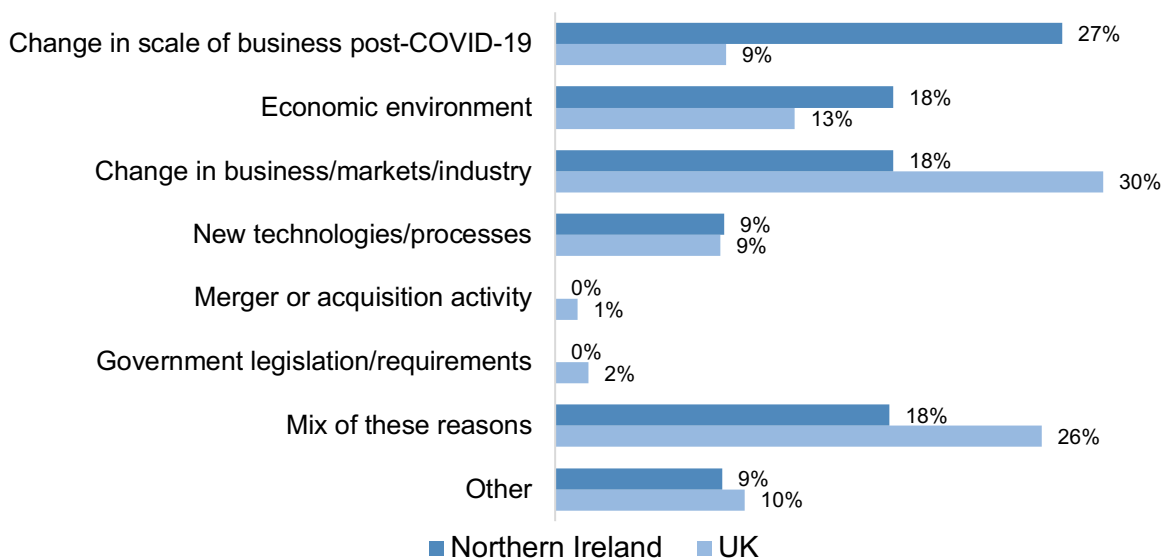
**Table 6 Anticipated demand for personnel change – UK vs Northern Ireland**

		Decrease	Remain the same	Increase
Managers and supervisors	UK-wide	4%	88%	8%
	Northern Ireland	4%	92%	4%
Design engineers and estimators	UK-wide	5%	81%	14%
	Northern Ireland	4%	92%	4%
Qualified electricians	UK-wide	5%	41%	54%
	Northern Ireland	4%	72%	24%
Apprentices	UK-wide	6%	45%	49%
	Northern Ireland	4%	71%	25%
Project supporting roles	UK-wide	5%	82%	13%
	Northern Ireland	4%	92%	4%
Fire and security system installers	UK-wide	7%	82%	11%
	Northern Ireland	4%	92%	4%
Electrical labourers	UK-wide	5%	64%	31%
	Northern Ireland	4%	91%	4%

Base variable: 390 to 452 (UK) and 23 to 25 (Northern Ireland) respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

Respondents foreseeing an increase or decrease in demand for any role were asked for the main reason for this change. The most common reason given is a change in scale of business post-Covid-19 (27% vs 9% for the UK) – see Figure 5.

**Figure 5 Main reason for change in demand – UK vs Northern Ireland**



Base: 325 (UK) and 11 (Northern Ireland) respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.

Compared to the UK as a whole, anticipated demand for personnel in the region in the next three years as a direct result of new technologies and processes is lower for all roles, but is anticipated to increase more than decrease for skilled and unskilled workers and apprentices/trainees – see Table 7.

**Table 7 Anticipated demand for job roles as a direct result of new technologies – UK vs Northern Ireland**

		Decrease	Remain the same	Increase
Directors and managers	UK-wide	5%	89%	7%
	Northern Ireland	4%	96%	-
Supervisors	UK-wide	5%	83%	12%
	Northern Ireland	4%	92%	4%
Project personnel	UK-wide	5%	76%	19%
	Northern Ireland	4%	96%	-
Skilled e.g. qualified electricians	UK-wide	6%	41%	53%
	Northern Ireland	4%	63%	33%
Unskilled e.g. labourer	UK-wide	6%	60%	33%
	Northern Ireland	4%	83%	13%
Apprentices/trainees	UK-wide	8%	44%	47%
	Northern Ireland	4%	58%	38%

Base variable: 396 to 442 (UK) and 24 (Northern Ireland) respondents. Source: Pye Tait Consulting 2023.