

EMPLOYMENT & INCENTIVES

Skilled Migrant Workers in the NI Tech Sector – *attracting and retaining highly skilled workers within the Tech sector in NI*

2020 was another great year for the Tech sector in Northern Ireland, 2021 has started positively and yet there still remains a deficit of skilled workers.

While the education sector continues to play catch up with industry need, the Tech sector, more than any other sector, is reliant on migrant workers. Employers have an opportunity to address the current shortage of workers through the Skilled Worker visa, and should be aware of the recently announced Elite Visa route that is set to be introduced by spring 2022.

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Introduction

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions that were put in place to deal with the virus, the Tech sector in Northern Ireland has continued to boom, with 2020 being the best year yet for technology companies as they posted a total turnover of over £3bn. As other sectors have taken a hit, the Tech sector has been able to benefit from the pandemic as more people and businesses increase their reliance on technology solutions. However, even with workers in the Tech sector in Northern Ireland earning £10,000 more than the average salary, the sector still has the most vacancies of any industry in the region. Employers should be aware of current arrangements and future plans to address the deficit of skilled workers within the Tech sector.

1. Skilled Worker visa: shortage occupations

One of the usual requirements for obtaining a Skilled Worker visa is that the applicant must be paid 100% of the job's usual going rate. However, where a role is recognised as being in shortage, an employee can be eligible for the Skilled Worker visa without having to be paid the full 100%. There are a number of Tech sector jobs on the shortage list, including programmers, software development professionals and web design professionals. For these roles, the worker will be eligible for the visa if they are being paid at least 80% of the usual going rate. Other changes to the immigration regime that streamline sponsorship of migrants mean this is an increasingly viable and attractive option.

2. Elite Visa route

Following the UK's exit from the EU, the Elite Visa route was announced with the aim of driving innovation in the UK within the fastest growing sectors, including Tech. With this route, an applicant with a job offer from a UK scale-up will be able to move onto a fast track for a visa. The applicant will not require sponsorship under a license or third-party endorsement. The scheme, which has

been compared to the previous Highly Skilled Migrant Programme and the current Global Talent Visa, is set to be introduced by **March 2022**.

Recommendations

As the Tech sector in Northern Ireland continues to grow and local universities are not yet close to meeting recruitment *demand*, it is unlikely that the current shortage of skilled workers will last. If Tech employers wish to attract skilled workers from abroad, they should be aware of the Skilled Worker option and aggressively take advantage of its placement on the shortage occupation list.

Although not yet introduced, the announcement of the '**Elite Visa scheme**' should be reassuring to local scale-up businesses that opportunities will emerge to keep them on the front-foot with attracting the best talent and maintaining a competitive edge. Once the Elite Visa route is introduced, it is likely that many employers and workers will want to make use of it as soon as possible. At this stage, it would be worthwhile for employers to become familiar with the visa process and keep up-to-date with any changes so as to ensure they are best placed to attain the best talent when the scheme opens.

Key contacts

If you need further information on the process of either of the above schemes, or would like to remain updated on the Elite Visa route, please contact a member of our Immigration team.



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