



# Office associate professionals: skills opportunities and challenges (2016)

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## Summary

In 2005–2015 office associate professionals, or business and administration associate professionals' employment grew by about 12%.

## Key facts

- The qualification requirements for business and administration associate professionals are rising.
- The skills required for business and administration associate professionals have changed considerably in recent years due to globalisation and organisational and technological change.
- The five key skills identified for this occupation are problem solving, communication, teamwork, planning and learning.
- In 2005–2015 business and administration associate professionals' employment grew by about 12%.
- In the following decade, they will continue to be one of the fastest growing occupational groups across

the European Union in terms of employment (7% of increase, almost 1.2 million of new jobs).

- They are a **shortage** occupation in six EU Member States, while four EU countries report them as a **surplus** occupation.
- The increasing penetration of ICT and ongoing digitalisation stress the need for ICT skills of this occupational group across Member States and economic sectors.

### Who are they?

The business and administration associate professionals<sup>1</sup> perform mostly technical tasks connected with the practical application of knowledge relating to financial accounting and transaction matters, mathematical calculations, human resource development, selling and buying financial instruments, specialised secretarial tasks, and enforcing or applying relevant government rules. Also included are activities relating to the provision of business services, such as customs clearance and buying/selling of real estate.

The five main subgroups for this occupational group are:

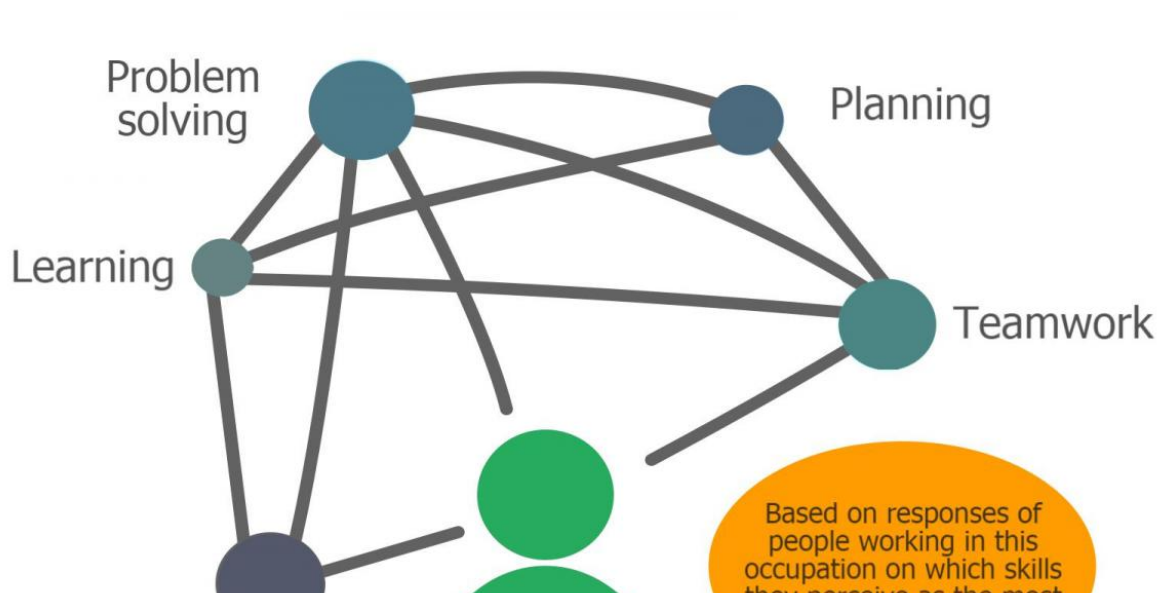
- financial and mathematical associate professionals;
- sales and purchasing agents and brokers;
- business services agents;
- administrative and specialised secretaries;
- and regulatory government associate professionals.

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### What skills do they need?

According to [Cedefop's European skills and jobs survey \(ESJS\)](#) the key 5 skills for business and administration associate professionals are **problem solving, communication, teamwork, planning** and learning. These skills could support employees in this occupation to also tackle anticipated future skill challenges (see drivers of change below).

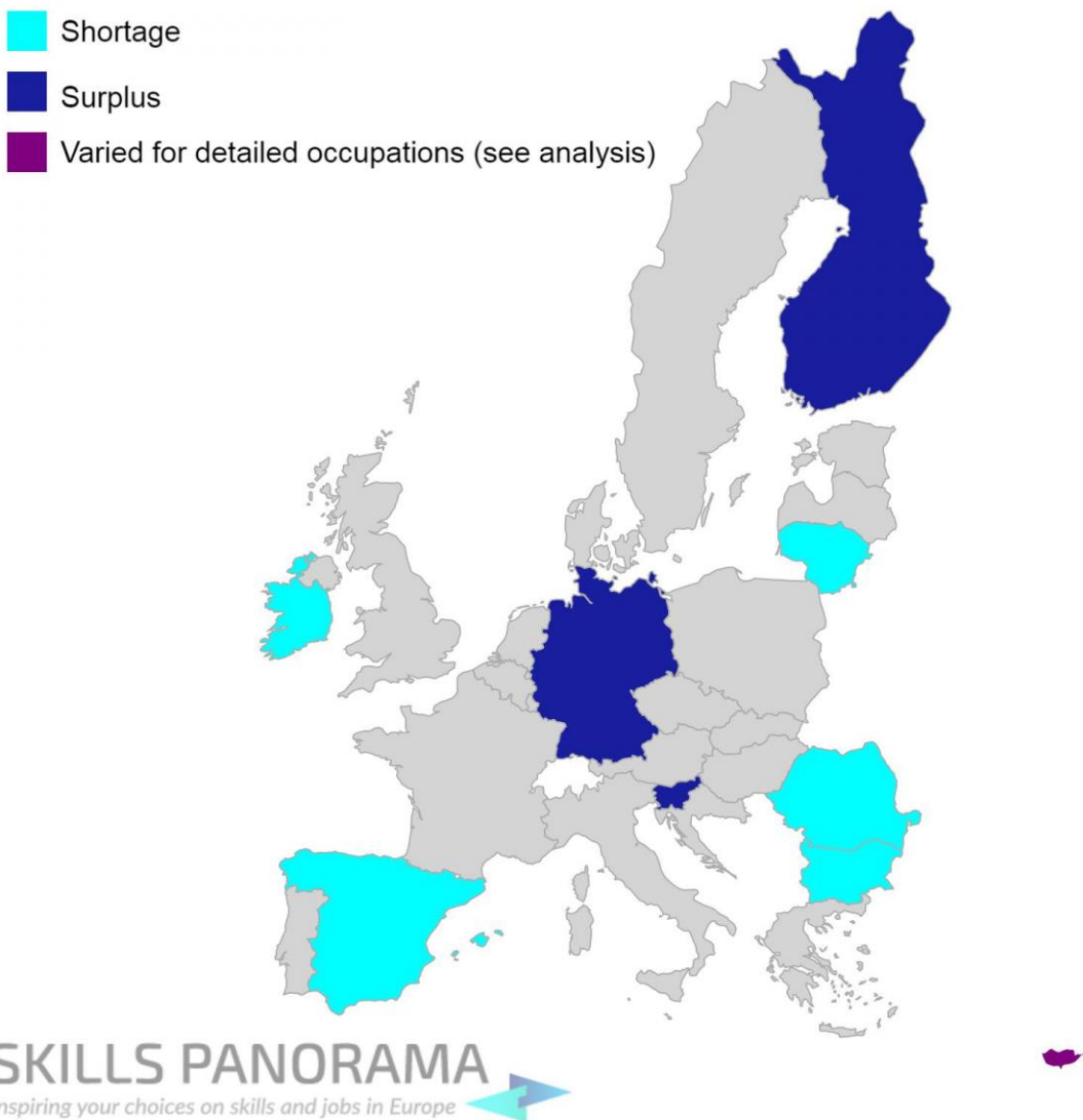
**Figure 1: Most important skills required for business and administration associate professionals**



### Where are they mostly in demand?

The labour market dynamics for this occupation differ across EU Member States:

**Figure 2: Shortages and surpluses for business and administration associate professionals across the EU**



According to [Cedefop](#), business and administration associate professionals are highly demanded (i.e. they are in [shortage](#)) in Bulgaria, Ireland, Spain, Cyprus, Lithuania and Romania. Skills [surplus](#) is instead reported in Germany, Slovenia, Finland (and Cyprus, but only of *sales and purchasing agents and brokers*).

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## What are the trends for the future? <sup>2</sup>

In 2005–2015 business and administration associate professionals' employment grew by about 12%. In the following decade, they will continue to be one of the fastest growing occupational groups across the European Union in terms of employment (7% of increase, almost 1.2 million of new jobs). In addition, almost 6.5 million vacated jobs will have to be filled because of people leaving to other jobs or out of the labour market (replacement demand <sup>3</sup>). More information can be found [here](#).

The qualification requirements for business and administration associate professionals are rising. Till 2025, almost 50% of these professionals will hold high qualification, exceeding the previously dominant share of those medium-qualified.

Unsurprisingly, about two thirds of business and administration associate professionals are employed within [business services](#), with 'wholesale and retail trade', 'financial and insurance activities' and 'legal, accounting and consulting activities' being the key employers. These three sub-sectors shall create almost half of new jobs in 2015–2025 period. On the contrary, job losses for business associate professionals are expected at '[public administration and defence](#)', which may be attributed to expenditure reduction and ongoing digitalisation of public administration services.

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## Which drivers of change will affect their skills?

The skills required for business and administration associate professionals have changed considerably in recent years due to globalisation and organisational and technological change.

- **The increasing penetration of ICT and ongoing digitalisation** stress the need for ICT skills of this occupational group across Member States and economic sectors. <sup>4</sup> Some formerly important skills are getting obsolete by the development of "fintech <sup>5</sup>", related to many routine tasks in financial, accounting and secretarial activities <sup>6</sup>. Technological developments such as "fintech" drive demand for emerging skills, as knowledge of particular software is essential in finance, trade, and commerce. Moreover, there is a widespread need for business and administration associate professionals to understand and deploy an array of new technologies in the context of their organisation. The professionals in this occupation that work with information and data analysis will also need sufficient skills to keep abreast with the greater use of mobile devices (for example, from their clients), which will be able to collect more and richer information and data. This has implications for skills requirements in the use of communications and analytical technologies and, importantly, the analysis of resultant information and data. <sup>7</sup>
- As employees mainly of business services, business and administration associate professionals need to cope with the challenges posed by ever-increasing **globalisation and competition**, especially in the exports arena. Growing international business interconnections also require that these associate professionals improve their skills related to cultural awareness, foreign languages, international logistics, foreign regulatory and quality assurance frameworks etc.
- **Financial and environmental regulations have increased and the trend will continue.** In the aftermath of 2008 financial crisis, Europe went through a revision of its financial regulation system <sup>8</sup>,

but several objectives still lie ahead (e.g. the banking union)<sup>9</sup>. As one fifth of business and administration associate professionals work for 'legal, accounting and consulting' and 'financial and insurance activities' sectors, constant update of their financial skills is necessary. Environmental regulation also continues to grow,<sup>10</sup> affecting workers' skills in wholesale retail trade, real estate activities and construction.

- **The focus on better and "smart" regulation** is a priority for the European Union<sup>11</sup>. As almost one out of five business and administration associate professionals works in the public sector, the relevant changes will require technical and sector-specific knowledge of new legislation, as well as soft skills such as communication and use of social media that enable the dissemination of legislative changes to particular audiences or the wider public.

"While the monitoring of compliance in the financial services sector has traditionally been outsourced with the introduction of these new standards there is more caution in the provision of such services which are more likely in the future to be laid at the feet of the *company secretary*. (...) With this increased focus on corporate governance, the role of the company secretary has been extended such that the secretary is now seen as the guardian of the company's compliance with legislative requirements and best practice.

Source: [The changing role of the company secretary](#)<sup>12</sup>

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## How can these skill needs be met?

The upsurge of digitalisation in the main employers of this occupation (such as financial and insurance activities, wholesale and retail) stress the importance of continuous and high quality on-the-job and in house training to upgrade and sharpen general IT skills or competences in handling sector or job specific ICT solutions (such as in 'fintech'). The importance of employee training in ICT, regulations frameworks etc. due to emerging trends are already recognised particularly in sectors, such as banking<sup>13</sup>.

Particularly for those working in human resource development, skills pertinent to new forms of work and organisation (e.g. teleworking), as well as to recruiting and retaining non-EU citizens/migrants will be useful to ripe benefits from technological and geopolitical developments.

If strengthening of cross-sector knowledge and skills like ICT and languages is desirable, a challenge may lie in correct identification of more sector specific skills (e.g. a specific set of regulations). Sharing of best practices at European level would provide useful advice to business and administration associate professionals. A framework could be designed and implemented for a regular exchange of best practices across different Member States.<sup>14</sup> Another option could be an improved sharing of best practices collected through European projects, which could provide tailored solutions for different sectors, sub-occupational groups, and territories. This could be especially useful especially for SMEs, given their vulnerability to international competition due to skill shortages.<sup>15</sup>

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## References

- [1] Defined as ILO ISCO 08 group 33 business and administration professionals. ILO (2012) [International Standard Classification of Occupations ISCO-08](#). More information on the occupation can be found [here](#).
- [2] 2016 Cedefop forecast.
- [3] The need to replace workers leaving a profession for various reasons, such as retirement. For more information on replacement demand and how it drives employment across sectors, can be found on the Skills Panorama [here](#).
- [4] European Commission 2013, *Definition of a Research and Innovation Policy Leveraging Cloud Computing and IoT Combination – Final Report*.
- [5] “Fintech” is a blanket term for technologies affecting the financial services.
- [6] Frey, B C & Osborne, M 2015, *Technology at Work. The Future of Innovation and Employment*, Oxford Martin School and Citi.
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- [8] European Commission, *Banking and Finance, Progress of financial reforms* accessed 14 June 2016.
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