SOLUTIONS FOR WORKFORCE CHALLENGES:

The Impact of the Greater Digital Skills Program

Queensland
Workforce Strategy
2022–2032

Jobs Queensland

GW3
GREATER WHITSUNDAY ALLIANCE
MACKAY ▶ ISAAC ▶ WHITSUNDAY
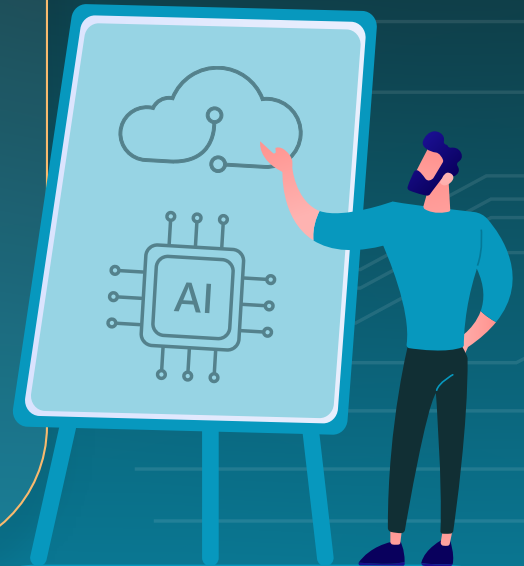
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Greater Digital Skills Program is an innovative, region-specific training initiative aimed at supporting small to medium enterprises (SMEs) within the Greater Whitsunday region to enhance their digital capabilities and address workforce challenges.

Through a series of **Masterclasses and Mentoring Integration Sessions**, the program provided hands-on technology experiences, expert mentorship, and peer-to-peer learning.

- **Masterclasses:** Practical, face-to-face workshops held within each Local Government Area (LGA), focusing on key digital skills.

- **Mentoring Integration Sessions:** Small group and one-on-one online mentoring provided real-time guidance for implementing digital strategies.

- **Community of Practice:** Businesses had opportunities to connect, share experiences and seek advice on digital adoption and growth.

The program successfully delivered three Masterclasses and multiple online mentoring sessions, equipping businesses with practical digital tools to improve operational efficiency and competitiveness.

The Greater Digital Skills Program is proudly supported and funded by the Queensland Government through Jobs Queensland.

The Greater Whitsunday Alliance team live and work in Mackay Isaac Whitsunday region and, long before these places were known by their colonial names, they were known as Yuwibara, Koinmerburra Barada Bana, Wiri, Birri, Ngaro, Gia, Juru, Jangga and Birriah respectively. We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the Greater Whitsunday region, and their continuing connection to the land, water and community. We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

OBJECTIVES AND GOALS

🎯 Original Objectives

Enhance Digital Capabilities

- Provide businesses with hands-on training and expert mentorship.
- Support integration of digital technologies to improve efficiency and competitiveness.

Community of Practice (CoP)

- Foster collaboration and knowledge-sharing among businesses.
- Create an ongoing network to support continuous digital skill development.

Workforce Development

- Address the demand for digital skills in the region.
- Upskill local businesses to meet current and future digital workforce needs.

Industry Resilience

- Strengthen business adaptability by accelerating digital adoption.
- Improve long-term sustainability through enhanced digital skills.

Objectives Achieved

- **25 businesses enrolled in the program**, exceeding initial expectations.
- **Masterclasses successfully delivered** in Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday LGAs.
- **Businesses engaged in online integration mentoring**, with a mix of small group and one-on-one sessions.
- **Increased digital confidence** among actively engaged participants, particularly in AI adoption.
- **Networking and collaboration opportunities** were highly valued, with the chance to learn from other participants, build networks and explore collaboration opportunities.
- **Expanded regional upskilling opportunities** by having a digital expert in the region to enable additional training opportunities for local networks.

Unachieved Objectives

- **VR Implementation Support:** Despite strong interest in the Virtual Reality Masterclass, no participants proceeded with one-on-one VR implementation support sessions.

This structured approach allowed businesses to explore and integrate digital tools at their own pace, ensuring an uplift in digital capability across the region.

OUTCOMES AND BENEFITS

Expected Outcomes

Strengthened digital capabilities among SMEs.

Increased workforce readiness for digital transformation.

Established a Community of Practice to support ongoing digital upskilling.

Improved business adaptability and competitiveness.

Actual Outcomes and Benefits

- **Enhanced Digital Skills:** Participants developed practical knowledge in AI, automation and digital security, improving business operations.

- **Time and Cost Efficiencies:** Businesses reported time savings through AI adoption and digital tool implementation.

- **Networking and Peer Learning:** Participants valued connections made through the program, leading to collaboration opportunities and shared learning.

- **Regional Digital Growth:** The program contributed to a growing digital capability in the region, with local business networks benefiting from the expertise brought in by the program.

- **Sustained Engagement:** Many participants continued to apply digital skills learned beyond the program, integrating new technologies into their business models.

This program demonstrated an uplift in digital capabilities, reinforcing the need for ongoing digital skills development initiatives in the region.

Digital Uplift*

EOIs Received

39 SMEs	Mackay	23
	Isaac	8
	Whitsunday	8

SMEs Accepted
25 (exceeding original target of 21)
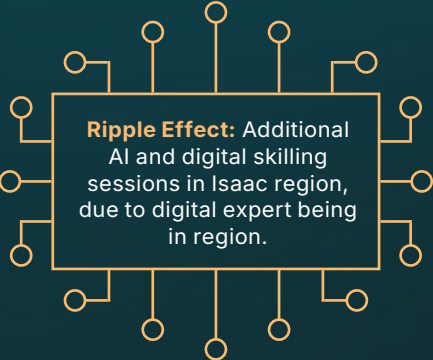
Participant Satisfaction
4.83 out of 5 (Target 4.5)

Digital Capability Uplift

22% — **Massive leap forward** – from unsure to confident using AI for multiple tasks.

55% — **Big improvement** – now understand where AI fits and how to use it.

22% — **Making progress** – experimenting more and feeling less overwhelmed.

1% — **Still early** – see potential, need more time.

Masterclass Attendance (Average) Target 15 → **Actual 22**

Mentoring Session Attendance (Average) Target 10 → **Actual 12.5**

Ripple Effect: Additional AI and digital skilling sessions in Isaac region, due to digital expert being in region.

*Based on midpoint data from the six-month report.

Greater Digital Skills Timeline

May 2024 – Planning and preparation commenced.

August 2024 - Digital Futurist Forum and Whitsundays Online Launch – call for Expressions of Interest.

5 September 2024 – SMEs offered places - AI Masterclasses Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday.

October 2024 - Online Integration Mentoring commenced.

November 2024 – Virtual Reality Masterclasses Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday – online mentoring continued.

Early December 2024 – Final online mentoring for 2024.

February 2025 – Recommenced online mentoring.

March 2025 – Review and Reimagine Masterclasses Mackay, Whitsunday and Online – online mentoring continued.

April 2025 – Online mentoring.

May 2025 – Program graduation event.

Topics Covered in the Program

Masterclass Themes

- **AI and Automation** – Understanding artificial intelligence applications, automation tools and practical implementation in business.

- **Virtual Reality and Emerging Technologies** – Exploring the potential business applications of VR and extended reality (XR).

- **Emerging Technologies and Tech Review Framework** – Wearable tech, Advance sensors, Bio medical, Bio mechanical. Reimagine the framework for tech review and update implementation.

MENTORING INTEGRATION SESSIONS

Participants explored a wide range of topics throughout the program. Key themes included:

⊞ AI Tools & Automation

- ChatGPT and other AI assistants.
- AI for content creation, SEO and email responses.
- AI tools for timesaving and document development.

📱 Digital Marketing & Social Media

- Canva for Business (video, branding, interactive elements).
- Facebook and LinkedIn masterclasses.
- Marketing funnels and email marketing strategies.

🛒 E-Commerce & Online Presence

- E-commerce integration and payments.
- Creating online shops and product descriptions.
- Automating bookings and managing Google Calendars.

🔒 Security, Admin & Workflow

- Google Admin & Security best practices.
- Client info management and digital audits.
- Streamlining admin with AI, Excel, Microsoft Forms.

📈 Business Efficiency & Planning

- AI for policies, grants and strategic documents.
- Inventory management and spreadsheets.
- Project and event planning with AI.

The integration mentoring sessions provided hands-on experience and personalised guidance, ensuring businesses could apply digital skills directly to their operations.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

Key Takeaways from Participants

- **AI is a game changer:** Many participants referred to AI as their "best assistant", enabling them to streamline content creation and administrative tasks.

- **Business growth through digital tools:** Participants reported significant improvements in social media engagement, website functionality and process automation.

- **Practical learning was valued:** Hands-on training and mentoring helped participants implement digital tools in real time.

- **Networking and community impact:** Many SMEs benefited from peer discussions, sharing insights and experiences that strengthened their businesses.

Testimonials

- *"I used to be intimidated by AI, now it's my best business tool!"* – Participant from Trading Tracks
- *"Canva and social media masterclasses helped me level up my brand presence."* – Small Business Owner, Cherish Hampers and Gifts
- *"This program saved me time and money—I now use AI to automate client responses and marketing."* – Participant from Move It Chiropractic

- *"The networking aspect was invaluable. Learning from others in the region helped shape my digital strategy."* – Participant from The Neighbourhood Hub

These reflections highlight the program's strong impact in increasing digital confidence and practical implementation of new technologies among regional SMEs.

Key Challenges and Adaptations

- **Participant Attendance & Engagement:** Business owners found it challenging to regularly attend sessions over the 9-month period. Adjustments to session formats, such as topic-focused group sessions and one-on-one mentoring, improved attendance.

- **Balancing Work Commitments:** Many SMEs struggled to prioritise digital upskills alongside daily business operations. More flexible scheduling or intensive short-term programs may improve future engagement.

- **Community & Peer Learning Value:** Participants highly value learning from and networking with other businesses. Future programs could formalise this element with structured networking or peer mentorship.

- **AI and Digital Tool Adoption:** Those who actively engaged reported significant time savings and increased efficiency, highlighting the value of practical, hands-on learning.

- **VR Implementation Interest vs. Action:** Despite enthusiasm during the VR Masterclass, businesses did not proceed with one-on-one support, suggesting a need for clearer implementation pathways.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMS

Shorter, More Intensive Training Blocks

Consider condensed training models to reduce long-term time commitments while maintaining learning effectiveness.

Structured Networking & Collaboration

Incorporate dedicated time and structured activities to strengthen business-to-business learning and support.

Hybrid Delivery Approach

Continue blending in-person and online sessions but explore more on-demand learning options for increased flexibility.

Implementation Support & Follow-Up

Provide ongoing post-program support to ensure businesses successfully integrate new skills and technologies.

By leveraging these insights, future programs can further enhance digital adoption, engagement and long-term business impact across the region.

PROJECT MANAGEMENT AND METHODOLOGY

The Greater Digital Skills Program was guided by a structured project management approach, led by GW3 in collaboration with key delivery partners.

Planning began with the creation of a detailed delivery timeline aligned with milestones from the original grant application. A dedicated Project Coordinator collaborated with the program delivery partners and managed day-to-day operations, communications and stakeholder engagement, ensuring strong alignment with program goals.

The program followed a hybrid delivery model, combining in-person Masterclasses with ongoing online mentoring, allowing for both broad participation and targeted individual support. The approach was iterative and responsive, with participant feedback used to refine session content and support needs in real time.

Close working relationships between GW3, facilitators, and local business networks helped ensure high-quality delivery across the Mackay, Isaac and Whitsunday LGAs.

RISK MANAGEMENT

The Greater Digital Skills Program incorporated a proactive and structured approach to risk management, with potential issues identified early and mitigations built into the program design.

Key risks included low engagement in early stages, facilitator or specialist unavailability and regional participation imbalances. These were addressed through strong stakeholder engagement, flexible scheduling and clear service agreements. Regular monitoring by the project team ensured emerging issues were quickly responded to, supporting program continuity and maintaining a high standard of delivery across all components.

CASE STUDIES

Cherish Hampers & Gifts

Business Overview

Cherish Hampers & Gifts is a Mackay-based business offering curated hampers filled with local products. The business focuses on supporting small producers and providing a premium gifting experience.

Challenges

- Needed more efficient marketing processes to manage large seasonal orders.
- Sought support in streamlining communication and managing client engagement.
- Required assistance in generating content and improving online sales strategies.

How the Program Helped

- Used ChatGPT to draft promotional emails and automate seasonal client communications.
- Developed Facebook and Instagram content plans using Canva and AI tools.
- Refined workflow to streamline bulk orders and integrate Square data with marketing tools.

Outcomes

- Reduced time spent on admin and marketing by integrating AI-generated content.
- Improved customer engagement through personalised campaigns.
- Successfully promoted seasonal campaigns and streamlined repeat client orders.
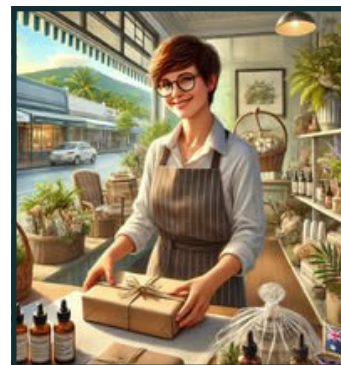
The photo above is an AI created image by Katrina of her business.

> **"AI is now like my paid and unpaid employee. It's helped me write product descriptions and plan ahead."**

Home Brewitt

Business Overview

Home Brewitt is a retail store based in Proserpine, specialising in home brewing equipment and supplies. They serve a niche market and offer products both in-store and online.

Challenges

- Time-consuming manual processes for uploading product descriptions.
- Needed better tools for organising customer information and marketing follow-up.
- Difficulty maintaining consistent digital marketing across channels.

How the Program Helped

- Used AI to generate over 200 product descriptions for beer, wine and spirit kits.
- Learned how to use ChatGPT to streamline inventory updates and social media content.
- Set up a system to automate reminders and booking links for in-store events.

Outcomes

- Time saved on creating SEO-optimised product descriptions.
- Enhanced online store appeal with clearer product listings and images.
- Developed customer journey email campaigns with AI support.

The photo above is an AI created image by Caroline of her business.

> **"I don't have a marketing team— but now I've got AI doing the heavy lifting."**

Barista Cliffe

Business Overview

Barista Cliffe is a mobile coffee van operated by Jarred Cliffe, a young entrepreneur based in Moranbah. The business services early-morning industrial sites and community locations across the Isaac region, offering high-quality coffee with a friendly local touch.

Challenges

Jarred was juggling early starts, event bookings and growing customer demand without streamlined systems. Managing bookings manually, tracking inventory and staying on top of email communications was time-consuming. With limited digital experience, Jarred was keen to learn how to use digital tools more effectively to manage and grow his business.

How the Program Helped

Through the Greater Digital Skills Program, Jarred gained hands-on experience with a range of tools to streamline operations:

- Set up and synced Google Calendar for scheduling and customer bookings.
- Learned how to create and schedule Facebook content to reach new and regular customers.
- Integrated Square and Gmail to manage customer orders and reduce inbox clutter.
- Used Square, AI and spreadsheets for inventory management.
- Built confidence using AI to support planning and reduce digital overwhelm.

> **"Now I use my calendar properly, manage my bookings better and spend less time checking emails. It just helps everything run smoother."**

Outcomes

Jarred now manages his calendar, bookings and online presence more efficiently. These tools have helped him reduce admin time, maintain consistent customer communication, and feel more in control of his schedule. His new systems have given him the confidence to grow his operations and look ahead to future business development.

The photo above is an AI created image by Jarred of his business.

GW3

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