

Agri-food employers launch careers roadshow

A series of events by Ireland's agri-food co-ops aims to help jobseekers improve their skills, writes Gareth Naughton

The agri-food co-ops have launched a new initiative to encourage jobseekers to give serious consideration to the opportunities the sector has to offer.

The Foot In The Door series of training and advisory events kicked off last week in Mallow, Co Cork, and will tour nationwide over the coming weeks, with the aim of giving jobseekers a clearer idea of the skills needed in a sector undergoing steady growth.

The Irish Co-operative Organisation Society (Icos) will spearhead the project, through its Skillnet programme, in tandem with some of the country's biggest agri-food organisations, including Dairgold Co-Op and Kerry Group.

The sector is casting the net wide in search of a wide range of skills, according to Billy Goodburn, co-operative development manager with Icos Skillnet.

"It is very broad," said Goodburn. "They could have general operative roles in dairy processing plants.

"If you look at the agri-store sector, they are looking for sales people, merchandising, store managers, assistant managers. There are a lot of seasonal roles that come up as well, depending on what is happening in the industry at the time."

Agri-food is important to the Irish economy. It is currently estimated to be worth €24 billion and it has experienced strong growth as exemplified by expansion projects such as Glanbia's €150 million



Billy Goodburn, ICOS Skillnet Manager; Simon Coveney, Minister for Agriculture; Ian Nuzum, chief executive of Skillnet; and Seamus O'Donohoe, chief executive of the Irish Co-Operative Organisation Society

investment in a 20-hectare facility at Belview on the Kilkenny-Waterford border.

It accounts for close to 10 per cent of the country's exports and 7.7 per cent of national employment. This rises to almost 10 per cent when you include employment in inputs, processing and marketing.

Icos member organisations have a combined turnover of about €14 billion, employing 12,000 people in Ireland, and a further 24,000 people overseas.

Its business is set to increase from 2015, with the abolition of milk quotas.

"Ireland's agriculture and food industry has a big contribution to make to the recovery and renewal of our economy," Icos president Barry O'Leary said recently at the organisation's annual general meeting.

"It has an equally big contribution to make to community wellbeing and the fabric of rural life, which means so much for our identity as Irish people.

"With a growing world population and continuing growth of about 2 per cent per annum in demand for food, Ireland is targeting a 50 per cent increase in agri-food output by 2020. With the abolition of milk quotas, producers are keen to expand their enterprises."

A quick look at the programmes available under the Icos Skillnet indicates the wide breadth of skills required in the sector, ranging from milking machine technicians to candidates in advanced merchandising.

Half-day Foot In The Door events are planned for Clonakilty, and Cork, as well as

Sligo, Dublin, Tipperary and Galway. Trainers will give introductory sessions on a range of skills aimed at helping jobseekers to access employment. The various co-ops

involved in the initiative will then be on hand to give participants an overview of their skills requirements.

"The biggest benefit of this is that the employers are in the room," said Goodburn. "They are saying 'listen guys, we understand that you are unemployed, we have jobs available and these are the different type of skills that our individual co-ops are looking for."

"If you want to apply for a job with us, this is what we are looking for in a CV, in a participant when they come in."

"They can give them that knowledge and they can say to them at the same time that, if they don't have that specific skill, you can go to Icos Skillnet and you can access these training courses free-of-charge to try to build up

skills in that area."

The initiative does not necessarily reflect a skills shortage in agri-food, according to Goodburn, but is more about an industry commitment to generate employment in rural communities.

"The co-op sector is growing at the moment. The likes of Glanbia, Dairygold and Kerry Group are all opening new plants over the next number of years," he said.

"They are saying, 'Look, rather than going to the big cities to recruit guys, we are rural and we are the smaller areas, let's try to attract people from those areas, let's show them what is available and support job creation locally.'"

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Ireland's agriculture and food industry has a big contribution to make

Pepper takes the heat out of rapid growth challenges

BY GARETH NAUGHTON

Rapid growth can be a double-edged sword. New business is always welcome, but it does not come without its own set of challenges, chief among them the need for new bodies to meet demand.

For service providers that require staff with specialised training and qualifications, this can be particularly difficult.

When Pepper Asset Servicing, a rapidly growing servicer of third-party loan portfolios, faced such a quandary, it opted to take control of the process.

It needed professionals with a very specific, accredited, product-adviser qualification in loans so, instead of relying solely on the availability of qualified candidates on the jobs market, Pepper teamed up with the Institute of Banking and created a bespoke APA Intensive programme to get recruits trained and ready to work after one month.

This APA "boot camp" means Pepper has been able to cast the net wider to find suitable staff, according to its chief executive, Paul Doddrell.

This is particularly important given that much of the company's rapid expansion is happening at offices in Shannon, Co Clare.

"There has been a lot of discussion about [what happens] after loan portfolios are sold, whether they are still regulated," said Doddrell. "We have always said that if we are servicing a loan portfolio, we will follow the relevant codes.

"As a result, it is important that we have the APA qualification for the appropriate positions.

"One of our challenges is that operating in the Dublin, finding staff with the APA qualifications is relatively straightforward, but being based in Shannon for the main customer operations means that the talent pool with APA is not necessarily there.

"That is why we hooked up with the Institute of Banking to do something innovative to plug the gap that we saw there," Doddrell said.

Pepper employs 220 people, the bulk of whom are based in Shannon. The company expanded the office space there in April, having secured several new contracts and announced 100



Paul Doddrell of Pepper

new jobs across its mortgage and commercial loans business last month.

"We had 5,500 unique visitors to our careers website in a week when we announced the jobs. Multiple hundreds of CVs came in, either directly or through recruitment agencies," he said.

The chief benefit of the bespoke programme means that recruitment is not limited to people who already have an APA in loans.

A total of 16 people have already completed the programme, and 20 now being trained.

Both new recruits and existing employees who want to up-skill can take part in the training.

They take four weeks' paid leave to complete the programme, which combines face-to-face lectures, supervised e-learning and self-directed learning.

Investing in a tailored, condensed programme made sense for firms like Pepper, Doddrell said, as it negated the risk involved in holding out to recruit qualified candidates.

"When you are in a position of expansion, you have to deliver a first-class service to your clients, so it is important that you have the staff ready and trained and they are adequately skilled to do the job," he said.

"The danger of the long game is that your new client mandate is awarded, and then suddenly you do not have the resources available.

"As a service provider, you can damage your reputation because you have taken too much on and you have not been adequately resourced, and that is not good for the customer or the ultimate client.

"This is potentially a more expensive way of doing it, but it de-risks the situation."

People Problems

Relationship Breakdown

RTE presenter fails to prove discrimination



Gerard Flynn

Employees who fail to secure promotion, or roles they are interested in, can come to believe that they have suffered discrimination in the workplace.

Proving that there has been discriminatory behaviour is, however, far from easy, as a prominent female broadcaster on RTE Radio 1 recently discovered.

When Frances Shanahan was appointed to a full-time, fixed-term, staff position with RTE in 1998, she felt that she had not been appointed on a salary that reflected her experience, or was in line with comparable radio reporters.

From 1989 to 1999, Shanahan was designated as a reporter/presenter, but she was working as a producer on the Farm News and Farm Week programmes.

She maintained that, in 2004, she was not consulted about changes in her role in RTE's agriculture department. Two years later, further changes were announced without consultation which, she claimed, favoured a younger, male colleague.

In November 2009, it was proposed that Shanahan be appointed stand-by presenter for Countrywide.

Three months later, she joined the Countrywide team, but claimed she was not given a meaningful role. Interviews and features she had worked on and recorded were put on hold, and others were edited and shortened unnecessarily, she maintained.

Then, in January 2011, she claimed she was passed over and not afforded the opportunity to present Countrywide when the regular presenter was on leave.

Instead, Radio 1 went outside the RTE organisation for a stand-in presenter, giving the job to someone with less radio experience, who was also younger than the complainant.

Supporting her claim for discrimination on grounds of gender and age, Shanahan also

stated that, during the 1990s, when she was a "reporter/presenter", according to her contract, she actually worked as a producer on Farm News and Farm Week.

In 1999, she also took over duties of the departing producer-in-charge of agriculture programmes, training staff, paying freelance contributors and taking care of administrative work.

She did receive a pay rise, but said that this did not recognise her experience as a producer/presenter, and that she should have been on the producer-in-charge scale, but was denied this because of gender discrimination by the radio station's head of regions.

Shanahan further complained of ongoing discrimination when, in 2009, as a consequence of being sidelined, she was assigned to the role of researcher on the Derek Mooney Show. Only after she had protested, she said, was she restored to a role on Countrywide and delivering reports for Drivetime.

RTE management claimed that Shanahan's case could not be decided, as more than six months had elapsed before she made a formal complaint

to the Equality Tribunal under employment equality legislation.

Her only "in-time" complaint was that of having been passed over in January 2011, and not allowed to present Countrywide when the regular presenter was on leave and an outside presenter was instead taken on. Only if this incident was discriminatory could earlier related incidents have been considered to play any part in a chain of discriminatory actions.

RTE management told the equality officer in the case, Hugh Lonsdale, that it operated a four-level structure in radio: a programme editor; a producer-in-charge; radio producers; and finally, reporters and presenters.

Shanahan had always been employed in the latter capacity and had never completed a radio producer training course, RTE said.

While the station said that it had used a younger woman as an outside presenter for Countrywide, it added that this had been done only after it failed to secure the services of a man roughly the same age as Shanahan.

Likewise, though she was

an experienced, knowledgeable and respected reporter/presenter, Shanahan had not been considered suitable, by the station's editorial board, to present an hour-long, live radio programme back in 2004 and 2009.

In addition, the station's management said, the man had a "strong voice" and was better able to carry a 60-minute broadcast. It contended, therefore, that being passed over in 2011 was merely a confirmation of decisions taken in 2004 and 2009.

Shanahan's complaint of discrimination on gender and age grounds failed, as the person taken on to present the Countrywide programme was a woman - the same gender - and the man RTE management had tried to get to do the job in the first place had been about the same age as her.

Therefore, it was found that she had failed to provide prima facie evidence of discrimination on equality grounds, despite feeling hard done by over many years.

Gerald Flynn is an employment specialist with Align Management Solutions in Dublin. Email gfflynn@alignmanagement.net

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■ Ronan Nolan is the new president of Chartered Accountants Ireland. He has been senior partner and head of corporate finance at Deloitte since 2009, having spent 26 years as a partner in the firm's audit and advisory department.



■ Airsynergy has a new non-executive director. Ciaran O'Brien was chief executive of Wind Capital Group in the US for four years up to 2012. Before that, he was Airticity's chief financial officer for eight years.



■ Michael Merrins is Category Solutions' new non-executive chairman. He was formerly managing director of C&C Group for nine-and-a-half years, up to 2013, and managing director of MG Services for three years.



■ Denis O'Flaherty is the new head of healthcare at Siemens in Dublin. O'Flaherty has been Siemens' national sales manager for the healthcare sector for five years. Before that, he was general manager with MRI Ireland for six years.



■ Triangle Computer Services has appointed John Keogh to the role of project manager. Prior to this, he was a consultant project manager at Capita Life & Pensions and IT technical services manager at Aviva Life International.

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