

New charter to help long-term jobless get back into workforce

Employers are to be encouraged to make the live register their first port of call when hiring staff, writes Gareth Naughton

Employers are being encouraged to sign up to a new charter, requiring them to draw half of all job applications from the long-term unemployed.

The Employer's Charter arose from the interim report of the Labour Market Council (LMC), chaired by HP Ireland managing director Martin Murphy. Its aim is to get more employers to engage with the live register when looking for new employees.

It is expected that the country's big employers will take the lead, with the hope that others will follow suit.

The most recent figures released by the Central Statistics Office show that long-term unemployment is falling by 4.5 per cent year-on-year, but those out of work for 12 months or more still account for 47.2 per cent of all claimants.

At the Chartered Institute of Professional Development (CIPD) annual conference earlier this month, Tesco Ireland chairman and LMC member Tony Keohane told attendees that long-term unemployment was "simply too high" for Irish society to maintain and failure to act could give rise to an "inter-generational" problem.

Although the Department of Social Protection (DSP) has taken significant steps to create a more streamlined service with a variety of job activation measures – including Job-Bridge, JobsPlus, Momentum and Springboard – there is still some reluctance on the part of employers to look to the long-term live register for job-seekers. The charter is a direct attempt to counter this, and make the public employment service a first port of call.

"We came into this recession with a very weak employment service, and it probably did not enjoy the confidence of employers," said Tony Donohoe, head of education, social and innovation policy with employer's group Ibec.

"This is an acknowledgement of that reality, and also that there has been that re-configuration of the employment service, bringing it under the umbrella of the DSP with the creation of the Intreo office, and, down the road, I am sure we will see increasing parts of it contracted to private entities."

Tackling long-term unemployment must be a priority if we are to avoid repeating the legacy of the last recession.

"The long-term unemployment figure is always the target. The live register figures get the publicity and we get fixated with them, but there is always a huge amount of churn in the labour market anyway, even in the good times people move in and out of employment. It is that structural long-term piece that has to be focused on," he said.

The job activation measures undertaken by the government are heading in the right direction, Donohoe believes, but greater crossover is needed with training and education services to ensure we make the most of the system.

The charter was a welcome step, said Brid O'Brien, head of policy and media with the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed (INO). For many jobseekers, just getting someone to open the door and consider them seriously is all that is required, she said.

"One of the things that the department, now that they also have the public employment service, needs to



Martin Murphy of the Labour Market Council



Mark Fielding of Isme



Michael McDonnell of CIPD



Tony Donohoe of Ibex

do ongoing work on is ensuring that they are supporting unemployed people to hear about jobs – to give serious consideration and get the supports to put forward a good application," said O'Brien.

"To improve their prospects of securing what employment is out there. Of course, the big challenge is that we do not have sufficient work even though employment numbers are moving in the right direction. We need employment creation on a much bigger scale, realistically," she added.

Perception

So why do employers balk at the idea of drawing an employee from the long-term unemployed?

There is a stigma attached which doesn't take into ac-

count the enormous jump in the numbers out of work thanks to the recession, according to Michael McDonnell, managing director of CIPD Ireland, which will be encouraging HR professionals to get behind the charter.

"Perception tends to taint reality. We have come from a situation where many people would see the long-term unemployed as work-shy, lacking in motivation and lacking in skills – and, therefore, quite a risk to recruit," he said.

"Up to the recession we had more than full employment, we were going to Canada looking for people, and then unemployment soared overnight to 14-15 per cent.

"An awful lot of really good people, through no fault of their own, found themselves

unemployed. People who would never in the normal course of events ever expect to see the inside of an unemployment office."

Accessing the unemployed has been made easier through the Intreo recruitment services and the fact that case workers are now assigned to jobseekers means that their assessments for work are much more accurate.

Changes to the social welfare system also mean that it makes financial sense for the vast majority of people to get back into the workplace if they can.

"You are getting access to really good experienced people who do not have a steep learning curve in terms of being able to assimilate into a workplace," he said.

Small employers

While acknowledging that aiming for 50 per cent of applications coming from the live register is honourable, Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association chief executive Mark Fielding said owner-managers were likely to put the business first.

"It is an aspiration that businesses would allocate half their recruitment resources to looking for the long-term unemployed," said Fielding. "The difficulty is that a small business does not have the ability to take on the long-term unemployed – they are looking for someone who can walk into a job immediately because they don't have the same facilities to train up people."

"Larger businesses will have an induction scheme, a training plan and the job that they are bringing them up to do will not be as multifaceted as someone coming into a small business who you want to turn their hand to everything," he added.

Even the JobsPlus sweetener – where an employer is paid up to €10,000 over two years when they hire someone who has been unemployed long term – is not enough to justify choosing that person over someone 'work-ready', Fielding said.

"There is a mix up here of the government's social re-

sponsibility to unemployed people and a business's responsibility to do the best they can for their existing employees and their shareholders."

Better matching by the public employment service – ensuring that the right person is pitching for the right job – could go some way to countering this reticence, the INOU's O'Brien believes.

"Some of it is a confidence thing on both sides. Bigger employers often have HR departments and they have internal structures in place to address any issues that might arise, but small employers often don't and that is where employment services need to make sure that they match up the right person."

"Get a few of those kind of wins and that could make a huge difference because an awful lot of this boils down to perception by employers around presuming that people are not able to do things that they may well be able to do."

"One of the things about this crisis was that the education and experience mix is different to the previous crisis. It is around making sure that we really do create those pathways back into work for people and smooth out those journeys as much as possible," she said.

Fielding believes the situation could be bettered if more money was made available to

subsidise employee upskilling via the National Training Fund – something that has fallen dramatically since the recession.

"It would help an uptake of long-term unemployed by small businesses, who would then avail of the JobsPlus, but they would then have some sort of a training fund when they take them on."

"There is no one as pragmatic as an owner-manager in a small business – if you ask them to take on someone long-term unemployed, but there is no money to train them or someone ready to work, they will take on the latter every time," he said.

Training post-hire is the last piece of the job activation puzzle, according to McDonnell, with more flexible learning options making it less onerous on both the employer and state.

"What is really needed now is sustaining employment as much as creating it," he said. "I think there needs to be a better sense of co-operation between the state agencies and employers to continue activation measures when people are back in the workplace."

"In the old days, it was viewed as the state subsidising training for employers and I think that mindset has to change in government and civil servant circles."

People Problems

Relationship Breakdown

Bakery worker with childcare issues was not unfairly dismissed

Kelly's Bakery in Wexford is a culinary institution in the south-east, having been founded in 1910 by James Kelly.

It is operated by a fourth generation of the Kelly family and employs 37 people. But one of them, Dovile Veronko, whose partner also worked in the bakery, faced serious childcare problems. This, in turn, led to the loss of her job.

Veronko joined Kelly's as a confectioner in February 2008 working the night shift, and proved to be a very capable and accomplished cake-maker.

In late 2011, she approached the production manager seeking a new shift, because of changes in her childcare arrangements.

It was agreed, as long as it did not affect cake production, that Veronko could work a 9.30am to 6pm shift, but this was changed shortly afterwards to 8.30am to 5pm to facilitate further time to secure reliable childcare.



Gerald Flynn

said that she could not, and should not have to, work until 5pm.

By early 2012, the production manager was concerned that some cake orders were not being completed.

Her immediate supervisor said that Veronko was a very good bakery worker, and his only concern was that she was coming in before 8am and leaving before 4pm, and was not working her allocated hours.

Things came to a head when a cake order came in mid-afternoon and Veronko said that she could not fill it, as she had to get home and it was left to the morning shift.

She allegedly said that she

would start and finish work when she liked. The bakery manager then considered changing her partner's shift to allow them more time to alternate childcare between shifts.

By mid-February, the production manager had given Veronko a verbal warning about leaving before the agreed time and then confirmed it in writing.

The management also amended her employment contract with a shift of 8.30am to 5pm, but this was not signed-off by the employee.

With no improvement in her time-keeping, five days later the production manager met her and she said that she could not work until 5pm and he responded by issuing a dismissal notice on the basis that she could not work the day shift to 5pm and neither could she work the night shift, so "it is with regret that we must give you two weeks' notice".

The production manager said that he issued the dismissal notice in the hope that Veronko would realise the importance of staying till 5pm, but there was no improvement.

The following week, the

production manager met with the confectionery supervisor to examine the possibility of allowing Veronko to finish at 4.30pm, pushing her partner's start time back 30 minutes to start the night shift at 6.30pm, and allowing them a two-hour gap to change childcare.

The proposal also involved approaching Kelly's most important cake customer to accept an earlier cut-off time for orders.

The production manager asked Veronko to consider the proposed changed shifts, but was told that she requested a P45, and, when he spoke with her, Veronko said any new shifts didn't matter, as she was leaving.

Unfortunately, relations had got out of hand, and Veronko felt that she could not continue working in Kelly's due to the earlier conflict and her childcare concerns.

She maintained that she had always finished any cakes before leaving, but the production manager said that he sometimes had to complete orders when she had gone home.

At an Employment Appeals Tribunal hearing in Wexford, Kelly's Bakery management

accepted that it had not complied with its disciplinary procedures, but had been making every effort to accommodate Veronko's family issues.

Nonetheless, the dismissal was because she could not, for family reasons, work the hours required by the business.

Effectively, the dismissal notice had been revoked, even if not in writing, by the attempts to arrange alternative shifts to support the hard-pressed parent.

According to the Employment Appeals Tribunal, these efforts effectively "cured" the procedural defects in that the dismissal notice was not formally withdrawn.

It felt that Veronko and her partner should at least have tried to work the revised shifts, to see if they would have worked.

It concluded that Veronko wanted an 8am-4pm shift and nothing else, which was not possible in the bakery business, and so she was not unfairly dismissed.

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■ Michael McDaid has been appointed partner in advisory consulting with PricewaterhouseCoopers. He has been a director at the firm for three years. Before that, he was an associate partner with IBM for eight years.



■ Sierra Support Services Group has appointed its first UK managing director. Jerry Collins joins from the Rotary Group where he spent 18 years as managing director. He was also formerly regional commercial manager with Kentz Group for five years.



■ Andy Campbell is joining signage company Rennicks as managing director. He was an associate director with Amey for four years and, before that, was a director with Mouchel for five years.



■ BWG Foods has appointed Sean Dennison to the position of head of IT. He joins from Cúram Software, recently taken over by IBM Ireland, where he was ICT manager. Prior to that, he was an ICT manager for ten years with Statoil/Topaz Ireland.



■ Joyce Kellett has been appointed major account manager at Laya Healthcare. She was formerly business development manager with Aviva Ireland for six years and recruitment consultant with Sigmarr Recruitment for three years.



■ Noel Mulhaire is the new general manager of the Lough Rea Hotel & Spa. Prior to this, he was general manager of the Ballykisteen Hotel & Golf Resort for one year, and managing director of the Woodstock Hotel for four years.

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