

Dipping into a new talent pool

One organisation is hoping to tackle the increasing skills shortage in the IT industry with candidates often overlooked by employers

BY GARETH NAUGHTON

The world of work has traditionally been an inhospitable place for the differently-abled, but things are changing.

As Europe struggles to meet significant skill shortages, particularly in IT, employers are being encouraged to dip into an often previously overlooked talent pool.

There is now room for a greater number of differently-abled people in the workplace, because the way we work has changed.

We are living in an economy that is less reliant on physical labour and in an environment where technology is creating more flexibility.

"That has created a new approach to work where, what used to be called atypical work has become typical," said Michael McDonnell, managing director of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development in Ireland.

Changing workplace

"In the past, there was a lot more physical work, you needed to be able to go physically to premises, and that inhibited a lot of people who might not be as mobile as others. A few things have changed.

"The nature of work itself – moving from a manufacturing-type industry to more added-value service type environments – has opened up new opportunities.

"There is also a much greater willingness, in Europe generally and particularly in Ireland, to look at different sources of attracting skills and talent, because there is a very serious talent shortage emerging."

The environment has, therefore, become much more receptive to what McDonnell terms "atypical workers".

Specialisterne

Using atypical workers has already gained momentum here, with the establishment in late 2012 of an Irish branch of the Danish not-for-profit organisation Specialisterne.

Specialisterne, which was founded in Denmark in 2004, aims to help people with Asperger syndrome gain employment in IT and other tech industries.

Peter Brabazon, general manager of Specialisterne Ireland, said that because many people with Asperger syndrome have an affinity with maths, there is potential for them to join the workforce and plug the growing IT skills gap here. "The typical condition of Asperger's particularly is that [people with the syndrome] have average to high intelligence and are particularly focused on careers or studying in the areas where maths is important – the STEM subjects: science, technology engineering and maths.

"Given that there is a shortage in Ireland of skills for the IT sector, particularly software, Specialisterne thought this was a marriage made in heaven. So how do we get the two together?"

"Typically 85 per cent [of those with Asperger's] are unemployed, but at the same time there are about 4,500 opportunities in the IT sector. We reckon that we would have about 1,500 people in Ireland today who would be suitable for the Specialisterne model," he said.

Selection process

Once a potential candidate for the programme is identified, they are interviewed to see if they are suitable for the IT workplace. They go through a workshop where they build a Lego robot and do some programming to give assessors a sense of their technical skills, as well their behavioural skills.

"Then we work on their skills in getting a job, particularly the CV. Sometimes they haven't a lot to say because it is their first time looking, or they are too literal and unfortunately downplay their own abilities," said Brabazon.

At the same time, the organisation is looking for a match for the candidate. Specialisterne has been successful in placing people with software company SAP – which has taken a particular interest in the programme here and internationally – as well as Microsoft and charity, Frontline Defenders.



Peter Brabazon, general manager, Specialisterne: 'The typical condition of Asperger's is that they have average to high intelligence and are particularly focused on careers in the area of maths'
Picture: Feargal Ward

Before beginning work, the candidate meets his new colleagues, and Specialisterne holds a special session for co-workers to let them know about the support available from the organisation.

A mentor is assigned to the new employee to help them navigate the culture of the organisation, and Specialisterne also continues to provide support for the employee where needed.

"Initially, to reduce the perceived risks on this, they are our employees. A candidate becomes our employee on a six-month or nine-month contract, but our objective is to have them become permanent – and that is happening," said Brabazon.

With stronger support at school level, and greater access to third level for differently-abled people, increasing numbers of those on the autism spectrum are going to have the skills that companies require, right up to PhD level.

It may take a bit more work at the start of the recruitment process, but Brabazon said that the returns were excellent, ensuring a win-win all round.

"Earlier investment is required. From the candidate's point of view, they move off benefits of €10,000 to a job, which may be starting at €30,000 a year," said Brabazon.

"From a corporation's point of view, they are getting talent



New approach: Michael McDonnell of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

– which is really in short supply – and from the state's point of view, it turns people who are currently on allowances into taxpayers. It is win-win on all fronts.

"Most of us are either parents or have an immediate relative who is on the spectrum, and from our point of view it helps the family as well. There are benefits that are not just monetary, which are very important indeed."

Top-down support

The commitment to supporting atypical workers needs to come from the top down and

is highlight potential issues of difference, which may never arise. Crucially, it is important that staff understand that this is a part of the company's talent recruitment, retention and development strategy rather than CSR initiative.

"Where it does work, probably the biggest single determining factor is that [companies] really have bought into it – otherwise it might work for a while and it is a bit of a gimmicky thing, but it hasn't been bedded down," said McDonnell.

"Are there inherent advantages in selecting somebody who is more challenged when it comes to gaining employment? I think there are," he added, pointing out that a candidate like this was more likely to have been assessed, evaluated and supported to a far greater degree than the rest of the workforce.

Advance preparation

The considerable amount of advance preparation candidates put in is also an advantage, but it is in the areas of productivity and engagement where companies really reap the rewards, McDonnell believes.

"People who are more challenged in securing employment have a number of positive personal attributes that go well in the workplace.

"They have demonstrated great resilience because they have to have that to keep going having faced an awful lot of challenges. The biggest barrier they face is very often the barrier created by other people's prejudice.

"They have to have courage to keep going in the face of rejection. They have to have determination to work at it and they bring it with them, because they do appreciate opportunities when they come.

"Therefore, they are more likely to have a higher level of loyalty to the organisation. Engagement and enthusiasm for the role would be very high."

This is particularly important in a working world where you are as likely to lose an employee to someone in Boston as to Ballina, he said.

The atypical worker will feature increasingly in the workplace in the near future. "It is going to be forced on organisations because, for decades, people have been talking about skills shortages and nobody really thought much about them because unemployment was high, but now it is a very real issue."

"What might have been called atypical approaches will become much more typical, across a whole spectrum of things. It will open opportunities for people who found it more difficult, simply because trying to get talented people is going to become harder."

The nature of work itself ... has opened up new opportunities

People Problems Relationship Breakdown

Trucker's sudden sacking proves costly

BY GERALD FLYNN

Richard Beashel was a truck driver who started working with the Stobart distribution company in November 2009. Eight months later, he was called to a meeting and sacked there and then.

He successfully took a complaint under employment equality legislation, claiming that he had been discriminated against on the grounds of disability, and was awarded €22,000.

Last year, Stobart Ireland Limited appealed the equality officer's decision to the Labour Court, which heard the appeal earlier this year.

The court heard that during his eight months with Stobart Ireland, Beashel had been absent for 23 days, all but two of which had been on the basis of medical certificates.

These included sinus trouble in March 2010, and 14 days' absence due to a back injury the following month.

In May, he was diagnosed with depression and was

given a medical certificate stating that he was unfit for work for the first half of June 2010.

When he returned to work, he met Stobart's operations manager, Dennis Woods, told him about his depression and gave him the medical certificate and details of his medication, which Woods recorded on a company form.

Woods was sympathetic and told Beashel that if he needed more time off to aid his recovery, the company would arrange for him to take holidays. His certified depression details were passed on to the human resources department.

A week later, Beashel was contacted by the firm's human resources department and told to attend a meeting with Stobart's operations manager for Tesco at Dublin Port, Paul O'Donnell, but given little detail of the meeting's purpose.

He was immediately dismissed on the basis that he had been absent for 23 days. The company said that he was also told that his "poor performance levels" were a



Gerald Flynn

factor, which he disputed. The driver claimed that the gap of just a week between his telling Stobart management about his depression and his sacking was related.

Under employment equality legislation, he said the onus was on the employer not to discriminate on the basis of his disability. Stobart countered that Beashel was suffering from an illness, not a disability, because the latter lasts a long time, and so he could not have been discriminated against on the basis of

disability. The Labour Court considered this argument and, under Section 2 of the Employment Equality Acts, noted that: "It is a well established law that depression comes within the definition of disability."

O'Donnell said that he had been contacted by HR stating that Beashel had exceeded an internal absence ceiling and he should consider what action to take.

He was not told of the driver's depression or health problems and so decided to sack him for excessive absenteeism.

He notified Stobart's human resources manager, Shane Doherty, of his intention to sack Beashel, but the HR manager did not raise the medical certificate held on file by the company's HR department.

Had he known of the certified disability, the operations manager said he may not have opted to dismiss the driver.

He said he had made up his mind to sack him before the meeting started, and did not ask him to explain his

absences from work or give any reason why he should not be sacked.

He said that, after he dismissed the driver, he asked him how he "felt", but Beashel "left the office without any substantive comment", the court heard.

Neither Stobart's human resources department, nor its manager, Doherty, gave any evidence during the appeal hearing, nor did it explain its decision. The company maintained that the driver "suffered a bout of depression," but not a disability.

The court heard that the man continued to experience depressive periods around the anniversary of his late father's death.

It found that Beashel had been discriminatorily dismissed by Stobart management on the grounds of disability, and ordered the distribution company to pay him €12,000 in compensation.

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Rob Hurley is KBC Bank Ireland's new head of consumer finance. Hurley joins from Danske Bank Ireland, where he was head of retail banking. Before that, he was a general manager in Rabobank



Arthur Byrne has been appointed chief financial and commercial officer of Core Media. Byrne is joining from Aegis Media Ireland, where he was group finance and commercial director for 17 years.



Wholesale telecoms operator eNet has appointed a new business development manager. Joe Flynn has been a senior manager in border and identity services with Accenture for 17 months.



IT consulting company Version 1 has appointed Lorna McAdoe as head of delivery for Northern Ireland. McAdoe joins from Kainos, where she was head of delivery for assurance and business services.



Hazel Morrison is the new president of the Insurance Institute of Galway. She is head of retail sales at Gleeson & Associates. She was previously with Clearys Loss Assessors for more than 13 years.

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