This article reports the final results from the large-scale Labour Recruitment Study funded by the Training and Employment Agency (hereafter the Agency), the Industrial Development Board (IDB), and the Department of Economic Development (DED). The project contributes to a research programme supported by the Research and Evaluation Branch (REB) of the Agency to improve understanding of the Northern Ireland labour market. The project has a twofold rationale which may be summarised as labour availability and efficiency - to assist in identifying areas with appropriately skilled labour for new employment - and equity - to advise on the equitable distribution of DED services and Targeting Social Need (TSN).

The Agency recognises that more accurate estimates of labour supply are needed which are sensitive enough to highlight areas of labour shortage, and which can identify undersupply by occupation and industry. This is important because the local economy depends on the availability of workers in sufficient numbers with appropriate skills. The availability of labour is also important for the efficient ongoing operation of existing employers and for any expansion plans by these firms.

The DED group is committed to work under Policy Appraisal and Fair Treatment (PAFT) and TSN guidelines. PAFT is an initiative that seeks to ‘equality proof’ government decisions so they do not impact unfairly on any given group. TSN is a government spending priority that seeks to target resources to areas and people in greatest need. Important questions concern the location of employment - is it necessary to create employment in TSN areas to alleviate unemployment or is the process of recruitment (e.g. targeting unemployed people) of greater significance? Or should both strategies be operated in tandem to ensure success?

Several issues discussed in this article are developed in more depth in the accompanying piece entitled Work to Workers: Does it Work? A case study of two plants in West Belfast.

A fuller impression of the research can therefore be gained by reading both papers.

The Study

The Study was commissioned in 1997. Data were collected during 1997 and 1998 from 15 employers spread across 22 sites in a wide range of industrial sectors (e.g. textiles, software, electronics, and engineering) in a selection of geographical locations (e.g. Belfast, towns, and villages). While these companies must remain anonymous as part of the conditions of the research we would like to take this opportunity to thank them publicly for their support of this project.

With the co-operation of these companies, core data were collected from personnel databases on some 14,000 employees, with additional information on a substantial minority of these workers. There are slight variations in the information collected between companies simply because of differences in the amount and type of information they hold on their employees. Nevertheless, typical anonymised data collected and held in the project databases usually include such topics as qualifications, past labour market history, postcodes, current occupation and age/gender information. To supplement these data, in-depth interviews were
conducted with personnel managers, employers’ organisations, and government agencies to give insights into recruitment patterns, skill shortages, recruiting strategies, and general labour market conditions.

As far as we are aware the Large-Scale Recruitment Study is unique within the UK (and perhaps more widely) on two counts. Firstly, we know of no other similar study elsewhere which has collected information as widely on different industrial sectors, sites, and numbers of workers. Secondly, the co-operation of companies, and the support of state agencies, has meant that it has been possible to collect a much wider range of information, and to gain more in-depth data, than has been possible in other locales where co-operation has been more restricted (for example, see Foley et al 1996).

Consequently, there are a number of unique and interesting uses to which the data can specifically be put.

The Geography of Recruitment

In an earlier article in last years’ Labour Market Bulletin (Shuttleworth et al 1998), we summarised the two-fold uses of the study as labour availability and efficiency - to assist in identifying areas with skilled labour for employment - and equity - to advise on the equitable distribution of DED services and Targeting Social Need (TSN). Since the equity dimension is explored more thoroughly in our paper on West Belfast, we take the opportunity here mainly to consider spatial issues of labour availability. We do so by taking one large employer as an example.

The anonymous employer, referred to as Site 1, is a recently established assembly plant which largely employs lower-skill workers but which, unlike some other sites in the study, also employs significant numbers of workers of other kinds (e.g. Craft & Skilled workers, Managers, Clerical staff). Located in a mid-sized town, the numbers of people within a 2km radius of the plant are low in comparison with some Belfast sites, but are high relative to the rural sites in the study. The site is also in a relatively affluent area - unemployment levels in the locality are low, and only a small minority of areas in the neighbourhood (about 10%) are designated as TSN.

Against this locational backdrop what can we say about its geography of recruitment? Map 1 (overleaf) examines this initially simply by mapping the locations where workers at the site live and then by comparing them with the catchment areas for different types of occupation. The catchment areas represented on the map are constructed to highlight the distance from within which 80% of employees in each occupational grouping are obtained.

These show a classical pattern given what is known about travel-to-work behaviour and job-search practices; namely that as wage levels/skill profiles increase, so also do travel-to-work distances. Thus, those employed in Standard Occupational Classifications (SOCs) 7-9 (Sales, Plant & Machine Operatives, Other Occupations) on average tend to live nearer the site than workers in SOCs 4-6 (Clerical, Craft & Skilled and Sales), and SOCs 1-3 (Managerial, Professional, and Technical).

Chart 1 (overleaf) presents the data in a different way showing graphically the percentage of workers by occupation who are drawn from within fixed distance bands of the site. The local peak of recruitment for SOCs 4-6 and 7-9 reflects the workers who live nearby the site in the town in which the plant is located. The peak for SOC 1-3 employees, however, comes some 30km from the factory reflecting the attraction of workers from Belfast. It is interesting to note, also, that relatively high proportions of SOC 4-6 and SOC 7-9 workers come from the same distance band, reflecting the associated importance of the underlying population distribution within Northern Ireland.
Interpreting the Data

The data have been interpreted in a number of ways to help in the objective of identifying areas with appropriately skilled labour for new employment. Firstly, the site can be treated as a case study to allow estimates of the likely geographical extent of recruitment at a similar planned employer - for example an assembly plant in a relatively affluent area with low levels of unemployment. While there are some merits in this approach it is unlikely to
be completely satisfactory on its own because of the geographical range of behaviour between different employers - see, for example, the comments on the highly localised recruitment for SOCs 7-9 in the article on the West Belfast sites.

A second approach used to interpret the data has attempted to control for differences in site, location, company culture, and recruitment practices to draw systematic conclusions about labour availability and the geography of recruitment. At one level this is relatively easily done by making descriptive comparisons between sites - for example how do SOC 7-9 workers at Site A behave as compared with those at Site B? This is a useful starting point for the analysis.

However, more detailed analytical approaches have proved necessary to extract greater value from the data. The importance of site in determining spatial recruitment patterns i.e. available population for labour supply, accessibility etc., can be explored more fully when the company data are stored in a Geographical Information System (GIS) and linked with the Census of Population and other administrative data sources. The objective of this was to investigate the feasibility of a set of ‘rules’ to help advisors develop better scenarios to forecast the geography of recruitment - e.g. how do SOC 7-9 workers located in densely populated urban areas behave and how does this differ from rural areas? In the case of Site 1, the spatially extensive pattern of recruitment can be related to the plant’s location in an area of low unemployment (possibly many other competing employment opportunities); relatively low population density (a restricted pool of workers in the locality which means seeking recruits from further afield), and access to the motorway network.

Qualitative information is also useful in interpreting spatial recruitment patterns and in developing employment scenarios for advisors. Interviews conducted in the locality of this site indicate a ‘tight’ local labour market and the presence of competing companies, all of which might be expected to widen the area from which workers would be sought. Furthermore, the company has had significant labour needs as a result of a high initial turnover and has thus been very active in seeking recruits. Again, this could be expected to mean that workers would be drawn from a wider area. In this sense, it is important to learn about how companies relate to localities and the local economic environment in which they find themselves.

**Other Uses of the Data**

The data from the Large-Scale Recruitment Study have also been used to look at labour supply from other perspectives than the geography of recruitment. For instance, the geographical patterns of recruitment are a direct manifestation of the way in which vacancies are filled but they have indirect effects. An example of this might be when a skilled worker is ‘poached’ from an established company to work at a new employer - this creates a vacancy at the firm which has lost the ‘poached’ worker that must be filled, and perhaps losses in time and production as well. The over-riding consequence is the potential to create a cascading vacancy chain through the local economy. The data collected in the study have provided insights into this process.

Early findings suggest that there is strong competition in the Northern Ireland labour market which encourages a ‘merry-go-round’ where employees might leave to go to a new start-up but after a while find that the novelty of working in ‘new’ employment wears off and they return to their old employer. The new start-ups, on the other hand, often find that they are swamped with applicants in their initial phase but then experience a high initial turnover before stability develops. Other aspects of interest include inter-company competition, skill shortages,
and views of the effectiveness of government bodies in facilitating jobs growth. Here our findings indicate that companies use a variety of strategies, ranging from out-and-out competition to informal co-operation, to manage skill shortages.

The analysis of local context and labour supply also has implications for TSN. In this context our results indicate that population numbers can be important in deciding which areas to target. Some areas with high relative rates of deprivation have quite low population numbers. In contrast there are other communities that have low relative rates of deprivation but, because they are densely populated, have higher absolute numbers of deprived and unemployed people. This indicates different types of social need and the possibility of tailoring interventions to local circumstances. The research also reflects the well-known fact that not all people resident within TSN areas could be categorised as being in social need - this also has implications for the targeting of jobs and resources.

**Conclusion**

The Large-Scale Recruitment Study is unique, as far as we are aware, within the UK in terms of the range of sites, sectors and absolute numbers of workers studied; and in terms of the depth and range of data available as result of the level of co-operation from companies and state agencies. It has therefore provided an important and valuable opportunity to investigate and to understand the operation of local labour markets in terms of labour supply, availability and efficiency.

The study has offered useful insights into the wider impact of job creation on the Northern Ireland economy and has contributed to the monitoring of TSN and equality issues. These issues are discussed in our accompanying piece entitled Employment Equality, Job Creation, and Inward Investment: The Example of West Belfast.

A full list of references can be obtained from the authors. SARU provide consultancy and analysis on Access to Employment / Education and on Targeting Social Need. They can be contacted on 028 9027 3829 (Tel); 028 9032 1280 (Fax) or via http://www.qub.ac.uk/saru/
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