“Employability is more than a supply issue. We need to do more than simply encourage people to train and get the necessary skills to successfully apply for a job. The issue is wider than that and the approach to solving it must be shared by individuals, employers, representative groups as well as Government” 2 (Minister for Higher and Further Education, Training and Employment).

Future work by the Halifax Call Centre is of particular interest in the context of employability. Firstly, as the largest ever single job creation project in NI it was necessary to source sufficient workers to fulfil the promise of 1500 jobs. Secondly, as part of an emerging call centre sector, the employer is not able to benefit from any locally available traditional/historical local labour pool.

It is our aim in this article to focus on factors beyond the individual, specifically on how employer behaviour and the accessibility of employment impinge on the process of employability. Using material gleaned from a quantitative analysis of workers along with qualitative interviews with employees, community representatives and the employer we consider two discrete examples3 relating to the Halifax Direct Call Centre which operates within the financial services sector. Our first example considers problems of accessibility relating to a site in suburban Belfast (Dundonald) where the employer was located for its first year of operation while the second example considers measures taken to widen access to employment following a planned move to new premises within the Gasworks/Cromac Wood site within Laganside.

The Halifax Call Centre is of particular interest in the context of employability. Firstly, as the largest ever single job creation project in NI it was necessary to source sufficient workers to fulfil the promise of 1500 jobs. Secondly, as part of an emerging call centre sector, the employer is not able to benefit from any locally available traditional/historical local labour pool.

1 Darren McKinstry and Ian Shuttleworth are principal researchers within C-STAR, Queen’s University Belfast. Contact details and further information are available at http://www.qub.ac.uk/c-star/


3 The case study material used here form part of the Labour Recruitment Study (see LMBs 12-15 for background), which is an on-going programme of research into the labour supply efficiency and equity implications of employment growth. To date the research has considered some 26 sites of employment comprising almost 20,000 employees.
but rather is involved in sourcing new labour amidst increasing competition from other emerging call centre employers and a potentially constricted supply due to UK wide negative press reports alleging ‘poor call centre working practices’ and reports of ‘burn-out’ and high turnover. Thirdly, this employer in particular is operating within the financial services sector where jobs can be perceived - because of a general requirement for specialist qualifications and/or experience-as potentially unattainable by a section of the potential labour pool. Together these points reveal an employer that needed to source a significant number of appropriately skilled workers amidst conditions that could serve to severely restrict labour supply. The implicit business case for implementing employability measures and motivation for widening access may thus be more acceptable (in cost/benefit terms) to this employer than might normally be the case and hence may provide useful insights into processes that may be of value in both refining notions of employability and in highlighting the benefits available to other employers from adopting more socially aware employment practices.

THE ACCESSIBILITY OF EMPLOYMENT

The extent to which individuals can gain reasonable access to employment, in both spatial and social terms is of importance in the evaluation of any significant job creation. With regard to the site in Dundonald, our full study explored a range of accessibility measures- spatial accessibility, the ‘chill’ factor and the social accessibility of employment. While the first two of these were found to have some ‘costs’ associated with them (interviews with workers highlighted the issue of physical accessibility over any chill factors) it was the area of the social accessibility of employment that was highlighted as important both in quantitative and qualitative findings and will form the focus of this article.

We can illustrate the importance of social accessibility via a consideration of the employee catchment in Map 1 which shows the number of workers drawn from each census ward in the Belfast Urban Area (BUA).

Map 1: Belfast Urban Area Wards Supplying Workers

---

1 Spatial accessibility refers to an individual’s ability to physically access the site of employment in terms of distance and time taken to get to work and how the cost/availability of transport, might impinge on the ability to take or seek work in any given location.

2 ‘Chill factor’ refers to the extent to which an individual would wish to avoid either travelling through, or seek working in an area of the opposite religion. It can be considered as a component of the social accessibility of employment.

3 Social accessibility refers to how the perceptions and characteristics of an individual; their family, peer group or wider community; or indeed of the area in which they reside or the areas in which they seek work might impinge on an individuals ability to seek or obtain employment.
In accessibility terms it is of interest to consider those wards which did not supply workers - clearly factors such as the stock of available workers, distance from the site of employment, spatial access and available transport etc. will be important in this regard. In simple visual terms it is noticeable that in general the majority of those wards not supplying workers are distant from the site, stretching toward Lisburn and Newtownabbey. What is perhaps unexpected though is to find that despite reasonably attainable jobs - they fall within Standard Occupational Classification 7 (sales and customer service occupations) and do no not require any specialist qualifications or previous experience - three wards in the immediate vicinity of the employer do not supply workers.

These areas do not suffer from problems of religious chill nor physical access (they are largely within walking distance and surrounded by other wards who did provide a number of workers) and yet did not provide any of the 574 workers (at the time of analysis) who took up employment at the site. They do however coincide with the location of the economically deprived, peripheral housing estates of Ballybeen and Tullycarnet. The phenomenon went largely unnoticed by the employer with the exception of one example:

“the guy who looks after facilities… was struggling to find cleaning staff… and put out a load of fliers in the various estates in and around Dundonald and thought it through and had gone to the sorts of places where people may be interested in that sort of work, who live close enough to walk to work even and he got a very poor response and he was quite surprised … quite disappointed about that… now why I just don’t know…”

(Personnel & Training Manager July 2001)

While further analytical and field work is required to more rigorously examine the spatial pattern in Map 1 it does raise questions about wider aspects of employability, the appropriateness of certain recruitment mechanisms, the value and importance of community outreach, and the actions that an employer might take to improve the ability (and willingness) of local residents to take work.

**IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY**

It is in this context that we can consider our second example, where the same employer has implemented a number of measures to widen access to employment in relation to its Laganside site.

The Laganside site shares certain characteristics with the Dundonald site in that local communities share similar problems in accessing employment. In contrast though the Laganside communities have benefited from a community infrastructure focused on localised job opportunities and have grown accustomed to liaising with new inward investment employers, facilitated for example by Laganside and DEL.

In general, the success of local employer/community involvement schemes is seen as mixed - certainly some local people are getting jobs but the extent to which this has been recognised by the local communities and indeed to which real efforts have been made by employers to engage locally unemployed jobseekers is a topic of debate.

Many of the ways that the employer has attempted to improve the experience of working in a call centre are neither new nor unique - from the outset they have adopted a relatively flat management structure, smart/casual is the only dress code, their premises are modern and open plan, meetings are informal and

---

7 A recent UK DTLR survey noted that some 13% of respondents had decided not to apply for a job in the previous 12 months because of transport problems, a figure rising to 25% for 16-24 year olds. Transport Statistics: Accessibility of local services and facilities (2002), Department for Transport, Local Government & the Regions http://www.transtat.dtlr.gov.uk/
The Halifax Call Centre: Employer Recruitment Practices & Employability
Darren McKinstry & Ian Shuttleworth\textsuperscript{1} C-STAR, QUB

managers sit with their teams rather than at separate desks or in offices. These practices while improving the experience of working in a call centre and potentially reducing turnover do not however directly serve - in the context of community involvement schemes - to overcome barriers to gaining employment or directly increasing labour supply and indeed for some the modern building can be seen as a socially inaccessible “employment edifice” (Community Worker, South Belfast).

**GENERAL ACCESSIBILITY MEASURES**

In addition to measures designed toward retaining workers the case study employer has however implemented a number of measures toward attaining them.

“We are very proactive, about finding ways to bring people into employment here other than just sticking an advert in the paper and seeing what happens... that includes designing courses specifically, providing extra support for people that need extra support. I mean all common sense stuff... but stuff that doesn’t always happen...”

(Personnel & Training Manager July 2001)

The employer’s approach is one of tailored flexibility to the core business needs, a process of very carefully tailoring advertisements, outreach and workplace culture. The first step in promoting access comes with those changes, sometimes minor, that can be made to engage all jobseekers and to provide an environment in which new or changing employment becomes a more fluid process on which to embark.

A notion shared by the employer and local communities is that there is a need for ‘sustained momentum’ in the notion of ensuring any permanent improvement in an individual’s employability - a sustained effort is seen as pivotal, the key to convincing the disenfranchised individual to invest in the process - to persuade them that they are not just completing another application; that there is a real, achievable and immediate job at the end of a finite process. It is in this context that the following measures are introduced and discussed.

**Flexibility** - Some of those seeking work may have very specific conditions under which they may be able to take work - pay, conditions, hours etc. The case study employer has identified this as an area where flexibility on their behalf could promote increased access to certain groups (e.g. working parents) and have implemented or are considering a number of processes. Flexibility is evident in the choice of possible start dates, hours and working patterns or indeed in the option to be placed on a waiting list until a suitable working pattern is available. Training can also be matched to the working patterns required by the individual with evening training sessions having already occurred and would be run specifically in the event of a recruitment drive targeted at evening shift workers.

**Qualification/Entrance Requirements** - At the outset the employer undertook a highly tailored review of skills needs and recruitment and selection procedures. Unusually and unlike most other employers they decided that they do not require a minimum level of qualifications for customer service assistants/call handler positions.

“We don’t need five ‘O’ Levels”, there seems to be this perception [in] Financial Services you must have five ‘O’ Levels, traditionally that may well have been the case in banking, [here] you don’t need to have one ‘O’ Level or a GCSE or... even a hundred yards swimming certificate. The way we recruit is about saying “We
can teach people to use the technology, we can teach people about the products... we can enhance people's customer skills”

(Personnel & Training Manager July 2001)

Additionally, previous experience within either the call centre or financial services industry is another seemingly likely pre-requisite that has been dispensed with and application forms and job advertisements have been redesigned to make applicants aware of this:

“it’s not about saying I’ve got to have Financial Services experience, or Call Centre experience, the majority of people that work here don’t have either... and it doesn’t have to be in work even but just life experiences of dealing with people, working in an environment where they’ve had to handle change... where they’ve had to work with each other... and this stuff can come from college experience, life experience, home experience...”

(Personnel & Training Manager July 2001)

Rather there is requirement to find people with what they term, the right ‘behaviours’ and their interview process is tailored around two key areas to uncover this - a standard aptitude test which evaluates literacy, numeracy and an ability to solve logical problems and a ‘behavioural competency interview’ where interviewees are walked through scenarios or life experiences. Unlike qualifications, these ‘measures’ are seen as relating directly to the skills needed to operate successfully within their specific business environment.

**WIDENING THE NET - TARGETING SPECIFIC GROUPS**

The employer has a strong desire to explore and actively engage diverse pools of labour-returners, those with few or no qualifications, older workers, disabled workers, the unemployed or those with minimal work experience.

...as far as recruitment's concerned, it's about trying to just sort of get people to think again - we think very carefully about the photographs that we put in our ads, they're not just any old photographs and it's just to perhaps prompt somebody to look twice and to think “That could be me... if they can do it, I can do it.”

(Personnel & Training Manager July 2001)

This process has been facilitated in part via a community forum. Facilitated by the Laganside Corporation and involving the employer, local community groups, partnership boards and JobCentre staff the forum meets to discuss accessibility measures - how perceptions can be changed and crucially how local jobseekers and the unemployed/returners can be afforded better access to employment within the site. The forum, following a period of mutual trust building, has proved an important mechanism and through it a number of processes have been put in place.

**Open Days/Mock Work Sessions** - Potential employees from local communities are encouraged by their local community representatives to visit the site and view the working environment for themselves. Employees showcasing the work environment are carefully selected to come from a range of diverse backgrounds themselves - older workers, unemployment, returnees etc - thereby illustrating how they were able to overcome similar barriers to gain employment at the site. JobCentre and Benefits office staff are available to provide multi-faceted advice on benefits and moving back
The Halifax Call Centre: Employer Recruitment Practices & Employability
Darren McKinstry & Ian Shuttleworth C-STAR, QUB

into employment.
Individuals benefit from direct experience of likely working conditions and the encouragement of workers while the employer benefits from both widening their labour supply and in receiving applications from individuals who now have an understanding of the work involved and therefore should be less likely to form part of any short term turnover.

Sequencing of Employment Drives with training programmes - This is one area in which community organisations felt there was much progress to be made toward maintaining ‘momentum’ for jobseekers i.e. if training programmes could be sequenced with employment drives so as to remove any intervening periods of non-activity then there was a significantly higher chance of getting non-employed jobseekers into the types of work for which they were being trained. Jobseekers would thus be provided with a direct employment goal and intervening inactivity or non-optimal types of employment could be avoided (both which may serve to disenchant the individual and lead to a possible withdrawal from the labour market). Through the forum, community organisations are now endeavouring to sequence job readiness programmes so that they complete as recruitment drives are announced by the employers.

Enhanced Recruitment Packs - To assist the applicants with less recent in-work experience the company recruitment pack was expanded to include a guide to completing application forms, preparing for interviews and undertaking aptitude tests. Additionally non-employed applicants were advised on the importance of including non-employment related experiences in problem solving and team working etc as an alternative to in-work experience - again representing an effort to remove barriers for those seeking work.

Signposting for unsuccessful applicants - Should an applicant be unsuccessful the employer uses the ‘rejection’ letter to not only thank the individual for their application but to provide pointers on how to perform better in the future (via help sheets on application forms, aptitude testing or interview skills) and crucially to provide immediate alternatives for the jobseeker via what is known as ‘signposting’ - not only is the jobseeker invited to apply again at the next recruitment drive but is also given information regarding relevant community/government agencies and ongoing schemes for which they may be eligible. The intent here is to capitalise on and maintain any momentum and to provide an accessible ‘next step’ for those seeking work.

“…it gave me a good impression of them …they’re looking for staff and they’re willing to let you know where you went wrong and they’re giving you a chance to reapply… nobody else ever did that.”

(Worker C, CSA/Call Handler).

Employment Initiatives - The employer is a keen advocate of schemes such as GEMS and Bridge to Employment.

“we’ve been really fortunate that we’ve been able to work very closely with the T&EA and the Bridge Schemes and have had some fantastic results and have got some very, very, very good people here through that route … I’ve been involved in similar types of exercises in other parts of the UK and I’ve not seen results anywhere near as good as we have here…”

(Personnel & Training Manager July 2001)

For the company the Bridge scheme provides a source of pre-screened workers for whom training is not only tailored to company needs but is also subsidised. In

---

8 Belfast GEMS (Gasworks Employment Matching Service) is a local employment initiative primarily focused on providing access to employment with business situated within the Gasworks and Laganside sites.
9 Bridge to Employment is a government programme providing the unemployed with employer linked customised and, if successful, a direct offer of employment.
addition, because it targets specifically the unemployed, effectively bypassing those already in employment, it reduces any within sector turnover, thereby growing and strengthening the sector as a whole. It can also be seen as having a workforce balancing effect in that it may provide access to a wider range of social groups than normally associated with the sector - be it on qualifications, gender, age, location or community background. For those seeking work it is additionally perceived, because of its visible link with employment opportunities, as a direct route into employment rather than simply another training scheme.

**CONCLUSION**

As indicated at the outset, ‘employability’ measures should be focussed beyond individual supply side factors onto a wider consideration of the demand side (employer) and factors influencing interaction between the two such as prevailing labour markets and social/spatial access considerations.

On the demand side the Call Centre industry, as a result of its explosive growth in recent years, has acquired an appetite for appropriately skilled labour. On the supply side the willingness of individuals to seek and take work in the sector has however been effected by negative press reports, with turnover an issue in those employers with poor working conditions.

Our examples point to job search and social accessibility as being important in gaining employment (supplementary field work is planned to examine this specific case in more detail). In addition we have examined how the employer can play a role in improving ‘employability’ - the case study employer has made considerable efforts to not only provide good working conditions but to make itself and the type of employment it offers, not only more attractive but also more widely accessible. Here it has embarked on a process of sustained outreach and has reviewed the skills and aptitudes necessary to undertake the jobs in question, removing qualification barriers from the process of gaining work.

As has been illustrated, individual jobseekers - particularly those previously non - employed - have benefited from the employers reassessment of skills needs and the outreach measures designed to improve access. For the employer, while initial motivation may have been the need to ensure labour supply, additional benefits have been found in improved perceptions of the employer by local jobseekers and in a more varied and stable workforce. Certainly interviews with workers would seem to support this with those recruited via the Bridge to Employment scheme seeming more willing to stay with the employer for an extended period of time when compared with those gaining employment via conventional means.

“I’m happy here... I’m hoping to stay for as long as possible... the working conditions are excellent... I’m happy here, I don’t think I’ll be moving...”

(Worker C, CSA/Call Handler & Bridge to Employment Recruit).

The process of outreach and its link with workforce stability is an important factor which over time has been recognised by the employer:

“...The people from the outreach mechanisms are in many cases some of the most loyal people we have...”

(Operations Manager, May 2002)

For the community there are also benefits to be accrued from engaging employers
The Halifax Call Centre: Employer Recruitment Practices & Employability

Darren McKinstry & Ian Shuttleworth\(^1\) C-STAR, QUB

and encouraging outreach measures. Interviews with community representatives in the Laganside area provided insights into how more accessible and attainable employment opportunities were slowly changing attitudes toward seeking work:

“there has been an upturn in employment in the area ... increased opportunities on the doorstep that have allowed people to go into the service industries... there’s more of a momentum about employment in the area... I’ve noticed that several of the young men in the community who were doing informal, casual work are now starting to ask us if it's viable that they could get into [the employer], because they’ve seen some people get in... and then there’s the whole knock on about improved esteem and identity...”

(Community Development Worker, South Belfast)

The employer has taken a number of significant and innovative steps which can serve as lessons for NI plc. The individual, social and business benefits accrued may serve to persuade other employers to adopt employability measures when explicit business benefits may not be immediately apparent. As a result of their actions, the case study employer has provided avenues for the non-employed (local and otherwise) to gain work and are now widely seen as offering good and accessible employment opportunities and have already succeeded in fulfilling their promised target of 1500 jobs.

Our thanks to the management and workforce of the Halifax Call Centre; Laganside Corporation; the South Belfast Partnership; and the various community representatives who participated in this research project.

About the Authors

Darren McKinstry and Ian Shuttleworth are principal researchers within C-STAR, Queen's University Belfast. Contact details and further information are available at http://www.qub.ac.uk/c-star/
Darren McKinstry Consulting

further information:

www.darrenmckinstry.com

info@darrenmckinstry.com