Days Hotel Belfast – A Case Study in Successful Employability
Darren McKinstry, Research Analyst

Early in 2003 the Sandy Row Community Forum (SRCF)- supported by the South Belfast Partnership Board (SBPB), Belfast GEMS and South Belfast Employment Office of the Department for Employment & Learning (DEL) – undertook steps to develop an initiative toward improving the employability of Sandy Row residents. At the same time the construction of the £12 million Days Hotel (3 Star) on a derelict site adjacent to Sandy Row provided a potential opportunity to work with a large local employer toward seeking enhanced access to employment for local jobseekers. The resulting Employer-Community collaboration process led to over 200 requests for further information from local residents, led to a dramatic uptake in community based capacity building programmes (e.g. CV services and interview assistance etc) and resulted, as part of the initial recruitment process in some 20 local residents gaining work, the vast majority of whom are still with the hotel at the time of writing (some 5 months later).

The success of this initiative promised to provide useful lessons – accordingly the

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<th>Organisation</th>
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<td>Sandy Row Community Forum</td>
<td>This is an umbrella body for community organisations which operate in the Sandy Row area of South Belfast. Sandy Row falls within the Shaftesbury Ward of South Belfast. The Forum was set up in 1996 and delivers a range of programmes covering early years, after schools, health promotion, education, youth, elderly and employability support.</td>
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<td>South Belfast Partnership Board</td>
<td>This is a multi sectoral body, comprising representatives of the community, private, statutory and political sectors which was set up in 1998 to co-ordinate the development and implementation and integrated regeneration strategy aimed at addressing the key issues affecting the most disadvantaged communities of South Belfast. One of its key thematic priorities is economic development and unemployment</td>
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<td>Belfast GEMS</td>
<td>Belfast GEMS is a local labour market intervention, which addresses the employability of residents of the most disadvantaged areas of South and East Belfast. The governing instrument for the initiative is provided by South Belfast Partnership Board. It is funded by Belfast Regeneration Office through the Department for Employment and Learning, as well as Belfast City Council, Laganside Corporation, Belfast Local Strategic Partnership and Halifax plc.</td>
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SBPB and Research and Evaluation Branch (DEL) jointly funded and commissioned research on this project.

This article thus summarises key lessons derived from the steps taken by the SRCF in seeking to find ways to work with both the employer and local residents toward overcoming perceived and actual barriers to recruitment / employment with the purpose of assisting local jobseekers into accessible and sustainable employment. In addition to supporting the work of the organisations outlined above, the findings are of particular relevance to the Taskforce on Employability and Long Term Unemployment toward more fully understanding the role of demand led employability processes in improving the accessibility of employment, specifically with regard to marginalised groups and communities.

POLICY CONTEXT

Access to Employment is a theme that has received increased attention over recent years. The European Commission identified ‘employability’ as one of four core pillars (alongside developing entrepreneurship and job creation; encouraging adaptability of businesses and their employees and strengthening equal opportunity policies for women and men) when it announced a wide-ranging European Employment Strategy (EES) in 1997. While a revised strategy (March 2003) saw a re-organisation of the approach (and the now familiar term ‘employability’ largely removed) the underlying themes remained and now focused more directly on supporting the EU Lisbon summit (2000) goals of sustained economic growth alongside ‘full employment’, ‘quality and productivity at work’ and ‘social cohesion via an inclusive labour market’.

These revised goals of the EES are particularly relevant in NI where social cohesion is an important issue and long-term unemployment is still recognised as a significant problem. The establishment in recent years of the Equality Commission for NI, the DEL – led Interdepartmental Taskforce on Employability and Long Term Unemployment (hereafter ‘the Taskforce’) and revised government policy initiatives such as New Targeting Social Need point to this importance.

With specific regard to employability, while it is recognised that such processes depend on the balance between ‘supply’ (e.g. individual knowledge, skills and household background) and ‘demand’ (e.g. the economic and social context within which work is being sought) much of the emphasis within UK employment policy remains focused largely on the importance of individual (supply side) characteristics in influencing outcomes in the labour market with little detailed focus on the important role that demand side characteristics can play in shaping labour market outcomes.

RATIONALE & RESEARCH DESIGN

Recent efforts by the SPBP and government departments such as DEL have sought to encourage local employers toward making employment opportunities more widely accessible. While anecdotal evidence points to resulting benefits for both an increased range of job seekers and also participant companies and communities, specific examples of such benefits are rare and under investigated. The opportunity to work with SBPB and specifically SRCF / Days Hotel provided a valuable opportunity to examine the processes, strengths and weaknesses of an Employer-Community collaboration process.

The principal method of data capture was via a series of semi-structured qualitative interviews with participant
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groups (employer, community organisation and a selection of those successful in obtaining work). While the full report outlines the key stages of involvement between the community forum and the employer toward establishing a local demand-led employability programme this short article instead focuses on summarising and highlighting key barriers and bridges to participation from the perspective of employer, community organisation and local jobseeker.

KEY THEMES

As might be expected, rationales for involvement generally focused around the core business areas of each of the participants. SRCF seeking to maximise potential opportunities and benefits for local residents; local jobseekers wishing to obtain new or better employment (better hours, better pay, working closer to home) and the employer wishing to engage a new and attractive supply of labour, while also reporting a desire to assist a relatively deprived community. Irrespective of the rationale for participation the collaborative efforts led to a number of key lessons.

In general, all parties benefited from an increased awareness of training and employment opportunities arising from the employer-community collaboration while the specific assistance of SRCF led to additional benefits.

By providing ‘pre-recruitment support’ with regard to completing CV’s and organising any subsequent interviews SRCF were able to assist local residents toward first securing an interview and then a job while ensuring those candidates presenting themselves to the employer were not only more fully aware of the type of work on offer but also (thanks to assistance with interview skills) increasingly able to provide information on specific skills and relevant experience as required by the employer during the interview process.

The localisation of the interview process (held by the employer but within the local community centre) and the willingness of the employer to visit community centres and engage with residents not only encouraged applicants regarding their chance of actually obtaining employment but in doing so, and as a result of positive word of mouth, dramatically increased the number of those presenting themselves for further information and / or interview. A mark of this success is that from an initial pool of 22 applicants who applied to initial publicity, subsequent word of mouth led to some 200 requesting additional information and being interviewed.

Similar benefits were realised via processes of ‘post-recruitment support’. For those successful in gaining employment, SRCF provided an ad-hoc and informal advice service – assisting individuals to settle into their new employment by for example providing advice on wages, payroll and seeking to minimise the effect of any teething problems associated with adapting a new work / life balance. The employer was encouraged by relatively low turnover, attributing at least part of the reason to the gratitude associated with having engaged the community and having delivered on a promise of accessible employment.

Areas for additional improvement did however arise – for example, closely associated with applicants lack of confidence with regard to completing CV’s and participating in job interviews (which SRCF worked to overcome via pre-recruitment support), those successful in obtaining employment have been reluctant to take promotion when offered by the employer, clearly reducing the effectiveness and benefits of the process for both individual and
employer. It was also felt that post-recruitment support could be more explicitly broadened to those unsuccessful in gaining work – encouraging applicants to reapply for subsequent vacancies while in the interim directing them to community based or government organised capacity building programmes.

Overall, the additional costs (time / effort) of participation required from the employer were seen as balanced by lower turnover and a workforce perceived as increasingly flexible and reliable because of its proximity to the site of employment and the positive word of mouth engendered by resulting community spirit and gratitude. The views of participants (employer, community organisation and jobseekers) and lessons from other similar work (See LMB 16, Ch. 16 – The Halifax Call Centre: Employer Recruitment Practices and Employability) point to a key advantage of the process being in a sustained and linked employability effort. Thus opportunity of direct access to a ‘real’ job not only provides added incentive to participate in training schemes but when tightly integrated with community assistance, the seamless nature of such processes means that participants can be guided from initial advice, through capacity building programmes, toward open days, job application and interview assistance. Those successful in obtaining employment further benefitting from post-employment support with those not successful benefiting from support and advice regarding other job opportunities and associated capacity building / training.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The report concludes with a number of detailed recommendations seeking to summarise key steps in the process and intended to be of utility in informing future similar employer-community interactions. In brief these can be summarised as follows:

- **General Approach:**
  - Establish a local employability working group to provide resources/expertise and act as a single point of contact for the employer. Identify potential business benefits such as decreased turnover, a widened labour supply, a potential workforce balancing effect, enhanced public relations and the ability of the community organisations to assist in the recruitment, screening and pre-employment preparation of potential candidates as unique selling points for an employer-community collaboration process.

- **Pre-Recruitment Phase:**
  - Schedule key dates with regard to any future potential recruitment exercises and proactively work with employers and the local community to ensure capacity-building programmes can be sequenced accordingly. Seek to minimise any barriers to participation by encouraging employers to review entrance requirements and methods of application (e.g. application form versus CV) and selection. Encourage the employer to visit the local community to promote opportunities and demonstrate commitment.

- **Recruitment Phase:**
  - Recognise the value of the collaborative (employer-community) process in persuading individuals to participate and the value of direct communication by employer staff and potential jobseekers. Encourage Community visits and open days accordingly alongside information and advice on the nature of
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employment available, flexibility in shifts, wages, available tax credits and personal / community development. Recognise the value of linking with partner organisations such as neighbouring communities, GEMS and the Employment Service to provide resources and share expertise. Seek to increase local awareness of opportunities and provide capacity building / support in making an employment application. Consider asking the employer to subsidise the cost of these (and possibly other) outreach efforts as a form of low cost advertising and community engagement. Consider the possibility of delegating the scheduling of interviews to the local community organisation and of holding the interviews locally to increase participation from those potentially intimidated by the interview process.

• Post-Recruitment Phase:

For those successful in the recruitment exercise provide further specific advice on available tax credits, payroll, contracts etc as well as facilitating an informal information network where appointees can raise queries / issues that they might not otherwise raise (e.g. with the employer).

Seek to relay key themes of concern / benefit to the employer toward improving conditions. Offer capacity building courses with regard to work-based skills and confidence building toward promotion etc. For those unsuccessful - initiate a series of employer facilitated signposting measures, providing information on alternative avenues (option to reapply, other employment, community assistance, government training etc) helping to ensure those interested in employment opportunities remain engaged with the labour market. Overall, obtain feedback from participants (employer, partner organisations, community) on costs / benefits experienced and if / how the process could be improved. Use this information to improve / promote future employer-community interaction measures.

Acknowledgments.

My thanks to the Sandy Row Community Forum, the management and workforce of the Days Hotel Belfast; representatives of DEL’s Research & Evaluation Branch and South & East Belfast Employment Service; the South Belfast Partnership Board and the various community representatives from South Belfast who through their involvement with this and similar projects have informed the themes presented here.

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