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In November 2003 MM Group Bangor announced plans to build on their 350 strong workforce and create 100 additional full-time, permanent jobs. At the time of the announcement Chief Executive Jeff Smith commented: “We are determined to grow MM still further and are fully prepared to invest in NI... the only obstacle to growth is finding enough of the right people quickly enough to meet our needs.”

In response to a request for advice by the employer, Research & Evaluation Branch (REB) of the Department for Employment & Learning (DEL) commissioned work to profile the existing workforce, recruitment processes and local labour supply conditions as background to informing the planned and future expansions.

This article summarises key lessons derived from the steps taken by the employer to expand recruitment at its Bangor site by seeking to find ways to overcome any perceived and actual barriers to recruitment.

Rationale & Policy Context

While the rationale for the research was primarily to assist the employer with recruitment and retention, the analysis of MM Group is however also of relevance DEL and InvestNI with regard to further developing estimates of labour supply and understanding recruitment processes.

The findings, which further supplement other work undertaken by the Author (with other Ni employers seeking to promote enhanced access to work) are also of importance with regard to informing ongoing programmes (such as DEL’s ‘Bridge to Employment’) and in the policy development work of groups such as the ‘Taskforce on Employability and Long Term Unemployment’.

Key Themes

The full research was conducted in four key areas – workforce profile; recruitment & retention experiences; labour recruitment catchment and labour availability & potential capacity. Quantitative & Qualitative data was collected from the employer early in 2004. For reasons of brevity and confidentiality only some of the themes are discussed in this summary article.

It is worth establishing at the outset of that MM Group have already done much innovative work to seek to expand recruitment and widen the accessibility of their employment.
opportunities. The focus of this research was therefore threefold: to examine what more, if anything, could be done; to consider where past efforts might be further improved, and; to distil key lessons that might inform the actions of MM Group and other employers.

Workforce Profile:

Quantitative data was provided to profile 349 call handlers (inbound and outbound) within the Bangor workforce. For applicants, previous experience in call centres was desirable, with some experience of customer service essential for outbound positions. No formal qualifications were required for Inbound calling positions, with GCSE ‘standard’ required only for outbound calling positions. This is reflective of a general move (particularly in ‘tightening’ local labour markets) away from formal qualifications toward more targeted selection methods such as aptitude testing and behavioural competency interviews.

Importantly, within MM Group there is some recognition of barriers restricting labour supply beyond the typically young and female employees normally associated with call centres, in that the above lessening of formal qualifications is in part “because we also want to be able to attract older workers” (MM Group Human Resources).

An examination of the age profile of the workforce (Table 1) reveals that overall 50% of the call handling workforce are aged 18-25 with 70% aged 35 or under. Findings from other call centres confirm that such a young profile is not uncommon in the industry. The workforce as a whole is some 52% female/48% male. Unlike the age profile, this finding represents a markedly higher proportion than in other call centres the author has examined where workforces are typically 70-75% female within call handling positions. Additionally, male employees exhibit a younger age profile than females - almost 60% of males aged 18-25 with 80% ‘35 or under’ compared to 43% (18-25) and 60% (35 or under) of females respectively. While much of the above could reflect the effects of specific recruitment practices and / or any differential patterns of retention amongst men and women DEL have tentatively speculated that the combination of a range of shift work and an ‘out of town’ location (a bus stop, useful for day shifts, is located approximately half a mile away) may make the employment more attractive to those with access to cars and reduced family commitments – typically younger males. MM Group has been encouraged to consider the reasons for such patterns within their workforce profile.

Table 1: Age profile of Workforce by Gender and Department

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inbound</td>
<td>Outbound</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Inbound</td>
<td>Outbound</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Inbound</td>
<td>Outbound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-17</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>349</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Analysis of MM Group workforce
Information regarding the previous employment status of workers (useful in profiling the characteristics of existing labour supply understanding) was unfortunately not available for analysis. MM Group are already aware that the targeting of specific labour pools (for example the non-employed, local communities, those in older age categories, can make important contributions toward ensuring adequate labour supply. This is one area in which MM Group could seek to build upon ongoing efforts to widen recruitment by further understanding the characteristics of the present workforce.

Recruitment & Retention Experiences;

The ability to attract and sustain worker numbers, particularly in tight labour markets, is heavily influenced by recruitment & retention strategies. The call centre sector in particular is commonly regarded as having retention problems and as a result associated recruitment issues.

Recruitment in 2003 saw MM Group appoint some 200 people, primarily within inbound call handling positions. As with many large employers recruitment is generally ‘rolling’, not only to expand the workforce but to replace those lost through turnover. Early plans for 2004 were to seek to expand the workforce by 100 additional staff.

Recruitment Practices

A variety of recruitment methods have been tried by MM Group over time. However in contrast to their expansion into an employer of regional importance, recruitment methods would appear to have followed an increasingly local focus. A ‘lack of interest’ from the applicants in greater Belfast labour market to past recruitment exercise has increasingly left MM Group preferring to focus more upon local weekly papers.

"we’re not advertising in the [NI Daily papers] anymore, that just didn’t work... didn’t get us any results, we advertise in the three local papers...”

Yet, the employer passively recognises the adverse impact of having a localised profile when trying to attract large numbers of applicants:

“our [profile]... was working very strongly against us... even though our growth has been huge - we’re the second biggest employer in North Down - ...nobody knew we were here, that hasn’t helped.”

At the time of writing MM Group has now embarked on a range of PR new activities (e.g. banner advertising at the Belfast Odyssey Complex) to raise its profile beyond the local area to one more commensurate to that of a large InvestNI backed employer.

Links with government job centres have been viewed as successful in part, again particularly in the local area (the localised profile of the company may have a role here also). The company has however been proactive enough to consider implementing schemes to make links with local schools although resources have not allowed this to occur as yet. During initial meetings with the company, discussions focussed on expanding this type of work to include other groups such as those representing local communities, specific groups (for example the non-employed, those with a disability or in older age categories etc). At the time of writing it is encouraging to note that MM Group have undertaken further work in these areas.

Working Practices

The above discussion has concerned itself with measures to recruit via proactively informing potential applicants of the benefits of working for the company. This ‘corporate’ message is however usually only part of a wider information resource available to potential applicants on working practices, conditions within the employer and ‘reputation’ spreading via ‘word of mouth’. It is in this regard that past or ongoing practices can influence not only the retention within a company; but the recruitment to it.

Early in their development, MM Group had fluctuating employment levels as they sought to respond to wider
Call Centre Recruitment Difficulties: An Investigation
Darren McKinstry, Darren McKinstry Consulting.

Variations in workload. The company facilitated these fluctuating employment levels by reliance on agency workers and in certain cases, rapid and considerable downsizing. As the company has become more established and the range of clients has increased the HR function have sought to promote the value of permanent positions against an over-reliance on agency staff, which are both costly and more difficult to fill.

“In this out-sourced world of ours we’ve always had a view... that we couldn’t commit to permanent jobs but actually when we stood back and looked at it we have more permanency and stability than we maybe had appreciated and natural attrition can take care of a number of the flexibilities that you need within your workforce...”

Today, MM Group has now reversed their initial approach - the vast majority of staff are now ‘non-agency’ and stability has been improved by an ability to transfer staff between different projects rather than via attrition. It is however vitally important that MM Group (or any employer in a similar situation) proactively promotes awareness of the vastly improved stability and reliability of their employment opportunities so that the potential for future recruitment may not remain diminished because of a (now outdated) negative ‘word of mouth’. Efforts to communicate such changes will likely pay dividends with regard to current and ongoing recruitment.

Retention
The company is increasingly focussed on promoting retention and has made considerable efforts to vary the nature of work employees undertake and has considered the role of enhanced terms and conditions. MM Group have had flexible working practices and policies for a substantial period of time and have built this benefit into advertising campaigns by specifically mentioning a range of full-time and part-time hours and days that are available to applicants. Additionally the employer is open to requests from staff for changes in working arrangements. Flexibility is an increasingly common aspect of employment contracts and one which this employer clearly see as a significant plus point in the package they were able to offer.

“our view was we offer flexibility... you could get hours that suit yourself, your children, your other jobs, whatever... we thought this was a big plus and we were selling this as one of the benefits of working here...”

Despite the underlying rationale, the implementation of this scheme (and in fairness that of similar schemes in other employers) was that in practice it also offered flexibility to the employer to change shifts, sometimes at short notice:

“when we looked more at the exit interviews and just kind of listening to staff... [a major factor was] not knowing what their shifts are going to be... they want to know that they're going to be working 7 to 11’... up until recently we couldn’t have told them what their shifts were going to be next week - that was a big minus.”

“It’s just a battle and a friction that doesn’t need to be there... it’s carrying through the discussions that you have at the initial stages and the agreements whether they’re written or just understood and not putting people in the position where they have to say “You know I can’t work this”.”

This was an unintentional bias of the scheme and at the time of writing MM Group have advised that they have now made substantive efforts to provide a system of reasonable, predictable, managed flexibility for all.

Overall, the employer has adopted an open and positive approach to recruitment and has shown a willingness to experiment with new methods as required. This multi-layered approach would seem to indicate a detailed understanding of the labour market. In the context of proposed expansion and improved job security (reduced reliance on agency staff) MM Group have been encouraged to re-visit the full range of
recruitment methods, including those noted as ineffective during their start-up/expansion phase.

**Labour Supply and Access to Work**

Given the ‘lack of interest’ of applicants from beyond Bangor (as noted above) it is of particular interest to examine the travel-to-work distances and spatial catchment associated with current MM Group employees.

**Travel-to-Work**

Information provided by MM Group was analysed to examine the distance employees travel to work. An analysis by gender (Table 2) reveals that while the pattern is generally balanced, females are more likely to come from areas immediately adjacent to the site (0-2km) than males.

It was found that 80% of the company’s call handling staff come from within 8km of the site, a distance around half of that of other call centre employers the author has examined. While the ability of the employer to attract such numbers from the immediate locale is potentially impressive, the short travel-to-work distance serves to restrict available labour supply. Efforts to widen the catchment (to distances comparable with other call centre employers) would increase the potential available labour supply.

Table 2: Travel-to-work distance by Gender and Inbound/Outbound Calling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Distance</th>
<th>Male Inbound (%)</th>
<th>Male Outbound (%)</th>
<th>Female Inbound (%)</th>
<th>Female Outbound (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
<td>1.20%</td>
<td>2.38%</td>
<td>0.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 '0-2km'</td>
<td>22.76%</td>
<td>20.93%</td>
<td>22.29%</td>
<td>30.50%</td>
<td>30.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 '2-5km'</td>
<td>38.21%</td>
<td>53.49%</td>
<td>42.17%</td>
<td>36.88%</td>
<td>35.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 '5-10km'</td>
<td>25.20%</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
<td>19.88%</td>
<td>18.44%</td>
<td>16.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 '10-25km'</td>
<td>11.38%</td>
<td>13.95%</td>
<td>12.05%</td>
<td>11.35%</td>
<td>11.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 '25-50km'</td>
<td>2.44%</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>2.41%</td>
<td>2.84%</td>
<td>2.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (%)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Analysis of MM Group workforce
Call Centre Recruitment Difficulties: An Investigation
Darren McKinstry, Darren McKinstry Consulting.

Employment Catchment Areas

Having considered travel to work distances we can move to consider the exact spatial nature of the MM Group catchment area. Discussions with the employer indicate a belief in a workforce almost exclusively drawn from within Bangor Town.

"As close to Bangor really as possible. We don’t get people from Newtownards... I mean Belfast is just a non runner"

Considered spatially (see Figure 1 below) we can see that the catchment is indeed localised around the town of Bangor (as would be expected from the restricted travel-to-work distances). However while the greatest concentrations (proportions of employees per ward) are close to the site and to Bangor town centre, the employer does manage to attract a number of workers from Newtownards. MM Group could thus potentially look to establish what makes Newtownards accessible for some workers and not for others and to share this message with potential jobseekers and local recruitment agency/jobcentre staff.

Most interestingly, it is evident that the current catchment area is skewed away from Belfast and towards the Ards peninsula. It is clear that this may reflect current localised recruitment practices (such as the coverage of local newspaper recruiting) which if amended could see increased recruitment in the under-represented areas towards Holywood, Dundonald and Belfast.

The employer have made some efforts in this regard – early in their development, the company did run a dedicated bus service from the site directly into Belfast. While this was seen as having initial success the service is ultimately viewed as having failed due to lack of interest with exit interviews at the time indicating that the ‘distance and inconvenience of travel’ was a reason for leaving.

This anecdotal evidence that Belfast is "too far" for workers to travel is however weakened in two main regards. Firstly, if workers travelled as far from the west of Bangor (towards Belfast) as they currently do from the east (towards the Ards peninsula - see Figure 1) then greater Belfast would fall within the recruitment catchment area. Secondly, it is known from work with Belfast call centres that Bangor residents are travelling to Belfast by train and bus for work. This illustrates both that if call handlers are able to commute the distance between Belfast and Bangor for call handling employment they may also be willing to travel from Belfast to Bangor; and secondly that there is a local Bangor ‘call centre’ workforce potentially available to MM Group.

It would thus seem possible that for Belfast applicants, Bangor may be regarded as ‘too far’ not in absolute terms but in relative terms i.e. because other acceptable employment is available closer to home. MM Group and other employers confronted with exit interviews where ‘access’ or ‘travel-to-work’ is quoted as a factor may wish to probe underlying reasons further.
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Summary

MM Group has grown from a small call centre employer into one of considerable size and regional importance. As it has grown MM Group has looked to improve both the conditions and security of the employment it has to offer.

An analysis of the workforce reveals that it is balanced in gender terms (with proportionately more males than other call centre employers examined) and as with other call centres, employs a relatively young workforce. Qualification requirements have been reduced over time, particularly for inbound call handlers and such efforts should serve to make employment more accessible to a wider number of potential applicants.

In seeking to expand their workforce they have over time tried a range of methods. The employer has however increasingly localised its recruitment efforts due to a perceived lack of interest from the wider (Belfast) labour market. The analysis (and anecdotal evidence) points to fluctuating employment levels, facilitated by a heavy reliance on agency staff as having had a negative effect on the perceived reliability of employment with the company.

Encouragingly, since the time of the research in early 2004 MM Group have done much to increase their profile and awareness of employment opportunities with, for example, high profile banner advertisements on bus services and at Belfast Odyssey where many of their key demographic would frequent.

Continued and persistent efforts with regard to outreach measures to attract a more diverse labour supply will build on existing work with specific groups and should serve to widen labour supply and further assist with recruitment & retention.

Acknowledgements. My thanks to the Human resources team of MM Group Bangor; representatives of DEL’s Research & Evaluation Branch and the various employers, employees and community representatives who through their involvement with this and previous projects have informed the themes presented.

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