Encouraging Women into Work: Overcoming Barriers to Recruitment
Findings and Key Lessons

March 2008
The WINS (Women into Non Traditional Sectors) project was established in 2005 to deliver a programme of pre-employment training and mentoring and work placements for long term unemployed or economically inactive women in Belfast along with research into barriers facing women working in non traditional sectors. The project concludes in 2008.

WINS was developed and led by Belfast City Council. Other members of the WINS Development Partnership are:

- Construction Industry Training Board/Construction Skills
- Department for Employment & Learning
- GEMS NI
- Housing Executive
- ICTU NI Committee
- Queen’s University, Belfast
- Training for Women Network
- Translink
- Women’s TEC

The WINS project also works with similar projects in Germany (Futura Project); the Netherlands (the Glass Wall Project) and the EQUAL at Work initiative of the Dublin Employment Pact, Republic of Ireland. More information on this work is available on www.horizoncrossing.com and www.dep.ie.

The WINS Project is part financed by the Department for Employment & Learning and the European Social Fund under the Equal Opportunities theme of the EQUAL Community Initiative. The EQUAL Initiative is a laboratory for new ideas to the European Employment Strategy and the Social Inclusion process. Its mission is to promote a more inclusive work life through fighting discrimination and exclusion based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation. EQUAL is implemented in and between Member States of the European Union and is funded through the European Social Fund.

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This research has been part financed by the European Social Fund under the NI EQUAL Community Initiative Programme for Northern Ireland. Research was carried out in 2007 by:

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Executive Summary
The Women into Non-Traditional Sectors (WINS) Project, part financed by the European Social Fund under the EQUAL Community Initiative Programme for NI, aims to encourage more women into areas that remain traditionally male and to generally widen the horizons of potential female employees by demonstrating that non-traditional employment is a possibility.

The WINS Project wishes to more fully understand where and how actions can be taken to reduce or overcome barriers to recruitment for those, specifically females, who may wish to take advantage of job opportunities within non-traditional sectors.

The rationale for this proposed study, developed from the above, is to examine perceptions of, and recruitment practices within three WINS partnership employers and, by comparing these to best practice elsewhere and the experiences of those who have or might seek recruitment in non-traditional sectors, to establish recommendations that could be adopted by a range of employers to the benefit of both employers and those seeking work.

The focus of the study is thus to consider a range of issues across a number of key employers and best practice studies to suggest a framework which could be used by WINS employers to modify operational processes to achieve wider strategic goals. The project is thus focussed on a broad piece of diagnostic work seeking to deliver a practical framework relevant to a number of key themes:

- to overcome perceptual barriers and to maximise the appeal of work in non-traditional sectors;
- to maximise the appeal of organisations toward becoming ‘employer of choice’;
- to remove barriers so as to maximise the accessibility of employment opportunities and to facilitate the maximum number of suitable applicants to make an application;
- to facilitate applicants to continue with an application and to progress as far as their skills, aptitudes and interests allow;
- to encourage applicants, successful or not, to recommend the employer to others or to consider making an application in the future for similar or other appropriate employment;
- to refine processes by suggesting a framework which promotes the alignment of strategic goals with operational processes to drive organisational effectiveness;

A case study approach has been adopted which - while not statistically representative of all applicants, employees, training organisations and HR staff - will provide a number of insights into current effectiveness and suggest routes to improvement.

This summary report forms part of a modular structure allowing the interested reader to engage with different components as their needs require. A separate document sets out the best practice identified from a review of key literature while this document sets out key recommendations, with supporting examples derived from fieldwork with participant employers; employees; training organisations and job seekers. The key recommendations seek to consider how current methods can be amended or expanded to increase the attractiveness of jobs to a wider pool of labour. The focus is one of developing a strategic approach to align operational processes so that they achieve the key recruitment and retention goals of the organisation.

In broad terms the approach gives practical examples of how an employer can:

- Create a workplace attractive to the labour supply being targeted (while seeking to maintain attractiveness to current labour supply);
- Improve accessibility to the post by identifying, minimising and/or removing barriers (real or perceived, in the workplace and in recruitment processes);
- Promote the key benefits of the job and organisation in a manner appropriate to the target audience and in recognition that the marketplace may hold outdated stereotypes and be ignorant of many of the benefits of atypical work.

Finally, it is worth noting that the framework developed builds not only on the findings from this study but also on lessons from an extensive portfolio of work that the author has conducted with a range of Northern Ireland employers and on those lessons arising from the general review of best practice.
Overview
2a Wider Context
Access to Employment is a theme that has received increased policy attention over recent years. At the European level 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 in 1997. While a revised strategy (March 2003) saw a re-organisation of the approach and the now familiar term ‘employability’ largely removed from the terminology the underlying themes remained, now focussed 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’.

The revised goals of the 2003 European Employment Strategy were particularly relevant in Northern Ireland where social cohesion is an important issue and long term unemployment and non-employment are still recognised as significant problems.

Importantly however, while it is recognised that ‘employability’ processes depend on the balance between ‘supply’ (e.g. individual knowledge, skills and household background) and ‘demand’ (e.g. the needs of employers; recruitment practices and the economic and social context within which work is being sought) much of the emphasis within the UK remained focussed specifically on the importance of individual (supply side) characteristics in influencing outcomes in the labour market (as is evidenced by programmes such as the New Deal) with little detailed focus on the important role that demand side characteristics and employers can play.

Further, and with particular relevance to this project, are issues of gender segregation in many industries and occupations with many of the sectors/occupations employing high proportions of females tending to be those where wages are less (e.g. administration) and where part-time working is more common (e.g. service sector).

The impact on employers of such gender segregation in labour supply or demand side recruitment approaches (which may serve to make employment less attractive to one group or another – unintentional or otherwise), is one of reduced access to a supply of appropriately skilled labour and a reduction in the available skills, experiences and abilities from which an employer may recruit.

2b The Women into Non-Traditional Sectors (WINS) Project

The Women into Non-Traditional Sectors (WINS) Project, part financed by the European Social Fund under the EQUAL Community Initiative Programme for NI, aims to encourage more women into areas that remain traditionally male and to generally widen the horizons of potential female employees by demonstrating that non-traditional employment is a possibility.

The WINS Model was developed in line with best practice in pre-employment and work experience training as identified through extensive research and in consultation with stakeholders. The WINS Model of pre-employment training and work experience has been benchmarked against the recommendations of the Equal Opportunities Commission Report ‘Action for change: How employers can break down gender segregation in vocational training and employment’. The participant employers have been recognised as ‘Exemplary Employers’ as a result of their work on the WINS Project. The Exemplary Employers initiative was established following the recommendations of the Women and Work Commission report ‘Shaping a Fairer Future’.

Ongoing work by the WINS partnership seeks to make employment opportunities more widely accessible to women via dedicated training programmes and by encouraging interaction between employers and sectoral/training organisations.

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1 The NI Taskforce on Employability and Long Term Unemployment define Employability as “the capability to move into and within labour markets and to realise potential through sustainable and accessible employment”.

2 For example, 31% of employed males are in skilled trades, compared to a negligible percentage of women, but only 6% of males are in administrative/clerical occupations, compared to 26% of females (Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (2005), Women in Northern Ireland: Statistics Bulletin, Belfast: DETI, p.14.)

3 Now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.
3a Rationale
The WINS Project wishes to more fully understand where and how actions can be taken to reduce or overcome barriers to recruitment for those, specifically females, who may wish to take advantage of job opportunities within non-traditional sectors.

While anecdotal evidence from similar projects (e.g. such as those seeking to overcome recruitment barriers for the long-term unemployed) points to benefits for both potential jobseekers and participant employers, specific examples of best practice in overcoming recruitment barriers are under investigated both internationally and in a Northern Ireland context.

The rationale for this proposed study, developed from the above, is to examine perceptions of and recruitment practices within the three WINS partnership employers\(^4\) and, by comparing these to best practice elsewhere and the experiences of those who have or might seek recruitment in non-traditional sectors, to establish recommendations that could be adopted by a range of employers to the benefit of both employers and those seeking work.

3b Objectives
The objectives of this project are to:

- **Identify best practice** of employers in recruitment & retention of women in non-traditional jobs via a review of agreed literature;

- **Summarise market place perceptions** of WINS employers on the part of training providers / potential female applicants for non-traditional jobs within the WINS employers;

- **Review current recruitment practices and processes**, considering potential barriers to recruitment;

- **Summarise perceptions and views of working practices** considering impacts on recruitment / retention;

- **Distil recommendations** for the refinement of processes and practices.

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\(^4\) Belfast City Council (BCC); Translink and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) is excluded from the analysis as it is not a direct employer.
Approach
This research is focussed on delivering a framework relevant to a number of key themes;

- to overcome perceptual barriers and to maximise the appeal of work in non-traditional sectors;
- to maximise the appeal of organisations toward becoming ‘employer of choice’;
- to remove barriers so as to maximise the accessibility of employment opportunities and to facilitate the maximum number of suitable applicants to make an application;
- to facilitate applicants to continue with an application and to progress as far as their skills, aptitudes and interests allow;
- to encourage applicants, successful or not, to recommend the employer to others or to consider making an application in the future for similar or other appropriate employment;
- to refine processes by suggesting a framework which promotes the alignment of strategic goals with operational processes to drive organisational effectiveness.

4a Key Considerations

In developing the methodology and structuring of the report we have been mindful of a number of key considerations or principles. These are summarised here, to both guide the reader and to set the context for the material that follows.

Overcoming Structural Barriers

In seeking to promote accessibility, employers benefit from first acknowledging and seeking to work to overcome the range of structural barriers that may impacted on individuals with regard to perceptions of the employer; lack of interest in NT sector; literacy / numeracy; poor soft skills; lack of confidence re: interviews / aptitude tests; poor word of mouth; competing opportunities; focus on salary versus benefits (attractiveness factors).

Strategic Versus Operational Actions

It is important to recognise from the outset that operationally, most employers will already be recruiting using a range of recognised, well-tested and standardised approaches. The goal of this exercise is thus not to suggest wholly new processes or to weaken those that exist - but rather to strategically align and enhance existing processes so that they meet the needs of a wider group of individuals (atypical workers); overcoming barriers and making the employer more attractive to those who previously would not have considered or would not have been able to make or continue with an application due to the perceptions or processes currently in place.

Attractiveness of Employment

It is commonly recognised that pay is the key driver in attracting someone into specific employment. While the role of salary should not be understated it is also the case that it forms only one of a range of factors which an employer may use to enhance the attractiveness of any particular employment opportunity. Examples of other factors include bonus schemes; career prospects; training prospects; likelihood of progression; location; entrance requirements; proximity to home; flexibility; shifts; working conditions / environment; sector; job security; likely co-workers; employer reputation; competing labour market options etc.

Labour Pools

The ‘labour pool’ for any specific job will be a derived from combination of factors including the nature and characteristics of the work and employer (demand); the characteristics of local workers (such as skills; demographics and home location) (supply) and structural / historical factors such as access to work (transport; childcare etc) and subject choice at school etc. In targeting ‘Niche’ groups or atypical workers it should be recognised that they may be responsive to differing ‘attractiveness’ factors to that of the main pool. This may allow an employer; with appropriate efforts, to expand its local labour pool without excessively increasing salary costs.
Recruitment influences Retention
Examing turnover (by employee characteristic) and seeking to encourage applications from specific groups accordingly, may further enhance organisational performance by further reducing turnover rates. Employers may thus wish to consider efforts to identify such characteristics (profiling their existing workforce) and to consider efforts to attract increased applications from more diverse groups – e.g. by gender, age, race, disability, previous employment status etc.

4b Methodology
A diagnostic case study approach has been adopted which, while not statistically representative of all applicants, employees, training organisations or HR staff, will provide a number of insights into current effectiveness and suggest routes to improvement.

The agreed methodology comprises the following key elements:

- Literature Review – to identify examples of best practice relevant to the recruitment of atypical workers, particularly females. (The literature review is presented in a separate document);

- Partnership Perspectives – semi-structured interviews with each of the three training organisations associated with the WINS programme to capture market place perceptions of employers and perceived barriers to recruitment of women into NTS from either a first hand perspective or as identified from day to day interaction with those women seeking such work or participating in the WINS training / placement programmes;

- Employer Perspectives – a review of recruitment materials and processes (job descriptions; advertisements; recruitment packs; application forms etc); and semi-structured interviews with key HR staff (to examine employers’ perspective on the recruitment process; perceived strengths and weaknesses in current approaches;

- Jobseeker & Employee perspectives – semi-structured focus groups to consider marketplace perceptions of the employers and barriers / enablers to recruitment and retention including Perceptions of work non-traditional sectors;

- Identification of Key Lessons - facilitating the participant employers and others to review operational processes and to inform the ongoing development of job descriptions; advertising; application forms etc.

In reviewing the key lessons set out below, it is vital that the reader considers these in their local context – mindful of organisational needs; local labour market characteristics and legislative requirements. Where amendments to practices or policies are planned, professional and/or legal advice should be taken as appropriate.

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5 All fieldwork was undertaken between December 2006 and May 2007
6 GEMS NI, Women’s TEC, Training for Women Network (TWN)
Key Lessons
It is argued that the strategy of attracting and retaining female (or atypical) applicants should begin by considering "what is likely to encourage and assist women to take work in this sector / employer?" Barriers and enablers are likely to be found in two key areas:

- the perception and nature of the job / employer; and
- the requirements of the post and the application process

The central theme of the approach is based on the recognition that any existing recruitment methods will attract a pool of labour; that pool being determined by the characteristics of the job, employer; local labour market etc. The approach adopted in this research is thus to consider not how current methods can be replaced but rather how they can be amended or expanded to increase the attractiveness of the job to a wider pool of labour.

With regard to the perception of the job, amending processes to combat stereotypes, to cause potential atypical applicants to stop and take a second look, to challenge their own engrained and implicit assumptions / stereotypes. The role of independent intermediaries such as training organisations and peers with good “word of mouth” stories cannot be underestimated in this context. In effect, so few employers seek to engage in a truly meaningful way with atypical employees that those who do, on an extended and ongoing basis, have much to gain.

However, an extended and ongoing commitment from employers is paramount in seeking to tap into new or niche labour pools – those seeking to return to work or to pursue new avenues will need time to make the extra investment to change or take employment and the commitment of the employer is key if they are to feel engaged by the process and to be given time to re-skill and apply for atypical opportunities. Maintaining momentum and delivering on managed expectations are key.

With regards to the requirements of the post and process, the recruitment process must start from the position/perspective of the potential applicant and seek to overcome any barriers they might face. Seeking to attract atypical applicants means considering new barriers or enablers that may not have impacted on the ‘traditional’ labour supply. The process must of course meet the needs of the employer; but that is not to suggest that, with examination, an approach cannot be found which delivers employer needs while further minimising the barriers to potential applicants.

Aligned to the agreed methodology, findings are set out under the following headings:

- Promoting Opportunities For Non Traditional Work;
- Labour Market Positioning: Market Place Perceptions & Building Better Workplaces;
- Applicant Job Search and Employer Outreach;
- Recruitment: Advertising, Assistance, Applications, Aptitudes & Outcomes;
- Summary: Mainstreaming Benefits of WINS.

In this context it is vital that learning from such programmes is mainstreamed into HR practice and policy.

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5a Promoting Opportunities for Non Traditional Work

Promote Benefits
- Promote unseen benefits of working in atypical roles as identified by existing workers – independence, responsibility, self management, varying work environment, delegation, creativity, etc.
- Build on career aspirations – recognise that a move into NT work may be the first step on a path of significant career change. Those seeking to move into NT work may thus be interested to expand their skills and gain relevant qualifications. Posts which offer some form of training or recognised qualification may improve both recruitment and retention.

Across all groups, most interviewees saw NT employment as an opportunity to ‘try something different’. Specific benefits that were expected / attractive included:
- more independence / less close supervision;
- A chance to be ‘out in the open’;
- Fixed hours – for example, less evening shifts and late changes than might be expected in retail / service sector roles.

However, employees also noted a considerable number of benefits that they had not considered nor expected at the time of application.

Key unexpected benefits included:
- delegation & trust - given a task and left to get on with it and deliver;
- autonomy – to plan own day and be in control of delivery (not found in service / admin roles);
- Personal development – Time alone to think while working on independent tasks (allowing time to plan day, work or life);
- Creativity – with regard to problem solving, working with others or working with hands.

Overcome Stereotypes
- Proactively challenge historical stereotypes - promote modern views of NT work to overcome historical stereotypes. Reinforce improvements in working conditions – manual handling regulations; working time directives; health & safety at work. Support this with highlights regarding awareness of modern facilities and available terms and conditions.

Stereotypes effect both the individual (‘is that job for me?’) and family and friends who ‘made light’ of the jobs or considered NT jobs to be of a lower ‘status’ than more traditional office work. Interviewees noted that stereotypes would also lead peers to raise concerns over personal safety or ability to do the work (such as driving, heavy lifting).

Other interviewees noted that where a job or type of employment was stereotyped, trainees may not even consider it long enough to consider either then positive benefits of the work or of a post with the specific employer.

Interviewees also noted that schools career advice had often followed stereotypes of the time or focussed heavily on higher education rather than apprenticeships.

Outreach & Peer Role Models
- Use outreach to enable applicants to experience the working environment - facilitate school placements; work experience and public open days.
- Use peer role models - Make use of current workers to bring life to these benefits, recognising also that seeing atypical people in atypical roles serves to visibly challenge stereotypes.

As noted later, specific opportunities are not always associated with key employers (e.g. employment in horticulture/grounds maintenance was
not considered something that the participant employers could offer). Perceptions about lack of facilities including changing, toilets and family flexible arrangements can also provide practical barriers to considering NT opportunities.

Training organisations argued that to combat outdated stereotypes, views of peers were important in forming opinions regarding NT work and in decisions to pursue such work. Typical examples included women being dissuaded from pursuing NT careers due to lack of peer acceptance of females in such roles. Promoting the visibility of role models would thus have major benefits.

Applicants commented that they had, for a long time, been ‘interested in the idea of outdoor or NT work… but didn’t know how to get into it’, noting that non-traditional work wasn’t taught or highlighted while they were at school and in general it did not form part of careers advice.

Partnerships with other employers; schools; training government or other organisations thus offer route to pool resource and /or promote opportunities across a diverse range of outlets and venues.

5b Labour Market Positioning

This section considers how the WINS employers and their sectors were perceived by potential employees and past applicants. The central theme here is key lessons on how an employer can develop and retain a reputation as ‘employer of choice’, even if they have no immediate plans to recruit. Linked to this is a consideration of how those employers promote their vacancies, contrasted with how the atypical workers interviewed tend to search for employment.

Market Place Perceptions: Branding & Reputation

**Reputation**

- Recognise that you cannot separate your reputation as a service provider / manufacturer etc from your reputation as an employer. All business activities thus have the potential to impact on the willingness of individuals to work for you.

- Consider how all activities and processes contribute to becoming ‘employer of choice’. Refine and embed a related message within all activities whether directly related to recruitment or not.

Interviewees noted the prevalence of historical stereotypes and also noted the potential for crossover in reputations – e.g. where a good service provider was assumed to likely be a good employer. Conversely, poor
performance in the past may continue to influence word of mouth long after those conditions have ceased to exist. Historical stereotyping of NT roles may thus account for the low number of female applicants to non-admin posts.

In addition, employers may need to work to develop reputations that are separate from general views on the type of jobs on offer (e.g. trainees did not explicitly separate views of a bus company as a potential employer from general perceptions of “bus driving” as a career. Thus views on the attractiveness of bus driving might overshadow views on the company as an employer per se. Employers must be mindful of this and seek to promote positive attributes of both.

Stereotypes

- **Recognise that large organisations with an established reputation may be stereotyped as offering employment only in one predominant area** – atypical work, by its very nature will likely not be associated with an organisation (i.e. if you predominantly offer administrative employment, those seeking other employment will not automatically think of you when seeking employment.

- **Being recognised as a source of high quality atypical employment in certain areas will set you ahead of competitors** – employers should lead advertisements with the job title AND an indication of willingness to attract atypical employees.

In general interviewees held polarised views on the type of employment that an employer might offer; with the views tending to focus on the commonly held view of the organisation (e.g. an employer who had a substantial number of admin jobs was assumed to offer only admin jobs). In some cases, key non-traditional roles where not associated with the employers, despite they have a number of vacancies in those areas. In other cases, private sector alternatives came to mind as key employers with no mention of opportunities in the public sector. This is important in that those seeking atypical work may not look past the company logo in job advertisements, thus reducing the potential labour supply for any particular post.

Further, where the job itself is stereotyped, applicants may not look beyond the job title. Some applicants expressed that they had long held the desire to be work in certain areas, but noted that they would historically never have applied as it was generally seen as “not a job for a woman”.

The absence of effective outreach and promotion, employees felt, left the general public with only the popular stereotypes. WINS applicants for example perceived some work to be heavy work and thus not attractive. However, in contrast, employees in post noted that in-fact the work was mechanised with updated policies such as manual handling regulations playing a key role in making the job much easier than might be expected. This presents a succinct example of the important gap between perception and reality and one which employers would do well to acknowledge if they wish to promote all areas of non-traditional work.

Finally, stereotypes regarding the type of contracts on offer, such as “casual or summer work” meant that women and/or those with caring responsibilities may not consider it as they may be looking for something more permanent. Employers must focus on promotion of the full range of opportunities, careers and benefits.

**Barriers**

- **Consider different types of barriers** that might affect an individual’s view of the organisation; willingness to apply; willingness to stay initially; willingness to stay in the long term. All will provide different routes to improving recruitment and retention.

- **Recognise the apprehensions associated with seeking work in large organisations.** Atypical applicants, without experience of working for large employers may feel that such employment is not attainable. Apprehensions can be reinforced by the sheer scale of buildings and infrastructure e.g. “an imposing or impressive City Hall”

- **Recognise that job titles may be vague and potentially misleading or off-putting to potential employees.** Someone interested in gardening may not think to look for a job in “Parks and Cemeteries” given potentially negative associations with grave-digging.
The availability of only “casual or summer work” meant that those with the need for a regular income could not consider such roles. Short term contracts may not be attractive to a large proportion of the labour market and thus may serve to impact on the employer’s reputation. Indeed training organisations shared this view, commenting that the impact of offering sequential, short term and seasonal contracts should not be underestimated with regard to weakening the position of the employer in the market place (possibly impacting on views of the employer as offering stable employment).

Some interviewees noted that some job titles could be perceived as vague with some terms having no implicit meaning and once explained to individuals, not appearing representative of the work involved.

<table>
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<th>Local environment</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Understand and respond to local labour market competition – analysing the previous employer of appointees or the destination of leavers can provide powerful insights into labour market competitors, allowing responses to be targeted effectively.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Respond to differing labour market conditions and your position within them. Some new private sector enterprises were not seen by the employers as competitors due to what were perceived to be less attractive terms and conditions. However, where applicants are not aware of specific benefits that you as an employer might offer, they will likely pursue those which appear most attractive. Promoting the benefits of working for your organisation may thus help to attract applicants.</td>
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To overcome or enhance marketplace perceptions, employers would do well to promote benefits and conditions of employment on a longer term basis, indeed discussion with staff and potential employees (see later) revealed that comparative benefits (of other organisations) are often not fully understood by the marketplace at the time of application.

Some employers had acknowledged this and had been proactive in promoting the range of posts on offer and of the benefits of the modern role, while also seeking to lower qualification requirements and offer training.

Moves to offer ‘apprenticeships’ were seen as highly attractive, conveying that the organisation wished to attract a wider the labour pool who may wish to stay with the organisation beyond seasonal work, thus developing and retaining knowledge and skills.

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<th>Employee Benefits</th>
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<td>• Identify and promote the range of positive benefits of taking employment with your organisation. Your organisation may have key benefits that may not be appreciated fully by job seekers – it is vital to promote aspects such as stability; pension; sick pay; training support; opportunities for transfer / development where they exist. Recognise that the majority of applicants will not be aware of or consider non salary elements if you do not promote them.</td>
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<td>• Lowering qualification requirements and offering apprenticeships will not only widen the labour pool but will likely attract candidates who wish to stay with the organisation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Recognise the implicit value in your sector / type of employment. For example, public sector benefits or the opportunities that come with working for a large employers. These may be well understood by HR and employees but may well not be by potential applicants.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Understand the value of stability and progression - short term seasonal contracts (now or in the past) may negatively impact on an employer’s reputation. In contract, opportunities for permanent work or work associated with recognised training / apprenticeships are likely to positively impact on reputation.</td>
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Large public sector organisations were generally perceived as attractive due to the degree of stability and flexibility that they might offer. Almost all applicants however noted that this was often their assumption and that it could be made more explicit in terms of attracting applicants to the employer.

Large employers were also seen as offering opportunities to pursue different career paths – both in other locations/centres and in other career areas - although interestingly not many interviewees had considered or been aware of this benefit prior to appointment. In addition the range of training offered by large employers was valued by employees but again this was not fully appreciated prior to appointment.

In general interviewees felt that employers could do more to proactively communicate key benefits of the work, including the autonomy and diversity that they felt was not present in more ‘traditional’ forms of employment.

**Marketing / Outreach**

- **Build a better organisation and market key benefits** to potential applicants. A lack of outreach and promotion will leave the general public with only the popular stereotypes.

- **Build a sustained programme** – short term outreach can be perceived as opportunistic. Better to develop a manageable strategy and to openly communicate that there may only be a limited number or set frequency of activities, rather than having potential applicants assume that the organisation is only motivated by short term interests.

- **Advertising to attract atypical workers needs to challenge preconceptions and stereotypes.** It needs to do that in a way which attracts attention and encourages the potential applicant to first read on, and then to pursue further information or to request an application pack.

- **Graphic design** - including carefully selected images and carefully tailored headlines – *is key to* attracting initial attention and *encouraging an applicant to read on in the face of personally held preconceptions.*

- **This must then be supported by carefully crafted outreach and tailored processes,** which provide opportunity to experience elements of the job or to hear from and interact with role models who can help overcome stereotypes.

Employees generally viewed the participant employers as “good employers” and there was a feeling that over recent years the employers had made progress in removing or seeking to minimise most of the barriers regarding entry to NT work. That said areas for ongoing improvement where identified and it was also felt that the employers needed to promote NT opportunities more – both across different areas of the workforce and crucially, to potential applicants.

While programmes of outreach did exist (primarily via schools, colleges and universities) there was potential for a wider range of work across a more diverse range of channels – from internet pages; to tag lines in all recruitment advertising; through to posters at job / community centres and attendance at recruitment fairs.

Outreach activities such as “have go days” and flexible working arrangements such as “term time working” were deemed to send important messages. In addition, word of mouth from existing employees was also important in engendering positive views within the market place.

Integrated efforts over an extended duration where seen as more effective than large scale but short term campaigns in that they both established AND maintained the reputation of the employer.

> “there is a perception that [the employer] has a willingness to engage with women and women’s organisations in a positive way – and [there is] flexibility there as well – things like term-time working” Training Organisation.

Crucially however, even where longer term activities were in place, the actual communication of a longer term
strategy could also pay dividends by allowing training organisations etc to become involved over time.

Advertising was however also pivotal (see later discussion for full detail) with interviewees commenting that good examples not only embodied the organisational commitment to diversity but described the benefits in terms that mattered to them – e.g. good salary, training and a pension, all of which was key to positioning the organisation.

I knew a woman bus driver… that’s what encouraged me to apply … if she could do it, I could do it… Applicant and Employee

While employers will have a range of assumptions about how they are perceived, these can at time be at odds with the views of applicants, employees and or/leavers. Understanding the views of each of these groups (and the atypical sub-sections within them) is important in improving conditions/practices and in making changes to attract and retain atypical workers.

Employers should conduct routine surveys/focus groups and seek to identify the range of factors (including the extent to which individuals are aware of them either in posit or at time of application) which they make the organisation attractive – e.g. relative importance of final salary pension scheme; sickness absence scheme; flexible working; uniforms etc.

The importance of seeing role models actually in post cannot be understated - leading applicants to accept that “it is a job for a woman” and secondly, apparently affirming that attitudes within the employer must be female friendly.

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Building Better Workplaces

This section sets out key lessons arising from an examination of employee views on employment/workplace characteristics. By doing so the opportunity exists to identify areas that could either be improved to encourage recruitment/retention or, where there are existing strengths that are not widely recognised by applicants, to identify areas which could be (better) promoted to establish the organisation as ‘employer of choice’.

For example, in general the opportunity for training and development was seen as a clear sign of commitment by applicants in establishing a career. Yet in most cases employees had not been aware that such opportunities would be available within the WINS employers thereby implying that there is scope for the employers to promote this as a key benefit from taking employment with them over other organisations.

Value of Diversity & Feedback

• Recognise the value of atypical workers to you and your customers - Attracting atypical workers can both address workforce imbalances as well as engaging a wider pool of labour with a more diverse skills base and labour availability (e.g. preference for working different shifts etc).

• Survey applicants, employees and leavers regarding the key benefits of working for the organisation or areas that need to be improved. Consider also surveying on perceptions of the employer (prior to taking employment) and the extent to which these were accurate.

The importance of seeing role models actually in post cannot be understated - leading applicants to accept that “it is a job for a woman” and secondly, apparently affirming that attitudes within the employer must be female friendly.

• For atypical workers, the induction has an additional role to overcome any negative stereotypes and perceptions re: NT work.

• Work to ensure workplace integration, both for the benefit of the individual and to promote positive word of mouth, reinforcing positive outreach/recruitment methods to attract atypical workers.

• Consider keeping atypical applicants together initially through induction and training as a means of building rapport and providing a peer support network for each other.

• Allocate each inductee a ‘mentor’ or ‘buddy’ to aid with extended workplace induction and to act as a point of contact for questions/assistance.

• Survey and seek input from inductees on factors that could further improve induction.

• Promote all of the above, if relevant, as benefits of taking up employment with your organisation.
With regard to induction and training, interviewees felt that a well planned and comprehensive induction was vital if retention and word of mouth was to be maximised.

Workplace integration is clearly important as any negative integration could have potential for substantial word of mouth, impacting on any positive outreach or recruitment methods.

Interviews revealed that in particular it is important to ensure atypical workers feel accepted within the workplace. Keeping inductees together initially and offering initially dedicated (single sex) induction where appropriate. Aligned to this must be efforts to ensure that inductees feel they have picked up sufficient skills to do the job. Phased induction (rather than a crammed all day session on day 1) is important, particularly for employees who may already feel under scrutiny due to their ‘atypical’ status.

Nominating a mentor / buddy was also seen as important. In one organisation where they had recently been introduced they were seen as a very positive step, providing a point of contact to ask questions and to seek assistance. In the context of ongoing induction they are seen as a vital new development in facilitating retention and overcoming any feeling of alienation.

**Training**

- **Recognise that training and development is seen as a clear sign of commitment by applicants in offering career progression.**
- **Seek to offer subsidised further education (including literacy and numeracy) where possible.**
- **Keep atypical training groups together initially (possibly offering single sex groups) to facilitate peer support, integrating into wider training groups overtime.**
- **Promote training / education opportunities to attract applicants.** Recognise that applicants are often not aware that large / public sector organisations often offer exceptionally attractive training packages.

The opportunity for training and development was seen as a particular strength of working for large public sector companies. However, in general employees did not feel that potential applicants would fully appreciate the full range of training opportunities available and thus there was much potential from employers to maximise the value of this asset in attracting workers.

In particular, atypical interviewees referred to the value of personal training plans (which they historically had felt were usually referred for managers or admin staff) and opportunities to improve literacy and numeracy via supported education.

Better centralised dissemination of information regarding the training opportunities available was however also important for retention, with many employees stating that they were not aware of the full suite of courses or support (finance, study time etc) available to them. As such there was a feeling that opportunities were being missed, or indeed that other employers may provide better opportunities for advancement when infact this was not the case.

**Facilities**

- **Recognise that for many people, the provision of appropriate facilities remains a key stereotypical barrier to considering non-traditional / atypical work.** Ensuring improvements and promoting same is thus likely to have considerable benefits.
- **In a non-traditional or manual environment, the provision of a dedicated female toilet is seen as important, but one that is not always present.**
- **Ensure that manual / NT workers have fair and reasonable access to company information and notices.** Notice boards should be kept up to date and if moving to intranet dissemination, ensure all employees have access to a networked PC.
Encouraging Women into Work: Overcoming Barriers to Recruitment

- **Recognise the satellite nature of much NT work** (i.e. working away from an office) and ensure employees have ready access to key contact numbers of management / HR.

- **Where uniforms and tools etc are provided, ensure this is communicated in job applications and packs.** If not, NT employees may see this as a barrier, assuming that this will be a ‘cost’ to them.

- **Promote an updated picture of NT employment to combat outdated stereotypes re: conditions and facilities** - manual handling regulations; working time directives; health & safety at work. Support this with highlights regarding awareness of modern facilities and available terms and conditions.

With regards to facilities, staff, particularly in outdoor work, felt that female specific facilities (e.g. toilets) had improved over time with recently constructed facilities certainly being of a high standard. They did however note difficulties remaining with some sites where perhaps there was still no dedicated female toilet. Some provision is made (e.g. use of managers’ toilet) but this is still not seen as satisfactory on an ongoing basis. Storage locker and/or changing facilities could also be introduced / improved.

Staff felt that this was both a perceptual and actual barrier to attracting and retaining female workers who could have stereotypes reinforced.

With regard to access to information and information sharing, atypical workers noted the importance of this (in relation to training courses etc) but also noted that in general access to notice boards or intranets seemed less that would be the case for ‘office workers’. It was felt that information provision could be improved for field or lone workers - e.g. key contact numbers of management / HR as well as more useful notice boards (e.g. information on training opportunities rather than only H&S information) for locations without internet access etc.

Indeed, if information dissemination within an employer is to increasingly move towards an intranet, it vital that all employees have ready access to a PC so as to avail of up to date news; training opportunities; policy changes etc.

In general there was a feeling that conditions would continue to improve as the number of females in the workforce increases, but that employers should not be complacent in seeking to improve facilities and thus attract more atypical workers.

**Work life balance**

- **Recognise that policies related to work-life balance can be seen as key benefits to atypical workers.** Seek thus to provide and promote key work life balance policies such as flexible working, child care vouchers, term-time working etc. Companies with strong work life balance polices can thus gain a position in the labour market above that which salary level alone might suggest.

- **Recognise that shift-working can pose a real barrier** – both working shifts around life / caring commitments and being asked to rearrange those responsibilities, possibly at short notice, to facilitate an employer’s request to temporarily change shift(s).

- **Consider implementing a robust and communicated approach to managing shifts** including: Shifts established and confirmed well in advance; implement a system to allow staff flexibility to swap shifts in a managed way for an agreed period; make real efforts to avoid last minute changes to shifts; take extra steps to ensure that employees do not feel under pressure to agree to change shifts at short notice, particularly where caring or other arrangements make things impracticable.
Seek to integrate existing HR policies so that a drive to maximise one goal does not impede or diminish efforts to maximise another (e.g. balancing fair participation on grounds of religion and gender). Take advice from appropriate statutory bodies on the best means by which to achieve integrated equality goals.

Where appropriate, promote the range of work-life balance polices on offer, recognising that these may be central to an applicant’s decision to pursue employment and indeed may facilitate extended retention with your organisation.

Employees discussed aspects of work life balance relevant to their roles. Shift working was a key issue – either in terms of fitting shifts around home / caring responsibilities (e.g. school runs); dealing with last minute changes to shifts or managing around split shifts (e.g. a morning and an evening shift without time to go home in between). Working on a constantly changing rota was seen as “very difficult with childcare arrangements”. Related to this, short notice of shift changes (that morning or the previous evening) made it difficult to arrange childcare and thus left the employee feeling under pressure. In addition, working split shifts (sometimes with up to 5 hours of unpaid free time in the middle of the day) was not necessarily seen as conducive to work life balance or family friendly policies.

“I would say... take a look at my shifts – they’re not really practical if you have kids” Employee

Some employers have taken steps in recent years, under flexibility policies, to allow staff to set / swap shifts on a rolling 6-8 week basis. This deals primarily with the first noted issue (i.e. linking shifts to other / caring responsibilities). It also goes some way to alleviating the second (last minute changes to shifts) as there is now both a formal system and a record of the staff members general unavailability at certain times. This makes it less likely (where managers make full use of the system) that staff would be asked to work unsuitable hours, or swap a shift, at short notice which was seen as a very positive step.

It was not however always the case and in general employers (evident across a range of studies) do not seem to recognise the personal impact which such requests can place on staff – feelings of awkwardness and inferiority at having to turn down an employers request, even where then have genuine reasons for doing so. Managing this issue well is likely to alleviate issues of entry and retention.

While shift work may remain a requirement of the job, there will likely be opportunities to consider how it works in practice. In this scenario, employers should be aware of the barriers (including accessibility of transport at unsocial hours and access to childcare) that this may present to potential NT applicants. Applicants felt that the following could minimise the impact of shift working:

- Shifts Known in advance;
- No last minute changes to shifts by employer; and no pressure to agree to change if caring/other arrangements impracticable;
- Flexibility to swap shifts for agreed period under work life balance policy.

Child care vouchers were also seen as a key benefit but again it was felt that employers needed to promote these aspects more to potential employees, as they would otherwise not be aware of their existence and may pursue employment opportunities elsewhere.

Innovative changes to terms and conditions – e.g. term time working – was also seen as offering an interesting and innovative approach to outreach – tapping into a pool of workers with a desire to work during certain times of the year. While there are clear advantages for those with children there are also advantages for those who wish to reduce their hours in advance of retirement or those who wish to have extended leave during the summer period (for lifestyle or other reasons).

Employees noted that it wasn’t understood at time of application that uniforms would be provided with some applicants believing that they may be required to supply their own work clothes (at their own expense). Applicants feel that this could be better explained either in the recruitment ad or pack as it may be off-putting to applicants who may not wish to / or be able to afford the initial outlay.
5c Applicant Job Search and Employer Outreach

This section compares the job search approaches preferred by applicants and employees with those most used by the WINS employers. Both vacancy advertising and outreach (which may or may not be directly linked to recruitment) are considered along with perceptions of these approaches. The purpose here is to consider how an employer may maximise the number of individuals willing to make an application.

Job Search Methods

- While newspapers still represent the mainstay of job search, applicants are increasingly using the internet (recruitment and employer websites) and from third party organisations e.g. job centres; training organisations.

- Recognise that online access still limited - Online information and recruitment processes, while growing in popularity, are still not fully accessible to many, including those in lower skilled / lower paid posts due to lack of access to a home pc and/or lower computer literacy. Hardcopy forms and telephone enquiries should therefore be retained and actively promoted as alternative to online sources.

The applicants and employees interviewed displayed some diversity in their approaches to seeking work by using a range of approaches, although centred on the use of newspapers supported by other means.

A number of applicants indicated that they would often consider applying for a range of entry level jobs. A clear process and an easy to complete form would encourage them to continue with some applications while not pursuing others.

On balance, applicants and employees felt that while online sources could provide a useful additional element if properly signposted, it should not be over-relied on given problems of access and thus should be part of a wider strategy incorporating hardcopy / telephone requests for information. Most relied on some form of word of mouth – either to share awareness of opportunities or to provide insights into specific types of work or views on specific employers.

Focus of outreach

- The focus of outreach should be on challenging stereotypes and overcoming perceptual barriers. Allow potential applicants the opportunity to hear key steps to succeeding in NT employment.

- Recognise that outreach offers an opportunity to proactively engage with those who might otherwise not consider you as a potential employer.

- Handled correctly outreach may also act as a proactive filter – ensuring that only those applicants with a confirmed interest in the work progress to make an application or undertake training (saving time and money for individuals, employers and training organisations).

- Carefully reconsider any strategy which moves the organisation away from free and/or publicly accessible sources of advertising or outreach – such as jobcentre (offices or online) or schemes such as bridge to employment. In short, a more diverse strategy is more likely to offer opportunities to engage with a wider applicant pool.

Many applicants noted that they would not have thought of the WINS employers as a source of potential employment if it had not been for targeted outreach or advertising (e.g. the WINS programme) which made it clear that specific non-traditional roles were available within the employers and that the employers were truly welcoming of applications from women. Challenging personally held stereotypes and assumptions is thus central to expanding labour supply.

On balance applicants felt that, despite the budget associated with large scale newspaper advertising, such approaches were currently not effective in attracting applicants to NT posts. Employees and applicants felt
that newspaper advertising could be improved and supplemented with a suite of outreach work (with cost savings by linking it in with existing work such as promoting parks; volunteering; recycling etc.

The majority of interviewees made use of government jobcentres and reinforced the importance of not only advertising in jobcentres but doing so in a way that would attract the attention of women to NT opportunities (images of women in the roles or flyers targeted at women).

**Interviewees noted that longer term outreach should seek to create interest using places women frequented alongside efforts to seed information networks such as via training partners; careers advisors or even teachers to increase the accessibility of information regarding NT roles.**

**Spatial approaches to targeting could also be considered – for example women further afield or in rural locations could be targeting via rural road-shows; free travel on buses to attend taster or training sessions.**

**Opportunities such as extended placements (such as those on the WINS programme), are seen as important in challenging personal stereotypes / barriers and providing a first hand experience of the opportunities that NT work can offer.**

**That said, it is vital that placements are planned thoroughly to ensure their success so that positive experience and word of mouth is maintained otherwise they can become counter-productive by actually reinforcing stereotypes and thus potentially impact on the ability of participants to recommend the organisation to peers.**

**Integration with Existing Processes**

- **Recognise that the focus of outreach is to supplement conventional methods rather than replace them**, the challenge therefore is to focus on the integration of processes to convey opportunities in a meaningful way and to a wider audience.

- **Integrate approaches and ‘signpost’ resources to increase effectiveness and reduce costs** - once potential applicants learn that information is available via jobcentres; company websites and training organisations the use of more costly newspapers can be reduced (e.g. the size of the ad can be reduced).

- **Ensure that outreach is set within global approaches to promote workforce diversity** and fair participation. If necessary take advice from organisations such as the Equality Commission and / or others.

- **Maximise existing assets –by advertising on work vans, buses, buildings, hoardings, bus stops or existing flyers / ticketing.** All may provide a cost effective means to promote the accessibility of opportunities. Where contact centres are a feature of the business, consider replacing the ‘on hold’ music with details of opportunities, with a signpost to ask the call handler or visit a memorable website (companyname.com/jobs) for further information.
While newspaper advertising is commonplace, the cost of rolling recruitment is often a key factor re: decisions to make lean of newspapers “particularly given amount of space each ad takes up”. Processes which integrate, supplement and/or (partially) replace newspaper advertising thus have the opportunity not only to diversity methods but reduce costs. Many organisations have some form of outreach process, although integration between outreach and recruitment goals often leaves room for improvement. The challenge is to focus and integrate those processes and the messages which they convey with more conventional avenues to ensure this delivers on key strategic goals. Supporting the value of a diversified approach, some applicants noted that they had learned about NT opportunities from information, not about job opportunities, but about opportunities to become involved with volunteer work via a community-centre notice boards. Integrating outreach campaigns can thus pay dividends.

Where physical assets do not exist, opportunities still exist to reflect established mediums for customer interaction - such as outreach pages on corporate websites or replacing telephone ‘on hold’ music with details of opportunities, even in generic terms with direction to “ask the call handler” or “visit our website” (employernamex.co.uk/jobs) for further information.

In general, employees support this, noting that there could be more proactive forms of engagement that linked job opportunities to actual activities as they were occurring – for example, advertising on the park vans/machinery; staking signs out when working, and using these to sell benefits of employer services AND the employment on offer (using pictures of women and men fulfilling the role). Advertising could be combined with lifestyle events which the employers may be facilitating, such as those being held at leisure / community / recycling centres or parks. The opportunity existed to have female employees (role models) there talking about working for the employer in key roles; supported by posters and take-away flyers/materials. Community talks about the value of specific public sector service provision could be combined with opportunities to promote related employment.

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**Build Partnerships / Communicate Goals**

- Establish and communicate the nature of the outreach strategy, including the range of modules and their likely frequency (e.g., one have a go day every two years). This is vital to ensure that participants expectations are managed and they do not perceive any one action as a ‘flash in the pan’.
- Communicate long term plans to facilitate partner organisations (e.g., training organisations) to integrate and promote their development schemes with your planned outreach, thus maximising the value to all.
- Consider forming partnerships with other employer(s) to reinforce the employers positive stance on meaningful outreach / corporate social responsibility.
- Develop relationships with trusted third parties such as community or training organisations (including job centres) to encourage attendance at placement opportunities and who can provide an independent source of advice about the benefits of non-traditional employment in general and within specific employers.
- Communicate events widely and on a long term and integrated basis. Give the potential applicant a sense of security by allowing them to understand the range of outreach opportunities that exist and where to find further information in due course – e.g., website or via telephone hotline.

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A number of interviewees advocated a longer term approach to recruitment, involving training organisations and other groups as a means to offer win-win benefits for both locally non employed (who are offered the chance of an interview as an incentive to undertake training) and for the employer (who benefits from new
sources of workers and from enhanced word of mouth in the local labour market).

Training / community organisations can also provide a source of expertise to the employer about particular barriers to recruitment or indeed market place perceptions about the employment / conditions on offer form the employer.

Components of Outreach

- **Promote, Promote, Promote... and deliver!**
  Promote opportunities for atypical applicants to sample new areas of work. Promote the organisation by demonstrating a visible commitment to both expanding and diversifying the workforce. Provide opportunities for individuals to challenge personal stereotypes regarding the suitability / acceptability of certain types of work.

- **Adopt a modular approach to training and outreach and promote the modules as both individual events and as part of a longer term outreach strategy.**
  This will cater for the differing needs of individual applicants who can effectively build a taster programme to suit themselves.

- **Use role models representative of your target group to visibly confirm that they can succeed in the roles.**
  Presentations or interactive talks will allow these role model to share their story which should generate goodwill and show that it is possible to overcome barriers.

- **Link outreach activities to lifestyle activities** (e.g. recycling events; garden fairs; car shows; health & care events) or **public spaces** (parks; on bus stops etc) to engage with potential applicants who may not otherwise be aware of opportunities.

- **Focus outreach activities in places atypical workers might frequent** (e.g. schools; surgeries; shopping centres; training centres; leisure centres; career advice centres).

- **Consider offering training and recruitment in shift / work patterns that meet with the needs of differing groups.** Those wishing to work specific shifts may not be available for training at other times.

- **Promote opportunities further afield, particularly where you have a very localised labour supply** (increasing market expansion as opposed to increasing market penetration).

- **Offer “Have a go days”, Placements or taster sessions** – genuine opportunities to be placed within an organisation or to try some of the activities that form the core of the job (bus driving; grounds maintenance etc) provide real opportunities to not only engage with potential applicants but to begin to overcome any preconceptions that they or their peers might hold about the work.

- **Dedicated sessions** (such a male/female only sessions), particularly in the initial stages of outreach programmes, may further increase uptake of outreach opportunities.

- **Survey potential applicants, applicants and employees to measure the effectiveness of recruitment activities** so resources can be targeted towards those most effective. Recognise however that outreach measures have a value in increasing awareness and not just in direct recruitment.

Applicants noted the power of visible role models i.e. actually seeing similar people in the jobs, or as an alternative seeing pictures or video of people in the jobs. Interviewees commented that they felt that actually seeing women working in the roles was a key ‘convincer’ in their decision to apply, helping them to fully realise that women could do the work.

“you don’t know if you do could it… it must take a lot of nerves, but then you see women doing it… [and you feel you can]”

Employee
Opportunities to interact with role models at taster sessions or to hear them give a talk on their experiences provided a real example of how a female could succeed in the role. This was very well received by interviewees who had experienced it and was deemed to have ‘made a real difference’; generating goodwill for the employer and showing that it was possible to overcome barriers.

Organisations with a strong reputation for outreach, over an extended period of time, were seen as particularly attractive and were well regarded by interviewees. Of particular note were outreach activities such as “taster / have a go days” which provide an opportunity to sample, at first hand, a key aspect of the job. These were seen as delivering multiple benefits. For example:

- promote opportunities to atypical applicants to sample new areas of work;
- promote the organisation by demonstrating a visible commitment to both expanding and diversifying the workforce;
- provide opportunities for individuals to challenge personal stereotypes regarding the suitability/acceptability of certain types of work;
- seed ‘word of mouth’ regarding not only the type of work, but also the employer and their commitment to diversity / recruitment;
- handled correctly the days also act as a proactive filter – ensuring that only those applicants with a confirmed interest in the work progress to make an application or undertake training (saving time and money for individuals, employers and training organisations);
- Taster sessions can additionally be targeted at atypical sectors to attract attendees from diverse / non-traditional backgrounds. Dedicated sessions (such as male/female only sessions), particularly in the initial stages of outreach programmes, may further increase the uptake of those from specific backgrounds.

“I went on a one day ‘have a go day’ - it encouraged me to apply”

WINS Applicant

That said, the support for ‘taster sessions’ was however tempered with views regarding known pitfalls and lessons from similar exercises in the past:

- Taster sessions need to be integrated within a wider outreach strategy so that they deliver clear benefits for the organisation over an extended period of time. In general they are not linked to specific recruitment exercises and so must be seen as a long term programme with longer term benefits (as noted above);
- Plans should be communicated and expectations managed if good word of mouth is not to be lost by potential applicants to see such activities as tokenistic or serving only short term interests of the employers;
- Where possible links should be made with training / community organisations to establish win-win outcomes for all participants. Working with training / community organisations offers an opportunity to help convert those “interested” to those actually “attending” and offers the potential for individuals to pursue related training in advance of any future recruitment;
- There should be a commitment to a rolling programme over a number of years (e.g. one taster per year for at least 3 years) to maximise word of mouth and integration with other programmes.
5d Recruitment

This section sets out some of the key aspects of the employer recruitment processes, considering the extent to which they overcome or reinforce barriers to making or progressing with an application. The purpose here is to recognise that while recruitment processes will have evolved to primarily meet the needs of the employer, modifications may be possible to facilitate the (non-traditional) applicant while improving or maintaining the outcome for the employer.

Job Requirements

- **Promote flexibility in employment and be proactive in doing so in recognition that the employee will often be nervous about raising the issue.** Applicants and employees strongly felt that an employer who was willing to set out and address issues of flexibility up front (and being clear the practical management of shifts) would be more attractive than one who did not deal with the issue.

- **Recognise the extreme filtering effect of qualification requirements.** In Northern Ireland over 40% of people have NO qualifications with 60% having less than 5 GCSE’s (or equivalent) at grades A-C.

- **Recognise the value of offering apprenticeships, bridge to employment schemes or lowering entrance requirements as a route into employment.**

- **Understand that such schemes are seen by applicants as representing a route to stable long term employment and convey images of a committed employer.** Not unsurprisingly these were often seen as making the employer more attractive than other opportunities.

A number of applicants noted the impact of the increasing trend for qualifications to be ‘required’ for entry level posts and the impact this would have on their ability to apply:

“Once I see Qualifications… it’s a ‘no’… older workers don’t have them so much”.

**Applicant**

Employers should not underestimate the dramatic filtering effect that a qualification requirement can have, for example the 2001 Census indicates that in Northern Ireland over 40% of people have NO qualifications with 60% having less than 5 GCSE’s (or equivalent) at grades A-C. In Belfast alone this would amount to around 120,000 people who could not apply for a job by way of not meeting this seemingly basic level of educational attainment. In some wards in Belfast the 2001 census indicates that approaching 60% of residents have no formal qualifications.

It was noted that employers who did lower qualifications and/or provided training were seen as more attractive to potential applicants. For example, WINS applicants viewed apprenticeship opportunities as a key attractor in non-traditional roles conveying not only that entry requirements will be lower but that they will be supported to develop in the post and will gain a recognised qualification.

A number of WINS applicants noted that they had always thought working for a large employer would require “big [formal] qualifications”. The imposing buildings associated with large employers is also to some degree intimidating or overwhelming.

“I wouldn’t take a glance at [their ads]… I’ve no chance of getting in there”

**WINS Applicant**

By contrast, employees (who had progressed through recruitment processes) with those employers noted that in some cases few or no qualifications were required. Employers should thus seek to challenge stereotypes about the type of work on offer AND entrance requirements.

Overall, interviewees were encouraged by the emergence of apprenticeships in non-traditional areas. Apprenticeships were seen as representing the opportunity to pursue a longer term ‘career’ (in place of a historical pattern of short term contracts) while at the same time reducing entrance requirements – to the benefit of individual, employer and colleagues.
This was confirmed by applicants and employees who commented that a key attractor to certain posts was the minimal entry requirements and the opportunity to undertake an apprenticeship – which not only conveyed a commitment by the employer regarding staff development / retention but also that it could be a stepping stone to other posts within the employer (or elsewhere). This made the employer instantly more attractive than other opportunities. The vast majority of WINS applicants and employees noted that if employers wanted to proactively attract women into NT roles then they need to advertise in a way that challenged personally held and societal stereotypes regarding the suitability and benefits of NT work – a first step was thus something that would instantly encourage a potential applicant to wish to find out more. In advertising terms this was likely to be facilitated by a stimulating visual image and engaging headline, placed large to attract the eye. Flowing from this, interviewees felt that it was important to establish key benefits of both the work and the employer, in particular how it would differ from more traditional work. 

For example, some interviewees commented that the WINS logo, by including the symbol for a female and using a clever headline, had been key in catching their eye, and encouraging them to read further:

**Advertising**

**Challenge stereotypes; promote benefits**

- **Advertising needs to instantly challenge personally held and societal stereotypes** regarding the suitability and benefits of NT work if it is to draw the reader’s attention and encourage them to read on to find out more.

- **Graphic design is important** – large fonts, white space; appropriate and eye-catching images (of female role models) and a banner headline that would draw applicants into the ad were all seen as vital in catching attention in the first few seconds.

- **Recognise that atypical workers may not recognise key benefits of NT work or your organisation.** Stimulating visual imagery (including females) should be supported by promoting the key benefits of NT work and the employer; in particular how the experience would differ from more traditional work.
Linked to this it was seen as important that information such as job titles were meaningful as it could be difficult for trainees to understand or identify with the opportunities.

In summarising their position, beyond an eye catching advertisement, WINS Applicants noted the importance of knowing the job title; then a mix of attractiveness factors – typically salary, working pattern (FT/PT/Shifts) and work life balance polices (such as flexibility, child care support etc). The importance of these factors could be seen as interchangeable depending on circumstances – e.g. childcare vouchers versus salary. Beyond this other factors such as accessibility; parking and benefits / pension were of interest. The identity of the employer became relevant in linking into word of mouth and perceptions regarding employment conditions and opportunities.

In general interviewees were critical of criteria based advertising:

“it just tells you what the job requires… the ad does nothing really to actually attract any under-represented groups.. Employee

In such cases, the amount of space devoted to the descriptive approach means that very little space is allocated to selling the benefits of the post, the organisation or the public sector or indeed challenging the stereotypes which serve to drive gender segregated applications to NT posts.

Interviewees felt that such advertisements tended to contain so much information that it was hard to pick out key factors, including key information such as hours worked or desire to diversify the workforce.

In contrast, WINS Applicants commented that ads which focussed on selling the benefits of the work and the employer were of more interest to them in considering a career; in particular drawing clear attention to phrases such as “Family friendly” would be influential as there was a feeling that not many employers offered this with a number of interviewees commenting that “they would be surprised to see that in an ad as they hadn’t done so to date”. This provides a clear opportunity for an employer to capitalise on already existing (and in some cases legally required) policies re: flexible working.

### Promote Key Benefits of NT Employment

- **Change the emphasis of the ad to sell the benefits of the post / atypical work as opposed to what the candidate must bring to the table.** Use stimulating language and phrasing (e.g. “top class”; “attractive”; “full training”; “responsibility”) to ‘sell’ the opportunity.

- **Promote the vacancy in a way that is attractive to potential (including atypical) applicants.**
  
  Interviewees saw the following as key in evaluating an employer - job title was generally seen as the most important aspect and thus should be prominent; then a mix of attractiveness factors – rewards (typically salary and pension); working pattern (FT/PT/Shifts) and work life balance polices (such as flexibility, child care support etc).

- **Consider reducing the focus on descriptive criteria based advertising** – for example include only essential (and not desirable) criteria and leave further details until the application pack. Use ‘signposting’ to point the interested candidate to a recruitment hotline or internet site for further details. It was thus not seen as essential that detailed information be included in the ad.

- **Be mindful of ‘corporate’ language and seek lay accessibility.** Criteria based advertising can be seen as “off putting”, written in what the interviewees saw as complex corporate language. Complex language may serve to increase the perception of the post as unattainable particularly where applicants have lower confidence and/or literacy).

- **Use the corporate communications team (where available) to develop a ‘recruitment brand’** as part of your corporate brand towards securing a position as “employer of choice”. Use these experts to drive lay accessible communications and provide a challenge function to the status quo of current advertising methods.
When shown sample ads in an alternate format (see sample overleaf), applicants and employees unanimously felt that it was a better approach — graphically indicating the women could undertake NT roles and setting out relevant details about what the post offered (as opposed what the candidate needed to have) and using ‘clever’ language and phrasing (e.g. “top class”; “attractive”; “full training”; “responsibility”) to ‘sell’ the opportunity.

The Translink ad is ‘attractive’ “… the picture tells you instantly what the job is — a woman driving a bus — women are acceptable in this role” — you don’t even have to read it” … Employee

“The [Translink] ad is better laid out… you don’t have to read through it, the benefits jump straight out at you… simple with everything I need to know to get me interested… I would give them a buzz” Employees
Interestingly, and as discussed earlier, these phrases used in the advertising were noted as matching in general some of the areas that they felt the job actually offered as opposed to the commonly held stereotypes. The choice of contact methods (phone and website) was also preferred over other approaches.

“You feel valued – responsibility; opportunity; care for customers… they have a role for me… and ‘Applicants from women particularly welcome’… I hadn’t noticed that on the [other] ads… “Employee.

The Translink advertisement was seen as a good approach also in a more limited space:

“[the Translink ad] doesn’t give as much info as the other ads but does much more to get you interested, enough to [wish to] find out more…” Employee.

Employees across a number of organisations felt that the Translink ad was strong (in that it had a clear job title and a clear picture of a female in the role) to the extent that it may encourage them to ‘stay with the ad’ even if their first perception was that ‘bus driving couldn’t be a job for me’:

“If it had just been a Translink logo in paper, looking for bus drivers… I would have thought, they probably wouldn’t want me… because I’m a woman” Employee.

“When you first see the words ‘bus driver’, you think I can’t do it - it’s male and I have no license’ BUT the ad says you can train for your license and there is a picture of a woman driving the bus; that’s good, you are encouraged to read on” Employee.

Where a candidate interest was sparked, they would be willing to visit an internet site or ring up to get details regarding the personnel specification for a job. Where this information was already included in an ad (as is the current approach of many employers), WINS applicants noted that it would encourage them to apply when employers had lower qualification requirements AND advertised that “full training will be given”.

In some cases, employers recognised that they could do more to develop approaches and to ‘signpost’ applicants to further sources of information – e.g. wider ranges of related vacancies via the company website or jobcentre online. Indeed, some noted that they were working towards such ‘signposting’. The potential here is thus reduce the amount of descriptive information in advertisements; indicating instead how further information could be obtained. Indeed, across the employers, much of the required ‘destination’ information (i.e. that reached when following a signpost) has already been prepared either in hard copy (a draft guide on how best to complete an application form) or online – a FAQ explaining the recruitment process and a section on benefits of working for the organisation etc. If refined and/or published, these could provide the basis for hardcopy guides or would provide suitable destinations for ‘signposts’ either in hardcopy of via the internet.

Facilitate Diversity in Recruitment

- Develop job criteria that are accessible by atypical applicants. Recognise that the alternative requirements (e.g. to qualifications) are potentially underplayed by placing them after the essential requirement. Thus, consider reversing the order of criteria equivalencies to reflect atypical routes into employment e.g. 2 years experience or qualifications in maths and English. By reversing the order it is argued that more applications could be encouraged from a wider pool.

- Overcome historical stereotypes by ensuring that the job title is meaningful to atypical workers and explaining the modern role e.g. improvements associated with manual handling regulations and machinery etc.

- Recognise and promote the value of flexibility and family friendly policies - Interviewees felt that a majority of employers still did not offer family friendly policies. Promoting such policies could thus pay dividends.
Offer a range of contact methods for further information - a dual approach (telephone and internet) was seen as important as many candidates do not have ready access to the internet (either due to lack of pc access at home or confidence in the use of the web). Interviewees indicated that if they became interested in a post they would be willing to call or visit an internet site to get further details regarding the personnel specification.

Survey existing workers to identify both key and unexpected benefits of NT employment opportunities. For example, interviewees identified independence and ‘personal responsibility’ as key unexpected benefits. There was thus an opportunity for employers to promote additional benefits of their employment opportunities.

Managing work life balance around shifts is a particular issue for female returners. Applicants and employees strongly felt that an employer who was willing to set out and address the issues flexibility up front (and being clear about the likelihood of last minute changes or the degree of flexibility with regards to renegotiating shifts) would be more attractive than one who did not deal with the issue.

Some employers have already recognised the importance of flexibility (in part time hours and/or predictable shifts) to the extent that it forms a corner stone of their recruitment campaign. See for example the advertisements below.
Applicants and employees were also shown a Northern Bank advertisement (see overleaf) from 2005 and asked for comment:
Encouraging Women into Work: Overcoming Barriers to Recruitment - Findings and Key Lessons
Applicants and employees immediately felt that the approach conveyed diversity and equality of opportunity — noting that the “image conveys everyone has an opportunity… women; the disabled; those with children etc…”

In addition, it was felt that the language used was written to reach out to atypical workers with phrases such as “just left school? At college? Want to get back to work? We’d like to hear from you.” These and similar phrases were seen as key in convincing individuals that such employment may be accessible.

In addition the imagery, layout and use of white space and clear bullets (setting out the benefits of working for the employer) all combined to encourage applicants to read on.

“The image and the layout… made me want to read it … that’s the first time I’ve ever looked at a banking ad… I can’t believe I actually have the qualifications to apply for it… that ad has changed my mind about that employer…” WINS Applicant

The northern bank ad was viewed as ‘interesting’; ‘family friendly’ and appeared ‘accessible to all’. Subtleties were however important with interviewees noting that it was important that the ad had included reference to ‘returnees’ alongside ‘school leavers’ otherwise they might simply have “moved on and stopped reading…”. As some interviewees didn’t have formal qualifications, they also liked the clear work experience equivalencies to qualifications.

**Assistance with Process / Sources of Further Information**

This section seeks to draw out some of the key aspects the interviewees felt were important with regard to assistance / sources of further information.

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### Effective Information Provision

- Recognise that a multifaceted and segmented approach (via telephone, hardcopy or internet) is generally seen as preferable to any single method in that it offers opportunities for applicants to engage in a variety of ways.

- Promote awareness of your range of resources – make people aware of available resources to assist their application - hardcopy or online.

- Recognise that many candidates for NT work do not have ready access to the internet (either due to lack of pc access at home or confidence in the use of the web).

- Develop a recruitment internet site to include: current vacancies and a “how to” guide (see below); Reproduce key information in hard copy.

- Lead with hardcopy summaries of any in-house or online information, giving applicants a strong reason to find out more – signpost to further online info via telephone / post.

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Many NT applicants and employees noted that they would usually ring for a form or application pack due to lack of PC access. Some may seek out a PC (via a family member or peer) but this would not be a usually course of action.

The option of downloading a form (to type or complete by hand) was generally seen as preferable to direct entry onto a website due to perceptions of the potential for lost data; no opportunity to save information to return to later and no the opportunity to print out a copy of the information at a later date in advance of interview. Of course, modern recruitment sites can overcome all of these concerns but the fact remains that preconceptions (and lack of access/IT skills) are holding people back from a move toward online recruitment.

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### Guidance

- Survey employees regarding their experiences of working with the organisation - use these as case studies to promote the organisation.

- Develop a “how to guide” in hardcopy and online to include: benefits of working with us; how we advertise; how to apply; overview of selection process; tips on application forms, aptitude tests and interviews; frequently asked questions (including response times etc); ask us a question (contact us).
- **Offer advice on completing your application form** - compile a short guide on how to complete an application. Make it short and where possible use the actual application form as the framework (e.g. inserting tips in place of applicant responses).

- **Offer advice on completing competencies** – explaining what they are and how to complete.

That said, many said they would look to access the internet if they felt there was information there that would assist with their application. Signposting is thus vital to move applicants to utilise the internet as a core source of information.

Any advice was however to be welcomed – in particular interviewees felt that a short/succinct guide on what sort of answers were required (particularly in response to competency questions) would assist the candidate to structure their response (e.g. by key theme) providing the panel with better information on which to shortlist. Applicants suggested a short prompt after each question or the underlining of key words.

“Some tips… letting you know what to bring out… and to stop you from putting in something irrelevant”

*WINS Applicant*

An approach, adopted by one employer to a greater extent that the other WINS employers, was to have a dedicated recruitment section on their corporate website. Using that site applicants could:

- browse current vacancies,
- discover where and how the employer advertises vacancies,
- find out how to apply,
- find out more about the selection processes,
- check out some of the benefits of working with the employer,
- get answers to many frequently asked questions, and
- find out how to contact the employer.

In addition the site included a detailed FAQ / advice section including answers to:

- Can I alter the format of an application form?
- Can I send in my CV in case there is a job available?
- Can you accept application forms by fax?
- Can you accept my CV instead of, or as part of, my application form?
- How can I boost my chances of success when it comes to the panel shortlist?
- I must have a specific qualification and/or a certain number of years' experience - what does this mean?
- The employee specification says I must clearly demonstrate competences by way of personal examples - what does this mean?
- What happens if there are technical difficulties when I submit my application form online or via email and it is received after the closing date/time?
- Will my application form be accepted if it is received after the closing date?
- Will you notify me when you receive my application form?
- This approach was highly commended although as will be seen below, there remained one important barrier to fully realising the value of this approach. Specifically while these resources are currently available in electronic format they were however not publicised in any of the company’s accompanying hardcopy literature or advertising.

None of the applicants interviewed were thus aware of the existence of the site, although all thought it would be a useful resource.

It was thus vital that employers promote the existence of such information. In addition there was also the view that at least a summary of key information should be provided in hardcopy given the limited internet access noted above and to provide clear reason for applicants to seek out further information – either via telephone or online.

“Without knowing that’s there … you have no reason to log on… particularly if you don’t have the web at home…”

*Employee*

It is thus recommended that such information be expanded (and refined to make it accessible to those with lower levels of literacy) alongside a summarised version which could be distributed with application forms or otherwise (containing key information and a ‘signpost’ to a fuller online resource or dedicated telephone line).
Recruitment Packs

- **Make recruitment packs concise,** clearly numbered and laid out and with a cover sheet setting out a clear indication of contents.

- **Adopt a modular approach** – comprising core and optional information to ensure information is most relevant to the post at hand.

- **Provide examples** of application responses, aptitude tests etc.

The size of some of the employer’s recruitment packs were regarded as ‘overwhelming’ and potentially a barrier to applying with applicants not knowing ‘where to start’ and as a result often not reading much of the material. Efforts to summarise the current material; to improve its layout to include clear labelling and to link this to a contents-listing via a cover page were all suggested as key improvements.

Sample aptitudes tests and information on the format of interview processes was all seen as helpful, particular where a majority of interviewees were not familiar with aptitude tests.

Finally, where a standard literature pack is sent out with all applications, it again is felt that adopting a modular approach would ensure that information is both minimised and relevant to the post at hand.

Application Forms

This section seeks to draw out some key strengths and areas for potential improvement with regard to application forms. WINS Applicants had a number of general points which they felt would improve many application forms associated with entry level jobs.

- **Don’t request additional sheets** – Both applicants and recruitment panels benefit from where a candidate is concise and draws out key points of relevance within the available space rather than attach additional sheets. Interviewees indicated that they would be put off by a large expanse of space to fill.

- **Provide clear instructions, on the form where possible** - Interviewees indicated that long instructions were less likely to be read than a few key pointers. However, conversely, a few useful pointers may encourage applicants to look at more detailed instructions.

- **Survey applicants and employees regarding the form and application process.** Seek to make changes as appropriate.

In general many forms were seen as overly complex and often not relevant to entry level jobs. For example qualifications may not be required for the job, yet are asked on the form alongside professional qualifications and membership of professional bodies.

Indeed the presence of questions, not related to the job, may create a false impression that they are relevant and may thus discourage applications.

Ease of Use

- **Recognise that applicants often apply for a range of entry level jobs.** Interviewees indicated that they would be more likely to pursue an application where the process was clear and the form short and/or easy to complete.

- **Design is important,** keep instructions short and to the point and ensure questions flow. Avoid using small fonts for extended text. If questions are repeatedly missed or instructions ignored, review the structure of the form.

- **Build bespoke forms from common modules** (e.g. address module; qualification module; employment module etc as required) to ensure the form is relevant to the post in question.

- **Make key themes stand out** - Interviewees suggested a short prompt after each question or setting out multi-part questions in bullet points and/or underlining keywords to focus the response.
“If you see it on the form you think it must be important… so if you don’t have it you might not apply”…

“if you’re applying for an office job... why do you have to put down if you have penalty points on your license?”

WINS Applicants

Almost exclusively interviewees noted that a form, specifically tailored to the job they were applying for (and not including spurious questions), would not only encourage them to apply, but also to spend more time completing the form given its relevance (particularly where succinct guidance had been provided with regard to completing the application form).

Where a form is excessive in length, candidates noted that they may decide that the effort required is not commensurate with their likelihood of progressing (particularly where they hold stereotypes of the employer or non-traditional work).

“you have to write essays for them – it’s an awful form” Employee

“its really, really long and very complex”… “its one size fits all – whether its managerial or entry level”… “applicants don’t like much about it”… “very off putting for people – it’s like a book”… “they’re quite difficult unfriendly forms”

Views of Training Organisations

Participants across all interviews relayed real, practical and first hand difficulties with some application forms, to the extent that it may lead them to not making an application.

Instruction pages containing so much information that you would be “unlikely to read any of it” presented an immediate barrier. Indeed it could be argued that the level of literacy and expertise required to complete the forms may not be appropriate to the lower skilled jobs within the organisation (and typical of those offered via WINS).

the form and application pack contains so much material… you don’t to know which to look at… by the time you get through the stuff you don’t need to know… you’d be less likely to apply”

Employee

The amount of space left for responses (sometimes a full page) with the option to append additional forms was also seen as off-putting to applicants (particularly when relating to competencies as this was already an area that was not well understood).

Applicants commented that it could potentially lead to applicants not completing or submitting forms.

“their application forms are like books… I don’t have time to fill in a book… the form is woeful, the interview process might be as bad… why would I want to go through that” Applicant

Often, questions allow applicants to ‘continue on a separate sheet if necessary’ but many employers recognise that shortlisting is more efficient if candidates are concise and draw out key points of relevance within the available space rather than attach additional sheets. Reinforcing a concise approach would likely benefit both applicant and panel.

“from sitting on a panel I would certainly appreciate if you didn’t have to look through 10 additional pages“ Employer

HR recognise the value to both applicant and recruitment panel in revising the form to make it easier to complete and to review, in effect the time invested by HR to improve the form will be time saved multiple times over by every member of a shortlisting panel.

“there are people in our organisation who are shortlisting hundreds of leisure attendants, hundreds of street sweepers , and would I’m sure welcome something that is easier to review…”

Employer

Some employers commented that a number of applicants for lower skilled posts had not been shortlisted due to not completing the form fully or adequately. Again, having an easier form which increases the volume of applicants is better for the organisation that getting only those who have the skills or the desire to complete a difficult form.
“anything that makes the process easier on applicants and easier on [employers] is to be welcomed… to attract more applicants… these are the sorts of things we need to be doing…” Employer

In addition, the format, structure, content of many applications could be improved by the clear use of headings with short help tips explaining what is required by way of response or underlining keywords to focus the applicant’s responses. For example:

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Short statement explaining purpose of this section.

5.1 Question Text Here

Tip: on completing this question with keywords underlined as appropriate

Box for question response.

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Employees noted that, despite using the internet for information search, they preferred to fill in a hardcopy form as they weren’t familiar with online data entry or word processing.

In addition, not all had access to a PC at home making hardcopy forms preferable. Interviewees did however indicate that they would seek out an internet connection if there was a sound reason for doing so (e.g. advice on completing the application form or interview tips / overview).

Where applicants has completed a form online, they preferred an option to save and return later to review, complete or correct and also some indication that they could print or download a copy at a future date (e.g. to review in advance of any interview). Advance notice of some of these factors would encourage applicants to use the internet.

A bespoke form, built from a set of common modules (e.g. address module, qualification module etc as required) would seem a likely way forward. Indeed discussion with employers revealed a willingness to move to forms which are more closely tailored to job groupings.

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Explain the relevance and use of any unusual criteria -
Unusual criteria such as height/weight should be directly explained on the form to ensure applicants continue to complete the question and the form.

If encouraging online applications, be sure to also facilitate hardcopy returns.
With online processes, ensure the applicant has the option to save and return/print or download a copy at a future date. Ensure these facilities are promoted in advance to encourage applicants to use the internet (if desirable).

Interviewees noted that some questions, even where relevant, were overly specific and difficult to complete – for example, information such as year of qualification and awarding body may not be known by anyone other than very recent school leavers.

Some forms go back so far you can’t even remember… I just write down ‘7 CSE’s; its been so long since I left school I can’t remember my grades”

Employee

Competency questions seemed to pose particular problems, possibly associated with relative levels of literacy. In many cases candidates did not have a clear sense of exactly what sort of information the employer was looking for. There is also some confusion due to the overlap with descriptive questions where information will typically have been provided earlier in the form (e.g. qualifications; employment experience). In this scenario candidates seem reluctant to repeat information in later questions and in not doing so may lose marks or fail to meet shortlisting criteria which rely solely on the answers to competency responses and not the information provided elsewhere.

It is also possible that the actual completion of such questions effectively becomes a practical test of skills which may not be relevant to the post being applied for. At best applicants indicate that they will seek help from a friend, but at worst they will only partially complete or not submit the application.

Employers should consider the removal of any question not directly utilised for shortlisting or as a minimum alternative it would be helpful to indicate that shortlisting is only based on certain questions.

Employers could also usefully provide tips or guidance as to the specific focus of the question – for example, questions relating to experience were interpreted as exclusively meaning “employment experience”, thus causing difficulties for returners who may have had the skills / experience from other non-work sources. In addition, in the competency section, it was also presumed by candidates that they should only relay “in work experience” and thus again would be difficult for returners / the unemployed to respond to.

Aptitudes Tests & Interviews
This section seeks to draw out some key strengths and areas for potential improvement with regard to aptitude tests and interviews.

Guidance
- Recognise the additional apprehension that labour market returnees may feel. Seek to explain the process fully and address any uncertainties.

- Explain the process in advance – including all stages; number and format of questions; explain the purpose, rationale and content of the tests; provide practice papers; explain the opportunity for retesting if unsuccessful (including the rationale for any waiting period).

- Signpost candidates to organisations who may be able to help with interview/aptitude testing skills.
Increasing the skills of applicants will likely benefit both individual and employer.

- Survey new recruits and employees to learn key lessons re: recruitment and induction.

In general those employees and applicants who commented on this theme noted that it was helpful that the letter calling you to attend (and the panel on the day):

* explained the process;
* indicated that there was an opportunity to ask questions;
• set out the number of questions / format of the test or interview
• Access to water and pen/paper were also seen as helpful.

Some employers have moved to minimise qualification requirements (which is to be welcomed) however aptitude tests present other barriers in terms of nervousness, particularly for those who may have not performed well in school exams. Again, anything that an employer can do to explain the purpose, rationale and content of the tests, alongside providing practice papers, will likely assist candidates from atypical backgrounds. Some employers provide practice papers and this is to be welcomed. Allowing retests with a short period (e.g. 2 weeks) may be of benefit to both candidate and employer. Where there is an extended interval, the reasons for this should be explained to candidates to minimise any negative perceptions of process and thus of the employer.

Some recruitment processes combine multiple stages (aptitude, interview and medical) into one day rather than calling applicants back on successive occasions. In general applicants were not keen on the long day or on the long waits UNTIL it was explained to them that this was in preference to calling them to attend on 3 separate days. Applicants immediately agreed that this was preferable and suggested that this should be explained to future applicants in advance by letter and again verbally on the day so that they did not feel unduly burdened by a full day process.

If the candidate successfully completes all three elements, they will progress to a short driving test. Successful applicants will usually be informed immediately (on the day) that they are suitable for appointment and will be contacted in due course with regards to a date for training school (although this can be up to a year).

In addition, surveying staff provided simple but important insights into the effects of not communicating the format of the interview process in advance; or indeed considering it from the perspective of the interviewee. The following provides one example:

you get made up, do your hair, prepare for the interview... and then you arrive and are asked to do a swim test first [occupational requirement]... you spend all this time getting ready, you want to give the best impression that you can give... you end up going to the interview like a drowned rat with mascara everywhere... also, there was only 10 minutes between the swim and the interview... you're rushed and you then feel less confident... Applicant

One of the employers in particular was proactive in organising focus groups every few years with new recruits to learn key lessons re: recruitment and induction. This practice is to be commended.

Focus / Content
• Recognise that criteria based on situational scenarios, behaviours and/or competencies rather than experience will likely widen access.
• Ensure testing / interviews are appropriate to apprenticeships posts, modifying them to make them appropriate to the lower entry requirements of these posts.
• Seek to offer interviews at times matching the shift pattern applied for.

With regard to interviews and aptitude tests, in some cases employers focussed on situational scenarios, behaviours and competencies rather than experience. This approach was established as a means of widening access to those who may have the skills to undertake the posts but not the previous experience.

Employers were however mindful of the need to carefully consider questions so that they test aptitude and not knowledge that an otherwise effective candidate could be provided through initial training (e.g. “what procedure would you follow if X occurred” could be covered by in house training). Reflecting this, some
of the employers were working to develop problem solving type questions, relevant to the job that would not rely on prior knowledge to the same extent.

HR staff also recognised, as with application forms, the difficulties that applicants for entry level jobs may face with regard to responding to competency based questions as opposed to having to simply state experience or qualifications.

“A lot of people interviewed, that might be suitable for the job... just don’t answer the (situational) questions properly…” Employer

Training organisations further recommended that competencies and tests of knowledge (in both application and interviews) should better take into account the nature of apprenticeships (when offered) i.e. questions on technical aspects of the job (which the apprenticeship is designed to provide) may act as a barrier to those candidates who might otherwise have the required personal aptitudes and soft skills to succeed on the apprenticeship and eventually in the post.

Some flexibility around timing of interviews (for example in relation to childcare) would assist candidates. Indeed where the company has advertised shifts or flexible working the interview process could seek to mirror these.

Outcomes
This section sets out some key learning with regards to the notification of outcomes and the value of managing this element of the recruitment process.

Facilitate Next Steps, Engender positive word of mouth
- **Manage expectations** – advise candidate how and when you will come back to them (e.g. after X weeks).
- **Welcome future applications and offer ‘signposting’** – e.g. for those unsuccessful, offer advice with regard to improving performance in relation to particular stages (e.g. completing application; undertaking aptitudes or performing at interviews etc) and on making an application in the future.
- **Advise applicants of the existence of training organisations** who can assist with future interview preparation, job search or training.
- **For the ‘successful’** – *go beyond initial induction to set out likely activities on day 1, week 1, month 1*. Link this directly to working with a mentor and introduce to and supply direct contact details for managers, mentor and HR.

An often heard complaint from applicants (in this study and elsewhere) is that employers take excessive time to respond (or never respond) with regard to outcomes, particularly unsuccessful outcomes. Interviews the consultant has conducted (here and elsewhere) indicate that typically candidates expect a decision and update within 2 weeks of submitting an application. Clearly in many case this will be impractical for the employer, particularly where extensive shortlisting is involved. Managing the expectations of applicants is thus key. This can be achieved via the initial covering letter or information sheets / online FAQ’s.

The downside of not managing expectations is to encourage poor word of mouth regarding the employer and to dissuade the employee from waiting for a response before applying to competitors. In the interviews conducted for this project, some applicants and employees noted that they would not reapply to employers who did respond to them in a timely manner.

With regard to letters received, in general employees in this study felt that ‘successful’ letters had been clear although they felt that interim updates could have been provided where candidates were on long reserve lists (or failing an interim update it could be better explained at the outset how the process would work).
Some NI employers are known to not only encourage applicants to apply again in the future but to refer applicants to organisations such as GEMS NI or others who can assist with interview preparation, job search or training. Such approaches may improve perception of the organisation, particularly for those individuals who may be may disappointed upon finding out that they have been unsuccessful.

Some employees noted that some job offers required an immediate start, not allowing them time to give required notice to current employers. All employers should be aware of the longer term downsides of recruiting those who do not wish to give proper notice to other employers – in effect the process potentially filters out those candidates who will insist on serving proper notice with the recruiting employer, the very behaviour a company would usually wish to recruit. With regard to starting employment, almost all interviewees felt that their extended induction period could have been more clearly explained with regards to what they could expect on Day 1, Week 1, month 1.

There is thus the opportunity for all employers to consider the language they use, how they manage expectations and to consider ‘signposting’ – e.g. to advise of helpful information (on their own recruitment websites) with regard to improving performance at any given stage of application (e.g. completing application; undertaking aptitudes or performing at interviews etc).

5e Summary: Mainstreaming Benefits of WINS and Similar Programmes

In the context of outreach and the ability to impact on perceptions of an employer and its relative position in the labour market, this section seeks to capture some key views regarding the value of WINS with regards to attracting atypical employees and assisting NT applicants into NT work.

Benefits

- **WINS type programmes can help expand the labour supply** generating benefits not only in direct access but also in establishing aspirations to gain work and to gain it within the participant organisations.

- Recognise that programmes such as **WINS can make a real difference** by assisting potential applicants to progress via an assisted environment into meaningful employment.

- **Employer placements are received “very favourably”** by the women and engender positive word of mouth for the course; the training organisation and the employers.

The quotes above clearly indicate the value of the scheme to applicants. In particular, training organisations noted the placements were received “very favourably” by the women and engendered good word of mouth for the course; the training organisation and the employers. The employer placement element is seen as having particular benefits when it came to interviews as applicants could recall direct experience of working in the environment and relay knowledge of
specific equipment and procedures relevant to the post.

However this is tempered by the fact that such courses, where they do not directly link to recruitment competitions, run a high risk of causing disappointment if those completing the courses are offered no opportunity to apply for a related job (particularly when a course has been so closely linked with an employer). Expectations must therefore be carefully managed from the outset, so that employers and potential applicants fully understand what is on offer otherwise the outcome can be negative with regard to attitudes toward the employer.

While it is acknowledged that many employers become involved in such programmes aligned to beliefs around corporate social responsibility and the benefits of outreach, the benefits of the schemes to employers (due to their long term and indirect nature) are difficult to measure in direct terms. There are however still steps that can be taken to ensure that such schemes do deliver practical and long term benefits. In particular, it is paramount that such schemes are mainstreamed so that HR teams are afforded access to the learning opportunities that come with such innovative outreach work.

For programmes such as WINS to become mainstreamed (and for key lessons such as formulating job advertisements and application processes to be retained) it is vital the host HR departments play a centralised role in the design and delivery of the programme. Future programmes similar to WINS may therefore benefit by taking more of a mentoring role alongside employers so that learning is mainstreamed rather than centralised within a specific project team. While this will likely required additional work and commitment on behalf of the participant employers, increased benefits are likely to arise in making a range of HR processes and procedures more accessible to applicants.

**Mainstreaming**

- **Long term benefits will only be realised if WINS type approaches are mainstreamed within HR teams and policies.** Future programmes may therefore benefit by taking more of a mentoring role alongside employers so that learning is mainstreamed rather than centralised within a project team.

- **Long term engagement will be maximised if the expectations of potential applicants and training organisations are managed from the outset.** Potential applicants must fully understand if they are to appreciate the level of employer engagement, otherwise the outcome can be negative with regard to attitudes toward the employer.
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