

ARE THE UNEMPLOYED THE PROBLEM?

In addressing the problem of unemployment, labour market policies have tended to focus on what is known as supply-side factors (those affecting people looking for employment) more so than demand-side factors (those affecting people who wish to employ labour). The demand-side approach identifies characteristics of the unemployed and long-term unemployed themselves as significant factors in explaining why they are unable to obtain employment.

A feature of supply-side policies is that the unemployed themselves are the focus of attention and for the most part are the target of policy interventions. One consequence of the dominance of a supply-side approach is that considerable attention has been paid to designing and implementing programmes such as SES, VTOS, CEDP mainline courses etc. to the comparative neglect of examining the nature of the labour market into which such programmes seek to place the long-term unemployed. Two important and neglected issues arising in this context are the recruitment practices of employers and their attitudes and views regarding the recruitment of people who are long-term unemployed.

A recent research report, When Skills Are Not Enough, published by the Tallaght Centre for the Unemployed and funded by the Tallaght Partnership's Community Development Programme, examined the recruitment practices of employers and their attitudes towards recruiting the long-term unemployed. The research set out to achieve the following:

- a) to ascertain how employers in Tallaght recruited people;
- b) to identify what characteristics they were seeking in job applicants;
- c) to determine their attitudes towards recruiting the long-term unemployed.

The research was based on a survey of 402 companies in the Dublin 24 postal area, of which 131 returned questionnaires.

The main findings from the research were the following:

1. 45% of employers used existing staff, word-of-mouth, personal contacts, or internal advertising to fill positions.

2. The largest single group of recruits were people moving from one job to another, followed by people who had been unemployed for less than one year. Only 5% of recruits came directly from long-term unemployment.

3. Employers highlighted the importance of and desirability that potential new employees should have flexibility, reliability, references, personal recommendations, and good health.

4. The main problems employers have in recruiting the long-term unemployed is their perception (a) that the long-term unemployed have difficulty in adjusting to work; (b) that they lack skills; (c) that they have bad work habits; (d) that they have a lower level of education.

5. Employers indicated that factors such as a reduction in PRSI for long-term unemployed, recent work experience, and a growth in the volume of business, would encourage the recruitment of the long-term unemployed.

6. Only a small number of employers indicated a preference for applicants aged over 35 years.

The central findings highlight two issues, firstly, the extensive use made by employers of a variety of recruitment practices based on some form of interior employee networks; secondly, the emphasis placed by employers on such attributes as flexibility, reliability, adaptability, and motivation.

On the basis of the results of the research, it is clear that improving the educational qualifications and vocational skills of the long-term unemployed is only one of a range of actions that need to be addressed to improve their employment prospects. The findings from this report must be taken on board by organisations such as FAS, the V.E.C., and community organisations interested in addressing the problems faced by the long-term unemployed. In particular there is a need to incorporate into programmes for the long-term unemployed measures which help to meet the requirements of employers, and to address the negative perception employers have of the long-term unemployed as potential employees.

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