

CHANGING SYSTEMS, CHANGING LIVES



It is widely accepted that individuals need to be flexible and adaptable to increase their opportunities for employment. However, it is more contentious to suggest that organisations need to change what they do to support the goal of a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Human Resources (HR) systems are generally considered to be neutral or benign influences in achieving this goal, the “Equal at Work” DP has demonstrated that this is not necessarily true.

Work undertaken by the lead organisation in the DP, the Dublin Employment Pact (DEP) provided the starting hypothesis for Equal at Work: that HR practices can act to slow or prevent the recruitment and progression of vulnerable groups within the labour market – hampering the move from ‘doing a job’ to ‘having a career’. Crucially, the DP works to alter systems, rather than improving the employability of individuals. As Philip O’Connor, Director of Equal at Work, says: “...So many of our actions focused nearly exclusively on ‘employability’ over the last few years. It would work to a point, but we could always see the need for organisations and companies to change what they do. EQUAL gave us the chance to take a ‘big-bang’ approach to changing things.”

THREE SECTORS, 11 ACTIVITIES, 48 ORGANISATIONS...

Activities undertaken by the Equal at Work DP recognised a need to review all aspects of the system - pre-recruitment, recruitment and progression – in the three main sectors of the labour market:

- Private;
- Public, and
- Voluntary/community.

Central to the approach is that the different sectors have different motivations, and therefore different HR policies and practices. Recognising this difference is crucial to the transferability and mainstreaming potential of the work: it would be unrealistic to expect a private sector employer to adopt exactly the same approach as the voluntary/community sector.

Actions and solutions developed by the DP have been specific to each sector; the unifying goal, however, remained the same: to develop open and inclusive HR policies and practices, to remove artificial barriers and to promote a more diverse, inclusive and open labour market.

A further reason for working with all three sectors is outlined by Grainne Healy, Project Development Consultant: “Once you start changing systems then you get into the real numbers...the City Council has around 6,500 employees – about 1,000 of those are at entry level – and the voluntary and community sector employs between 30 and 40 thousand people. Changes on this scale could have a big impact.”

The activities of the DP are various and wide ranging (there were 11 separate actions in total) and were divided by sector:

EQUAL at Work in the Public Sector:

The DP reviewed how local authorities recruited new staff. Particular emphasis was placed on what conditions were placed for accessing jobs, as rigid entry-level requirements cause great barriers to people with few qualifications. The aim of the action was to develop a more competence-based recruitment system.

The second action in the public sector piloted new inception training and mentoring processes to support progression of employees in local authorities.

The DP also worked to promote the progression of lower grade hospital administrative staff to the higher grade of Medical Secretary at Tallaght Hospital. At the same time it was also reviewing the entry-level requirements of the hospital.

EQUAL at Work in the Private Sector:

The DP convinced two large private sector firms to pilot a job-rotation model. By encouraging workers to try out new working environments, habits and tasks, the project helped them to develop additional skills and to gain a better understanding of how the company worked as a whole. The firms, on the other hand, were able to better assign people to tasks and functions they were better at or liked most.



Activities undertaken by Equal at Work focus on a variety of sectors

The IT sector is still growing fast in Ireland. EQUAL at Work developed a progression route which helped graduates of the 'Fastrack to Information Technology' (FIT) programme (a pilot action to get people with few qualifications into the IT sector) to access higher education.

EQUAL at Work in the Voluntary and Community Sector:

The voluntary and community sector is extremely diverse in terms of themes, size and structures of organisations. The DP wanted to present a clearer picture of their HR systems and processes, and therefore launched a study to identify good practices in this area. Training was developed to make sure that other voluntary and community organisations could learn from these practices.

The DP also looked at ways to compare, in a systematic way, remuneration for workers in the voluntary and community sector with that of equivalent workers in the public sector.

All actions launched by EQUAL at Work were supported by a cross-cutting working group on Equality and Diversity issues pertinent to all three sectors. This work concentrated upon the development of sector specific training modules and making the business case for increased equality and diversity in the workplace.

In order to carry out such a wide range of activity, partnership has been fundamental to the Equal at Work DP, and there are nearly 50 partner organisations from the three sectors involved. Key actors in the partnership include: two local authorities; a large hospital; five statutory agencies; three trade unions; four employer organisations and networks; eight training/educational bodies; 11 Area Partnership Companies; and 14 NGOs or community organisations.

HOW HAVE CHANGES IMPROVED PEOPLE'S LIVES?

The evaluation of the DP's work ¹ shows that there have been a number of positive impacts - both on HR systems and on individual lives. There is not enough room in this short summary to document each impact, but key benefits worth mentioning are listed here.

Public Sector achievements:

The work to review recruitment processes and entry levels for jobs in local authorities was highly successful: thanks to EQUAL at Work the mandatory requirement for applicants to have at least completed their secondary education has been removed. Instead, the skills and abilities of the

¹ McDonnell, F. (2004). *New HR Strategies to Promote Equality in Organisations: an evaluation of the Dublin Employment Pact Equal at Work project*, Hibernian Consulting.

candidates are now assessed through a newly devised 'competency framework', which makes it much easier to have their informal knowledge and skills taken into account in the recruitment process.

Equally, there were many benefits to individuals involved in the work at Tallaght Hospital. 'Lynda'², a single parent with no Leaving Certificate and some history of drug abuse took part in the work experience and training at the hospital, and was offered a part-time job there. Since then, she has moved into full time employment. 'Claire', an older woman who needed to re-enter the labour market after a long absence, in order to earn money to care for her ill husband, was also involved in the on-the-job training offered through Equal at Work. She now has a full-time job with a mental health organisation. Finally, 'Diane', a young traveller with no secondary education leaving certificate is now being employed at Dublin City Council as clerical officer, as a direct result of her participation in the work experience and training activities.

Private Sector results:

The job rotation model piloted in the private sector led directly to ten people – many refugees or new migrants – being offered full-time employment with the two food producers. One member of this group had an accountancy qualification from his country of origin; his new employer is supporting him to gain the equivalent Irish qualifications. The model was recommended for mainstreaming by EQUAL Ireland.

Progress in the Voluntary and Community Sector:

The study of HR systems in voluntary and community sector has led to much wider discussions about the role of trade unions and the state in terms of supporting employees in the voluntary/community sector. This is important given that this sector is responsible for delivering an increased range of services to disadvantaged groups.



Equal at Work brought many benefits to individuals involved in the work at Tallaght

CHANGING MAINSTREAM SYSTEMS – WHAT WORKS?

The key impacts in terms of changing mainstream systems are outlined above in relation to job rotation work with the private sector, and in changing the recruitment processes for entry-level jobs in local authorities. As well as documenting these successes, it is useful to examine the reasons for them.

Improving mainstream policy and practice was built into the design and the goals of the DP from the outset. Without an improvement in these areas, the numbers of people benefiting from Equal at Work would remain low. There were a number of critical success factors arising from the work:

- *Having the audience for the work involved in the partnership itself.* Key partners in the DP – such as Dublin City Council, private sector companies, voluntary and community organisations - also represented the 'demand side' of mainstreaming: they wanted to know how to improve their HR practices and, through direct involvement, could see practically how to do so.
- *Deciding what 'mainstreaming' is in relation to the work and making a concerted effort to achieve it.* The partners of the DP arrived at agreement as to what 'mainstreaming' should be defined as, and what would constitute success in this area. This ensured a greater focus on this aspect of the DP and more targeted products. For instance: the Equality and Diversity working group produced a CD-ROM toolkit covering issues pertinent to all three sectors; Equal at Work also held two conferences where senior staff from target

² Names have been changed.

organisations attended, Grainne Healy said that this “...was really useful to be able to make the case to them face-to-face”.

- *Concentrating on areas where mainstreaming would not require more money.* The DP focused on altering ways of working, and not simply expecting mainstream budgets to continue to fund activity started under EQUAL. This approach recognises previous failure in this area.
- *Using formative evaluation to prove ‘what works’ and identify areas for further work.* The DP made good use of formative evaluation – not only identifying areas of success and impacts, but also to think about mainstreaming opportunities. The evaluation concluded that: “*What seems clear from the outputs that emerged from Equal at Work in mid-2004 is that that project’s original hypothesis was valid...The challenge arising from the project for the mainstream organisations identified is to consider how they can take forward the outputs and learning arising from Equal at Work, so as to increase the levels of equality in their workplaces.*”

Contact

Mary Bigley
Project Manager, Equal at Work
Dublin Employment Pact
7 North Great Georges Street
Dublin 1.
Tel: +353 (0)1 878 8900
Fax: +353 (0)1 878 8711
Email: mbigley@dublinpact.ie
Web: www.dublinpact.ie

A short version of this "Success story" and other "Success stories" are available on the [EQUAL website](#)