

Changing systems, changing lives



It is widely accepted that individuals need to be flexible and adaptable to increase their opportunities for employment. But it is more contentious to suggest that organisations need to change to encourage a more diverse and inclusive workforce. While Human Resources (HR) systems are generally considered to be neutral or benign influences in this respect, the "Equal at Work" Development Partnership (DP) has demonstrated that this is not always true.

Work undertaken by the lead organisation in the DP, the Dublin Employment Pact, 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."*

Working across sectors to remove barriers

Equal at Work aimed 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. Recognising the differences in HR practices between these sectors was crucial to the transferability of the work: it would be unrealistic to expect a private sector employer to adopt the same approach as the voluntary/community sector.

Actions and solutions have been specific to each sector but the unifying goal 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.

In the public sector, the DP started by reviewing how local authorities recruited new staff. Particular emphasis was

placed on entry requirements as they can present significant barriers to people with few qualifications. As a result of EQUAL's involvement, candidates for jobs are now assessed through a more competence-based recruitment system, taking better account of their informal knowledge and skills.

New solutions for the private sector

A job-rotation model was piloted in the private sector after the DP convinced two large firms to take part. 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 most suited to. This project has led directly to ten people – many refugees or new migrants – being offered full-time employment. One member of this group had an accountancy qualification from his country of origin and is now studying to gain the equivalent Irish qualifications – with the support of his new employer. The model was recommended for mainstreaming by EQUAL Ireland.

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

All the actions launched by EQUAL at Work were supported by a cross-cutting working group which concentrated on developing training modules and making the business case for increased equality and diversity in the workplace.

The "demand side" was important in the partnership

In order to carry out such a wide range of activity, partnership has been fundamental to the Equal at Work DP, with nearly 50 organisations from the three sectors involved. Key actors 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.



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Claire, an older woman who needed to re-enter work after a long absence caring for her sick husband, was involved in the on-the-job training offered through Equal at Work. She now has a full-time job with a mental health organisation. And “Diane”, a young traveller with no secondary education leaving certificate is now employed at Dublin City Council as clerical officer, as a direct result of her participation in the EQUAL project’s work experience and training activities.

Major 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 find out ways to improve their HR methods and, through direct involvement, learnt how to do so in practice.

A more detailed version and other EQUAL success stories can be found at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/activities/search_en.cfm

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Contact details:
 Dublin Employment Pact
 Mary Bigley
 Project Manager, Equal at Work
 7 North Great Georges Street
 Dublin 1, Ireland
Tel: +353 (0)1 878 8900
E-mail: mbigley@dublinpact.ie
Website: www.dublinpact.ie