

When did it become all about the money?



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Periodically, over the last year, articles have appeared from the great and the good on how the education system is not turning out the “right people” for those sections of the economy that are growing.

So much has been spoken and written about this that restructuring of certain curricula subject have been extensively reviewed. In most articles, there is a focus on anything to do with Mathematics and Science, with particular emphasis on Information Technologies and related areas. While there is certainly a lack of skilled people in certain aspects of IT, there are other aspects to consider in this situation. There is also perhaps reluctance on the part of some companies to consider in broader terms, what it is that they offer potential employees, and how to attract the best. The situation has now arisen that certain technologist type positions, albeit they are very specialised, are now commanding basic salaries equivalent of head of function and even CEO positions in certain other sectors. Pushing money at the issue is one solution, but it has resulted in the highest bidder wins situation. It also has completely eroded the employee/employer relationship. People feel very little commitment to their company or what it is trying to achieve.

Since the 90's Ireland has been very successful in attracting major multinationals to this island. Many of these have very deep pockets to attract in those who seek to further their careers. This may reflect a large issue of how the sector has developed, particularly with the rise of the social media giants. But other than a salary, what is being offered? Not with all, but certainly some, very little else, would seem to be the appropriate reply. This behaviour would seem to set the tone for the entire sector. And yet small businesses (or business units from more traditional sectors) here struggle to source appropriate talent. Either they simply don't have the money or their structures do not allow them throw that sort of money at the issue. Certainly offering a reasonable salary is a prerequisite, but it is only part of the offering that smart people seek and smart companies offer. Companies who offer more than just salaries can attract the very best, even when their salary level are more at the market median. And serious, clever people would do well to consider the broader issues.

Now it would be naive to think that there is some easy solution to this issue, but I would also suggest that it is somewhat one sided of those within the IT sector to point the finger at the education system saying how it fails them so. People talk about how it is increasingly difficult to compete in such an international market that Silicon Valley type salaries with perks, like gyms, free dry cleaning, etc. are difficult to match. But it is not as if this is the first time a sector has developed fast globally and yet other businesses have found ways to attract the “right” people.

One thing that we have noticed is that clever people are as much interested in how the company can develop their career as they are in the absolute salary package that they will get. A company that can offer more than just a monetary package will always attract the “right type” of people to their business. Why are some companies reluctant to take clever people into their business and teach them the skills that the business requires? The accountancy profession has been doing this for years to great effect.

We see companies projecting million/billion € turnover and substantial profits, but they seem to struggle to get the skills that they need? Really? In an economy like Ireland where we have a highly educated general population with high levels of unemployment, it is difficult to find bright smart people with good transferable core skills? Or is it that some companies want someone else to provide their “off-the-shelf” employment solutions?

Certainly third level sector has a role to play, but have we become so blinkered in what is required, particularly so at entry/operatives levels. Someone who has demonstrated an intellectual ability in any discipline, who has a good work ethic with good transferable skills, is surely a possible candidate for any position? However, businesses do need to have a creative attitude to development and training. By having a very structured career development and skills programme, a company can offer something that is difficult to copy, the business can secure a pool of talent and the people will be less likely to seek alternate positions, because the trade-off will not be just about the money. The business will become a “must-have” on the CV, and people will fight for positions there. Money is important and we will not comment on how some companies are abusing the internship process. However, if a business can offer a level of attractive options as well as a reasonable level of remuneration, then attracting the right people becomes a different issue.

For those at the upper levels of their careers, the offer of developing additional skills is also very attractive, but is often concerned with managerial skills rather than the technical aspects of a particular position. It is about providing an environment where developing those more difficult to define skills critical to success, are required. We are always surprised when we come across managers who have gained great skills, but it has almost been in spite of their employers rather than by design. It is about providing support and guidance (particularly externally) that can make the difference. Being flexible on times & distance working (particularly for employees with younger children) can provide real incentives to people to join a business.

Of course, none of this is new! And we all understand that business can't take the same parentalism stance as say, Cadbury's or GE did in the past. But surely when there is a shortage of certain skills specific to a particular sector, those companies within that sector can find creative ways to overcome those difficulties. There is much that can be learnt from other sectors that many of the “new” economy companies would benefit from the experience and wisdom of more traditional sectors, as to how to build and manage business through the highs and lows of the business cycle.

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