

The Essential Work Experience Handbook

Third Edition

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To Jim for his patience and support and To Caroline With thanks to Independent Newspapers

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Chapter 1

The Changing Nature of Work

What is work?

The Oxford English Dictionary describes work as 'an activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a result or such an activity as a means of earning income'. Work is an essential part of all of our lives. In most cases it provides us with a means of obtaining an income, but it also enables us to develop our talents and reach our potential.

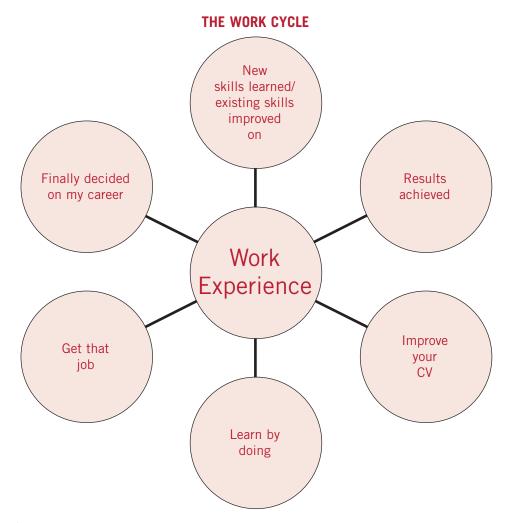
A visit to a local FÁS office or to the careers section in a local library can provide a wealth of information on a wide range of work occupations. A very useful website with thousands of possible career options and corresponding educational and training requirements, work descriptions and salary rates can be found at www.careerdirections.ie.



What is work experience?

Work experience is the experience that a person has in the world of work, or of working in a specific field or occupation. We need a job to get experience and experience to get a job.

The term 'work experience' is often used to mean a type of volunteer work that is commonly intended for young people, often students, to get a feel for professional working environments. The work experience placement is mostly unpaid, and at the end of the period, a character reference is usually provided.



The three modes of work experience

Work placement mode

The learner works in an established company or organisation that the course providers have deemed suitable to provide quality work experience. The learner participates in work related to the vocational award area. For example, a student hoping to achieve the FETAC Childcare award may find suitable work experience in a crèche.

Work practice mode

The learner is involved in a realistic work programme set up by course providers that gives substantial hands-on experience of the vocational area. The work practice must be carefully planned, structured and monitored by course providers. For example, a student wishing to be awarded the FETAC Media Production or Multimedia Production award may be involved in producing a promotional DVD for his or her college.

Work-based learning mode

This mode is designed to enable learners to gain FETAC accreditation for current or prior experience of work in a vocational area directly related to the certificate being sought. The experience of work must be substantial, verifiable and relevant to the vocational certificate area. For example, this mode is suitable for a learner who has worked for three years as a sales assistant in a busy city centre electrical shop and is now undertaking a course of study leading to the FETAC certificate in Retail Studies.

Finding a work placement

Looking for a work placement can be a daunting task for many people. The following information may be helpful in finding a suitable placement:

- Think about the type of business or organisation you might like to work in and then find out if there are any in your area.
- A good starting point in looking for work experience is to ask people you know, e.g. family members or friends, to help you find a placement.
- Looking at company advertisements, either in the local paper or in the Golden Pages, can be a big help in finding a business that may offer to take you on a work experience placement.
- Write a letter or e-mail to the owner or managing director, setting out your request for a placement and why you need work experience.
 Indicate why you are interested in spending some time in the company and what you might be able to do for them.
- Follow up your letter with a telephone call or, better still, a personal visit if you have not had a response within a week.
- Once offered a placement, make sure that it is clearly stated what you are expected to do, the hours you will work and who you will report to.
- At the end of the placement period, think about what you have learned from the experience so that you can articulate your achievements.

The nature of work in Ireland today

The years 1994 to 2006 saw immense economic progress in Ireland. This period of boom, known as the Celtic Tiger years, brought:

- Labour shortages resulting in net immigration for the first time in Ireland's history.
- An influx of multinational companies such as Google and eBay.
- Growth in both the number and nature of indigenous companies.
- Rapid expansion of construction projects, particularly housing, offices and roads.

The decline in Ireland's economic fortunes in more recent years was mainly the result of a global economic downturn and an over-reliance on the construction industry as a provider of jobs and a creator of wealth. In the short term Ireland must endure a period of rising unemployment and company closures. Many respected commentators, however, maintain a positive outlook and expect to see export-led economic growth in a few years time. It is important that you use this period to gain the requisite skill set and relevant work experience in your chosen career area to enable you to take full advantage of the prospective upturn in the economy.



Women in the workforce

It is difficult to comprehend that forty years ago married women were prevented from working in many occupations. Thankfully, legislation was changed and now women are making an immense contribution to our growing economy. Professions previously considered the preserve of men are now attracting women.

The numbers of women working as architects, company directors, engineers and scientists have increased significantly in recent years, as well as the number of women now holding public office. For the first time, we have a female Ombudsman and the last two Presidents of Ireland have been women.

The changing nature of work

The clear white-collar, blue-collar distinction that was evident in the 1970s and 1980s no longer exists.

Significant changes to the time spent in the workplace and the ways that work is carried out are apparent. The traditional 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Monday-to-Friday working week is losing its appeal, with many workers now opting for flexi-time and job sharing.

Many workers are also now choosing to telework, i.e. working from home for a number of days each week. Using modern telecommunications, employees can work from home. For example, an employee might work one day per week at her company's Dublin office and on the other four days telework from home in Nenagh, Co. Tipperary.

The advent of the internet and mobile telecommunications means that information can be moved instantaneously and decisions made quickly. Business no longer has to be conducted in the traditional office setting and greater scope now exists for networking for business. Technology such as video conferencing, e-mail and mobile phone text messaging has provided greater worldwide communication, leading to greater product and customer knowledge as well as business competitiveness.

E-business (electronic business conducted via the internet), e-commerce (buying and selling goods and services over the internet) and e-marketing (web advertising) have become accepted as the norm when it comes to twenty-first-century work practices. Online bookings for holidays and online shopping with credit card payment are now the norm. Employees now need IT skills to secure jobs in Ireland's competitive work environment.

People working in the media, e.g. news reporters and correspondents, now transmit news and information from distant countries using e-mail via laptop

computers and videophones, thanks to WAP technology. (WAP means wireless application protocol and enables internet access on mobile phones.) News can be received on location at the click of a button.

Communications giants like O_2 , Meteor and Vodafone have emerged and there is a greater demand for workers in the communications industry as a result.

Types of employment

The old traditional sectors of employment used to be referred to as primary, secondary, tertiary and other. Nowadays different definitions exist:

- **Self-employed**: A couple of decades ago, the majority of self-employed people in Ireland tended to be farmers. This has changed in recent years. The number of people in Ireland who have started their own business in areas as diverse as acupuncture and web design has increased greatly. This path to employment is not for everyone and requires a good deal of vision, organisation and dedication. A successful self-employed person can feel a great deal of self-fulfilment and can achieve a good measure of financial reward.
- **Pensionable secure employment**: Public service workers fall into this category, e.g. Gardaí, nurses, teachers.
- Contract employment: An individual may be contracted to a company for a six- or twelve-month period to undertake a body of work. Some IT professionals prefer this approach to work.
- **Part-time employment**: An increasing number of part-time workers are joining the workforce. Examples of people in this category are students, semi-retired people or parents with young children.
- Voluntary employment: Many people give their free time to work for non-monetary gain. Examples of people in this category are youth club organisers, charity shop sales assistants and hospital radio broadcasters.



The labour market

The labour market is an important and active area of research at the ESRI and covers a wide range of themes:

Labour market dynamics

Sociologists and economists at the ESRI have been, and are presently involved in, important micro-economic studies of unemployment and labour market dynamics, including:

- · the 'employability' of the unemployed
- transitions from school to work
- transitions from unemployment to employment
- transitions from home to work
- the labour market impact of education and training
- the labour market impact of active labour market programmes
- the labour market impact of initial education
- the effects of training at work on both individuals and corporate performance

Equality and the labour market

The ESRI has undertaken a number of important research projects relating to issues of gender and the labour market. These include studies of the male-female wage gap, occupational segregation, women returners, work-life balance and the relationship between fertility and female labour market participation. Gender is also a central concern in research conducted on part-time employment and flexible working.

Equality issues have also been addressed in studies of older workers and will be developed in current work on labour market participation among those with disabilities.

Vacancies and skills

During the recent employment boom, shortages of labour emerged as an important labour market issue. The incidence of vacancies in the private non-agricultural sector of the economy has been investigated in a number of national surveys carried out by the ESRI Survey Unit on behalf of FÁS and Forfás.

The importance for the economy of an adequate supply of skills led to the establishment by the government in 1997 of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs. Research undertaken for the Expert Group has focused on issues relating to general skill shortages, graduate trends and medium-term demand/supply projections for professionals and technicians in engineering, computer science and other sciences.

Occupational forecasting

The information provided by the FÁS/ESRI series is of considerable value in determining medium-term strategies and in planning training provision. It is necessary to examine trends and developments in the labour market in order to ensure a proper balance of skills as Ireland's economy continues to expand and structural changes occur in the sectoral and occupational composition of employment. For some years, the Institute has been heavily involved in providing medium-term forecasts of the economy. The FÁS/ESRI series provides forecasts in the manpower area which specifically identify the implications of medium-term output and sectoral employment forecasts for the economy's occupational requirements and the educational attainment required to fill the jobs which are likely to be offered by employers in the future.

Working conditions

- · Minimum wage.
- Flexible working, including part-time and temporary work.

Research has been carried out for a range of Irish government departments, FÁS and Forfás, the European Commission, the OECD and the ILO. Researchers working in this area participate in a number of European research networks and regularly publish the results of their work in academic journals as well as books and monographs.

Source: Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) (www.esri.ie).

Self-evaluation and career choices

Before you embark on a particular career, a good starting point is to make an honest appraisal of your aptitudes, strengths, weaknesses, abilities, aspirations and qualifications.

This is often a difficult but quite revealing and helpful process. If you dislike working in the evenings, then perhaps a career as a chef would not be a wise choice. If you work best by yourself, then a career in hotel management would not suit. If you enjoy numerical analysis and business calculations, then a career in accountancy could be for you.

In doing a self-evaluation and an analysis of a future career, you should look at:

- Aspirations for the future.
- Experiences.
- Future options.
- Abilities and qualifications.

Some examples of areas of work and corresponding work options are:

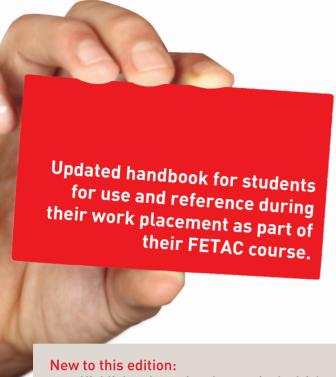
- **Agriculture**: Farmer, veterinary surgeon, crop contractor.
- Media: Reporters, correspondents, journalists, event managers, film producers, directors.
- Building: Carpenter, electrician, plumber.
- **Business**: Accountant, bank official, economist.
- Catering: Chef, waiter, health and safety officer.
- Child care: Crèche supervisor, nanny, paediatrician.
- Information technology (IT): Network technician, programmer, website designer.
- Law: Barrister, legal secretary, solicitor.
- **Public service**: Garda, teacher, political representative.
- Retail: Buyer, sales assistant, window display designer.
- **Tourism**: Coach driver, hotel manager, tour operator.

STUDENT WORKBOOK QUESTIONS

Exercise 1: Personal introduction

Now go to your student workbook at the back of this book.

- On p. 125, write an introduction to your student workbook by introducing yourself. Give a very brief description of your course, subjects being studied, proposed work experience details and any other personal details.
- 2. Explain what you know about work and work experience in the twenty-first century and your future career plans, i.e. what you want to do and how you plan to get there.
- 3. Display a critical awareness of how the nature of work and work practices have changed in recent years.
- 4. Explain how necessary you think it is to obtain work experience.



- Highlights the major changes in the Irish economy and the changing nature of work post-Celtic Tiger
- Provides details of all relevant changes in employment, and health and safety legislation
- Helps develop students' job-finding skills and interview techniques
- Provides key information on employment rights, employment, legislation and equality issues
- Highlights the importance of global, technological and demographic trends in relation to job seeking
- The Learner Record guides the student through:
 - · Planning and preparation
 - Experience in the workplace
 - Review and evaluation of the work experience

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