

Businesses in Northern Ireland benefiting from Good Work

Case Studies from the Research:

Building a business case for good jobs: Links between Good Work and innovation, productivity and employee health/wellbeing

June 2024

As part of a research report¹ for the Labour Relations Agency, IER undertook a series of interviews with staff and management at two Northern Ireland based firms celebrated for their good work and employment practices. The purpose is to provide illustrative case studies of how the research findings demonstrating the positive relationships between the seven dimensions of Good Work as an expression of job quality² and innovation, productivity and employee health/wellbeing within firms are experienced within Northern Ireland businesses.

¹ The full report is available from the Labour Relations Agency and the Institute for Employment Research. All the interviews were conducted in accordance with the University of Warwick's Ethical Research Policy, IER's quality assurance procedures, and all relevant data protection legislation.

² The seven dimensions are: terms of employment; pay and benefits; health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing; job design and the nature of work; social support and cohesion; voice and representation; and work life balance. These dimensions draw on the research conducted by IER for the Chartered Institute for Personnel & Development (CIPD) and adopted by Irvine, G., White, D. and Diffley, M. (2018) Measuring Good Work, The final report of the Measuring Job Quality Working Group, Carnegie UK Trust, Dunfermline.

The Kilkeel Way: Manufacturing a win-win for workers and the business

In Kilkeel, County Down, workers at Collins Aerospace (henceforth Collins) are working to manufacture commercial aircraft seating for global airline companies. The facility produces everything from simple main cabin seating composed of 200 parts to bespoke premium cabin seats with 5,000 parts – not including the electrics. The facility has been in operation for more than 50 years, although it recently became part of the Raytheon Technologies corporate family. Collins has been recognized by the CIPD NI for their good employment practices, including winning the best employee voice initiative, best hybrid and flexible work initiative, best people team, and best apprenticeship team.

Currently the facility employs around 800 workers who are broadly classified into the hourly paid workforce (those working in production and logistics) and the salaried workforce (office staff engineers, and management). The workforce is growing again following pandemic-related staffing reductions, although recruiting is a challenge, particularly among the higher-skilled positions. Collins offers a variety of opportunities for skill development, certifications, and internal apprenticeship programs. These opportunities reflect a commitment to staff development and the challenges of recruiting staff with the appropriate skills. Many of the senior management team have worked their way up from the factory floor, including the facility's previous managing director, who started on the shop floor and twenty years later was leading the facility (he has since been promoted into corporate functions). Despite globalized competition from sister facilities, the Kilkeel facility remains a significant production facility particularly for the bespoke seats and it is working to become a Centre of Excellence.

Recognizing the need and benefits of skill development at every level, Collins offers engineering leadership programmes, master assembler programs, and cooperative programmes with local colleges and universities. It also recognizes the need for management training as employees move through the ranks. As explained by the HR Business Partner, "We do a lot of work with our managers to try and develop their capability so that... translates into the more empowered and equipped that they are, then these issues [they may face such as grievances, discipline, etc.] don't escalate or become a bigger issue." Investing in management training is part of the firm's "bigger picture thinking, strategic thinking" to enable more productive work processes and reduce pressures on external recruitment.

Investing in their workforce was also signalled as important by the Operations Improvement Team Lead, who described their job as making sure people feel valued because that is how they promoted good work in people. She said, "My main theory is a happy person, a motivated person will do the best job, will... take pride in their work, will take pride in their quality, will think about their customer and so on." This sentiment was echoed by the SOA POA Lead (a logistics and customer relations position) who explained "the key to the business, the key to any business, is the people".

Managers, human resource leads, and others echoed the benefits of having good jobs. Employee voice and environments without fear mean that when mistakes happen people "put their hand up" and "come with suggestions". Improvements to the productivity of the production lines come about through creative job design activities that are "bottom-up" ideas to ensure buy in from the line workers and the engineering staff.

The FinTrU Culture: A high tech future that is good for business and employees

Working with investment banks around the globe, FinTrU designs technology-enabled solutions to help their clients meet regulatory obligations. In the ten years since its founding, FinTrU has been named one of Europe's fastest growing companies by the Financial Times and it currently employs 1200 people worldwide across Belfast, Derry/Londonderry, London, Dublin, Letterkenny, Maastricht, New York and Porto. FinTrU has been recognized for its employee relations, job quality and inclusive workplace. It has won awards and recognition from the Irish News Workplace and Employment Awards, the Digital DNA awards and it holds a Silver Diversity Mark – one of only seven organisations in Northern Ireland to have received this mark.

FinTrU prides itself on being a people-centred workplace, a workplace of choice for the best and brightest. Upon receiving the Diversity Mark, FinTrU founder and CEO Darragh McCarthy was quoted as saying, “we want all employees to have a sense of belonging at FinTrU and to be their true selves at work ... Our goal is to continue to be a leading employer in Northern Ireland and we are steadfastly focused on ensuring our company provides everyone with the opportunity to be comfortable at their workplace and excel in their careers.”³ To support the company strategy to “attract, develop and retain the best talent in the marketplace”, FinTrU offers high quality jobs with supportive training programmes in an inclusive and engaging environment. The company's employee-focused culture is exemplified by a variety of wellbeing programmes, clear career progression pathways, training and learning opportunities, and inclusivity – all of which leads to a high-performance workplace. As explained by the Head of Employee Relations, “For people to perform well, they need to be comfortable...we want people to be themselves at work.”

FinTrU's people-centred culture is essential for the firm's success in recruiting and retaining skilled workers. As the financial services sector grows in Northern Ireland, the recruitment market has become very competitive. The Head of Talent Acquisition explained, “FinTrU's reputation and workplace helps the company stand out. We get great feedback on our culture, our training and development opportunities, salaries and hybrid working – which are so important to people.” And with what was described as a “skills shortage”, the Head of Employee Relations explained that providing good jobs is essential, “We need to make sure we are attractive and competitive. We want to recruit and retain the very best talent.”

Employee morale and wellbeing are valued at FinTrU and enable a high-performance workplace. There are book clubs, exercise courses, walk and talks, and a variety of other activities. FinTrU has a “high performance culture and we recognize that our people need downtime too”. Participation in these events starts at the very top with the CEO and managers showing up to Yoga or virtual chats. “After having a chat and having the craic [at yoga] then you know that if there are any questions or concerns, they can come to you because we have already broken the ice.”

New initiatives such as a new NeoNatal leave Policy to support parents with children born premature or sick emerge from employee initiatives. With offices and clients across the globe, FinTrU has its finger on the pulse of where things are likely to go. “We've been without a government for some time, so where there is a need, we are introducing policies in advance of legislation to ensure we support our employees.” As for the costs of some programmes

³ FinTrU awarded the Silver Diversity Mark for leading diversity and inclusion commitment.

and policies, the Head of Employee Relations explained that “Quite often the costs [for these types of policies] are built in. If people come back to work too soon because the company did not provide the policy, then that can have a direct impact on their work and on their entire team as well as themselves. It is a necessary for the company to invest in their people.”

About the authors

These case studies were authored by Dr Emily Erickson and Professor Chris Warhurst of the Warwick Institute for Employment Research. Thanks to reviewers who provided comments and to Dr Sally Wright of Sheffield University for her help with the fieldwork.

These cases studies are based on the research as interpreted by the authors. They are not intended to represent the views of all ReWAGE members or the firms named.

About ReWAGE

ReWAGE is an independent expert advisory group modelled on SAGE that is co-chaired by the Universities of Warwick and Leeds. It analyses the latest work and employment research to advise the government on addressing the challenges facing the UK’s productivity and prosperity, such as Covid-19, the cost-of-living crisis and labour shortages.

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ReWAGE is primarily funded by the UKRI’s Economic and Social Research Council.