



Mobility Centres

*Facilitating employee mobility,
adaptability and flexibility*

Draft submission to the Forum on the Workplace of the Future



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helping *our* clients...
to better know *theirs*

Introduction

Tom Martin & Associates/TMA are pleased to make this submission to the Forum on the Workplace of the Future which is being organised by the National Centre for Partnership and Performance.

This submission is applicable to all four themes being addressed by the Forum, the Private Sector, the Public Sector, the Changing Workforce and National Policy and Supports.

The basis for this submission was an EU Leonardo da Vinci-funded project involving Irish Dutch, Greek and Czech partners of which Tom Martin & Associates/TMA, FÁS and Glanbia plc were the Irish representatives. The objective of the project which ran from 1999–2001 was to examine the concept of in-company mobility centres as means of encouraging employee mobility both within and without an organisation.

The project was a continuation of an earlier Leonardo da Vinci project which involved TMA, Goodbody Economic Consultants and the Services Industry Research Centre (SIRC) in UCD along with the same Dutch and Greek partners and with a Portuguese partner. The project studied measures to assist employees in large-scale redundancy situations and led to the initial concept of a mobility centre.

The Mobility Centre concept

Mobility centres can be defined as being units within companies where employees can obtain advice, information and training support on future career opportunities both inside and outside the company. The initial impetus to establish a mobility centre—sometimes called job or career change centres—may stem from a company's need to reduce staff numbers. The rationale for the mobility centre is, therefore, to assist employees being made redundant to find employment opportunities outside the company. Mobility centres in addition to helping employees to find alternative career opportunities can also assist them to cope with organisational change.

The experience of companies which have established mobility centres is that even when the down-sizing programme is complete they can play an important role in facilitating employee mobility within the organisation.

Mobility centres have been likened to an internal employment service within a company and often perform the services which a national or regional employment agency would provide to a person seeking to enter or re-join the labour market.

In times of labour shortages, mobility centres can play a role in assisting managers to recruit personnel from other parts of the organisation. They can provide an information dissemination role to employees on job opportunities in other parts of the organisation and by identifying the training requirements which employees must acquire in order to achieve those job openings.

In summary, mobility centres were originally conceived to assist companies to help

redundant employees to find alternative jobs outside of the organisation. However, some innovative companies have developed mobility centres as a means of facilitating employee mobility both internally within the organisation and in to and out of the organisation.

Policy relevance of mobility centres

A key element of the mobility centres concept is, of course, employee mobility. This can mean functional mobility meaning vertical or horizontal movement within a company. Internal and external mobility refers to employee mobility into, within and out of a company. Geographical mobility covers the change of geographical place where the work is carried out. Employee mobility may be desirable for a number of reasons both qualitative and quantitative. Companies may have a requirement to increase the vitality and innovativeness of its employees (qualitative mobility) and it may also have a need to increase the quantitative mobility of employees (e.g. down-sizing or increasing new employee in-take).

The concept of mobility centres is very closely tied in with another human resource concept, employability. With the trend towards atypical working e.g. short term contracts, part-time work, etc., participants in the labour market have to focus on developing their long term employability prospects. In other words, individuals have to assess their skills and expertise in the context of likely demands for those skills in the future. Individuals will, therefore, be looking at employment opportunities which can enhance their future employability. Employers who can offer training provision and opportunities for vocational development are more likely to attract suitable candidates. Employees who are concerned with their future employability prospects can make use of the services provided by mobility centres to plan their future career and to identify the skills they will need to pursue their career choice. Mobility centres can advise employees of opportunities in other parts of the organisation which they can avail of to further develop their skill set and experiences.

Mobility centres can also have linkages with another key issue in human resource development, life-long learning. The introduction of new forms of working and information communication technologies is revolutionising the work-place. Employees are now more likely to be working in teams and undertaking a much wider variety of tasks. Hence they need a wider range of skills—both technical and inter-personal. With the dual role that the mobility centre can play in advising on vocational and soft skills training, there is potential for the mobility centre to assist employees to identify relevant educational and training provision not only within the company but also externally.

Benefits of Mobility Centres

The introduction of a mobility centre within an organisation can bring a number of benefits not only during times when reductions in employee numbers are required but also during times of labour shortages when companies must maximise its existing work force.

ENHANCING EXTERNAL MOBILITY The mobility centre can play an important role in facilitating external mobility when an organisation needs to reduce staff numbers. The mobility

centre can achieve this by providing employees with information on external job openings and by providing training on job search techniques. The fact that the company is providing services to employees who are being made redundant over and above to what is the norm can play an important role in maintaining good relations with the work force and, additionally, can reduce the negative publicity that large-scale lay-offs can generate within the economy. This latter point is particularly the case if the organisation has a high public profile.

FACILITATING INTERNAL MOBILITY By providing information to employees on job opportunities within the organisation, the mobility centre can facilitate internal mobility of employees. This can have the benefit of retaining existing employees along with their skills and expertise. There can also be the incentivising and loyalty generating effect of encouraging employees to seek higher level positions within the company. In situations where there is full employment within the economy, the mobility centre can facilitate internal mobility so that job openings in one part of the company can be filled by employees from other parts of the company.

CREATING A CLIMATE OF CHANGE Through its work in providing counselling and other support services to employees, the mobility centre can facilitate an acceptance of change among staff. Given that the only constant is change, the role that the mobility centre can play in assisting employees to deal with change can be a significant benefit. Organisations where employees have the ability to cope with rapid organisational change are much more likely to progress than those organisations where there is a deep hostility and suspicion to organisational change.

MAXIMISING EMPLOYEE CONTRIBUTION The saying “square pegs into round holes” can sometimes be very apt description of employees who occupy positions for which they are clearly not suitable. The mobility centre can play a role in assisting employees to find the most suitable career path and thus maximise their individual skills and talents. The company can benefit from having employees whose combination of skills and expertise match those required by the position they hold.

FACILITATING TRAINING AND LIFE-LONG LEARNING With their emphasis on preparing employees for career change, mobility centres can create an awareness among employees of the importance of training and life-long learning. Mobility centres can begin the process by undertaking skill audits of employees and highlighting the importance of new skill acquisition in terms of future career development. Through linkages that the mobility centre may have developed with external organisations it can point employees to relevant providers of education and training provision.

MORE FLEXIBLE AND ADAPTABLE ORGANISATIONS The services that the mobility centre can play in facilitating employee mobility can result in the organisation becoming more flexible and adaptable in response to changes in the market-place. History has shown that organisations which can adapt to change are much more likely to survive in the longer term. It is a truism that the only constant is more change and if a company has flexibility and adaptability as a result of employees who are more mobile then it has a better chance of being able to cope with external changes.

Evolution of mobility centres

Research in the Netherlands has identified four types of mobility centres.

1. *The curative mobility centre*

Mobility centres are usually established in response to a redundancy programme to assist employees losing their jobs to find employment opportunities elsewhere. This type of mobility centre is sometimes called a curative or reactive mobility centre because the impetus for its formation is a reaction to a problem e.g. redundancy or closure.

A curative or reactive mobility centre can be viewed as an internal out-placement unit because the emphasis is on assisting redundant employees to find jobs outside the organisation. The focus of the curative mobility centre is on promoting the mobility of employees out of the organisation.

The disadvantage of this type of mobility centre is that it can be viewed as a resource for “losers” in an organisation i.e. those that are being made redundant. Management while agreeing to the establishment of mobility centre during times of employee downsizing may be in favour of closing it when the redundancy programme is completed because its existence is a reminder of a time which they would rather forget.

2. *The preventive mobility centre*

The focus of the preventive mobility centre is both internal and external employee mobility. This type of mobility centre seeks to prevent the emergence of problems within an organisation by stimulating voluntary mobility among employees in those parts of the organisation which are likely to come under pressure to reduce numbers.

This is done by increasing awareness among employees of job opportunities elsewhere within the organisation as well as externally. It provides information on the skills and expertise needed for alternative positions/careers.

The work of the preventive mobility centre while focusing on operational matters also begins to deal with strategic issues.

3. *Pro-active mobility centre*

The third type of mobility centre, the pro-active mobility centre, is still involved in providing services to facilitate internal and external employee mobility but has a stronger input in terms of strategic human resource development policy. The centre has an important role in the development and implementation of policies which are focused on employee mobility.

The pro-active mobility centre is also strongly directed towards preventing future enforced external replacement by facilitating the voluntary internal mobility of employees.

4. *The pro-active mobility policy*

The fourth stage in the development of mobility centres sees the integration of mobility policies with mainstream human resource development policies. In other words, employee mobility has become an integral part of the organisation's human resource development strategy.

Though the mobility centre continues to exist all of the company's human resource development personnel are now all fully trained in mobility techniques.

One of the aims of the pro-active mobility policy is to place emphasis on the mobility of employees in all parts of the organisation's policies. By integrating mobility in all aspects of its strategic policies, the organisation becomes more flexible and adaptable.

The experience of Mobility Centres in Ireland

This section provides examples of Irish companies which have developed mobility centres and outlines some of their experiences.

The ESB was probably the first Irish company to introduce a mobility centre and they were followed by Glanbia plc (formerly the Avonmore Waterford Group). The Resource Business established by eircom (formerly the state telephone company, Telecom Eireann) is currently one of the largest mobility centre-type operations in Ireland.

RTE also introduced a mobility centre at its headquarters in Donnybrook, Dublin.

ESB (Career Change Centres)

The Electricity Supply Board (ESB) is the state owned electricity generating and distribution company in Ireland. It has known for some time that its monopoly position would be under threat from deregulation of the electricity generation and distribution market. In order to prepare for competition, management and trade unions agreed to a voluntary redundancy programme which would involve a reduction in the work force of approximately 2,000 employees.

As part of the redundancy programme the management agreed to provide advisory and support services to staff members leaving the company. Two in-company centres known as Career Change Centres were established, one in Dublin and the second at its Money-point power generating plant. The ESB considered using external out-placement consultants but decided to recruit the Career Change Centre staff from within the company. The staff members were, however, trained by a UK company which had experience in out-placement.

The two Career Change Centres provided a number of services to over 900 employees including:

- Career advice;
- Self employment;

- Self marketing;
- Administrative support;
- Interview preparation;
- Job search;
- Training services;
- Personal financial advice.

The focus of the Career Change Centres was on assisting staff members to seek a new career outside of the ESB. It should be noted that many of those leaving the ESB under the redundancy programme were in the 55+ age group and as they essentially were taking early retirements they were not major users of the services provided by the Career Change Centres.

The services provided by the Career Change Centres were considered useful by both employees taking the voluntary redundancy package and by management. However, falling demand for the services of the Career Change Centres resulted in most of the staff reverting back to their previous jobs and the effective closures of the Centres themselves.

Though the Centres have closed, a proposal is being submitted to the senior management of the ESB to re-establish the Career Change Centres to deal with what is termed the “survivors’ syndrome” which is taken mean the employees who remain after the redundancy programme and who often face an uncertain future in a rapidly changing environment. It is suggested that the Career Change Centres can help disaffected employees to adjust to change and to contribute positively to the continued development of the company.

Glanbia (Job Centres)

The second company to establish an in-company mobility centre in Ireland was Glanbia, formerly called the Avonmore Waterford Group, and which was a partner in the Mobility Centres project. The company was formed from the merger of two large dairy companies, Avonmore and Waterford. Both companies were from the South East of Ireland and were rivals in a number of markets. The merger resulted in a company which had a number of duplicate plants which if eliminated would have resulted in substantial economies of scale—which was one of the reasons for the merger. The new company commenced a programme of rationalising the number of plants which resulted in a redundancy programme at its plants in Dublin and in the South East.

The government established two Task Forces to investigate alternative jobs for the redundant workers in Dublin and the South East. FÁS, another of the Irish partners in the Mobility Centres project, was actively involved in both task forces.

Glanbia had learnt of the ESB initiative and decided to establish what it termed a Job Centre in both Dublin and the South East. Like the ESB, the management of Glanbia

considered using external out-placement consultants to assist with the redundancy programme but decided to establish its own centre. A manager and a secretary was appointed to each Job Centre which was equipped with computers, printers, telephones, photo-copiers and newspapers. The Job Centres provided a number of services to people being made redundant including:

- Financial/taxation advice;
- Counselling;
- Retirement planning;
- Business start-ups;
- Training;
- Job search/assistance;
- Pension planning.

The services provided by the Glanbia Job Centres were very similar to those provided by the ESB Career Change Service. A major difference between the two was that Glanbia developed two initiatives: the first was a development fund financed by the company to assist in the attraction of new companies into the South East. The second was a seed capital fund into which it and Enterprise Ireland, the state indigenous industry development agency, committed funds on a 50:50 basis to assist redundant workers to establish new businesses. The investment fund amounted to 4.76 million euro and the combined seed capital fund was 6.3 million euro.

The Glanbia redundancy programme has been completed and the Job Centres in both Dublin and the South East have now been closed. The work undertaken both by the Task Forces and the Job Centres were considered very successful in assisting the redundant workers to find alternative careers outside of the company.

Eircom (Resource Business)

The only company which is currently known to have an internal mobility company in operation is eircom, the privatised state telephone company formerly known as Telecom Eireann. The centres, Resource Business, were established following negotiations between management and trade unions on the need for the company to survive in a deregulated market. The company plans to establish thirteen Resource Business centres around the country which will be mainly staffed by internal employees though they are supported by external counsellors.

The main objective of the Resource Business centres is to contribute to eircom being a viable, profitable and growing business by creating the environment and support structure which will:

- Support employees through change;

- Facilitate the identification and pursuit of realistic options and life choices;
- Foster on-going personal development and learning;
- Encourage mobility across functions and business units;
- Support the development of an entrepreneurial culture;
- Help meet the staffing requirements of the business units.

Employees whose job has disappeared are required to register with the Resource Business though registration is voluntary for all other employees. The company has closed a number of units in the West and North of the country and the employees of these units must register with the Resource Business centres.

The Resource Business centres work with employees to identify job opportunities elsewhere within eircom; this could be a short-term assignment on a specific project or it could be a full-time job somewhere else within the company. Alternatively, the Resource Business can help employees to seek employment outside of the company or assist the employee to start a new business. As with Glanbia, eircom has established an investment fund to assist in the development of new enterprises by staff members.

The Resource Business centres provide advice and support to employees in helping them to decide their future options which the Resource Business unit calls “pathways”. Thus, if an employee expresses an interest in finding a new job outside of eircom, the Resource Business advisor will help him to identify career goals and develop a CV. The employee can participate in a training programme to develop their future career options.

The main focus of the Resource Business unit to-date has been on encouraging and facilitating mobility within the company particularly from business units in rural areas to large urban centres such as Dublin where there are number shortages. In the long term it is likely, however that the unit will focus more on assisting external mobility.

Issues for consideration by the Forum

Mobility Centres have the potential to play a valuable role in the workplace of the future. They can provide a support function to management to increase organisational flexibility and adaptability and they can also provide advice and support services to staff to increase their career flexibility and long term prospects.

As illustrated in the cases of the ESB, Glanbia and eircom, Mobility Centres have played an important role in assisting employees of organisations undergoing major staff rationalisation programmes to prepare for new careers outside of the company. They can also assist the remaining employees to adapt to new ways of working and to cope with issues relating to the “survivors syndrome.”

The type of services provided by the Mobility Centres by ESB, Glanbia and eircom suggest that this is a potential approach to large scale redundancy situations where there is a need to provide a range of support services to employees being made redundant.

The lessons learnt by these companies indicates that Mobility Centres can be effective in assisting employees to successfully make the transition to a new career outside of the organisation. It is suggested that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment along with FÁS should be encouraged to consider the resourcing of Mobility Centres in companies where large-scale redundancy programmes are being contemplated.

Mobility Centres can also play a role, however, in companies that are developing and which need to develop a more flexible and adaptable workforce. Mobility Centres can assist management to develop internal solutions to staff/skill shortages by encouraging employees to develop new skills which can facilitate them to transfer to parts of the organisation where there are staff/skill deficits. Mobility Centres can thus act as an internal employment services unit within the company by alerting employees to new opportunities within the organisation and identifying the skills they need to acquire to take advantage of such job opportunities.

In an era of atypical careers and life-long learning, Mobility Centres can also be a source of advice and support to employees who wish to develop new career opportunities either internally within the company or externally. The Mobility Centre can be a resource where employees can have their skill sets assessed and be provided with advice on how skill deficits can be addressed in order to progress their careers. The provision of such a service is one reason why Mobility Centres are located outside the traditional HR structures within a company.

Mobility Centres can also be designed to provide support services to new employees joining the company. In some companies, Mobility Centres offer a “mentor” or “buddy” type support to new recruits to assist with their integration into the organisation. This type of support could also be relevant to the integration of employees from different or disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is recommended that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment provide funding for the provision of in-company Mobility Centres on a pilot basis. This would facilitate the development of a greater understanding of how Mobility Centres can assist in the development of dynamic and flexible organisations and can assist employees to progress their careers in an working environment that demands that skills be constantly and continuously be upgraded.

Further information

More information on the Mobility Centres concept can be obtained from the web site:

<http://www.mobilitycentres.net>