

Researching and Understanding the Key Drivers in the Career Decision Process

The purpose of this report, written by Geoff Lamb on behalf of the Collaborative network **Harvesting Tomorrows Skills**, is to research and understand key drivers in the career decision process and to propose ideas and potential outcomes that might be of interest and of use to Agri-food stakeholders in the future.

The report fulfils part 5.2 of the Harvesting Tomorrows Skills Project (HTS), a programme managed by NIFDA and funded through InvestNI. It highlights the need for the Agri-food sector to better understand the career decision-making process of potential employees and how this knowledge could be used to attract a sustainable number of workers to the industry.

Executive Summary

Introduction

Historically Northern Ireland's agri-food sector has not been perceived as a viable career option for many young people. Research into young people's attitudes towards food careers compelled the introduction of the successful Tasty Careers programme, which aimed to attract talented young people into Agri-food. Whilst this has had a positive effect, the industry needs to invest in a wider range of programmes to attract a broader spectrum of people. An industry-wide plan is required to drive sectoral attractiveness in a co-ordinated and cost-effective manner.

Over recent years many local Agri-food companies have become increasingly reliant on migrant workers. The industry growth thus enabled could be curtailed should these workers decide to leave Northern Ireland, which could happen, irrespective of Brexit. There is a significant risk that the high levels of employee turnover and recruitment difficulties experienced across the Agri-food industry in the past could return. In the face of stiff competition from other economic sectors, some strategic growth will be automation driven. However, many sub-sectors will continue to be people reliant. The

future of Agri-food depends on actions taken now that will ensure an adequate flow of talent towards the industry, at all educational levels and from across the population.

A wide range of interventions is required to overcome potential labour shortages and sectoral attractiveness is an important part of this process. Tasty Careers, whilst effective, is constrained by a lack of resource. To ensure the success of any local work towards sectoral and careers attractiveness, a knowledge-based approach is suggested. This involves investigating theories and models of career choice to discern the most appropriate future actions in terms of both effectiveness and cost.

Theories and Models of Careers Choice

There are many theories of Careers Guidance and Counselling; these have developed through time from basic matching models towards those that emphasise job satisfaction and the need to find a purposeful career. Some theories have proven long lasting and gained credibility over many years and these remain useful, particularly when used as one of several approaches for individuals. No single model has yet been conceived that fully explains the complexities of careers choice in a changing world. Models are discussed which are deemed to be most relevant to the Northern Ireland Agri-food sector.

The early trait and factor theories assume a static scenario whereby an individual is matched to a suitable job which is pursued throughout their career; whereas later models highlight the need for careers guidance over a sustained period, reflecting the ever-changing world of careers.

Several of the models contain results-oriented tests and, although there are associated issues, they can nonetheless form part of an overall analysis of career aspirations. These include the Trait and Factor Theory and the Seven Point Framework although this approach possibly peaked with the Myers Briggs Typology and Holland's Vocational Personalities and Work Environments Theory.

The Theory of Work Adjustment is another model which can help individuals make effective career choices and recognises that the correspondence between an individual and their job role may change through time.

Super's Life Style/Life Space Theory deals with the evolving "self-concept" of an individual and is useful for a careers professional who can identify the life stage at which an individual is located. The model acknowledges the fragmented nature of modern careers compared to those of the past. These ideas have been taken forward by Savickas, whose Careers Construction Theory views vocational behaviour from three different perspectives, enabling the careers advisor to better understand client preferences.

Gottfredson's theory describes the development of career choice in young people and highlights the need for learning about different job roles, in tandem with their self-development. The model describes the process of career choice as 'the unconscious activity of rejecting unacceptable alternatives prior to identifying the most accessible and preferred options'. This might entail dropping an initial career choice for one which is more realistic, and reasons may vary depending on the availability of education and employment – a move from the ideal to the realistic. This might also happen due to a lack of awareness of what is available, or incorrect assumptions about the nature of roles. Whilst Gottfredson considers the impact of society pressures on individual decision-making, Law focuses on some of the mechanisms by which this takes place. He has identified five separate forms of influence over the individual which can come from "community interaction" with groups such as teachers, parents and peers. This can be either positive or negative. These ideas are similarly approached by Krumboltz in his social learning theory of career decision-making. In both cases the careers guidance professional can help an individual build up positive perceptions of themselves and their potential careers options. Krumboltz' theories emphasise the proactive role of the careers advisor and the ongoing link with their clients throughout their careers. The advisor mentors the individual client and helps them cope with unplanned career changes. The theory of happenstance is particularly relevant in a 21st Century context, whilst the Social Cognitive Careers Theory offers a useful

framework for explaining educational and vocational interest development, choice making, and performance.

The models show that much good careers work is underpinned by effective communication; this can be both personal (helping individuals to understand their own motivations and identify areas of interest) and industry based (whereby wide-ranging programmes of awareness can help with individual career choice).

For the Northern Ireland Agri-food sector the models show that the key is to undertake a range of interventions which are based on the provision of effective Labour Market Intelligence (LMI), disseminated via a wide variety of processes, and to everyone from primary school pupils through to adult careers changers.

LMI is used in a variety of ways, ranging from the careers professional passing information to their clients, through to individuals being provided with access to sources which help them uncover areas of interest. LMI may also be used to challenge misconceptions about certain roles (extremely applicable to Agri-food).

Clearly LMI is an important component of many theories that careers guidance professionals will utilise with their clients. There are many local sources of Information available, although in some instances these need to be translated into relevant LMI that can be used by careers practitioners and other stakeholders who have influence over those making career choices. This was formerly done through sectoral bodies, but this is no longer the case. There exists a clear need for the Agri-food sector to provide transparent and accessible LMI for use by careers practitioners, utilising social and online media amongst other sources and demonstrating real-life situations. LMI underpins all the work that the sector needs to undertake to attract the best people towards careers in Agri-food and all other activities are predicated on this provision.

Local Careers Initiatives

The major careers body in Northern Ireland is the Careers Service *which "provides an impartial, all-age careers information, advice and guidance service throughout Northern Ireland. Professionally qualified careers advisers can help young people and adults make informed choices about their future career paths. Careers advisers can also help parents/guardians with their child's future career plans."*

The Careers Service has an extensive website is backed up by a team of expert advisors, providing impartial advice to their client base.

The Careers Service has previously been briefed on the Agri-food sector and the wide range of career opportunities it offers. This report recommends that this work recommences and is further developed.

Food-related initiatives are delivered by several local bodies and seek to enhance the knowledge and understanding of teachers, pupils, careers advisers and occasionally the wider population. They aim to promote positive attitudes towards agriculture and food across schools and the community. Whilst some collaboration and partnership exists between delivery agents, there is little overall strategic coordination.

The initiatives include:

Tasty Careers – delivered by Food and Drink Sector Skills, supported by CAFRE and local food companies, this initiative provides an excellent example of effective collaboration

Open Farm Week-end – organised by Ulster Farmers Union and involving a range of agri-food stakeholders it aims to promote the 'gate to plate' message to the wider community

CAFRE's Loughry Campus Syllabus Support Programme and **Schools Liaison Programme.**

GCSE in Agriculture and Land Use

Eat, Taste and Grow – produced by *safe*food and the Public Health Agency; Dairy Council for Northern Ireland and Livestock and Meat Commission.

Dig In –a collaboration between the UFU and Agri-Aware in the Republic of Ireland.

Further Discussion and Recommendations

These following recommendations aim to benefit the Agri-food sector throughout Northern Ireland:

1. Provision of high-quality Labour Market Intelligence (LMI)

Specific LMI should be generated to cover different age groups of school children, students and adults as well as careers teachers and practitioners. Whilst the general content of information remains constant, the amount and style of presentation should vary somewhat, depending on the audience.

LMI can be disseminated effectively by a variety of means, including:

- Information sheets and infographics – a quick and effective method of conveying relevant information.
- Presentations – such as broadening out Tasty Careers with a view to overcoming the slow increase in STEM uptake over the last few years despite much resource and effort.
- Social Media – the use of social media tools such as Apps etc is vital.
- Information packs distributed to primary schools – any interventions at this level should be undertaken by expert groups such as Sentinus.

2. Structured Employer and School Links – an Engagement Framework

Many companies already have informal links with schools in their vicinity and this is furthered by the efforts of careers teachers. However, a coordinated effort is needed for the Agri-food sector to link schools and companies together in a significant and organised manner. These links would be with all schools from primary to post-primary levels as well as FE and HE and would provide many company benefits, not least the opportunity to positively influence young people towards a career in Agri-food. Schools would also benefit from these linkages. The Industrial Cadets programme could provide suitable accreditation but this requires further investigation.

3. *Provision of Work Experience*

Work experience provides the local Agri-food sector with an opportunity to reinforce positive messages and overcome negative perception. To ensure full benefit is gained, it is vital that any work experience opportunity is well planned before, during and after any placement. This activity would be aimed at a wider target audience than simply those taking food related qualifications and thus enhance the potential impact.

4. *Course/Intervention for Career Changers*

This is primarily aimed at the adult market and for those graduates with a non-food related qualification who may wish to pursue a career in Agri-food. This could take the form of bespoke educational intervention or possibly a “wraparound” of extant qualifications which could then be badged as food ready and tweaked to meet the specific requirements of individual employers. Should a need for such an intervention be identified, then a pilot is suggested.

A coordinating mechanism is urgently required to make collaborations effective and such an approach will offer cost saving opportunities.

The activity requires delivery under a brand (to be discussed), possibly under the auspices of the Sectoral Partnership for Food. Some activity has been noted in other areas or sectors and these have some potential to act as a marker for local Agri-food specific work. For any of this proposed work to be effective, a sensible level of resource is needed. Given the importance of Agri-food to the local economy any best practice identified could and should be amended for local implementation.

Conclusion

This report has investigated theories of career choice to inform recommendations for future work, whilst not neglecting previous examples of good practice.

Whilst the local Agri-food sector will continue to develop technology which may

remove the lowest skilled jobs from the system, a longer-term strategy is required which will have a lasting, positive impact on recruitment to Agri-food, at all levels of entry.

To make this strategy work, a collaborative body is suggested with a working title such as Food Careers NI, which could either operate under a brand already in existence or as a completely new concept. The example of STEM and Essential Skills demonstrate the need for work over a sustained period of years to attempt to achieve successful outcomes. Sectoral attractiveness has latterly become recognised as being of greater importance than ever to Agri-food but this will require the effective allocation of public and private sector resource. Without a workable local government, there is likely to be a dearth of funding in the shorter term; however, this should not prevent effective arguments being made now for the development of longer-term work.

Without a sustained and focused programme of careers attractiveness, the Agri-food sector in Northern Ireland will continue to struggle to reach its full potential.

Geoff Lamb - 2018