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Back to school?

With more competition in the jobs market than ever before, it is important to be at the top of your game. For many people, this could mean a foray into higher education, writes Róisín O'Sullivan.

Over the last two years the uncertainty surrounding our economy, jobs, taxes and salaries has caused a growing sense of restlessness among the Irish public. Suddenly we are no longer wandering from one day to the next, getting our work done and only planning as far as our next mini-break. Instead we are beginning to question all of the things that we once took for granted. We have started to ask ourselves some tough questions - am I happy with my living situation? Is this the right job for me? Where do I see my career going? Is this really what I want?

For far too many people, redundancy has decided the answers these queries, yet for more still, the recession has made it clear that they need to become more pro-active in deciding their life paths. In most cases, further education will be one possible remedy for redundancy or restlessness.

To upskill or not to upskill?

According to industry insiders, upskilling has never been a wiser decision. "Traditionally across developed countries, times of economic slowdown are the times when the greatest levels of interest are seen in upskilling and in changing career paths," says John O'Sullivan, director of The Institute of Physical Therapy. "Emerging from a downturn with new or enhanced

skills means that you are in the strongest possible position to benefit when the upturn comes."

Katie Morrisroe, admissions officer in American College Dublin, is in agreement with O'Sullivan. "Now is the ideal time for workers to improve their skills and qualifications. The recession won't last forever and it is the people who have invested in improving their skills and gaining more experience that will be the first to feel the upswing."

In the short term, upskilling may also make your current job that little bit more interesting. "Developing new skills or new approaches to old tasks and updating your knowledge means that your role and the way you work can constantly evolve. This brings new challenge and 'freshness' to your job and helps your sense of self-worth and achievement as you master new skills," says O'Sullivan.

Divisional director of the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants' (CIMA) Republic of Ireland division, Denis McCarthy, also asserts that upskilling is important in today's market, although his reasoning is a little different. According to McCarthy, the value of upskilling will be felt as much by the employer as the employee. "With the economic climate the way it is, not just in Ireland, but globally, the need for

individuals to improve their skill set is more important than ever.

"Ireland's rapidly rising level of unemployment is creating a very large pool of people, all competing for an increasingly small number of jobs. Employers are now spoiled for choice and this means that additional education and training have become an imperative. To remain competitive, employees must now have a more diverse skill set that will appeal to employers under pressures to cut costs and drive efficiencies. Employees must now prove what added value they can bring to an employer beyond the basic job description," explains McCarthy.

"An increase in levels of training and upskilling across the economy also has the potential to increase the prospects for success of Irish businesses and, in particular, SMEs. These businesses need employees with a diverse skill set, who can add value by bringing with them increased versatility, fresh insights, specialist expertise and compliance based qualifications," says McCarthy.

For the gainfully employed, upskilling can be as simple as requesting feedback, requesting opportunities to do new work or availing of in-house training programmes. Networking regularly with groups that are relevant to your job is another constructive way to spend time and can open doors to seminars, training sessions and think tanks as well as offering the benefit of shared experiences.

This may not always be enough however, and for the unemployed or anyone considering a career move, formal education may be the only way forward. But is it really a good time to spend your valuable time and money on learning a whole new skill set?

"Anyone who finds themselves facing redundancy or unemployment should

consider their options," says Katie Morrisroe. "We would recommend that people take time to consider their strengths and their weaknesses and what they enjoyed in their last role. A recession is an opportunity for people to reassess their career path and undertake new training or experiences."

Career changes

But maybe your restlessness, salary cut and changing work environment have led you to the belief that a complete change of career is in order? With so much uncertainty in the jobs market is this a sensible time to pursue a change of lifestyle?

Frank Rock, head of mentoring and talent development in Harvest Resources, says that it is important to spend time reflecting before making any decisions. "Consider the following questions clearly," he says.

"What is causing my insecurity in my current role? Is it just a case that I need to upskill or increase the scope of my current role? What can I do to make my current role more valuable to my manager and the organisation at large? Am I moving for the right reasons or have I fallen victim to the negativity being generated internally and externally regarding my job/sector/the economy in general?"

"At the moment it is extremely important to be realistic about your current skill set and where you want to be. Consider all aspects of a career change prior to making a decision to leave a secure position in an organisation. It is much easier to search for a new job that is a good fit when you have the comfort of having a job whilst searching. Experience tells me that the grass is not always greener on the other side! Career changes should not be made in haste - there is a big difference between a job change and a career change. Only change career if it is in line with your overall goals for life, not because your sector is experiencing difficulty," says Rock.

Denis McCarthy also urges caution. "Employees should keep a close eye on market trends before making any decisions. For instance, it may be necessary to be more realistic in relation to the employment landscape and more prudent when evaluating existing job security and long-term viability. Ultimately however, above all else, a strong qualification and continued training will benefit both employee and employer. Businesses realise that they need talented professionals to help them succeed in tougher economic climates and gaining the necessary skills to service this requirement can aid an employee's career

progression and development. Recession or growth, a relevant and valued qualification will mean employers want you onboard."

On the other side of the fence, John O'Sullivan argues that if the option is available to learn a new profession while still retaining your current job (studying in a part-time or weekend capacity or through distance learning for example), that there is no reason why a bad economy should delay your decision. "Now is always the best time to engage in education. The longer you have left to use your new skills or learning, the more you stand to gain from them. Conversely, the longer you postpone the beginning the harder it gets to get going. Have you ever met anyone who said 'I wish I hadn't known that when I started out?'" he says.

Choosing a course

Once you have decided to pursue higher education, the next hurdle is choosing a course. According to John O'Sullivan, your current career could be the secret to figuring out what your next should be. "Initially, think very carefully about the aspects of your job you like - the things you are best at. Usually, this will be the most enjoyable part of your day, so further study to enhance these skills



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or develop new ones can seem more a labour of love and a natural step for you. If you can develop these skills as well as earning a formal, recognised award, then a course might seem doubly attractive."

Once you have decided on a course, you should go about getting your hands on the relevant prospectus and curriculum, says McCarthy. "In choosing a suitable course, a prospective student should fully investigate issues such as suitability, career direction, time requirement and cost. Additional things to consider are what professional recognition and exemptions are available and what transferable skills can be gained. The content of courses with the same subject can vary significantly between different providers and it is therefore crucial to read the course prospectus, course brochures and websites to find the course programme that best suits your requirements."

Next, you should approach the college itself. "The best way to choose a course is to talk to the admissions office," says Katie Morrisroe of American College Dublin. "They can arrange for the student to meet other students, give information on what graduates from the course have achieved and arrange for them to meet members of the faculty. Returning to education is a

challenge and the best preparation is to find out as much as possible."

Distance learning is another option open to anyone considering learning a new skill while still working full-time or for anyone with huge time commitments at home. But is it as effective as in-class learning? "Research indicates that there is no difference in the sense of satisfaction associated with completing either distance learning or in-class learning options," says Harvest's Frank Rock. "The most important factor contributing to the effectiveness of the learning is how suited it is to the person completing the course. This includes, the level of the qualification, the learning style of the participant and how well suited the course is to the lifestyle of the participant. Distance learning can be more difficult also as there still does exist a technology hurdle."

Challenges

Besides the cost and commitment, there are other worries for anyone choosing to return to higher education after an extended period of absence. "Workers re-entering education generally are anxious as they have been away from education for sometime and feel 'rusty'. However, once in the system they can find that they are easily adaptable and

tend to grasp what is being taught in the lectures much quicker than the 'regular' students," says Katie Morrisroe.

John O'Sullivan has noticed a similar worry among mature students in his physical therapy course. "The biggest fear we hear before committing to the course is that one could be 'too old'. However, since we started the course more than 20 years ago, we have never heard it mentioned as an issue once someone has enrolled. What can be tougher is finding the time to set aside for study. We find that students who have those few hours a night free for study, can achieve a new career in three short years in an area that has always interested them and will always challenge and reward them."

According to Frank Rock, confidence is a prominent concern for many mature students. "Confusion often arises between a person's need to prove their IQ and the advantage they have of years of business experience and 'people knowledge', gained only through working in different industries and companies. Remember it is more to do with EQ (emotional intelligence) than IQ. Understanding people and business through experience is a huge asset to anyone." ■

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Times they are a-changin

Bob Dylan's sixties lyrics "The times they are a-changin'" still ring true today for those charged with developing their company's sales.



Executive Education
UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School

Many sales professionals are now turning to more rigorous systems and methods to help them deliver results, rather than relying on their own personal intuition to get by. In recognition of this need, UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School developed a Diploma in Sales Management in collaboration with the Sales Institute of Ireland. This postgraduate qualification equips sales managers with the advanced tools and methods necessary to develop themselves and their businesses in a more scientific manner.

Each participant attends a series of eight intensive workshops, over a period of 10 months. Workshops are held on Fridays and Saturdays so as to minimise interface in busy work lives. After each workshop, an assignment is undertaken to address sales related issues in areas such as sales strategy and sales-force design. These continuous assessment assignments are designed to deepen the learning gained, by applying the theory in the work place. The final part of the programme is the completion of an action research project that seeks to consolidate the participant's understanding of the broad range of subjects covered on the programme.

The programme is designed to expose participants to a range of business disciplines, enhancing both their personal and organisational effectiveness. Participants are able to immediately apply their learning in the workplace following the very first module.

Diarmuid Gavin, general manager of Pamex Ltd, completed the programme at a time when the company was expanding into other markets. "The best part about the diploma has been the application of the learning into practical everyday ways of working. You are encouraged to continually bring the theory alive and make it work for you to become more successful. The diploma equipped me with practical models to ensure a successful launch into the Northern Ireland market."

Strategic thinking skills, structured salesforce decisions and tools to identify and leverage sales performance initiatives for delivering company growth are just



some of the things participants can expect to develop on the programme.

"The key issues that Bord Gáis Energy currently face include the ever-changing energy markets in Ireland, due mainly to de-regulation of the market and hyper competition from many new market entrants. As a key account manager in a tough sales environment, the learning and experiences of the diploma have assisted in equipping me with the skills required in today's challenging energy markets. The particular emphasis of strategic planning coupled with analysis of the business environment and the various analytical tools have emerged as key determinants in how I deal with complex negotiations on a daily basis," said Gary Griffin of Bord Gais Eireann.

Participants on the programme come from a wide range of companies and sectors. The diversity of backgrounds further enhances the learning experience for all involved. "Having come from a scientific background I had no formal training or exposure to any business-related subjects until I enrolled in the Diploma in Sales Management. The Finance module for example gave me a broad appreciation of all the financial elements involved in running a small business and an insight into how to maximise cash flow which has really helped in these challenging times," commented Audrey Bradley, business development executive with Aalto Bio

Reagents

For Philip Larragy, sales and marketing manager of Aspera Solutions, the diploma offered an opportunity to update and refresh his knowledge. "Having a 25-year gap since completing a marketing degree, the refresher aspect of this programme was significant. A lot of old thinking and habits were challenged and new ideas and concepts revived my interest in the role I play and how I might cope with new challenges.

"I feel a lot more comfortable in my role knowing that on top of 30 years sales experience in IT, I also have the benefit of the latest in business education specific for my profession."

Bernard Faughey, programme director says, "Participants have all reported significant advantages for themselves and their teams after attending the programme. More than half of the class of 2008 has chosen to continue with their studies on the Master of Science in Strategic Sales Management. This is a significant testimony in its own right, and a sign of the new direction the profession is now taking."

Indeed the times they are a changing as sales managers now join the ranks of other professions with a postgraduate professional qualification.

For more information contact Liz Knight at liz.knight@ucd.ie, phone 01 716 8801, or visit www.smurfitschool.ie ■