MAPPING INFOR WORK TO THE

■ WHILE ADVANCED INDUSTRIALIZED NATIONS LIKE THE

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U.S. have been gradually developing information-sector employment along with the IT evolution, newly industrializing nations are leapfrogging directly from traditional agrarian to state-of-the-art information economies. Ireland is a prime example of such a nation. The rapid transformation of Ireland's work force during the closing decades of the 20th century was the object of an ethnographic investigation of the fit between aspects of Irish society and the emergence of its information economy [1].

The case of Ireland offers lessons for all those who are concerned about the development of an information-sector work force. It reveals the importance of conscious public policy, educational and infrastructural coordination, along with the ability to adapt the policy vision in response to issues and opportunities. These lessons relate to the characteristics of information-sector work, the development of information-sector workers, and the need for an adaptive approach to policymaking and planning.

Information-sector work is dynamic, knowledge-intensive, and creative. In the information sector, quick response is required in order to keep up with constant technological changes. Innovative responses to the marketplace are the hallmark of the information sector. New ways of thinking are needed to fuel the continuous search for new information products and services. One unexpected finding from this research was the fit between the work ethic of the information sector and that of an agrarian economy.

In contrast to nations where information-sector work forces emerged from the ranks of industrial workers, the Irish work force often came directly from the farm. For good and for bad, Ireland had less of an industrial base as it forged ahead into this new economy. It didn't have the business and production-oriented workplace habits derived from industrialism. But neither did it have industrial-era baggage such as rigid job definitions, worker-management divisions, and resistance to change [2].

The result of an information sector growing at an unprecedented speed is a global demand for qualified information-sector workers. The challenge applies throughout the work force supply chain from educating through recruiting to motivating and managing these workers. Ensuring a supply of appropriately qualified information-sector workers raises issues of both educational and social policy. The availability of young, English-speaking, and well-educated workers was one of the main reasons that firms came to and remained in Ireland. Young workers were considered more flexible and open to new ideas. These characteristics were seen as particularly suited to information-sector work. Because the Irish workers were less experienced, they were also considered more adaptable and less resistant to changing methods and technologies. Irish government officials described the information-sector workers as hungry for intellectual challenge and the opportunity to use their minds.

An important lesson that Ireland learned was that educational and employment policy need to be coordinated. It was not sufficient to reorient the educational system to make it compatible with the employment needs of an information economy. Graduates must also be able to find jobs. Until this lesson was learned, an industrial policy intended to stem the tide of emigration had resulted in some of the best and brightest leaving the country.

The good news of employment opportunities must also be balanced against the barriers to IT employment. Two work force challenges for Ireland relate to gender and socio-economic class. I witnessed the tension between opportunity and restriction with respect to women working in the IT field [3]. While women thought it was easier to get along in the information sector than in traditional industries where assumptions regarding gender-typed work were more firmly established, they acknowl-

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edged the stereotype of IT work as a male activity.

Issues related to socio-economic class were about the reluctance to acknowledge the *existence* of social class boundaries and the ways in which these boundaries hold people back. This recognition is the first step in bringing underrepresented groups into the information economy. Making the fruits of the transformation to an information economy available to both men and women from all social classes cannot be achieved overnight. Assumptions about one's life chances and educational opportunities, which were fixed for generations, take time and conscious intervention to alter.

Adapting the Vision along the Way

Six outcomes were expected to result from Ireland's information-sector work force. The first was the creation of more sustainable jobs to offset the decline in agricultural work. Next, was the stimulation of indigenous industry through sourcing to multinational firms and from the growth of Irish spin-off companies. The third expected outcome was a change in educational credentials as more people attended school to acquire the skills necessary for employment in the information sector. Greater employment opportunities, in turn, would lead to stemming the tide of emigration. The combination of more jobs, more indigenous industry, higher levels of education, and the ability to hold on to these highly qualified workers could not help but enhance the overall economy. Finally, it was believed the economic impact of the information sector would, in turn, produce social, psychological, and political impacts of their own.

While all these impacts have been realized, the employment journey from agrarian to information-sector work has not been the straightforward progression that, in retrospect, it might have appeared. Neither was it an overnight phenomenon. Rather, Ireland's journey reveals the nation's ability to adapt to the growing awareness that it was creating a distinct information sector. As this information sector came into focus, employment and educational planning was directed toward preparing a labor force that was equipped to do this new type of work. Along the way, policymakers came to understand the characteristics of information-sector work and to relate them to Ireland's unique socio-cultural factors. The case of Ireland tells us that developing a qualified information-sector work force requires conscious planning and insightful adaptation to unanticipated consequences. Ireland's story shows how each nation or region must identify and exploit its own competitive strengths. What works for one country will not necessarily work for another. Above all, the case of Ireland shows the importance of focusing on people.

Conclusion

The lessons from Ireland offer food for thought to other nations and regions seeking to develop information-sector employment. Irish policymakers created an employment vision that coordinated public policy, educational planning, and infrastructure development. The multinational firms came to Ireland because they wanted a foothold in Europe and because Ireland provided the most competitive economic incentives. However, the reasons for staying were increasingly about the characteristics of the labor force. The lessons from Ireland reinforce the fact it is the *people*—in all their complexity and diversity—holding the key to unlocking the promise of the information age. **C**

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