

Clash between flexible working and “onsite” demands growing -survey

Brian Sheehan

The push for more onsite work “has clashed with candidates’ desire to maintain flexible arrangements, creating tensions between employers and employees”, according to a new specialist survey.

“Rising living costs and the ongoing housing crisis, particularly in Dublin, have exacerbated this stand-off”, Morgan McKinley says.

The recruitment firm’s ‘Irish Employment Monitor’ also reports a 14.6% decline in professional job openings in the final quarter of 2024 compared to the previous quarter. They say this reflects “cautious hiring strategies by multinationals amid global economic uncertainties”.

Despite the overall decline, however, the Monitor says the Irish employment market remained active, with sectors and disciplines such as regulatory compliance, financial services, and emerging technologies like AI and automation showing resilience, “offering targeted opportunities for skilled professionals”.

Meanwhile, the number of professional job seekers rose by 6.8%, increasing competition for fewer roles.

Trayc Keevans, Global FDI Director, MM Ireland, said: “The end of 2024 was marked by global economic caution, exacerbated by the U.S. presidential election and ongoing concerns about corporate tax and trade policy changes. Multinational firms in Ireland, particularly in technology and life sciences, scaled back hiring amid these uncertainties.”

“FRICTION” EVIDENT

Meanwhile, the debate over hybrid and onsite work intensified, says Keevans, with employees resisting the return to full-time office schedules. “This friction, combined with the housing crisis and rising living costs, significantly slowed job mobility.”

Keevans says the technology sector saw a sharp rise in demand in the final quarter of 2024, driven by end-of-year project deadlines and preparations for the EU’s Digital Operational Resilience Act (DORA).

Expertise in automation, AI, and regulatory compliance was in high demand, especially in Dublin. This shift towards highly specialised roles “highlights a continued imbalance between job seekers and available positions, reflecting employers’ focus on critical skills”.

Looking ahead, AI and automation are expected to drive further growth as companies accelerate digital transformation initiatives.

Keevans says that in financial services, the introduction of DORA heightened the focus on operational and third-party risk, spurring demand for risk, and compliance professionals.

While fund accountants were in strong demand for the last quarter of the year, the broader sector faces challenges in attracting emerging talent, “largely due to its traditional image compared to the dynamic appeal of technology roles”.

“ENHANCED PACKAGES”

Keevans explains that the “ongoing housing crisis” has exacerbated these issues, “prompting some younger professionals to emigrate for better opportunities. To counteract this trend, employers are offering enhanced benefit packages, as they strive to retain skilled employees amid a competitive market”, she says.

In accounting and finance, senior professionals have “exhibited reluctance to change roles due to broader market caution”.

Advances in AI and automation streamlined tasks such as accounts payable, “leading to smaller team sizes, while stricter onsite work requirements further limited the talent pool”.

Also, with professionals increasingly valuing flexible work, the sector faces continued challenges in attracting and retaining talent.

Meanwhile, many professionals are moving from the food sector to pharma in search of better working conditions and higher pay. “While this benefits the pharmaceutical industry, it leaves the food sector more challenged with skills shortages, particularly in production roles”.

Trayc Keevans says the engineering sector maintained stable hiring levels. But again, the “push for fully onsite roles” has created recruitment challenges, as many professionals continue to prioritise flexible working arrangements.

“To address these challenges, some companies introduced retention bonuses to secure critical talent and ensure project continuity”

ER & HR IN DEMAND

The Monitor found that human resources hiring expanded, “particularly for Employee Relations specialists and HR Business Partners”, as companies sought to manage “workforce complexities”.

“Efforts to enhance HR Information Systems reflect a broader initiative to improve employee experiences and optimise workforce management. Despite this, a shortage of junior HR professionals persists, aggravated by low unemployment and emigration”, according to Keevans.

Data centre projects have slowed amid concerns about their energy demands, prompting a shift in priorities. Employers are under pressure “to meet ambitious infrastructure goals while managing persistent workforce shortages.”