



LEONARDO ECON-IT

Market Assessment Report

**Craigavon Industrial Development Organisation
(CIDO)**



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1 INTRODUCTION

This country specific market assessment has been prepared by CIDO as part of Work Package 01 (Market Assessment) within the LEONARDO ECON-IT project. The purpose of this market assessment is to research a general overview of the Business Advisors' sector in Northern Ireland (UK) with a particular emphasis on assessing their training needs.

The report is structured in the following way:

- Section 2, *Background Information*, describes in a very general way the structure of the sector
- Section 3, *Methodology*, explains the steps followed for the preparation of the report
- Section 4, *Quantitative Analysis*, presents the numeric results from the application of the questionnaires
- Section 5, *Conclusions*, merges the output of the questionnaires with the focus group and desk-based research outcomes to provide the picture of the Business Advisors training environment
- Section 6, *Recommendations*, summarizes in a structured way the results of the two previous sections
- Annex 1, *List of Participants*, contains the list of organisations involved in the study. CIDO acknowledges their support during the course of this research and would like to thank all of them for their readiness and availability.

2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Northern Ireland is a region within the UK with its own administrative structure. While working in co-operation with other regions of the UK, it has substantial transferred powers from the central UK Government with responsibility for a range of local affairs such as economic policy (excluding taxation), training, agriculture, transport, environment, education and health and the development and implementation of policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion. The Northern Ireland administration discharges these responsibilities within the expenditure limits set by the UK Treasury.

The public sector accounts for 63% of the economy of Northern Ireland which is substantially higher than 43% of the United Kingdom as a whole. In total, the British government subvention totals £5,000m, or 20% of Northern Ireland's economic output. The subvention represents the shortfall between the total amount of money that is raised in Northern Ireland, mainly in taxation, and the total amount spent in the region.

Northern Ireland is currently enjoying a period of economic growth with output and employment rising and unemployment falling. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per head in Northern Ireland still remains lower than the rest of the UK.

Unemployment in Northern Ireland is currently at its lowest level in 18 years and it is generally agreed that the new period of political stability has already stimulated business activity and has begun the transition from a public service economy to a more balanced model. The new climate has also encouraged inward investment with many hundreds of new jobs coming on stream in the past twelve months. Business starts are at their highest ever level with 2,700 people entering self-employment since Jan 2006 (Source SABP).

Business development continues to be an issue for both established and developing businesses across Northern Ireland and while there are a number of publicly funded programmes which address the establishment of new businesses, there are relatively few business development programmes.

It is in these specific areas that the majority of business advisers in Northern Ireland operate as mentors, advisers and consultants. The professional sector in Northern Ireland is made up by three different and stratified categories of organisations:

- Large multinational consultancy houses such as Price Waterhouse Cooper and BDO Stoy Hayward. These companies operate at the higher end of the Northern Ireland marketplace and are staffed by well qualified professionals. While their experienced staff are generally academically well qualified to meet their responsibilities, their graduate intake does take some time to accumulate the experience and craft necessary to operate as a professional. These companies provide all kind of services, from the most sophisticated ICT application to the most traditional accounting or auditing services.
- Specialist in-house advisers – These professionals are employed by Banks, Government Departments such as DARD and DEL, InvestNI and Academia and are made available to client organisations as and when required.
- Smaller independent companies such as Goldblatt McGuigan, LOCUS, Jenkinson, Initiative – these companies operate almost exclusively in Northern Ireland with perhaps limited activity in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Their range of services is quite extensive but the most successful specialise in a small number of sectors such as local government review work, feasibility studies, ICT, human resources, professional skills training, Quality Systems (ISO).

- The small companies – sometimes made up by a single business adviser operation on his/her own. These operations often work mainly on a local basis and offer traditional services to SMEs (accounting, financial, personnel). Some also operate in highly specialised areas such as patent searching and product development. Their portfolio of customers is quite stable and fidelity and trust are the main features of their relationship. The pressures of operating and managing a small, one man consultancy are such that little time is set aside for the review and development of professional skills training and as a result, this group is by far, the most in need of any kind of support.

These four categories are in fact different worlds with practically no contact among them. Their problems and the solutions they adopt to solve them are completely different also. For obvious reasons, this market assessment addresses the last two categories.

At present, there is no Business Advisers Register at any level and quantitative information about the sector across Northern Ireland is difficult to research. The recent amalgamation in the UK of the Institute of Business Advisers and the Institute of Management Consulting has led to the establishment of the Institute of Business Consulting (IBC) and the Northern Ireland Branch has a membership of around 280, the vast majority of this membership.

Membership of the Institute is not a pre-requisite for employment in any of the categories of organisations discussed in this market assessment. However, membership is a pre-requisite for those involved in business startup training. There is no representative body either, and even the own definition of what means a Business Advisor is not agreed, There is of course a National Consultants' Association, and similar bodies in the regional environments, but there is no compulsory affiliation that, in any case, is quite often reduced to big or medium-sized companies.

Business Support Organisations in Northern Ireland offer all business sectors a comprehensive suite of services irrespective of their scale, location or business activity. Among the most relevant we find:

- Invest NI which is responsible for the development and implementation of the economic development strategies and policies set by the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly. The organisation has also responsibility for inward investment activity
- Local Enterprise Agencies – Enterprise NI is the umbrella organisation which represents 33 independent agencies throughout Northern Ireland. Each agency is run by a board of voluntary directors and are organised either as companies limited by guarantee or as registered charities. Generally, agencies provide workspace and support for small and start up businesses at a reasonable cost and all profits are re-invested in the business
- Further Education Sector (including Universities). FE Colleges operate across Northern Ireland and provide services to their associate companies, either with their own means, or using informal business advisors' networks. Generally, their training programmes are funded jointly with local government and tend to focus on specific business sectors such as hospitality, tourism, mechatronics, building and construction and the traditional textile and garment trades.
- Federation of Small Business (FSB) and other Professional Associations. They provide services to their registered members in an individual way and, by extension, to their companies, if applicable. These Associations also have a National, Regional and Provincial representation and are also quite independent from one level to the other. Some examples:
- Chambers of Commerce. They usually have a provincial distribution and provide services to their affiliate companies.

3 METHODOLOGY

Following the structure described in the ECON-IT application submitted to the LEONARDO Programme, and the conclusions of the first partner's meeting, the steps followed to build the study have been:

- Devise, develop and build a questionnaire for Business Advisers based on the original version in Spanish. All 280 members of the Institute of Business Consulting in Northern Ireland were invited to contribute their views. The questionnaire was made available electronically. This questionnaire has been subsequently answered by 61 business advisers operating across the full range of all four organisational types previously discussed in this document.
- Devise, develop and build a questionnaire for Business Support organisations operating across Northern Ireland based on the original version in Spanish. In total, 50 organisations were invited to make their views known and 19 responded by completing the on-line questionnaire.
- Identification of key issues from the answered questionnaires
- Focus Group meeting with representatives from both categories (Business Advisers and Business Support organisations) to discuss the key issues previously identified
- In parallel with these activities, desk-based research has been undertaken in order to confirm or modify the results obtained from the previous activities. This has been done through the Internet access to the Web pages of relevant organisations both public and private.
- All the collected information has been analysed to produce the Conclusions and Recommendations Section of this report.

4 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

An online survey tool was used to obtain feedback from the two target groups, namely, Business Advisers and Business Support Organisations.

4.1 Questionnaire for Business Advisers

Question 1

I work as: (please choose one category)		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
An employee of a business support organisation	44.07%	26
A self employed independent business adviser	44.07%	26
A consultant employed by a consultancy firm	8.47%	5
<i>answered question</i>		59
<i>skipped question</i>		2

This output indicates that the results, evenly split across the dominant business advisory groupings, should be an accurate reflection of the views of business advisers in Northern Ireland.

Question 2

Your Gender?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Male	46.67%	28
Female	53.33%	32
<i>answered question</i>		60
<i>skipped question</i>		1

This output indicates that the role of business adviser in Northern Ireland is not a gender dominated issue.

Question 3

Your age group?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count

Under 30 years old	25.42%	15
30-50 years old	54.24%	32
50+ years old	20.34%	12
<i>answered question</i>		59
<i>skipped question</i>		2

Question 4

Have you a third level qualification? If so, which of the following disciplines is it in? Please select the subject matter area which best describes your qualification.		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Business	70.49%	43
ICT	6.56%	4
Arts	4.92%	3
Languages	1.64%	1
Philosophy	0.00%	0
Sciences	9.84%	6
None of the above	6.56%	4
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 3 provides an interesting insight into the academic background of business advisers in Northern Ireland. We are not surprised that over 70% of respondents had an academic background in business related topics but given the importance of ICT in today's business environment, the fact that just less than 7% of our respondents claimed the subject matter area as their primary degree is surprising. Compared to the wider European experience, languages are also a low priority and given the need to develop export potential, this is an interesting result. Moreover, just less than 7% of respondents had a primary degree in none of the areas suggested - we wonder what disciplines were involved?

Question 5

Do you consider membership of a professional body important in terms of career progression?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	95.08%	58
NO	4.92%	3
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

This result clearly confirms the need for recognition from a professional body and its value in terms of career development and progression.

Question 6

At each stage of our career, we all entertain aspirations as to what we hope to be doing in ten year's time. Which of the following roles best describe your particular aspiration right now? Please select one of the following.		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Self employed, independent business adviser	40.98%	25
Senior consultant in a consulting practice	4.92%	3
Senior partner in a consulting practice	9.84%	6
Senior Manager/Chief Executive in a business support organisation	24.59%	15
Business Adviser employed in a business support organisation	3.28%	2
None of these	16.39%	10
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

This is an interesting result which suggests that a significant number of those currently involved as business advisers aspire to self employment. And while this might be expected from those closely involved in working with people with an entrepreneurial attitude, it is also interesting to note those with an aspiration to become a senior manager/chief executive in a business support organisation. It is likely that this particular view would be prevalent among those currently working as business development people in the local enterprise agency network in Northern Ireland.

Question 7

If you have selected “None of these” ; in the previous question, you can, if you wish, use this text box to express your particular aspiration. However, if you prefer not to express a view, then proceed to Question 8.	
answer options	Response Count
	8
<i>answered question</i>	8
<i>skipped question</i>	53

This question offered a “free text” option and the responses collected were as follows:

Self-employed - not sure in what capacity
Self employed in another capacity
Self employed running my own business however not business advice.
I intend to retire in 8 years time.
Academic
I expect to have retired
I see myself not just as a Business Adviser but also a Training Consultant & Facilitator
Retired

Question 8

Right now, do you have a plan to achieve your aspiration?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes	80.00%	48
No	13.33%	8
I don't have a professional aspiration right now.	6.67%	4
<i>answered question</i>		60
<i>skipped question</i>		1

This result confirms that the majority of our respondents already have a personal professional development plan

Question 9

Assuming that you have such a plan, does it involve the development of a personal Continuous Professional Development (CPD) plan?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	87.72%	50
NO	12.28%	7
<i>answered question</i>		57
<i>skipped question</i>		4

Again, confirmation that respondents appreciate the importance of a personal Continuous Professional Development plan.

Question 10

Which of the following statements best describes your current position in respect of a Continuous Professional Development plan? (You may make more than one choice)		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
I already have a plan in place	42.62%	26
I am considering putting a plan in place	49.18%	30
I have decided not to put a plan in place	0.00%	0
I have decided on NONE of the above for the moment	8.20%	5
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Previous answers suggest that respondents already acknowledge the importance of having a personal professional development plan. However, when challenged to declare the current status of their personal plan, it is clear that good intentions is the dominant situation. It appears that business advisers acknowledge the importance of such a plan but perhaps haven't just got around to planning their plan or doing anything about it. Note the 8% of respondents who have decided on neither action – we wonder about the responses to this question as it was designed to generate a 0% response.

Question 11

In your opinion, which of the following activities should be included in a personal professional development plan? – please select from the following list – you may choose more than one category.		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Formal training courses - residential during the week	24.59%	15
Formal training courses - non-residential during the week	68.85%	42
Formal training courses - residential during the weekend	34.43%	21
One day training events such as Business Breakfasts, Sharpen your Skills Symposiums etc	68.85%	42
Part-time evening third level study such as Diploma in Business Consulting, MBA or Post Grad Diploma	55.74%	34
On demand, on-line programmes such as the IBA Bootcamp	39.34%	24
On demand, on-line programmes such as the CMI Speedlink Programme	21.31%	13
The IMC WALB Programme (residential weekend)	11.48%	7
None of these	1.64%	1
answered question		61
skipped question		0

While traditional, formal training programmes remain the staple of continuous professional development training programmes, there is a significant preference for on demand, on-line professional skills training. Anecdotal evidence suggest that the traditional model is much favoured by the large, multinational employers and those employed by local enterprise agencies and government agencies and bodies while the on-line, on demand model is much more preferred by those involved in the smaller organisations and the self employed.

It should be noted that the IMC WALB programme option is a fictitious training programme.

Question 12

If you have selected “None of these” to the previous question, you can use this panel to express your particular views on this matter. However, if you prefer not to express any views, then please leave this text box blank and proceed to Question 13.	
answer options	Response Count
	3
<i>answered question</i>	3
<i>skipped question</i>	58

The comments collected in response to this question were as follows:

*Self development through research and project work
 My professional area works outside of the mainstream dealing with environmental, succession, capital gains and agricultural support and depends heavily on networking
 MSc*

Question 13

Turning to the cost of a continuous personal professional development skills programme, who, in your opinion should cover the costs involved?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Yourself	31.15%	19
Your employer	22.95%	14
Shared between yourself and your employer	45.90%	28
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

This question was included in our questionnaire to establish who should pay the costs of a personal professional development plan. The interpretation of the result is that the individual, irrespective of employment status, expects to carry part of the costs.

Question 14

Turning to sources of continuous professional development skills training programmes, have you any preference as to which organisation could supply training resources to meet your particular professional needs? You may choose as many options as you wish.		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Institute of Business Advisers	36.21%	21
Institute of Business Consulting	63.79%	37
The Chartered Management Institute	50.00%	29
Institute of Management Consulting	34.48%	20
Further Education Colleges	44.83%	26
Third Level Institutions	62.07%	36
Invest NI	31.03%	18
Enterprise Northern Ireland	29.31%	17
<i>answered question</i>		58
<i>skipped question</i>		3

The results related to this question suggest that the three most preferred sources of professional skills development training are the Institute of Business Consulting, Third level Institutions and the Chartered Management Institute. If the responses which referred to the Institute of Business Advisers and the Institute of Management Consulting (now both merged into the Institute of Business Consulting) are factored in, then the clear preferred source of training is the Institute of Business Consulting. This indicates that professional skills development training products carrying the endorsement of the IBC would be preferred by the professional business advisory community in Northern Ireland.

Question 15

Are there sufficient training opportunities available to you presently to ensure that your personal professional skills development programme can be implemented?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	51.67%	31
NO	48.33%	29
<i>answered question</i>		60
<i>skipped question</i>		1

This response is unexpected as few Institute of Business Consulting training opportunities have been available during the year.

Question 16

What is your estimate of the number of man-hours that you have spent on CPD in the past year? Please select the most appropriate option for the list below.		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
None	0.00%	0
No more than 10 hours	19.67%	12
No more than 20 hours	18.03%	11
20 - 40 hours	34.43%	21
40 - 60 hours	27.87%	17
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Again, the response to this question is difficult to assess. Given that there were very few opportunities available to IBC members over the past year (Sharpen Your Skills and Enterprise Week), it was a surprise to discover that 61% of respondents claim to have carried out between 20 and 60 hours CPD in the past year. Sharpen Your Skills was worth 8 hours while each Enterprise Week was worth 2 hours per session (5 sessions). This response suggests a poor understanding of what constitutes continuous professional development.

Question 17

Do you consider membership of a professional body at the highest possible level important to your career?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	67.21%	41
NO	14.75%	9
DON'T KNOW	18.03%	11
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

This question was included as a check question and confirms the result obtained in Question 4. Note that in Question 4, 58 respondents acknowledged the importance of membership as a career building tool but in this response, there seemed to be a lower valuation on the level of membership.

Question 18

In your view, would the level of membership of a professional body have an impact on your career prospects?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	55.93%	33
NO	20.34%	12
DON'T KNOW	23.73%	14
<i>answered question</i>		59
<i>skipped question</i>		2

This is a further check question and the response indicates that while the majority of respondents agree that the level of membership would impact on career prospects, there is a significant percentage who have no views on this matter. Given that membership levels are determined by the level and scope of continuous professional development activity, it is apparent that a continuous professional development programme is an essential element of career progression.

Question 19

Do you consider a personal continuous professional development programme to be an essential element of your career plan?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	88.52%	54
NO	9.84%	6
DON'T KNOW	1.64%	1
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

No comment necessary – this validates the result of Question 17.

Question 20

Should a personal continuous professional development programme be compulsory for those who offer business advice professionally?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	75.41%	46
NO	14.75%	9
DON'T KNOW	9.84%	6
<i>answered question</i>		61
<i>skipped question</i>		0

4.2 BUSINESS ADVISORY ORGANISATIONS

Question 1

Thank you for taking the time to help us with our questionnaire. All information provided will remain confidential and will be used solely to gather information on the attitude of business support organisations towards the continuous professional development of business advisers/mentors/consultants.

We'll start by asking how many business advisers/mentors/consultants are employed by your organisation - please select from the following list.

answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
1 to 5 people	68.42%	13
6 to 10 people	10.53%	2
More than 10 people	21.05%	4
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 2

We're interested in knowing more about the areas in which your business advisers/mentors/consultants operate. Please select the main areas relevant to your organisation from the following list. You may select as many categories as you wish.

answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Training resources development	42.11%	8
Training delivery	68.42%	13
Business mentoring	84.21%	16
Business coaching	52.63%	10
e-commerce coaching	15.79%	3
e-commerce development	21.05%	4
Business development	78.95%	15
Other areas of activity (please specify)		7
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 3

How about the profile of your business advisers/mentors/consultants? Are they predominantly...		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
MALE	66.67%	10
FEMALE	33.33%	5
<i>answered question</i>		15
<i>skipped question</i>		4

Question 4

And what is the predominant age group? Please select one of the following:		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
20 - 30 years old	16.67%	3
31 - 50 years old	44.44%	8
51 years old or over	38.89%	7
<i>answered question</i>		18
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Question 5

Looking at your organisation's advisers/mentors/consultants, how would you rate their overall experience and skills level? Please select the most appropriate statement from the following list:		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Competent	5.26%	1
Good	5.26%	1
Very Good	47.37%	9
Excellent	31.58%	6
the best in the business	10.53%	2
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 6

Is membership of a professional body a pre-requisite in your organisation's recruitment and selection process for business advisers, mentors and consultants?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	38.89%	7
NO	61.11%	11
<i>answered question</i>		18
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Question 7

In your opinion, does your organisation actively encourage those working in a business advisory and support role to develop and undertake a personal programme of continuous professional development?		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	73.68%	14
NO	26.32%	5
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 8

If the development of a personal continuous professional development programme for business support professionals is encouraged, how does your organisation provide support - please select from the following list and you may select more than one category.		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Time off is made available	70.59%	12
Funding is made available	47.06%	8
A reward system is in place (such as a bonus for completion)	5.88%	1
A combination of the above	17.65%	3
None of the above	11.76%	2
Other sources of encouragement (please specify)		5
<i>answered question</i>		17
<i>skipped question</i>		2

Question 9

We're also interested in the subject matter areas that your organisation considers to be most appropriate as part of an employee's personal continuous professional development programme. From the list shown below, we invite you to make your choice - you may select as many from the list as you like and feel free to suggest areas that you feel should be on the list.

answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Finance	42.11%	8
Marketing	63.16%	12
Business operations	78.95%	15
e-Commerce enablement	21.05%	4
HR policy	36.84%	7
Health and Safety	31.58%	6
Production	15.79%	3
logistics	21.05%	4
Intellectual property issues	42.11%	8
Other subject matter areas (please specify)		6
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 10

In your opinion, are the opportunities for employees in your organisation to access suitable continuous professional development in Northern Ireland adequate?

answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
YES	52.63%	10
NO	47.37%	9
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 11

in your opinion, are the costs of such training (please select one from the list below)

answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
too high?	31.58%	6
reasonable?	63.16%	12
good value?	5.26%	1
<i>answered question</i>		19
<i>skipped question</i>		0

Question 12

Take a look at these statements and select the most likely reason why your organisation might REFUSE permission for a staff member to participate in a training event which is part of a personal continuous professional development plan. You can select more than one statement		
answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Can't afford the cost of the training event	27.78%	5
Can't afford the time off	27.78%	5
The training event is not appropriate	50.00%	9
The training event is too far away	27.78%	5
The subject matter is inappropriate for the staff member	61.11%	11
Continuous professional development is not a priority	0.00%	0
Continuous professional development support is not the responsibility of this organisation	0.00%	0
Continuous professional development is a personal decision for the employee	16.67%	3
Other reasons for refusal - please use this box to express your views		3
<i>answered question</i>		18
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Question 13

If staff in your organisation have to participate in training programmes or events as part of their continuous professional development programme, where would you prefer it to take place? Please make your selections from the list below - you can make as many selections as you like.

answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Belfast area	72.22%	13
North West	11.11%	2
Enniskillen	0.00%	0
Omagh	11.11%	2
London	0.00%	0
Dungannon	27.78%	5
Edinburgh	0.00%	0
Omagh	11.11%	2
Dublin	11.11%	2
On-line	44.44%	8
Cardiff	0.00%	0
In House	38.89%	7
Any other locations?		3
<i>answered question</i>		18
<i>skipped question</i>		1

Question 14

These days, training in professional skills is available from a vast variety of organisations. Which of the following organisations do you feel would be most likely to provide training, certification and validation of the skills necessary for a business adviser/mentor/consultant to operate effectively?

answer options	Response Percent	Response Count
Invest NI	17.65%	3
Your own organisation	35.29%	6
Commercial contractors	11.76%	2
Chartered ManagementInstitute	70.59%	12
Business for Business	11.76%	2
Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce	5.88%	1
Institute of Business Consulting	76.47%	13
Enterprise Northern Ireland	23.53%	4
Any other organisation (please specify)		3
<i>answered question</i>		17
<i>skipped question</i>		2

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the responses to these questionnaires and the output from the focus group combine to provide a useful insight into the attitudes, aspirations and the training needs of business advisers currently active in Northern Ireland.

Overall, the business adviser community is evenly split in respect of gender and just over 40% are employed by a business support organisation. Over 75% of all Northern Ireland based business advisers are aged over 30 (54% are aged between 30 and 50) which suggests a mature, experienced cohort of business professionals. The vast majority of advisers have a third level qualification in a business subject but relatively few have academic credits in ICT, sciences or languages.

There also appears to be a significant cohort of advisers (40.98%) who aspire to successful self employment as their preferred career path. Irrespective of the career aspiration, respondents recorded that membership at any level of a professional body would be a valuable professional asset. It is also apparent that membership at the highest possible level was important and that while 80% claimed to have a personal professional development plan, only 42% had a plan in place.

Continuous Professional Development training programmes, delivered primarily by the Institute of Business Consulting, are confirmed as the bedrock of most personal professional development plans and while the traditional classroom based training remains popular, just over 60% expressed a preference for on-line, on demand training. The result to Question 9 (4.1 Questionnaire for Business Advisers), suggests that a blended approach to professional skills development training provision might best meet the needs of business advisers in Northern Ireland.

In the course of the earlier Focus Group discussion, it was clear that overall, the existing training resources were not considered adequate and the development of ECON-IT will help alleviate this situation. It should also be noted that two other on-line, on demand resources will also strengthen the training resources available – these are the Business Advisers Bootcamp (IBA) and the online self assessment tool which could be used as a means of providing an assessment of prior learning. This could then assist in the accurate planning of a personal professional development plan.

Concerning the costs involved in undertaking a personal professional development plan, the majority of business advisers in Northern Ireland (68%) agree that training fees should be shared between employers and employees.

Overall, it is apparent that professional skills development training is clearly recognised as an integral part of career development. This training needs to be readily available, everywhere, at a reasonable cost at the point of delivery. The training also needs to be validated and recognised by a professional body (The Institute of Business Consulting is the preferred body) in terms of assessing appropriate membership levels. In turn, the higher the membership level, the greater the value in terms of career development and progression.

The results of this questionnaire suggest a strong consensus about the usefulness of online, on demand web-based training materials due to their lower cost and its easy access from everywhere. There is also agreement that a blended approach to training where the use of the web-based material is reinforced by participation-like solutions would make the best use of the training time available to business advisers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Several basic recommendations can be extracted from the information collected and analysed in this market assessment study.

- There is a clear market for EU-supported training tools for Business Advisers as part of a blended learning package.
- Business Advisers have clear, ongoing training needs particularly in areas outside their specialist knowledge areas. This is especially true in the younger age group (less than 30 years of age) where it takes time to build business maturity and experience. Any comprehensive blended learning training package should take this into account
- Web-based training tools and solutions are the most preferred training vehicle but training packages must be offered as a mix of presence and Internet sessions. If this is not possible, at least, some contact with external experts should be provided during the training period.

1 ANNEX 1 – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

- **Practising Business Advisers**
 - 280 members of the Institute of Business Consulting in Northern Ireland

- **Business Support Organisations**
 - The Manager/Chief Executive of each of the 33 Local Enterprise Agencies in Northern Ireland
 - The Chief Executive of Enterprise Northern Ireland
 - The Senior Management Team – Invest Northern Ireland
 - Senior Departmental Managers – Belfast Metropolitan College and North Down and Ards College

- **Focus Group Meeting** (Townsend Enterprise Park, BELFAST (22 June 2007))
 - Joseph McCormack – Business Adviser
 - Ray McKendry – Business Adviser
 - Muriel Graham – Training Development Professional
 - Emma Dyer – Business Adviser
 - Joan Campbell – Further Education Professional
 - Stanley Wallace – Chartered Mgt. Institute
 - Jacqueline Farrell – Business Adviser
 - Bill McNeill – Business Adviser
 - David Hewitt – Business Adviser