



LEONARDO ECON-IT
Market Assessment Report
COUNTY MEATH
IRELAND

July 2007

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 This document has been prepared by Meath County Enterprise Board (MCEB), Ireland within the framework of the LEONARDO ECON-IT project, for Work Package1, Market Assessment. It provides a general overview of the Business Advisers sector throughout the County of Meath, Ireland, focusing on assessing the current strengths and weaknesses for Business Adviser training, opportunities, and to assist in the exchange and adoption of good practice

1.2 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 Advisers 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 organizations involved in the study. MCEB takes this opportunity to thank all of them for their participation and genuine contributions.

2 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 An Overview of Small Businesses and the Business Advisory sector in Ireland.
- 2.2 Over 97% of businesses operating in Ireland today are “small”-they employ fewer than 50 people. There are approximately a quarter of a million small businesses in Ireland, employing 777,000 people, more than half the total private sector, and a non agricultural workforce.
- 2.3 As the Irish economy becomes increasingly knowledge based, and as a low value added activities migrate to the lower economies, a greater proportion of the country’s wealth will have to be generated by indigenous companies. The small business sector is the incubating ground for these companies. Some of them will be technology based companies, who will exploit the states substantial investment in R&D and help to assert Irelands position as a knowledge creator and innovator.. A greater proportion will be in services, reflecting the growth internationally of the services sector.
- 2.4 Studies carried out in Ireland have shown that the level of general management skills in Irish small businesses is relatively poor, particularly in specific functional skills such as human resources, marketing and finance, and in forward planning and strategic management. However at present resource constraints are not the primary barrier to enhancing management competence in the sector.. Approximately €35 million per annum in public funding is available until 2009 to support management training and development, including non financial supports such as mentoring, particularly in SME’s.
- 2.5 The principal bodies charged with supporting small businesses are Enterprise Ireland and the network of City and County Enterprise Boards located throughout the country. Each has different areas of focus, and each provides its clients with a range of financial and non financial supports. There are also a number of other agencies and programmes of relevance, including Business Innovation Centres, FÁS, Údarás na Gaeltachta and LEADER. A short description of each is provided below.

Enterprise Ireland

- 2.6 The core mission of Enterprise Ireland is to accelerate the development of world class Irish companies so that they achieve strong positions in global markets. The broad focus of Enterprise Ireland’s SME activities is to assist Irish companies with between ten and 250 employees in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors that are actively selling into or attempting to break into, international markets. Enterprise Ireland also provides support to start up and micro enterprises (fewer than ten employees) in the same sectors, provided they have the potential to achieve rapid growth and international expansion.

City and County Enterprise Boards

2.7 The 35 City and County Enterprise Boards (CEB) provide financial and non-financial support and assistance to micro enterprises in their respective areas. The principal focus of the CEB's is on micro enterprises operating in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors, although there is some flexibility in this respect.

Business Innovation Centres

2.8 Business Innovation Centres (BIC) operate in five cities – Dublin, Galway, Cork, Limerick and Waterford. The BIC's foster innovative and technology orientated start ups and small businesses by providing services directed at the development of new ideas and their conversion into real business projects. This involves advice, guidance and one-to-one mentoring. The BIC's do not provide financial support from their own resources, but are funded through Enterprise Ireland and also raise income by charging early-stage companies for some services.

FÁS

2.9 FAS is the state training and employment authority. It provides a range of training and employer programmes, recruitment services, and support for cooperative and community based enterprises. FAS has a broad client remit, offering services for businesses, job seekers and employed people seeking training, and its business service programmes are available to all sectors of industry and commerce, and to all sizes of firms whether indigenous or foreign owned.

LEADER

2.10 LEADER is the EU Community Initiative for Rural Development which provides approved local groups with funding to implement multi sectoral business plans for the development of their areas. The aim is to encourage the emergence and testing of new approaches to integrated and sustainable development in rural communities. There are 38 LEADER companies currently operating in Ireland

Údarás na Gaeltachta

2.11 Udaras na Gaeltachta works to develop the economies of Gaeltacht areas and to encourage the preservation and extension of Irish as the principal means of communication in the Gaeltacht. In this context it promotes productive schemes of employment through the development of local natural resources, skill and entrepreneurial abilities, and supports community development initiatives. Industries include audio visual activities, textiles, engineering, electronics, tourism, aquaculture and other natural resource based enterprises.

2.12 In addition to the above there are a number of business representative bodies including Chambers of Commerce, the Irish Business and Employers Confederation (IBEC), the Irish Small and Medium Enterprises Association (ISME), the Institute of Management Consultants and Advisers, and the Institute of Chartered Accountants amongst others. These industry

representative bodies offer a wide range of training and development courses to their members across a broad spectrum of business related disciplines and sectors.

2.13 It is accepted that there that is a lack of coherence and co-ordination amongst these various organisations, with no accredited Business Advisers body or register in existence at this stage. Hence, despite the range of small business support organisations and representative bodies, and the current substantial funding available for the next three years in Ireland, the business advisers sector is highly diverse and complicated across all sizes of businesses with no national business adviser standard in existence.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 As per the structure described in the ECON-IT application submitted to the Leonardo Programme, and following on from the conclusions at the first partner meeting, the following process was adopted:

- In the first instance the questionnaires were forwarded via email as and then followed up via telephone and face to face meetings to elicit further qualitative information and provide further clarification where required
- Adaptation of the terminology was employed for the questionnaire for Business Advisers to reflect the local dialect. There were 11 responses from the various business advisers to the questionnaire via e mail, telephone, and face to face meetings were necessary. A similar process was implemented for the targeted Business Support organisations. A total of 6 responses were elicited from these organisations. A list of those consulted is included in Annex 1
- Analysis and identification of key issues from the answered questionnaires
- A focus group took place with a representative sample from both the Business Advisers and Business Support organisations to discuss the key issues previously identified and gather further qualitative data
- Furthermore desk research was carried out order to provide an empirical basis on the results obtained from the actions described above.
- The collated information has been analyzed producing a report, capturing all the key elements of the information and feedback to produce both conclusions and practical recommendations in sections 5 & 6 of this report respectively.

4 QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

4.1 The following section outlines the qualitative information collected from the questionnaires and previously described approach. Taking into account the small numbers of business advisers and business support of organizations involved it should be appreciated that this does not allow for significant statistical results. However, it can be argued that this method reflect some of the trends at a micro level within the member state of Ireland and are underpinned by the desk based research carried out which is reflected at national level. Comments are added when applicable.

Questionnaire for Business Advisers

Do you practice as a Business Advisor under the auspices of a professional body?		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	100	All the business Advisers belong to at least one representative organisation. Membership of a related body is primarily compulsory for their profession and or sectoral specialism. Their involvement varies from the provision of information, networking, contacts continuing professional development and lobbying.
No		

How do you undertake continuing professional development (CPD)	
Answer	Comments
100%	All those consulted attend related courses, seminars, and conferences provided by their representative professional body and County Enterprise Board, across a wide range of specialisms Concern was raised by a number of the business advisers that anyone can set themselves up as a Business Adviser, causing more problems than they can solve and this reflects poorly on their own profession

Are there any training courses or further education provided for B.As. in your area?		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes		It would appear that there are no specific courses tailored specifically to address the generic training needs of business advisers but there are an extensive range of training and management development courses, seminars etc which are useful to them. These are provided by the wide range of both public, private, and non governmental organisations previously mentioned.
No	100	

Are you aware of other surveys or research taking place into the training needs of B.As		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes		None of the respondents were aware of any survey, research, or other activity into the training needs of business advisers at local, regional, or national levels.
No	100	

What kind of business advisory training materials do you use	
Answer	Comments
Various	Power point, flip chart, case studies, video, professional publications, Internet, web materials, and their own course notes and materials developed over the duration of their profession

Do you have any knowledge about globally EU approved training programmes for B. A.		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes		
No	100	

What are your thoughts on the development of e-learning materials for B.As		
Answer	%	Comments
Very useful	75	
Moderately useful	25	
Not useful		

Do you find it necessary to introduce any kind of Quality Insurance Policy for B.As		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	100	
No		

Are you interested in how other EU countries provide training/further education to B.As.		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	100	
No		

Getting to know other countries provision of B.A. training and CPD would help your work		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	100	
No		

Which training models do you give preference to		
Answer	%	Comments
Participation	80	There was a strong preference for training models based on participation rather than the internet, but it should be noted that the majority of those included the internet as a method to be employed in the training model based on participation
Internet	20	
Mixed		

Like to take part in operating an international interactive web based training portal for B.As		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	60	This would indicate some resistance to becoming involved in the project , primarily due to time constraints and their own workload. However, further clarification that minimal input would be required should resolve this issue to some extent
No	40	

Necessary to publish your own and other countries training programmes for B.As/SMEs		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	70	The majority indicated yes although their publications would not be translated into other languages due to the costs involved, but would if there was a financial incentive available.
No	30	

How many entrepreneurs ready to develop does a B.A. keep regular personal contacts with	
Answer	Comments
Variable from 3-9	On average this results in 5 entrepreneurs where the business adviser keeps regular contact with the entrepreneur

Are you able to reimburse the expenses of your training without any support and by SMEs		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	100	All the respondents are reimbursed for their expenses from the County Enterprise Board with none of their SME's contributing to the costs involved. It should be noted that in relation to non manufacturing and non international trading services MCEB have recently introduced a nominal fee of €50 per consultation
No		

Questionnaire for Business Support Organizations

Are there concrete research results for the governmental support of Business Advisers		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	50%	It is noted that a programme was proposed for the City & County Enterprise Boards in conjunction with the University of Limerick for Business Advisers. However, this is no longer the case, although some business support bodies and industry specific representative organisations have produced some reports which refer to the business advisory sector as an element of their overall strategy. An example is the "Small Business Is Big Business", commissioned by the Small Business Forum, set up in 2005 by the Department of Industry and Trade. The task of this body is to consider the current environment for conducting small business in Ireland, and to advise on the adequacy and appropriateness of public policy responses.
No	50%	

What kind of media provides public sector support organisations with information on the training/development needs of B.A.		
Answer	%	Comments
Media		.
Advisory networks	55	
Labour organizations		
Conferences	10	
Working meetings, visits	15	
Specialised bodies	10	
Training courses	10	

Placement organisation		
Do you feel public sector support organisations should encourage and support the formation of B.A. networks		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	100	
No		

Is there a role for public sector support organisations to oversee the CPD of B.A.s		
Answer	%	Comments
Yes	100	There is overwhelming support for their involvement in an integrated strategic support, however this is something that would have to be agreed and adopted at policy level
No		

5 CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 As a result of the above activities including the answers to the questionnaires, desk based research, personal consultations, and subsequent focus group; the following conclusions can thus be made.
- 5.2 In the first instance, and perhaps most importantly, there is no single dedicated business advisory body in Ireland at national level which addresses the generic training needs of small business advisers, and provides specific tangible support to this vital sector including a formal accreditation process. As previously stated there are a plethora of both public, non governmental, and private sector organisations and institutions, to which this sample group have subscribed and are members of at different levels of expertise and competence. This clearly underpins the need for the ECON IT project as this is at its core
- 5.3 Furthermore, taking into account that 97% of businesses in Ireland can be classified as small, the range of business advisory support is indeed extensive and financially well resourced, but is both complex and confusing for the business advisers let alone the small businesses themselves. This in itself presents a clear training and development need. To date there appears to be limited governmental focus on the development of an integrated strategic development approach for the business advisory sector.
- 5.4 The sector operates in a range of different markets and knowledge, along with variable resources in addition to the different sizes of companies worked with ranging from the very small to the large business. There would appear to be no vertical structure in place to allow the career of the business adviser to advance in relation to the size of the business that they are working with and their particular expertise and specialism.
- 5.5 Provision of information and indeed research into the needs of this increasingly important and growing business advisory sector is limited to say the least with only some basic research carried out at local, and to a lesser extent at regional level. Development, training, and continuous improvement of the business adviser is very much dictated by the character of the individual, with some constantly seeking to improve their expertise whilst others merely “pay lip service” by becoming a member of some associated business organisation where entry requirements are basic
- 5.6 There is a willingness present to explore the possibility of becoming involved in this EU sponsored project with a view to learning from other regions and adopting best practice from the different member states, although there is a general wariness of the input required being too intensive
- 5.7 As previously mentioned there are numerous courses which focus on sectoral specialisms such as food, engineering, IT, etc and on functional business processes such as marketing, finance etc, and thus the training need is not required there but more so in areas such as time management,

strategic planning, promotion of services and mutual collaboration, and project management amongst others.

- 5.8 In relation to a preference of training models there is a clear consensus on participative training methods with the internet a being an important but not the primary focus of the course. As one respondent stated “there is a limit to the usefulness of the world wide web.....and we can all get lost in the amount of information, and end up not getting what we were looking for in the first instance”.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 As a result of our research and analysis, and the aforementioned conclusions we would propose the following recommendations to be taken into account when developing the materials for business support advisers on a transnational basis

- Establishment of basic criteria which clearly defines the primary functions of the Business Adviser
- The training model should be based on proactive participation with the internet an integral tool in the delivery of the project, and interspersed with personal consultation and workshops through the remaining development of the ECON IT project
- The training materials should focus on a set number of basic business advisory skills such as strategic management, project planning, time management, and industry specific promotion. They should also include a comprehensive range of case studies which promote best practice on a transnational basis.
- Investigation into the possibility of an initial EU accreditation process on completion of the project. Further consultation should take place with key policy makers in each participating member state during the remainder of the project ensuring joint ownership and also assist with the dissemination process

1 ANNEX 1 – LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Practising Business Advisers

- Michael Bradley,
- Alec Florence,
- Fiona Carmody,
- Andrew Lynch,
- John Dempsey,
- Michael Murphy,
- Mark Beggs,
- Orla McGuinness,
- Sarah Callaghan
- Dolores McCarthy
- Frank O'Reilly

Business Support Organizations

- FAS
- Enterprise Ireland
- LEADER
- MCEB
- LCEB
- Meath Chamber of Commerce
- Micro Trade

Focus Group Meeting MCEB, Navan, 29th June 2007)

- Hugh Reilly, CEO, MCEB
- Caroline Lynch, Assistant CEO, MCEB
- Lorna Cooney, Business Adviser
- Tom Devlin, Business Adviser
- Dominic Mullan, Business Adviser
- Michael Langdon, Business Adviser