

# Focus. Monthly magazine of SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives). October 2006

October 2006

## Focus

The electronic newsletter from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers

- About 'Focus'
- Cover
- Contents
- News
- International
- NI Focus
- Agenda
- Viewpoint
- Partners
- Feedback
- About SOLACE

**Slivsers of time: Employ people hour-by-hour**

# Perfect timing



ODPM funded project brings a new form of contingent labour, says *Richard Manby*

Online purchasing of stationery, travel and consumables is generally agreed to have cut costs for businesses by 30% or more. But it's been hard to achieve similar savings in the purchase of temporary labour, a significant annual budget item for any LA. Certainly, the workflow of making bookings can be computerised but it's been hard to change the fundamental dynamics of a booking.

Within the e-gov agenda, the ODPM funded a project designed to change the fundamentals of how top-up workers can be booked. We have been keeping a low profile while making sure the sophisticated online technology required works and while piloting with LB Newham and Tower

Hamlets. Now, we are ready to serve LAs across the country.

Our project, Slivers-of-Time Working aims to crack a fundamental problem in the labour force. Accenture research shows 13.7m people in the UK can be available for work but only around other life commitments, for example; childcare, studying, medical issues, care of a dependant adult, retirement balance, starting own enterprise or existing part time work. On the demand side are employers who need to purchase workers hour-by-hour.

How could it work for an LA? Imagine there is a football match in town on Saturday. A council may well book two street wardens to reassure residents. But the real need is not two wardens for a day but, perhaps, 10 wardens for the hour when the stadium empties. At the moment that would be highly expensive to arrange. The overheads, and risk of transaction

failure, in purchasing 10 contingent workers for one hour on a Saturday afternoon would kill the notion before it was even considered.

But, it's worth thinking through how different public services could be if this kind of precision was routine. Leaves start to fall this morning? By lunchtime, the head of public realm has extra squads of previously inducted cleaners on the ground across the area. Homecare clients fussy about when they are visited? Schedule exactly in line with their wishes. And so on.

Online purchasing of the spare hours of local people is the key to making this kind of service delivery a mundane reality. That's only viable if done online. And it requires new technology underpinning the service. Job-boards and auction sites can not cope with the complex issues involved.

Page 1 of 2

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We launched the pilot Slivers-of-Time marketplace in East London last December and now have served 200+ people working for a range of employers, including the two local boroughs who have used them for (a) leafleting (b) market research (c) ad hoc cleaning (d) stewarding (e) envelope stuffing.

Significant cost savings are beginning to emerge. Not least because Slivers-of-Time marketplaces, which are operated by agencies who no longer incur the kind of margin-busting overheads associated with current ways of booking, are free of any transaction charge for LAs until mid 2008. After that point they are funded by a small percentage mark-up on each hour bought.

These markets allow individuals to (a) list the hours they are willing to work, day by day (b) say when they can be contacted (c) define "My Terms", the characteristics of bookings they will do against their personal rules for constructing the pay rate (read on if that sounds like an invitation to charge whatever you want) (d) receive bookings where a purchaser has committed to buy by

text message (e) build a track record of reliably completed bookings based on buyer's acceptance of online timesheet.

For buyers, the purchase of one person for an hour or 50 people for 8 hours takes under a minute. Log-on to your agency's marketplace, specify the type of work, postcode and hours. Then instantly get a list of every Slivers-of-Time seller who is (a) available (b) qualified (c) contactable (d) willing to do that specific booking if the employer will pay their rate. The sellers are listed in order of rate (which includes their pay plus employer's NI and agency margin) and ranked by their track record of reliability. A more reliable seller will command 80p or more an hour difference.

All the administration of the transaction is through the system. Timesheets are aggregated and the agency issues a monthly invoice as normal. If the

employer wants, the system can run pools of local people who have been inducted in particular types of work. Those individuals might be very cost effectively inducted by multiple employers in their area.

We are only beginning to glimpse what this new marketplace might achieve. The service is scalable to the whole UK and ready to immediately serve any LA that wants to launch (a) a newly inclusive way of working (b) a resource for service delivery that can also benefit other local employers. Starting a local marketplace can be done in a few weeks.

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Page 2 of 2