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<http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=5290291>

The screenshot shows the IDEA Knowledge website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for 'Home', 'About our site', 'Contact us', 'Help', 'Glossary', and 'Site map'. Below this is a search bar with a 'GO' button. The main content area displays the article title 'No time to waste: the 'Slivers-of-Time' programme' and its introductory text. A sidebar on the left contains a menu with categories like 'Improving your council', 'Organising and people development', 'Talent management', 'Local government issues', 'Local government latest posts', 'Overseas recruitment', 'Skills pathways', 'Succession planning', 'National framework', and 'Slivers of Time?'. The footer contains logos for 'local.gov.uk', 'Improvement Network', and 'Direct.gov'.

No time to waste: the 'Slivers-of-Time' programme

It is a familiar predicament for any cash-strapped council manager – a short-term peak in the demand for staff, but no cost-effective way of instantly recruiting good people to plug the gap. The 'Slivers-of-Time' programme offers a way to tackle this. Piloted in the London Borough of Newham and rapidly expanding to employers elsewhere, it is attempting to improve the match between staffing demands and employee availability for the benefit of all concerned.

Why Slivers-of-Time?

Like other major employers, councils have established procedures to recruit core staff for local services. For other staffing demands, council managers rely on overtime working, contract workers and other temporary solutions. These arrangements provide councils with flexibility to meet their workload demands. But they can often be costly, inefficient and bureaucratic.

From a potential employee's point of view, the marketplace for jobs can be equally inflexible. Balancing the time required for family, leisure, caring or study commitments is complex. Faced with this, many people feel they cannot enter into any form of paid employment.

Others are keen to be economically active. But the pursuit of the often elusive 'work/life balance' can mean they avoid traditional patterns of working. They prefer more flexible employment that suits their tastes and lifestyle. In both situations, the marketplace for work can seem unappealing and unresponsive to individual needs.

Millions of economically inactive people are willing and capable of working for at least part of their lives. The Slivers-of-Time programme works on this principle. For some, this may be one day a week or a few days each month. For others it may be one or two hours in any given period. These workers may not work outside irregular times.

Until now, these 'sellers' of time were largely unattractive to employers, the 'buyers' of their skills and expertise. The Slivers-of-Time programme aims to tackle this dilemma and provide a marketplace for those able to work for small, but identifiable, periods of time.

How does it work?

The UK government and private companies jointly fund the Slivers-of-Time programme. Any major employer can use it. The Office Deputy Prime Minister (as was) provided resources from its e-innovations fund to pilot work in the London Borough of Newham. This has demonstrated the potential of the programme for other local authorities.

As a buyer of time, the council registers its requirement for staff as demand dictates. This is based on planned and known commitments, unexpected staffing shortages or short-term peaks in demand. Bookings can be for as little as half an hour or whole days or weeks. Individual managers are set up as buyers in a council-designated cost centre. The council pays only for the staff it employs and the time that they work. There are no set-up costs and the 'marketplace' is currently free to local authorities until June 2008.

Innovative technology automatically matches buyers' needs with individual sellers' willingness to work. This Personal Availability Trading Technology operates as a back-office service to both employers and employees. All potential employees, or sellers of time, are set up on the system. They have all been vetted by an affiliated recruitment agency. Payroll and invoicing is handled by these agencies as it is for conventional temporary work assignments.

A variety of people have found the Slivers-of-Time programme meets their employment needs. These sellers of time include lone parents, job seekers, carers, students and the newly retired. They are vetted and registered for work. They can then decide the hours they work, the kind of bookings they would like – short-term, limited travel etc – and their preferred rate of pay. If their availability is matched to a buyer's requirement for staffing, they are notified by either email or text message. If they accept the booking offered, they are sent a second message containing all the instructions they need to report for duty.

How has the programme operated in Newham?

Newham has used Slivers-of-Time for well over a year and has made good use of the programme in recruiting numerous temporary staff for a variety of tasks. This has included market research, cleaning, archiving and administrative work.

Paul Williams works in the 'Pathways to employment' section of Newham Council. He is upbeat in his praise for the programme. "It's a simpler way to get the people we need for routine work." He adds the initiative has reduced much of the bureaucracy and costs associated with traditional methods of recruiting temporary staff.

Operationally, the key benefit of the programme has been the flexibility that managers with devolved budgets have in recruiting staff at short notice to meet unexpected or unplanned workloads. As they pay only for the specific time booked with sellers they have no risk of spending more than was budgeted.

Outside of this, the programme has wider social and economic benefits. It is helping to create a pool of economically active local workers who can to sell their available time to local employers.

John Defoe, the Neighbourhood e-Markets Project Manager for the Newham pilot, says: "It is good for both buyers and sellers. It empowers employees and gives employers more operational flexibility in staffing to meet their operational demands."

Next steps

The wider rollout of the Slivers-of-Time programme in local government will require commitment from councils individually and collectively. Individually, councils could use the programme to promote a sustainable marketplace of socially and economically active local workers.

Collectively, groups of authorities and other employers need to ensure there is a sufficient 'critical mass' of buying to warrant the expansion of the programme outside London. Early research has suggested there needs to be at least £100,000 spent on temporary staffing in any area to stimulate a local Slivers-of-Time marketplace.

Local authorities continue to struggle with the operational demands of providing services in a world that demands a 24/7 response. The Slivers-of-Time programme could be one idea whose time has come.

This article was published in September 2006.