

Residents are being encouraged to sell chunks of their time on the labour market. It's a completely flexible system that provides a route out of unemployment and allows landlords to engage with their tenants, says **Tony Marven**

All in good time

The majority of housing associations invest time and energy in engaging with their residents. There are community champions, feedback forms and meet the staff sessions. But what about residents as employees? Some housing associations do well employing householders from their properties. Others find a mismatch between their requirements and available residents.

Wider trends in the labour market could start to make it routine for associations to engage with their local community as an employer. The UK Labour Force survey continues to chart the death of the traditional job. More and more of us consider ourselves underemployed (having some work but wanting more) or find we are required to work irregular hours. This is driven by the needs of

organisations but also the desires of individuals. Research commissioned by the former Office of the Deputy Prime Minister from Middlesex University earlier this year showed that over 70 per cent of people in target groups in London would prefer working for multiple employers each week to having a 'normal job'.

These profound changes in personal ambition coincide with the increasing usefulness of the internet in the labour market, both as a tool for finding work and a means for booking staff. Together these two forces could create new opportunities for housing associations that want to engage with their communities.

One pioneer in this area is the government funded Slivers of Time programme currently being piloted in east

London with involvement from East Thames Housing Group and Pinnacle Housing. The pilot currently has 230 individuals selling their time. Buyers including Newham and Tower Hamlets councils, British Waterways and a local market research provider.

Started with ODPM funding, the programme aims to crack a long standing problem in the labour market. Millions of individuals in the UK need to work around other commitments in their life such as childcare, studying, medical constraints, existing part-time work, or even searching for a rewarding job. These people need to sell their spare hours around these commitments, often at short notice. At present, their best bet is too often the informal economy.

But countless legitimate employers would like to access a pool of top-up workers they could buy for a few hours here and there to get them through a peak period or some ad hoc task. Housing associations for example often need a couple of hours cleaning done instantly, or some additional office support. Deliveries between buildings, transcribing, even flat pack furniture assembly are all tasks that can quickly be accomplished with an hour or so of one or more local people. Obviously that would only be viable if the people whose hours are purchased were clearly reliable, honest, flexible and motivated to do a good job. Overheads need to be minimal and purchasing effortless.

Resolving these issues and creating legitimate markets for spare hours that are truly safe, simple, cost effective

and enticing is a complex task and Slivers of Time aims to solve those problems. Based on the internet and run by recruitment agencies or other service providers, these markets allow anyone to be vetted and then specify the exact hours they would like to sell day to day in periods as short as one hour. By channelling existing spending from budgets like administration, leafleting, maintenance or cleaning this way, housing associations can start a local market. Other employers can then come in and buy from a pool of residents who choose to work this way and this serves the wider regeneration agenda.

Online working

These new ways of working are already impacting on individuals. The east London marketplace for Slivers of Time is serving people like Emine Cencki who has a disability that has stopped her getting conventional employment. But in the last few months Cencki has racked up 112 hours of work in 31 short bookings at times when she felt able to work locally.

Working this flexibly does require computer usage. The overheads of trying to run such a market offline would make it a non starter. A problem for these new marketplaces is of course that 38 per cent of the UK population, generally at the poorest end, do not regularly use the internet. But research shows the overwhelming reason is not an intense dislike of technology. There is a widespread view among people at the bottom of the wages pyramid that the web has nothing to offer them.

As we are constantly reminded, the internet is a highly efficient way of buying things, which is of little use to the time rich and cash poor.

So a key question about tools such as Slivers of Time marketplaces has to be: can they offer a compelling reason to venture online, possibly using a free access point such as a community centre or library? There is some evidence that the answer is yes, so long as some support is provided.

In London, East Thames Housing Group pioneered a scheme, funded by London Connects, called Slivers of Time ready. This gave selected residents up to five one hour personal training sessions. Their trainer was an established Slivers of Time seller who had been inducted by a local college in how to teach people the basics of computer use in a relaxed and encouraging way. Saphire Rankine was one of the first beneficiaries of the scheme. Out of work for years she has recently completed four bookings each roughly two hours long. She's earned more than £40 over six weeks, which she's allowed to keep within permitted earnings on top of her benefits.

Does that add up to a significant improvement in Rankine's life chances? Advocates of these new work styles claim that someone doing just a couple of hours work a week is infinitely more attractive to an employer than someone doing none. As many of us know, trekking from job interview to job interview can be a dispiriting existence; particularly if everyone wants proof of your experience, before they'll give you a job that enables you to build experience.

Working odd hours for a variety of employers can be a fast track through this problem. As East Thames resident, and Slivers of Time seller Joel Ebong says: 'I'm not interested in working Slivers of Time long term. I want a proper job. But this is letting me show that I'm keen to work and I like the variety.'

Marketplace incentive

However enticing the website, these markets for individuals' time are meaningless without buying power. And employers won't bother trying to buy if there's no one selling. That chicken and egg problem limits the spread of online services offering new ways of working.

This is the problem a housing association willing to look at new tools for engaging with local people could solve. By committing to spending through a marketplace just for residents, housing associations can create an immediate incentive for an agency, internal or external, to promote the new service. That can be marketed to households and to other employers who have a need for top-up workers at irregular times.

The launch team for Slivers of Time is considering how differently things can be done in any one of these marketplaces. To take an example, a housing association with £100,000 to spend over the next year on environmental improvements would typically set up a work plan involving clearing graffiti, painting public areas and tending gardens then create four full-time jobs for the 12 months. But, if that work plan was broken up into small tasks, that spend could guarantee 16 hours a week for 32 people over the next six months, or 10 hours a week for 57 people, even two hours a week for 285 residents.

For housing associations up and down the country such schemes could give them access to hundreds of households providing essential but sporadic bursts of work. www.sliversoftime.com/housing

