Summary Report

Skills at Work in Northern Ireland 2006

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BACKGROUND

This report provides a brief summary of some of the key findings from the 2006 Skills Survey, an innovative approach to measuring the skills being used in the Northern Ireland economy through a survey of employees, consistent with the “Skills at Work” survey carried out in Great Britain at the same time.

INTRODUCTION

Raising work skills attracts the interest of policy makers and researchers alike. However, evidence on the use of work skills in Northern Ireland has hitherto been in short supply. This report presents a brief overview of work skills in Northern Ireland drawn from data collected for the 2006 Skills Survey. The survey generated a high quality, and reasonably large, representative sample of working individuals living in the United Kingdom aged 20-65, consisting of 7,787 respondents. A total of 498 of these were in Northern Ireland. The survey’s aim was to gather information on the skills used at work via questions directed at workers themselves.

This report explains how several different aspects of work skills can be measured using the information gathered and examines the distribution of job skills among those in work.

The report focuses on the distribution of skills using the following measures:

- **broad skill** measures including the qualification level required on entry into jobs, the training time for the type of work individuals carry out and the learning time needed to do jobs well;
- the use of **computer skills** and their level of sophistication;
- the use of **other generic skills**, such as problem-solving and communication skills;
- **employee task discretion**, that is the level of control employees have over the detailed execution of work tasks and hence the extent to which employees’ judgement and skill is required; and
- **employee attitudes** to work and skill development, the opportunities for training and learning, and the consequences of, reasons for and costs of employee development.

KEY FINDINGS

THE PATTERN OF BROAD SKILLS

In 2006, three out of ten jobs (30.0%) in Northern Ireland required a level 4 or above qualification for entry. However, a quarter of jobs (25.1%) required no qualifications on entry. A similar polarisation of jobs is reflected in the training times respondents reported for their current type of work and the length of time it took to learn to do the job well – three-fifths of jobs (59.8%) in Northern Ireland were reported as requiring less than three months training time, while around three-tenths (29.9%) reported training times of over two years. Similarly, some jobs took a long time to do well, while others were picked up relatively quickly. Over a quarter of jobs (26.1%) could only be done well after spending more than two years in post, but a similar proportion of jobs (23.0%) could be learnt in under a month.
It is not clear which gender is in more skilled jobs in Northern Ireland. In terms of the highest level of qualification required to get jobs, men and women are neck and neck with no statistically discernible difference between the genders. However, women record significantly higher scores for training time¹ compared with men and men record significantly higher scores for learning time² compared with women. Nevertheless, this masks marked differences in the skill content of jobs occupied by women who work part-time compared to those who work full-time. These differences are large and statistically significant across all three measures, and therefore confirm that the jobs done by women part-timers are, on the whole, lowly skilled. Job skills in Northern Ireland are distributed in line with occupational expectations with those at the top of the hierarchy requiring more skills than those at the bottom. In addition, the skill level of jobs declines with establishment size and tends to be lower in the private sector.

As gauged by broad skills measures, jobs in Northern Ireland are not unambiguously higher or lower skilled than those elsewhere in the UK since on one measure they are higher skilled, while on two others they are lower skilled. Furthermore, none of these differences are statistically significant. Overall, then, it is reasonable to conclude that jobs in Northern Ireland – according to the broad skills measures – are of a similar skill level to jobs elsewhere.

Northern Ireland has approximately the same proportion of people with level 4 or above qualifications as in the UK as a whole – in 2006, 32.2% of those in Northern Ireland possessed these qualifications compared to 32.8% of those in the UK. It also has a similar proportion of jobs requiring this level of qualification on entry. However, at the other end of the scale, the picture is very different. Whereas less than one in ten people (9.4%) in the UK as a whole have no qualifications to their name, around one in six (16.2%) people living in Northern Ireland are unqualified. The proportion of jobs requiring no qualifications on entry in each country also differs, if only by three percentage points. In Northern Ireland a quarter (25.3%) of jobs can be secured without a qualification compared to a slightly higher proportion (28.2%) of jobs in the UK as a whole. Thus, at the lowest level the qualification demand/supply discrepancy is smaller in Northern Ireland than it is in the UK as a whole – Northern Ireland has a nine percentage point gap between the demand and supply of jobs/people in the ‘no qualifications’ category compared to a gap of 19 percentage points for the UK as a whole. ‘Over-qualification’ is less prevalent in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK. However, even in Northern Ireland a third (32.4%) of workers are in possession of a qualification which is higher than the qualification required for the job they currently occupy. This compares to an ‘over-qualification’ rate of almost two-fifths elsewhere in the UK.

THE PATTERN OF COMPUTING SKILLS

Over two-thirds of jobs (68.1%) in Northern Ireland use computers. In 41.1% of jobs, computer usage is ‘essential’ for the job, and in 14.5% of jobs it involves using computers in ‘complex’ (e.g. use of spreadsheets) or ‘advanced’ (e.g. programming) ways. In 34.3% of jobs use of the internet is either ‘essential’ or ‘very important’.

¹ Training time is the total length of training time, since completing full-time education, required for the particular type of work carried out by respondents.
² Learning time is the length of time it takes respondents to do their job well.
In contrast to the picture with respect to our measures of broad skills noted above, computer skills are used significantly less in Northern Ireland jobs than in jobs elsewhere in the UK. For example, computer use is ‘essential’ for 46.7% of jobs across the UK as a whole, six percentage points above the figure for Northern Ireland.

Women in Northern Ireland are more likely than men to report that computers are ‘essential’ for their jobs (44.6% compared with 37.8%), but are less likely to be using computers in ‘complex’ or ‘advanced’ ways (10.3% of jobs compared with 18.5%). Among women the differences are also striking: computers were essential in the jobs of 33.4% of part-time workers, as compared with 50.1% of the jobs of full-time workers.

All indicators of computer use are very considerably larger in Managerial, Professional and Associate Professional occupations. All indicators of computer use are greater for those working in establishments of at least 25 workers, compared with those working in smaller establishments. Computer participation, the centrality of computing and the centrality of internet use are all greater in the Service Industries than in the Production Industries, and greater in the public than in the private sector. However, there are no significant differences between sectors in the level of complexity with which computers are used.

THE PATTERN OF OTHER GENERIC SKILLS

There are modest but significant differences between the generic skills deployed in Northern Ireland jobs, as compared with jobs in the UK as a whole. In several skill domains, jobs in Northern Ireland require lower skill levels. On average, jobs elsewhere in the UK require higher literacy, technical know-how, horizontal communication skills, problem-solving skills, checking skills, emotional skills and aesthetic skills than those in Northern Ireland. These differences generally apply within industries, as well as in aggregate.

There are differences between the generic skills utilised by men and women, with women typically found in jobs requiring more communication skills, and more emotional and aesthetic skills. Among females, those in full-time jobs exercise considerably greater levels of generic skills in all domains than those in part-time jobs. To illustrate, writing long documents is essential for 30% of full-time jobs, but for only 14% of part-time jobs.

Generic skills vary across sectors and occupations in expected ways: for example, influence skills are strongest in the Public Sector, and in Managerial, Professional and Associate Professional occupations, and are on average considered less than ‘fairly important’ in other occupations.

DISCRETION AT WORK

In Northern Ireland, one in two (50.3%) respondents claimed to have ‘a great deal’ of influence over their work effort, while two out of five (42.2%) claimed to have ‘a great deal’ of influence over quality standards. Much smaller, but sizeable proportions, claimed to exercise ‘a great deal’ of influence over what tasks are to be done and how (22.5% and 32.8%).

Women in Northern Ireland are, on average, able to exercise more autonomy at work than their male counterparts. For example, 55.2% of women reported that they had ‘a
great deal’ of influence over how hard they worked compared to 45.1% of men who claimed to have a similar level of job control. Similarly, there was a gap between the proportions of men and women claiming to have ‘a great deal’ of influence over work standards – 38.5% of men claimed to exercise this level of control compared to 45.5% of women.

Employees in Northern Ireland enjoy less latitude in how they carry out their daily tasks than employees working elsewhere in the UK. Only a third (32.8%) of employees in Northern Ireland exercise ‘a great deal’ of influence over how they are to do their daily tasks compared to over two-fifths (42.7%) of employees working in the UK. Similarly, there is a ten percentage point gap between the proportions claiming ‘a great deal’ of influence over quality standards in Northern Ireland compared to those working in the UK minus London and the South East. Men in Northern Ireland enjoy significantly lower levels of autonomy than elsewhere. Women’s discretion levels, on the other hand, are much the same in Northern Ireland as they are in other parts of the UK.

**TRAINING AND LEARNING**

Many job features are important to people’s work orientations, but ‘good training provision’ does not appear to be one of them. It was ranked ninth out of fifteen job features in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, it was rated as ‘essential’ by over a fifth (22.8%) of job-holders in Northern Ireland, a figure higher than in the UK minus London and the South East (16.5%) and in the UK as a whole (20.5%). Two-thirds (65.3%) of Northern Ireland employees received some form of training in the last year. Almost identical proportions were reported in the UK minus London and the South East and in the UK as a whole.

Over half (56.3%) of the Northern Ireland non-trainees said that they ‘did not want any training’ compared to around a fifth (19.0%) who said that ‘my employer was not willing to provide additional training, even though I wanted it’. Two-thirds (63.3%) of Northern Ireland respondents who did not undertake training in the past twelve months regarded such activity as irrelevant to the job. Nevertheless, the lack of training may be considered an obstacle to improved work performance. However, this does not appear to be the case. Around nine out of ten (88.3%) Northern Ireland non-trainees thought that their lack of training would not harm them in keeping up with changes in the job. This figure is around ten percentage points higher than elsewhere.

When training is undertaken it is often at the behest of the employer: whereas only a third (32.6%) of Northern Ireland trainee respondents claimed personal responsibility, around three-quarters (74.2%) mentioned that training had been initiated on the suggestion of their employer. It is notable that employers have a stronger say in training decisions in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK. In both the UK as a whole and in the UK minus London and the South East, trainees reported that training was undertaken at the employers’ request in two-thirds of cases compared to three-quarters of cases in Northern Ireland.

The impact of training on work performance was high. For example, nine out of ten Northern Ireland respondents said that it was important for keeping up-to-date with developments in the job; that it had helped them to improve their work practices; and that it had improved their skills.
On-the-job learning through experience and experimentation as well as learning from others was strong. Around a third of Northern Ireland respondents strongly agreed that: the job itself requires learning; they are able to learn from work colleagues; and they are expected to help others learn. These mirror the results for the rest of the UK.

Overall, a fifth (20.0%) of Northern Ireland respondents registered a strong desire for future training and nearly a quarter (22.4%) were optimistic about their chances of getting training in the future. Elsewhere in the UK respondents were a little less optimistic.

SUMMARY

This brief summary provides some of the key points from Skills at Work in Northern Ireland 2006, which provides evidence on workers’ views of qualifications, skills and training related to their current job. This uses a new and different approach to measuring skills in the NI economy, called the “job requirements approach”. The report makes comparisons with the UK minus London and the South East and the UK as a whole. These key NI points are only the ‘first findings’ from the 2006 survey. Several skills-related issues are still to be investigated in greater depth, and the data offer considerable scope for empirical testing of modern theories about the evolution of employment and work.

Full copies of the report “Skills at Work in Northern Ireland 2006” can be downloaded from www.delni.gov.uk/worksskillsni2006
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