

Internship scheme attracts just 825 – half of them from old scheme

Of the 825 people who have started internships under the Government JobBridge scheme, 483 had moved from the pre-existing Work Placement Programme (WPP).

This implies that 342 new internships have begun since the JobBridge scheme came into being on July 1. The figures given are from August 26, when there were a total of 2,708 internship opportunities advertised on the JobBridge website.

Internships are categorised into 11 different industry sectors and the largest number of internships so far, with 633 internship starts, is in the 'other services' category. This category includes security, cleaning and hairdressing but the website also shows a variety of marketing and administrative jobs.

Slightly more than half (52%) of the advertisements in this 'other services' sector were for internships requiring third level education, while 27% sought second level. The majority of all internships advertised are for a nine-month duration (the scheme allows them to be for either six months or nine months).

The total cost of the scheme to the Exchequer can be estimated by multiplying the number of participants by the €50 per week top-up payment over social welfare that is made, giving a weekly cost of €41,250, or just over €2 million at the current level of participation. A total of up to 5,000 individuals may participate, which would mean a weekly cost of €0.25 million, or an annual cost of €13 million.

WORKER DISPLACEMENT

The Department of Social Protection says that if there are any issues raised about the alleged use of the scheme for displacing existing workers, these are "investigated fully". To participate in the scheme, host employers must:

- Have no current vacancies in the area of activity in which the internship is offered;
- Ensure that the internship does not displace an employee;
- Confirm that the employer will not provide an internship opportunity under JobBridge to an individual they have an existing employment relationship with.

Host employers have to complete a monthly compliance report for each intern. This confirms that the development work experience is progressing in accordance with what was agreed, and that the intern attended the required number of hours of the internship week, in accordance with what was agreed. Employers cannot pay the intern, but expenses incurred may be reimbursed.

The scheme is available to those who have been on the Live Register and in

receipt of Jobseekers' Benefit or signing on for credits for at least three months. The three months do not have to be consecutive.

This aspect of the scheme was criticised by one small software industry employer on RTE's Morning Ireland this week. Charlie Melia of cloud computing firm 'profitsflow.com', cited an example of one young person seeking an internship with them but did not qualify because he had recently done a FAS training course.

Organisations with up to ten employees can have one internship place, those with 11-20 employees can have two internship places, 21-30 employees allows three internship places and those with 30 or more employees can have 20% of the workforce, to a maximum of 200 workers.

Those participating must be supplied with a reference detailing the learning and skills development undertaken during the period. Time off also has to be given for attending job interviews and local social welfare and FÁS offices.

CIPD RESPONSE

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) is currently drafting a guide to internships. It says that while a well-developed programme can provide as much benefit to the organisation as the individual, "a reluctant intern who is simply following instructions in order to maintain social welfare benefits is of no use to either party".

CIPD suggests that employers could have the option of paying an exit fee to the intern, or some additional top-up.

Best practice also suggests that the company should appoint an individual or mentor to set some time aside to supervise an intern and review his or her performance. The intern should also be given the opportunity of giving the organisation feedback through an exit interview.

The CIPD is disappointed that the scheme is time-limited to two years. Michael McDonnell, director of CIPD Ireland, said: "If successful JobBridge or a similar programme should become a permanent feature offering participants valuable job experience before entering the workforce proper."