

DPER report looks at IR expertise in the Civil Service

MARTIN FRAWLEY

Three-quarters of HR managers across the civil service believe that the IR skills of the staff in their unit “could be enhanced and developed further”, according to a survey conducted by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The report – ‘*Research Project – Evaluation of Industrial Relations Expertise in the Civil Service*’, by Niall Quinn of the civil service industrial relations unit in DPER, also found that more than two-thirds of HR managers felt they did not have enough staff in their unit to carry out the tasks required.

Asked about the level of expertise in their unit, just one HR manager of the 16 who returned the anonymous survey (surveys were sent to 18 HR managers and 16 responded, or 89%), said he/she was ‘extremely satisfied’, three said they were ‘very satisfied’, while eight said they were ‘somewhat satisfied’ and four said they were ‘a little satisfied’.

While no HR manager said they were ‘not satisfied’, this still leaves just a quarter of HR managers across the civil service who are either extremely or very satisfied with the IR skills in their unit.

It was noted that staff’s confidence in dealing with formal processes, such as the Civil Service Conciliation & Arbitration Scheme, “could be enhanced”.

Larger departments tended to be more satisfied with staff than the smaller departments. And as the survey delved into the practicalities of IR, HR managers appeared to be more satisfied with the staffs’ IR expertise. For example, 11 of the 16 managers said they were either extremely or very satisfied with their staffs’ ability to deal with staff representatives and union officials inside and outside the formal IR processes.

THE FÓRSA CHALLENGE

The report finds that the development of IR skills across the civil service is important in the context of a number of challenges arising from the current industrial relations environment. These included the emergence of “a new, and arguably stronger union – Fórsa” which will potentially represent 80% of all civil servants.

Other challenges identified include the implementation of the ‘Building Momentum’ public service agreement, while in the context of the unwinding of the FEMPI pay cuts, the report said “it is possible that more claims for improvement to terms and conditions will be raised by public service unions”.

Meanwhile, prior to the current health crisis, expectations for improved terms and conditions, including pay increases, “were growing”. It continued:

“The current crisis may change the country’s financial position and this may give rise to challenging negotiations and disquiet amongst staff and staff representatives.”

IR SPECIALISTS

Just under half of HR managers said it was difficult to attract staff into the HR unit, with only 27% disagreeing. In contrast, just 7% said they had difficulties in retaining IR staff in the unit, though the reported noted that 40% of the HR managers were undecided.

The survey also asked HR managers to suggest ways that IR skills could be enhanced.

A number suggested that the Public Appointments Service (PAS) establish specialist competitions to recruit staff with IR expertise, while the Civil Service should also develop career pathways for IR specialists.

There was praise for the IPA’s Professional Diploma in Industrial and Employment Relations. Some suggested that there could also be a complementary range of shorter courses focussed on training in employment law, IR legislation, negotiations and conflict resolution and the Civil Service Conciliation and Arbitration process.

There were also suggestions for information sharing among HR units, with some looking to the establishment of a central repository for IR documents, as well as quarterly meetings of HR units across the civil service.

Some suggested that the Civil Service Industrial Relations Network, which was established in 2019 and already meets quarterly, could be expanded. Others said that there could be greater advertising of the benefits of the CSIRN, the inference being that some HR managers were unaware of its existence.