

# Engaging Early Career Professionals in Ireland

Maximising Your Investment  
in Early Career Programmes



Organisations in Ireland are not taking full advantage of their investment in early career individuals. Now is the time for organisations to reconsider the value of early career professionals in building an agile and resilient workforce.







## Foreword

Early career professionals are a critical component of any organisation's talent strategy. These individuals, when properly supported and nurtured by organisations, serve as the building blocks of a next generational workforce. There is a significant amount of potential and reward that organisations can reap from early career professionals, but the hiring and retention of this demographic carries significant challenges.

The hiring of early career professionals is the most challenging it has been in decades in Ireland, and yet, their onboarding and retention could not be more significant than right now, according to the results of an Irish early careers survey produced by Aon and HPC.

Aon Ireland partnered with HPC to develop a survey evaluating the state of early career programmes in organisations across Ireland. Organisations from more than 15 industry sectors responded to the survey. The respondents to the survey collectively employ more than 150,000 people and hire more than 1,500 university graduates each year.

In this report, we highlight six key takeaways from Aon and HPC's Irish early careers survey and provide four key recommendations to organisations to improve early career programmes that take into account future talent strategy goals.

# Key Takeaways

## 1. Early Career Programmes Are Viewed as Critical to an Organisation's Talent Strategy

Amidst a shifting landscape, it is clear that early career programmes are increasingly being viewed as vital to an organisation's talent strategy. When asked how important early career programmes are to an organisation's talent strategy, 30 percent of survey respondents rated it as highly important with a further 50 percent rating it as important.

Among those surveyed, 88 percent of survey respondents said the purpose of their early careers programme was "to attract high calibre people who can contribute to the organisation".

The second most cited reason, selected by 77 percent of respondents, was "to accelerate the development of critical skills and knowledge".

This view of the importance of early career talent and its alignment with talent strategy is in line with other markets globally and with feedback from companies and organisations across Ireland. Organisations are investing heavily in early career programmes in order to meet commercial challenges and prepare themselves for the future. Early career programmes are a key vehicle to recruit people who will add to the talent pool across the organisation.

## 2. The Critical Challenge Facing Every Early Career Programme Is Retention

According to 44 percent of organisations surveyed, retention is the most pressing issue facing them.

**Retention is the primary challenge for a number of different reasons including:**

- Competition from larger competitors;
- Salary expectations;
- Lack of career paths;
- A desire for graduates to travel post Covid; and;
- Unwillingness for some graduates to move internationally.

The survey revealed that 65 percent of organisations who measure the effectiveness of their early career programme use retention and promotion of programme participants as a key metric.

Given the critical importance of early career programmes to an organisation's talent strategy, it is important for HR professionals to understand how best to address the challenges impacting the retention of early careers talent.

Our experience is that organisations might often try to make themselves as attractive to as many candidates as possible. While this might result in attracting a wider pool of candidates, it can often result in hiring candidates who might not be a long-term fit for the organisation.

As is evident later in the report organisations should look to consider how they present themselves pre-hire and bring greater clarity to their employee offering. Adopting this approach will go a considerable distance towards ensuring that talent is retained.

### 3. Outdated Processes Are Still Being Used Which Negatively Impact Diversity and Quality of Hire

The survey highlighted a number of activities being used as part of early career programmes in Ireland that impede diversity and the programme purpose to deliver critical skills for the future.

**These include:**

- The use of a CV to support decision making (almost 90 percent).
- Just over 10 percent fully integrate the Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes (KSA's) they identified as key for success into their psychometric assessments. Furthermore, one third of our talent acquisition professionals are not competent in using and explaining the psychometric results to the business. We know conversations with business leaders can be difficult, and the perception is often 'if it's not broken, don't fix it'. HR need to be able to use data and insights effectively to influence and enable change, and ultimately create the workforce of the future and deliver on the purpose of their early career programme.
- Only half of the respondents integrate KSA's into at least 80 percent of their formal development offering. This highlights significant opportunity for improvement and a clear way to accelerate the delivery of critical skills for the future or the development of future leaders.

There is an increasing recognition of the value of diversity, as well as the importance of a data driven approach. It is critical to select candidates using tools free from bias, and objective assessment measures throughout your hiring – and be competent in using this data to make better decisions.





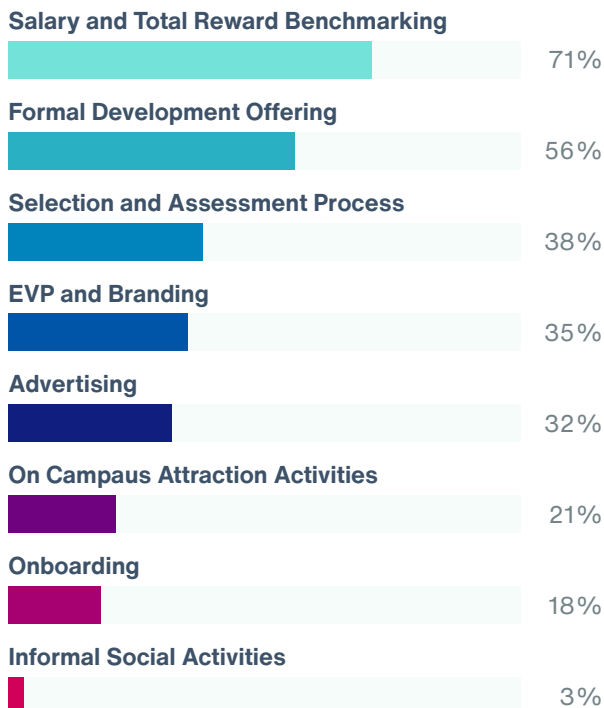
## 4. Companies Are Trying to Win the Race for Talent Through Pay

The survey by Aon Ireland and HPC has also revealed that the greatest financial investment across early career programmes is on salary and rewards, followed by formal development offerings and, thirdly, selection and assessment processes.

Almost 20 percent of respondents said that competition around salaries was the biggest challenge they face in relation to their early career programmes and 75 percent of organisations listed salary and total rewards as their greatest financial outlay. Despite this, one in five respondents have not reviewed their total reward packages, including salary, for early career hires in 2022.

Transparency around rewards and structure matters to early career talent in the long term, and this includes providing a good understanding of how inflation impacts merit increases and overall salary levels. Company benefits, the environment and office perks also matter when it comes to attracting and retaining talent, but they will not overcome or justify a below average salary.

### Areas of greatest financial investment across early career programmes in Ireland:



## 5. How Organisations Present Themselves Matters

The report found that the main purpose of early career programmes in Ireland is to attract high calibre people who can contribute to the organisation. However, a key challenge highlighted by respondents was exactly this – the attraction of high calibre candidates.

According to our research, Ireland’s HR professionals believe that Employer Value Proposition (EVP) and branding has the biggest impact on attracting and hiring candidates. However, the financial investment in EVP and branding, as well as advertising and on campus attraction activities, is relatively low.

Formal development offerings and early career programme structures are also critical to attracting candidates, with salary listed as the fourth differentiator. While we know that development offerings, programme structure and salary matter to early career professionals, in most cases, details of these elements are not advertised or actively communicated to prospective candidates. This lack of transparency might contribute to candidates rethinking their decision at offer stage, or even after joining which would impact retention. The bulk of the early careers budget is being spent post hire. But our findings suggest that a greater focus could be brought to how organisations present themselves pre-hire.

This mismatch could be addressed in two ways: re-allocate a portion of the budget to EVP and branding activities to attract prospective candidates, and actively advertise details about development offerings, programme structure and salary.

## 6. Companies Use a Wide Range of Approaches to Development, but Need to Be More Selective

Our report found that organisations are using a sophisticated blend of development activities. The purpose of these development activities is to raise engagement, connect graduates with the organisation and develop critical skills that the organisation needs.

**The top five activities included in development programmes are:**



\* for power skills such as collaboration and resilience

However, when we asked about the effectiveness of each of the approaches, the data is more mixed. Projects, which are used by 79 percent of respondents, are ranked 8 out of the 10 options provided as most effective for development. Presentations by senior leaders, which are used by 2/3 of organisations who responded, were ranked as the most effective development activity.

While it is tempting to ensure that your organisation’s development offering closely mirrors those of your competitors and other exemplars, the data suggests that organisations need to be selective in the options they choose. This is covered in greater detail in recommendation four.

# Recommendations

## 1. Understand What Is Driving Hires to Join Your Organisation

While reward continues to be a key differentiator, it is no longer enough. Organisations are competing with every industry for the same type of talent and skills, and this is made more challenging in the current market which is characterised by full employment and ever-increasing uncertainty. What drove candidates to apply to an early career programme yesterday is different today, and we know that employers are having to work harder than ever to engage new generations of employees.

Despite this, our research suggests that employers in Ireland have an opportunity to gain greater clarity on the biggest factors that impact attracting and hiring candidates to their organisation. If there is not a clear understanding as to why people are joining, it is harder to retain them.

### That is why employers should consider the following steps:

- Gather and use data driven insights to understand what is driving the interest of Generation Z to their early career programme. This should be done regularly by surveying your early career talent and benchmarking and conducting market research.
- Think about how you will communicate with candidates (tip – think digitally); how will you ensure you put the candidate at the centre of your communication strategy and create a sense of excitement; how can you create an immersive experience and how will you ensure they relate to your brand and fuel engagement? Do not forget to carry this through to post hire activities, such as formal development to ensure you are delivering on the expectations you have set. Having consistency in your messaging and offering throughout your early career programme from pre hire to post hire will help drive retention.

### Understand What Is Driving Hires

**1**

Use Data Driven Insights

**2**

Think About Your Communication







## 2. Get Really Focused on Your Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

Employers, and HR professionals in particular should spend time understanding your EVP and ensure that your early career programme aligns to this.

Not embedding your EVP into every aspect of your early career programme from attraction through to development will cause disengagement and potentially impact retention.

A strong EVP is a key driver of employee engagement, which in turn drives retention. Whether the purpose of your early career programme is to attract and retain the best talent in today's competitive market, to accelerate the development of critical skills and knowledge, or to identify future leaders, it is critical to create and nurture a compelling EVP.

### There are three key steps to do this:

- **Define your EVP.** This should reflect what your business needs, the purpose of your early careers programme, what employees and candidates expect, and how to differentiate yourself from other talent competitors. When you define your EVP, you create a foundation for how you will make future decisions about the employee experience needed to drive success.
- **Tell your story.** Your story is all about expressing your EVP and what you offer to employees—in words, visuals, style, and tone. It is critical to be intentional about how you communicate your EVP throughout all your attraction, hiring and development activities. This can be achieved by developing core messages that can be used by your leaders, managers, HR and talent acquisition team. Let candidates speak to you through various platforms. This will provide a more human and personal feel. Build your story into your development activities and encourage early career talent to create their own version of the story.
- **Align your experience(s).** It is not enough to simply tell a good story—employees and candidates need to see your EVP in action across the entire employee experience – from work to team, organisation and reward and benefit frameworks. On the point of reward and benefit frameworks, while fair pay is important and benchmarking systems can be used to check this, increasing compensation packages alone is not enough nor is it sustainable. You need to be considering other elements of what you can offer your employees. Having a strong EVP that incorporates elements such as DE&I, career reskilling, training and upskilling, and building a sustainable work life balance will enhance talent attraction and retention efforts.

### Get Focused on Your EVP



### 3. Redefine Your Future Skills Requirements and Align These With the Entire Early Career Programme Process

If an early careers programme is delivering critical skills for the future – employers need to be clear about what they are. Once clear about what they are, they need to align them to every stage in the early careers programme.

One of the top three purposes of early career programmes in Ireland identified through our research is to deliver critical skills for the future and identify future leaders. The Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes (KSA's) needed for future business success are not the same as those required yesterday, or even today. This means moving from hiring early career talent for specific skills for a specific job towards hiring for agility to develop new skills to fill future roles. Finding out what those critical skills are should be driven by data, using a combination of market insights, benchmarking data and external research around future skills. The biggest risk for employers is to rely too heavily on past experience and subjective opinions that will reduce future business success as well as impacting negatively on diversity.

Once employers have designed their future skills framework, they should align this to every stage in the early career programme.

#### For example:

- Your future skills framework should be incorporated at the attraction stage through content or videos and job matching tools on your website.
- At assessment stage, implement an objective approach such as psychometrics, video interviews that are rated by artificial intelligence, and assessment centre exercises to measure candidates against your new future skills framework. This includes a shift from focusing on academic achievement to identifying future potential and key competencies such as learnability, curiosity and agility.
- At onboarding stage, ensure senior leaders bring your future skills framework to life through story telling.
- At development stage, ensure the development activities are underpinned by your future skills framework. This is covered in greater detail in recommendation four.

Organisations that identify and build future skills into their hiring and development processes, are more likely to realise success in their broader talent strategy. Failure to act now poses longer-term risks.







## 4. Focus on Development Activities That Have the Greatest Impact

While the survey by Aon Ireland and HPC has showcased how organisations are using a wide range of approaches to development, they are not always choosing the methods that are most effective. It is clear from engagement with employers in Ireland that many organisations follow a templated approach to development and do not always consider the activities that will have the greatest impact on people in their early career.

While it can be tempting to follow “best practice” and to look at exemplars of great development, these approaches might not necessarily translate effectively to your organisation. While it is useful to scan the development offerings used in other companies, identifying the activities that have the greatest impact and that are aligned to your strategy is of greater significance and importance.

### To do this, we recommend you take four specific steps:

- Once you have identified the critical KSAs your organisation is trying to foster (see recommendation three), you need to integrate these into each aspect of the development process. As well as focusing on critical KSA's in formal workshops, they should be integrated into mentoring programmes, presentations by senior leaders, curated content, and any other development offering you use.
- In addition to the critical KSA's we recommend that you provide everyone with the skills, tools and opportunities that allow them to effectively plan their career. As early career talent moves from the school or university environment to the world of work, we cannot assume that they will understand how to plan their careers. Providing them with the skills and tools as early as possible might help drive retention.
- Integrate these KSA's into your feedback and formal review processes so that programme participants are constantly nudged about their importance and have an opportunity to discuss them in practice.
- Finally, you should ensure that the experiences you provide also reinforce the KSA's you are trying to stimulate. If you are trying to stimulate curiosity and innovation, people must be exposed to work and experiences that stimulate these traits. Simply providing a two-day workshop on innovation will not stimulate the traits you require in a meaningful way.

### Maximise the Impact of Your KSA's



# Outlook







## The Need to Embrace Change

**Despite the challenges faced by organisations in hiring and retaining early career talent and the critical importance of these programmes to their organisation's talent strategy, most organisations have yet to embrace the need for change in the coming two years.**

While 18 percent of organisations are seriously considering change, more than 50 percent are equivocal about the need to change. Given the challenges that organisations are facing post-Covid, and the challenges facing early career talent as they adjust to forging their careers in an environment dominated by hybrid working, this is surprising.

As trusted advisers to leading Irish employers, our experience is that early career talent is most likely to be impacted by hybrid working, as they do not receive the organic experience and mentoring opportunities that exist in a fully in-person environment. In addition, the data from this survey suggests that Covid has created fresh challenges to the skillsets of early career talent and might also have changed how they engage with the workplace.

Finally, the market for talent has arguably never been more competitive. As organisations compete for talent that will provide them with a competitive advantage, it has never been more important to ensure that early careers programmes deliver on the expectations that senior stakeholders have of them.

By taking on board the key recommendations outlined in this report, employers across Ireland can harness the full value of early careers talent and ensure they create a seamless experience for those taking their first steps on their career journey.

## Contact Us

**if you are ready to revisit how you select and develop your young talent.**

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We design and deliver the following tailored solutions: leadership development, management development, graduate development, high potential development, capability development, executive coaching and leadership team coaching. To learn more, visit [wearehpc.com](https://wearehpc.com).

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