

Ireland's 150 Best Employers: Employees now able to call the shots

Flexibility, more autonomy, a good work-life balance and pay rises are all key to retaining sought-after professionals in the tightest job market in decades

A new MacBook Air, swag packs, paid time off for birthdays, and pay increases of 20pc for working fewer hours. These are just some of the advantages of being a sought-after professional in the tightest job market in decades.

Now that the balance of power in the labour market has shifted from the employer to the worker, employees are the ones calling the shots.

In some sectors, candidates are juggling multiple job offers, prompting their existing employers to counter-offer not just with higher pay and the flexibility to work where they want but with ever more lavish and unique perks and benefits.

On [TikTok](#), employers oblivious to the new status quo are being mercilessly ridiculed by younger staff for trying to force them back to the office after the pandemic for the sake of the “company culture”, while “QuitToks” — where people celebrate their resignations on the social media platform — have been amassing billions of views.

The phenomenon of workers leaving their jobs in droves, for myriad reasons, has been dubbed “The Great Resignation” in the US, where, as recently as March, a record 4.5 million workers quit the labour force and job openings hit a high of 11.5 million.

However, evidence in Ireland suggests it's more of a Great Reshuffle, with people not so much quitting the workforce as leaving bad jobs and poor managers.

Many are joining companies that offer more flexibility, more autonomy and a pay rise high enough to outrun the rising cost of living.

In March, 30pc of workers told an iReach survey they were looking to switch jobs within 12 months, compared to the 23pc of people surveyed in December, while a survey by Excel Recruitment in March found that 38pc of employees were planning on finding a new job this year.

But a surge in job vacancies — at a time when the unemployment rate has returned to pre-Covid levels — and rising wage demands are creating a headache for companies already battling soaring energy and supply-chain costs.

The Excel Recruitment Employee-Employer Feedback Survey showed 52pc of employers were planning to raise pay this year.

Barry Whelan cannot remember such a frenetic pace of hiring since he set up Excel 20 years ago.

“It’s getting very, very like the Celtic Tiger,” the CEO says. “Companies are doing as much as they can to retain staff. It’s very challenging on all fronts because the market is overheated, despite the war in [Ukraine](#), and there’s a big labour shortage.

“Employees are looking to move jobs for greater work-life balance and a change of scene and we’re seeing spectacular counter-offers from employers. If you’re a valued employee, your employer will absolutely do their best to hang onto you because business is good.

“Obviously, this is a bit of a nightmare (for recruiters) because a candidate might have gone all the way through rounds of interviews and in comes this counter-offer from their own employer, which is really pushing wage inflation. One consultant on my team placed a pharmacy manager in a job that paid €40,000 and involved a 40-hour week, but their employer upped their pay to €50,000 and reduced their work week to 35 hours.

“A project manager we got a job offer for really wanted a better work-life balance. We got her a great work-from-home job and a really good benefits package that she didn’t have before. But her employer basically allowed her to drop to a four-day week from home, gave her a 20pc pay increase, and introduced a range of benefits for her.”

Whelan says companies that already have a great benefits package fail to communicate the range of benefits they already have to employees, leaving them vulnerable to savvy rivals.

“One of our clients is a nice young fashion start-up who is on the ball, so when you start working for them you get a swag pack delivered to your home, along with a MacBook Air, a keyboard and a mouse,” he says.

“In their swag pack, they have company merchandise, like a branded water bottle, and in the pack they outline the benefits that people get, which include the ability to go from 25 days’ annual leave to 30 days by buying holidays, the bike-to-work scheme, a company savings club, health

insurance, a strong pension, Tax saver tickets (for public transport use), and early maternity leave.”

Retaining talent

Niall O’Callaghan, a partner at Lockton Insurance Brokers Ireland who advises employers on how to offer benefits that can attract and retain talent, says the type of perks and benefits that companies offer has evolved as a result of the pandemic from the free meals offered by tech giants.

“You’re seeing more support for covering travel costs to entice people back to work,” he says.

“There might be support for people on their tax returns and providing access to digital tools that make it easier to apply for a mortgage and other digital technologies to help people manage their finances and their health. Life cover, pensions and health insurance, more employees are seeing that as crucial, but they are also asking, ‘what else is my employer doing to improve my well-being and create an environment where I can thrive?’. Be it financial well-being or mental or physical health, individuals want to feel supported to develop and thrive.

“Mental well-being is now hugely important, as is supporting female health and well-being. Organisations are asking if people need assistance with IVF or surrogacy. There’s innovation in that space where employers are really helping people with the big stresses and strains on their lives. Forward-thinking organisations are looking at how they can take care of their people as they go through life’s various challenges.”

Last month, [Lidl](#) announced the 6,000 people who work at its stores, regional distribution centres and offices across the island of Ireland would be entitled to paid fertility leave. The German discount supermarket chain — which began a hiring spree of 750 people last year — said all employees undergoing IVF treatments would be offered two days paid leave for each cycle.

The new fertility policy was part of a benefits package relaunch that includes compassionate leave for employees affected by early pregnancy loss or miscarriage, menopause support resources, maternity leave, adoptive leave, fostering leave and carers leave. In 2021, Lidl became the first company in Ireland to recognise early pregnancy loss and miscarriage as a bereavement in a compassionate leave policy, offering three days at full pay to all employees, regardless of gender, including those with a surrogate mother affected by an early pregnancy loss or miscarriage. Employees also

have 24-hour access to Lidl's Employee Assistance Programme for mental health support, with up to five free sessions with a professional counsellor.

“Retail is a competitive space and we are competing (for staff) with hospitality, among other (industries),” says Maeve McClean, chief people officer at Lidl Ireland. “During the pandemic, we recruited a number of people from industries that were massively affected, such as hospitality and events, and many of them have chosen to stay with us now as they love the opportunities they are getting with Lidl.

“We are constantly looking at our benefits package to make sure we are catering to employees at all life stages. Two-way communication with our teams is essential to understanding their needs and adapting our offerings accordingly.

“Last year, we had over 96,000 applications to join our business, which clearly demonstrates that we are an attractive employer.”