

Leadership Insight

by Paul Healy Chief Executive Skillnet Ireland



Paul has operated at an executive level in commercial environments for over 20 years. His broad areas of expertise include: Education and Labour, Market Policy, Human Resource Development, Public Affairs and Corporate Governance.

Please provide a brief history of your career.

I spent the first 10 years of my career in financial services, in sales and sales leadership positions. The experience of being a Financial Advisor at the age of 22 was a positive one for me, setting the basis for sound commercial awareness, customer service and self-discipline. I went on to manage a business for Bank of Ireland, before switching to a career in HR, a discipline I worked hard to master and served in a number of senior HR management positions through my career. I also ran my own business for a time and developed a career in academia, all before taking up my current position as Chief Executive of Skillnet Ireland.

You joined Skillnet Ireland as Chief Executive in 2016 and since this time, the structure of and messaging from Skillnet Ireland has changed. Were you brought into Skillnet Ireland to bring about this change or was this something you instigated?

Probably a bit of both. Skillnet Ireland is a unique organisation in so many ways. We sit neatly between industry and Government, leading a partnership of 70 enterprise bodies, providing talent development and upskilling to 15,000 businesses and 60,000 workers throughout the country every year. What attracted me to the role was the immense pent-up potential of a Government agency that puts businesses in control of the process, and one that fosters a networked approach that leverages Ireland's open culture of collaboration.

Working in deep collaboration with our industry partners, including CPA Ireland, we have developed

our organisation substantially since 2016, investing €140million in Ireland's workforce during this period, and delivering some of the most innovative workforce development initiatives ever seen in Ireland.

Can you give some insight as to what the catalyst was for this change?

When you think about it, technological advances, globalisation, climate action and an array of competitive forces are combining to disrupt the workplace to an extent that is unprecedented in history. Powered by AI, we are seeing technology performing ever more complex tasks that were once thought to be the sole domain of humans. Some jobs are disappearing entirely, but new technologies are also unlocking enormous potential within businesses, bringing new jobs, many of which never existed previously. We are also seeing the very nature of employment itself being redefined, with the rise of the gig economy, portfolio careers, virtual and remote working, and extended working lives.

Turning specifically to Ireland, there are multiple challenges now facing businesses here, not least of which are the complexities arising from Brexit. As our labour market continues to tighten, businesses are confronted with acute skills shortages in ICT, engineering, science, construction, healthcare and financial services among others.

Ireland's foreign direct investment (FDI) model has never been in a position of greater challenge. The trend over recent years is for countries to reduce their headline corporation tax rates.

To remain competitive, we must boost the other pillars of Ireland's FDI proposition, particularly talent. The issue of small and medium enterprise (SME) productivity is also a growing priority area with several national and international reports expressing concern around the productivity levels within our indigenous SMEs. Finally, to the most pressing issue of our time; climate change and the implications for businesses and workers as Ireland transitions to a low carbon and environmentally sustainable economy.

For our businesses and workers to adapt to this new world, and for our enterprise base to thrive and to prosper, a major shift in the intensity of talent development and upskilling is now urgently needed. The work of Skillnet Ireland is deeply rooted in all of these challenges and they serve as a catalyst for ongoing change in our organisation.

What were the biggest challenges in implementing the changes and how did you overcome these challenges?

A challenge for a comparatively small Government agency is to make your voice heard. In many ways I am fortunate in this regard because Skillnet Ireland has such a powerful story to tell. The agency has been recognised as an international best-practice model by the EU Commission, the OECD and the ILO, among others.

Yet, that message hasn't always cut through to the domestic audience. For us, the job of good 'storytelling' is vital as each year we must successfully navigate an intensely competitive funding process.

Skillnet Ireland operates on a cost sharing basis with businesses, so the investment we secure from Government is effectively doubled.

However, the work of convincing businesses to continuously invest in their people can sometimes be an uphill battle, and understandably so, as business owners are distracted by a multitude of issues. Yet again, this points to the importance of promoting the benefits of workforce development so that we can engage enterprises that are not investing sufficiently in their workforce and that are vulnerable to economic shocks.

We ourselves have invested heavily in our brand strategy and our marketing and communication activities in recent years, and we will continue to do so. At Skillnet Ireland we are building a world class enterprise-led organisation to help prepare Ireland for the future of work. We are ambitious for Ireland. We are ambitious for Irish businesses.

With over 60 distinct Skillnet Ireland Networks nationwide, how did you go about helping these networks through the changes?

Ireland's enterprise base is fortunate to be effectively served by well-organised industry clusters, sectoral associations, employer bodies, Chambers of Commerce and enterprise-led regional development associations. These bodies and their

Network Managers form the core of Skillnet Ireland. 630 industry leaders serve on Skillnet Steering Groups up and down the country, volunteering their time, energy and expertise in service of both their sector and the national interest. In many ways we 'lead from behind' - yes, we create the framework, design the supports and provide the funding, but it is these bodies and their talented and committed people that make it happen.

What is the most important business lesson that you have learned in your career to date?

I think it is the value of self-awareness and reflection. Thinking about 'what worked well, what didn't work well, what have I learned and what will I do differently'. But this thinking should also be applied to the world around us - to be curious about that world, to ask questions and investigate things, and importantly to challenge our assumptions and 'norms', particularly when it comes to people.

The best advice that I have been given through the years has always been about perspective. Work and career, although important, are but just one aspect of our lives. If we centre our lives around career too much, I think in the long term this will not produce good outcomes for us. I try to be grateful for the past, enthusiastic for the present, and optimistic for the future.

To date what has been your career highlight?

I'm still chasing it!

Artificial Intelligence is the next leap for Accountants. Is this a theme that you see coming into all industries and careers?

Disruptive technologies like artificial intelligence and automation will dramatically affect how we work and the jobs we do. OECD analysis suggests that 14% of jobs in OECD member countries have a high probability of being automated and, on average, as much as 40% of jobs could be significantly impacted by automation over the coming years. Also, PwC research has stated 85% of CEOs from around the world expect their commercial landscape to change as a result of AI.

The accountancy profession is no different, and in some ways is on the front line of AI. Throughout history automation has brought both a downside and an upside: jobs have been lost to technology, but new growth has been unleashed. What unites these is of course upskilling. Accountants should embrace these new technologies, learn how to work with them, and re-train where necessary. From this, new value and new opportunities will be created for the profession.

Within this context, it was particularly pleasing to see the work of CPA Ireland Skillnet and CPA Ireland recognised by peers on a European stage for a Digitalisation Award and I applaud the ongoing work of CPA Ireland Skillnet in transforming workforce upskilling and development within the Accounting profession.

What advice would you give to aspiring leaders today?

I think leaders sometimes can get tangled up in their own organisations, particularly in large companies. I think it's vital to be outward looking. You can be very successful and good at what you do, but without building relationships or an outside network you will struggle to advance a career or grow a business.

