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Facing the recruitment challenge in Cumbria

Professor Frank Peck examines the scale and structure of the recruitment challenge in the national and Cumbrian labour market



As the UK emerged from the pandemic, a key question concerned the time that it might take for the labour market to adjust to the new levels of economic activity. During 2021, the number of job vacancies rose rapidly and recruitment difficulties were widely reported in all sectors of the economy.

The number of vacancies advertised nationally went above one million during the summer of 2021 and we have now witnessed 12 months of steadily rising levels of vacancy, with the latest figure showing around 1.3 million.

The recruitment challenge, it seems, is taking some time to resolve. We see this nationally in many key sectors, including ongoing problems with staffing levels in the transport industry and also in the National Health Service. There are nuances in different sectors, of course.

In health, the pandemic created unprecedented peaks in demand for workers and there are now high numbers of unfilled posts, particularly in nursing, at a time when there is continued workforce stress on existing staff arising from the legacy of the pandemic.

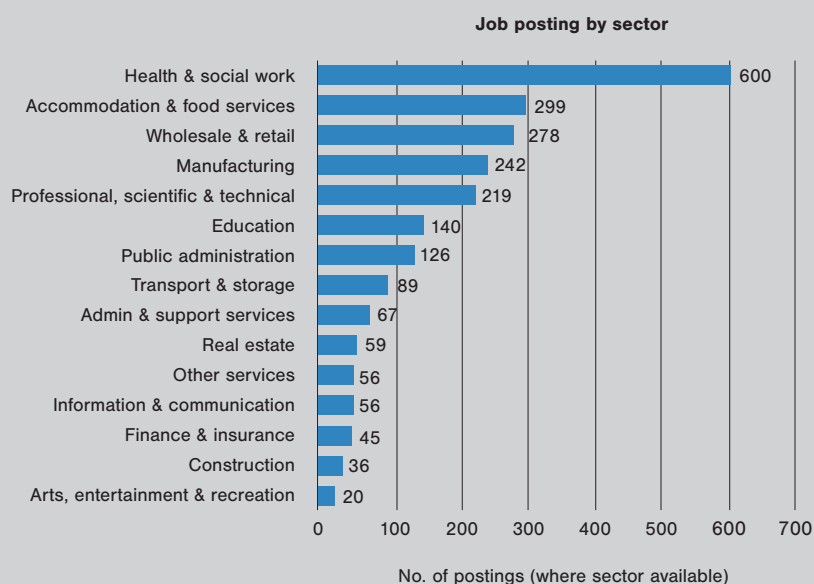
In aviation, however, the pandemic led to workforce reductions to try to survive the downturn in activity, but now the industry is struggling to recruit trained staff to meet renewed demand for travel.

Latest data from National Statistics (Feb-Apr 2022)

give an indication of sectoral variations in the recruitment challenge.

In terms of volume, the highest numbers of vacancies nationally are in health (212,000), accommodation & food (171,000) and retail distribution (163,000). The pressure on the labour market, however, is better captured by looking at the vacancy rate per 100 jobs in each industry. In these terms, the tightest labour market situations are in accommodation & food (ratio of 7.8), ICT (5.8), arts & entertainment (5.5) and health (5.0).

An indication of the level of demand for staff in Cumbria can be seen in data on job postings recently published by Cumbria Intelligence Observatory. This data provides counts of jobs advertised on various channels including job boards, employer websites, newspapers and notifications to relevant public agencies. Since the start of 2022, counts of job postings have reached record levels. In total, there were 3,482 new postings of jobs in Cumbria in April 2022 which is 602 more than in April on the previous year. The distribution of these jobs by sector mirrors the picture given in national data regarding the current recruitment crises across sectors. The largest numbers by far in Cumbria have been in health & social work followed by other sectors that are critical to the economy of Cumbria, notably accommodation & food services, wholesale & retail and in manufacturing.

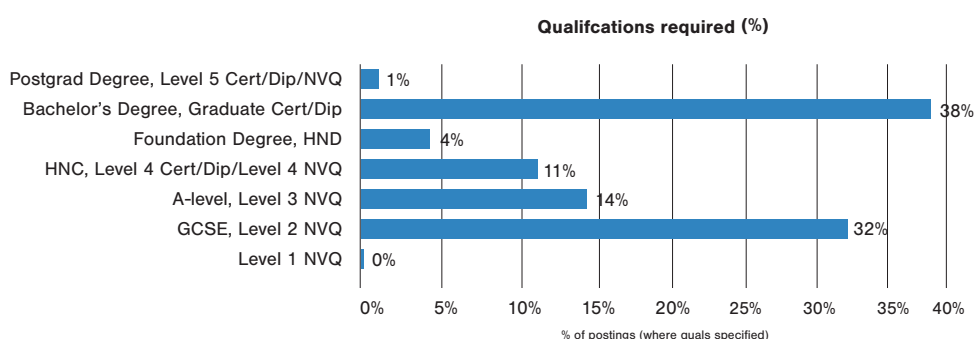
Figure 1: Job Postings in Cumbria by Industry Sector in April 2022

Source: Data from Labour Insight (Burning Glass Technologies) reported by Cumbria Intelligence Observatory, Labour Market Briefing May 2022, p.21

In some cases, job postings name an employer. The NHS has by far the largest number of job posts in Cumbria (230 in April 2022) followed by Cumbria County Council (86), Center Parcs (47) and BAe Systems (37). The list includes many other significant employers in the visitor economy (Inn Collection Ltd, Bourne Leisure Ltd and Westmoreland Ltd). The widespread nature of the recruitment challenge can also be seen in the geographical distribution of postings which affect all the major urban centres across Cumbria

but prominently in Carlisle (759) but also in Kendal (258), Penrith (189), Barrow (188), Workington (148) and Whitehaven (113).

This data can also be analysed by various characteristics including significantly by level of qualification, although this detail is only available for around one fifth of such postings. Even so, it is significant to note that where qualifications are specified in job postings, around 48% require degree level while 32% require GCSE or NVQ level 2.

Figure 2: Job Postings in Cumbria by Qualification Level (%) in April 2022

Source: Data from Labour Insight (Burning Glass Technologies) reported by Cumbria Intelligence Observatory, Labour Market Briefing May 2022

Reflecting on this evidence, the data suggests quite strongly that labour market adjustments are neither simple nor are they quick, especially in a sophisticated modern economy where skills and qualifications matter. It shows that, while downsizing can happen relatively quickly, rebuilding a workforce is time-consuming and is usually accompanied by several other labour market challenges including the need for training, retraining and, significantly,

addressing worker retention. Most employers will be familiar with the principles and practice of workforce planning – how to assess future workforce requirements to ensure that the right skills are available in the right places at the right time. The present challenging circumstances highlight the need for businesses of all sizes to view recruitment as just one part of a holistic approach to build and then sustain an effective and well-motivated workforce.