



## **AFTER TRAMLINES ONE:**

Long-term outcomes of a community-based training programme in professional IT qualifications for unemployed people

Report to The Ballymun Job Centre

Susan O'Donnell  
Models Research

May 1999



---

## CONTACTS

### **The Ballymun Job Centre**

Ballymun Town Centre, Dublin 11

[bmunjob@indigo.ie](mailto:bmunjob@indigo.ie)

Tel: (353) 01 842 5722

Fax: (353) 01 842 5671

### **Models Research**

Abbey House

15-17 Upper Abbey Street, Dublin 1, Ireland

[info@models-research.ie](mailto:info@models-research.ie)

Tel: (353) 1 872 4911

Fax: (353) 1 873 3917

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The researcher would like to thank the Tramlines graduates, staff of the Ballymun Job Centre, former Tramlines trainers and staff, and Tramlines graduates' employers who contributed their time and thoughts to this evaluation and offered their ideas for improving future Tramlines-type programmes.

The Ballymun Job Centre acknowledges the assistance of the Combat Poverty Agency in subsidising this evaluation. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Combat Poverty Agency.

# C O N T E N T S

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	4
THE STUDY'S AIM AND OBJECTIVES	6
METHODOLOGY	7
BACKGROUND	8
SURVEY OF TRAMLINES GRADUATES	10
Employment status and job satisfaction	10
Salaries	13
Constraints and inequalities in employment	15
Further training and professional development	18
Further personal and community development	20
Reflections on the MCP and Tramlines	22
SURVEY OF EMPLOYERS	24
CONCLUSION	30
FRAMEWORK FOR THE TRAMLINES MODEL	32

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report evaluates the long-term outcomes of Tramlines One, the first training programme in professional IT certification for unemployed people in Ballymun. From early 1996 to December 1997, Tramlines One trained 25 unemployed people in Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP) certifications. Eighteen of the 25 were formally classified as long-term unemployed.

The Ballymun Job Centre commissioned this study to determine the extent to which Tramlines contributed to sustainable employment for the graduates of the first training programme. A survey was conducted of the first Tramlines graduates one year after graduation, and a smaller survey was conducted of a selection of their employers. For a fuller picture of the employers' perspective on Tramlines-type programmes, a more widespread survey is recommended.

Overall, the evaluation found very positive sustainable employment outcomes. One year after graduation, all the Tramlines graduates were employed, with 81% working full-time and 19% part-time.

Their employers included a range of large and SMEs, both multinational and indigenous organisations and public sector bodies. The most common employment for graduates was a variety of technical support positions, with IT trainer the second most common position.

The employment situation was mostly stable but 38% had worked for more than one employer and 5% for three or more employers during the year. More than 75% of the graduates were satisfied or highly satisfied with their employment. Reasons for satisfaction included being treated like a professional; sources of dissatisfaction included lack of training at work.

The first year of employment in the IT industry was a huge learning experience for the graduates, with 81% satisfied or highly satisfied with their professional development. However, as noted, there was general dissatisfaction with the lack of training opportunities on the job. Most of the graduates were continuously self-training and learning as a normal requirement of their jobs. However, less than 10% had furthered their MCP qualifications and only 33% in total had undertaken training they believed would further their career. Most graduates attributed their low take-up of training to their employers.

The average annual full-time salary of the graduates working in the IT sector was £15,620, with most earning less than the average. Tramlines graduates were earning salaries similar to graduates with certificates, diplomas, and university degrees in IT.

The research found a considerable salary difference among graduates, with prior educational level linked with the largest salary differential. Graduates with a leaving cert - most of whom were previously long-term unemployed - were making on average £3,142 more than those without a leaving cert, despite having below average leaving cert results. To some extent, the salary difference reflected the varying performance of trainees with and without a leaving cert while in the Tramlines training programme. Employers agreed that having a leaving cert did not guarantee ability in the IT sector.

Gender was another area of persistent salary differential, with women earning on average £1,981 less than men. Lone parents had the lowest salaries, and childcare continued to be an ongoing concern for many. Employers noted the lower status of women in the IT sector and suggested that women were paid lower salaries because they were less self-confident than men, less aggressive in demanding higher salaries, and less mobile in employment because of their family responsibilities.

The employers surveyed were reluctant to offer training on the job because they were unsure of reaping a suitable return on their investment, believing that the newly-trained employees would demand higher salaries and be in an improved position to seek employment elsewhere. However, while the cost of training employees could be high, the cost of taking on a new employee could be even higher. Small indigenous Irish firms found it difficult to compete with the large multinationals for qualified IT staff.

The graduates were keen to stay with employers who paid for or provided good quality training - in a number of cases, graduates were willing to stay in less-than-desirable jobs if good training were provided.

The Tramlines graduates rated their MCP qualifications very highly, believing they had great currency in the IT labour market. Employers, however, were more reserved in their views of the MCP certification, believing it was a good starting point but only one element of what was required in an employee.

Employers valued other qualities equally to IT skills. They wanted good customer relations abilities, a professional attitude, and familiarity with the business environment. In these areas, Tramlines graduates, who previously had little or no experience in professional employment, were below par when starting out in the IT field but were learning these skills in employment.

Along these lines, the employers' suggestions for improving a Tramlines-type course centred on giving the training programme a more holistic approach, with substantial focus on training in non-IT skills.

Based on the findings of this evaluation, we can say that Tramlines has had an extremely positive sustainable employment impact; the report endorses the NESF recommendation (Forum Opinion No. 2, 1997) that Tramlines should be a model for moving long-term unemployed people into sustainable employment.

The outcomes of the original Tramlines evaluation and the current research suggest that the Tramlines model should operate within the context of a strong local IT sector and include the following elements:

Training in professional IT certifications in demand by employers

Training in customer service skills desired by employers

A flexible training organisation

An appropriate recruitment, selection and induction process for trainees

Adequate training allowances for trainees

A system of personal support for trainees and adequate staff resources

An appropriate mix of training approaches

Targeted supports for trainees without a leaving cert and women trainees

Support and provisions for childcare and career guidance for lone parents

## INTRODUCTION

The IT sector is central to economic development and one of the most rapidly expanding areas of new employment in Ireland. At the same time, unemployment -in particular long-term unemployment - remains a persistent problem. Few unemployed people without IT qualifications have been able to access the new professional jobs in the sector.

The IT sector traditionally hires graduates with third-level qualifications, which are largely out of the reach of the long-term unemployed. The vision behind the Tramlines project developed by the Ballymun Job Centre was that professional IT certification could be made accessible to the long-term unemployed in Ballymun.

From the Spring of 1996 to December 1997, Tramlines One delivered training to 25 unemployed people in the Microsoft Professional Certification (MCP) qualification. The MCP certifies a professional level of expertise in Microsoft software. Within months of training completion, all 25 Tramlines One graduates were working in career-path employment using their IT skills.

The Ballymun community in North Dublin, long associated with high unemployment, is now known also for its high number of MCP-certified people working in the IT field. This change is due to the Tramlines programme and its spin-offs, including the Tramlines Two training programme, the Online training programmes offered in the nearby Whitehall House Senior College CDVEC, and Tramlines Ltd., a Ballymun-based commercial company offering computer training, services and support.

Tramline's success is now recognised in Ireland by community organisations, Partnership companies, Local Employment Services, employers and trainers in the IT sector, and government agencies dealing with education and training.

Tramlines has been put forward as a model for moving long-term unemployed people into sustainable employment. The NESF (National Economic and Social Forum) highlighted Tramlines as an example of a tailored training initiative to address long-term unemployment, suggesting in their 1997 report (Forum Opinion No. 2) that this approach to training can be mainstreamed in national labour market policy. The Chairman of IDA Ireland echoed this suggestion in the IDA 1997 Annual Report.

At the time of writing, Tramlines-type projects are currently underway or in advanced development in a number of disadvantaged areas in Ireland, including Dundalk, Leitrim, and Limerick, as well as Derry and Belfast. Tramlines is also a model for the Fast Track to Information Technology (FIT) programme currently in development in partnership

with IT companies including IBM, Oracle, Hewlett Packard, CSC, COREL, AIB, Symantec, Microsoft and CBT Systems, as well as the LESNs, APCs, FÁS and VECs in conjunction with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

The Ballymun Job Centre commissioned this report to evaluate whether the certifications, skills, competencies, and self-confidence acquired by the Tramlines trainees in training were able to lead to sustainable employment. It is hoped that the *After Tramlines One* report can contribute to the further development of Tramlines-type projects in disadvantaged communities and to policy on measures to provide sustainable employment for the long-term unemployed.

## **THE STUDY'S AIM AND OBJECTIVES**

The *After Tramlines One* research aimed to determine the extent to which Tramlines contributed to sustainable employment for formerly unemployed people in Ballymun.

The objectives were to:

Investigate the employment situation and experiences of Tramlines One graduates;

Identify potential constraints to sustainable employment and professional development for the graduates;

Investigate potential income and employment inequalities among the graduates;

Investigate the graduates' further training and progression in the workforce;

Highlight the contribution of Tramlines to the continuing development of Ballymun;

Suggest ways that future Tramlines-type training projects may be improved.

Include the experiences and opinions of employers;

Re-evaluate the Tramlines model.

## METHODOLOGY

The information in *After Tramlines One* was gathered primarily from a survey of the Tramlines graduates based on in-depth interviews conducted in November and December and a group session in December 1998.

All 25 graduates were invited to participate in the evaluation process. Twenty-three of the 25 graduates took up the invitation, resulting in 21 full interviews, one partial interview, and additional inputs from the group session. The high response rate of 84 percent from the 21 full interviews allows confidence in the research findings.

A group session was held in December 1998 with Ballymun Job Centre staff.

Interviews were conducted in February and March 1999 with five of the graduates' employers, each of whom had hired two or more graduates. Given the small number of employers interviewed, the survey results indicate general trends in thinking and experience rather than a representative picture of employers in the IT industry.

The survey data regarding graduates' salaries and mobility was compared with the data in the 1998 Technology Salary and Benefits Survey published by Computer Staff Recruitment (CSR), Dublin.

The researcher, Susan O'Donnell, also conducted the original Tramlines evaluation in 1997 while employed as a researcher with the School of Communications, Dublin City University.

## **BACKGROUND**

The Ballymun Job Centre, a community cooperative established in 1986, is a job-placement, training, and enterprise development organisation. In cooperation with state training agents, the Ballymun Job Centre and the Ballymun LESN are involved in numerous training programs.

Tramlines One, a pilot project developed and delivered by the Ballymun Job Centre, was funded primarily by the EU (EMPLOYMENT Integra programme) and FÁS, the Irish state training agency (through CE and training allowances), and supported by donations of training materials, software and exam fees by Microsoft Ireland.

The profile of the 25 trainees was:

### **Educational levels at intake:**

leaving cert: 14 trainees (4 of these had third-level experience but no qualification);  
one-third of the leaving certs were average and two-thirds were below average  
no leaving cert: 11 trainees

### **Gender:**

men: 17  
women: 8 (including 5 lone parents)

### **Age at graduation:**

21-24: 15 trainees  
25-29: 5 trainees  
30+: 5 trainees

### **Social Welfare status at intake:**

Unemployed more than one year: 18 trainees (5 LPA and 13 UA)  
Unemployed less than one year: 7 trainees (5 UA and 2 UB)

Social welfare categories include: LPA (lone parent allowance); UA (unemployment assistance, which can be claimed if they have not worked 39 weeks continuously in the previous tax year); and UB (unemployment benefit, which can be claimed if they have worked more than 39 weeks continuously in the previous tax year).

Through their Tramlines training, all trainees successfully passed at least one Microsoft exam leading to Microsoft certification, with more than half achieving passes in three or more exams. At the end of the programme, the 25 trainees altogether had

achieved 68 Microsoft Certified exams, and 17 of the trainees had achieved one or two MCP certifications. All trainees also completed supplementary courses in personal development, communication and Internet skills.

The MCP exam performance varied considerably among the trainees. Prior educational level was the most significant background factor associated with performance - the trainees with leaving certs passed more exams, and this was despite the fact that two-thirds of the leaving certs were below average. Not having a leaving cert at all was linked with lower than average performance.

Being a lone parent was another significant factor linked with lower than average performance. Childcare responsibilities or difficulties interfered with the training of many lone parents.

The evaluation of Tramlines at graduation time found that trainees had boosted their levels of self-confidence and improved significantly their attitudes towards work. Their increased self-confidence was tied strongly to their belief they would find employment at the end of the course. Many acquired a taste for learning and professional self-development, and a number planned to continue their training and acquire further certifications in 1998.

## **SURVEY OF TRAMLINES GRADUATES**

### **Employment status and job satisfaction**

#### *Employment status*

One year after graduation from Tramlines, the employment outcomes were extremely positive. All the 21 graduates surveyed were in employment in December 1998, with 17 (81%) working full-time and four (19%) working part-time.

Three of the four part-time workers were working almost full-time hours and most were working part-time by choice.

#### *Employers*

The employers and past employers of the Tramlines graduates represented the spectrum - mostly in the IT industry, as well as large businesses, SMEs, public institutions, and community and voluntary organisations.

They included (in alphabetical order), Accord, Aluset, the Ballymun Job Centre, Digital/Compaq, Dublin City University, Fyffes, Gateway 2000, IBM, Jefferson Training, Leitrim Partnership, Modus Media, Moss Technology, Symstar (Grenada), Tramlines Ltd., Whitehall House Senior College CDVEC, and Workstations Ltd.

#### *Positions held*

The most common position for graduates was technical support, with seven (33.3%) graduates, and another two (9.5%) working as technical consultants giving technical support. A considerable range of IT expertise was required among these graduates - some were delivering basic computer support to office or home users while others were consultants on specialised computer systems for corporate clients.

Of these nine graduates, three were working on telephone technical support lines for large multi-national computer companies; two were working in-house for large organisations; and four were working for various clients of their employers.

The second most common position was IT trainer. Of the five (23.8%) graduates working as trainers, three were with a small IT training company, and two worked for a VEC. In addition, one more graduate (4.8%) was working as a training coordinator in a large community-based organisation, involving management duties as well as training.

All the trainers were delivering training in Microsoft products, mostly at the lower end of the Microsoft certification spectrum for computer professionals - Microsoft Office User

and Windows 95, and some were also delivering training in ECDL - the European Computer Driving Licence.

Two graduates (9.5%) held systems coordinator or network administrator positions; one worked in-house for a large community organisation and one for the clients of a small IT company.

Of the four remaining graduates, one was working as a programmer; one was a hardware service and repair technician; and one was working in production, testing computer chips.

Only one trainee was working outside the IT field - as a programme assistant in a voluntary organisation, she used her computer skills in an office situation.

### ***Mobility***

The employment situation was mostly stable with a certain amount of mobility between employers. Twelve graduates (57.1%) had worked for one employer since graduation, eight graduates (38.1%) had worked for two employers, and one (4.8%) had worked for three or more. Many graduates were hoping to move to new employers in the upcoming year. (Their reasons for moving will be discussed shortly.)

To put this situation into context, the 1998 Technology and Benefits Survey by CPR estimates that staff turnover in the computer sector averages 16 percent overall; a figure for the turnover in the first year of employment was not available.

### ***Employment satisfaction ratings***

Sixteen graduates (76.2%) said they were satisfied or highly satisfied with their employment experiences in the year since graduation. Only five graduates (23.8%) were unsatisfied, with none claiming to be highly unsatisfied. Reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction were mostly related to working conditions.

### ***Sources of satisfaction with employment***

A significant source of satisfaction with employment was being treated like a professional, which for many meant having flexible hours and an easy-going atmosphere.

They were happy in their jobs when they liked the people they worked with and felt comfortable in their working environment. They enjoyed interesting work, meaning that their skills matched the tasks expected of them, or that work challenged them to apply their skills to learn new competencies.

They were keen to stay with employers who paid for or provided good quality training - in a number of cases, graduates were willing to stay in less-than-desirable jobs if good training was provided.

*Sources of dissatisfaction with employment*

As noted, overall the graduates were satisfied or very satisfied with their employment experiences of the previous year; however, many graduates had changed employers or indicated they were planning to do so in the upcoming year.

The major source of unhappiness with employment was the lack of training at work. In some cases, the technical support workers were required to give advice on technical issues outside their knowledge or experience, and not surprisingly, they found this aspect of their jobs highly stressful. Lack of training was also a particular concern for trainers.

Lack of internal progression routes was another significant issue; for many graduates, the only way of moving into more challenging work or a higher salary was to leave the company.

Some graduates were unsatisfied with their salary, although in some cases a good training programme compensated a low salary.

## Salaries

### *Annual salaries of Tramlines graduates*

In December 1998, one year after graduation, the average annual full-time salary of the 20 graduates working in the IT sector was £15,620.

Eleven graduates (55%) were earning less than the average salary of £15,620, and nine (45%) were earning more than the average.

At that point, many graduates had received at least one salary increment but had not been in employment for one full year and were awaiting their annual review.

For the above calculation of the Tramlines graduates' salaries, salaries for part-time workers were adjusted to full-time levels. Three of the four part-time workers were earning more than some full-time workers and working almost as many hours as the full-time workers.

The actual salaries, including actual part-time salaries, for the Tramlines graduates as a whole ranged from less than £10,900 to more than £19,000. The full breakdown of annual salaries by graduates is:

less than £10,900:	one (4.8%)
£11,000 - £12,900:	one (4.8%)
£13,000 - £14,900:	seven (33.3%)
£15,000 - £16,900:	seven (33.3%)
£17,000 - £18,900:	three (14.3%)
more than £19,000:	two (9.5%)

### *Comparison with other graduates*

To put these figures in context, we will look at the 1998 Technology Salary and Benefits Survey by CPR which was conducted at about the same time. CPR found that the overall entry level salary in the computer industry for graduates with certificates was £13,000, for graduates with diplomas was £15,000, and for graduates with computer degrees was £16,625.

Taking into account the salary differential among the 20 Tramlines graduates working in the IT sector, we can see that eight Tramlines graduates (40%) were earning salaries similar to graduates with certificates, seven Tramlines graduates (35%) were earning salaries similar to graduates with diplomas, and five Tramlines graduates (25%) were earning salaries similar to graduates with computer degrees.

***Salaries by type of employment***

For the nine Tramlines graduates working in technical support or as technical consultants, the average annual salary was £15,260 - with six earning less than the average and three earning more.

For the five graduates working as trainers, the average annual salary was £15,800, with two graduates earning less than the average and three earning more.

For the six remaining graduates working in other positions in the IT field - the systems coordinator, network administrator, training coordinator, programmer, hardware service and repair technician, and production operative - the average annual salary was £16,000, with three graduates earning less than the average, one trainee earning the average, and two graduates earning more.

## CONSTRAINTS AND INEQUALITIES IN EMPLOYMENT

### *Educational level*

The educational level of the graduates prior to Tramlines was the most significant factor related to differences in salaries, but the research did not determine the reasons behind this.

Graduates with a leaving cert were earning higher salaries than those without a leaving cert, despite the fact that the quality of their leaving certs was low: two-thirds of the leaving certs were below average and the rest were only average. Most of the graduates with leaving certs had been previously long-term unemployed, many for more than two years. Job satisfaction ratings between the two groups were similar - around 75% were satisfied or highly satisfied with their employment.

For graduates with a leaving cert, the average salary was £16,792; for those without a leaving cert, it was £13,650.

The different levels of certifications achieved in Tramlines training could partly but not wholly explain the salary differential of £3,142 between those with and without a leaving cert.

Almost all the Tramlines graduates believed that with an MCP qualification and a year of work experience, it did not matter whether an employee had a leaving cert or not. As will be discussed later, most of the employers had similar views.

As well, almost all the graduates said they believed that having an MCP qualification was just as valuable or more valuable than having a computer degree, and they also thought that their employers felt the same. Several graduates spoke of doing the same jobs, or even more complex tasks, than co-workers who were computer graduates.

### *Performance in Tramlines training*

The earlier evaluation of Tramlines found that the performance of the trainees in the Tramlines programme was related to their prior educational levels, with most of the above-average and average performers in Tramlines training having leaving certs. This difference continued in their salary levels.

A year after graduating from Tramlines, the average salary was £13,668 in the below-average performers group; £16,666 in the average group; and £16,428 in the above-average group. The two groups were similar regarding satisfaction at work - almost all were satisfied or highly satisfied.

### ***Gender***

Gender was another significant factor related to salary differences among the graduates: men earned higher salaries than women. However, both women and men had similar job satisfaction ratings - around 75% were satisfied or highly satisfied with their employment.

The average full-time salary of the women surveyed was £14,219 and of the men surveyed, £16,200.

The salary differential between women and men was thus £1,981 - a difference which remained despite the influence of other factors. Women with a leaving cert earned less than men with a leaving cert (salary differential £1,937). Women without a leaving cert earned less than men without a leaving cert (salary differential £1,283). Women with children earned less than men with children (salary differential £1,964). Women without children earned less than men without children (salary differential £1,667). (Employers' perspectives on gender are discussed later in this report.)

Two of the women graduates experienced what they believed to be gender discrimination at work: two male colleagues were given higher salaries despite having similar qualifications. They both moved on to new employers and were satisfied with the new working conditions.

### ***Social Welfare status***

The graduates who were long-term unemployed prior to Tramlines came out very well in the salary outcomes. Their average salary after a year in employment was £16,260, which was higher than that of the group of graduates who were unemployed less than one year prior to Tramlines (average salary £15,667).

Among the different Social Welfare categories, lone parents had the lowest salaries (average salary £13,550). The salary differential between the long-term unemployed and the lone parents could be explained by the educational level and gender factors previously discussed.

### ***Age***

There was no significant difference in salaries by age group.

### ***Childcare***

An earlier evaluation of Tramlines found that childcare was a significant constraint to performance in Tramlines training for the lone parents. The survey of graduates found that although childcare continued to be a major problem for some in their first months at work, it had been mostly sorted in the first year on the job.

However, childcare remained for some lone parents an ongoing concern. A number of graduates - both women and men - said that an offer of free, good quality childcare would be an incentive to stay working with a company. Some of the women working part-time wanted the extra time to spend with their children.

### ***Discrimination against Ballymun***

None of the graduates experienced discrimination at work because they came from Ballymun. Two came up against it at job interviews, with the interviewer mocking their accent and telling them how to pronounce his name "properly." Another graduate heard a negative reference to the Ballymun accent at work, and one overheard an anti-Ballymun discussion in the smoke room at work but believed the speakers did not know he was from Ballymun.

Many graduates believed that anti-Ballymun discrimination was fading fast in the workplace or had already disappeared.

### ***Housing***

Housing was not a constraint to employment for any of the graduates. Most continued to live in Ballymun. Some were actively looking for housing outside Ballymun and at least one graduate had bought a house in Dublin since graduation.

### ***Transportation***

Transportation was not a significant constraint to employment. Several graduates suffered through regular long trips on the bus - in some cases involving more than an hour to cross over to the south side of Dublin. Some graduates were taking driving lessons and some had bought a car or were planning to do so.

## **Further training and professional development**

### ***Professional development ratings***

The first year at work after Tramlines was a huge learning experience for all the graduates. In the survey interviews, they spoke about how they had significantly improved not only their IT expertise but also their interpersonal skills and general work habits.

The graduates rated their professional development highly. Seventeen (81%) said they were satisfied or highly satisfied with their professional development the previous year, with four graduates (19%) unsatisfied.

However, despite this significant learning experience, there was general dissatisfaction with the training situation at work. Many graduates believed they needed further training to progress, with some feeling the situation was urgent.

### ***Further training in employment***

At the time of graduation from Tramlines, many graduates planned to continue their training and acquire further MCP qualifications in 1998. In employment, most graduates were continuously self-training and learning as a normal requirement of their jobs. However, only seven graduates (33.3%) had undertaken training they believed would help them in their career progression; seven (33.3%) had taken training which would not help their careers; and seven (33.3%) had not done any training at all.

Only two graduates (9.5%) had acquired further MCP qualifications - one in Windows 95 and another in NT4. In total, three graduates (14.3%) were actively pursuing further MCP qualifications, through courses and self-study. Other courses taken which they believed would further their careers included: 38 days of courses towards SAP certification (taken by one graduate); a 2-day course in Novell; a one-day course in telephone skills; a six-hour course in sales techniques; and a half-day course in teaching ECDL.

Among the courses taken by graduates which they believed would not further their careers were: induction training specific to their employers; the half-day ECDL course; six 2-day software courses (taken by one graduate); and a one-day course in manual handling.

### ***Constraints to training in employment***

Most graduates laid the responsibility for their low take-up of training with their employers. They wanted time off to study but few employers allowed this. Most graduates said their employers had no training strategy or it was very limited, and management was too busy to consider their training needs. Women with childcare responsibilities faced a particular barrier when training was offered at times outside regular working hours.

Graduates believed that management did not want to make the investment in training if there were a high turnover in the company or when there was no proven customer/client need.

On the other hand, several graduates said the lack of training was the graduates' responsibility - the first year of employment was a time of learning to integrate into the workforce and taking a break from the intensive training in Tramlines. They believed that many more graduates would take up their MCP training in the second year of employment.

## **Further personal and community development**

### ***Confidence ratings***

Almost all graduates had increased their self-confidence since graduation, and almost all were very confident or confident about their futures. One graduate said: "I see myself going places. I'm not worried about anything. If I leave this job, I'll get another one - I have lots of offers." This and similar comments suggested their self-confidence continued to be linked to their perceived worth in the labour market.

### ***Support networks***

Almost all the graduates were part of a support network that could help them in their careers. For most, this revolved around other Tramlines graduates - a core group kept in regular contact via email, phone, and social meetings. For some graduates, their support network evolved from new contacts made at work.

### ***Sharing IT skills***

All the graduates had passed on IT skills and expertise to others in the community. One graduate fixed the computer of a community group in her block. Another cleaned a computer virus for a local women's group. Another installed a computer in a local day nursery. Many had helped local people taking IT courses or using IT at work. All had passed on IT expertise to family and friends.

### ***Graduates as role models***

Many graduates saw themselves as role models in Ballymun. They had been approached by local people interested to know more about Tramlines and what was involved in working in the IT field.

Many graduates believed their success had encouraged others to achieve something similar. They had friends becoming interested in computers and jobs using IT. One graduate said that: "People want better jobs than ghetto jobs - Tramlines is changing the ghetto attitude."

Graduates pointed out that Tramlines and its spin-offs were happening at the same time that the economy was booming and big changes were underway in Ballymun inspiring an unprecedented confidence and hope in Ballymun community members.

### ***Living and working in Ballymun***

One year after graduation, most graduates were happy to continue living in Ballymun, and almost all would be willing to work in Ballymun if a suitable job were available in the community.

This attitude contrasted significantly with the situation one year previously, when most wanted to leave the community. Reasons for staying a year later were mostly related to the increased confidence in the future of Ballymun. Graduates who did want to leave were unable to find suitable housing in Ballymun, were concerned with the ongoing drugs situation, or simply wanted the opportunity to live elsewhere.

***Tramlines trainers***

In addition to the graduates, Tramlines produced three highly-qualified computer trainers, all from Ballymun. One year after graduation, all three said they were doing very well, working full-time as Microsoft trainers and happy in their jobs, and all had progressed their MCP training.

## **Reflections on the MCP and Tramlines**

### ***Views on the MCP programme***

Almost all the graduates held the MCP in high regard and believed the industry held the MCP in high regard for network engineers and trainers; however, it was questioned whether the MCP was well known as a programming qualification.

Graduates believed the MCP "looks great on a CV," and were increasing in demand by employers. Most were confident the MCP had great currency in the IT sector.

### ***Tramlines and the MCP***

The graduates believed that Tramlines should continue to focus on the MCP because it was so widely regarded in the IT sector. However, concern was expressed that the MCPs do not have as much currency as a computer degree in the long-term, in the sense that a computer degree can be 20 years old and still be of interest to employers, whereas an MCP was outdated with the software.

Concern was also expressed about "flooding the market with MCPs," that as more people in Ireland acquire the certification, they would have comparatively less value in the workforce.

### ***Satisfaction ratings for Tramlines training***

One year after graduation, all the graduates were satisfied or highly satisfied with their Tramlines MCP training.

All would recommend Tramlines, but some believed that professional IT training is not suitable for people without good interpersonal and social skills, which they have found necessary for IT work.

### ***Strengths of the Tramlines programme***

When asked about the particular strengths of Tramlines, aside from the obvious benefit of MCP training, the graduates spoke mostly about the personal interest in their progress shown by trainers and staff, and by the other trainees.

Trainers and staff encouraged them to go at their own pace, helped them along when they needed a push, and offered support for personal issues. Trainees also learned from each other, and when they failed exams, they "failed with 10 others, who would help you pass the next time."

***Suggested revisions to the Tramlines training programme***

Shortly after graduation, many of the graduates participated in a process to revise and refine the Tramlines training programme. Overall, the revisions suggested in the survey focused on the need to incorporate more practical and professional exposure into the training programme. Graduates believed this would help ease the "huge jump" between training to employment.

Suggestions included having servers and peripherals operational in the classroom - with trainees gaining hands-on experience of installation of networks and peripherals, and general familiarity with hardware and software in a "live" situation. Professional exposure could be increased through more talks to trainees by industry professionals and more visits to work sites. Other suggestions for Tramlines are incorporated into the concluding section of this report.

## **SURVEY OF EMPLOYERS**

Five employers were surveyed for this study, each of whom had hired two or more Tramlines graduates. Considering the small number of employers interviewed, the survey results indicate general trends in thinking and experience - which could be pursued further by a wider survey.

Employers interviewed included a Business Manager in a large multinational IT company, the Leader of staff and student IT services at a Dublin university, the Manager of a small community-based IT company, the Coordinator of a CDVEC IT training programme, and the Sales and Marketing Director of a major Dublin IT services company.

### ***Opinions of the MCP qualification***

Surprisingly, given the graduates' overwhelmingly positive endorsement of the MCP qualification, employers were much more reserved in their views.

Two believed the MCP was a good starting point - although it was "an excellent benchmark for computer competence," it was only the foundation for applying it in a business situation.

One said that an MCP: "Wouldn't mean an awful lot - I'd be looking for someone with a broader outlook." Another believed the MCP was "pretty low-grade, support desk level" but held a very high opinion of the MCSE (the full Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer). The final employer was "dubious" of the MCP, believing that it showed the holder could learn to pass exams but was only "one of five factors I would look for in an employee." All the employers equally valued non-IT skills - a point which will be discussed shortly.

### ***Comparisons with third-level graduates***

For the employers in the IT training field, an MCT (Microsoft Certified Trainer) was a requirement in employees, and employees with the MCT would therefore be more valuable than employees with a third-level degree but without an MCT qualification. At the same time however, in a teaching/training situation, employers believed that employees with a third-level degree would be more valuable because they could be called upon to deliver a wider variety of courses.

For the employers in the IT technical support field, the MCP qualification was seen as having a major advantage over a computer degree in that a new graduate with an MCP could be put out to work more quickly than a third-level graduate, who might need months of acclimatisation to the practical applications of IT.

On the other hand, some believed that a person holding a computer-degree had "more well-rounded" knowledge, that they had been exposed to a broader range of courses in university and could be trained in a new area more easily than someone with only an MCP background. In fact, one employer believed that the trend towards MCP training rather than a more general IT education represented an undesirable "narrowing of skills."

The employers pointed out that the MCP qualification has become almost a requirement for many technical jobs. Most believed that the shortage of people with MCP qualifications was only temporary and that as more people acquired MCP qualifications, the MCPs would decrease in value compared to third-level qualifications; however one believed the MCP will increase in value because of the huge growth potential of IT in Ireland.

Opinions were mixed as to whether the MCP qualification would go out of date faster than third-level IT degrees. Some believed that MCPs would not go out of date because the time lag between new product introduction and take-up by customers meant that someone with an MCP qualification would have time to learn the new product.

Other employers believed that MCPs could go out of date rapidly - one recalled that Novell qualifications were "red-hot" a few years ago but "bombed when the product market share dropped," and said it was difficult to predict the how the market will change in the future.

### ***Suitability in employment***

Overall, employers were on the lookout for IT staff who had good interpersonal skills, who came across well in an interview, and who seemed to fit in well with the existing staff.

The employers surveyed were satisfied with their employees who were Tramlines graduates and believed they had the IT skills and expertise required for the job.

However, a major finding of the survey of employers was that for them, good customer service, communication and business skills, an understanding of the company's focus, as well as confidence and a professional attitude were every bit as important as IT skills in their employees. In these areas, Tramlines graduates, who previously had little or no experience in professional employment, were below par when starting out in the IT field but were learning these skills in employment.

Speaking of their employees as a whole, not just Tramlines graduates, one employer said that an employee with top-notch IT skills was of little use if he or she were not capable of explaining to a client how a mouse worked. Others noted that their employees needed to

interact professionally with clients and know how to handle themselves in a variety of challenging situations. For instance, employees were often required to explain complex technical situations to clients who were senior managers with little technical background, a situation requiring considerable delicacy.

On the other hand, Tramlines graduates could offer something that other employees might not have - as one employer described it: "They have ability, the initiative to work hard on their own, and a great desire to break out of their background situation. I have found them intelligent, gritty and resolute people, who just needed an opportunity to succeed."

### ***Offering training on the job***

Employers believed that employee training was a team approach -the motivation had to be there in the employee, and management had to be pro-active and embrace the employees' initiative.

Employers' willingness to offer employees training on the job was clearly linked to employees' mobility. Employers believed that keeping employees with the company meant keeping them happy - one described the "constant treadmill to keep employees happy" - and that quality training was key to keeping employees happy at work.

Yet many employers surveyed were reluctant to offer quality training to employees because they were unsure of reaping a suitable return on their investment. Training was expensive and they believed that after finishing training, employees would demand higher salaries and leave the company to get them.

This situation varied among employers. For example, when told that many employers do not offer training to their employees, an employer in a large multinational IT company said that was a "naive" approach. He said the cost of taking on a new employee is "horrendous" - and calculated the cost of taking on someone new for a job paying £20,000 at around £30-40,000, not including the "hassle." For this reason, his company was willing to pay considerable amounts to keep employees with the company, and much of that was by offering and paying for high-quality training.

On the other hand, several employers pointed out the difficulty for small indigenous Irish companies to compete with large multinationals for qualified IT staff. One said that the large multinationals "trawl through" the Microsoft lists of qualified MCSEs and then try to recruit them aggressively, usually offering salaries well out of the reach of the smaller Irish firms.

Employers in the IT training field were in a position of having to offer their trainers training, so that they in turn could train clients in the latest applications.

### ***Employers' training needs***

When asked what kind of training course they would most like to offer their staff as a whole and not just the Tramlines graduates, three employers named non-IT training - a customer service course, a sales course, and a course in organisational behaviour and team working. Two named IT training - the full MCSE training, and specialised technical training.

### ***Salary differentials by educational background***

Most employers surveyed generally agreed that a leaving cert was "not a huge indicator of ability" in the IT sector and could not understand why Tramlines graduates without a leaving cert were paid less than graduates with a leaving cert qualification.

However, some pointed out that a leaving cert was often an indicator of other attributes, such as good time management and a more disciplined approach. One noted that traditionally employers in some sectors have a strong bias against employees without good English and maths at second-level.

Only one employer was constrained by company policy regarding hiring an employee without a leaving cert. In this case, the organisation could not give a contract of more than three years to someone without a leaving cert.

Most employers would offer a higher salary to new employees with a computer degree than new employees with an MCP because they believed the third-level skills were "more well-rounded," meaning they had been exposed to a broader training.

Employers in the educational sector in particular would tend to pay higher salaries to people with a computer degree because of the strong belief in higher-education, although they and other public sector employers could not generally offer salaries as high as the private sector.

However, a new employee with a full MCSE qualification would have great potential for higher earnings.

In any case, the employers believed that salary differentials among graduates with different educational backgrounds would "equalise out" over the years because salaries in the long-term are related to performance and customer relations.

### ***Salary differentials by gender***

All the employers surveyed said their own organisation did not pay different salaries to employees of different genders in similar positions.

However, several employers pointed out that there were few women heads of IT departments, and that this was "an industry-wide problem." They believed this was related to the "natural pecking order" in every organisation, in which men were more self-confident than women and rose to higher positions.

Others said that women employees were more "loyal" and "dependable," often because they had family responsibilities making them less mobile in employment. Women were more dependent on their employers, who could safely offer them less money than male employees who demanded higher salaries and had more job mobility.

One employer suggested that men were more useful than women as IT support staff on the road because they could be expected to lift heavy equipment, while many women in this position might require help from clients who might be reluctant to help lift equipment.

### ***Childcare issues***

To varying degrees, childcare was an issue for all the employers surveyed. In some cases, childcare had posed major problems for employees and had negatively affected their job performance. This was a particular difficulty for lone parents. It was suggested that employers should offer more flexible working conditions to employees with childcare responsibilities.

### ***Suggestions for improving Tramlines***

When asked if they would recommend a Tramlines-type course to someone wanting to enter the computer field, all were positive in their response but qualified their endorsement with the need to ensure that the person was suitable for a job in the IT field, and had or could acquire good interpersonal skills. One said that while he was enthusiastic about Tramlines, he would encourage his own son to take an IT diploma to access a broader range of training.

The employers' suggestions for improving a Tramlines-type course focused on making it a more holistic training program by increasing the confidence of Tramlines graduates, giving them more customer relations skills, and making them more aware of the business context of IT.

Tramlines would benefit from more work placements, to give the trainees more of an understanding of why businesses use IT and Microsoft software.

Two employers believed that sales training would be a big asset, giving the Tramlines graduates the skills to negotiate a variety of business situations. Another specific suggestion was telephone skills.

Suggestions on the IT training side included: a practical hardware course - teaching them how to swap boards on a PC; skills in software testing and Web page development; and exposure to a programming language.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this evaluation, we can say that Tramlines One has had an extremely positive sustainable employment impact.

One year after Tramlines, all the graduates were in employment using their IT skills, earning salaries comparable to graduates of certificate, diploma and degree programmes in IT.

More than three-quarters were highly satisfied or satisfied with their employment and their professional development. Almost all had further increased their self confidence, were confident or very confident about their futures, and were part of a support network that could help them in their careers. They were all positive about Tramlines and would recommend it to anybody wanting to enter the IT field.

We can therefore endorse the recommendation of the 1997 NESF (National Economic and Social Forum) report that Tramlines is a model for moving long-term unemployed people into sustainable employment.

One of the study's objectives was to identify constraints to sustainable employment and professional development. The most significant was the lack of training opportunities at work. A valid concern raised was that the graduates' MCP qualifications might have less currency in the long-term than third-level certifications, making training on-the-job particularly important for them. This issue will continue to be an ongoing challenge, given the difficulties for most employers to offering training to their employees. Addressing this situation will likely require a policy-level response.

The lack of viable options for childcare is another potential constraint to sustainable employment and professional development for graduates of Tramlines-type programmes. Childcare remained a challenge for some women graduates with childcare responsibilities, although the situation had improved since the Tramlines training days when it was for many a significant barrier to their performance. Both the earlier and the current evaluation found that childcare was an ongoing concern for employers as well.

The study also investigated income and employment inequalities among the graduates. The most persistent centred on their prior educational level, specifically whether or not they had completed their leaving cert cycle, with the graduates without a leaving cert earning significantly less than the others - an earlier evaluation found that this was also the most significant factor related to their performance in the Tramlines training programme itself, with the trainees without a leaving cert gaining fewer certifications. Clearly, this situation will need to be addressed in future Tramlines-type programmes.

Another inequality centred on gender, with women graduates earning lower salaries than their male counterparts. Again, creative solutions will be needed to tackle this inequality, which is of course a widespread structural situation in the labour force extending well outside the IT sector.

Finally, the study was able to highlight the continuing contribution of Tramlines to the development of Ballymun - the graduates had passed on IT skills and expertise to others in the community and saw themselves as positive role models in the community. Most wanted to remain living in Ballymun because they were increasingly confident about its future.

## **FRAMEWORK FOR THE TRAMLINES MODEL**

This section considers the first Tramlines evaluation, the current survey, and an evaluation conducted by the ESF (Evaluation Report: ESF & the Long Term Unemployed, Dublin, November 1998) which looked at Tramlines along with dozens of other EU-funded training programmes. Based on these three evaluations, we can outline the framework for a successful Tramlines model.

### **1. A strong local IT sector**

The strength of the IT sector will ultimately determine the sustainable employment of Tramlines graduates - and of all other workers in the sector. We can expect that Tramlines-type programmes will continue to be a viable measure for targeting unemployment and creating new IT professionals for as long as the IT sector remains strong.

Given the high mobility in the IT sector, many IT professionals will gravitate toward Dublin where most IT jobs are located - which raises the question of whether a Tramlines-type programme outside Dublin will be successful in keeping new graduates in the local area.

Tramlines' success is clearly linked to a strong local IT sector for another reason: Both in training and in their first year in employment, the Tramlines trainees' motivation, self-confidence and positive attitude were rooted in their belief that their MCP qualifications would ensure sustainable employment locally.

### **2. Training in professional IT certifications in demand by employers**

Tramlines was designed for Microsoft Certifications, but the model could be modified for other IT certifications, and indeed for certifications other than IT.

Clearly, employers currently want employees with MCP certifications, and for some jobs, value these more than third-level qualifications. The full MCSE qualification is in particular high demand. However, third-level IT qualifications are seen by employers as a indicating a broader range of skills.

The danger of training in product-specific skills is ensuring that the product will remain strong in the market; if the market share drops dramatically - as happened with Novell networking software - people with certifications in this software will also lose their currency. Some employers believe that MCP qualifications will lose value as more people gain them - again, this situation is linked to the strength of the local IT market.

### **3. Training in customer service skills desired by employers**

For employers, customer service skills, a professional approach and an understanding of the business environment are equally as important as IT skills in their employees. Tramlines graduates were below par in this area but learning a great deal on the job. The Tramlines graduates also noted their "huge leap" from training to the work environment. Given this situation, the Tramlines model should include a strong exposure to these areas as an integral part of the training.

### **4. A flexible training organisation**

The choice of training organisation is crucial. A primary challenge of the Tramlines model is that the requirements for the certifications are outside the training organisation's control. Microsoft certification requirements can change rapidly in order to meet the needs of a dynamic and rapidly evolving industry.

Organisations taking on the Tramlines model must have quickly-adaptable training structures in place, with a management approach to match; training staff in particular must be capable of quickly adapting to changes. As long as the training organisation can respond to and incorporate change successfully, they can be assured of producing graduates with the latest knowledge of products who will be attractive to employers.

### **5. An appropriate recruitment, selection and induction process for trainees**

Recruiting long-term unemployed people onto skills training programmes has been a particular difficulty for training agents. The Tramlines model should include innovative recruitment, selection and induction methods. A key element is running a high-profile, high-energy, positive and targeted recruitment campaign, with considerable inputs by the programme staff and management focused on engaging the trainees.

### **6. Adequate training allowances for trainees**

The Tramlines model should include adequate allowances for the trainees, which are vital to ensuring their participation in training.

### **7. A system of personal support for trainees, and adequate staff resources**

The Tramlines model requires that staff are able to offer support for the particular difficulties facing long-term unemployed people, including a range of personal, financial and self-esteem issues. The ESF evaluation recommends that trainer/trainee ratios should be

lower where the long-term unemployed are in a majority to allow for more intensive supports - with a minimum requirement of 1:12 (compared with current ratios of 1:20 on FÁS and VTOS courses). In addition, there should also be a full-time programme coordinator.

### **8. An appropriate mix of training approaches**

The Tramlines programme includes a mix of training approaches including intensive training, monitored self-study, and practical work. Tramlines was most successful for trainees with a prior leaving cert. The Tramlines model should place particular focus on trainees without a leaving cert, to give them the needed skills and supports to increase their chances of success. This might include more one-on-one tutoring, training in study skills, time management and exam techniques, and a focus on practical project work rather than book learning.

### **9. Targeted supports for trainees without a leaving cert and women trainees**

The Tramlines model should include targeted supports for trainees without a leaving cert and women trainees aimed at increasing their self-confidence and ability to negotiate for salaries equal to their counterparts in the workforce.

### **10. Support and provisions for childcare and career guidance for lone parents**

The Tramlines model should include provisions for childcare for trainees with childcare responsibilities, through training allowances and support for making childcare arrangements. Lone parents may also need career guidance and help with finding ways to ensure that childcare does not remain a barrier in their employment.