

# Dublin needs to attract 'creative class'

Free wi-fi on public transport is just one of Dublin Chamber's novel ideas to put the capital city at the forefront of knowledge economies, writes Ruth Wildgust

**T**he high cost of living in Dublin is threatening its development as a 'knowledge city' with a highly skilled workforce, according to a new report by the Dublin Chamber of Commerce.

In its report, *Developing a Knowledge City Region: A Ten Point Plan*, the chamber calls on the government to implement a number of measures to attract highly skilled workers, including financial and tax incentives aimed at offsetting the high cost of living in the capital.

"The real challenge is to take some quantum leaps in Ireland's positioning among first world nations in terms of connectivity and the knowledge economy," said Dublin Chamber chief executive Gina Quin.

To create a viable knowledge economy in the city, Quin said it was vital to attract a "creative class" to support future inward investment. "The creative class comprises people from science, communications and engineering to people in arts, design and entertainment, as well as those involved in the creative application of services," she said.

## Broadband

Broadband connectivity is, said Quin, a major issue threatening Dublin's economic development. In its report, the chamber outlines a ten-point action plan recommending initiatives such as a pilot wi-fi system for Dublin's public transport system and a new policy to ensure that all new homes built in and around the

city are fibre-ready.

"We're improving, but so are our competitors in the EU, so Ireland still ranks low in the table of connectivity and broadband," said Quin, who believes that the provision of wi-fi in the city's public transport system would offer a potential panacea for commuters.

"Having free wi-fi on public transport would be a fantastic point to sell to overseas workers as well as Irish workers and go a long way towards creating a unique feature for Dublin," said Quin. "It would reduce the congestion and raise Ireland's image as a 21st century economy."

The committee that produced the report examined how Ireland compared with a number of other cities worldwide, including Stockholm, Tallin, London, Barcelona, San Francisco, and Shanghai.

A report on knowledge creation released in 2006 by Mastercard ranked Dublin 31st out of over 100 cities internationally. New York came first.

"Given our history and innovation in education and research and development, we'd love to see Dublin move up that list into the top ten or 15 city regions in the world," said Quin.

## Attracting talent

Projects such as the IFSC, Transport 21 and the Digital Hub have significantly increased Dublin's reputation as an innovative city, according to Eamonn O'Raghallaigh, director of specialist recruitment consultancy [lifescience.ie](http://lifescience.ie).

"Significant investment in research and development programmes, notably in science and technology, have posi-

tioned Dublin strategically in terms of its potential to be a leading global knowledge city," said O'Raghallaigh.

"There are already several cities that identify themselves as knowledge cities, or have strategic plans to become knowledge cities," he said. "The list includes Barcelona, Melbourne, Delft, Panama City, Shanghai, Kista Science City (near Stockholm), Bangalore, Palmerston North (NZ),



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Medina and Dubai."

Dublin has the advantage of a highly educated workforce already in situ, said O'Raghallaigh, but infrastructural improvements are now vital to bring the city in line with leading global knowledge cities.

[Lifescience.ie](http://Lifescience.ie) targets overseas candidates where there is a shortage of experienced workers locally, specifically in the pharmaceutical and healthcare sectors.

"This involves building strong international networks and ongoing aggressive mar-

keting campaigns to generate interest in Ireland as a potential location and to attract highly skilled workers," said O'Raghallaigh.

"We have had considerable success in generating interest, particularly in the European, Indo-China and North American human capital markets. There has been a significant increase in the number of quality applicants for the required roles."

## Cost of living

One issue consistently raised by international candidates, said O'Raghallaigh, is the cost of living in Dublin. "The introduction of short-term financial incentives recommended in Dublin Chamber's plan would have an immediate positive effect and somewhat psychologically offset the high cost of living in Dublin."

Despite this, he said Dublin had a reputation among international candidates as a city of cultural diversity, amicable people, opportunity and affluence.

"Candidates from the pharmaceutical industry are particularly enthusiastic, considering the fact that nine of the world's top ten pharmaceutical companies have significant operations in Ireland and they see Dublin as a location for considerable career progression," he said. "Dublin has also consolidated itself as a centre for excellence in scientific and medical research with

investment in these areas significantly increased in recent years."

## Brain gain

Britain leads Europe in the "brain gain" race, according to O'Raghallaigh. "Over 300,000 foreign students were enrolled in British colleges and universities in 2004, accounting for 11 per cent of all foreign stu-

dents studying abroad.”

O’Raghallaigh said that Britain’s Highly Skilled Migrant Programme (HSMP), introduced in 2002, has been a success with only 1,100 admitted in its first year rising to nearly 27,000 in 2005.

“Other countries that have implemented strategic plans to attract highly skilled foreign workers include Canada, Australia, UAE and France, and the majority of these have met with considerable success.”

An expedited immigration application process will increase Dublin’s attractiveness to international candidates.

“The introduction of the EU ‘blue card’ scheme will be critical in integrating migration trends in Europe, standardising immigration procedures and allowing easy movement of non-EEA skilled workers within EU states,” said O’Raghallaigh,” said O’Raghallaigh.

## Cultural mix

Dublin still compares very well with the rest of the world in terms of attracting skilled people, according to Sean Gannon, senior consultant with Collins McNicholas Dublin. “Dublin is seen as an attractive destination that is vibrant and multicultural, with plenty of opportunities and still a welcoming place,” he said.

“Ireland needs to embrace cultural diversity as it represents openness and tolerance to new ideas and various lifestyles. It is important to knowledge workers who often want to socialise and learn from people with different perspectives. Work-life balance can be extremely important to someone coming to live in Dublin, and can at times be the deciding factor in accepting a job.”

With the support of the government and organisations like the IDA, the focus for industry in Dublin should be on developing more innovation clusters, said Gannon, such as networks of private companies or public ventures focused on a shared field of study or devel-

opment.

“Being clustered in one area allows for collaboration of industries and makes it easier to attract the skills to the capital, he said. “The Digital Hub is a prime example of how this can be achieved.”

According to Gannon, Ireland can continue to compete with other knowledge-based economies by continuing to devise attractive, innovative and far-sighted foreign investment and competition policies and encouraging and embracing technology and research and development.

Gannon said that Ireland’s success in investing in growth in the technology sector, implementing policy and attracting businesses like HP, Microsoft and Dell in the 1980s, was now recognised internationally as a strong economic business model. “Fundamentally, no matter what the industry, IT remains at the core of every competitive economy and Dublin’s growth relies on this to maintain its competitive edge,” said Gannon.

## Melting pot

Dublin is a vibrant city that continues to have huge potential in the knowledge economy, according to David Martin, director of EMEA finance and business intelligence with Google. Martin was a member of the committee that drafted Dublin Chamber’s ten-point plan.

“Google is a great example of a knowledge company succeeding in Dublin, with a

highly talented workforce coming from across Europe and beyond. Already we have grown to about 1,500 employees and we continue to actively recruit as we grow our business,” said Martin.

“Our Googlers work with markets across Europe, Middle East and Africa, all from Dublin. In many ways Dublin has become the ‘melting-pot’ of Europe with its ability to attract such highly skilled people from across Europe and be-

yond,” he said.

“As a city though, we need to build on this solid start ensuring that we create the right business and social environment to attract and retain such talent – it is all about the ecosystem you create.”

The fall-off in science and engineering students and graduates needs to be addressed, said Martin. “A shortage of talent in this area is a big concern to a company like ours – not just because it makes it more difficult to source talent locally, but also because it damages the ability of the city to build and maintain the right ecosystem for a knowledge economy to thrive,” he said.

“It is important that the city continues to invest and work on making Dublin an attractive place to live and work, not just for young mobile talent but also for more seasoned talent that typically come here with their families.”

## Tipping points

There are plenty of tactical steps that will help develop Dublin as a knowledge city, said Martin. These can be relatively inexpensive and quick to implement and can serve as “tipping points” or “beacons of intention” for Dublin.

“I think we touched on a few good examples of these in the Dublin Chamber report, for example wi-fi-enabling public transport or changing the building regulations and including in the city’s development plan a requirement that no new dwellings be built in the city without either optical fibre or a duct into which optical fibre can be blown at a later date.

“I think we need to get on with it and do things. If there is one thing I have learned from working in the knowledge economy, it is that it is fast-moving and unlikely to wait for any city to catch up.”