

Becoming a National Champion Bank: An interview with Shane Quinlan

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Bank of Ireland's Head of Financial Wellbeing Shane Quinlan tells Thinkbusiness.ie editor John Kennedy how improving the financial wellbeing of customers, colleagues and communities is at the heart of the Group's strategy and ambition to be Ireland's National Champion Bank.

Financial Wellbeing takeaways from Shane Quinlan:

- The Covid-19 crisis will focus minds more than ever on the importance of Financial Wellbeing for the future
- There are three key drivers of Financial Wellbeing: Financial Literacy, Financial Capability and Financial Confidence
- Improving levels of financial literacy is at the heart of Financial Wellbeing and it is about enabling customers to learn more about good financial management and steps to take to improve their financial health
- There are four pillars of Financial Wellbeing: save, spend, borrow and plan
- New emerging digital tools are enabling people to better understand their financial position and plan for specific life goals like education, holidays and retirement

People often make assumptions about banks that are rooted in long-held perceptions. The reality is banks look just as hard at themselves as they do at balance sheets, and one stark realisation that emerged in recent years was that some employees at Bank of Ireland were equally challenged when managing their finances as the public they served.

This harsh truth came from Bank of Ireland research that found a third of the Irish population were very worried about their finances and this was echoed in a similar internal survey of Bank of Ireland employees.

Ireland's first Financial Wellbeing Index was published in 2019 and based on nationally representative research conducted by Bank of Ireland, in association with RED C Research. It revealed that Ireland had a Financial Wellbeing score of 61, which meant as a nation we were "managing" financially but not "thriving", which is the optimum category of financial wellbeing.

These truths spoke fully to Bank of Ireland's purpose under the leadership of CEO Francesca McDonagh to enable its customers, colleagues and communities to thrive. One way to achieve this is enabling people to thrive financially by making better financial decisions for themselves and for those that matter most in their lives.

In response to this, Bank of Ireland launched a new Financial Wellbeing programme in March 2019 to support consumer capability and confidence when it comes to their personal finances. The programme was grounded in nationally representative Financial Wellbeing research, which uncovered that more than half of people in Ireland (55%) have no pension and one in four would last less than a month without having to borrow if they lost their main source of income.

Guiding the programme is the Bank's Head of Financial Wellbeing Shane Quinlan, who prior to joining Bank of Ireland in 2015 worked with Danske Bank across Scandinavia in senior customer and strategy roles.

"Our purpose is to enable our customers, colleagues and communities to thrive. That means being with our customers every step of the way as they make life decisions. Financial Wellbeing is about what you do with your pot of money, not the size of it. It's about making sure that you can cover day-to-day expenses, plan for the future and cope with the unexpected, enabling you to do the most with what you have. Our research has shown that the majority of people in Ireland are not in as much control of their finances as they want to be, and the recent Covid-19 emergency will have exacerbated that.

“Through our programme, we want to help consumers build a better relationship with money, empower them to take control of their daily finances and ultimately support better financial decision-making for themselves, their families and their businesses. Consumers and businesses can improve their financial wellbeing in the same way as they improve their physical health or fitness – through awareness, setting goals, and accessing supports.”

“A lot of it comes down to structure and education. Some people with high incomes can be poor at understanding or managing their finances while others on more modest incomes can have high levels of financial literacy, manage their finances effectively on a day-to-day basis and have their pension plans in good order. There are four pillars of Financial Wellbeing: save consistently, spend sensibly, borrow responsibly and plan effectively. It is about prioritising but also knowing how to structure, and the key to that is education and having the tools to be able to manage and plan.”

Quinlan also explained that there was a strong focus on improving the Financial Wellbeing of his Bank of Ireland colleagues. An internal survey that ran in parallel to the national research revealed that 4 in 10 of bank employees were challenged when managing their finances. This flew in the face of assumptions that just because people worked in banks, they were financial whizzkids. “There are lots of people who work in a variety of roles and skillsets across the bank that don’t necessarily get full exposure to the bank’s products and advisory services. In the first year

of the programme we have focused on helping our colleagues learn more about good financial management and steps to improve their financial health by providing educational content, delivering seminars and launching a new Wellbeing app that includes modules on Financial Wellbeing.”

Boosting the financial literacy and ultimately financial wellbeing of the Irish public is arguably one of the biggest missions for Bank of Ireland in its 240-year history. Some of the key initiatives delivered by the bank in the past year include the rollout of a new Youth Financial Wellbeing programme across primary, secondary and 3rd level, the launch of an online Financial Wellbeing Centre and Financial Health Check, a new digital investment self-service tool for customers, and the opening of a new Vulnerable Customer Unit to support customers dealing with particular issues of vulnerability (e.g. age-related, health-related etc).

Since the launch of the programme over 100,000 children across Ireland have participated in the Bank’s youth literacy activities, over 1,000 financial literacy hours have been delivered to older customer groups, over 4,500 customer cases have been supported by the Vulnerable Customer Unit and more than 2,000 Bank of Ireland employees have attended Financial Wellbeing seminars and training with the bank’s Financial Wellbeing Coaches. In addition over 100,000 people have engaged with the bank’s online Financial Wellbeing centre with more than 55,000 of those undertaking the personal or business online Financial Healthcheck.

Covid-19 crisis will focus minds on financial literacy



Zoom forward to Spring 2020 and like the rest of the world the bank is dealing with the challenges of Covid-19 and through its actions so far, it is very much living up to the ideal of becoming the National Champion Bank.

In response to the crisis, the bank has created the technical capacity to enable 70% of its employees to work from home. It moved with speed to offer protections for businesses, streamlining services and fast-tracking payments to SME suppliers. The response included donating €1m in emergency funds to the Community Foundation for Ireland to help support the most vulnerable across the island of Ireland, creating a priority hour in branches for over-65s and carers, and temporarily waiving contactless fees for all customers. The bank also introduced mortgage and loan payment breaks, as well as new dedicated services for customers cocooning and healthcare workers.

As the Irish people and its businesses come to terms with the financial shock caused by Covid-19 to their incomes and wellbeing, Quinlan believes people will be more conscious of the importance of Financial Wellbeing:

“As we saw after the global financial crisis in 2008 customer attitudes to finances are likely to shift on the back of Covid-19. We are likely to see a demographic of people emerge who are going to be averse to building up debt and who will be more focused on building up savings buffers to be prepared for any future shocks. I would expect to see an increased appetite from consumers to engage with the bank on their Financial Wellbeing.”

Quinlan said that Financial Wellbeing is at the heart of Bank of Ireland’s drive to help the Irish economy get back on its feet.

“As a bank we will focus on helping our customers improve their Financial Wellbeing as we emerge from the crisis. As the crisis hit, we put in place a lot of supports such as payment breaks, waiving of fees and measures aimed at assisting vulnerable customers through this emergency. As the country starts to recover, supporting our personal and business customers to rebuild after the crisis will be a key focus.”

Quinlan concluded:

If we do this right and contribute to improving the nation’s Financial Wellbeing, we will be on the path to becoming Ireland’s National Champion Bank.”

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