

SFA National Small Business Awards 2022



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We would like to thank all our sponsors and partners for their valuable support in making the **SFA National Small Business Awards** such a success over the last 18 years.

We look forward to continuing these relationships with another successful year in 2022.

 SFA National
Small Business
Awards

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CONTENTS

Introduction from Sven Spollen-Behrens, SFA director	4
INSIGHTS	
Claudia Saumell, client engagement manager, Bord Bia	5
FOOD AND DRINK	
Local sourcing, natural ingredients and consumer awareness	6
INSIGHTS	
Caroline Burke, small business manager, Cisco	9
OUTSTANDING SMALL BUSINESS	
Resourcefulness, agility and identifying gaps in the market	10
INSIGHTS	
Mags Brennan, head of business banking, Permanent TSB	13
MANUFACTURING	
Investment in facilities and excellence in production	14
INSIGHTS	
Ailbhe Cooke, senior digital marketing specialist, One4all Rewards	16
RETAIL	
A new category this year, demonstrating versatility and resilience	17
INSIGHTS	
Geraldine Larkin, chief executive officer, National Standards Authority of Ireland	20
INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR	
Addressing real-world problems with an eye on global trends	21
INSIGHTS	
Michael Office, VP Product Marketing, Sage	24
SERVICES	
Putting the customer first with attention to detail	25
INSIGHTS	
June Butler, chief executive officer, Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland	27
SUSTAINABILITY	
An environmental ethos with a difference	28
INSIGHTS	
Maureen Walsh, managing director, DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland	31
WORKPLACE WELLBEING	
Going the extra mile in looking after employees	32
INSIGHTS	
Enda McDonnell, director, Dublin Region, Enterprise Ireland	34
EXPORTER OF THE YEAR	
Bringing quality and innovation to international markets	35
INSIGHTS	
David Curtin, chief executive officer, .IE	36
EMERGING NEW BUSINESS	
Five small businesses carving their own niche	38

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Comment from the chair



I am delighted to offer my congratulations to all the 2022 finalists in the SFA National Small Business Awards programme. Now in their eighteenth year, these awards celebrate achievement, innovation, and excellence amongst small firms, and it is these very qualities that are evident in the companies featured in this special awards supplement.

All the companies presented here are among the best in Irish small businesses. Each employing fewer than 50 people, they represent a wide range of business sectors, right throughout Ireland. From reading their success stories you will no doubt be inspired by their drive, constant innovation, and commitment to growth.

The people involved here are truly representative of the diversity of entrepreneurship in Ireland, from environmentally-friendly companies to established and traditional, family-run businesses. As our economy reopens, these companies will play a significant part in rebuilding and driving growth in Ireland's indigenous sector.

As we continue to face uncertainty it is encouraging to see such innovation in our small businesses. It will be so important to harness the energy, agility, and determination of the businesses we read about in this supplement and support them by creating a business environment that values small business, supports entrepreneurship and rewards risk takers.

The businesses profiled here have

availed of a fantastic programme to date as part of the SFA National Small Business Awards. As well as receiving extensive media and PR benefits from becoming a finalist, all of these companies have received a subsidised training package and a strategic management masterclass weekend. They have also showcased their products and services in the Awards Village at the SFA Business Connect event at the Aviva Stadium.

In conclusion, I would like to thank our sponsors and judges for their continued support in making the entire awards programme possible. Our sponsors are Bord Bia, Cisco, DeCare, Enterprise Ireland, .IE, One4all Rewards, NSAI, Permanent TSB, Sage and the SBCI and our management training partner is Skillnet Ireland.

Our very hardworking judges include: Sue O'Neill of Shellcove and awards judging panel chair, Mairead Cirillo of Environmental Business Advice; Tom Cooney of TU Dublin; John Ihle from the *Irish Independent*; Padraig Sheerin from Three; Brian O'Kane of Oaktree Press; Professor Frank Roche, chairman of Dublin Business Innovation Centre; Geraldine Lavin of 3rdi and Ken Germaine, CEO of Funding Master.

I wish all the finalist companies the best of luck tonight at the Gala Final and in the future.

Graham Byrne
SFA chair

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HOPE IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

Despite a bumpy start to 2022, Ireland's small business community remains determined to weather the storm and come out stronger, writes Sven Spollen-Behrens, director of the SFA



Sven Spollen-Behrens, director, SFA

Ireland is a nation of small businesses and small firms with fewer than 50 employees account for 98% of the total number of businesses in Ireland, employing one in every two private-sector workers. They are present in every village, town and city in the country.

We have seen this through the SFA National Small Business Awards this year, with entrants from all over the country competing in the awards and showing what a range of diverse and interesting businesses can be found across Ireland.

The opening months of 2022 have seen major ups and downs for the small business community. Initially, it was a time of great optimism when the economy was finally allowed to fully open up and resume trading. As the weeks and months went on, the rate of inflation, the cost of doing business and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have caused pinch points for many small businesses.

Not only are many finding it hard to

keep up with soaring utility and fuel bills, but small businesses are now facing into supply chains being disrupted due to the war in Eastern Europe. In short, small businesses are experiencing uncertain times now and it is more important than ever for government to support them and the jobs they create.

Inspirational finalists

The finalists in this year's SFA National Small Business Awards demonstrate that with a clear business vision and a sense of optimism, passion, drive and perseverance success is achievable.

These awards would not be possible without the generous support of our sponsors. Their support highlights their commitment to small business in Ireland and I would like to express our gratitude to each of them, namely: Bord Bia, Cisco, DeCare, .IE, Enterprise Ireland, NSAI, One4all Rewards, Sage, SBCI, Permanent TSB, and to Skillnet Ireland, our manage-

ment training partner. Thanks also to our media partner, the *Irish Independent*.

I am delighted that once again this year we have a very special charity donation for our winning company. Our 2020 overall winner KORE Insulation has very kindly donated a special bursary of €5,000, which the winning company this year can donate to a charity of its choice. I would like to extend our sincere gratitude to Noel Brady, Caroline Ashe and the KORE Insulation team for this very generous donation.

Finally, I want to congratulate all of this year's finalists. Regardless of the outcome, you are all winners and deserve every success; the quality and standard of our awards finalists is really second to none.

To find out more about the SFA National Small Business Awards programme and see past and present finalists and winners go to www.SFAAwards.ie.

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BRANDING BOOST

For any food or drink business, the brand is not just a logo or pack design, it reflects values and aspirations that consumers connect with, writes Claudia Saumell, client engagement manager, Bord Bia

When it comes to branding, achieving coherence and clarity is not only nice to have, it's crucial for standing out in the market and making better connections with the consumer. It's about defining a clear message of the values inherent in your product and understanding what your target consumers are looking for to ensure they are drawn to those values.

Consumers have changed a lot since the pandemic – they like to cook from scratch, they spend more time at home and their wellbeing and the wellbeing of the rest of the family are key priorities.

Authenticity has come more to the forefront in consumers' minds, so it's important for a food brand to have a story; the 'when', the 'why' and the person behind it to make it personal and connect with people.

Before designing and developing a brand, it's essential that you have a good

understanding of the market. Know what your competitors are doing and how the consumer is responding to this so you can identify how to differentiate yourself.

Consumer research of your target group is key to achieving the right messaging and visual impact. The power of a distinctive, reliably consistent brand is an undeniable advantage when generating brand assets. You need to understand how the brand will look and feel across all touchpoints and keep images and words aligned.

Brands of today must have a digital presence, but one that is seamlessly integrated with physical and human touchpoints. The consumer doesn't think channels, they simply see a brand. Since Covid-19, e-commerce has taken on a life of its own. So, not carrying out research to understand the values of your target audience might implicate that your brand will ultimately not resonate with them and fail to captivate.

“The power of a distinctive, consistent brand is an undeniable advantage when generating brand assets. You need to understand how the brand will look and feel across all touchpoints.”

SuperBrands initiative

Bord Bia runs a programme called SuperBrands, which is dedicated to helping smaller Irish food and drink companies to develop their brand in order to grow and thrive.

There are three main components to the programme: good thinking, creative design and consumer research. Good thinking involves companies working with a marketing professional who will help them to understand their market and category, as well as identify key competitors and what their point of difference is. Once this is done, the creative design phase develops a brief and executes brand design propositions.

The final stage is when consumer research is undertaken. This involves



Claudia Saumell, client engagement manager, Bord Bia

testing potential brand propositions with consumers and exploring your category and competitors with consumers. At the end of the process, the participants receive a full debrief of the findings and a final report.

What we hear from companies that have taken part is that SuperBrands makes a real impact on their business. A good example is Pure Treats, a range of products aimed people with diabetes or who are becoming more conscious of sugar consumption. This company left with a thoroughly researched new brand name and visual ID as now depicted on its packaging and website.

Additional supports

With over 200 member companies, Bord Bia's Brand Forum has been working with food and drinks companies for many years to develop and grow their brands and business. The forum is focused on providing practical thought leadership and best practice in food and drink branding.

Quarterly events focus on expert speakers and industry case studies. The forum also offers a wide range of bespoke brand-building workshops, including on social media, copy writing and tone of voice, video strategy and packaging design. In addition, the forum offers a recipe video and photography content production service.

Another support provided by Bord Bia is Brand Health Check, which offers members an opportunity to partake in a large-scale, online survey of grocery shoppers across an extensive range of categories. The survey is designed to collect and analyse important information

DIETARY DYNAMICS

The Dietary Lifestyles report published by Bord Bia in March 2021 shows how diets have evolved since 2018, enabling Irish food and drink companies to understand how people are approaching their diets and the dynamics at play – looking in particular at relationships with protein and alternative proteins.

Some of the key takeaways are that health and sustainability continue to drive interest among those following vegan, vegetarian or flexitarian diets; 85% of people deem themselves to be very healthy and 65% are making more of an effort to be aware of the environment.

The study found that there is a move towards balance, with 55% of respondents saying they're trying to eat a balanced diet and don't follow a specific diet or food lifestyle (up 3% since 2018).

Covid-19 had a significant impact on dietary trends in that it made people become more aware and conscientious about their food. Natural and preservative-free became more important for consumers; the study found it was the third-biggest driver of choice when it comes to food.

to help brand owners such as brand awareness, brand experience and future brand potential.

For more information on the SuperBrands programme, companies are encouraged to send their enquiries to superbrands@bordbia.ie.



Shenda Loughnane, Dentsu Aegis and April Redmond, Unilver with John Fanning, Brand Focus chairperson at a Bord Bia Brand Forum event in 2020



The O'Malley family, Achill Island Sea Salt

Salt of the earth

Testament to the quality of the salt that comes out of Achill Island Sea Salt's Co Mayo base is the fact that chefs can't get enough of it

A family business started nine years ago, Achill Island Sea Salt set out to revive the long-forgotten tradition of salt production and now produces a premium salt highly sought after by chefs and home cooks alike.

Marjorie and Kieran O'Malley, who started the business in their kitchen, have been helped along the way by their children Maebh, Colm and Sean. Marjorie O'Malley says the company has grown every year since its inception and would sell more if it were able to produce more.

"People have a growing appreciation that sea salt is an unprocessed product that maintains all of its minerals," she says. "There is a resurgence in cooking from scratch and an awareness that using good salt in the cooking process will enhance a meal."

After starting in their kitchen, the O'Malleys later moved into a portacabin beside their home. When demand grew they transferred to an upscale facility in 2016 that afforded them the space they needed.

"There is a resurgence in cooking from scratch and an awareness that using good salt in the cooking process will enhance a meal."

The company exports to customers all over the world who order online – many of these, says O'Malley, from the Achill diaspora. They also sell regularly to some small companies based, for example, in Northern Ireland, Holland and Switzerland.

Sustainability focus

One of the biggest challenges for the business – and one that is particularly pertinent today – is that it uses a lot of gas to produce its salt and therefore has high energy bills. Despite this, O'Malley says sustainability is high on the agenda and the company has recently engaged a consultant to help it reduce or offset its carbon footprint.

Another challenge was designing the production process, given the fact that salt is such a corrosive substance and necessitates, for example, very high-grade stainless steel. The business is also weather-dependent in that it cannot collect water in stormy conditions.

The O'Malleys have been noticing a lot more demand for sea salt as an ingredient in confectionery, and the business is working on several collaborations with fudge producers, for example. They are also starting to see a demand for the salt by bakers for use in sourdough and other loaves.

The company has five employees, which increases to eight in the busier summer months, when it runs a coffee truck outside the premises. Selling single-origin coffee along with treats such as sea-salt chocolate brownies and caramel squares, it has proven hugely popular with visitors. There is also an expanded on-site gift shop and free self-guided tours – making the salt producer a mini-tourist attraction in its own right.

www.achillislandseasalt.ie

Going with the grain

Goodness Grains Gluten Free Bakery has made it its business to give gluten-free breads and cakes the same appeal as any other – and it has paid off

From its inception Goodness Grains always aimed to give gluten-free customers precisely what they wanted. So when starting out in 2013, Michael Kelleher did his homework first. As sales and marketing manager Geraldine O'Shea explains, in its early days the business spoke to potential customers, asked them what they wanted – and then went away and made it.

"I remember one man in particular being really thrilled with the breads and cakes in our range," she says. "He was in his 60s and had been diagnosed as a coeliac 20 years earlier. At that time, he told us, he had to order his bread from a chemist, and it would arrive in a tin can. Back then gluten-free bread was very much a medical product, so that's the look and feel it had."

When the Goodness Grains team was developing its brand, one of the main goals was to take away those medical connotations and make the product more appealing. This suffused everything from the choice of name for its brand to what it

included in its range.

"When we surveyed coeliacs in the early days, they wanted good bread and they wanted a treat," says O'Shea. "Even though the market has grown since then to include lots of different gluten-free products, they still essentially want the same things."

Significant producer

With a staff of 32, Goodness Grains is now among the biggest bakery producers of gluten-free options in Ireland or the UK. This gives it the advantage of being able to offer a full range of products to wholesalers.

Currently, 30% of the company's business is exports. For example, it produces own-label bagels for a well-known brand in the UK, which it ships three times a week, and also has a small presence in Sweden, Denmark, France and Germany.

Apart from their obvious appeal to coeliacs and others looking to reduce gluten, Goodness Grains' products are also vegan and in many cases high in fibre. So the company is well positioned to harness the whole wellness trend. But it also supplies cakes, muffins and tray bakes, for which there was a noticeable spike in demand during the pandemic.

This year, says O'Shea, the company will be looking to develop the UK market as well as expand its trade in bagels. "Most of the gluten-free bagels on the shelves are basically just bread with a hole, so we're trying to achieve an authentic baked-and-boiled bagel."

"Even though the market has grown to include lots of different gluten-free products, coeliacs still essentially want the same things."



Michael Kelleher and Geraldine O'Shea, co-founders, Goodness Grains Gluten Free Bakery

www.goodnessgrains.com



Libby Carton and Rick LeVert, co-founders, Kinnegar Brewing

Tapping into the future

Although a move from design into brewing might not seem the most natural of segues, it has worked out very well indeed for the pair behind Kinnegar Brewing

Rick LeVert and Libby Carton came to the brewing business as complete newbies in 2011 when they set up Kinnegar Brewing, the Co Donegal company behind catchy beer names such as Limeburner, Devil's Backbone and Scraggy Bay.

Before that the pair ran their design firm Carton LeVert for many years. What prompted the move from design into beer was down to a combination of circumstances at the time – chiefly the fact that they both questioned whether they wanted to continue working in design.

“Carton LeVert was a great business and we were very lucky with it, but it was difficult to keep generating new ideas and we wanted a change,” says Carton, adding that it was “curiosity” as much as anything else that saw them venture into brewing.

She reckons that what differentiates Kinnegar from the many other craft breweries that have sprung up around

“Our two brewhouses give us the scope to produce volume and the flexibility to develop fresh ideas and regularly make new beers.”

the country is the fact that its beer is so accessible.

“If an outlet wanted to carry only one craft beer and still keep their customers happy, they could do that with us,” she says. “We appeal on two levels; on the one hand you have the craft beer geeks, who are really interested in the latest new thing and on the other you have ordinary people who just enjoy drinking beer.”

She sums it up by saying that people enjoy drinking Kinnegar’s beer without the beer necessarily being the topic of conversation.

Exceeding expectations

Happily, the level of growth the business has experienced over the years has far exceeded Carton and LeVert’s expectations. Having started with a pilot brewery, in 2013 Kinnegar moved to a commercial scale and four years later had to move to a new facility in Letterkenny to keep up with demand. It now employs 16 people.

“Our two brewhouses give us the scope to produce volume and the flexibility to develop fresh ideas and regularly make new beers. It has really only been in the past two years that we feel we’re making headway and not firefighting any more,” says Carton.

This year she says she is particularly looking forward to finally attending a few beer festivals and meeting consumers again. They have also just finished constructing a tap room, meaning that for the first time they will be able to serve beer at the brewery.

“That, in combination with our brewery tours, will be a nice extra string to our bow,” she says.

www.kinnegarbrewing.ie

Simply delicious

Founder of Oishii Foods Ciara Troy was well ahead of her time when she started her sushi business 16 years ago, and she hasn’t looked back since

Not many people get to turn their passion into their livelihood, but that’s exactly what Ciara Troy did when she started Oishii Foods straight out of college back in 2006. Her aim was to share her love of Japanese food with a wider audience, and she has certainly achieved that; Oishii – which means ‘delicious’ in Japanese – is now a well-loved name to sushi fans all over Ireland.

From humble beginnings in her own kitchen, Troy began to supply farmers’ markets all around the capital, and the business took off from there. Now based in Dublin’s Smithfield, Oishii Foods employs 25 people with plans to hire three more.

The business recently started shipping to Northern Ireland – its first foray beyond the Republic – in a move Troy describes as “groundbreaking”. “It was a logistical challenge but a very proud moment,” she says. The company is supplying Lidl and Tesco in the North

and Troy says the possibility of shipping further afield is definitely on the agenda.

The fact that so many consumers are aware of the importance of good nutrition now has of course worked in Oishii’s favour. “Because of the nature of our product, it naturally ticks a lot of those boxes,” says Troy. The company also does a vegan line, which is doing very well.

Leading the way

Troy says the business has spent nearly 16 years carving out a niche for itself and building a strong reputation for freshness and quality. “We have also always tried to be innovative and look for what hasn’t been done before,” she says. “We have tried to be a leader rather than a follower.”

Another strength is the company’s sheer resilience. “We have ridden out all the ups and downs through the years,” says Troy, who went from maternity leave straight into the pandemic. The silver lining, as she explains, was that it gave her a chance to reassess what Oishii was doing well and what she wanted it to be as a business.

She is also clear about the value of the people she has around her. “I’m so proud of all the people I have worked with and we have had many great moments over the years.” Oishii has picked up numerous awards but Troy never gets complacent.

“For me, awards are just a moment in time; they say that you did a good job. But the mark of a business is its staying power. It’s about facing the daily grind and keeping things going no matter what.”

“We have also always tried to be innovative and look for what hasn’t been done before – to be a leader rather than a follower.”



Ciara Troy, founder and managing director, Oishii Foods

www.oishiisushi.ie



Gary Lavin, founder and chairman, VITHIT

Hitting the spot

All good ideas seem obvious in hindsight, but when Gary Lavin started his healthy drinks company VITHIT two decades ago he was on to something big

Back in 2000, former professional rugby player Gary Lavin became exasperated with the lack of healthy drinks in shop and gym fridges and decided to do something about it. He developed and launched two low-calorie, vitamin-rich drinks – which in turn went on to form the basis of the now popular VITHIT brand.

When Lavin first set out, most cold drinks contained large quantities of sugar or other nasties, with no alternative for consumers who wanted their drinks to be delicious but genuinely healthy at the same time.

“When I first tried to get it on the shelves, people thought it was just another sports drink; they had never seen a low-calorie, healthy drink with vitamins,” he says.

He worked hard on getting the flavours right, and this, combined with the fact that his drinks came with the full recommended daily allowance of eight vitamins, struck a chord. Lavin spends anything between nine and 18 months

“At first, people thought it was just another sports drink; they had never seen a low-calorie, healthy drink with vitamins.”

developing each flavour. “I want people to taste this product and think it is just as good as any sugary counterpart,” he says.

Growth spurt

Last year saw VITHIT record growth of about 38% in Ireland alone, but it was in its export markets where the real action happened. The UK, for example, was up by 79%, and the outperformer was Australia, which climbed by 307% last year and is expected to grow by another 200% in 2022. Last summer the company managed to get its products on the shelves of two of Australia’s biggest retailers – Woolworths and 7-Eleven.

The sixth-best-selling soft drink of any kind in Ireland, VITHIT outsells Diet Coke and Coke Zero and is the only privately held company on the top 20 soft drinks list. Lavin says a company in his business has to have its product do three things to succeed: “It has to look good to come off the shelf the first time and taste good to come off a second time, but it also has to be good because people will look at the ingredients.”

Although most familiar to people in its trademark bottle, VITHIT has also been available in cans since last year. Lavin plans to make it available in different ways – and for different occasions.

He also hopes to move up to fifth place on the bestselling soft drinks list by next year, and increase the brand’s foothold in the UK market where VITHIT is already the bestselling functional drink. VITHIT also has potential on the US market, where it is already stocked in 300 Duane Reade pharmacies in New York.

www.vithit.com

Taking flight

The two entrepreneurs behind Woodfire & Wings, Ian Jackson-Ryan and Rory Burgess, have come up with a premium takeaway experience that stands out from the crowd

Business partners Ian Jackson-Ryan and Rory Burgess knew they had hit on a good idea when they came up with the Woodfire & Wings concept, but they can’t have foreseen just what it would lead to.

Restaurant owner and chef Jackson-Ryan had been running the restaurant at Boomer’s pub in Clondalkin, which is owned by Burgess, when the pair decided to make some changes. Their plan was to convert an empty unit to the side of the pub into their own takeaway as an add-on to the main business.

“We started sparking ideas off each other,” says Jackson-Ryan. There was clearly no shortage of inspiration, and the pair quickly settled on the idea of a premium takeaway offering of restaurant-standard food and specialising in wood-fired pizza and wings. “There was nothing like it in Clondalkin at the time,” he says.

After about a year experimenting with recipes, sourcing equipment etc, they opened the doors of Woodfire & Wings in 2019. Covid-19, while hitting the pair’s other businesses hard, was a blessing in

disguise for the fledgling takeaway. “Our business grew by about 400% during Covid-19 and we went from eight staff to 40,” says Jackson-Ryan.

Growing footprint

They subsequently converted the pub’s private function room into a 150-seater sports and cocktail bar to boost Woodfire & Wings’ footprint even further. It proved a good move, and Jackson-Ryan and Burgess are preparing to open a second Woodfire & Wings outlet in Tallaght. The 2,500 sq ft unit will see the business hire an additional 20 staff – and Jackson-Ryan says they already have their sights set on a third outlet once this one is up and running.

But they have even more ambitious plans than that; the ultimate goal is to turn the business into a fully-formed franchise operation. “We think that it is strong enough to be a national brand; it’s as good as anything out there,” he says.

Having already reopened their original pub and restaurant, Jackson-Ryan and Burgess also came up with another new brand – Street Burger – the first outlet of which is beside the new Woodfire & Wings unit in Tallaght, and this will be followed by a second branch in Clondalkin.

Back at base, the first Woodfire & Wings branch is thriving, serving about 1,000 people on a Saturday from all over Co Dublin as well as further afield including Kildare and Wicklow. The company invests heavily in staff training and turnover is low. This is important, seeing as the main factor that gives the business its edge over competitors is its customer service.

“There was nothing like it in Clondalkin at the time. Our business grew by about 400% during Covid-19 and we went from eight staff to 40.”



Michelle Comiskey, financial controller, and Ian Jackson-Ryan and Rory Burgess, co-founders, Woodfire & Wings

www.woodfireandwings.ie

EMBRACING TECHNOLOGY

Caroline Burke, small business manager at Cisco, outlines the main things to consider when it comes to adapting to the new digital reality accelerated by the pandemic and other challenges

The past two years have been trying to say the least. And while our lives both professionally and personally changed overnight, this also presented many enlightening moments. Forced into radical changes, small businesses have shown the true meaning of resilience, adaptability and collaboration.

Small businesses represent 90% of companies and account for more than 50% of employment worldwide. They are the backbone of our communities; when they are strong, we're all stronger.

Cisco is delighted to sponsor the Outstanding Small Business Award in the SFA National Small Business Awards. We have been so impressed by the passion and creativity of the finalists this year. It really hasn't been easy for them with the pandemic itself, soaring shipping and logistics costs and ongoing supply chain challenges. Many have survived by embracing technology that under normal circumstances would take months to onboard and adapting to an online presence almost overnight.

“Many businesses survived by embracing technology that under normal circumstances would take months to onboard and adapting to an online presence almost overnight.”

More than eight in ten small businesses say using new technology is key to their company's survival and growth. Adapting to a new digital reality shouldn't mean straining your resources to onboard every available digital advancement. In order to quickly roll out innovations and drive business results, you need to consider three things:

1. An empowered remote workforce

Today's workforce spends 80% of its time on meetings, phone calls and emails. To remain productive, at-home workers need anytime access to their apps, data and each other. Empower your remote teams with integrated technologies such as cloud-enabled collaboration solutions that facilitate efficient collaboration and allow them to contribute wherever the workday takes them. Solutions must be reliable, secure, and compliant while eliminating the friction points that cripple productivity.



Caroline Burke, small business manager, Cisco

2. A secure e-commerce platform

Customers have changed the way they shop and it's so important that SMEs offer their products and services online. During the pandemic, consumers pivoted to online shopping. Small businesses responded accordingly, replacing 94% of their in-store sales with online purchases.

How were they able to make that shift? By reinventing their business models and adopting e-commerce technology. To determine the right platform for your business, consider the following:

- **Speed** – To avoid losing consumers to a competitor, your e-commerce site should load in fewer than three seconds.

- **Compliance** – If your business transmits or stores cardholder data, you'll need to ensure your e-commerce site follows PCI compliance requirements.

- **Supply chain** – Look for a platform that optimises for e-commerce and last-mile, last-minute delivery.

- **Reliability** – Downtime can have a detrimental effect on your revenue and your reputation. When your network goes down, your business goes down.

3. A robust cybersecurity network

When it comes to network cybersecurity, many small businesses consider themselves too small to be targeted. The truth is that cyber criminals have significantly shifted their efforts towards small businesses in recent years. It can

feel very daunting to even think about how to keep your business secure and protect your customer data but the first step is to understand what systems are critical to operate your business and then build out from there. For a retailer that might be a point-of-sale system; for another business, email might be most important.

Take the time to understand the needs of your small business and work with a technology partner who can customise cost-effective security solutions. Key ones are cloud-delivered software-as-a-service solutions that can be updated as new threats emerge.

Make sure you apply the latest software patches and security configurations. Ensure your employees are cyber-aware, relying on strong passwords and dual-factor authentication whenever possible. Also encourage caution with emails from unknown senders that contain attachments or embedded links.

Positioning for growth

A combination of networking solutions, collaborative cloud-based tools, and robust security offerings can help businesses capture every opportunity and sale possible. While technology represents a huge opportunity for growth, small businesses must feel empowered when it comes to embracing digital transformation.

A 2020 Small Business Digital Maturity Study conducted by IDC and commissioned by Cisco revealed that more than 70% of small businesses were

“Empower your remote teams with integrated technologies such as cloud-enabled collaboration solutions that facilitate efficient collaboration and allow them to contribute wherever the workday takes them.”

accelerating their digital transformation because of Covid-19. The vast majority (93%) of these small businesses said they were already relying more on technology during the pandemic. The study showed that small businesses that fully embraced digitisation saw their revenue grow eight times faster than those that didn't.

The study suggested that you don't have to be a technology guru to transform your business. Seven simple steps can take you from digital novice to digital native:

1. Develop a three-year digital technology roadmap that aligns with your business goals.
2. Prioritise the critical business processes you want to automate.
3. Evaluate and invest in the right technology to fit your needs and budget.
4. Upgrade your employees' digital skills through talent acquisition and training.
5. Find a technology partner to act as your IT support team.
6. Keep pace with industry trends and best practices in technology.
7. Start simple and choose solutions that can scale with you as you grow.

Embracing digital transformation isn't a stopgap solution. With the right strategy and solutions in place, you can continue to support your business long after the pandemic is over. The digital foundation you create today should include integrated tools and technologies that can simplify your efforts and position your small business for growth.



David Walsh-Kemmis, founder, Ballykilcavan Brewing Company

True Brew

Ballykilcavan Brewing Company is breathing new life into a 440-hectare farm near Stradbally, Co Laois, home to the Walsh-Kemmis family since 1639

David Walsh-Kemmis became the 13th generation of his family to run the Ballykilcavan farm when he took over from his father in 2004. Back then the vast majority of the land was given over to growing barley, but he soon realised that it wasn't economically viable and needed to look for alternative sources of income.

He decided to focus on the farm's high-quality natural resources and long heritage and settled on the idea of a sustainable craft brewery and visitor centre. After investing around €200,000 between renovations and fit-out, the first batch of beer went into production in 2016.

"The brewery is in the original stone grainstore which was built in around 1780," Walsh-Kemmis explains. "Over the centuries the building was used to store and mill barley and oats after harvest for bread making, animal feed and maybe even making beer. It is too small for modern farm equipment but is the perfect size for a small craft brewery."

"We have a longer than usual maturation period and all our beers are completely unfiltered and unpasteurised when they are packaged."

Local sourcing

The Ballykilcavan Brewery now produces six different beers including pale, brown and red ales, stout and lager. Most popular with drinkers are double-dry, hopped hazy pale ale 'Lineblocker' and 'Bambrick's Brown Ale', a rich and malty American-style ale with notes of dark chocolate and burnt toffee. All the barley, hops and water required in the brewing process are sourced from within 500m of the brewery building itself.

"We have a longer than usual maturation period and all our beers are completely unfiltered and unpasteurised when they are packaged," says Walsh-Kemmis. "This natural method adds flavour and complexity and allows the flavour of the ingredients to really shine through." Among other accolades, the company was awarded six medals at the 2019 Dublin Craft Beer Cup and won a silver medal in the Food and Drink category at the 2019 National Startup Awards.

Sustainability is hugely important to Walsh-Kemmis and this approach extends to the new visitor centre which is coming onstream this year. In addition to the focus on natural brewing techniques and local sourcing, the roof of the brewery has been fitted with solar panels to reduce energy consumption, all spent grain is recycled and all product packaging is plastic-free and fully recyclable.

The future looks bright with the addition of six new fermenters which will see capacity doubled to 120,000 litres. This will facilitate faster production scale-up as the company looks to grow its customer base locally and move further into export markets, according to Walsh-Kemmis.

www.ballykilcavan.com

Horses for courses

Major investment in recent years has established Blackthorn Hill Stud near Saggart, Co Dublin as one of the best-equipped private livery yards in the country

Lifelong horse lover Jonathon Corway has invested over €500,000 in the 25-acre Blackthorn Hill Stud site on the outskirts of Dublin since taking it over back in 2017. Situated within easy access of the traditional equestrian strongholds of counties Meath and Kildare, he embarked upon a comprehensive refurbishment programme in May 2018 with the intention of bringing its facilities up to Olympic standard.

In addition to individual stables for 19 horses, Blackthorn Hill Stud now also includes a top-quality 60m x 40m showjumping arena, a 40m x 20m dressage arena, three all-weather fields and a lunging ring along with hot and cold wash bays. Work is currently ongoing on the construction of a larger dressage arena, an all-weather cross-country track and improved livery yard facilities.

"The first thing we had to do was improve access to the site from the main roadway which we have now completed," Corway explains. "We've had a great response to the upgraded facilities

from returning customers and business has picked up significantly since the re-opening."

Personalised service

A huge selling point for the Blackthorn Hill facility is its relatively small size, which enables Corway and his staff to offer a more personalised service. "Our three all-weather fields ensure that every horse stabled here gets out for exercise every day, regardless of the weather," he says.

"That's a major selling point for many horse owners who might only see their animals at the weekend. It's important to them that the horses are out every day as it's good for their physical and mental health. A lot of the larger yards are unable to offer this service, so that's a huge advantage for us." Work will begin on three more all-weather areas later in the year.

In addition to the 25-acre site, Blackthorn Hill customers also have access to a number of nearby forest parks, which are ideal for trekking and offer views towards the city, the Dublin Mountains and the green pastures of Kildare.

"We are very lucky to be in such a beautiful setting," Corway says. "It's one of the nicest places in the country to ride horses or even go for a walk. The pandemic definitely hit us hard, but we have made a lot of progress here over the past few years and are delighted to be able to offer a unique, top-quality service which we hope will soon be on a par with the very best small livery facilities anywhere in the world."

"We hope our unique, top-quality service will soon be on a par with the very best small livery facilities anywhere in the world."



Jonathan Corway, founder, Blackthorn Hill Stud



Kevin Thomas and Leonard Morrissey, directors, One Agency Recruitment

One vision

Established in 2019 by Kevin Thomas and Leonard Morrissey, One Agency is making waves in the recruitment sector due to its novel approach to candidate sourcing

One Agency was formed following extensive market research into the recruitment sector and its use of social media to source candidates which co-founder Kevin Thomas undertook as part of his MBA course at the Smurfit School of Business.

“We realised that social media was significantly under-utilised in the sector and that there was an opportunity to target potential candidates more accurately and cost-effectively than was happening at the time,” he explains. “We decided it was time to break the industry rules, upset the status quo and do things differently.”

It was a brave move but one that has paid off handsomely. Backed by Enterprise Ireland, the company already has 42 clients spread across the tech, retail, food and banking sectors and will be looking to move into other industries over the next few years as the business expands.

One Agency has placed over 600 candidates in employment to date and boasts a remarkable 80% interview success rate. Sales increased by more than 400% during the pandemic. It currently employs seven staff at its offices in

“We realised that there was an opportunity to target potential candidates more accurately and cost-effectively than was happening at the time.”

Blanchardstown, Dublin 15, with that number expected to double before the end of the year.

Social push

“We identified a couple of key factors which told us recruiting via social media was the way to go,” Thomas says. “The first is that 73% of Millennials found their latest job via social media, with that percentage even higher for Gen Z. We also discovered that 75% of employees are not actively looking to change jobs, but would consider it if something better came their way. We realised that social media was the best way to reach these candidates and built our business model around it.”

This model has enabled the company to significantly undercut its competitors, charging a 9% commission compared to the industry standard of 15%. The main concerns for client companies are cost of recruitment and quality of candidate, with no-shows also a big problem.

“We are able to offer significant savings to our clients through lower commission and more accurate targeting of suitable candidates,” Thomas explains. “Over 90% of our candidates show up for interview, with 80% of them subsequently being offered the job. It’s a speedier process which also helps to save money. The overall saving for clients is around 25%.”

The goal for the next few years is to continue to gain market share in Ireland while also expanding into the UK and Europe. “We have everything ready to go,” says Thomas. “We’re looking forward to the challenge.”

One Agency is also shortlisted in the Innovator of the Year category

The velvet touch

After spotting a gap in the market for sheep’s milk products, Rockfield Dairy launched its own range of specialist yogurts and cheese which are now available nationwide

Working and living in Europe for many years, husband and wife Michael and Aisling Flanagan noticed a wide variety of sheep’s milk products on sale and wondered why that wasn’t the case in Ireland. On returning to live on Michael’s family sheep farm near Claremorris, Co Mayo, they investigated further. They quickly realised there was a gap in the market here and, in 2015, Velvet Cloud was born.

“Trends such as an increased interest in gut health, greater attention being paid to food intolerances, a growing demand for dairy alternatives and a concerted shift towards sustainable, locally-produced produce all pointed to an opportunity we couldn’t ignore,” explains Aisling Flanagan.

“We made some trial batches of sheep’s milk yogurt and passed them around to chefs who were really encouraging, so we decided to give it a go. Sheep’s milk has a higher nutritional profile than cow’s milk. It’s thicker and creamier and ideal for people who are sensitive to cow dairy or

who don’t like the taste of goat dairy.”

Seven years on and the company is going from strength to strength with Velvet Cloud sheep’s milk cheese and yogurt now available in over 130 retail outlets and a growing number of high-end restaurants nationwide.

Continuous improvement

The brand was awarded a prestigious central billing listing with wholesaler Musgrave in July 2021, which has helped to both drive sales and reduce administration costs. Its food service business continues to expand, with Velvet Cloud currently the only Irish yogurt identified by brand on the menus of some of the best restaurants in the country.

Further to losing 40% of its sales overnight when the pandemic hit, Velvet Cloud had its own e-commerce site up and running within 24 hours.

“We have consistently developed and improved our online offering and digital marketing activities since and online sales now account for 25% of our total turnover,” says Flanagan. “We have achieved a 60% repeat customer rate through the site which is almost unheard of for food products sold online.”

With production capacity increased to meet growing demand, there are exciting times ahead for the Velvet Cloud team of four people. “Our vision for the next five years is that Velvet Cloud will be available in all Irish multiple retailers and we are hoping to add at least one more supermarket listing this year,” says Flanagan.

“We also plan to pick up on the development of our tourism offering - ‘Meet The Food Producer and Visit Ireland’s Only Year Round Sheep Dairy’”

“We made some trial batches of sheep’s milk yogurt and passed them around to chefs who were really encouraging, so we decided to give it a go.”



Michael and Aisling Flanagan, co-founders, Velvet Cloud



Finlay Dargan, COO, Simon Hillary, CTO and Pierce Dargan, CEO, Equine Medirecord

Galloping ahead

Having secured significant business-to-business contracts in the past year, Equine Medirecord is making its mark at horseracing events internationally with its innovative solution

Based in the Curragh, Co Kildare, Equine Medirecord's software solution, which replaces paper-based systems for equine welfare compliance, is continuing to make great strides since the company was founded by Pierce Dargan in 2016.

Equine Medirecord develops, sells and maintains a mobile application and website to allow for the proper recording of medicines administered to racehorses and other bloodstock that is mandated under regulation. The solution has proven to reduce time spent on regulatory documentation by up to 50% and ensure complete compliance when inspected by regulators.

The Equine Medirecord platform allows for the full veterinary history of a horse to be recorded securely, ensuring the best possible horse welfare, as well as aiding with crucial anti-doping procedures. Results are submitted digitally to designated regulators and officials, ensuring the highest level of integrity and transparency of veterinary records.

"We've made big progress in securing more business-to-business contracts in the past year, such as with the Jockey Club of Saudi Arabia and the

"Contracts such as these help us because the events attract top international and national competitors, who in turn are introduced to our system and can be advocates."

Pegasus World Cup, which took place in Gulfstream Park in Florida in January," says Dargan. These wins followed Equine Medirecord being hired by the Breeder's Cup in 2020 to build a system for capturing medical information on the horses competing at the World Championships in Kentucky to pre-clear them to race.

Local endorsement

"Contracts such as these help us because the events attract top international and national competitors, who in turn are introduced to our system and can be advocates that further our discussions with their local bodies," notes Dargan.

"We were in discussions with one regulator when the local senior regulatory vet joined the meeting spontaneously and announced he had just used our system for the Saudi Cup and then demonstrated it to them. Having local advocates and endorsements means we continue to gather momentum as we grow our global reach."

Staff numbers have remained largely steady at 10 team members over the past 12 months, but Dargan expects this to change. "Coming out of the depths of the Covid-19 crisis has led to a significant amount of projects previously put on hold coming live again. The scale and scope of projects we have under discussion would definitely lead us to increasing our headcount and I wouldn't be surprised if it was significantly larger over the next 24 months."

Equine Medirecord has been licensed by regulators in Ireland, the UK, France, the Middle East and the US to replace their mandated paper-based systems for equine welfare compliance. "We hope to be announcing several new geographies covered by our system in the coming months," says Dargan.

www.equinemedirecord.com

Force of nature

Using only natural ingredients and no artificial additives, Miena's Handmade Nougat has allowed the quality of its products speak for itself and drive export sales

Willemien (Miena) Rust has come a long way since she started to make nougat inspired by her native South Africa in 2010. The only natural nougat manufacturer in Ireland, Miena's Handmade Nougat now produces a range of products under its own brand as well as for Dunnes Stores (Simply Better), Harrods and Xocolatl. It is also exporting to the UK, Denmark, Belgium, the US and Asia.

"I didn't have to pitch for any of my international contracts. Buyers tasted the product and got in touch. Last year, I was part of a Bord Bia virtual showcase, which involved sending samples of my pistachio product to buyers in the US. This led to listings with Central Market, a big upmarket grocery chain in Texas," she says.

Rust is very much part of the brand and has developed all of the nougat flavours herself. "Each flavour has a story behind it - for example, when she lived in Dubai, my mother-in-law used to stew sundried figs in Cointreau with cinnamon sticks and serve with gorgonzola cheese. So I wanted to get the fig and orange flavours

into my bars," she explains.

Avoca was the first retailer to stock Miena's Handmade Nougat, in 2014. Rust decided to replicate her favourite Avoca pie in her nougat products made with freeze-dried strawberries and rhubarb.

Increased capacity

Having started out in a converted garage in Wicklow's Glen of Imaal making 250 bars a week, Rust invested in larger equipment in 2017 after winning the Simply Better contract with Dunnes Stores. These days she and her team of three women produce 2,000 bars a week over the course of three days. "We are at maximum capacity from September to December when we have three more contract people working with us," she says.

It's a labour-intensive process: for example, on day one, sugar, glucose and honey go into a vat, which is effectively like a big cake mixer, for an hour and 20 minutes. Once this reaches the right temperature, egg white powder and water are mixed in and this all cooks for six hours. During that time, nuts are roasted and moulds prepared.

"It is all about timings and temperatures. When it's all cooked, I take some of the nougat out with my finger and roll it. If there's no finger print, it's ready. Every batch is tested in that way," notes Rust.

The Miena's Handmade Nougat factory recently started to package products in a new flow wrapper, which will increase shelf life from six months to up to a year. "Up until now we have produced as we get orders in. The longer shelf life will open things up for us and enable us to continue to grow," says Rust.

"Up until now we have produced as we get orders in. The longer shelf life will open things up and enable us to continue to grow."



Willemien Rust, founder, Miena's Handmade Nougat

www.mienas.ie

LENDING SUPPORT

Mags Brennan, head of business banking at Permanent TSB, discusses the challenges facing small businesses and how the bank's dedicated team and approach aim to make things easier

The first big issue facing businesses in Ireland, particularly in the micro end of the SME sector, is coming out of Covid-19 and the removal of government supports. This is going to continue to be a challenge for some more than others, depending on how the business is set up and what sector it's in.

In response to the pandemic, most SMEs shaved down costs and became more efficient. This needs to be ongoing and done more effectively through digitisation to support the long-term sustainability of businesses. We have seen a lot more digitisation within the SME segment over the past year, but connecting with customers, regardless of whether business-to-business or business-to-consumer, will continue to pose a challenge.

One positive thing to come out of Covid-19 is the fact that savings are at an all-time high, similar to when we had the SSIA scheme in the early 2000s. It is positive that consumers now have this money to spend, but that will dissipate over time because of rising costs and interest rates. We have an economy which is predominantly service-based and dependent on people having spending power.

Inflation from a cost perspective is of major concern to businesses themselves, particularly in relation to energy and the likely impact of the war in Ukraine on the supply of oil and gas. There is also uncertainty around the supply of aluminium, metals and fertiliser. Regardless of what happens with this conflict, there will be impacts for Irish SMEs, the extent of which remains an unknown – as is a potential increase in interest rates, which the European Central Bank may consider.

“Between our 40 professionals and 76 branches, we are working with SMEs across the country digitally, over the phone, in-person or on customer premises.”

On top of all of this, certain SMEs are facing staffing difficulties, particularly in hospitality, home care and nursing homes. Also, if SMEs are not thinking about climate change and sustainability and their role in that, this could be costly later on from a carbon tax perspective.



Mags Brennan, head of business banking at Permanent TSB

It's important for SMEs not to forget what they have learned over the past two years and to really focus on their business model and ensure it is sustainable for the future by watching costs and looking for opportunities. And there are plenty of opportunities, for example Brexit offers huge possibilities for SMEs to go into Europe, helped by digitisation.

Moving forward

At Permanent TSB, we are a business bank that supports SMEs of all shapes and sizes and across sectors. With a 200-year history, we're not in it for the short term. Our advice to any SME owner who is struggling is to engage with their bank early and keep communication lines open, because when one problem has bolted, it becomes another problem.

Permanent TSB now has 28,000 SME customers; SME lending doubled in 2021 and we plan on doubling it again this year. Around 80% of this lending is new, coming out of other banks and non-bank providers. We have been accepted as a third business bank and the acquisition of Ulster Bank's micro book and asset finance business will hugely support the continued growth of the business.

We have a really strong business banking team in place, four times the size it was 18 months ago. Between our 40 professionals and 76 branches, we are working with SMEs across the country digitally, over the phone, in-person or on customer premises. The addition of 25 Ulster Bank branches will increase our footprint, particularly in the North West. Slowness to give decisions and fulfilling

PERMANENT TSB'S SENIOR BUSINESS BANKING TEAM

Mags Brennan, head of business banking – a career banker with extensive experience in banking both in Ireland and internationally

Mark Harris, regional and sectoral head of business banking – previously head of telecom and media investment at AIB, having worked for Mazars and Ernst & Young.

David McCarthy, regional and sectoral head of business banking – an experienced business banker leading the Permanent TSB team of business banking managers in Dublin.

Tom Leahy, regional and sectoral head of business banking – a vast amount of business banking experience, including senior roles in the UK, and was CEO of BDM Boylan Solicitors in Cork.

Catherine Doyle, head of business development – A career banker with over 30 years' experience, having joined Permanent TSB in 2016.

loans has been one of the biggest issues for SMEs with banks over the past 12 months. This is one thing we have addressed and it's worked really well. We have centralised the whole process to ensure it is professionally managed from start to finish and SMEs get decisions and their money quickly. The fact that we are smaller makes us easier to connect with and this speeds up the decision-making process too.

Because we are a small bank, we have engaged with partnerships in particular areas to enhance the products and services we provide to business customers. Two key product partnerships we formed in 2021 are with Worldpay for merchant acquisition and Bibby Financial Services for invoice discounting. Over the past 18 months we have been bringing discounted loan products to the SME market through offering the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland's Future Growth Loan Scheme and Brexit Impact Loan Scheme, which have been very popular.

In order to highlight the importance of digital transformation for SMEs, and help individual businesses on their digital journeys, we have also partnered with Digital Business Ireland to make all of its supports available to our customers for free.



Noel Connolly, managing director, and Eve Connolly, director, AFT Blinds

Shades of success

Having started out as a small family business supplying fabrics and components, AFT Blinds is now one of Ireland's leading producers of high quality window blinds

Established in 1997 by husband and wife Noel and Eve Connolly, AFT Blinds initially supplied fabrics and components to a number of local blind manufacturers from a small storage unit in Finglas in Dublin. The original idea behind starting the business was simply to earn themselves a decent wage, according to Noel Connolly, but they quickly realised that there was an opportunity to create something much bigger. Turnover last year topped €4m.

"Our stock range grew year on year and soon we were renting five storage facilities," says Connolly. "However, as our customer base expanded we knew we would need our own dedicated facility and moved to a small factory unit in Dublin 15. It meant having to get a mortgage, but we were on our way."

As the supply element of the business continued to thrive, the decision was taken to begin manufacturing. Part of the premises was transformed into a production facility and specialist staff were engaged. "It was a huge change, but it enabled us to reach a much broader client base," explains Connolly. "It meant

"Our goal is to become Ireland's leading supplier of window blind products, with Smartshade established as number one in the luxury sector."

we could sell to customers who didn't manufacture for themselves, including the likes of retailers, architects, builders and fit-out companies."

Exponential growth

The move into manufacturing proved a wise decision and the business grew exponentially over the next few years. It currently employs 28 staff between the Dublin 15 premises and a new, larger facility in Dublin 11 where it now produces a wide range of blinds for the residential, retail, office, hotel, healthcare and other sectors. These include venetian, cassette, roller and shutter blinds, which are available in multiple different shades, sizes and sustainable fabric types.

The company recently launched 'Smartshade', its own high-end range, which has already established itself as a leading brand in the luxury market. During the pandemic, AFT Blinds retooled some of its machinery to produce specialist medical rail and anti-ligature products for the healthcare sector.

The next step is to move the entire business to a single state-of-the-art production facility, which Connolly believes will enhance production capability and improve overall efficiency. He sees Brexit as a good opportunity as more customers are now looking to source locally.

"Our goal is to become Ireland's leading supplier of window blind products, with Smartshade established as number one in the luxury sector," he says. "We are also looking at the export market and are keen to expand our business in the healthcare sector, which we have identified as offering significant growth potential for the future."

www.aftblinds.ie

In the can

From its base in Mullingar, Co Westmeath, Bevcraft has expanded its mobile canning service across all of Ireland, the UK and several countries in mainland Europe

In March of this year, Bevcraft acquired the business of Them that Can in the UK, greatly expanding its mobile canning business and making it the largest mobile canner in Europe. In the same month, Bevcraft was one of just four Irish companies to make the FT1000 Fastest Growing Companies in Europe list.

Friends Ciarán Gorman and Darren Fenton established the business in 2016 as a 'craft can' specialist. Its main service is to send its 15 mobile canning lines and crews into craft breweries to convert tanks of beer into cans, ready for supermarket shelves and off-licences.

Last year, the company handled close to 50 million cans for thousands of different products across different sizes, branding type and beverage style. "Bevcraft was one of the very first companies to develop mobile contract canning solutions anywhere in Europe," notes Gorman.

Further to commissioning cutting-edge technology at its UK site in October 2021, Bevcraft is now operating the only commercial direct-to-can digital printing service currently in Europe, he adds.

"The technology allows us to print in smaller volumes directly onto the can, which eliminates the need for craft beverage producers to use plastic sleeves and labels."

"The Tonejet Cyclone technology allows us to print in smaller volumes directly onto the can, which eliminates the need for craft beverage producers to use plastic sleeves and labels," he says. "This technology has been over 20 years in the making and we are proud to be the European beta site for it."

Impressive automation

The 10,000 sq ft digital can printing plant in Peterborough features complete end-to-end automation, including robotic arms, depalletisers, repalletisers, print engines, primer stations and extensive conveyance and extraction infrastructure. By the end of this year, Bevcraft will have invested a total of €5m in the UK market.

"The decoration facility in the UK complements our mobile canning lines, which are in effect a distributed manufacturing service. We provide an all-inclusive, tank-to-can service at breweries across Europe with minimal commitment and maximum flexibility," says Gorman.

"The final element of our manufacturing footprint is a new beverage innovation centre at our Mullingar base where we will have the capacity to handle a wider range of non-beer products."

Bevcraft has grown its workforce to 35 people and is on track to approach 40 employees by the end of this year. Its mobile canning service now offers coverage across all of Ireland, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and parts of France and Germany, while the can distribution and decoration divisions are exporting to 15 countries across Europe. "We are currently assessing additional markets to open physical bases in to further expand our footprint," notes Gorman.



Darren Fenton and Ciarán Gorman, co-founders, Bevcraft

www.bevcraft.ie



Eileen Buckley, director, Evelyn O'Grady, R&D manager and Dan Buckley, MD of Cloverhill Food Ingredients

The right ingredients

Initially supplying to customers in Munster, Clover Hill Food Ingredients started out in 2003 with just two employees but has since grown into a multi-million euro concern

Based in Millstreet, Co Cork where it now employs 40 staff at its state-of-the-art manufacturing and warehousing facility, Clover Hill Food Ingredients was founded by Dan and Eileen Buckley. Dan Buckley had spent 15 years as a technical sales representative for global food ingredient manufacturers Griffith Laboratories, Dalgety Food Ingredients and Kerry Ingredients and decided it was time for a change.

He had noticed that the larger manufacturers were becoming more inwardly-focused, rationalising their delivery terms and making it harder for SME customers to source ingredients at competitive prices. He set out to exploit this gap in the market and Clover Hill Food Ingredients was born.

The first step for the fledgling company was to establish its own warehouse facility where it could mix ingredients in consignment sizes more suited to the needs of smaller customers. The move proved a huge success and Clover Hill is now a one-stop-shop supplier providing a

“We offer flexible batch and bespoke ingredient mix solutions for our customers, which helps them to minimise waste and meet the specific needs of their own clientele.”

600-strong suite of top quality ingredients and ingredient mixes to bakery product and ice-cream makers nationwide across the retail, catering and hospitality sectors.

Extensive product range

Supplemented by agencies for leading international brand names such as Backaldrin, Foricher, Norte-Eurocao and Dreidoppel, Clover Hill's extensive product range includes everything from flour, chocolate, bread mixes, confectionery mixes and packaging to fruit and vegetables, biscuits, seeds, spices, dairy and raising agents. Delivery is next day via Clover Hill's fleet of temperature-controlled vehicles.

“We offer flexible batch and bespoke ingredient mix solutions for our customers, which helps them to minimise waste and meet the specific needs of their own clientele,” Buckley explains. “We are constantly researching new product trends and new solutions to improve our service and have a team of technical experts who advise customers on how to get the most from their equipment and ingredient mixes. This is particularly important at a time like this when there are labour supply issues and a shortage of qualified bakers.”

The next two years will see further growth at Clover Hill with plans in place to significantly expand the Millstreet facility. Increased automation of some production lines will also add to capacity as Buckley plots the next chapter in the company's story.

“We have a strong presence in Ireland and the next step for us is to look at the export market,” he says. “We have identified significant potential in this area, which we hope will create exciting new opportunities to maintain our strong growth trajectory.”

Bags of distinction

Dublin-based Thorn Environmental has carved out a niche for itself with its eco-friendly refuse sacks and liners which are making a big impression in export markets

Thorn Environmental was born out of one family's desire to keep the planet safe for the next generation. Established in 1997, there are now two generations of the Thorn family working in the business, with a third expected to follow soon.

A previous incarnation of the company was the first to launch refuse sacks on rolls on the Irish market. A re-assessment of its operations in the mid-1990s saw a strategic shift towards the production of eco-friendly packaging and waste management solutions that were in line with the EU's new environmental action programme, now known as Agenda 2030.

“Environmental legislation provided the initial spur to realise opportunities that may not have been spotted if it didn't exist,” explains company director Adam Thorn. “We have subsequently been able to carve out a niche for ourselves via a combination of macro-environmental analysis, innovative thinking and ongoing R&D investment to create a product range that meets all consumer and legislative requirements.”

Thorn launched its main earth2earth® brand in 1997, which now includes bio-degradable sacks, liners, films, paper,

compostable films and a new closed-loop, recycled film product which is set to be launched in the coming months. Manufactured at a state-of-the-art plant in Malaysia, clients cover a wide gamut of industry sectors, including food, manufacturing, retail, logistics, hygiene and safety.

Bio-based breakthrough

Three years ago the company began researching the possibility of developing new carbon-negative materials made from bio-based plant resins. A polyethylene resin manufactured from sugarcane was identified as a suitable raw material, which, when added to three other resins, produced a material of suitable strength for manufacturing.

A study by the carbon auditors Carbon Trust confirmed that the resin had a negative carbon footprint of -3.09kg per kg. A new range of carbon-capture refuse sacks manufactured from the new material was launched in October 2019 and has proven hugely successful. “We believe this is a world first,” says Thorn. “We've had a great response from customers across both the public and private sectors.”

Firmly established as the largest supplier of refuse sacks and liners to the Irish market, Thorn believes that the export sector will be its main source of growth over the next few years. “We had already seen robust growth in the UK which levelled off with Britain leaving the EU but is beginning to increase again,” he explains. “We have developed our presence in France, Germany, the Benelux countries and Turkey, while 2020 saw our first move into the Asian market. This year we are targeting Australia and New Zealand and hope to move into the US as well.”

“We have developed our presence in France, Germany, the Benelux countries and Turkey, while 2020 saw our first move into the Asian market.”



Adam Thorn, director, and Myles Thorn, managing director, Thorn Environmental

COMMUTING SOLUTION

It's possible for employees of Irish SMEs to purchase e-bikes and safety equipment up to the value of €1,500 tax-free with Cyclescheme, writes Ailbhe Cooke, senior digital marketing specialist, One4all Rewards

As businesses across Ireland return to the office, it has become apparent that, while employees have missed the camaraderie and routine, the commute to the office has become a key consideration. With warmer weather and brighter days in our midst, it's a great time to rethink your commute. If you're in the market for a new bike, an e-bike could be just the ticket to a faster, more eco-friendly alternative.

One4all Rewards' Cyclescheme offers the perfect solution for employees looking to upgrade their commute and start cycling from as little as €5 per month. Businesses can benefit from a centralised online platform to track, approve and review applications, along with a dedicated Cyclescheme account manager who will be on hand to assist with any queries they have along the way.

Here are ten great reasons for you or your employees to opt for an e-bike:

1 Pedalling is a breeze

We're no stranger to strong gales in Ireland and oftentimes the greatest obstacle to getting outside can be braving the elements on your bike. E-bikes can make it easier to power through harsh, windy conditions, facilitating a smooth commute no matter the weather. Thanks to the additional boost from the motor, pedalling through gusts of wind is a thing of the past.

2 Boost your fitness

Don't let the motor fool you; you can still reach your fitness goals with an e-bike as the motor only kicks in once you start pedalling. In fact, it's the perfect way to ease into the world of cycling if you're a beginner or if it's been a while since you got back in the saddle – it can assist you and adjust as your fitness levels improve. It's also a great solution for those who suffer from ailments or joint stiffness as it's a lower-impact exercise.



Ailbhe Cooke, senior digital marketing specialist, One4all Rewards



3 Head for the hills

For many, hills can be a stumbling block to cycling, particularly for those considering it as a pre-work commute. This is another great reason to switch to an e-bike as the trusty motor helps to remove any additional effort required to brace challenging hills and climbs while keeping the speed to get you to your desk on time without feeling overexerted.

4 Go green

Vehicular transport is responsible for over 20% of greenhouse gas emissions in Ireland. Making the switch to cycling is a simple but impactful way to do your part to fight climate change and work towards climate action. E-bike batteries can be easily recharged with renewable energy, making it a great eco-friendly commuting alternative that won't slow you down.

5 Save money

Whether you're travelling to the office by car, train, or bus, those costs can easily add up and have become more apparent since returning to the office. With Cyclescheme, e-bikes and associated equipment can be purchased for up to €1,500 free of any tax, PRSI, or USC. In addition to the tax savings with Cyclescheme, the cost of recharging e-bikes is minimal and, with proper care, maintenance costs (such as tyres, chains, and brake pads) are infrequent.

6 You make the rules

Commuters will be all too familiar

with transport delays that are out of their control. Commuting by e-bike means you will no longer be limited by public transport schedules, over-packed buses, fuel levels and traffic updates. This is where that motor comes in handy again as you can jet off at a time that works for you and avoid the dreaded rush-hour traffic; all without breaking too much of a sweat.

7 Go the distance

E-bikes have come a long way in recent years. Thanks to improvements in technology, e-bike batteries can handle longer distances than ever before without running out of energy, making it the perfect option for those commuting to and from the office.

“Businesses can benefit from a centralised online platform to track, approve and review applications, along with a dedicated Cyclescheme account manager.”

8 Pick up the pace

If you've been held back by injuries or fitness levels then an e-bike is a great tool to help you get cycling and enjoy the great outdoors again. An e-bike caters for all abilities and enables a level playing field so you can ride at an impressive speed, regardless of the weather or terrain conditions. It's also a great way to get involved with group cycling without worrying about keeping up with fellow cyclists.

9 Enjoy yourself

In addition to the boost in endorphins from the exercise, commuting on an e-bike is generally a more enjoyable option than sitting in traffic on the way to or from the office. Getting some fresh air, zooming past traffic jams, and taking on hills with ease can work wonders for both the mind and body.

10 The choice is yours

There is such a vast range of e-bikes nowadays that there is a model to suit all needs, wants and abilities. Whether you're looking to take on mountain biking, to explore local trails, or you're looking for some comfort while you cruise, you are sure to find what you're looking for. When you sign up to Cyclescheme, you can choose to purchase your bicycle and equipment from over 300 bike stores across the country.

For more information, email info@cyclescheme.ie



Lulu O'Sullivan, founder, Giftsdirect.com and TheIrishStore.com

The whole package

Gifts Direct and The Irish Store do what they do extremely well – delivering gifts known for their style as well as their substance

Lulu O'Sullivan started her first business many years ago when she was 21 and with barely a penny to her name. Her first foray into the world of entrepreneurship took the form of 'InterTeddy' – essentially InterFlora for teddy bears.

Although O'Sullivan's dream had initially been to run her own fashion business, when she returned to Ireland after time spent in New York and Australia she simply didn't have the kind of capital required to set up a shop.

"I had to find something I could do that wouldn't cost much," she says. "So I borrowed £2,000, got myself an office in Exchequer St in Dublin and spent £1,000 buying stock."

In what was in hindsight a very savvy move, she gave whatever she had left to McConnells PR to garner as much publicity as possible for her fledgling company. "Because it was such a quirky idea I got a lot of PR that first year, which put us on the map," she says. As the business grew, she added champagne, wine, chocolates etc – and Gifts Direct was born.

"Everything has to look and taste right. We spend a lot more than some of our competitors on how gifts look when they arrive."

Embracing the Internet

In the meantime, of course, the Internet came along. Because the company was already selling directly, this suited its business model nicely. In fact, recalls O'Sullivan, Gifts Direct and Kenny's bookshop in Galway were the first two websites to go live in Ireland.

In 2008/09 O'Sullivan attended a leadership course for growth at Stanford University in the US. It was, she says, a "game-changer" and inspired her to launch her second brand, The Irish Store.

Unlike Gifts Direct, which is geared mainly towards people born in Ireland, The Irish Store is aimed squarely at the Irish diaspora or simply fans of all things Irish. In practice, that means it has a target market of about 80 million, compared to Gifts Direct's six million. Some 95% of business done by The Irish Store is for export, compared to 35% for Gifts Direct. Between them they have 30 full-time staff, although this swells to about 60 in the pre-Christmas period.

Across both her brands, O'Sullivan is picky about the products she will sell and what kind of "curb appeal" they have. "Everything has to look and taste right," she says. "We spend a lot more than some of our competitors on how gifts look when they arrive."

She is also crystal clear about the importance of customer service. "When I started out I had no money, so every time someone placed an order I wanted to make sure they had a really 'wow' experience," she says. "That is close to my heart and something we constantly work to achieve."

**Gifts Direct/
The Irish Store
is also shortlisted
in the Exporter
of the Year
category**

Walking on air

An astonishing array of parts along with a thorough understanding of the finer points of everything it supplies are key to what sets Air Impact apart

Air Impact has its origins in 1970 when founder Martin Hogan spotted a gap in the market for the supply of air and pneumatic equipment. At the time he ran a bus company, and when his buses broke down he often found it difficult to source what he needed. So he started doing it himself and word got around.

He finished his business degree and opened a shop in Liberty Square in the capital. His wife Patricia had a background in accounts, and the pair made a formidable team, as demonstrated by the fact that the company is still going strong over 50 years later and has a presence in both Dublin and Thurles.

Currently employing 15 people, Air Impact is Ireland's go-to supplier of air tools, pneumatic tools, air compressors, compressor spare parts and garage equipment. It retails equipment but also supplies a wide range of industries from agriculture to equestrian and automotive to pharmaceuticals.

Directors Belinda and Jerry Hogan returned from Australia many years ago to run the Dublin office, but since

moved to Thurles. Belinda Hogan says the company's unique selling point is that it offers compressed air and pneumatic solutions backed by tech-savvy advice. Air Impact is also differentiated by the fact that it stocks tens of thousands of parts for everything from Chicago Pneumatic, Nuair and SIP to Stanley and Fini products.

"We have never lost any staff and we always strive to ensure that the product a customer gets is the right one for the job," she adds.

Constant testing

The business constantly tests new products in order to stay at the forefront of latest developments in the industry. All of its products are made by world-class companies to the highest specification and in accordance with international standards.

Hogan says the implementation of the e-commerce website was a huge undertaking, but very much worth the effort. Also, when she and her husband joined the business, everything had to be moved from a manual to a computerised system.

This year, she says, Air Impact hopes to do more cross-training of staff as well as focus on international markets. Currently, these account for about 5% of the business, but the company has its sights set on growing this.

"We hope to continue to build our self-sufficiency so that we can withstand changes in the industry and anything else that is thrown at us," says Hogan. "We are also always on the lookout for innovative products that we can source and get to our customers before anyone else does."

"We have never lost any staff and we always strive to ensure that the product a customer gets is the right one for the job."



Martin Hogan, founder, and Jerry Hogan, director, Air Impact



Rebecca Harrison, managing director, Fishers of Newtownmountkennedy

Always in style

Established some 43 years ago in Co Wicklow, Fishers of Newtownmountkennedy has a reputation for an in-store experience beloved of customers and staff alike

Over the years, Fishers of Newtownmountkennedy has survived – and thrived – by changing with the times while never forgetting to listen to customers. But it also listens to staff; the working environment is tailored to suit each member of its team of 20 people, the majority of whom work part-time.

“All our staff have other interests or activities and we like to work around those as much as possible,” says managing director of the family-run department store Rebecca Harrison.

For example, one employee volunteers in the National Gallery so is not rostered to work on Tuesdays, while another volunteers in a nursing home so doesn’t work on Thursdays. The business also operates a repeating four-week roster – something quite unusual in this sector, where many employees only know a week in advance what shifts they will work.

“This gives our staff certainty and allows them to plan,” says Harrison.

Employees here have a real voice when it comes to business decisions;

“It’s not just about buying a pair of trousers; it’s about coming down and enjoying your visit, and perhaps learning about what suits you best.”

Fishers of Newtownmountkennedy is also shortlisted in the Workplace Wellbeing category

for example, when the pandemic struck they were consulted before any decision was taken on whether to close. In the end, management and staff decided together to close even sooner than required by government.

Staff loyalty

The firm is flexible when it comes to time off for staff to look after their mental health, and there is an active social side to work. If any further proof were needed that this is a well-liked employer, you only have to look at the fact that almost its entire staff has been in situ for over 10 years, and quite a few for over 20.

“We have an incredibly loyal staff; if they weren’t happy they would have moved on,” says Harrison. “People spend too much time at work for it not to be a nice environment and we believe it’s our job to make that happen.”

At the helm for 12 years now, Harrison says Fishers’ strength lies in the fact that it has constantly evolved: “We have always kept our eyes open for new opportunities.”

A prime example was when it introduced other businesses into the store to broaden the range of products and services available. There is now a complete health and wellbeing space with a physiotherapist, hearing clinic, skin clinic, hair salon and health food shop.

Although Fishers sells online, it remains deservedly best-known for its in-store experience.

“It’s not just about buying a pair of trousers; it’s about coming down and enjoying your visit, and perhaps learning about what suits you best,” says Harrison.

Face value

For sisters Rhona and Corinna Tolan, it has been onwards and upwards all the way for Monica Tolan, The Skin Experts – but then, they did learn from the best

When Monica Tolan started her skincare business she could never have imagined it would still be thriving over four decades later. Neither could she have foreseen that it would be so ably captained by her daughters Rhona and Corinna. And although Monica sadly passed away in 2019, her legacy is very much alive and kicking.

Back in 1980 she was working in Switzers when she decided to train as a therapist and went on to open one of the first salons in Balbriggan, Co Dublin. Corinna and Rhona, who had already been working with their mother for some years, officially took the reins in 2011. Five years later they opened a clinic in Malahide, then went online and, just last year, added a London clinic to their stable.

Rhona Tolan says they learned a huge amount from their mother about how to run the business and provide the best treatments. “You can get a facial done anywhere but not necessarily get the best results,” she says.

Apart from that, their success has been

down to “sheer hard work”, copious amounts of staff training and the fact that they only use medical-grade brands. Many of the firm’s 41 female employees, who range in age from 18 to 54, have grown with the business – switching between part- to full-time roles as needed.

Prioritising online

When the first lockdown came along in 2020, the business seriously upped its game. Although already online, it quickly prioritised this part of its operation. “We bought four laptops so therapists could do consultations from home,” says Tolan. “For a while we had the entire market.”

During the pandemic the sisters boosted the profile of the business by creating Instagram accounts for staff. They also launched a new website, for which they changed the backend to Shopify. This allowed greater streamlining with service providers so products would ship quicker.

It was a good move given the fact that, where the business had once been shipping 10-15 parcels per day, lockdown saw it ship 80-100 daily. Although this reduced slightly after the first lockdown as competitors started to catch up, it now stands at 40-50 a day.

This year the business will launch an app, which will give users access to a senior skin therapist at any time and allow them to upload progress pictures, book appointments and buy products. Customers can either get a free version or a paid version for €79 a year. The paid version will come with various benefits such as ongoing product discounts.

“We bought four laptops so therapists could do consultations from home. For a while we had the entire market.”



Rhona and Corinna Tolan, directors, Monica Tolan, the Skin Experts



Gary Meaney, managing director, Reflect Autocare

Rise and shine

Founder of Reflect Autocare Gary Meaney takes obvious pride in every aspect of his business from testing products to customer care – and it is paying off

Gary Meaney was working as a truck driver in 2012 when he spotted a niche in the market for autocare products and, as he puts it, “took a chance”. He means this literally; he sold his car for a few thousand euro, bought some products and started knocking on doors.

That was January of 2012; by that September Meaney had come up with the Reflect Autocare brand, and a year later saw him move the business out of his home. From there he rented a small unit in Millennium Business Park in Dublin 11, but the business quickly outgrew it and he had to move into a larger unit.

Currently employing 12 people, Meaney has since bought two units of his own in the same park, where he now has state-of-the-art showrooms. His wife, sister and son have all got involved in the business in various ways, with his son for example helping to get the website off the ground in 2012.

Reflect Autocare’s customer base is large and varied and includes major car

“I tweak products to my own formulation and then get the manufacturers to go with it. I also try to keep products reasonably priced.”

dealerships all around Ireland. Bigger customers include the Joe Duffy and Colm Quinn groups, the Office of Public Works and Fingal County Council. The business also supplies numerous hardware stores and motor factories as well as clients with buses, coaches and trucks, and is a regular presence at truck shows.

A true one-stop shop

Meaney says his business is truly a one-stop shop, whether you want to buy a power washer, get some hoses fixed or source a full valeting setup. Reflect Autocare is, he says, “a retailer for detailers”.

Having worked in dealerships as a teenager, he always had a passion for the industry, and tests every product he brings in before introducing it to customers. “I tweak them to my own formulation and then get the manufacturers to go with it,” he says. “I also try to keep products reasonably priced so people are getting good value.”

One of the bigger obstacles Meaney had to overcome with his business was when he was personally out of action in 2014 due to serious illness. It was around the same time that he was taking on a second unit, so to say it was a stressful time would be an understatement. He thankfully recovered, and says the move was the “best thing he ever did”.

Looking ahead to the rest of this year, Meaney sees the upward growth trajectory for the business continuing; in the longer term he hopes to investigate the feasibility of starting to manufacture his own products here in Ireland.

www.reflectautocare.ie

Social media savvy

Fashion retailer Mary Meehan has pivoted her business in a remarkable way, tapping into the consumer demand for online communication combined with truly personal service

The clever response of fashion boutique owner Mary Meehan to the Covid-19 lockdowns has led to Facebook becoming her main online sales channel and the need to rent a 2,300 sq ft warehouse to meet growing demand. With 40 years’ experience in fashion, Meehan owns Verve Boutique in Killybegs and V2 Boutique in Donegal Town.

“During the first lockdown, we had closed shops full of pre-ordered clothes. I decided to create videos of me wearing different outfits, giving viewers lots of ideas on putting items together,” she says. “They really took off and we now have customers from all over Ireland, the UK, the US and Australia.”

Meehan’s videos go out on Facebook three times a week at 7.30pm. Once a video goes up, customers send a private message or call to order. There are now nine people working in the online department, who call customers back at their convenience if they wish and process orders with next-day delivery.

“A lot of customers travel to our stores in Donegal because of the videos and some people even set alarms on their phones to remind them to watch.”

Meehan employs a total of 15 people. “All of the staff are interested in their work and adapted well to using technology more. Customers love the personal one-to-one service over the phone; they chat about their day and feel like our friends. This is why our returns are only at 7% of orders, compared to other places which see returns of 30-40%. “A lot of customers travel to our stores in Donegal because of the videos and some people even set alarms on their phones to remind them to watch.”

Unique and affordable

Verve and V2 stock a selection of unique, affordable ladies clothing ranging from casual to occasion wear. Meehan is more than a retailer; she also has a talent for styling.

“I have an eye for my customers. When I know somebody I can visualise them in something and I often know exactly what an individual customer is going to order.”

Often asked for selfies on the street, Meehan is modest about being the model and star of the videos: “People don’t want perfection, I think they like the fact I’m honest and down to earth.”

Adding another string to her bow, Meehan has launched her own luxury holiday rental, located 5 minutes away from the Verve store, which she rents out to customers who travel for the “shop and stay experience”.

“I have a really loyal customer base and get a lot of new customers every week. I want to build my own warehouse and hope to diversify into homeware – people often private message me about my lamps or cushions that they’ve seen in the videos,” she says.



Mary Meehan, owner and manager, Verve Boutique

www.vervedonegal.com

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

As sponsor of the Innovator of the Year Award, National Standards Authority of Ireland is active in helping Irish companies to use standards to their advantage, writes chief executive officer Geraldine Larkin

An organisation's ability to innovate is widely recognised as a key factor for sustained viability and growth, particularly in nebulous times such as these. Adopting an innovation standard can shorten time to market, saving both time and money.

Throughout the pandemic, National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) has worked with SMEs in navigating the uncharted waters. Through engagement with NSAI, Irish companies can guarantee they are ahead of the curve when it comes to product and service innovation.

Embracing innovation is crucial for Irish companies as evolution enables the ability to compete at a global level. Research and innovation need standards to create a foundational framework from which innovators can design specific solutions. It provides a set of parameters to work within so that they can focus their energy on creating tailored and impactful solutions.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) produces standards on innovation management that contain the distilled knowledge of businesses and experts from around the world. These standards are available to Irish SMEs through NSAI.

“In 2022, NSAI in partnership with RISE in Sweden will offer certification for innovation management professionals in Ireland who deliver innovation management programmes to industry and government.”

Taking a wider view of innovation, outside of technical research and development, the ISO 56000 Innovation Management Standard provides a set of interacting elements that enable an organisation to develop and deliver innovation. These elements address organisational context, leadership capability, operational support, planning, measurement, and ongoing improvement.

The ISO 56000 series provides businesses with the fundamentals of innovation management principles, describing why organisations should engage in innovation activities. It gives



Geraldine Larkin, chief executive officer, National Standards Authority of Ireland

businesses a guidance framework that can be adapted to suit any business and sector.

The innovation standard series has been developed as a guidance standard to help companies to build a systematic approach to innovation. It is the result of years of work from national standards bodies around the world, including NSAI. This standard series focuses on the system companies put in place as a driver of innovation in their business.

Tools for resilience

Innovation is introducing change to create value for the organisation and its stakeholders. Change can encompass new or improved products or services, the way offerings are created or delivered (process innovation), the structure and methods of the organisation (organisational innovation) as well as changes to operational and business models.

The degree of change can range from small improvements (incremental innovation) to large fundamental changes (radical/disruptive innovation).

In 2022, NSAI in partnership with RISE in Sweden will offer certification for innovation management professionals in Ireland who deliver innovation management programmes to industry and government.

Quality assurance of a person's capacity to lead innovation work gives them a clearer role and a reinforced mandate to create value for the organisation. The new certification programme will drive

professionalisation for the innovation management professionals' sector and result in innovation work being conducted in a systematic way.

A recent report from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development identified problems with productivity levels in the Irish SME sector. It found that the gap in the productivity of large companies versus SMEs here is growing.

Using standards can help business owners to improve their risk mitigation process. Forward-thinking organisations need to consider how standards and certification can offer a methodology to make them more resilient in the face of future shocks.

The pandemic and more recent market shocks stemming from the war in Ukraine have demonstrated that small businesses need to take a planned, proactive approach to risk mitigation.

Adopting standards can meet customer requirements and enhance their satisfaction. Companies can use standards to make a leap forward in their business and help them avail of opportunities as they arise. The standards offered by NSAI give companies the tools to ensure the fundamentals of their business are sound.

Independent certification

Achieving third-party certification independently validates compliance with best practices as set out in standards.

NSAI provides independent

certification to organisations, enabling them to demonstrate compliance with international standards. This allows them to operate to the highest international standards.

For example, ISO 9001:2015 is a globally recognised quality management system standard, which provides a model that companies can use to build an effective quality management system.

Benefits of certification to ISO 9001 include the provision of products and services in the most cost- and resource-efficient manner, leading to more customers, more sales and more repeat business.

ISO 27001: 2017 is an internationally recognised standard for managing risks related to the security of the information you hold. The standard is designed to provide a framework for an organisation's information security management system, which includes policies and procedures relevant to how data is controlled and used.

Certification to ISO 27001 helps companies of all sizes recognise the importance of information and cyber security while giving customers confidence in the cyber-resilience of their suppliers.

The NSAI provides access to several groups of ISO standards that are of particular benefit to smaller firms. These standards assist them in reducing their costs, risk mitigation and enhancing their competitiveness. By putting standards in place, small firms now have a framework to build on past successes and innovations in a structured way.

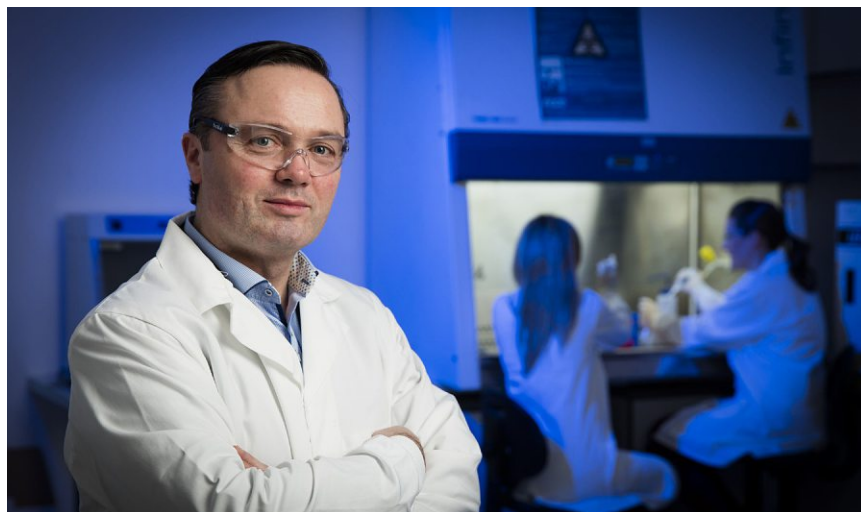
Through early and active engagement in standards development, companies can set themselves apart from their competition, providing them with valuable tools to make their business more competitive and resilient.

NSAI is delighted to sponsor the Innovator of the Year category in the SFA National Business Awards 2022. These awards go to the heart of what NSAI does in supporting Irish businesses and organisations celebrating excellence, achievement, and innovation.

For more information on how working with NSAI benefits your organisation, I strongly encourage you to contact us via our social media pages or go to our website, www.n sai.ie.

SOCIAL MEDIA LINKS

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Philip Noone, CEO, Aalto Bio Reagents

Fighting the good fight

A small company with a global outlook, Rathfarnham-based Aalto Bio Reagents is playing a key role in fighting disease all over the world

One of the longest-established privately-owned biotech companies in the country, Aalto Bio Reagents supplies high-quality raw materials and reagents to the in-vitro diagnostic industry and research laboratories worldwide.

Counting most of the major pharmaceutical companies among its customers, Aalto Bio Reagents' products are central to the development of effective diagnostic kits which are used in the identification of a wide range of infectious diseases.

The company has grown by more than 60% over the past two years alone as demand for its products has increased significantly, particularly in the US and Japan. It now directly employs 17 staff at its new 5,000 sq ft state-of-the-art facility in Dublin 14 along with a number of contractors in IT, legal, accounts and other areas.

With full ISO 13485:2016 quality management accreditation, it also has a US presence through business development offices in Auburn and San Diego.

The key to Aalto Bio Reagents' success to date is its strong technical capability

"We have built up a strong working relationship with our clients due to our ability to react quickly to the emergence of new diseases and viruses."

which facilitates a quick turnaround of raw materials combinations for clients, according to owner and managing director Philip Noone.

Fast reaction

"We have built up a strong working relationship with our client base due to our ability to react quickly to the emergence of new diseases and viruses," he explains. "We were the first to market with proteins and monoclonal antibodies for diagnostic kits for the likes of Zika, SARS, Covid, Dengue and Chikungunya."

The company's profile was significantly enhanced in the early days of the pandemic back in 2020 when it created a critical reagent for the manufacture of PCR testing kits from scratch in less than three weeks for the HSE.

The next couple of years will see Aalto Bio Reagents continue its expansion into the US. "We are also working with Enterprise Ireland to break into the Chinese market," Noone says. "We have a number of new products in development as well which will be launched in the near future." These include raw materials for lime disease variant diagnostic kits and for the identification of neuro-degenerative conditions such as Alzheimer's disease.

In the meantime, the company continues its rigorous research and development programme. "There are about 5,000 different diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans," Noone explains. "We have picked out the top ten and focused our research on them. The process never stops."

The company has built up its own disease treatment library, which currently contains over 300 treatments which are frozen and stored. "We try to anticipate what might be coming down the line," adds Noone.

Aalto Bio Reagents is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category

Pump it up

Providing bespoke end-to-end water and waste-water pumping solutions to public and private sector customers for over 30 years, innovation remains central to Champion Pumps' success

Established by Martin Campion in 1988 initially as an agency supplying Italian-made Lowara pumps to households, Champion Pumps currently employs 47 staff between its headquarters in Gortnahoe, Co Tipperary and offices in Dublin and Limerick.

The company continues to import Lowara pumps to this day amongst a number of leading international brands. However, it now also designs and manufactures full water and waste-water treatment solutions at its state-of-the-art Tipperary facility for its 500-plus customer base across the municipal, commercial, industrial, agricultural and domestic sectors. These clients range from single households and farms to hotels, business parks, construction companies, county councils and even the 3 Arena.

"We are committed to providing clean, safe water to everyone," company director PJ Ryan explains. "One of the keys to the success of Champion Pumps over the past 30 years is that we haven't had to rely on a single sector for our business. As fortunes rise and fall in certain industries, we have been able to adapt accordingly."

Serviced by a 40-strong fleet of vehicles which include a lorry fitted with an 80-ton crane, a vacuum tanker, six potable water tankers and 18 service

"One of the keys to the success of Champion Pumps is that we haven't had to rely on a single sector for our business."

vehicles (some equipped with pump-lifting cranes), the company provides a full end-to-end service to all of its clients, including 24-hour monitoring and emergency call-out.

Customer focus

"Our primary focus is on our customers," notes Ryan. "Having continuous access to clean water and working waste-water systems is crucial and we pride ourselves on our ability to respond quickly when there is a problem. Our monitoring systems mean that we can identify and solve potential issues before they become a problem for the customer, while our central location means we can be anywhere in the country within a couple of hours."

According to Ryan, there is constant customer demand for product and service improvements, particularly in areas such as connectivity and increased energy efficiency. Champion Pumps' in-house team of specialist engineers and software developers work closely together to meet these new requirements.

"It would have been hard to imagine it in our sector 30 years ago, but we are now competing with the big IT companies for software developers," Ryan says. "Technology, most notably the Internet of Things, is playing an increasingly important role in our business and we have invested heavily in our IT systems over the past few years."

"Amongst other things, new technology has helped to significantly enhance our maintenance and monitoring capabilities. This has been crucial in reducing customer downtime by identifying and addressing issues as quickly and efficiently as possible."

Champion Pumps is also shortlisted in the Services category



Martin Campion, owner, Champion Pumps



Stephen Dempsey, managing director, EcoVolt

Feel the heat

Dublin-based energy solutions provider EcoVolt has developed a suite of revolutionary new electric heating products that are eco-friendly and help to reduce energy costs

Stephen Dempsey established EcoVolt in 2003 and spent several years supplying mechanical and electrical engineering services to the residential and construction sectors. He then decided to try something new and went in search of an alternative to the costly, low-efficiency storage heaters that were all the rage on the Irish market at the time.

After initially importing ceramic heating units from Germany, he decided to go into manufacturing for himself in 2012. He wanted an electric heating solution that was quick, effective, easy to install and could stand up to the vagaries of the Irish climate. Not finding anything suitable, he decided to design his own version.

EcoVolt launched its first product in 2014 and just eight years later has seven unique products on the market. The company has grown significantly over the intervening period and now employs 22 staff at a dedicated 10,000 sq ft manufacturing and warehousing facility in Dundrum, Co Dublin.

The product range includes everything from electric ceramic radiators and heat pumps to CeP heating panels,

“I believe it is the future of heating and will make a significant contribution to reducing energy costs for users everywhere in the years ahead.”

photovoltaic panels, ductless building ventilation systems with automatic heat recovery, control panels and solar hybrid inverters that store energy from the sun during the day for use at night.

Quick installation

Customers come from both the domestic and commercial markets with products available for purchase and installation directly from the company itself or via a nationwide network of stockists. “All of our solutions are low-energy consumption and extremely environmentally-friendly,” Dempsey explains.

“That is hugely important at a time when energy costs are rising exponentially and people are looking to reduce their carbon footprint. They are also quick and easy to install with installation of complete systems possible in less than a day in many cases.”

All of the new product lines have proven very successful to date, but Dempsey is hopeful that the CeP pre-fabricated carbon heating panel will be a game changer for the company. Compliant with Nearly Zero Energy Building and passive housing standards, CeP panels can be easily installed either during initial construction or as part of a retrofit programme. They offer a relatively large heated surface area at low energy input compared to more traditional systems. In addition, they can be controlled from a central panel and linked to solar panels or other energy sources.

“Basically, it’s a gypsum plasterboard panel painted over with a conductive coating made from carbon graphite,” Dempsey explains. “It’s very simple but I believe it is the future of heating and will make a significant contribution to reducing energy costs for users everywhere in the years ahead.”

www.ecovolt.ie

Get the message

ISO 27001-accredited Phonovation has been providing dedicated line, secure messaging and mobile identity services to customers across multiple industry sectors since 1988

Based in Dun Laoghaire, Co Dublin, Phonovation was one of the pioneers of the premium rate line and mobile group messaging revolution. It all started with a couple of local bookmaker shops and a deal to deliver live commentary of races from Ireland, the UK and further afield.

This ‘real-time’ service proved hugely popular and the company quickly won contracts with other major organisations including RTE and Met Éireann to run competition phone lines and collate weather data, respectively.

More than 30 years on and Phonovation still provides those services, although they now account for just 10% of turnover. Quick to move with the times, Phonovation has developed a range of secure, reliable mobile messaging and identity solutions for a growing client base. “The more we use our mobile phones for our communications, the more secure they need to be and our services ensure that they are,” says Phonovation CEO Gavin Carpenter.

In 2010 it launched InteractSMS, a group text messaging service enabling businesses to securely batch message up to 5,000 customers simultaneously. “Messages are generally simple things like an appointment reminder, but they are a highly effective way of communicating directly with customers,” notes Carpenter.

The company now provides this service for clients across the government, financial, retail, healthcare, telecoms, utilities and other sectors, sending over 25 million messages monthly.

Tackling fraud

Phonovation developed its innovative 2FA (Two Factor Authentication) mobile identification and fraud prevention

system in 2017 to combat the rise of cybercrime. Built by the company’s own in-house team of engineers and security experts to facilitate safer transactions, it has since become the largest part of its business and is now widely used across the financial sector.

“Our mobile identity offering verifies the SIM owner in real time. This enables banks to react instantly if there is any suspicious activity on the card. This quick response is vital in protecting people’s money and reducing fraud,” notes Carpenter.

With a suite of scalable solutions, the company has enjoyed strong growth in recent years and now employs 36 staff between its Dun Laoghaire headquarters and offices in Hoxton, London. Carpenter puts this growth down to an ability to adapt and innovate.

“There is a lot of positive attitude and energy in the company and we are always looking to develop new solutions for our customers. There are 7 million mobile phones in this country alone that need to be protected,” he says.

“We developed two new products during the pandemic, including a world-first solution to counter the rise of smishing. We are currently working with our telecoms partners on a rollout.”

Phonovation is also shortlisted in the Services category

“The more we use our mobile phones for our communications, the more secure they need to be and our services ensure that they are.”



Gavin Carpenter, CEO, Phonovation

www.phonovation.com

INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR

Viva la vida

VivaGreen is a global leader in the development of high-quality, environmentally-friendly alternatives to a wide range of household and garden products

After spending several years in the US, brothers Russell and Garrett Walsh returned to Ireland in the late 1990s with a burning desire to do their bit for the planet. Putting their engineering backgrounds to good use, they formed VivaGreen and began to research and develop affordable, eco-friendly alternatives to everyday products.

Fast-forward to today, and the company manufactures an extensive range of high-quality, biodegradable, chemical- and plastic-free, recyclable goods for export worldwide. Currently employing five people, VivaGreen exports 80% of what it makes here in Ireland, with the UK and US among its biggest markets.

One of VivaGreen's first products was GreenStake®, a plastic-free biodegradable landscape stake for pinning sod and tents that breaks down into the soil after use. Launched in 2000, over one million have been sold to Glastonbury Festival alone and today the product is used by the likes of Augusta National Golf Club and other world-renowned courses. GreenSax Compostable Bags – the first fully-biodegradable bin liner on the Irish market – quickly followed.

Proliferation of products

The past five years have proven extremely fruitful with a number of exciting new products coming onstream. The award-winning MossOff Chemical-Free outdoor treatment range for lawns and surfaces such as tarmac, patios, decking and roofs was launched in 2016, with a growing customer base that includes Waterways Ireland, Blarney Castle and Gardens, Ballygallon Stud and the UK National Trust.

In the household sector, ReMade, a heavy-duty refuse sack made from

“A partnership with SuperValu setting up re-fill stations has proven very successful and we hope to extend the scheme further over the coming months.”



Russell and Garrett Walsh, co-founders, VivaGreen

recycled plastic, hit the shelves in 2018, followed by re-usable food storage bag solutions SnackSax and Scrapack a year later. In 2019, VivaGreen launched DeOdour Chemical Free, a treatment made from natural minerals which was developed to eliminate bin odours.

VivaGreen launched its Tru Eco range of laundry and household cleaners in 2020. “This range is available in all SuperValu stores and 80 independent health stores and eco shops nationwide. All ingredients are plant-based and fully-biodegradable in dispensing bottles made from 100% recycled re-usable plastic,” says Russell Walsh, co-founder and head of

product development.

“A partnership with SuperValu setting up re-fill stations in select stores has proven very successful and we hope to extend the scheme further over the coming months.”

Innovation remains at the heart of VivaGreen's business and there are plans to launch more new products for both house and garden later this year as the company continues to grow. The Walsh brothers have stayed true to their ethos since the company was first formed all those years ago. It may have taken a while for consumers to hear the message, but they're listening now.

www.vivagreengroup.com

INSIGHTS



Building SME talent

Supporting SMEs to accelerate innovation, enhance digitalisation and address climate action have long been at the heart of Skillnet Ireland's strategy, writes its director of communications and policy Tracey Donnery

As the national agency dedicated to developing talent for business, we invest in people to ensure that businesses are confident, have the capacity to work effectively with new technologies and business practices and can also leverage these vital resources to innovate, grow and compete.

Each year, we deliver talent development solutions to over 20,000 companies, ranging from high-growth start-ups and SMEs to scaling multinationals and FDI businesses across multiple industry sectors – 85% of the 20,000 companies that we will support this year will be either small or micro firms.

Skillnet Ireland brings industry, expert thought leaders, government and academic institutions together to work collaboratively to create talent development initiatives where business ideation thrives, competency with new

technologies can grow and leaders can transform businesses. Taking key insights from the SFA and our own industry insights to truly understand the challenges and opportunities for Irish SMEs, Skillnet Ireland partnered with the SFA to develop MentorsWork. A unique proposition, this is designed to enable business to thrive and accelerate productivity and innovation activity right across the economy.

We believe it plays a key role in supporting businesses at different stages and scales.

Since 2020, over 1,000 business leaders have availed of expert mentoring and practical and tactical guidance for their business through MentorsWork, making it a highly successful talent initiative for SMEs.

The recently launched Innovation Exchange initiative, in partnership with



Tracey Donnery, director of communications and policy, Skillnet Ireland

Dublin Business Innovation Centre, helps SMEs achieve a commercial return from bringing together large and small firms in unique new ways to enrich Ireland's wider business landscape.

The Innovation Exchange is a marketplace for innovation, where businesses facing digital transformation challenges are connected with SMEs with the talent to help them achieve their ambitions.

Skillnet Ireland is a partnership organisation working with 73 industry partners, including the SFA, each enabling companies themselves to identify their skills gaps and look at what their priorities are in terms of developing their business and people.

“In the past two years, Skillnet Business Networks have made an extraordinary difference, offering talent development supports that have been instrumental in keeping businesses trading.”

In the past two years, Skillnet Business Networks have made an extraordinary difference throughout the country, offering talent development supports that have been instrumental in keeping businesses trading through unprecedented challenges.

Skillnet Ireland was recently awarded an additional €11m in funding under the EU Brexit Adjustment Reserve, presenting an exceptional opportunity to collectively support the SME sector in Ireland in 2022.

This will allow our enterprise-led Skillnet Business Networks help SMEs across a wide range of sectors and all regions plan for success in key areas including digitalisation, sustainability and innovation.

Businesses leaders and their teams are encouraged to explore the talent development and business supports available from Skillnet Ireland at www.skillnetireland.ie.

KNOCKING DOWN BARRIERS

In the face of increasing cost pressures and digital transformation, Sage is committed to providing real solutions, insight and support wherever it can to enable Irish SMEs to thrive

Latest research from Sage called ‘Small Business, Big Opportunity’ confirmed that rising costs and concerns about inflation are keeping business owners up at night, with 23% of respondents saying this poses the biggest risk to their business looking ahead to the next 12 months. The same percentage cite cost increases as the biggest negative impact on their businesses today and 43% anticipate cost pressure will rise in the coming year.

“This research shows that SMEs have demonstrated incredible resilience throughout the pandemic. But their confidence cannot be mistaken for invincibility,” says Michael Office, VP Product Marketing at Sage.

“We carry out regular polling to make sure we understand the sentiment of SMEs. This enables us to adapt the support we provide to them to help knock down barriers, invest in our solutions to enable greater efficiencies and lobby the Government to ask for the support they need that will help them to thrive.”

Drawing on a strong ecosystem of insight and experience, Sage has developed free resources for business. These include Sound Advice, a one-stop-shop podcast presented by business journalist Bex Burn-Callander aimed at helping listeners to make their small business financially successful, in one year and beyond. “Whatever you want to know, we help businesses to tackle it with a line-up of entrepreneurial stars delivering honest insight,” says Office.

“Equipping both small businesses and the general public with stronger digital skills, across more widely-used business software and in more niche areas, is of paramount importance.”

Another free resource is Sage Advice. This award-winning blog delivers advice and guidance on a range of different business needs from managing your taxes to getting payroll right and growing your business.

For the next generation of accountants, Sage has launched a first-of-its-kind, interactive e-learning portal for accounting students at Technological



University of the Shannon in Athlone, Co Westmeath. “This will help to develop aspiring accountants for the Irish jobs market by instilling real-world entrepreneurial and business skills, with a qualification supported by the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants,” Office notes.

Making a difference

Sage offers various tools and technologies that are making a real difference to small businesses, in terms of increasing efficiencies and progressing their digital transformation. One key tool it updated last November is the Sage Accounting banking service. This service addresses key pain points for small businesses in their operations and makes it easier for accountants to run their practice, while removing the complexity of importing transactional data manually.

Latest figures from credit risk specialists CRIFVision-Net show that a total of 25,695 new start-ups were registered in Ireland in 2021, the highest number on record in one year. This has meant that solutions such as Sage Accounting – aimed at sole traders and small business owners – have been in significant demand, according to Office.

“Sage research has also shown that accountants were named by SMEs as ‘critical’; a staggering 92% of SMEs use the service of an accountant, with 49% using their services weekly,” he says. “This has

meant products such as Sage Accounting with Partner Edition, which helps to manage accounting and bookkeeping clients in one place, have also been very popular.”

A recent report from Accenture highlighted how there were clear positives in the growth of digital skills development in Ireland. However, the same report revealed that the ‘digital divide’ and skills gaps in Ireland’s digital society have in fact widened during the pandemic.

“Equipping both small businesses and the general public with stronger digital skills, across more widely-used business software and in more niche areas, is of paramount importance. Government and industry have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to achieve a step change in digital adoption among SMEs and the wider economy to recover post-Covid-19,” says Office.

“At Sage, we regularly evolve and innovate to serve changing customer needs. Recent acquisitions including Brightpearl, GoProposal, Cake HR [now Sage HR] and Auto Entry will come to the forefront of our technology offering in the Irish market in 2022.

“We continue to look at areas where we can innovate further and provide business solutions for positive impact for small businesses, such as a new product in development that will enable accountants to digitise their practices and work more closely with their clients.”

TIME TO THRIVE – AREAS TO FOCUS ON

Stay connected to your customers

– Insight is everything; use this to drive more informed decisions about what your customers like and when they buy so you can remain ahead of the game and your competition. Also remember to engage with them in the right way to help forge trusted relationships.

Remain as agile as possible

– What helped those businesses that survived the pandemic was how they were able to adapt quickly. Technology is a great enabler to this – using digital tools to run your business means you can be always on, anywhere.

Build your network

– Stay connected to the wider businesses ecosystem in your area, join physical and also digital groups, for example on Facebook, that enable you to learn from others and gain support from likeminded peers.

Continue to communicate with relevant government bodies and stakeholders on their challenges and also conduct internal audits to identify where immediate opportunities – and risks – can be found.



Willie McMahon, Claire McMahon and Kevin Davis, co-owners, CalX Instrumentation Services

Measured for success

Less than three years since its foundation in Co Meath, CalX Instrumentation Services is already a leading player in calibration management and verification in Ireland

Established in June 2019 following the merger between Eurotech Calibration and Trefoil Controls – two companies with long experience in calibration management – CalX Instrumentation Services now counts many of Ireland’s largest pharmaceutical, life sciences, medical device and food and dairy manufacturers and several large fuel retailers among its customer base.

Calibration is a key element of highly-regulated industry sectors such as pharmaceutical, food and medical devices where product ingredient and manufacturing process management are crucial to meeting rigorous quality and safety standards.

“Our number one priority is to ensure that all client analytical and process instrumentation is operating correctly and to regulatory standards,” explains Kevin Davis, company co-founder and operations director. “We have a team of expert engineers who work closely with customers to maximise their processes, minimise process downtime and manage equipment life-cycles.”

“We offer a 360-degree solution to simplify and streamline the entire process

“We have a team of expert engineers who work closely with customers to maximise their processes, minimise process downtime and manage equipment life-cycles.”

which allows clients to focus on their core business. All necessary documentation is collected and stored on our online portal which is accessible 24/7. This ensures that customers are always audit-ready.”

Fueling growth

Another important element of the company’s offering is verification – the process of comparing, checking, testing or adjusting a weight or measure to ensure that it conforms to a standard. CalX currently provides verification services to Maxol, Applegreen, Circle K, Texaco, Certa and many independently-owned fuel retailers nationwide.

“Verification is about fair trade and making sure that customers are getting what they’re paying for,” Davis says. “Fuel pumps tend to over-dispense over time anyway due to wear and tear, so it actually pays retailers to get their pumps verified.”

CalX has enjoyed significant growth over the past three years. Employee headcount has increased from 14 to 43, with client service hours continuing to rise as the company wins new business. A total of 3,712 hours were completed in June 2021, a 314% increase on the same month two years previously.

Davis puts this growth down to the staff and customer service, predicting a further 20% growth in new business for this year, mostly from the life sciences sector. “Being able to provide a top quality service means having the best possible management team, technicians, trainees and support staff in place,” he says.

“Our aim is to create an environment where people want to work and feel appreciated. In 2021 we were awarded Apprenticeship Employer of the Year by Apprenticeship Ireland and we’re keen to promote our branch of engineering to females considering future careers in STEM.”

Adventurous spirit

Key to the success of Carlingford Adventure Centre is continuous innovation and investment, with an exciting new treetop venture set to open in time for summer

Located just an hour from Dublin and Belfast on the picturesque Carlingford Peninsula in Co Louth, Carlingford Adventure Centre provides outdoor pursuits and activity holidays for children and adults. It’s owned and operated by the McArdle family, who swapped a drapery business for the great outdoors back in 1990, and promises “fun and challenging activities in a safe and friendly environment”.

Taking full advantage of its location between the mountains and the sea, Carlingford Adventure Centre includes both land and water-based activities. Terra firma pursuits include hillwalking, orienteering, rock climbing and laser combat, while water-sports enthusiasts can try their hand at kayaking, canoeing, raft building, water trampolining and stand-up paddling.

There is plenty of accommodation available on site, including apartments, dormitories, dining hall and activity rooms – making the destination ideal for all types of groups from families to company departments on team-building trips.

In 2014, the company launched Skypark, which is now Ireland’s largest zipline and aerial adventure facility. Including

“You can’t afford to stand still in this industry – you need to constantly come up with new ideas and facilities to keep customers coming back.”

the only wheelchair-accessible zipline in the country, the 16-acre site is home to several obstacle courses of varying difficulty, featuring ziplines, cargo nets, rope bridges, giant log swings and more at heights ranging between 6 and 40 ft. There is also a junior version tailored to five to eight year-olds along with footgolf, frisbee golf, aeroball, archery, mini golf and other facilities.

Keeping it interesting

“You can’t afford to stand still in this industry – you need to constantly come up with new ideas and facilities to keep customers coming back,” says company chief executive Tom McArdle. Over €300,000 was invested in upgrading facilities between the two sites over the past two years with more pencilled in for this year and next.

“We used the pandemic closure as an opportunity to invest in our IT systems. This will make us more efficient and help to improve the customer experience going forward,” McArdle adds.

The company’s latest innovation involves a collaboration with Coillte and Failte Ireland on a new treetop nature tourism centre in Rathdrum, Co Wicklow. Located on the estate of 19th century Irish nationalist Charles Stewart Parnell, the new €16m Beyond The Trees Avondale project will include a 1.2km ‘footpath in the sky’ treetop walkway leading to a 38m wooden viewing tower (the equivalent of 12 storeys) offering spectacular views over the Avondale estate and the countryside beyond.

Also included will be a unique sensory tunnel, a walled garden, visitor centre and café. Constructed using Irish timber from Coillte forests, the new facility is expected to become one of the leading tourist attractions on the east coast.



Tom McArdle, managing director, Carlingford Adventure Centre



David McNamara, CEO and John Killilea, technical director, CommSec

Safety net

Dublin-based cyber security solutions provider Commsec has some big plans for the future as it targets expansion into Asia and other international markets

CommSec was established in 2013 by cyber security specialist David McNamara who correctly predicted that online fraud, data theft and other forms of cyber crime were set to become major issues over the coming decade.

Now employing 25 staff, the company provides affordable cyber security services to public and private sector organisations of varying sizes in Ireland, the UK and Europe.

“A lot of businesses don’t understand cyber security and therefore just ignore it. That’s a huge mistake. The vast majority of cyber crime is committed by organised criminal gangs who are experts at hacking systems, stealing valuable information and in some cases demanding a ransom for its safe return,” McNamara explains.

“The HSE cyber attack last year has helped raise awareness of the issue, which is a good thing. Business is built on trust and failing to adequately protect customer or partner data can cause huge losses and do irreparable damage to a company’s reputation.”

Bespoke solutions

ISO 27001-accredited, CommSec offers a full suite of bespoke solutions to help identify, protect, prevent, detect and analyse cyber risks and threats. Using the latest leading-edge technologies, these range from consultancy, investigation, vulnerability scanning, testing, protection, identity and access management, incident response and staff training to full CISO (chief information security officer as a service) and SOC (security operations centre as a service).

CommSec has developed its own hybrid vulnerability scanning platform (CheckScan+), which is used

“Our aim for the future is to continuously improve on what we can offer through the development of new solutions and services.”

to identify potential vulnerabilities in client applications, websites and IT infrastructure. Supported by the CommSec team, it also configures scan timings and scope, interprets results and prioritises remedial actions.

McNamara feels that having the right mix of highly-skilled and experienced staff has been key to the company’s success to date. “We are in it for the long haul and are keen to add value for our customers,” he says. “We have assembled a great team with strong cyber security expertise at a time when there is a skills shortage in the area. Our aim for the future is to continuously improve on what we can offer through the development of new solutions and services.”

Following a recent upgrade in systems capabilities, McNamara is ready for the next phase of development and export growth over the next few years. “We have linked up with a company in Singapore with a view to getting a foothold in the Asian market,” he says. “We are also looking at Australia as well. The issues of data security and cyber crime aren’t going to go away any time soon, which means our services will be in demand for many years to come.”

www.commsec.ie

Designed to last

Repeat business from multinational clients has been central to the growth of OSENG Engineering Services, which is currently on a recruitment drive to keep pace with demand

Gary O’Sullivan founded OSENG Engineering Services in 2018 with the aim of improving the design side of pharmaceutical construction projects and filling a gap he identified for engineering consultancy in the west of Ireland. Last year, the Mayo-based firm worked on 36 projects and over 90% of its turnover is repeat business.

“The projects we’re working on are getting bigger and bigger as our recognition in the market grows. We can now see three or four years’ of work ahead. We recently started a project for a pharma client, which will run until 2025. Clients are coming to us requesting us to do more work for them and word of mouth has been powerful,” O’Sullivan explains.

“Our focus on design from inception to completion has been key to our success. But clients also really value the personal touch we provide. They know they can pick up a phone and speak to the director of the company and within an hour and

“The projects we’re working on are getting bigger and bigger as our recognition grows. We can now see three or four years’ of work ahead.”

a half we can get to their plant and sit in front of them. In the coming weeks I will be travelling to meet clients at their US operations.”

While the life sciences sector continues to account for a substantial proportion of its work, OSENG has also been doing a lot in the logistics space. For example, it is putting 300kW of solar panels on the roof of a new flagship facility it is working on in Dublin for DB Shenker. “Sustainability has become a big focus for us. We advise clients on how to get in front and make the transitions needed,” notes O’Sullivan.

Work-life balance

Currently employing a team of nine, O’Sullivan forecasts an increase in his workforce to around 16 people by the end of this year. He believes getting the work-life balance right will be important in attracting and retaining talent: “We recently made the transition to staff working a nine-day fortnight. Working hours have been extended by half an hour over the nine days and everyone has every second Friday off,” he says. “I’m currently exploring the option of opening an office on the east coast to allow staff to work there as well as a day or two a week at home if they want.”

O’Sullivan is also very focused on pushing technology further into the forefront of the business. OSENG uses augmented reality (AR) smart glasses and helmet-mounted AR headsets, which allow the firm to show clients designs overlaid on existing facilities remotely and validate them. It has also built its own software for snagging and walk-down systems – accessible in real time via tablet – and now views all projects in 3D.



Gary O’Sullivan, managing director, OSENG Engineering Services

www.oseng.ie

PROMOTING ACCESS TO FINANCE

June Butler, chief executive officer of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, explains why the organisation is so important in supporting Irish SMEs through these challenging times

Q What is the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI)?

A Set up by the Department of Finance in September 2014, the SBCI is Ireland's national promotional institution focused on ensuring Irish SMEs can access finance at competitive interest rates and under favourable terms. The SBCI works through our network of bank and non-bank on-lending partners to deliver lower-cost, easier-to-access finance for Irish SMEs and to drive competition in the Irish credit market.

Q What difference has the SBCI made to Irish SMEs since it was established?

A Since we started our lending activity in March 2015 more than 46,000 Irish SMEs have availed of SBCI-funded or guaranteed products. We have provided low-cost liquidity or partial guarantees on loans totalling more than €2.8bn. As a State-owned promotional institution, we provide wholesale finance to SMEs through our on-lending partners (banks, non-banks and credit unions), ensuring that the benefit of our support is delivered to Irish SMEs. SBCI products are designed to fill gaps in the finance market and loans supported by the SBCI will generally be at a reduced interest rate, will have reduced security requirements or will be of a longer term than is available in the market.

Q The SBCI operates the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme on behalf of the Irish Government. How has this been progressing?

A The €2bn Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme (CCGS) was launched in September 2020 as an emergency measure to assist SMEs with the challenges they were facing due to the pandemic. To mid-March 2022, the scheme had received 11,377 applications with a value of over €824m. The CCGS has supported more SMEs than any other SBCI/government risk-sharing scheme so far. The €2bn in funding capacity was an important statement of intent, and a commitment from the Government that the capacity is there if needed.

“Since we started our lending activity in March 2015 more than 46,000 Irish SMEs have availed of SBCI-funded or guaranteed products.”



June Butler, chief executive officer, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland

Data to mid-March 2022 shows a consistent take-up of the scheme across a wide range of sectors, including wholesale and retail (18%); accommodation and food services (14%); agriculture, forestry and fishing (12%) and manufacturing (10%). With an average loan size of slightly over €66,000 and a maximum term of five-and-a-half years, the scheme is proving to be accessible to a broad spread of SMEs which are seeking funding to help them address working capital needs or to refinance Covid-19-related debt over a longer period.

Q The SBCI also offers the Brexit Impact Loan Scheme; how can this help SMEs impacted by Brexit?

A The Brexit Impact Loan Scheme (BILS) supports qualifying, viable Irish businesses by providing access to affordable, medium-term finance

enabling them to invest in their business. This scheme offers low-cost lending of up to €1.5m per applicant over a six-year period. In addition, as the SBCI provides an 80% guarantee to the participating lender, the collateral requirements are reduced, with loans of up to €500,000 being unsecured. The BILS scheme is available through AIB, Bank of Ireland, five Metamo Credit Unions (Access CU, Cara CU, Savvi CU, St Canice's CU and St Francis CU) and Permanent TSB. The eligibility process is easy and straightforward, and SMEs can find out more at www.sbc.gov.ie.

Q How does the SBCI support SMEs involved in innovative and energy efficiency projects?

A Energy efficiency is a critical element in the delivery of measures that will mitigate climate change in the future.

“We’re developing a pilot loan guarantee scheme for SMEs, which will allow them to finance their investment in energy-efficiency equipment over terms of up to ten years.”

The SBCI's Future Growth Loan Scheme (FGLS) was designed as a longer-term investment loan for SMEs that want to innovate and change their business, and energy efficiency measures qualified for scheme eligibility.

In SBCI we believe that developing products that can help SMEs become more energy-efficient will contribute to them becoming more innovative and enable them to become more sustainable in the long term. For this reason, we're developing a pilot loan guarantee scheme for SMEs' investment in energy efficiency, which will allow them to finance their investment in energy-efficiency equipment over terms of up to ten years. We aim to launch the new SBCI Energy Efficiency Loan Scheme in the market in the second quarter of this year.

Q What are the key challenges faced by SMEs seeking to access credit and how can the SBCI support them?

A The challenges SMEs are facing at present are different from the ones they faced when the SBCI was set up, with availability of skilled staff and access to new customers now among the main priorities for most businesses. However, access to finance remains an issue and we will continue to develop products and on-lender relationships to help address this challenge. Our commitment is to deliver effective financial support to SMEs that experience failures in the Irish credit market, while driving competition and innovation, and ensuring the efficient use of both government and EU funding and guarantees.

To find out more about the SBCI and the funding options available, SMEs are encouraged to actively engage with SBCI through its website (www.sbc.gov.ie), social media (@SBCIreland), helpline (01 238 4000), email (info@sbci.gov.ie) or come and talk to the team at one of the events or webinars which they regularly attend.



Eoin Cluskey, owner and founder, Bread 41

Flour power

Artisan bakery Bread 41 is on a mission to bring organic bread and a message of sustainability to Dublin City Centre and beyond

Located on Pearse St in the heart of Dublin, Bread 41 is a bakery with a difference. Its objective, says owner Eoin Cluskey, is to get people back into eating real bread made using traditional methods with just flour, salt, water and on occasion some nuts, seeds, grains and even a little dried fruit.

In addition to a thriving over-the-counter trade, the Pearse St premises also includes a stylish eatery where customers can sample a diverse menu of tasty dishes ranging from kimchi fritters to artisan sausage rolls, all created in-house from scratch. The company also supplies a number of local hotels, restaurants and cafés with organic bread and pastries.

“We are committed to working with and for our local community in a spirit of co-operation and sustainability,” Cluskey explains. “We use only locally-sourced, organic ingredients in all our products, which are created from centuries-old recipes. Our breads are leavened entirely from wild yeast and bacteria starter doughs and can take up to 48 hours to make from start to finish. It’s a slow

“We have installed solar panels on the roof to reduce energy consumption and have introduced decongesters in the kitchen to minimise waste.”

process, but it ensures that they are more digestible and better for the body.”

Speciality loaves produced daily on site include perennial favourites Wholegrain Sourdough and Granary Brown along with Shakelton 7 Seed, Wicklow Mountain Rye, Glentie Malt and Oat Porridge.

Above and beyond

The Bread 41 commitment to sustainability goes beyond ingredients sourcing and production. “Every decision is made with a view to being as sustainable as possible,” Cluskey says. “We have installed solar panels on the roof to reduce energy consumption and have introduced decongesters in the kitchen to minimise waste. We hope to be a zero-waste business by year end.”

He has also implemented a ‘bring your own cup’ policy for take-out customers, thereby eliminating plastic cup usage entirely. “It may have cost us some business to begin with, but customers have responded well and are fully supportive of the policy,” he notes.

Keen to revive the lost art of traditional bread making, Cluskey runs free classes and demonstrations in schools around the country. “It’s an important element of our corporate social responsibility policy and I would love to see bread making returning to the Home Economics syllabus,” he says.

There are plans to open new premises in Dublin and Wicklow later this year before expanding further into Cork, Galway and Belfast. Cluskey is also looking at the idea of establishing a community bakery at one of the sites over the next three to five years, which would see the full milling, baking and retail process accommodated under one roof.

www.bread41.ie

Confection perfection

Luxury vegan confectionery producer Chocolatey Clare is built upon the twin pillars of fairness and sustainability, two principles close to the heart of its founder Clare Tait

After working for almost 30 years first as a technical German translator and then in the field of adult literacy, Clare Tait finally took the plunge and started her own company in 2016. A long-time vegan, she had always enjoyed creating vegan confectionery treats for family and friends, but never thought she could turn it into a viable business.

Six years on and her unique range of hand-crafted, luxury vegan chocolate bars and bon bons is proving very popular with the growing number of discerning consumers who are looking for ethically-produced fare that doesn’t compromise on quality.

“As a vegan I didn’t see a lot of choice out there when it came to chocolate, so I knew there was a definite gap in the market,” Tait says. “But I wanted to go further; I wanted to produce something unique that would align with my vision of the world.”

The Chocolatey Clare range is now available in a growing network of retail stockists around the country and online via the company’s e-store. All products are manufactured in Ireland from specially-selected, ethically-produced chocolate which Tait chose for its rich, dark flavour.

“As a vegan I didn’t see a lot of choice when it came to chocolate, so I knew there was a definite gap in the market.”

The packaging is also manufactured from completely sustainable materials. The inner wrappers are made from a home-compostable, plant-based film, while the outer boxes are made from FSC-certified board that is printed with vegetable-based ink using wind-powered printing machines.

Year-round demand

With six variants, the chocolate bars are the mainstay of the Chocolatey Clare range. The bon bons come in four different flavours with each sweet hand-painted with cocoa butter. Originally launched as a seasonal item, they have proven hugely popular with strong demand all year round. Tait is constantly experimenting with new flavours and hopes to launch a number of new variants later this year.

Proud of the core values underpinning the company, Tait has written a sustainability charter outlining these principles. “From its inception, the business has been built on the core values of food ethics, fairness and sustainability and every single decision taken since then is rooted in these principles,” she says. “We work only with suppliers who have a proven record of involvement in humanitarian, environmental and charitable projects that benefit local communities and demonstrate fundamental respect for humans, animals and the environment.”

Tait has recently outsourced much of the production and fulfilment work and is looking to take a more strategic approach to the business. “I want to expand my customer base and get the range out to more people, including non-vegans,” she says.



Clare Tait, founder, Chocolatey Clare

www.chocolateyclare.com



Cormac Reid, founder, ROCTEL

Making connections

With a strong emphasis on sustainable solutions, ROCTEL is a one-stop shop for companies looking to outsource their telecoms and IT requirements

Established following the de-regulation of the Irish telecommunications market in 2000, ROCTEL has been providing managed telecoms and IT services to large and small organisations across multiple industry sectors for more than 20 years. It started out as a small consultancy business advising clients on the build-out of their telecoms and IT network requirements.

However, as client needs changed it invested in its own state-of-the-art, 24/7 network maintenance, security operations and data management centres, which have enabled it to deliver a premium, end-to-end service to its customers at lower cost.

Sustainability has long been at the heart of the ROCTEL company ethos, with each client solution designed to have minimum impact on the environment.

"We are acutely aware of our need to operate in a sustainable manner and are proud to say that we make every effort possible to be as green as we can in every area of our business. We use as little plastic as is possible and re-use packaging 90% of the time," explains founder Cormac Reid.

"A key element of our sustainability drive is a commitment to re-wilding the Irish countryside where possible. We have an initial target of 10,000 trees."

"In addition, there has been considerable investment in our recycling centre onsite in our Dublin office, which has led to more efficient waste disposal. This ensures a responsible and ecological handling of waste materials. And we dispose of obsolete equipment safely."

Commitment to re-wilding

ROCTEL has recently gone one step further and invested in a number of circular economy initiatives, including the planting of its own forest in Co Wicklow. "A key element of our sustainability drive is a commitment to re-wilding the Irish countryside where possible," says Reid. "We have an initial target of 10,000 trees, all of which are indigenous to this country."

The company has enjoyed strong growth over the past few years of around 15-20% per annum. "We now have 12 highly-skilled, full-time staff and access to as many contractors as we need," Reid says. "Our client base is largely made up of mid-market multinationals and larger indigenous companies, mainly across the financial, retail and aviation sectors. Other key sectors include enterprise, tech and renewables."

Although it is primarily focused on the Irish market, ROCTEL also has small offices in London, Barcelona and Santa Barbara on the US west coast.

Reid aims to continue to develop the company's service offering over the next few years to provide a seamless, end-to-end service for customers. "Our goal is to be the number one provider of one-stop-shop managed network services in Ireland for our target market," he says, "I believe our unique blended offering backed by real-time support and ongoing investment will enable us to achieve just that."

www.roctel.net

Food harmony

With a menu celebrating the best of Irish produce, it's easy to see why Dublin 2 café Tiller + Grain has a growing fan base

A labour of love for chef Clair Dowling who always harboured a desire to start her own sustainable food business, Tiller + Grain first opened its doors back in January 2019. Located on South Frederick St, the core principle underpinning the business is very simple – take the best fresh, seasonal Irish produce, treat it simply and well to create tasty, nutritious food.

In keeping with that ethos, all ingredients are sourced from local Irish suppliers specially selected for their commitment to sustainable farming methods and made fresh every day in the Tiller + Grain kitchen. Fare on offer to eat-in, take-out and for special event catering includes a wide variety of imaginative meat, fish and salad dishes along with breads, cakes and pastries.

Examples include mixed red and green cabbage salad with kale, Brussels sprouts and pickled red onions with white wine vinegar and maple syrup dressing and roasted aubergine with homemade harissa and lemon Greek yoghurt.

"No two days are the same here and our menus are constantly changing," Dowling explains. "We love fresh ingredients and

enjoy nothing more than to experiment with unusual combinations to come up with something new and different that our customers will appreciate. We are a produce-led business and we want to celebrate the amazing farmers and food producers we have on this island."

Complete buy-in

Dowling points to the commitment of the nine-strong Tiller + Grain team and complete buy-in from suppliers as being key to the success of the company to date, particularly during the pandemic when the café was forced to close. During that time the business was re-aligned to focus on take-out and delivery services and developed a new market in weekend/staycation luxury catering boxes.

Sustainability has been a cornerstone of the business since day one. "Start as you mean to go on," Dowling says. "A key concern for us from the beginning was to minimise waste. We use absolutely everything we buy in from our suppliers. Anything left over from one day is turned into stock or something useful for the next day's menu. Apart from anything else, it reduces our workload as there is less need for composting."

Dowling will continue to promote the twin messages of sustainability and commitment to local ingredients and suppliers when she resumes her workshop series later this year. Aimed at everyone from home cooks to catering professionals, they proved highly successful before the pandemic hit. "They are a great way to introduce new Irish ingredients into the mainstream," she says.

"We are a produce-led business and we want to celebrate the amazing farmers and food producers we have on this island."



Clair Dowling, founder, Tiller + Grain

www.tillerandgrain.ie



Bernard Lee, operations director, Packaging Laundry

The complete package

Bray-based Packaging Laundry is making a significant contribution to the circular economy by reconditioning empty bulk packaging for re-use

Packaging Laundry was established in 2017 by father and son Norman and Bernard Lee who identified a gap in the market for reconditioned bulk packaging. With over 40 years' experience in the packaging manufacturing sector between them, they realised that there

was a far more environmentally-friendly way of dealing with intermediate bulk containers (IBCs) and drums than just sending them for recycling after a single use.

Now with five full-time and two part-time staff, the company provides a full end-to-end bulk packaging inspection,

“Studies have shown that using a reconditioned IBC or drum compared to a new one results in 70% less carbon being released into the atmosphere.”

leak testing, reconditioning, storage and sales/rental service to a growing number of clients nationwide.

“Our mission is simple: to provide the best environmentally-compliant reconditioned packaging and reconditioning service in Ireland,” company operations director Bernard Lee explains. “In doing so, we hope to divert thousands of IBCs and drums from recycling to re-use every year and make a significant contribution to the circular economy and global sustainability. Studies have shown that using a reconditioned IBC or drum compared to a new one results in 70% less carbon being released into the atmosphere.”

IBC expertise

Packaging Laundry's Bray facility is the largest IBC cleaning and storage site in the country and home to the only IBC cleaning line that meets food industry

safety and hygiene standards. Suitable for both plastic and stainless steel IBCs, the company's 'laundry service' starts with external power wash and label removal before an internal triple wash using the only 400-bar internal pressure washer in Ireland.

This is followed by internal vacuum and drying to remove all moisture before the bottle and valve are subjected to rigorous leak tests. New valves and sealing pins are fitted if required before a final outer clean and shine.

IBCs for reconditioning are collected free of charge from customer sites, with a small fee charged for drums containing hazardous materials or which are considered beyond repair and fit only for recycling. “Our main focus is on re-use. However, in some instances there is no choice but to send them for recycling,” Lee explains. “We are also the only company in the country that offers a re-bottled IBC service where the original inner is cleaned to UN standard before being fitted with a new outer bottle.”

The company's commitment to sustainability is evident in its own production and waste management practices. “We are in the process of installing solar panels on the factory roof to minimise energy consumption,” Lee says. “We currently re-use around 98% of our waste material and hope to increase that further this year. Of the remainder, everything is recycled – absolutely nothing goes to landfill.”

www.packaginglaundry.ie

MASTERCLASS

Learning from the best

As part of the SFA National Small Business Awards programme this year, finalists came together for a special masterclass weekend

A masterclass was provided to all finalists of the SFA National Small Business Awards this year on 18 and 19 February in the Hodson Bay Hotel in Athlone, Co Westmeath. Part of a prize package, the aim of the weekend was to immerse business owners in an entrepreneurial environment to stimulate new ideas for growth.

Participants were able to share experiences with contemporaries, learn from the success and mistakes of others and hopefully build working relationships that will last into the future.

Sponsored by the awards' training partner Skillnet Ireland, this management programme was designed to help business owners to take a more strategic approach to managing their business and to develop their own personal skills.

The format comprised firstly of media, negotiation and presentation skills training for business owners and managers. Following this, Emma Crawley, SFA HR executive provided HR guidance for small businesses and an update on the latest



developments in employment legislation. Business owners also got the opportunity to explore how to manage their own wellness and take part in a practical session on cybersecurity for small business.



GUEST SPEAKERS

Barry McLoughlin

A senior consultant in the Communications Clinic's Training Clinic, Barry McLoughlin joined the company having worked for a number of years as a solicitor in private practice. He now provides training in the areas of job interviews, CV preparation and pitching, negotiating and influencing as well as media and general communication skills. He has worked with a wide range of individuals and organisations, including the GAA, Invesco, Concern, Chartered Accountants Ireland and the Central Bank.

David Casey

David Casey is the wellness and health promotion manager for DeCare Dental for Ireland and Europe. With over 10 years' clinical experience in health-care, he has worked over the past seven years designing, building and

implementing wellness and education programs for over 500 companies, organisations and healthcare settings across Ireland and the UK. Casey has an MA in Health Promotion and is currently studying for his doctorate in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Medicine in Trinity College Dublin.

Patrick O'Callaghan

A subject-matter expert in data protection and cyber security markets for over 15 years, Patrick O'Callaghan's career began with research into encryption in micro devices in the early 2000s. From there he moved to Citi Bank to lead the Sarbanes Oxley implementation for its European life assurance business. O'Callaghan led the security consulting teams for top global consulting firms before founding Kontex Security in 2015. He has designed the security systems for multiple large utilities across the UK and Ireland.

WORD OF MOUTH

Both employers and individuals are increasingly valuing dental, vision and wellness benefits driven by a rising awareness of the links between oral health and general health and wellbeing

While Covid-19 brought about a new set of oral health challenges, particularly inflation, DeCare has seen strong membership growth over the past two years in Ireland. Its dental membership increased by 14% in 2021 with growth in the year to date of 6.5%. Vision membership continues to gain traction in an environment where people are spending a great deal of time at their screens, according to the company's managing director Maureen Walsh.

A subsidiary of US health benefits provider Anthem, DeCare is Ireland's only specialist dental, vision and wellness benefits provider, serving a total of 500 companies and 56,000 individual members across a range of sectors. First established in Ireland in 1999, its team has grown from 115 to 135 people in the past two years.

"The dental inflation rate being experienced by our members over the past 18 months is around 10% and there are waiting lists for many dental practices. This has resulted in more people seeking assistance towards the rising costs of dental care. Our dental insurance products help to mitigate this financial burden. The fact that employers and staff are valuing this and have become accustomed to dental benefits is creating a lot more momentum in the market," she says.

"Driven by Covid-19, companies recognise they have a responsibility to keep their staff well and have identified dental and vision benefits as a key enabler. They are also increasingly seeing such benefits as a meaningful way to hold onto staff and attract new employees. Candidates are now actively asking whether prospective employers have dental and vision insurance."

"Driven by Covid-19, companies recognise they have a responsibility to keep their staff well and have identified dental and vision benefits as a key enabler."

With the rising popularity of benefits, DeCare continues to invest considerable time and effort in research, education and delivering wellness programmes to align with societal needs. The team addresses key areas including employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, employee wellbeing and mental health and customer wellbeing and satisfaction.



Elaine Feeney, Maureen Walsh and Noeleen Lowry of DeCare Dental receiving a public service award in 2022

"It's all fine and well to have a financial plan for your care, but you need to understand why you have it and how to use it. Our team looks at the whole connection between oral health and the entire body and the direct correlation between dental problems and people's ability to speak, eat, be confident and have human connection," Walsh explains.

Promoting wellness

DeCare has been delivering customised virtual wellbeing programmes since the first lockdown. These have continued ever since depending on customer requirements – some companies opt for a monthly session while a lot prefer quarterly programmes.

"We have seen a very big demand for our wellness programmes during the pandemic. There has been a lot of different dynamics at play, from stress caused by working from home and grinding of teeth to an increase in the cosmetic side driven by employees looking at themselves on camera every day," says Walsh.

"During a virtual session, our team will do a presentation on topics such as healthy eating habits for kids or how oral health relates to mental health. A lot of programmes are focused on the whole

person. By looking after your mouth, you have the power to be a chronic disease preventer. Over 120 diseases can be detected in the mouth."

Despite domestic and global challenges, Walsh believes there is cause for great optimism and the opportunities that lie ahead. "Our industry is experiencing momentum. New business models are emerging and we must play a leading role in keeping our workforce and our customer workforce well in order to deliver for a multi-generational society. 2021 was a milestone year for the DeCare team and 2022 is off to a dynamic start. In many respects, the company is thriving as we continue to pursue a growth agenda and important transformation initiatives," she says.

"The pandemic has brought about recognition that public health is multidimensional and must be addressed and financed in a multidimensional manner. This will become more pronounced over time and we must influence progress to ensure that insurance and complementary services play a vital role in financing dental and vision care. The cost of dentistry and our relationship with dental practices will be key areas of focus for us over the coming period."

RESEARCH AND INNOVATION

An estimated €90bn a year is spent on providing dental treatment in the EU and not enough money is being spent on preventing oral diseases and improving oral health outcomes.

Against this backdrop, DeCare has teamed up with a consortium of 11 partners in academia, data analytics, oral health services research and dental insurance in eight EU countries to assist the development of a more sustainable dental care system that promotes health across the EU. Called Advocate Oral Health, this five-year project is funded under EU Horizon 2020. DeCare is working with EU partners to advance other projects in the current round of EU Horizon funding.

Dave Casey, DeCare's wellness manager, is also pioneering doctoral research at Trinity College Dublin, which is focused on the vital role that human connection plays in a person's wellbeing and how companies have the power to drive change at a societal level.



Managing director Dave Kieran (right) with the ZOMA team

All worked out

Creative design and branding agency Zoma doesn't just talk the talk when it comes to work-life balance; its approach is practical and hands on

Alongside its rebranding in February of last year, Dundalk-based creative design and branding agency Zoma took the opportunity to revamp its culture at the same time.

"We wanted a big part of our culture to be based on being healthy both physically and mentally," says managing director, or 'chief handshake officer' as he dubs himself, David Kieran. "By being active ourselves we can create better material for our clients. We feel that if we showcase a happy environment, businesses are more inclined to work with us."

To this end, Zoma formed a partnership with another local business, Fred's Functional Fitness, which drew up workout plans for staff. The Zoma team of six people now works out together every week on 'Workout Wednesdays'.

"It's great for morale, and it's also good to get out of the office," says Kieran. "It was particularly good over Covid-19 when we all needed a break."

"The creativity we have each day stems from our team bouncing off each other, working out together and having that rapport."

The company took its commitment a step further when it added its own gym last year, and it also allows hybrid working – although many have been choosing to come in to the office where Kieran says there's a "really good buzz".

Creative culture

Zoma has experienced huge growth in the past 18 months, at least some of which Kieran puts down to the wellbeing culture it has built internally. "The creativity we have each day is of the highest standard. That stems from our team bouncing off each other, working out together and having that rapport," he says.

"There's nothing worse than people coming into a place they don't enjoy; the results from that person will be negative. It's like in sport where, if you have good team morale and the players enjoy their training, you'll usually see success on the pitch."

This year is shaping up to be an eventful one for Zoma, which is set to move into new premises in the autumn. Its new offices will feature an even bigger gym, and will be very much designed to be as advantageous as possible for staff.

"People will be able to walk around and use different desks and there will be 'creative tables' and areas for relaxing and socialising," says Kieran. "The offices we're in can't sustain our team any longer, which is a good problem to have, and it's a really exciting move."

He is also looking forward to getting out of the office more this year, networking and talking to businesses and potential clients. "We have lots of new clients already on board; they're seeing our creativity in content creation, web design and branding."

www.zoma.ie

Crystal clear

Established in Dublin four years ago, data and analytics firm Clear Strategy has the kind of relationship with staff that some businesses can only dream about

Clear Strategy has grown rapidly in recent years, going from just four employees at the start of the pandemic to 15. As its staff grew, says director Julie Collison, so did its emphasis on establishing effective on-boarding processes – particularly during Covid-19.

"We had a daily stand-up meeting which was sometimes work-related but often just coffee and cake to see how everyone was doing," she says. "We had a daily close-out meeting to see how everyone's day went, and sometimes had virtual drinks together."

In a further indication of its commitment to staff, the business hired Leinster Rugby's James Tracy as business development manager; Tracy is now driving its wellbeing policies. To date this has included setting up the 'Roots' programme, whereby once a month staff can give frank appraisals of how things are going and what if anything they would like to see changed.

Crucially, this doesn't involve either of

the directors – something Collison was keen to see; she says they wanted 'warts and all' feedback. So far the 'warts' have been minimal; for example there was a recent request for a new microwave and coffee machine in the kitchen. "But it could be about anything," says Collison.

Team empowerment

Clear Strategy also operates 'self-governed teams'. In other words, where a team is working on a project – which typically lasts about six to eight weeks – they can decide themselves how much they need to be in or out of the office. Meanwhile it's not unheard of for employees to occasionally bring a pet to work, everyone gets a day off on their birthday and during July and August, work stops at 3pm every Friday.

During Collison's time in senior roles at Vodafone, she saw first-hand the benefits that an employee-centred approach can bring, and wanted that for her own company. "One of our straplines is: what matters to them matters to us," she says. "The business won't succeed if our employees are not happy."

Collison and fellow director David Fitzpatrick hope to introduce an equity share scheme later this year, which will really put employees in the picture in terms of the overall direction and success of the business. "We want to make everyone part of our story," she says.

And if that were not enough, the business is also in year one of a three-year plan, with the Empire State Building as its theme. If the company meets its goals by year three, the whole team will take a trip to New York to see the real thing.

"One of our straplines is: what matters to them matters to us. The business won't succeed if our employees are not happy."



David Fitzpatrick and Julie Collison, directors, Clear Strategy

www.clearstrategy.ie



Managing director Joe McCaffrey (centre) with the Duke McCaffrey team

Team building 101

Duke McCaffrey will not be found wanting when it comes to team spirit; the construction consultancy thrives on it thanks to carefully thought-out policies

As Duke McCaffrey's bids and marketing director Rebecca Coffey puts it, "mind your employees, and they will mind your business". It is an adage the company has very much taken to heart – and demonstrated time and again, particularly during the pandemic. Coffey is the company's wellbeing champion and therefore the main point of contact for any employee with concerns either of a personal or professional nature. During lockdowns the firm worked hard to make sure everyone felt connected and supported. As well as the weekly Microsoft Teams meeting, there was a Friday social call.

"This was where we could talk about anything but work, and when everyone was stuck in lockdown it was a good opportunity to see how people were doing," says Coffey.

As society started to emerge from Covid-19, Duke McCaffrey introduced a blended working policy – but not before careful consultation with staff.

"We didn't want to force anyone to come back and do anything they were not comfortable with," says Coffey. "Even after the lockdowns some people were nervous

"Our staff retention has been excellent. We want to keep our staff happy and well and make sure they know we're here for them."

about coming back to work. So we spoke to each employee to see what suited them and worked around each individual."

Charitable work

The Dublin-based firm combines employee wellbeing with charitable work via some of its corporate social responsibility initiatives. For example, it designates one day a year when employees undertake a project to help someone in need. This year it hopes to spend a day helping Respond Social Housing.

Last year employees took part in a fundraising triathlon which involved them covering 100km through walking, cycling or swimming. The joint effort gave everyone a focus beyond the office and employees motivated each other. As soon as restrictions were lifted, staff met up to complete the Bray to Greystones cliff walk – the final leg of their 100km. Whatever funds staff raised were matched by the business and went to their chosen charity, the Giggle Fund.

The firm also actively fosters employees' personal development. For example, it has facilitated many lunchtime seminars where experts gave talks to help with employees' continued professional development hours.

From a purely business point of view, all of these policies are reflected in the quality of the work Duke McCaffrey produces for its clients, notes Coffey. With a current tally of 17 staff, she says the firm's priority is to retain the people it has rather than necessarily scale up.

"Our staff retention has been excellent. We don't want to become huge but we want to keep our staff happy and well and make sure they know we're here for them."

The real deal

At Kildare-based cloud solutions provider Zinon IT Solutions, staff are in no doubt that there is genuine buy-in when it comes to employee wellbeing

With eight employees, Zinon IT Solutions doesn't have a huge wellbeing budget – but it is consistently proving that this is not necessarily a barrier when it comes to looking after your staff.

The company comes at the issue both from the perspective of environmental wellbeing and health. With the former, for example, it gets involved in activities that promote environmental awareness, recently bagging an award in the Sustainable Kildare campaign. Meanwhile, with mental wellbeing the firm is proactive in various ways, including taking part in the local Darkness into Light fundraiser in Naas each year.

"While we don't have paid-for health programmes as such, we try to get involved in community activities such as these so that employees feel they are part of something," says sales and marketing manager Shane Sembrano.

During Covid-19, the company kept in constant contact with employees in case any were finding the going difficult. "Because we are an IT business it was

easier for us to move to remote working, but we were also conscious of staff having to adapt from working in the office to working from home," says Sembrano.

Practical support

With this in mind, Zinon provided lots of support of a practical nature, for example by supplying noise-cancelling headsets and ergonomic chairs. There was also a virtual daily meeting. This was a casual 30-minute meetup just to talk with employees and discuss how things were going.

"If you take care of your employees it will be reflected in how they take care of clients, and then word of mouth will bring more business," notes Sembrano. "The people are the backbone of the organisation. Yes, we have quality products, but you can't do much with them if the service your employees provide is not on a par."

It is of course tough for small companies to compete with multinationals (and their hefty budgets) when it comes to promoting wellbeing. But where small companies like Zinon IT have the edge is the fact that there is far less bureaucracy involved.

"It's a very direct approach," says Sembrano, who has worked in a large "rigid" corporate environment in the past and finds this much different – in a good way.

"I feel less stress; there is an open-door policy, so if there is something I'm not comfortable with I can go to a manager and they will be approachable. If I were ever to leave, that's the first thing I would miss. It has become the standard for me, and I would wonder whether I'd get the same anywhere else."

"If you take care of your employees it will be reflected in how they take care of clients, and then word of mouth will bring more business."



Karl Dempsey, managing director, Zinon IT Solutions

LEADING THE CHARGE

Enda McDonnell, director, Dublin Region, Enterprise Ireland, discusses the current climate for Irish companies and how the agency's new strategy and ongoing supports aim to ensure the enterprise base continues to succeed

Irish companies have lived with periods of acute uncertainty in the past and are living with it at present. Ireland's enterprise base has always demonstrated the capacity to meet challenges. The core question is whether it can position itself to leverage every single asset and relentlessly pursue every single opportunity in a rapidly changing world. Only this will ensure success in the long run. Enterprise Ireland can help.

For Irish companies, uncertainty means continually adapting business approaches. It means diversifying into new markets, leveraging existing customers and sourcing new opportunities as part of a long-term plan.

Enterprise Ireland's mandate is to support manufacturing and internationally-traded services companies with ambitions to enter or scale in highly competitive international markets.

In doing this, Enterprise Ireland develops and deploys financial and non-financial supports systematically. It does so on a one-to-one basis and in partnership with companies. Innovation, Operations, Sales and Marketing, Finance, People and Strategy are the key six foundation pillars for sustained international success. Any one of these elements in isolation is insufficient. Combined they are mutually reinforcing and drive sustained growth.

Enterprise Ireland has supports under each of these elements to support a company's growth ambitions. Those supports are integrated with Enterprise Ireland teams located in 40 overseas locations. These are industry experts working with Irish businesses across the world, making connections to end-markets and potential customers looking for innovative solutions.

Strong jobs growth

In 2021, Enterprise Ireland client companies employed nearly 208,000 people (and a similar number again in terms of indirect employment) with 20,000 new jobs created last year. Annual spend in the Irish economy by these companies in 2020 was €29bn. That's quite an annual stimulus package.

All sectors showed growth with



An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and Leo Clancy, CEO, Enterprise Ireland, launching the 'Leading in a Changing World' strategy

particularly strong jobs growth reported in life sciences (14%), business services (12%) and digital technology (10%). The positive jobs figures saw increases in employment across all regions in Ireland, with, for example, employment increasing by 9% in the North West and by 7% in the South East. In total, 68% of new jobs created were outside of Dublin.

Considering this strong job creation occurred in a year of ongoing challenges in the wake of Covid-19 and a new trading relationship with the UK, it demonstrates again what companies can achieve regardless of the conditions they face.

To build on this success and ensure Irish enterprise continues to succeed in changing times, Enterprise Ireland launched a new three-year strategy earlier this year. This 'Leading in a Changing World' strategy sets out key initiatives the agency will undertake to deliver on the ambitions for Irish enterprise.

The five key strategic ambitions for Irish enterprise and for Enterprise Ireland identified over the period 2022-2024 and beyond are:

- Export-focused Irish enterprises delivering growth across all regions
- Ireland as a world-leading location to start and scale a business
- Irish enterprises achieving competitive advantage through customer-led innovation and digitalisation
- Irish enterprises leading globally on sustainability and achieving climate action targets
- Enterprise Ireland providing world-leading service to the companies it supports.

Focus on key areas

The strategy was built on intensive consultation with the companies we support and other stakeholders. That consultation determined that in order to

“For Irish companies, uncertainty means continually adapting business approaches. It means diversifying into new markets, leveraging existing customers and sourcing new opportunities as part of a long-term plan.”

respond to new challenges and adapt to new opportunities in the rapidly evolving global environment Irish enterprise will require a focus on a number of key areas, including:

Increased levels of innovation – this will ensure Irish enterprise can compete and ultimately lead in rapidly changing global markets.

Digital adoption and transformation – this involves leveraging digital technology to improve productivity, profitability and develop new market opportunities

Sustainability – adapting business and operating models to manage both the challenges and opportunities presented by fundamental policy, regulatory and market changes as a result of climate change.

Leadership and organisational capability – this involves anticipating and responding to the significant levels of organisational transformation required to remain competitive.

Skills and diversity – delivering a competitive advantage for enterprise through the development of diverse teams and attracting and retaining a changing mix of skills.

The strategy runs to the end of 2024 and sets an ambitious target of creating 45,000 jobs over the next three years and increasing exports by Enterprise Ireland client companies to €30bn by 2024.

In deeply uncertain times, Ireland's enterprise base should be seen as a national resource and one to be celebrated. It creates direct and indirect employment. It resources our education and healthcare systems. It ensures the State has the means to take care of our most vulnerable, regardless of who they are, where they come from or the circumstances under which they are here. Its success is Ireland's success.



Samsul Alam Biplob, Orla Whitehouse and Rafiqul Alam of ABSA Meats

Meat of the matter

From its base in Co Clare, ABSA Meats has carved out a niche which has led to expansion and growth in both Ireland and European markets

Originally from Bangladesh, Tareq Khan was studying and working in retail in Ireland around 12 years ago when he spotted a gap in the market for premium Irish halal meat. “There was no other competitor or business like this in Ireland at the time and only a select few abattoirs were doing halal,” says Orla Whitehouse, manager at ABSA Meats’ facility in Shannon, Co Clare.

“Tareq decided to set up his own business in Ardagh, Co Limerick and started out in 2011 with three employees serving the local market. Now, exports represent 70% of ABSA Meats’ turnover and we have 45 full-time staff.”

As the business grew, Khan purchased the facility in Shannon, where carcasses are taken in and manufactured to customers’ requirements. The next step was to buy his own abattoir, which is also in Co Clare. “Tareq has a very strong belief that everything he sells has to be halal, which means animals have to be slaughtered in a particular way. There has to be no discrepancy in that. Having the abattoir means the company has

“ABSA Meats started in 2011 with three employees serving the local market. Now, exports represent 70% of turnover and we have 45 staff.”

100% control over the entire process from slaughter through to cutting, packing and shipping the meat,” Whitehouse explains.

All of ABSA Meats’ beef and lamb is from grass-fed, Irish-bred livestock sourced from local farmers. As an add-on to the meat products, the company now has its own brand of chicken products, ‘Hennah’, and its own brand of seafood products, ‘Caridean’. The seafood is sourced from Asian markets, including Bangladesh. “All of our products are top of the range,” says Whitehouse.

Network of contacts

Khan developed export sales through building a network of contacts in the Muslim community throughout Europe. “He made a lot of contacts on yearly retreats at different mosques around Europe who loved the quality of the Irish produce. It became clear that high-quality Irish halal meat was a unique selling point. So he then did a lot of market research and focused on building relationships with clients,” says Whitehouse.

“Exporting started off with one customer once a week taking one pallet of product. Now we’re distributing pallets of fresh products to France on a Monday and Germany on a Thursday and on Friday we ship pallets of frozen goods to Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Spain and Italy.”

There is a strong focus on customer service at ABSA Meats. Its facilities are fully EC approved and operate under Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine guidelines. “We have full traceability of every product we sell to guarantee confidence for our customers in food safety and the highest standard of food hygiene,” the company website states.

www.absameats.com

Tortilla triumph

Blanco Niño’s method of producing Mexican corn tortillas has led to an impressive foothold in European food service markets and a successful entry into Irish retail

Three years ago Blanco Niño occupied a small corner of a 14,000 sq ft facility in Clonmel, Co Tipperary and employed 14 people. Now, the corn tortilla manufacturer is using the entire space for production, trebling its capability, and has workforce of 42 people.

On a road trip across Mexico, founder and CEO Philip Martin learned how to make authentic corn tortillas using an ancient recipe before starting the business in 2015.

“We make our tortillas and chips using non-genetically modified, sustainably grown corn, water, salt and lime. The corn is cooked, then steeped for over 16 hours before grinding into a dough. This process is a traditional Mexican technique going back thousands of years,” he explains. “We are still following the same process but have scaled up using increased automation.”

Blanco Niño is selling into 16 European markets via 42 distributors across the continent. Around 70-80% of exports are of premium-quality, frozen corn tortillas which mainly go to restaurants and chefs. “Food service had to be put on ice because

“Food service had to be put on ice because of the pandemic, but it’s coming back now with gusto. Underlying consumer trends have worked in our favour.”

of the pandemic, but it’s coming back now with gusto. Underlying consumer trends such as the move towards health, authentic ingredients and sustainability have worked in our favour,” says Martin.

Coming up trumps

“In addition, restaurants re-evaluating their menus during lockdowns meant we tended to come up trumps. There was a lot more focus on tacos because they are generally easy to prepare. Food service is going to be a sector with post-traumatic stress disorder for a long time, but we expect it to be strong for us in the coming years. Sales are more than double what they were pre-pandemic.”

In early 2020, Blanco Niño was working towards the launch of its own branded range of premium tortilla chips into supermarkets. “The pandemic made the necessity of accelerating our journey into retail apparent. In May and June of 2020 we started to properly pitch to supermarkets and got phenomenal support. The week after our first production run, we had our first order from Dunnes Stores. We got a small listing with SuperValu, which is now expanding rapidly. Otherwise, most of our retail growth has been through independents such as Fallon & Byrne,” says Nolan.

A total of 500 retail outlets now stock Blanco Niño’s tortilla chips range and the team is currently working on salsa products to complement this, which Martin hopes will be launched soon. “For now, our retail focus will be on Ireland and the UK, although we have also sold into Sweden and Iceland,” he says.

Blanco Niño is also shortlisted in the Manufacturing category



Philip Martin, founder and CEO, Blanco Niño

www.blanco-nino.com

DIGITAL ADAPTATION

The latest .IE Tipping Point research published this year highlights how Covid-19 has accelerated digital trends and forced businesses to adapt the way they operate

Consumers have fully embraced the convenience of online shopping. In response, SMEs have been forced to adapt digitally, and increasingly attitudinally, and transform their static brochure websites into e-commerce hubs. So says David Curtin, chief executive of .IE, the company that manages .ie domains, the preferred online identity for business in Ireland.

The .IE Tipping Point report, 'Irish e-commerce and digital business in the post-Covid era', is the final report of a trilogy of research published in partnership with Digital Business Ireland. It assessed the attitudes and adaptations to the pandemic of 1,000 Irish consumers and 500 retail and consumer-facing professional services SMEs. One of the key findings showed that SMEs are not prioritising protection of customers' data despite this being a big concern for individual consumers.

Need to do more

The HSE ransomware attack in 2021 showed how a small error can lead to the crippling of critical infrastructure. Similar incidents among businesses are increasingly common, yet most are entirely avoidable with the use of basic cyber-security tools and practices – such as antivirus software, using a password manager, restricting staff's ability to run 'exe' downloads and applying software updates promptly.

The research found that 75% of consumers are 'very' or 'somewhat concerned' about the security of their personal information when shopping online. However, six in ten SMEs either don't take any precautions to protect sensitive customer data or don't know how to. "While it might be tempting for an SME to postpone investing in anything that doesn't lead to a measurable return in the here and now, a cyber attack can be devastating and lead to permanent erosion of customer trust," says Curtin.

Consumer behaviour

Consumers will be driven by convenience, ease of use and experience. As many now value the flexibility of hybrid working, they also value hybrid shopping. They enjoy the experience and the convenience of in-store shopping while simultaneously valuing the ease and speed of e-commerce. Consumers will gravitate towards retailers that give them the best of both worlds.

Covid-19 has accelerated Ireland's move towards cashlessness: 62% of consumers said they were using cash 'significantly' or 'somewhat less' since the start of the pandemic. Surprisingly, increasing cashlessness is universal among all generations. Despite this, as many as 25% of Irish SMEs still only accept cash payments.



David Curtin, chief executive, .IE

Sustainability and the environmental friendliness of a product and its supply chain remain a priority for consumers. Almost 80% said it is 'very' or 'somewhat important' that the product they order online is produced and delivered in a sustainable way.

Digital natives

The majority of consumers will prioritise online shopping in 2022; 16% will do most of their shopping online, while

TRENDS TO WATCH

Age is a predictor, not a guarantor

It's no surprise that Millennials and Gen Z, the first to grow up in the Internet age, are more likely to embrace online shopping. However, there are exceptions to generational trends. While all consumers estimated that 55% of their online purchases since Covid-19 was with Irish retailers, among Gen Z that figure was just 41%. SMEs must not apply a one-size-fits-all digital strategy to their target demographics.

Consumer preferences are not static

Digital technology changes quickly – and consumer expectations with it. Consumers are increasingly interested in paying for goods and services with a digital wallet and willing to use augmented reality technology to 'try on' or sample certain products. SMEs should take note of what consumers value in a digital shopping experience and find affordable ways to meet that demand.

Digital service provision is a strong growth area

Covid-19 made physically visiting a service provider difficult. Many businesses were forced to find ways to provide their service digitally, such as over Zoom. Half of SMEs that provided digital services reported an increase in sales over the course of the pandemic.

While full digital service provision is relatively immature, it is likely to emerge as a growth area. SMEs that invest in this technology early are likely to gain traction among hybrid-shopping oriented consumers eager for more choice and flexibility.

Digital mastery through persistence

The SMEs that looked after their digital assets are likely to be the ones that weathered the toughest restrictions. After years of steady investment, many businesses are naturally attuned to changes in digital consumer demands. They have actually flourished since Covid-19, with some exceeding 50% online sales growth.

39% said they will shop for necessities in-store, such as groceries, but buy most other things online. Nearly half (45%) of all consumers plan to do most of their shopping in-store.

However, strong generational differences are emerging in consumer attitudes to online and in-store shopping.

"Irish SMEs need to be aware of the different shopping preferences among the digital native generations, particularly as economic purchasing power shifts to them in the coming years. Businesses that don't cater to these needs or offer a compelling online experience will simply lose out to their competitors at home and abroad," says Curtin.

Sustained investment

SMEs increasingly view websites as dynamic sales enablers or points of sale. Of the SMEs that are e-commerce-enabled, 55% noted an increase in their online sales over the past two years, with more than a third recording a sales increase of more than 51%. Businesses with a dated or non-transactional website should prioritise an update in 2022.

"An increasing number of SMEs are selling online with modern e-commerce software, which is very positive. However, digital investment must be a proactive and sustained part of business spending. Digital change is constant and rapid, and Irish businesses should be careful to avoid stagnation. International retailers will be more than eager to snap up Irish customers frustrated with a lack of innovation at home," Curtin notes.

To download the report, visit www.weare.ie/tipping-point. In addition to its role as the national registry for .ie domain names .IE operates the .IE Digital Town Programme and provides insights and data for SME organisations.

Generational breakdown of online shopping habits

I will do most of my shopping in physical stores

24%	29%	29%	50%	65%
Gen Z	Young Millennial	Older Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer

I will shop for necessities in-store but will shop for most other things online

43%	52%	49%	39%	24%
Gen Z	Young Millennial	Older Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer

I will do most of my shopping online

33%	18%	22%	12%	11%
Gen Z	Young Millennial	Older Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer

.IE Tipping Point Report 2022

PATHS OF DISCOVERY

All of the winners in the Emerging New Business category in the SFA National Small Business Awards have come up with approaches and ideas that others hadn't previously explored

BIASOL

Siblings Niamh and Ruairi Dooley founded BiaSol in 2020 following a light-bulb moment when they realised that repurposing food waste was a viable way to be more sustainable and create healthy food products.

"BiaSol is Ireland's first producer of foods made from brewers spent grain (BSG). There was a lot of desk research involved, as there are only one or two companies in the US that are a few years ahead of us with this idea," explains Niamh Dooley, who has a background in food science.

The Dooleys collect the leftover grain from local craft breweries in the Midlands and bring it to their facility where it is dehydrated, milled and turned back into food ingredients. "What results has a fabulous malty, nutty flavour and is high in nutrition, with over 40g of fibre per 100g, over 20g of protein per 100g as well as B vitamins, minerals and prebiotics," says Dooley.

The pair started by sending samples out to chefs, who are now adding three different BiaSol products to bread and crackers and creating deserts and pastries

"What results has a fabulous malty, nutty flavour and is high in nutrition, with over 40g of fibre per 100g and over 20g of protein per 100g."



Andrew Murphy and Mark Fallon, co-founders, Coopman Search and Selection

with them. Among others, Maurice McGeehan, the 'no-waste chef' of the IRFU is a big fan. "Previously chefs would get the malt flavour from Guinness or by importing malt from other countries," notes Dooley.

In February, BiaSol launched Super Mill Grains, "the world's first up-cycled health food product", into health stores nationwide, further to setting up full-scale production for this at its 1,000 sq ft facility in Athlone, Co Westmeath last December.

To get the business off the ground, the siblings bootstrapped in the beginning. They then won Competitive Start Fund funding from Enterprise Ireland as well as receiving Local Enterprise Office grants. "We need to grow so we're on the journey to raising finance," says Dooley.

www.biasol.ie

COOPMAN SEARCH AND SELECTION

When Andrew Murphy and Mark Fallon started Coopman Search and Selection in 2019, the core pillars they focused on were to make a positive impact on the lives of professionals and be more engaging as a recruitment firm. They had worked together for several years at a global recruitment firm and wanted to follow their own vision.

"Our unique selling point is how we run the business. From the outset we pledged to plant ten trees for every placement we made and actively fundraise for a charity partner. Regarding engagement, we host events and produce thought-leadership

"From the outset we pledged to plant ten trees for every placement we made and actively fundraise for a charity partner."

content and podcasts on topical issues such as diversity and inclusion and remote working," explains Murphy.

"Rubber-stamping all of this, we became the first recruitment firm in Ireland to be B Corp certified, which gives us the framework to hold ourselves accountable to be more socially responsible. Clients use us first and foremost for our technical expertise, but they like that we are a sustainable partner that takes away their supply chain risk."

Specialising in financial services recruitment, Coopman Search and Selection primarily focuses on the Dublin and London markets, across front office, risk, compliance and accounting on a permanent and interim basis. "We have gone from being two guys with laptops to a team of nine. We plan to open a UK subsidiary in the second half of this year and employ 15 people across the two cities," says Murphy.

Fallon adds that the firm is well placed to support customers amid the war for talent. "As we are somewhat of a boutique, we are able to build deep connections with candidates employers may not have access to. There is an increasing number of 'passive' candidates now - people who are not applying for new jobs but open to hearing about them."

www.coopman.ie

CRAFT COCKTAILS

Dave Mulligan started Craft Cocktails during the pandemic as a lifeline for his venue, BAR 1661, having observed bottled cocktails appearing on shelves since 2015. "We were able to move at a speed that I knew larger organisations could not and as such we were first to market in Ireland in this category," he says.

Craft Cocktails is a range of premium bottled cocktails made with 100% natural ingredients and premium spirits. The brand launched in October 2020 with six colourful cocktails delivered direct to the consumer, including an innovative personalisation service for gifting. With the motto 'Made by Bartenders, Not by Pretenders' the range was created by the team at BAR 1661 and now includes 12 classic cocktails with limited-edition cocktails throughout the year.

"The main thing that allowed us to stand out was the natural stabilisation of our cocktail range. This gave us an extended, six-month shelf life and allowed us to produce a consistent flavour range and fulfill large orders on demand," says Mulligan.

By its first birthday the Craft Cocktails range was available in over 40 retailers and venues around Ireland. Cuckoo Lane, a custom-built brand showroom and dedicated cocktail factory was then opened, allowing Craft Cocktails to stand



Niamh and Ruairi Dooley, co-founders, BiaSol

EMERGING NEW BUSINESS



Dave Mulligan, founder, Craft Cocktails

alone as a separate business with over 15 employees.

“We like to partner with independent and likeminded businesses. When looking at the on-trade proposition, our neighbours in Dublin 7, Galway Bay Bars, really stood out. Craft Cocktails are now being served in 14 of their Irish venues,” says Mulligan.

“We were able to move at a speed that I knew larger organisations could not and as such we were first to market in Ireland in this category.”

“We have been working on an exciting project with our partners at Intrepid Spirits, a poitín-based, canned cocktail which I expect to hit the shelves this summer. Our range is going to pop up in more and more hotels and bars around the country and there will be some new flavour releases.”

www.craftcocktails.ie

LAKELAND KAYAKS

Featured on The Late Late Show ‘Taking Care of Business’ special in November 2021, Lakeland Kayaks is on a mission to make kayaking mainstream. When co-founders Ray Carolan and his wife Claire Weston decided to look into the pastime for themselves two years ago, they couldn’t source a kayak online.

“I had injuries and kayaking appealed to me because it’s a low-impact sport. But, any suppliers we tried seemed to be overwhelmed and there was no customer service that we thought was up to scratch,” Carolan recalls.

“I worked as an e-commerce consultant for large companies and had observed

“I set up a website that was experiential with support and a chat function. Our three customer services staff talk through the benefits of the sport.”

their level of service online. So, we made the decision to set something up with a strong customer service aspect to it. We want to make kayaking accessible to everybody and take the fear and complication out of it.”

In its first year Lakeland Kayaks sold 3,500 kayaks and turnover reached €1.5m – purely from e-commerce. “I made sure to set up a website that was experiential with support and a chat function. Our



Ray Carolan and Claire Weston, co-founders, Lakeland Kayaks



Chris Fleming, founder, Sea Green Health

three customer services staff talk through the benefits of the sport, the reasons to get into it and how to go about it,” says Carolan.

Earlier this year, the company launched its own registered trademark brand, Skipjack. “We have designed our own moulds, which come in from China, and now have a 4,000 sq ft warehouse in Longford and a 2,500 sq ft one in Mullingar. There are two people working on logistics,” says Carolan.

“The next step for us is to get into retail and we are in talks with retailers in both Ireland and the UK, where we see a lot of potential for Lakeland Kayaks. We also have scope to break into organising kayaking trips and outings as we have insurance for a full-time lifeguard.”

www.lakelandkayaks.ie

SEA GREEN HEALTH

The seed for the idea for health food supplements brand Sea Green Health

was sown when founder Chris Fleming was doing some consulting work with a Spanish firm that was growing marine microalgae. He had previously spent 15 years distributing brands into pharmacies and health stores.

“Marine microalgae are the basis of all life on the planet. They contain every vitamin, every mineral and all amino acids. In the ocean there is an estimated 800,000 different strains of marine microalgae. Science only knows about 100 of these,” he notes.

“This is such a new science; Sea Green Health is one of the first of the world to use marine microalgae in health food supplement formulations.”

“Only recently has it become technologically possible to ‘farm’ these microalgae – and in way that is 100% sustainable, which is really important to me. I source the microalgae from a plant in India and another one in Portugal where they are farmed in clean-room conditions.”

Sea Green Health started with a blend of two different marine microalgae and used this blend as a base for other products for gut health, immunity and skincare. “In the future we will also explore bone health. This is such a new science; Sea Green Health is one of the first of the world to use marine microalgae in health food supplement formulations,” says Fleming.

“So far we have been selling online both in Ireland and the US and plan to move into pharmacies and health stores in Ireland in the coming months. I also hope to open our own manufacturing facility.”

www.seagreenhealth.com

LIVE CONNECTION

Thanks to Covid-19 restrictions being lifted, Business Connect took place as a live event in the Aviva Stadium on 9 March as part of the SFA National Small Business Awards 2022 programme



Sven Spollen-Behren, director, SFA, Graham Byrne, Flender and SFA chair, Frank Gleeson, Aramark and president, Ibec and Sue O'Neill, chair of SFA awards judging panel



Ronan Morgan, Ciaran Scanlon and Catherine Doyle, Permanent TSB



Michael and Aisling Flanagan, Velvet Cloud and Odilon Hunt, AVA Systems

Business Connect is a flagship event for the SFA that brings members together with leading medium and large companies across a wide range of industries. Hosted by broadcaster Richard Curran, this year's exciting marketplace event gave a rare view inside the buying processes and decision making in some of Ireland's leading companies.

On the day delegates heard from: heads of procurement on what they look for in partners; small companies providing insights on how to win big contracts; and organisations and agencies that provide support for collaboration.

Key themes explored were sustainability

challenges, the recent digital phenomenon in retail and the race for talent. Delegates shared many experiences with experts and peers and there was plenty of networking with buyers.

The finalists of the SFA National Small Business Awards programme showcased their businesses on the day as the best in Irish small business and were interviewed by the awards judging panel as part of the judging process. The awards sponsors also exhibited at the event.

If you would like to get involved in Business Connect next year contact sven.spollen-behrens@sfa.ie.



Miena Rust, Miena's Handmade Nougat and Ciaran O'Neill, Oishii Foods



Becci Harrison, Fishers of Newtownmountkennedy and Alan Finneran, I.E



Leonard Morrissey and Kevin Thomas, One Agency Recruitment and (centre) Clara Mason of Cisco

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