

Irish Independent 



SFA National Small Business Awards 2024



Small Firms Association, 84/86 Lower Baggot Street, D02 H720, Dublin 2 **Tel:** 01 605 1776; **Email:** awards@sfa.ie; **Web:** www.sfa.ie **#SFAAwards2024**

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Comment from the chair

I am delighted to offer my congratulations to all the SFA National Small Business Awards 2024 finalists.

This year the SFA is celebrating 20 years of the awards programme, which recognise achievement, innovation and excellence among small firms right across Ireland. 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 deals with current challenges, these companies will play a significant part in sustaining and driving growth in Ireland's indigenous sector.

It is encouraging to see such innovation in our small businesses in the face of continuing uncertainty. 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 programme.

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 recent SFA flagship event Business Connect.

In conclusion, I would like to thank our sponsors and judges for their continued support in making the entire awards programme possible. 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; Pdraig Sheerin of Three; Brian O'Kane of Oaktree Press; Professor Frank Roche, chairman of Dublin Business Innovation Centre; Geraldine Lavin of 3rdi and Ken Germaine of Funding Master Projects. I wish all the finalist companies the best of luck tonight at the Gala Final and in the future.

Geraldine Magnier
SFA chair and director
of Ildiro Analytics

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INTRODUCTION

RISE TO THE CHALLENGE

It's time to put small businesses at the heart of policy development. Addressing the issues they face is crucial to their long-term prospects, writes David Broderick, director of the SFA

Ireland is famous for many things. Our musicians fill large arenas, our athletes become world champions and our actors receive accolades for their performances on the big screen. The unsung heroes of our society are the entrepreneurs, especially those who are running small businesses.

Small firms with fewer than 50 employees account for 98% of the total number of businesses in Ireland, employing nearly half of the private-sector workforce. These indigenous businesses are a central feature on village high streets, in our communities and in bustling towns.

The SFA National Small Business Awards programme celebrates the best of these entrepreneurs. It is a unique opportunity for the SFA to showcase the diverse range of businesses that are thriving in the economy. It is a credit to these businesses' success amid a time of high input costs driven by energy prices and supply-chain disruptions.

While it is a pleasure to recognise these entrepreneurial achievements, many issues remain and further challenges are afoot.

Political uncertainty

It is estimated that around 4 billion people globally are going to vote in elections this year, making 2024 a year like no other. Ireland is going to have a general election within 12 months in addition to local and European elections taking place in June. Our nearest trading partner, the UK, is likely to have elections in the autumn.

Even in less politically-turbulent times, elections bring uncertainty. Political uncertainty inevitably impacts on the wider economy and small businesses can be vulnerable to such uncertainty.

Ahead of the forthcoming general election here, members of the SFA have reflected on the various issues, both short- and long-term, that are impacting the sector. The most troubling issue was how many businesses are struggling to cope with the transition towards the Living Wage.

This concern has been further exacerbated by the increased minimum-wage requirements that came into effect in January. While larger firms may be able to absorb increased labour costs, many small businesses cannot.

In sectors that operate with low margins, increased labour costs inevitably lead to redundancies. There are already signs of this reality in parts of the retail and hospitality sector. The canary in the coal mine is starting to feel unwell.

More to be done

The SFA welcomes the recent government announcement to reduce the warehouse debt interest rate to 0%. This is an important step to assisting those



David Broderick, director, Small Firms Association

businesses that are still trying to emerge from the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the phased amendment of the Credit Union (Amendment) Act 2023 will enable credit unions to unlock funds for small businesses and personal loans.

The SFA is calling on all political parties to put Ireland's indigenous companies and entrepreneurs at the centre of its policies. Without a thriving small business sector, the spectre of empty shop fronts will adorn our towns and a competitive marketplace will be replaced by an oligopolistic market that will ultimately impact consumers' pockets.

To help small businesses cope with the transition to the Living Wage in addition to the forthcoming pension recommendations and rising auto-enrolment rates, the SFA is recommending PRSI rebates, increases to

“While it is a pleasure to recognise these entrepreneurial achievements, many issues remain and further challenges are afoot.”

the Earned Income Tax Credit for SMEs and a reduction in Capital Gains Tax.

The long-term issues the Government must address are related to upskilling, staff retention, financial sustainability and digital transformation. Simplifying the administration procedure for research and development tax credits, unlocking the funds of the National Training Fund and introducing a national training voucher scheme to boost in-company training would be welcome developments.

Networking and upskilling

The SFA will continue to recognise entrepreneurs' achievements as well as foster networking through various events, most notably its annual Business Connect event, which took place in Naas, Co Kildare in January.

In order to assist small businesses with ever-increasing regulatory requirements, the SFA will assist businesses with HR queries, host webinars on subjects of relevance and represent its interests to political stakeholders.

It is essential for business owners and their staff to be equipped with the right skills to ensure their enterprise survives. The SFA's MentorsWork programme provides supports through mentoring and targeted learning opportunities to help businesses across Ireland sustain and improve their companies.

This free training and upskilling programme in partnership with Skillnet Ireland gives small-business owners and their staff the skills required to be productive in a shifting business environment.

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. This support highlights their commitment to small businesses in Ireland and I would like to express our gratitude to each of them: Bord Bia, Elavon, DeCare, Microfinance Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, the National Standards Authority of Ireland, One4all Rewards, Sage, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, PTSB and Skillnet Ireland. Thanks also to our media partner, the Irish Independent.

Finally, I want to congratulate all of this year's finalists. Regardless of the outcome, you are all winners and are a credit to the entrepreneurial spirit of our small, thriving nation.

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.

PERSONALISED APPROACH

PTSB's new head of business banking, Seán Farrell, is excited to build on the bank's growing presence in the business banking market and lead the offering into its next phase



Seán Farrell, head of business banking, PTSB

Seán Farrell will lead PTSB's ambitious growth strategy for the business banking market as it seeks to build on the platform strengthened by its acquisition of Ulster Bank's performing micro-SME loan portfolio and its launch of PTSB Asset Finance last year.

To enable its ambition, PTSB has grown its team of business banking specialists significantly over recent years and offers a range of services through its various channels as well as in-person support through its network of 98 branches nationwide. The business banking team has extensive sectoral experience in areas including hospitality, engineering, agriculture and retail.

"Our ambition is to be Ireland's best personal and business bank through exceptional customer experiences. PTSB has made great strides in growing our business banking offering in recent years and we have the ambition and scale to keep growing strongly in line with our Business Banking Strategy," says Farrell.

"We have been doubling activity levels year on year and are focusing on lending €1bn to SMEs over the next three years."

Currently serving a total of over 1.2 million customers, PTSB has a long banking history in Irish communities with roots that stretch back over 200 years.

"As a leading provider of retail and

business banking services in the Irish market with a presence in 98 locations nationwide, we want to leverage the knowledge and expertise of our business banking team to engage with business customers and provide the appropriate solutions to help them to achieve their ambitions," Farrell explains.

"We are focused on delivering a best-in-class customer experience through our voice, digital and in-person channels. Our team is mobile and can meet our customers where it suits; and when it's possible, we want to meet business owners at their own premises to listen to and understand their needs."

Making things easier

The bank's dedicated team and personalised approach aims to make things easier for business customers in the face of continuing challenges in the Irish business sector.

"We will continue to deliver exceptional customer experiences so that our business customers feel supported when dealing with economic challenges. PTSB is very focused on getting the balance right between digital support and in-person customer engagement," notes Farrell.

"At PTSB we are 'Altogether more human'. This means bringing the best of technology and our people together to solve real customer needs and deliver a

better banking experience. We listen to our customers' valuable feedback on an ongoing basis and keep them at the heart of everything we do.

"As the digitalisation journey continues, we are striving to get the balance of 'tech and touch' right for our customers. We recognise the importance of investing in digital channels and services while also providing exceptional personal support when it's needed.

"We also understand that over the course of our customers' lives, their needs and circumstances will change and so whether extra support is needed during key financial moments, or on an ongoing basis, our team is here to help."

"PTSB has made great strides in growing our business banking offering in recent years and we have the ambition and scale to keep growing strongly."

PTSB's SENIOR BUSINESS BANKING TEAM

Seán Farrell, head of business banking – has held a number of senior positions in the SME lending sector, including head of product development at the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, which to date has supported funding of over €3.8bn to more than 57,000 SMEs.

Tom Leahy, regional and sectoral head of business banking – over four decades dealing with business customers supporting their banking needs, both in Ireland and UK. Was also CEO of a large regional law practice and is a Regional Executive Committee member with Ibec. Now leading a team of business managers in the South and East.

Mark Harris, regional and sectoral head of business banking – previously head of telecom and media investment at another financial institution, having worked for Mazars and EY.

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

Elaine Dunne, regional and sectoral head of business banking – an experienced business banker who joined PTSB in 2020. Now leading a team of business managers in the North East and West.

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

Trusted partner

PTSB continuously evolves its business banking offering to support business banking customer needs. Partnerships have become increasingly important in this regard. "Over the past four years, we have done a huge amount of work with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland as an on-lender for various schemes," says Farrell.

Other PTSB partners include Bibby Financial Services, which enhances its offering in the working capital space, and Worldpay and Sentinel for payments solutions.

The bank has also partnered with Digital Business Ireland to make all of its supports available to PTSB customers for free. In addition, PTSB continues to champion and support local businesses through partnerships with the Small Firms Association, Guaranteed Irish and Chambers Ireland.

MANUFACTURING



LEINSTER ENVIRONMENTALS

Dundalk, Co Louth

Founded in 2004, Leinster Environmentals recycles waste plastic into low-carbon, high-quality raw materials used to make parts for world-leading automotive and aerospace brands. It is investing €2m in plant and infrastructure to increase capacity by 15%, having adopted Lean manufacturing in 2021. Pictured are business development and purchasing manager Ray Duignan and operations manager Mark Byrne.



HYGEIA

Oranmore, Co Galway

With a heritage going back to 1939, Hygeia is a manufacturer and distributor of products for the garden care, agricultural and veterinary sectors across Ireland and the UK. Its clients include garden centres, home stores, co-operatives and veterinary clinics. It has a dedicated R&D team and a strong focus on sustainability. Pictured is CEO John Byrne.



TOTAL PLASTIC SOLUTIONS

Dromcollogher, Co Limerick

Total Plastic Solutions is a plastic-injection moulding company specialising in the manufacture of custom, high-precision moulded components for a diverse range of industries. Certified to IATF 16949, ISO 13485, and ISO 9001, it invests heavily in R&D to improve efficiency and productivity. Pictured is chief operating officer Jason McLaughlin.



THORN ENVIRONMENTAL

Ballycoolin, Dublin 15

Thorn Environmental is a pioneer in the production of eco-friendly and sustainable packaging alternatives since 1997. With products certified by the Carbon Trust and TÜV, it was the first to market with biodegradable, water- and heat-resistant compostable films and its new carbon-captured products made from sugar cane. Pictured are director Adam Thorn and managing director Myles Thorn.



K&K WINDOWS

Gorey, Co Wexford

With its blend of cutting-edge technology and craftsmanship, K&K Windows has grown to become one of Ireland's largest fabricators and installers of uPVC and aluminium products for residential and commercial projects. It is the only manufacturer and installer of the Residence 7 Window system in Ireland. Pictured are managing directors Sorcha and Thomas Kenny.

FARM FRESH FOODS

Carrigtwohill, Co Cork

From its purpose-built, 3,000 sq ft production facility on the family farm, Farm Fresh Foods sells premium salads and sauces to a variety of customers throughout Munster, including wholesale, retail and local artisan retailers. It is focused on using the best and freshest local ingredients available. Pictured is CEO Patrick Twomey.



A WINNING FORMULA

Claudia Saumell, client engagement manager at Bord Bia, advises on how Irish food and drink companies can drive exports with the help of a range of tailored supports

The value of Irish food, drink and horticulture exports was close to €16bn in 2023, with 34% of the total destined for the UK, according to the latest figures from the Central Statistics Office.

The UK remains a key market for a large number of Irish SMEs – despite the challenges that emerged since the implementation of regulations in a post-Brexit era.

According to Bord Bia's recent Exporter Sentiment study, 73% of Irish food and drink exporters remain optimistic about expected market growth in 2024. Companies were most positive about the potential for export growth to Europe and the US (68%), followed by the UK (63%).

Many Irish businesses pursuing growth look to export markets to increase their revenues. But before prospecting for exports, companies should invest time to assess their capabilities for expansion, prepare their teams to upskill and define who within the company will take up the role of managing new accounts in potential markets.

Commercial strategy

Bord Bia's Client Capability team works with businesses to develop their commercial strategy. This is about making choices to drive profitable growth across channels, categories, customers and consumers to deliver on business objectives.

It all starts with decisions around the key principles of 'Where to play' and 'How to win'. Businesses should make choices about which channel, customers and geography to prioritise as well as how to target the consumer using a compelling value proposition. A key piece of the commercial marketing strategy is understanding where the intended market is heading and what the implications for your business are.

Scaling up

While the path to drive growth via exports is being developed, the company needs



Claudia Saumell, client engagement manager, Bord Bia

“While the path to drive growth via exports is being developed, the company needs to assess its ability to scale up to service new accounts.”

to assess its ability to scale up to service new accounts. The current set-up might not be enough to expand production. If so, consider investing in your existing premises or identifying a third party to outsource extra output to.

Quality of the product and continuity of supply are non-negotiable. If you can't meet the demand, it's likely that competitors will take the opportunity and move into that space swiftly. Competitors are watching and move fast, so ensure your output meets the demand of your existing customers and plan for extra output for your new customers' needs.

Rebranding for export

The fact that your product is doing well in Ireland does not necessarily mean that success can be easily replicated in neighbouring countries. Consumer trends might be similar but market conditions, economic policies and social behaviours affect consumer purchasing habits in a completely different way.

The Brand Development team in Bord Bia supports companies in assessing the need to rebrand for an export market. They can help companies to adapt messaging to the local consumer and test both the product and packaging with local users.

The Bord Bia service Super Brands helps companies to better understand the consumer appeal of their brand and the category in which they compete. Super Brands will work with a food or drink company to uncover a relevant and compelling proposition for their brand.



Building your brand through media channels and understanding your competitive set should be part of your strategy for growth. Identify the advantages your product has against your main competitors in each channel and capitalise on your unique selling points. The suitability and competitiveness of the product in the export market needs to be researched carefully if long-term sales are to be achieved.

Consumer-behaviour trends

Keeping abreast of the newest food trends and category insights is essential for your growth journey. Not only will this validate your business strategy based on short-, medium- and long-term data but it will also provide a shopper-customer holistic view that will help you to retain and increase business growth.

Bord Bia has developed a new trends platform called Cultivate, uniquely designed to uncover behavioural trends and measure those trends by interest and opportunity on a global scale. The Cultivate Engine provides guidance to businesses as they think about which behavioural trends to innovate for now and which to prepare for in the near future.

Client information

Companies that want to become Bord Bia clients need to send a client request form (accessible from www.bordbia.ie) and the Client Engagement team will individually assess the request. Companies must have a turnover of €100,000 per annum and manufacture in Ireland. Access to specific supports and services can be limited depending on interest. Some of the supports require a 50% contribution. Some supports will require that companies are Origin Green verified members to be eligible to avail of them. To receive the weekly client email please send a request to info@bordbia.ie.



FOOD AND DRINK



BURREN SMOKEHOUSE

Lisdoonvarna, Co Clare

Family-owned artisan smokehouse and food tourism operator Burren Smokehouse is dedicated to producing the finest quality Irish smoked fish. A leading organic smoked salmon brand, its range now includes mackerel, trout and eel as well as gift hampers. Wholesale customers in Ireland include Fallon & Byrne, Dunnes Stores and Ashford Castle. Pictured is managing director Birgitta Hedin-Curtin.



OISHII FOODS

Naas Road Business Park, Dublin

The largest sushi producer serving the Irish retail market, Oishii Foods' customer base includes Lidl, Tesco, Dunnes Stores, Musgrave Group, Applegreen and BWG. The Japanese-inspired company set up in 2006 makes fresh, ready-to-eat sushi products in a range of pack formats and at various price points. Pictured is managing director Ciara Troy.

LOUGHRAN BREWING STORES

Dundalk, Co Louth

Loughran Brewing Stores was created in 2014 with a single goal in mind: to deliver brewers the best brewing ingredients. It works with suppliers and producers from around the world that share its values of quality-first farming and care for the environment through pioneering sustainability practices. Pictured are managing director James Loughran, Natalie Maestri of KeyKeg and Rob Hamilton and Jethro Duarte-Holman of Loughran Brewers Select.



HX46 CAFÉ AND PAN ASIAN CASUAL DINING

Goatstown, Rathfarnham and Deansgrange, Dublin

The philosophy at HX46 is simple: exquisite food and consistent quality at a reasonable price – all in a cool and contemporary setting. Since 2013, it has styled itself as a café/restaurant specialising in pan-Asian casual dining and incorporated takeaway and delivery with an intuitive online ordering system. Pictured are owners Chunna Li and Jay Wang.



MURPHY'S ICE CREAM

Dingle, Co Kerry

Murphy's Ice Cream has been making authentic Irish ice cream from scratch and from natural ingredients since 2000. It sources milk, cream, free-range eggs and organic sugar locally and toasts, simmers, bakes and extracts real ingredients for its inclusions – even making its own sea salt from Dingle water. Pictured is CEO Sean Murphy.

HYDE IRISH WHISKEY

Little Island, Co Cork

HYDE Irish Whiskey is a premium range of Irish whiskey matured and 'finished' to perfection in West Cork. The Hyde family has been involved in Irish whiskey since 1640. Only the finest oak casks are selected from around the world to give each HYDE Irish Whiskey its distinct taste and character. Pictured is CEO Conor Hyde.



PAYING WITHOUT DELAY

Advances in technology mean there are more options when it comes to paying. Retailers can now offer customers a choice, making the check-out process a painless one

New payment technologies mean that the checkout experience is evolving. While in-store, shoppers no longer need to contend with old-fashioned cash registers and tills as technology is streamlining the payments process and helping to eliminate frustrating queues.

Just as there are many different types of retail, there are many types of payments experience.

“Customer demand and behaviour differs greatly among retail sectors,” says Paul Dunne, head of sales in Ireland at payments provider Elavon Europe.

“A supermarket shopper buying a week’s groceries might prefer to use a handset to scan barcodes as they move through the store to track their spending and save time by packing their items as they go.

“This way of shopping, with no interaction with staff, has become much more popular in recent years. Alternatively, if shoppers are just buying a few items, they might prefer a self-checkout kiosk rather than queue at a checkout conveyor belt.

“The retailer might offer a number of different checkout options within the same store, giving customers the choice.”

Digital innovations

Supermarket checkout methods differ from those of a clothes shop, a pharmacy or luxury retail, where shoppers typically expect more interaction with store staff.

Yet even high-street retail is increasingly embracing mobile payments and self-checkout technology to meet consumer demand and remove the pain point of queues.

Digital innovations such as automated collection points for online shopping orders and self-checkouts at fitting rooms



Paul Dunne, head of sales in Ireland, Elavon Europe

are at the cutting edge.

But mobile point-of-sale (mPOS) solutions that effectively bring the till to the customer, wherever they are in-store, also eliminate queues and enhance the customer experience.

And of course, it’s now almost impossible to ignore having an ecommerce offering. That might be click-and-collect – sometimes called buy online, pick-up in-store (BOPIS), or browsing in-store and ordering online.

E-commerce ‘here to stay’

There’s no getting away from the fact that

online shopping is convenient, according to Dunne.

“Consumers, who in the past might have had security concerns about online shopping or found it confusing, have now had positive experiences for the most part and new habits have formed,” he says.

“I think that online, in-app and remote shopping are permanent features of the retail landscape, and everyone involved in retail should be embracing that.

“But we know that lots of people like shopping with friends or family, especially

younger people. There’s no getting away from a need for physical stores. A mix of both in-store and online, which is omnichannel retail, is the way forward.”

The good news, for consumers at least, is more choice and convenience around shopping. The challenge for retailers is this means having to manage several methods and processes for ordering, delivery and payment.

Retailers have been forced to get comfortable with hybrid ways of trading, recognising that online platforms are the ‘shop windows’ of their businesses.

Shops still popular

Reports of the death of the physical shop are greatly exaggerated, in Dunne’s view. In 2023, research by Elavon suggested most adults in Ireland shop in-store rather than online. That’s particularly the case when buying groceries and household goods. More than 80% of shoppers said they visited a store to buy those items, with the rest buying online or wherever was most convenient.

In fact, it was only when buying toys and games did people say they preferred shopping online over a store, with more than a third saying they bought from a website and about a quarter visiting a shop. The rest said they picked the most convenient option.

The research also shows that customers like to see and touch what they’re buying. When over 1,000 adults in Ireland were questioned, more than 70% said seeing what they were buying was a reason to visit a physical shop.

Meanwhile, almost half of adults said supporting their local economy was a reason to visit a shop. This increases with age, with 52% of the over 55s citing this reason – heartening news for those who run small, independent stores.

“To thrive and not just survive, you need to offer a blend of alternative and traditional options for both shopping and payments, as well as the extras consumers expect to make their shopping experience more enjoyable – and make your business more memorable,” says Dunne.

“As a payments partner, Elavon has a deep knowledge of the retail sector. We’re putting our expertise to good use, helping clients to give their customers quick and easy payment options as part of an exceptional, end-to-end retail experience.”

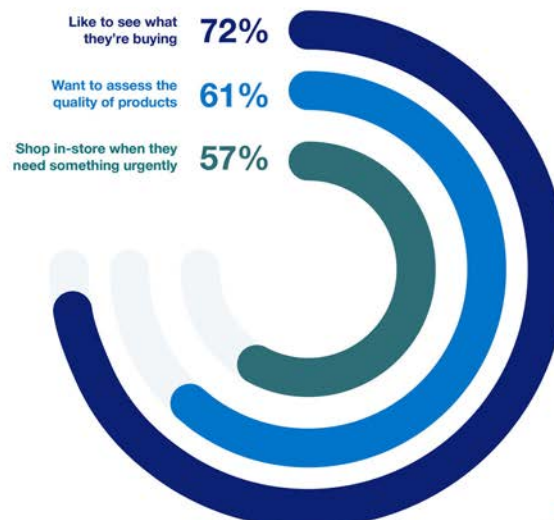
Elavon can provide the technology needed to accept payments from customers whether they’re local shoppers in your store or online customers from anywhere in the world using multiple currencies through a myriad of different platforms.

To find out more about how the checkout experience is evolving visit [Elavon.ie](https://www.elavon.ie) or scan the QR code on this page.



Top reasons to visit a shop

Yonder: Online survey of 1,082 adults in Ireland, March 2023.
Q: Which, if any, of the following reasons would encourage you to shop physically in store?



OUTSTANDING SMALL BUSINESS



DRINK BOTANICALS IRELAND

Ranelagh, Dublin 6

Drink Botanicals Ireland's ready-to-use dried garnishes reduce fruit waste and enhance the presentation and flavour of cocktails and culinary dishes. Its syrups are made with natural ingredients. Serving both the B2B and B2C markets, the company has successfully exported to the UK, the US and the Middle East. Pictured is CEO Laura McCarthy, who came up with the business idea in 2017.



ZINGIBEER

Fairview, Dublin 3

Zingibeer is the first Irish-produced, alcoholic ginger beer made using fermented fiery ginger, fresh and zesty lemon and a unique and secret blend of botanicals. Set up in 2021, Zingibeer is currently producing and selling over 20,000 litres of the product a month and has secured listings with national retailers. Pictured are co-founders father and daughter Kevin and Rachel Byrne.

JACK MURPHY CLOTHING

Skerries, Co Dublin

What began as a local corsetry business in the 1940s is now a luxury outerwear brand with global distribution. Jack Murphy Clothing makes slow-fashion collections focusing on quality fabrics and styles. Womenswear accounts for 80% of its offering and sales. Pictured is head of sales and marketing Sarah Murphy, who joined the business in 2018.



IRISH SOCKSCIETY

Lisoban Business Park, Galway

Established in 2017, Irish Socksciety has quality, sustainability and community at its core. Selling socks inspired by Irish culture, language and landscape, the company supplies to around 200 retailers and offers subscriptions online and custom-design services for corporate clients worldwide. Pictured are co-founders Joanna Ciezka and Aleksandra Kieldanowicz.



NUTTY DELIGHTS

George's Street Arcade, Dublin 2

Nutty Delights is Dublin's first and only specialty retailer focused on gourmet nuts, dried fruits and nut-based products. Its physical and online stores offer ethically- and sustainably-sourced products from around the world. Customers range from health-conscious individuals to culinary enthusiasts looking for unique, high-quality ingredients. Pictured is co-founder Nikunj Mehta.

FUNKY MONKEY FOODS

Finglas, Dublin 11

Funky Monkey Foods is offering a home-alternative to Chinese takeaways with its curry-sauce, salt-and-chilli and chow-mein mix products. All cooking, packing and recipe development is carried out in-house. Stocked in Aldi and SuperValu stores nationwide, the products are also bought online by customers in Ireland and the UK. Pictured is founder and director Deborah Crowley.



REAPING THE BENEFITS

In a tight labour market it's important to keep on top of the latest developments in relation to employee benefits, especially Revenue's Enhanced Reporting Requirements

You may have been hearing things about Enhanced Reporting Requirements (ERR) over the past while and wondering how it might affect you and your business, in particular, your rewards programme.

Terry Spence, One4all Rewards director B2B Sales, says: "Here at One4all Rewards we want to make sure the process is as smooth as possible, and your employees can still enjoy their One4all Rewards, stress-free."

From 1 January, 2024, under ERR you will now be required to provide more detailed information to Revenue on the benefits you give to your employees. This will include benefits under the small benefits exemption scheme such as One4all Gift Cards.

The small benefit exemption can allow an employee to receive a voucher or non-cash benefit without giving rise to a charge to tax where certain conditions are met. The voucher or non-cash benefit must meet all the following conditions to

"We want to make sure the process is as smooth as possible, and your employees can still enjoy their One4all Rewards, stress-free."

qualify for exemption from tax:

- The voucher or benefit cannot be part of any salary-sacrifice arrangement between the employee and employer
- The voucher or benefit can only be used to purchase goods or services and cannot be exchanged in part or in full for cash
- The combined number of such benefits in a year is limited to two
- The combined aggregate value of these two benefits or vouchers an employer can give in a tax year is limited to a maximum of €1,000.

"Any benefit that is part of your rewards programme should be checked to see if it's a taxable benefit before being given to the employee," Spence explains.

How does ERR work?

You will now need to submit benefits paid to the ERR prior to it being paid to your employee. From the 1st January you are required to submit details to revenue in relation to three categories: remote working daily allowance, travel and subsistence expenses and the small benefit exemption.

They are simply just split into different categories. You can submit expenses/benefits via ROS either via File Upload or using the ROS online form.

ROS allows you to obtain a monthly report of expenses/benefits submitted to Revenue. These reports can be printed. Employees will also be able to view expenses/benefits information submitted



Terry Spence, director, B2B sales, One4all Rewards

to Revenue by you.

With ERR, nothing changes with One4all Rewards' ordering process; the only difference is your requirement to inform Revenue on or before the gift card is given to your employee.

One of the conditions of the small benefit exemption is that it is only the first and second provision of such a gift, with a maximum value of no greater than €1,000, that are to be deemed as small benefits and subject to the exemption.

Cyclescheme – a key employee benefit

Employees of Irish SMEs can purchase three types of bikes and safety equipment ranging between the value of €1,250 and €3,000 tax-free with One4All Rewards' Cyclescheme.

Finding ways of saving money and looking after one's wellbeing is key for employees. "Workplaces are continuously trying to improve employee health and wellbeing. Introducing the Cyclescheme benefit for your staff is a simple, effective way of contributing to that," says Terry Spence, director of sales at One4all Rewards.

Cyclescheme provides options ranging from traditional bikes, e-bikes and cargo bikes. Here are a few reasons for you or your employees to join:

Save money

Travelling to work by car or public transport can be costly. A traditional bike with associated equipment can be purchased for up to €1,250 free of any

tax, PRSI, or USC, while an e-bike can be purchased for €1,500. There is even a bigger saving for cargo bikes with purchases of up to €3,000 tax-free via Cyclescheme.

Up your fitness

Exercise and fitness are crucial for a balanced lifestyle. For those taking on a new exercise regime for the first time it can be daunting. Cycling is a proven low-impact exercise on the body but is highly effective in terms of fat loss, increased fitness and increased energy levels.

Nurture your wellbeing

There has been a spotlight on employee wellbeing recently. "People often complain about stress and 'switching off' from work. Cycling to and from work is a perfect way to occupy the mind away from over-thinking about work-related tasks and decompressing before you get home," notes Spence.

Go green

Climate change is an ongoing issue and vehicular transport is responsible for over 30% of greenhouse gas emissions in Ireland. Switching to an e-bike is a top eco-friendly commuting alternative as its batteries can be easily recharged with renewable energy.

Cycle with ease

The capabilities of e-bikes have improved due to advancements in technology. E-bike batteries can handle longer distances so cycling can be a much quicker commuting option than it was before.

Options galore

There is a huge range of bikes available, including models for all abilities to styles for all tastes. Signing up to Cyclescheme allows you to purchase your bike and equipment from over 300 bike stores.

For more information on how you can get started, email rewards@one4all.ie



RETAIL



THE SPORTS ROOM Wicklow Town

The Sports Room was set up in 2014 with the vision of creating a community hub around sport through a shop. This independent technical sports shop specialises in running, swimming and all things bike, including repair. It even has a café. Pictured are owners husband-and-wife team Mark Williams and Ciara Kavanagh.



PICADO MEXICAN

South Richmond Street, Dublin 2

Founded in 2011 as an e-commerce website, Picado Mexican has grown to become Ireland's leading Mexican boutique grocer and cooking school. The team shares its knowledge and heritage through the pantry, cooking classes and supper-club evenings, unlocking the stories and secrets of Mexican food for customers. Pictured are co-founders Alan Foran and Lily Ramirez-Foran.

WILLIE DUGGAN LIGHTING

Hebron Business Park, Kilkenny

Lighting-design specialist Willie Duggan Lighting educates people on all aspects of lighting in its experiential showroom and through masterclasses and lighting-certificate courses as well as social media, blogs and newsletters. It believes open collaboration with customers is the key to success. Pictured is managing director Willie Duggan.



JJ BURKE CAR SALES

Ballinrobe, Co Mayo

Celebrating 50 years in business in 2024, JJ Burke Car Sales is a family-run dealership with a relentless focus on high levels of customer service. It is a main dealer for new Renault, Peugeot and Dacia cars as well as a variety of second-hand vehicles. Pictured are dealer principals Pauline, Joseph and Karen Burke.



HERD BUTCHERY

Butler's Bridge, Co Cavan

HERD Butchery was founded in 2021 by Robert Mee, who had spent a decade honing his butchery skills in Toronto, Canada. Inspired by his childhood on the family farm, his passion for sustainable farming practices and high-quality food led him to open his own shop, which has become a food destination in the village.

TOUR AMERICA

Milltown, Co Dublin

Established in 1995, Tour America is the largest seller of holidays to the US to Irish people while its Cruise Holidays arm set up in 2001 is also a market leader. The company has created a five-star retail brand called The Travel Suite, whose premises is now the head office for all of its retail businesses. Pictured is managing director Mary McKenna.



MAKING THINGS EASIER

Small firms need to get to grips with Revenue's Enhanced Reporting Requirements now and payroll software and systems from Sage are there to help

Various legislative changes introduced by the Government mean that small firms are facing extra administration work which many are struggling with. These include statutory sick pay and Enhanced Reporting Requirements (ERR). Having come into effect on 1 January, ERR is the most pressing of these changes for small firms at the moment, as a lot of them are still unsure about dealing with the expenses requirement and how this impacts benefits-in-kind.

The new legislation is part of the Finance Act 2022 and introduces Section 897C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, which provides for mandatory real-time reporting of certain reportable benefits provided to employees and directors.

ERR will provide Revenue with increased visibility of tax-free amounts being paid to employees, along with data capable of being analysed for compliance interventions.

Under ERR three categories of non-taxable payments to employees (and paid directors) must be reported to Revenue in real time. These are the small benefits exemption, remote working daily allowance and travel and subsistence.

None of the guidance on these payments has changed – they just now need to be reported on and in real time. So, for example, if your company pays employees their travel expenses every four months, then this must also be reported to Revenue every four months, and on the same date.

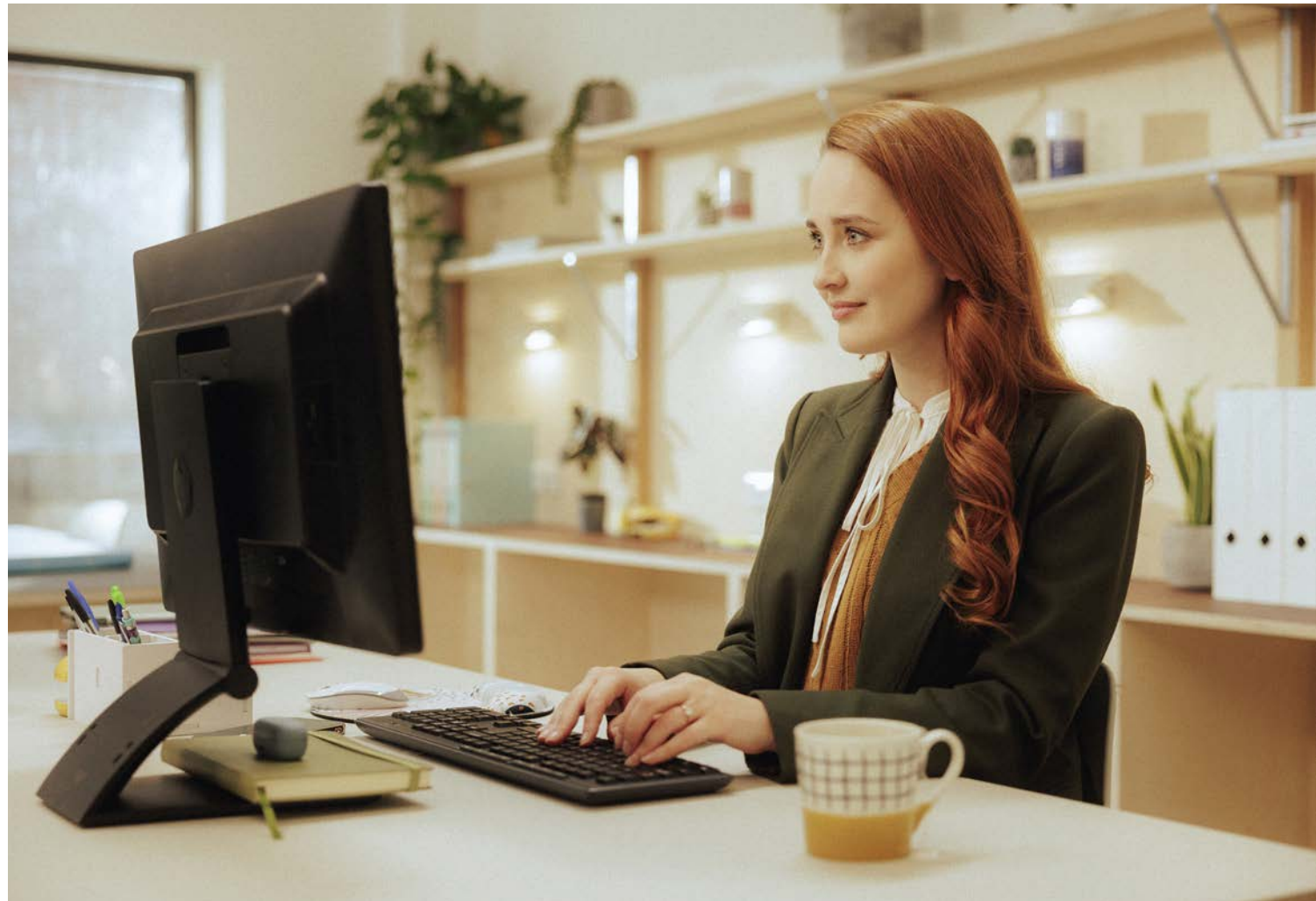
Employers were already obliged to keep such records and Revenue could ask for them if it wanted to. However, in reality this was rarely done, except maybe if the business was being audited. As such, the requirement to now submit regular, real-time reports is a significant change that will entail significant extra administration.

Approach to compliance

Compliance with ERR is already underway in the business community. Figures published by Revenue show that by 31 January, over 66,000 ERR submissions had been made by around 17,500 employers. The submissions relate to over 702,000 payments and benefits provided to 226,800 individual employees and directors. The value of these payments and benefits amounts to almost €86m.

Revenue is taking a service-for-compliance approach, which means that from now until 30 June, 2024 it won't seek to apply any penalties for non-compliance with ERR. However, it has recently confirmed that employers must still submit all ERR-reportable items that have been paid since 1 January.

This means that ERR is not optional until the end of June, just that you won't



get any penalties if you decide not to do it until after that time. So it's best to get started on ERR as soon as you can. This initial reporting requirement is only phase one and further employee payments and/or benefits are likely to come within the ERR scope in the coming years.

Software upgrade

Sage upgraded its payroll software in time for ERR's start-date and has gone a step further since with further improvements based on customer feedback to make it even easier to submit ERR expenses and benefits.

These improvements in Sage Payroll (Micropay) version 27.1 include a way of streamlining the process by assigning an ERR category to your expense payments and a feature that enables you to resubmit data from previous periods.

Sage continually evolves all of its products to better suit the way SMEs run their businesses. They also make them more robust, secure and easy to use.

"Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and at Sage, we are committed to providing them with the

tools and support they need to thrive and grow," says Paula Egan, head of direct sales at Sage.

"Our solutions are designed to streamline processes, increase efficiency, and ensure compliance with regulations so our customers can focus on what truly matters – running and growing their businesses."

Sage customers get more than just

software to support them with the many challenges facing them in the current climate. They automatically become members of the Sage community, which allows them to tap into exclusive benefits.

These include award-winning support, talks and articles from the world's leading experts and community forums where they can connect with other similar businesses.

ERR – tips for preparing your systems

- Review how you're currently collating the required information and whether it fits in with the reporting parameters set out by Revenue
- If the data is collected across departments other than finance, such as HR, ensure there's a system in place for collating the data together
- Determine who is responsible for the reporting and ensure they have the required permissions on ROS.

"Small businesses are the backbone of our economy, and at Sage, we are committed to providing them with the tools and support they need to thrive and grow."

SERVICES



OSENG
Claremorris, Co Mayo
Established in 2018, OSENG is an engineering design and project management company which has invested heavily in technology. It approaches all projects from inception to completion with the knowledge and experience acquired from over 15 years' involvement in multi-disciplinary projects. Pictured are mechanical project manager Johnny Madden and founder and managing director Gary O'Sullivan.



MONEYSHERPA
Dundalk, Co Louth

Since it was established in 2020, Moneysherpa has been helping Irish consumers make smarter financial decisions and act on them to improve their finances. It does this by giving easy access to straightforward advice and then dealing with financial institutions on behalf of the customer for free. Pictured are managing director Mark Coan (foreground) and the Moneysherpa team.

CLIMEACTION
Monahan Road, Cork

Founded in 2021 by Paul Murphy and Joe Aherne, Climeaction is revolutionising how businesses approach carbon reduction by delivering standardised solutions that drive impactful climate action and enhance ESG performance. Catering to every sector and business size, its holistic approach is intentional, as effective decarbonisation requires expertise throughout the entire supply chain. Pictured is the Climeaction team.



PD CERAMICS
Loughrea, Co Galway

Inspired by his family's dentistry legacy, Paul Dowling leads the team at PD Ceramics in pioneering advanced dental-technology production techniques to produce high-end dental crown and bridge solutions for customers in Ireland and the UK. PD Ceramics has been setting standards as a dental laboratory since 1986. Pictured is the PD Ceramics team.



ROCTEL
Mary's Abbey, Dublin 7

Managed services provider ROCTEL is focused on providing the best-in-class cloud, collaboration, security and broadband services to address the dynamic needs of its clients. Committed to innovation, it develops personalised and agile services that are sustainably managed rather than transactional. Pictured is CEO Cormac Reid who founded the business in 2000.



PAWPRINTS CREMATION
Trim, Co Meath

Pawprints Cremation was founded in 2011 as a compassionate pet-cremation service dedicated to honouring the bond between pets and their owners. It provides dignified and personalised cremation solutions and its state-of-the-art facilities ensure a respectful and eco-friendly process. Pictured are office manager Dawn McCarthy, managing director Glen Patten and administrator Samantha Fogarty.

OPEN FOR EXPORTERS

Enda McDonnell, regional director, Dublin, Enterprise Ireland, discusses why a strategic developmental approach is important for driving exports and supporting companies on their journey

Enterprise Ireland is committed to supporting the development of Irish-owned companies on their journey to achieving greater scale and to become global leaders in their field.

Enterprise Ireland works with Irish-owned companies, with a focus on manufacturing and internationally-traded services, to support their export ambition. We believe these businesses are key pillars in local economies as they drive prosperity and create jobs in communities around the country.

Success for our client companies overseas, and the direct and indirect jobs that results in, translates into an increased demand in the Irish economy for services and raw materials.

Despite various challenges, employment in companies supported by Enterprise Ireland reached a total of 225,495 in 2023, the highest-ever recorded. The total number of jobs created was 15,530.

Each of Enterprise Ireland's three main sectoral divisions recorded jobs growth with Food and Sustainability now employing 66,047 people (+3%), Industrial and Life Sciences employing 93,652 (+2%) and Technology & Services employing 65,796 people (+2%).

Exports by Irish companies supported by Enterprise Ireland climbed 19% in 2022 to reach a record total of €32.1bn. Growth was recorded across all overseas regions and in individual industry sectors. For example, exports to the Eurozone, accounting for 25% of the total, rose by 28% in 2022. The UK continues to be an important market, making up 29% of all exports and showing an increase of 13% year on year.

Why diversify?

As Ireland is a small, open economy, we are often impacted by global economic trends. Diversifying away from the domestic market, and exploring exporting opportunities, spreads the risk. Having the ambition to grow internationally is always positive, but can often be a strategic necessity.

When we discuss diversification with companies, sometimes it is about not being dependent on one particular market such as the UK or the US. For domestically-focused Irish companies that might think exporting is not for them, we want to highlight that by exploring their exporting options, it can often help to protect and future-proof their business.

We are focused on how we can support companies in the short, medium and long term, to either break into new markets or grow sustainably in existing ones. Our approach is to start with the conversation of where a company is at now; look forward to the north star of what's possible in two or three years based on this, and then prioritise the Enterprise



Leo Clancy, CEO, Enterprise Ireland, speaking at the publication of its End of Year Statement in January

Ireland supports and services that will best meet its needs.

There are opportunities everywhere, depending on a company's sector or offering, and Enterprise Ireland works with companies on a one-to-one basis to help them to explore, identify and validate the opportunities they see for themselves.

As companies embark on exploring their exporting opportunities, preparation and market research is fundamental, and Enterprise Ireland supports such as the Market Discovery Fund are a key element in this regard. Before a company takes the first step into a new market, we will work very closely with them on building export capability, which is really important.

Any company's success will ultimately depend on a comprehensive business plan – not just about taking a systematic approach to exports, but what is underlying this such as innovation and technology, training and development of people, and capability across all levels in the business.

We will help companies to identify challenges and gaps in the business; where they are doing well and where

they need further developmental work – for example, around digitalisation and the green agenda, which are no longer additional extras but need to be fundamental parts of a company's business plan.

Collaboration on coordination

Enterprise Ireland has 39 offices around the world, so our client companies can talk directly to market advisors on

“We are focused on supporting companies in the short, medium and long term to either break into new markets or grow sustainably in existing ones.”

the ground about the markets they're interested in. And we also work closely with IDA Ireland and the Irish embassies abroad to leverage Team Ireland's experience and pathfinders in all markets.

There is a real focus now within the national enterprise ecosystem to ensuring that there is a structure in place so that companies are guided based on their particular needs and will be signposted to the right supports. It is about building on the strong relationships that already exist between Enterprise Ireland, the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs), third-level research institutions and other partners.

For example, a micro-enterprise focused on the domestic market that started out with an LEO will need extra supports as it strives to become an exporter. All of the government support agencies and LEOs are focused on collaborating in a practical way to make this as seamless as possible.

To learn more about how Enterprise Ireland supports Irish companies to develop high-growth strategies and to enter new markets with innovative and sustainable solutions, visit www.enterprise-ireland.com.

EXPORTER OF THE YEAR



KLEARCOM

Carriganore, Waterford

Klearcom is a 100%-export software-as-a-service business for multinational call centres, with customers primarily in the US, India and Europe. It recently opened offices in Ahmedabad in India and in New York in addition to its headquarters at ArcLabs on the South East Technological University campus in Co Waterford. Pictured are founders Liam Dunne, Mark Rohan and Satish Barot.



HYDE IRISH WHISKEY

Little Island, Co Cork

Over the past ten years HYDE Irish Whiskey has created a brand that can now be found on bar and retail shelves all over the world, having sold millions of bottles since launch. It has delivered consistently strong sales growth year on year into over 65 export markets worldwide. Pictured is CEO Conor Hyde.

ZEUS SCOOTERS

Kildavin, Co Carlow

ZEUS Scooters is Ireland's leading international micro-mobility company driving sustainable transport in cities across the globe. Its core proposition is electric-scooter sharing with a fleet of 9,000 electric scooters available for rental in over 40 cities, primarily in the UK and Germany. Pictured are COO David O'Reilly, Dan Barry (Enterprise Ireland), founder Damian Young and Stephen Burdock and Elliot Griffin of BVP.



OCEANR

Kinsale Road, Cork

OCEANR is an eco-conscious clothing brand dedicated to ocean conservation. It collaborates with over 250 organisations all over the world that are focused on ocean health to custom-design premium apparel made using recycled plastic and sustainable materials. Over 90% of its business is sold outside of Ireland. Pictured is founder and CEO Tom Cotter.



LOUGHNAN BREWING STORES

Dundalk, Co Louth

Loughnan Brewing Stores has brought positive disruption to the brewery-ingredients supply market domestically and abroad. An acquisition in 2022 allowed the company to expand significantly in the UK market and it has also grown in mainland Europe. Pictured are Rob Hamilton (Loughnan Brewers Select) Fergal Carroll (Loughnan Brewing Stores), Jim Solberg (Indie Hops) and managing director James Loughnan.

BURREN SMOKEHOUSE

Lisdoonvarna, Co Clare

In 1995 Burren Smokehouse started in food tourism by selling its own and bought-in products and experiences at its visitor centre. Now, 60% of its online sales are international with France, the US and Germany as the top three markets. It has a database of 10,000 private mail-order customers. Pictured are co-founders Peter Curtin and Birgitta Hedin-Curtin.



COMPETITIVE EDGE

There is a strong and important link between the worlds of standards and innovation, writes Geraldine Larkin, chief executive officer of the National Standards Authority of Ireland

For small firms, standards are a source of competitive advantage, allowing them to drive economic growth and make global trade possible. If you have a product based on an international standard, you know it will stand up in any market regardless of what language is spoken. It's like bringing in a global consultant to tell you how to build your product.

Successful companies often ensure that they can utilise and incorporate existing national or international standards when introducing innovation as this will make the likelihood of market adoption far greater.

The National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) is the national standards body for Ireland. Reporting to the Minister of Employment Affairs and Retail Business at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, we are a business-improvement partner for Irish enterprise.

A standard is a technical document that serves as a guideline, definition or norm. Its central tenet is consensus about how to: make a product; manage a process; perform a service; or supply resources.

Implementing standards is a way of ensuring best practice and that things are done uniformly and compatibly. The keyword for me in relation to standards and innovation is 'interoperability'. Standards establish the baseline rules; they specify the foundation or basic language of a product. From there a company can build on that in whatever sector that might be.

For example, Blockchain was originally designed for the fintech market with standards governing how it operates. Drawing on existing rules and best practice in other areas, the technology can now be found in food traceability and other solutions it wasn't initially developed for.

NSAI's catalogue includes over 28,000 standards covering every industry, from technology to transport, food safety, construction, agriculture and healthcare. Most are based on international standards. Small firms can be assured that whatever standard they apply represents the latest thinking from experts in any particular field.

Opportunity to contribute

Standards are typically developed on a consensus basis, where leading experts across industry, academia and the public sector come together to develop a standard. NSAI encourages small firms to get involved in influencing standards, at both national and international levels.

Firstly, small firms can join a technical committee. Secondly, Irish firms can submit their views on draft standards as part of our public consultation process. We have a platform called 'Your



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

Standards, Your Say', which is free to join and where firms can read and comment on all draft standards that are of interest to them.

Because of the ease of contributing online since Covid-19, we have seen a noticeable increase in small firms

“We have many examples of Irish firms playing a leading part and punching above their weight in developing global standards.”

getting involved. A small, innovative Irish company can, through NSAI, have an equal voice to some of the largest global companies in this process, which can give them a major competitive advantage.

We have many examples of Irish firms playing a leading part and punching above their weight in developing global standards. Among them is former SFA award-winner Kore Systems, which has contributed to the development of the original code of practice for housing retrofit. This new code of practice will be vital for Ireland to meet its target under the National Retrofit Plan.

Progress with certification

Not only is NSAI the national custodian of standards and measurements, it also provides a certification service for conformity assessment. For any business

“NSAI's catalogue includes over 28,000 standards covering every industry, from technology to transport, food safety, construction, agriculture and healthcare.”

or organisation, achieving certification is hugely beneficial. It can even be game-changing. The independent assessment of a firm's product or service can carry them across the globe.

Certification effectively involves a third party looking at the application of a standard to a particular product or service to affirm that all requirements have been met. Through NSAI's certification schemes, innovative companies can prove to their customers that their management systems, cybersecurity process, energy usage or a number of other processes are state-of-the-art and can be trusted.

For a small business, the certification process should only take a day of NSAI's time. Not every standard needs to be certified; independent verification is like the icing on the cake as you're still applying best practice if operating to a standard.

A new certification scheme that should be of interest to small firms is the Certification of Innovation Management Professionals in Ireland. Due to be launched later in the summer, this is a really exciting programme in collaboration with Swedish research institute RISE whereby we will formally certify people who are demonstrating high levels of innovation.

There are so many people in Ireland doing huge innovation work across the private and public sector who deserve such recognition.

The Certification for Innovation Management Professionals is designed for internal innovation champions or external innovation consultants who are knowledgeable in management systems aligned to the ISO 56000 series of standards.

These new guidance standards provide international best practice on the systematic management of innovation activities in organisations of all types, including SMEs.

To find out how the NSAI can help your small business, visit NSAI.ie or sign-up to our free ezine at NSAI.ie/ezine.

INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR



ATC

Tallaght, Dublin 24

Established in 1991, ATC is committed to providing energy-efficient, smart, controllable products that deliver value for wholesalers and companies in a range of sectors. It has developed seven product ranges in 11 years. Pictured are procurement director Liam Prendergast, finance and HR director Mary Curley, managing director Brian Walsh and group chairman Ciaran O'Reilly.



WATERFORD DISTILLERY

Mary Street, Waterford

Waterford Distillery is on a radical, category-changing quest to unearth whiskey's most natural flavours. It has introduced the world to organic Irish whiskey, bottled the world's first biodynamic whiskey and revived heritage barley varieties that had been lost from the Irish landscape.

DYNAMIC ELECTRICAL ENGINEERING CONTRACTORS

Tymon North, Dublin 24

Set up in 2020, Dynamic Electrical has developed a unique, CE-marked fire-suppression system that is environmentally friendly with no maintenance needed over a five-year cycle. No cables or batteries are required. It currently supplies into pharma companies and the healthcare sector. Pictured is managing director Edward Nolan.



ZEUS SCOOTERS

Kildavin, Co Carlow

ZEUS was the world's first company to operate a three-wheeled sharing e-scooter; it has introduced the world's first solar charging station for e-scooters and has developed leading-edge Internet-of-things technology with military-level accuracy of less than 2 metres. Pictured is the ZEUS Scooters team.



KLEARCOM

Carriganore, Waterford

Klearcom's artificial intelligence platform tests interactive voice response systems and voicebots used by multinational call centres. It helps clients to avoid customer outages and prevent churn due to poor delivery of technical services. Pictured are founders Liam Dunne, Mark Rohan and Satish Barot.



ONEPAGECRM

Liosban Industrial Estate, Galway

OnePageCRM is a pioneering, action-focused customer relationship management platform for freelancers and small businesses globally. It allows users to build networks and nurture business relationships instead of simply storing contact details. Pictured is CEO Michael FitzGerald.

ON-SITE REFUELING

Baldonnell, Dublin 22

On-site Refueling was set up in 2008 to fundamentally change the way fleets fuel their vehicles with a more-simplified and direct fuel-distribution network. Fleet managers can access fuel data using the company's auto-logging technology. Pictured is managing director Adeola Ogunsina.



TIMELY SUPPORT

Colin Moran, head of lending at the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, outlines the impactful new schemes it has introduced to drive SME growth and sustainability

The year 2023 marked a significant period for the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) as it continued to pursue its mission of promoting economic growth and supporting SMEs throughout Ireland.

One of the primary objectives of the SBCI is to improve the accessibility of finance for SMEs. Since its foundation in 2014, it has supported funding of over €3.8bn to more than 57,000 of such businesses.

In 2023, the SBCI worked to expand its range of loan products to ensure that viable businesses have the financial support they need to thrive.

Through partnerships with commercial banks and non-bank lenders – which more recently include a range of credit unions – the SBCI facilitated the provision of affordable and flexible loans, reducing barriers that SMEs often face when seeking financing.

As a result, a significant number of Irish businesses were able to access capital for expansion, innovation and job creation, which is stimulating economic growth and fostering entrepreneurship. There is a very clear demand for this type of finance, with 3,913 SMEs availing of SBCI-facilitated loans in 2023.

Ukraine Credit Guarantee Scheme

Operated by the SBCI on behalf of the Government, the €1.2bn Ukraine Credit Guarantee Scheme was launched in January 2023 and will run until the end of this year. Its purpose is to support businesses impacted by higher supply-chain and energy costs due to the on-going conflict in Ukraine.

Under this scheme, finance of €10,000 to €1m is available at reduced rates for up to six years. A key benefit is that for unsecured loans up to €250,000 no personal guarantee or collateral is required.

Instead of an SME or farmer being asked to provide security, which they sometimes don't have, the scheme offers a government guarantee of 80% to participating on-lenders. This makes the process much faster.

So far, over €200m has been drawn down on the scheme by businesses from a wide range of sectors, including wholesale, retail, manufacturing and hospitality.

The on-lenders participating in the Ukraine Credit Guarantee Scheme include AIB, Bank of Ireland, Capital Flow and 13 Credit Union groups. Collectively, they have 64 branches around the country. Alternative, non-bank lender Linked Finance joined the scheme in February.

Sustainability drive

The SBCI prioritised initiatives that support environmental sustainability in 2023. These initiatives will help to



Colin Moran, head of lending, Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland

reduce carbon emissions, promote renewable-energy projects and advance green-business practices across various industries in Ireland.

Furthermore, by encouraging SMEs to adopt sustainable practices, the SBCI has played a role in aligning Ireland's economy with global sustainability goals. Embracing eco-friendly practices is not just a trend, but a necessary measure for SMEs' long-term growth and viability. Green investments can stimulate long-term cost savings by optimising a

“By encouraging SMEs to adopt sustainable practices, the SBCI has played a role in aligning Ireland's economy with global sustainability goals.”

company's use of resources.

Launched in September, the €500m Growth and Sustainability Loan Scheme aims to address the ongoing gap in the SME credit market for longer-term unsecured investment loans. A minimum of 30% of this scheme is targeted at investment in climate-action and sustainability purposes.

It follows the launch in 2022 of the Energy Efficiency Loan Scheme, which was tailored to SMEs investing in energy-efficient equipment to reduce their energy bills and closed for new applications last December.

The purpose of the Growth and Sustainability Loan Scheme is to support the transition to sustainability for Irish businesses and further stimulate green investment. It covers loan amounts from €25,000 up to €3m for terms of seven to ten years. Loan amounts of up to €500,000 are unsecured thanks to the 80% government guarantee.

There is an additional 0.25% discount applied to businesses with climate-action and environmental-sustainability eligibility. Businesses can avail of the funding for a broad range of strategic investments, including smart meters, cooling equipment, LED lighting, building upgrades and roof and wall insulation.

We have seen several businesses use the funding to install solar panels on their commercial premises while on the agricultural side it has been used quite a bit for new machinery that is more energy efficient.

The next big thing

Over the past few months, the SBCI has been collaborating with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications and the European Investment Bank on the development of the Home Energy Upgrade Scheme.

This will be SBCI's first foray into consumer loans. Due to be introduced in the coming weeks, the scheme is aimed at supporting consumers and non-corporate residential landlords seeking to upgrade the energy efficiency and decarbonisation of their properties.

The scheme will provide vital support in helping the Government to achieve the targets set out in the National Residential Retrofit Plan. Customers will be able to both avail of grants through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and discounted loans through SBCI's on-lending partners. This means they will be able to fund the cost of retrofit projects not covered by grants spread out over ten years.

SUSTAINABILITY



DRUMHIERNY WOODLAND HIDEAWAY

Leitrim Village, Co Leitrim

Drumhierny Woodland Hideaway is a unique destination where luxury harmonises with sustainability intertwined with a rich historical legacy. Its 16 eco-friendly lodges and wellbeing sanctuary are nestled within a 100-acre estate with roots going back to the 17th century. With every direct booking a tree is planted. Pictured are managing director Karl Moffatt and marketing manager Alison Moffatt.



HYGEIA

Oranmore, Co Galway

Developed from 2019, Hygeia's Nature Safe product range is tailored to the market trends of natural and organic gardening, regenerative gardening, climate-resilient gardening, grow-your-own wildlife and biodiversity. It includes Nature Safe Slug & Snail which uses oyster shells to protect vulnerable plants. Pictured are owner John Coyle and CEO John Byrne with Hygeia's seaweed-based products.



OB-1 HAIR

Maynooth, Co Kildare

OB-1 Hair is a go-to destination for sustainable and environmentally-conscious hair-care. It has grown to become a vibrant and inclusive community hub with a dedicated area for autistic clients. Its motto 'Be kind or be quiet' reflects its commitment to creating a positive and nurturing space for all. Pictured is managing director Lorraine Naughton.



BURREN SMOKEHOUSE

Lisdoonvarna, Co Clare

Burren Smokehouse sources 100% Irish organic salmon, mackerel, trout, and eel for smoking and has achieved numerous product awards. Verified members of Origin Green and the Burren Code of Practice, it recently installed solar panels with the aim of reducing its electricity dependence on the grid by 40%. Pictured is managing director Birgitta Hedin-Curtin.



RE-CYCLE BIKES

The Stoneworks, Dublin 18

Re-Cycle Bikes takes old bikes and refurbishes them for resale in the circular economy. If a bike is not fixable, it will be safely scrapped sustainably. It recently launched Re-Cycle Tyres & Tubes, working with bike shops to collect their old tyres and tubes to be crumbed for second use by Bord na Móna. Pictured is owner Willo King.

WATERFORD DISTILLERY

Mary Street, Waterford

When Waterford Distillery began distilling single malt whiskey in 2015, no Irish distillery was using entirely Irish ingredients. Working with over 100 individual farmers, Waterford Distillery has introduced the world to 100% all-Irish whiskey for the first time in generations. It has proved in its research that whiskey is affected by terroir, just like wine.



HEALTHY PROGRESS

With its continuing emphasis on team development and innovation, DeCare is playing a leading role in promoting health and wellbeing in the workplace

Over the past five years specialist dental, vision and wellness benefits provider DeCare's net membership in Ireland has grown by 76% to reach close to 70,000 members. Over 98% of corporate members renew with DeCare annually and its individual membership recorded its strongest growth and retention rate to date in 2023.

This growth is occurring against the backdrop of companies increasingly seeking ways to keep their staff well, attract and retain talent and foster connection. "Dental and vision benefits, bolstered by education and wellness, provide meaningful avenues for this connection," says Maureen Walsh, managing director, DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland.

"We don't take this for granted and work as a team to find ways to innovate and deliver valuable plans and services effectively to our members and the dynamic companies we partner with."

Over 70% of large employers and 53% of small employers have reported a planned increase in benefits, according to Mercer's Employment Benefits Survey 2023.

"Benefits that were once considered a 'nice-to-have' are now an integral component of employee-benefit programmes. Employers are placing increasing importance on dental health for a variety of reasons, including identifying dental benefits as a key enabler of their teams living a healthy lifestyle," says Walsh.

Preventative care

Continuity of preventative dental care leads to better oral health outcomes and lower costs over the course of someone's life, she continues.

"An analysis of our claims costs over a three-year period from 2020 to 2022 showed that there was just a 6% increase in follow-up costs where an individual received preventative care every year. This rose to a 62% increase when no preventative care was received during the period," she says.

"Companies are partnering with DeCare to help to increase health literacy. Healthy

"Dental and vision benefits, bolstered by education and wellness, provide meaningful avenues for connection."



The DeCare team at Ibec's KeepWell Awards

choices are enhanced by providing access to extensive oral and general-health promotional material, oral health checks and one-to-one consultations in the workplace. This has an exponential effect on our working population and their families."

In October 2023, DeCare introduced new benefits designed to provide extra cover for preventative dental care during pregnancy and extra preventative cover for people with diabetes and those undergoing chemotherapy.

"There are proven links between oral and general health in all of these cases. Similarly, eye exams can offer insights into our overall health, detecting diseases such as diabetes or glaucoma. Modern living and prolonged exposure to digital screens can create eye issues. This has driven the popularity of DeCare vision plans in Ireland," says Walsh.

The bigger picture

DeCare is aligned with the vision of the global health strategy of the World Health Organization. This means it seeks ways to play its part in the bigger picture by supporting implementation of the Global Oral Health Action Plan 2023-2030. It is focused on forging strategic partnerships aimed at meaningful engagement to support oral health priorities at global, regional and national levels.

For example, it recently partnered with

the European Academy of Paediatric Dentistry in supporting its annual conference across Europe. "Another exciting element of this partnership is that we will sponsor a bursary award for a student trainee or newly-qualified paediatric dentist," notes Walsh.

"As the population continues to grow, it is vital that we support trainee dentists, hygienists and dental nurses to deliver dental services, whether they are in the public or private sectors."

The DeCare team is a group of diverse, enthusiastic, authentic and ambitious people dedicated to positively influencing the oral, optical and general health of society, according to Walsh. They all embrace lifelong learning, whether that's PhD research and master's programmes; upskilling by taking digital, system-security or artificial intelligence (AI) courses or taking part in design-thinking programmes.

DeCare's health promotion manager Dave Casey is leading doctoral research at Trinity College Dublin that seeks to understand how important connections with others truly affect our health. This area of study focuses on the management, prevention, and promotion of health.

In Casey's study, minority populations are examined in relation to fundamental concepts such as belonging, isolation, loneliness in connections, narrative approaches and diversity and inclusion.

"These are effective ways to reach people within the workplace and have meaningful conversations about oral and vision health and their links to overall health."

For its corporate partners, DeCare has created bespoke monthly publications, which work in tandem with onsite oral-health programmes, webinars and one-on-one consultations.

"These are effective ways to reach people within the workplace and have meaningful conversations about oral and vision health and their links to overall health. There is a great deal to be done in raising awareness and coverage for oral-health services," says Walsh.

"The team is committed and encouraged by the progress that we're making. Digital, AI and global dynamics are bringing new opportunities for progress as well as challenges each day so there is never a dull moment."

WORKPLACE WELLBEING



HILLS FINE ART & CRAFT MATERIALS

Baldonnell Business Park, Dublin 22

Introduced in 2022 in response to employee feedback, Hills Fine Art & Craft Materials' workplace wellness initiative incorporates enabling ownership of work organisation, regular discussions with staff, team building events and hybrid working arrangements. Personal health resources, including an employee assistance programme, are also provided. Pictured is the Hills Fine Art & Craft Materials team.



FUNKY MONKEY FOODS

Finglas, Dublin 11

Each member of the team of four people working for Funky Monkey Foods is treated equally and involved in company decision-making. It is a happy, friendly workplace where hard work and effort are recognised, staff meetings are held every month and products are produced to the highest standard. The company recently moved into new, upgraded premises. Pictured is founder and director Deborah Crowley.



ICE GROUP

Tuam Road, Galway

The ICE Group culture objective is to have a "focused, energised, and happy workforce that emulates wellbeing". The theme 'Be Bloody Brilliant' was introduced in 2019 – requiring individuals to seek those 1% gains that when combined deliver brilliant client service and drive success. From this challenge the directors introduced a four-day week to foster greater productivity and wellness. Pictured is director Margaret Cox.



Three Q Recruitment

Lower Abbey Street, Dublin 1

Three Q's founders, managers and team collaborate on a continual improvement process to protect and promote the health, safety and well-being of all workers. The company supports a three-strand approach comprising internal team physical health and safety, external mental and emotional wellbeing programmes and wellbeing as a key element of company culture. Pictured is founder Cora Barnes.

LENDING A HAND

Microfinance Ireland's mission to provide loans to businesses that have difficulty securing bank finance is particularly compelling for emerging businesses, writes Des McCarthy, chief executive of Microfinance Ireland

The Emerging New Business category of the SFA National Small Business Awards encompasses businesses that are less than two years in existence. Our experience is that these are the businesses that find it most difficult to secure loans to fund the costs of start-up and growth. Over 40% of our loans are made to businesses that are less than 18 months in existence.

Microfinance Ireland is the government-funded lender responsible for funding micro-businesses that are having difficulty accessing loans from the conventional bank market.

Many micro-enterprises report that access to finance is a critical barrier to starting and expanding their businesses. Microfinance Ireland is there to fill these funding gaps by providing loans of up to €25,000 over a term of three to five years. To be eligible for a Microfinance Ireland loan the business must have fewer than 10 employees and turnover of less than €2m.

Our clients are the businesses that provide the everyday products and services that are consumed in towns and villages throughout Ireland. These businesses play an important role in providing employment and vibrancy to the local community. Our borrowers are spread throughout the country with around 75% of loans to businesses located outside of Dublin.

Developments in 2023

Microfinance Ireland saw steady demand for its loans in 2023 with small businesses once again showing their resilience by starting and expanding businesses – despite challenges such as higher business costs and attracting talent in a tight labour market.

In 2023 we received over 990 applications, a 4% increase on 2022, with loans advanced at just over €6m, which was marginally ahead of 2022. This funding supported 576 jobs.

Recognising the impact of cost increases, Microfinance Ireland reduced its interest rates on new loans by 1% in early 2023 to 6.5% and to 5.5% if the application is submitted through a Local Enterprise Office (LEO).

Microfinance Ireland's interest rates are fixed for the duration of the loan, which gives the borrower certainty as to the monthly repayments. This is particularly important in an environment where many other costs are increasing.

Prevailing trends

In terms of trends, we are starting to see businesses seeking loans to progress small energy-efficiency initiatives, often in conjunction with the grant funding available from State agencies. Businesses are realising that investing in green initiatives, even starting with small items,



Des McCarthy, chief executive officer, Microfinance Ireland

is essential to ensure their future survival and growth.

In Q4 2023, in response to the floods and other extreme weather events, Microfinance Ireland launched a new loan product for businesses that were directly impacted. The Flood Relief/Extreme Weather Event Loan scheme was structured with a low rate of 5.5% and a six-month payment moratorium to allow the business time to reopen and generate cashflow before payments commenced.

The loans are available to fill the gap between grant aid or insurance proceeds and the cost of reopening. While demand to date has been muted it is likely that

“Microfinance Ireland saw steady demand for its loans in 2023 with small businesses once again showing their resilience by starting and expanding businesses.”

impacted businesses will first utilise the grant funding and only seek a Microfinance Ireland loan to cover any shortfall in reopening costs. This loan remains available for impacted businesses if and when they need it.

Referral partners

Microfinance Ireland works very closely with the LEOs located throughout the country. The LEOs are often the first stop for start-ups, providing mentoring, advice and training such as the Start Your Own Business courses.

Our experience is that loans with LEO input have a higher approval rate. We recognise the benefits of these LEO interactions with the 1% interest-rate reduction on loan applications submitted through the LEOs.

The commercial banks are also referral partners and will signpost customers who do not currently meet their lending criteria to Microfinance Ireland. Our higher risk tolerance, which is enabled by support from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the European Investment Fund, allows us to take risk where it is not appropriate for the banks. Bank referrals also receive the 1% interest-rate discount.

Goals for 2024

Microfinance Ireland was established in 2012 to assist entrepreneurs to start and

expand their businesses. Recent OECD research has shown that entrepreneurship is lower among certain groups, including women, migrants, seniors, youth and people with disabilities – often due to a lack of finance.

One of our 2024 goals is to more actively promote our loans among these groups to ensure these “missing entrepreneurs” have an opportunity to start their businesses and realise their dreams.

Another strategic objective is the introduction of a new automated online-application process, which will allow customers to easily apply online and upload the documentation required for completing the loan evaluation.

The technology will transform the customer-application journey while we continue to maintain the high level of human interaction we have with each of our applicants. This will ensure applicants can make the best case for their business.

Our overall goal for 2024 is to increase the number of businesses that we fund and the number of jobs we support. Microfinance Ireland is well capitalised and has the funds to significantly increase our lending to micro-enterprises.

Businesses that need finance to build their business but cannot access bank loans are encouraged to apply for a Microfinance Ireland loan at www.microfinanceireland.ie or through their LEO.

EMERGING NEW BUSINESS



COLECTIVO

Dublin City

Colectivo is a consultancy founded on the belief that collective actions create impact. It helps businesses take social and climate action by facilitating their transition to sustainable models – in a very practical way. Since 2022 it has worked with global insurance, technology and educational organisations as well as UN agencies and investment funds. Pictured is founder and CEO Laura McDermott.



LITTLE LEARNING STEPS

Enniscorthy, Co Wexford

Founded by primary school teacher Terri Morris, Little Learning Steps provides reusable, fun, interactive learning products for children. It has two main product categories: interactive learning books and wipeable colouring mats aimed at children aged three to ten. The interactive learning books consist of 10 velcro activities and 10 dry-wipe activities. Pictured is Lucy Byrne.

ECCO SPRAY

Bowling Green, Galway City

Ecco Spray is revolutionising medical ultrasound with the introduction of POCUS Spray, a groundbreaking transmission medium for ultrasound exams that challenges the dominance of ultrasound gels. This pocket-sized 50ml spray is a game-changer for point-of-care ultrasound (PoCUS). It simplifies the process, allowing physicians to just spray and scan. Pictured is co-founder Will Hogan.



WEIGHLESS WONDERS

Jobstown, Co Dublin

Founded by nutritional consultant Caraldine Nolan (pictured) in December 2021, Weighless Wonders provides online and in-person weight-loss classes with a holistic approach to wellness. The company's ethos is that weight loss needs to fit around a person's lifestyle and family and not the other way around. Nolan describes Weighless Wonders as "a great support system for losing weight and life in general".



JUSTTIP TECHNOLOGIES

Co Dublin

JUSTTIP is a cashless tipping solution that allows customers to tip employees directly without the need for cash. The scalable platform is separate to the client's business with end-to-end transaction reports and complete transparency for employees and customers. It allows employers to help their staff earn more while keeping their business compliant with all new legislation. Pictured are co-founders Ciara Walsh and James Fahy.



TAILORED LEARNING

Targeted upskilling is proving key for Irish SMEs in challenging times, writes Aoife O'Sullivan, head of network development and innovation at Skillnet Ireland

Changeable market conditions, the rapid growth of digitalisation and the green transition mean now more than ever access to targeted upskilling is crucial for businesses of all sizes, across all sectors.

SMEs are the bedrock of the Irish economy, accounting for 99.8% of the total number of enterprises operating in Ireland. Collectively they generate over 40% of the total turnover in the economy and employ over 60% of the workforce, according to 2022 figures from the Central Statistics Office.

Established 25 years ago, Skillnet Ireland engages directly with businesses to meet their talent-development needs. Our primary objective is to support companies to become more competitive by providing the right upskilling and reskilling solutions to their employees.

Through our 70 Skillnet Business Networks and national initiatives – including the Skillnet Climate Ready Academy and MentorsWork – covering each industry sector and region in Ireland, we put enterprise in control of the process.

In practice this means our programmes are tailored specifically to what businesses want and are driven by market need. Each year, Skillnet Ireland delivers upskilling supports to some 25,000 businesses and 92,000 individuals.

Talent landscape

A new report from Skillnet Ireland, entitled 'Ireland's Talent Landscape 2024: Future Skills Challenges of Irish Business', found that existing time commitments are the main barrier preventing workers from engaging in upskilling programmes.

Of the SMEs surveyed, 46% said that time is the main barrier preventing upskilling of employees, while 56% don't have a talent-development strategy in place and don't plan to implement such a strategy in the next 12 months.

The study found that 49% of SMEs rate the economic strength of their businesses as "very strong" with the majority having upskilled their staff within the past 12 months. However, 51% reported difficulties in recruiting staff with the necessary skillset. Cyber security, financial management and marketing and sales were identified as the much-needed skills for SME business growth.

Continued support for SMEs is essential, particularly to ensure that the 21% of SMEs reporting no upskilling for their employees over the past 12 months can avail of relevant supports in the future.

These findings demonstrate the need to develop upskilling programmes designed to meet the specific needs of SMEs and individual sectors, so that more SME businesses can benefit from the lifelong learning opportunities available for their employees.

The demand for more tailored learning

options was also highlighted in a recent study from Restaurant & Hospitality Skillnet. 'The Future of Irish Hospitality' report found that through the continued development of micro-credential programmes, Restaurant & Hospitality Skillnet could play a leading role in the delivery of training in the digital-skills arena, including specific upskilling in areas such as finance and accounts, payroll, social media and e-learning.

The study identified several individual employee types and found that a "Future Star" would thrive on role-specific upskilling, while someone who falls into the "Career Mover" category could benefit from a micro-credential programme that would encourage them to stay in the sector.

Micro-credentials momentum

Micro-credentials are smaller units of assessed learning recognised by higher education institutions and other trusted credential-bearing agencies or professional bodies. They offer many benefits such as short lead-in times to certification, flexibility in learning and skill provision in new and expanding areas.

In recent years Skillnet Ireland, Skillnet Business Networks and national initiatives have co-created a number of micro-credential programmes covering a variety of areas including climate action, transport, construction and food and drink.

In 2023, Skillnet Ireland and the Irish Universities Association came together to host two workshops for Skillnet Business Network managers to promote the



Aoife O'Sullivan, head of network development and innovation, Skillnet Ireland



Representatives from Skillnet Ireland and the Skillnet Business Network at the Spearheading Talent Convention, November 2023

co-creation of micro-credentials targeting the needs of industry and offering the ability to upskill at a more flexible pace.

The Skillnet Climate Ready Academy partnered with the University of Limerick (UL) to launch the first enterprise-led, stackable micro-credential programmes dedicated to climate action in Ireland. The three micro-credential qualifications are designed to develop tailored sustainability charters and action plans for organisations in the areas of energy, sustainability and waste and circularity.

Taste 4 Success Skillnet, which supports businesses operating in the food, seafood and drink industries, has developed a brewing and distilling micro-credential programme with Maynooth University and several micro-credentials focused on food systems and nutrition with University College Dublin.

MentorsWork initiative

Meanwhile, Skillnet Ireland's MentorsWork initiative is continuing to support the workforce and talent-development needs of the Irish SME sector. MentorsWork connects SME owners and managers throughout Ireland with experienced mentors, helping them to navigate business challenges and plan for growth.

The initiative helps businesses address the challenges of strategic planning, financial management, digital transformation and examining new business models. The programme provides bespoke guidance, advice and mentorship and supports small companies to create a bespoke business

“Our primary objective is to support companies to become more competitive by providing the right upskilling and reskilling solutions to their employees.”

improvement plan. It also provides workshops and masterclasses under the four thematic pillars of: People, Finance and Growth, Digital and Automation and Business Processes.

Talent is harder than ever to source and retain but as market conditions and global trends continually change the playing field, investing in talent development is a tried and tested way to remain competitive.

SMEs continue to be the beating heart of the Irish business landscape and the need to continually support this cohort to prosper is crucial to the well-being of the Irish economy.

To learn more about how your business can avail of the talent development solutions offered by Skillnet Ireland, visit www.skillnetireland.ie

20 YEARS

MEANINGFUL MILESTONE

The SFA National Small Business Awards programme has gone from strength to strength over the past 20 years, providing a springboard for success for participating companies

When the first SFA National Small Business Awards programme kicked off in 2004, Ireland was in the middle of the Celtic Tiger era. Broadband speeds were slow, e-commerce was in its infancy and the iPhone had yet to be launched. Small firms were largely competing with others on their street or in within their city or county.

The business landscape was very different, but there are some parallels with today's climate, as Pat Delaney, director of the SFA at the time, reflects: "The economy was booming. It was an epoch of the greatest economic expansion the country had ever seen and there was strong employment. The Government was obsessed with looking at macro-economic aggregates rather than the rise in personal credit and debt – which turned out to be a big mistake," he says.

"The SFA had issued a housing report in 2004, which was focused on the impact of a 70% increase in house prices. It signaled that there was a crisis pending, but nobody realised what the extent of it would be. Other issues the SFA was concerned about at the time included electricity and gas prices, planning and transport. It was lobbying to bring inflation down below 2% -- strangely similar to where we are now.

"Small businesses were the backbone of the economy, which they still are, although the environment they're operating in is very different now. They are the ones that will be most conflicted by the lasagna of cost increases businesses are going to have to consume over the next two to three years."

Management capability

One thing that hasn't changed in Delaney's view is that over any economic period the best-managed businesses are the ones that will survive. Management capability within SMEs was identified as one of the four 'essential conditions' for Ireland's success identified in the Government's Enterprise Strategy Group report in 2004.

"This remains a key constraint to small-

"Small businesses were the backbone of the economy, which they still are, although the environment they're operating in is very different now."

business growth and lack of investment in management capability is still the reason why around 46% of start-ups fail within the first five years," Delaney notes.

The SFA National Small Business Awards programme was created to recognise the contribution of individual companies and celebrate the success of small business generally. Delaney was pleased to see how strongly the sector responded to it and the difference it has made over the years.

"An enormous achievement has been the development of female entrepreneurship, which is now burgeoning and well established. It's important to note that it's not just about owner-managers, staff also play a major role within award-winning companies."

First overall winner

The first overall winner of the SFA award was artisan food producer Mr. Crumb, which in 2005 was employing 30 people and moving from a 5,000 sq ft facility to a 30,000 sq ft factory in Co Westmeath. These days, it has an average of 90 employees, rising to 150 seasonally, and is delivering across Europe.

Mr. Crumb was founded in 1996 by Bernard Coyle, who had noticed a gap in the market for fresh breadcrumbs while working as a salesman for a major bakery.

"Winning the SFA award helped to raise our profile greatly and expand the business. We started out producing breadcrumbs but quickly added premium stuffing to our range, followed by toppings, party food, flavoured butters and melts. In more recent times we have launched snack food for foodservice under the Invisible Chef brand," he says.

"We have always viewed research and development as being key to the progression and success of the business. Mr. Crumb will introduce another exciting brand and range to retail soon."

Coyle says the fact Mr. Crumb is a family business has positively influenced its



Bernard Coyle, founder, Mr Crumb



SFA director David Broderick, An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar and SFA chair Geraldine Magnier with SFA representatives

growth and development. "We have been very lucky as my son Jason joined the business early on and was instrumental in pushing it forward through sales and marketing. All family members have contributed in some way over the years. My younger son Conrad is also currently involved in the business."

David Broderick, current SFA director, also came from a family business and can relate to many award-finalists' stories. "My mother started making cheesecakes in our basement in 1983. This has since grown to become a well-known global confectionary brand selling into 30 countries around the world. I grew up with the business and when it really started to take off with grab-and-go products and snacks I worked in the factory and on deliveries," he recalls.

Household names

"The fact that the SFA awards have lasted the test of time is really significant. So

many winners and finalists have since become household names and brands and achieved international success. That's the part I love about it – when companies like these tell me that being part of the SFA awards programme was the springboard that got them going on that path.

"Often winners go on to do great things relatively quickly. Sam Moffett, founder and managing director of Moffett Automated Storage, was announced as EY Entrepreneur of the Year 2023 within a couple of months of winning the overall SFA award. We know we're doing something right when we look at achievements like this."

Broderick notes how valuable the connections finalists make through the SFA awards programme are in terms of their progression afterwards. "Even just getting an introduction at an event such as Business Connect is really important. Networking helps finalists to find out who they really need to speak to within a big

20 YEARS



Megazyme founder Barry McCleary in his laboratory in 2014



Former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern TD and former SFA director Pat Delaney in 2006



Jason Coyle, director, Mr Crumb

things. Many come from the food and drink sector such as the Jelly Bean Factory, Connemara Seafood, Glenisk, VitHit and Java Republic. Impressive companies from other sectors include The Smooth Company, Aalto Bio Reagents, Topform, Herdwatch, Voya and Megazyme.

International impact

Overall SFA National Small Business Awards 2013 winner Megazyme was acquired by American multinational Neogen Corporation three years ago.



Barry McCleary receiving an award from the American Association of Analytical Chemists for Method of the Year in 2023

company for example or they hear about practical things they can then implement quickly within their business," he says.

"We know how hard-pressed small business owners are in terms of time and cash flow so we will do everything we can to support them with practical, hands-on advice."

There is a long list of small firms which have been part of the SFA awards programme and went on to do great

"Winning the overall SFA award raised our professional profile, both locally and internationally. It had a very positive effect on staff morale."

Barry McCleary founded the business in 1988 to develop innovative test procedures and reagents for the measurement of key quality parameters in various food industries.

"Initially, our research focused on the cereals, milling, baking, beer and animal-feed industries. I had developed knowledge of these industries' needs from my time with the New South Wales Department of Agriculture in Australia," he explains.

From that point, the company's interest expanded to food and nutrition and then to the wine and dairy industries. "To be able to develop test methods and kits, we had to produce a range of enzymes within Megazyme. This required investment in a molecular biology laboratory to allow the production of enzymes by recombinant technology. This venture succeeded very quickly, allowing us to develop a full range of test kits for these industries," says McCleary.

"By 2012, I realised that we needed to be able to synthesise a range of chemicals for further kit development. This led to investment in new organic chemistry laboratories and employment of exceptional organic chemists. Following a few years of research, this investment also paid off."

When Megazyme won the Innovator of the Year and the Overall Winner awards in the SFA National Small Business Awards in 2013, it was perfect timing, McCleary continues:

"The company was flying and essentially debt-free. Many of the methods developed by Megazyme had become international standards, and the fiber methods had even become standards of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the highest world body for method accreditation.

"Winning the overall SFA award raised our professional profile, both locally and internationally. It had a very positive effect on staff morale. People like to work for a successful company. Raising the company profile also helped us to attract good-quality staff.

"Personally, winning these awards gave me great joy and helped to validate that what we were doing was important."

Over several years Megazyme had been approached by a number of companies wishing either to buy the company or to form various business alliances. In 2019, it was approached for the third time by Neogen with various models for either collaboration or outright purchase. The sale was completed in December, 2020.

"In the discussions, it became clear that due to Brexit, Neogen was planning to use Megazyme facilities as its European base. So, not only were jobs protected, but significant new employment has occurred," notes McCleary.

Valuable process

Reflecting on the SFA awards process, McCleary believes that preparing to apply is actually more valuable than even winning the award.

"In preparing the application you're forced to look critically at your business in terms of what you're doing well and what could be improved; which products are paying for themselves and which need to be reviewed.

"In our case we asked questions such as 'Is there a good return on research investments?' 'Why are particular products sold? Is it simply for profit, or is the product supplied mainly to make the company and its range of products more visible?'

"In most small firms we are so busy that we never take enough time to look closely at the business and ask such questions. The awards application process requires this detailed review."

Broderick agrees with McCleary on this: "Even if a business hasn't been shortlisted for an SFA award, filling in the application form is a great moment for reflection and for them to realise how far they've come."

TRAINING

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

A comprehensive strategic masterclass weekend sponsored by Skillnet Ireland, which included communications, media and presentation skills training, was held in January as part of the SFA National Small Business Awards 2024 prize package



Orla Kelly, PTSB, David Broderick, SFA and Mary McLoughlin, PTSB



Catherine McGovern, PKF



SFA National Business Awards finalists attending the masterclass in Athlone



Barry McLoughlin, The Communications Clinic

Breann McGarry, ICE Group, Jacqueline French, PD Ceramics and Rachel Byrne, Zingiber



Cora Barnes, 3Q Recruitment and Adam Thorn of Thorn Environmental

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!



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GO RAIBH MAITH AGAIBH...

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 20 years.

We look forward to continuing these relationships with another successful year in 2024.

Presented by



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SPONSORED

BUSINESS CONNECT

FLAGSHIP EVENT

Business Connect took place on 8 February at Killashee Hotel in Naas, Co Kildare, including a showcase exhibition of SFA National Small Business Awards 2024 finalists

Over 400 delegates attended this year's Business Connect, which had the theme 'Where growth meets opportunity' and was hosted by Richard Curran with David McWilliams as keynote speaker. Business Connect is a unique opportunity for CEOs of small businesses to engage, discuss and forge meaningful connections with industry peers and leading business experts. The sessions for delegates at this year's event were: 'Supply Chain Responsibility - Why small firms can't ignore cybersecurity as a supplier'; 'Modern Money - On being financial-flow savvy'; and 'Getting in the door of Big Business - The how-tos for small business'.



James Lawless TD, Fianna Fáil - Kildare North

Nik Mehta, Nutty Delights, David Broderick, SFA director, David McWilliams, Geraldine Magnier, SFA chair and Laura McCarthy, Drink Botanicals Ireland at Business Connect



Left to right: David McNamara, CommSec, Rohit Thakral, Target Integration, Jacqui McNabb, LEO Kildare and MC Richard Curran



Geraldine Magnier, SFA chair and co-founder of Idir Analytics

SPONSORED

BUSINESS CONNECT



Naira Ludescher, SFA



Cian O'Driscoll and Stephen Herring of Murphy's Ice Cream



Caraldine Nolan, Weighless Wonders and Laura McDermott, Colectivo



Left to right: Alan Foran, Lily Ramirez-Foran and Elizabeth Smithwick, Picado Mexican



Elizabeth Wall and Niamh O'Shea of OCEANR



Mark Williams and Ciara Kavanagh of The Sports Room



Patrick Twomey, Farm Fresh Foods



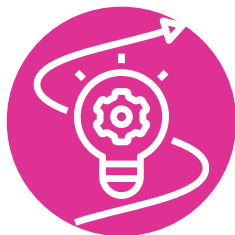
FOR YOU & YOUR BUSINESS:



Connecting

Creating valuable connections and networks for members

Innovating
Positioning small business at the forefront of technology and sustainability, helping them maximise the opportunities they bring to their business



Representing + Influencing

Advocating for members and promoting their expertise and contribution to the economy



Growing
Supporting small business owners to scale, export and create sustainable jobs across the economy



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Learn more about us at www.sfa.ie or telephone **01 605 1776**

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