

# SFA National Small Business Awards 2020



Small Firms Association, 84-86 Lower Baggot Street, Dublin2. Tel: 016051500; Email: [info@sfa.ie](mailto:info@sfa.ie); Web: [www.sfa.ie](http://www.sfa.ie) #SFAAwards2020

## SPONSORS



## PARTNERS



# Thank you for your support!



## GO RAIBH MAITH AGAIBH ...

We would like to thank all our sponsors for their valuable support in making the **SFA National Small Business Awards** such a success over the last 16 years.

We look forward to continuing these relationships with another successful year in 2020.

PRESENTED BY



84/86 Lower Baggot Street, D02 H720, Dublin 2

(01) 605-1664  
awards@sfa.ie | [www.sfa.ie/awards](http://www.sfa.ie/awards)

🐦 SFA\_Irl | 🌐 Small Firms Association | #SFAAwards2020

SFA National  
Small Business  
Awards

# CONTENTS

Introduction from Sven Spollen-Behrens, SFA director	4
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Gillian Willis, small business manager, Bord Bia	5
<b>FOOD AND DRINK</b>	
Innovation, quality service and local ingredients	6
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Geraldine Larkin, chief executive, NSAI	8
<b>MANUFACTURING</b>	
New product development and ingenuity	9
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Regina Moran, business director, Vodafone	11
<b>SERVICES</b>	
A relentless desire to put the customer first	12
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Terry Spence, employee engagement expert at One4all Rewards	15
<b>OUTSTANDING SMALL BUSINESS</b>	
Finding niches in a crowded market	16
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Patrick Farrell, retail banking director, Permanent TSB	18
<b>INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR</b>	
Unique offerings responding to market trends	22
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Eoghan Hanrahan, regional director for Dublin, Enterprise Ireland	22
<b>EXPORTER OF THE YEAR</b>	
Internationalising from a small base	23
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Nick Ashmore, chief executive, SBCI	25
<b>SUSTAINABILITY</b>	
Keeping the environment in mind	26
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
Maureen Walsh, managing director, DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland	28
<b>WORKPLACE WELLBEING</b>	
Making employee health and wellbeing a priority	29
<b>INSIGHTS</b>	
David Curtin, chief executive, IE Domain Registry	31
<b>EMERGING NEW BUSINESS</b>	
Five small businesses with great ideas	32



## Comment from the chair

I am delighted to offer my congratulations to all the 2020 finalists in the SFA National Small Business Awards programme. Now in their sixteenth year, these awards celebrate achievement, innovation and excellence amongst small firms and it is these very qualities that are evident in the companies featured in this special awards supplement.

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

The people involved here are truly representative of the diversity of entrepreneurship in Ireland, from new high-tech companies to established and traditional family-run businesses. Given the right support and environment, these companies will play a significant part in driving growth in Ireland's indigenous sector.

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

The businesses profiled here have availed of a fantastic programme to date as part of the SFA National Small Business Awards. As well as receiving extensive media and PR benefits from becoming a finalist, all of these companies have received a subsidised training package and a strategic management masterclass weekend. They have also showcased their products and services in the Awards Village at the SFA Business Connect event (see page 34).

In conclusion, I would like to thank our sponsors and judges for their continued support in making the entire awards programme possible. Our sponsors are BordBia, Permanent TSB, One4All, Vodafone, Enterprise Ireland, IE Domain Registry, DeCare, SBCI, NSAI and our management training partner is Skillnet Ireland.

Our very hardworking judges include: Mairead Cirillo of Environmental Business Advice; Tom Cooney of TU Dublin; Donal O'Donovan from the *Irish Independent*; Brian O'Kane of Oaktree Press; Professor Frank Roche, chairman of Dublin Business Innovation Centre; Tara Lilly-White Torpey, EY Ireland, Geraldine Lavin, 3rdi and Ken Germaine, Germaine Business Planning.

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

**Graham Byrne**  
SFA chairman

EDITOR: Sorcha Corcoran | DESIGN: Robert Armstrong, INM Design Studio, Belfast Telegraph House, Clarendon Dock, 33 Clarendon Road, Belfast, BT1 3BG  
PUBLISHED BY: Independent Newspapers Ltd, 27-32 Talbot Street, Dublin 1

### SPONSORS



### PARTNERS



# PASSION AND DRIVE

Sven Spollen-Behrens, director of the SFA, highlights the positivity that exists in Ireland's small business sector and the need for a strategy to support its continuing growth

Ireland is a nation of small businesses and small firms with fewer than 50 employees account for 98% of the total number of businesses in Ireland employing one in every two private sector workers. They are present in every village, town and city in the country. We have seen this through the SFA National Small Business Awards this year, with entrants from all over the country competing in the awards and showing what a range of diverse and interesting businesses can be found all across Ireland.

According to the latest 'Small Business Sentiment Survey', our healthy economy continues to drive ambition among our small business community. Domestic economic growth, which is forecasted to be close to 3.1% this year, was identified as the biggest opportunity for small business owners in 2020. Two thirds of survey respondents indicated their intention to invest in their business and recruit over the coming year. These investments will be in a wide variety of sectors, giving a boost to villages, towns and cities across the country.

Although the current economic outlook is favourable, the survey results also focused on several areas of concern for small firms. Risk factors identified were Brexit, the ability to attract talent and slower economic expansion – all of which have the potential to reduce growth and confidence in our small business sector.

## Need for strategy

In this post-election phase when parties engage with each other to form the next government, the SFA is campaigning for the development of an SME and Entrepreneurship Strategy. This will focus on driving productivity and innovation, introduce a comprehensive tax policy that is conducive to small firms, achieve a step-up in financial skills, and will get behind our incredible small business owners who between 2014 and 2019 created 75,000 jobs.

We will urge the next Cabinet to listen and make every effort to understand the challenges faced by small firms, including the rising cost of doing business and regulatory burden, access to training and education and the need for better broadband to maintain competitiveness.

As we look to the future, we must also make it easier and more attractive for small firms to transition to a low carbon economy and play a role in alleviating climate change. Over the next decade we will see entire sectors undergo radical changes and create new types of enterprises and jobs.

There is a commitment by government and European policymakers to tackle climate change. Therefore, government and businesses have important roles to play to encourage, develop and adopt innovative technologies, products and services that increase efficiencies,



**Celebrating the launch of the SFA National Small Business Awards were (from left to right): David Casey, health promotion director, De Care Dental; Sinead Byrne, finance director, Vodafone; Declan Coppinger, marketing finance manager, Bord Bia; Patrick Farrell, retail director, Permanent TSB; Sven Spollen Behrens, director, SFA; An Taoiseach Leo Varadkar TD; Sue O'Neill, SFA; Paul Healy, CEO, Skillnet Ireland; Geraldine Larkin, CEO, NSAI; Eoghan Hanrahan, regional director, Enterprise Ireland and Jock Jordan, group sales director, One4All**

reduce waste and deliver sustainable development as economies across the world transition to low carbon, bio and circular economies.

For Ireland to meet its binding emission targets, we need to engage and empower our small business community by setting clear and definite environmental targets, policies and incentives so they know what needs to be done in enough time to transition to a low carbon economy.

**“Providing small businesses with additional State supports to identify and exploit opportunities from the green economy would both help to meet carbon targets and make Ireland more self-sufficient with supplies.”**

Providing small businesses with additional State supports to identify and exploit opportunities from the green economy would both help to meet carbon targets and make Ireland more self-sufficient with supplies.

## Awards programme

The SFA National Small Business Awards are now entering their sixteenth year. The finalists in this year's awards come from a wide variety of backgrounds, sectors and parts of the country. They all clearly demonstrate that with a clear business vision, a sense of optimism, passion, drive and perseverance, success is possible.

These awards would not be possible without the generous support of our sponsors. Their support highlights their commitment to small business in Ireland and I would like to express our gratitude to each of them, namely: Bord Bia, DeCare, Enterprise Ireland, One4All, IE Domain Registry, NSAI, SBCI, Permanent TSB, Vodafone and to Skillnet Ireland, our management training partner. Thanks also to our media partner, the *Irish Independent*.

I am delighted that once again this year we have a very special charity donation for our winning company. Our 2013 overall winner Megazyme International has very kindly donated a special bursary of €5,000 which our winning company can donate to a charity of its choice. I would like to extend our sincere gratitude



**Sven Spollen-Behrens, SFA director**

to CEO Barry Mc Cleary and to Megazyme for this very generous donation.

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

To find out more about the SFA National Small Business Awards programme and see past and present finalists and winners go to [www.sfa.ie/awards](http://www.sfa.ie/awards).

# RESONATING WITH CONSUMERS

In light of the latest consumer trends, small food and drink businesses are ideally positioned to respond to market demand while continuing to innovate



Karen Tyner, senior manager, Bord Bia and Gillian Willis, small business manager, Bord Bia at its Small Business Seminar 2020

**“Power increasingly lies with the small players who can interact with consumers on a more personal level.”**

That’s the message from Bord Bia’s small business manager Gillian Willis who advises that small companies need to maximise on the ‘small is beautiful’ trend among consumers.

In recent years, consumers have been increasingly looking to buy from brands whose purpose aligns with their beliefs. Their purchasing decisions are driven by their ethical values and a search for authenticity, sustainability and local – all of which are important elements of many small food and drink producers’ offering. Therefore, those small food and drink

**“Consumers, more than ever, want an immersive involvement in the food products they purchase, including an understanding of the supply chain from farm to fork.”**

producers which successfully tell their brand story have the opportunity to take advantage of these consumer trends.

A Bord Bia report which looked at consumer attitudes to local food found ‘local’ is a strong purchase motivator for consumers, who often link a product to a particular place or individual. “This highlights the importance to consumers of small brands including a location or personality element in their brand story,” says Willis.

Meanwhile, ‘Community and Identity’ is a key lifestyle trend influencing consumer choices, according to Bord Bia’s Consumer Lifestyle Trends 2019 report. A sub-trend in this area is ‘Access and Involvement’. This shows that consumer creativity is on the rise, as individuals want active involvement in and the chance to make their mark in their community and on the goods they consume.

Consumers, more than ever, want an immersive involvement in the food products they purchase, including an understanding of the supply chain from farm to fork. Small producers are often in a position to provide consumers with a high level of involvement in their business and give them a more bespoke experience.

Multinationals have also recognised this growing consumer trend and are looking for ways to operate in this space. “We are seeing an increasing number of

multinationals adding smaller brands to their portfolio,” says Willis. An example of this is the US cereal giant General Mills acquiring the meat snacks company Epic Provisions, as it recognised that this ‘small brand’ story was resonating with consumers. This also highlights that small producers are continuing to pave the way in terms of research and development and innovation.

So how can small business ensure they are capitalising on this growing trend? A key way is to approach this is to look at the marketing mix, ‘the four Ps’:

**Product** - Is your product communicating your positioning? Is your product reinforcing your messaging?

**Pricing** - Does your pricing strategy match consumer expectations? Is it priced accurately against its competition?

**Place** - Having identified your target consumer, are you selling your product using the correct locations? Where should it be available in the ‘bricks and clicks’ world?

**Promotion** - Are you communicating the product’s benefits and features to the consumer in a clear way and using the right avenues?

Bord Bia has understood the increasing need for consumer reassurance on sustainability and the environmental and social impact of food. To understand how consumer needs are constantly changing please visit [www.Bordbia.ie/industry](http://www.Bordbia.ie/industry).

## Bord Bia supports to small business

The annual **Small Business Seminar** gives small businesses an opportunity to network with their peers, hear from industry experts and meet with the Bord Bia team.

**Foodworks**, run by Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland and Teagasc, is an accelerator programme helping to develop the next generation of scalable and export-driven Irish food businesses.

Bord Bia partners with a number of Irish supermarket chains on their **retailer programmes** – Aldi (Grow with Aldi), Lidl (KickStart) and Supervalu (Food Academy). These programmes give small food and drink businesses the opportunity to sell their products on supermarket shelves as well as receive training and mentorship.

The **Bloom Food Market** also provides an excellent opportunity for small food and drink companies to build their brand among consumers and to meet with buyers. Over 50 food companies participate in the Food Market at the annual Bord Bia event.

Each year, a number of organic companies attend **BioFach**, the world’s leading organic trade fair. This gives these companies the opportunity to showcase their products and meet with prospective buyers.

The Bord Bia **Marketing Assistance Programme** is open to companies with a turnover greater than €100,000 and less than €3.5m in the year prior to application.

Bord Bia introduced the **Step Change Programme** in 2015 as an additional fund to support companies with turnover greater than €100,000 and less than €10m in the year prior to application.



Pat Cussen, sales manager, Healy’s Honey and Dr Nicholas O’Brien, Ireland’s Ambassador to the Federal Republic of Germany at BioFach



Owner Rebecca Harrison (centre) and members of the Food and Fishers team

## Ingredients for success

For the past seven years, Food at Fishers has been focused on serving the finest and freshest food in a friendly and stress-free ambiance

**W**ith an attention to detail for sourcing local home-grown produce, Rebecca Harrison has developed Food at Fishers into the thriving and bustling café it is today in the picturesque town of Newtownmountkennedy, Co Wicklow.

Currently with a loyal and local staff of 13, Harrison started the company in 2013. Teaming up with head chef Chelsea Doolin, who has won several culinary awards for her cooking, was a fortuitous moment. With Harrison's background in business and marketing and Doolin's in the food industry this has made for a winning combination.

"What makes us different is our good quality, locally-sourced seasonal ingredients and making everything fresh in-house," says Harrison. The café offers gluten-free, dairy-free and vegetarian options and has a takeout menu.

Having started out as a facility for Fisher's department store, the café has grown substantially and holds its own now as a separate business. While the

**"This personal touch makes us different to a lot of other cafés. Our staff have been with us for years and have a love for what they do."**

menu evolves all the time, dishes like 'hot open chicken sandwiches with bacon, brie and caramelised onion' are a consistent favourite. "The new goat's cheese with pear and walnut salad is going down a treat at the moment," says Harrison.

Originally a pastry chef, Doolin makes "mouth-watering and appealing desserts", everything from classic baked cheesecake and hummingbird cake to a light and flavoursome carrot cake.

As a daytime café specialising in lunch, brunch and treats, table service was a priority from the start. "This personal touch makes us different to a lot of other cafés. Our staff have been with us for years and have a love for what they do," notes Harrison.

Over recent years, the business has expanded from a 40-seater café to an 80-seater, providing a heated seating area outside and facilities for bike racks to cater for the many cyclists coming to the area.

The role the café plays in the community is very important to Harrison. It hosts morning workshops which can include felting, crocheting and wire art. "This offers a service to the community, not only in terms of learning new skills but also as a social gathering." Fashion shows also take place on a regular basis before the rush of the lunchtime trade.

On the corporate side, the café provides local businesses with lunches and platters of food for board meetings and training days. "We try to make our platters visually creative for these events, serving coronation chicken on homemade brown bread and Wicklow ham with cheddar cheese and fresh salad," says Harrison.

## Warm welcome

A flair for the personal touch and a dedication to preserving the family heritage through the generations are what set Kettles Country House Hotel apart

**N**estled in a peaceful setting just outside Swords, Co Dublin, Kettles Country House Hotel is one of a kind. Originally set up in 1978 by Joe and Phyllis Kettle, it is now owned by their sons Colin and Joseph Kettle with their brother Barry also working within the business catering for functions.

Extensive refurbishments were carried out in 2006 on what was originally the Rolestown Inn to redevelop the property as Kettles Country House Hotel. It offers 25 relaxing en-suite rooms blending tradition and modernisation to create the perfect stay while still maintaining an old-style country experience. There is a complimentary airport shuttle service and guests can also avail of the free car park.

With an extensive menu from locally sourced products the dining room is bustling from morning to night. Having previously worked in the Crown Plaza in Queenstown, New Zealand and in

Newgrange in Navan, Co Meath, Colin has trained extensively and gathered ideas to incorporate within the business. "It was ingrained in us from a young age to work in the hospitality industry and also to support our local people and produce," he says.

Open all year round with a staff of 44, mostly local people who have worked for the company for years, Kettles Country House Hotel caters for everything from corporate and social events to private functions. Repeat business is significant, with the same customers having their weddings, children's christenings, communions and confirmations at the hotel.

Online marketing has been a successful tool for the thriving wedding trade. There is always one family member to meet the wedding guests on arrival and there is a family member in the hotel at the end of their evening which adds a personal touch to the couple's special day, notes Colin.

Quoting his father, he says: "A happy customer is a smiling customer leaving here and they will always return as a regular. Look after your customers and your customers will look after you."

Over the next three years the family hopes to add a further 25 bedrooms – still holding onto a traditional, country feel with bright warm tones inspired by the late Phyllis Kettle. This expansion would enable the company to cater for a wider clientele such as bus tours, bigger functions and a larger corporate market.

**"It was ingrained in us from a young age to work in the hospitality industry and also to support our local people and produce."**



Colin and Joseph Kettle, owners, Kettles Country House Hotel



**Thomas Hayes, business development and marketing manager, The Tipperary Cheese Company**

## Tipp top

Having built up a strong following in the food service market, The Tipperary Cheese Company is working on maximising its retail presence

**W**ith a heritage of 400 years, The Tipperary Cheese Company is located in the picturesque pastures of the Golden Vale in Borris, Co Tipperary, producing top quality soft cheese and yoghurt for over 30 years.

This family-run business has been handed down through the generations having been originally set up by two brothers Liam and Donal Hayes.

Thomas Hayes, who is heavily involved in the marketing side of the business, says: "My Dad [Donal] started a milk round in the 1970s and in the 1980s both brothers started making a soft, creamy cheese to sell to local hotels and restaurants in Tipperary. This is where the concept for the company came about."

The land is now farmed by both Liam and Donal and there are 30 full-time employees. As well as milk that is produced on the farm, neighbouring milk is also used to bring the products to table. The cows eat the richest of grass almost

**"We are aware of climate change and the effect large processors can have on the environment so we are doing our best to tackle this."**

all year and are housed in the winter to ensure top quality milk.

As well as supplying its products wholesale to schools, hotels and hospitals and having an award-winning cheese in Supervalu, The Tipperary Cheese Company is introducing a fortified Vitamin D children's yoghurt for sale in July as part of the Lidl 'Kick-start' programme.

The company has been selling into the UK for 30 years and is in the process of developing new products with a fast food chain there. Breaking into the Dubai market over the coming years is something Hayes would like to see come to fruition. With 90% of The Tipperary Cheese Company's business in the food service sector, the vision over the next few years is to maintain this market while also expanding its retail presence significantly to all major supermarkets.

Conscious of trying to reduce its environmental impact, the company is in the process of installing an anaerobic bio digester, which it aims to have achieved by the end of this year. Waste water and animal waste from the farm and factory can create gas. The objective of installing the bio digester will be to harness this gas to generate electricity and heat the water for the factory, farm and also for the two houses on the farm.

"We are aware of climate change and the effect large processors can have on the environment so we are doing our best to tackle this. We are also trying to create more sustainable packaging," says Hayes.

## Back to baking

With two retail premises thriving in Dublin, Camerino Bakery is focused on high quality natural ingredients, ethical sourcing and originality

**W**hile working as a human resources manager at an engineering firm, Canadian-born Caryna Camerino started baking in the evenings as a stress reliever and form of escapism from the corporate world.

What started out as a hobby and a passion for baking progressed from providing homemade treats in her home to selling them in market stalls at weekends and eventually becoming a wholesale business, providing her own produce to local independently owned cafes and restaurants around Dublin.

In 2014 Camerino Bakery opened its first retail premises, a small takeaway bakery in Capel Street and in 2018 a sit-down cafe at the basement of Goethe Institut on Merrion Square was added. The Cafe on Merrion Square will soon be offering natural biodynamic wines and snacks in the evenings.

"We care about the origin of the food, high quality natural ingredients and buying from ethical companies that give back to the community," Camerino explains.

As she says herself, Camerino has come a long way from "a one-woman stall at a market" to now working as part of a team of 28. Growth has been consistent thanks to low staff turnover, high customer engagement and a desire to provide the best produce.

"Everything we bake is made with personal attention, love for the craft and the best butter in the world. The Camerino customer is looking for something fresher, more original, more beautiful," she says.

Sandwiches are made on homemade bread with the freshest and best quality ingredients sourced from outstanding local suppliers. Camerino Bakery's raspberry cheese cake brownies are award-winning and it will bake bespoke cakes for any occasion tailored to the customer's needs.

Customers celebrate their most important personal moments from birthdays, weddings, communions, and career achievements with lovingly-made Camerino cakes. That means that the company maintains close relationships with customers that last for years. "That sense of connection translates into powerful loyalty and referrals as well as shared experiences on social media," Camerino notes.

**"Everything we bake is made with personal attention, love for the craft and the best butter in the world. The Camerino customer is looking for something fresher, more original, more beautiful."**



**Caryna Camerino, owner, Camerino Bakery**

The products, which are beautifully indulgent and appetising, are ideal for Instagram, she adds. "We love to share the fun of working in Camerino Bakery by posting what we've made or what we're up to. We also collaborate with like-minded food businesses and community programmes to foster creative inspiration and these partnerships lead to shared social media exposure."

The website is a virtual shop window with tantalising and mouthwatering delights that make it even easier for customers to choose the perfect cake for their next celebration. "Even our PR department is homemade," says Camerino.

# HIGH STANDARDS

Geraldine Larkin, chief executive officer of the National Standards Authority of Ireland, explains what the organisation does and the relevance and importance of standards for SMEs

**T**he National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) is Ireland's official standards body. We aim to inspire consumer confidence and create the infrastructure for products and services to be recognised and relied upon across the world.

Where a standard already exists, NSAI works with businesses to help them apply it. Where a standard is needed, NSAI will work with relevant parties at a national or international level to create and develop the appropriate standard.

For many SMEs operating in a highly competitive and fast-paced environment, implementing standards into their business may not be at the top of the list of priorities. NSAI understands this. We know that investing in standards can be a time-consuming process, however we believe early and active engagement in standards development can help companies set themselves apart from their competitors.

Standards help businesses to de-risk, drive down costs, boost productivity and grow profits. They allow companies to accelerate their research and development (R&D) activities, which enables faster mass-market adoption of products across competitive international markets. It can also instil confidence in the existing customers of a business resulting in retention, as well as attracting new opportunities.

The standards most suited to Irish SMEs are: ISO 50001 (Energy Management Systems), ISO 14001 (Environmental Management Systems), ISO 90001 (Quality Management Systems) and Excellence Through People.

#### A direct say

Participation in the standards development process allows SMEs to have a direct say on Irish, European and international standards being developed that shape the market in which they operate. By actively engaging in standards committees, Irish companies can ensure they are ahead of the curve when it comes to product innovation and ensuring they continue to meet international trade requirements.

Standards have also been seen to bridge the innovation gap between R&D and global market impact by building customer trust and confidence in new innovative solutions. In collaboration with national RDI Centres, NSAI has continued to promote the benefits of Irish engagement in international standards development with companies involved in R&D and innovation.

This value is reflected in the level of industry engagement with standards through the NSAI Consultative Committee membership, which now stands at over 1,600 members. It is through this committee structure that NSAI facilitates Irish industry



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

**“By actively engaging in standards committees, Irish companies can ensure they are ahead of the curve when it comes to product innovation and ensuring they continue to meet international trade requirements.”**

engagement in European and international standards development work programmes across all industry sectors on ‘national mirror committees’. These are in standardisation areas including information and communications technology, advanced manufacturing, construction (including Building Information Modelling), health, electro-technical and gas networks and appliances.

#### Aiding innovation

An organisation's ability to innovate is widely recognised as a key factor for sustained growth and economic viability. The innovation capabilities of an organisation include: the ability to understand and respond to changing conditions; to pursue new opportunities; and to leverage the knowledge and creativity of people within the organisation, as well as in collaboration

with external stakeholders and partners.

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

The new ISO series of guidance standards on Innovation Management, developed by innovation experts from across the world, provides international best practice on the systematic management of innovation activities in organisations of all types, including SMEs. The standard provides practical tools and methods on how SMEs can effectively and consistently deliver new products and services to their customers on an ongoing basis.

To support the continuing and vital contribution of SMEs to the Irish economy, NSAI provides information

## Implementing standards – ten benefits to SMEs

1. Helps you to compete on a level playing field with bigger enterprises.
2. Opens export markets for your products and services.
3. Helps you to discover best business practices.
4. Drives efficiency in your business operations.
5. Adds credibility and confidence for your customers.
6. Opens new business opportunities and sales.
7. Gives you a competitive edge.
8. Reduces business risks.
9. Helps your company to grow.
10. Enables a common “language” to be used across an industry sector.

on the benefits of implementing standards for their businesses. We do this using various channels, such as attending industry conferences, hosting events, working with academia, hosting webinars, and promoting our work on our website and on social media platforms such as Twitter and LinkedIn.





**Big Red Barn is also shortlisted in the Innovator of the Year and Exporter of the Year categories**

**Donal Byrne, founder and owner, Big Red Barn**

## Making it modular

Big Red Barn has branched into manufacturing a range of homes at affordable prices having originally supplied to the events industry

**O**wned and managed by Donal Byrne, Big Red Barn has grown from five staff in 2014 to 40 in 2020, employing many young people returning from abroad to work with the company at its base in Swinford, Co Mayo.

In 2019 Big Red Barn launched its 1,600 sq ft Dormer home which is delivered in turnkey condition with no other contractors required on site. Made from CE-certified steel and Scandinavian pine, the home meets all building requirements and is an almost 'zero energy' home at an affordable price. Starting at €150,000, the cost is significantly less than a traditionally built home.

Trish Byrne, head of marketing and sales at Big Red Barn, explains the innovative building methods used by the company: "Using off-site manufacturing we significantly reduce the overall construction time and cost of homes. Because these homes are factory manufactured they can be completed in a matter of weeks as opposed to months or years as is the case with conventional building."

Off-site construction has a number of environmental benefits. Waste is significantly reduced – there is 52% less landfill than a traditional build and 70% less carbon footprint.

Byrne highlights the diversity in Big Red Barn's client base: "Our customers range from older couples who are downsizing to younger couples with families. We are seeing an increase in people purchasing our affordable €40,000, one-bed home for older people who want to live independently but require a bit of support and need to live close to family."

January of this year saw the launch of Big Red Barn's 'Tiny Home', which can be used as a starter home, student accommodation, Airbnb or holiday home. These small (250 sq ft) structures are built on wheels allowing them to be moved to the perfect location. The homes feature a living area with vaulted ceiling and can sleep up to four people in two double loft rooms.

Byrne believes modular homes offer a solution to the present housing crisis: "The process is not governed by some external factors present in traditional builds such as adverse weather, challenging site logistics or skills shortages. The speed of the programme leads to earlier project completion."

Big Red Barn has completed a number of significant projects in the UK, the most recent at Hinkley Point C nuclear power station, one of Europe's largest building projects. It has also provided residential units to families in the Greater London area. With the onset of Brexit it has increased its focus on the US market where it has a base and plans to start manufacturing later this year.

**"Because these homes are factory manufactured they can be completed in a matter of weeks as opposed to months or years as is the case with conventional building."**

## Concrete results

Design-led products and ambitious plans have driven rapid growth at Carlow Concrete, which is now eyeing the Northern European market

**S**et up in 2016 as a precast manufacturer of large underground tank systems, Carlow Concrete is already a market leader in this area in both Ireland and the UK and is now looking to accelerate growth with a new product line and expansion into Europe.

The company's main business continues to be the design, manufacture and installation of the tanks, which are used to contain excess stormwater to alleviate flooding. "We have hundreds of these installed across the UK and Ireland," says managing director and co-founder Enda Byrne.

"Whereas most pre-casters got tied up with commodity-type products, we are very design driven." As a result, he says, each tank is site-specific, tailored to suit each client's exact requirements.

The company, which has an output of around 120 articulated lorry loads of product from its Garryhill, Co Carlow factory each month, is also involved in other large-scale tank solutions. For example, it recently completed work on the largest pre-cast reservoir in Europe, in Cumbria in the north of England. It is also doing a lot of the drainage work on the new North Runway at Dublin Airport. "That's one of the largest tank installations ever in Ireland," says Byrne. "The projects are getting bigger and bigger all the time."

A brand new area, meanwhile, is its modular housing system, which has just received full NSAI agrément approval and is currently awaiting National House Building Council approval in the UK.

"We have brought the building system to market in the past few months and are

currently on a number of residential sites with that across Ireland," says Byrne.

"We can put up a pair of semi-detached homes in a week. After we leave site it's a waterproof envelope ready for internal fit-out by the electricians, plumbers and plasterers. This should be a real game changer for the government and how it meets its housing targets every year."

Looking at new markets is also part of the plan. "We see the potential for setting up an office, probably in Brussels, so we can hit the northern European market," Byrne says. "We know our product travels and we've looked at that as part of our Brexit risk mitigation strategy. It's something that does stack up."

**"Whereas most pre-casters got tied up with commodity-type products, we are very design driven."**

Carlow Concrete was named Best Export Business in the National Enterprise Awards 2018. It has also recently been accepted by Enterprise Ireland as a new high potential start-up (HPSU).

The company currently employs 14 people directly, as well as around 35 sub-contractors in the factory and another 30 on site installations of various projects.



**Carlow Concrete is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category**

**Enda Byrne, co-founder and managing director, Carlow Concrete**



Declan and Matthew Grimes of Kells Traditional Timber Windows and Doors

## Window of opportunity

Merging age-old techniques with the latest technology is the focus for Meath-based Kells Traditional Timber Windows and Doors

**M**aking beautiful and high quality windows and doors that are energy efficient and made using sustainable wood is top of the agenda at Kells Traditional Timber Windows and Doors.

The company was set up in Kells, Co Meath in 1997 by Paddy and Margaret Grimes, together with their sons Matthew and Declan. Today, Declan and Matthew are working alongside their siblings Damien, Patrick and Orla and a team of 28 to grow the company's three brands: Kells Traditional Timber Windows and Doors, Konic Doors and Metolike 2016.

According to Declan Grimes, the company is one of the largest bespoke manufacturers of high performance timber windows and doors in Ireland and the UK. "For people who love their homes, the Kells name stands for high quality, beautifully crafted timber windows and doors," he says.

The company has a focus on energy efficiency and environmentally sustainable products. "As a pioneer in the industry, Kells was the first Irish manufacturer to have an A-rated energy efficient traditional timber sash window crafted in Ireland," Grimes

**"The complete product range is environmentally friendly and based on traditional joinery manufacturing methods."**

says. "The complete product range is environmentally friendly and based on traditional joinery manufacturing methods."

Plans for the next few years include building on the company's environmental commitments by eventually manufacturing all of its products out of Accoya. This is a high performance and sustainably sourced soft wood that undergoes a proprietary, non-toxic acetylation process that permanently modifies the wood to the core. The result is an environmentally friendly solid wood with durability, dimensional stability and beauty that matches or exceeds even the best tropical hardwood, according to Grimes.

The company will also be making continued investment in automation and software through its Kelforth programme. "This programme will allow us to manufacture a truly bespoke product that through software and automation will become very standard and in turn will yield higher profit margins and a faster turnaround. We feel that we nearly have the assembly of new wooden windows and doors to the same stage as the assembly of Lego."

For the future, Grimes says he sees Kells becoming a dedicated manufacturer of high-end bespoke wood products, selling directly to trade and reseller/distribution partners in Ireland, the UK and the US.

This month, after receiving Intertrade Ireland Fusion Programme funding, Kells will begin an 18-month project to develop an online portal. This will enable clients to be directly involved in the design of their products and allow them to view their own projects in virtual reality. Potential clients will be able to download a quotation through the portal at the click of a button. And the new software will link with the company's current production system.

[www.kellswindows.com](http://www.kellswindows.com)

## Heaven sent

A brand that literally started at the kitchen table, Green Angel is now looking to become a major export player

**C**ombining their respective skills and knowledge of seaweed (thalassotherapy) and essential oils (aromatherapy), Chris and Mary Mitchell set up Green Angel in 2005 after seeing a gap in the market for a full range of Irish skin and hair products.

The pair worked with a chemist to develop a skincare range that was initially manufactured at the kitchen table and filled by hand into simple white jars. A year later, they moved to a warehouse unit and continued to make the products using relatively basic equipment.

While the all-organic product went down well from the start, getting the marketing and distribution strategies right was a challenge in the first few years. Interestingly, things started to improve during the recession. "Because we were a home brand, we got tremendous help and support. That set us on the road and many retailers were willing to open accounts with us," Chris Mitchell says.

In 2008, the company had four employees and operating losses of €33,000. By 2020, it was operating out of a state-of-the-art factory in Rathcoole, Co Dublin, while staff numbers had increased to 22 and the company made "a good profit".

"Green Angel now has a purpose-designed, highly efficient factory where we prepare all products in-house from

scratch," says Mitchell. "This allows us full control of provenance, efficacy and reliability of all products."

"Our products are innovative and creative and continually push the boundaries in the development and use of ingredients in ground-breaking new products." He adds that the inclusion of natural ingredients is of utmost importance to the brand, along with the use of natural packaging.

In late 2018, Green Angel launched a rebrand following consistent feedback from the sales team, retail partners and consumers. According to Mitchell, the redesigned packaging, which followed 18 months of research and development, has had a huge impact on domestic and international sales.

In fact, last year's turnover was up 40% over the previous year and Mitchell is expecting a similar revenue spike in 2020.

Green Angel has clear goals for growth that support the team's vision of becoming a major export player, he says. As well as returning to seven UK trade shows it exhibited at in 2019, the company will this year be attending leading skincare and beauty trade fairs Cosmoprof Italy, Cosmoprof USA and Cosmoprof Asia.

On the new product front, it has developed a pipeline of new products or new product combination offers that will come on stream on a three-monthly basis.

**"Our products are innovative and creative and continually push the boundaries in the development and use of ingredients in ground-breaking new products."**



Chris and Mary Mitchell, co-founders, Green Angel

[www.greenangel.com](http://www.greenangel.com)

# TECHNOLOGY FOR GOOD

Vodafone Ireland is using seamless connectivity to enable new ways of working for the advancement of our rural communities

**T**hrough cloud-based platforms, machine-to-machine services and professional ICT support, Vodafone's myriad of mobile, broadband and networking solutions can offer firms the chance to succeed in a connected world, whatever the size of the organisation.

As business director, Regina Moran leads a team that services all of Vodafone's business customers across the Irish market. "Connectivity is at the core of everything we do - fundamentally, our purpose is to partner with customers to realise their connected ambition," she says.

A relative newcomer to the telecommunications sector, having joined Vodafone less than two years ago, Moran has seen sizable industry shifts during this relatively short timeframe. "Vodafone was the first operator to launch 5G, which is going to be an amazing game-changer in terms of technology and the Internet of Things as we see a whole new set of business models emerging," she says.

"5G brings ultra-fast speeds, but it's also about low latency and very high bandwidth, and this combination will allow firms to do things we probably haven't even fully dreamed of yet."

Vodafone has the infrastructure in place to make a huge difference to the connectivity landscape in Ireland over the coming years. The company offers integrated, next-generation fixed and mobile solutions in addition to cloud-based platforms. One example of this is One Net Business, a solution aiming to simplify lines of communication for firms in one intelligent cloud-based system, so people can work from anywhere, at any time. It basically acts as broadband backup. "If a small firm can't trade due to a drop in connectivity, that has a hugely negative impact," notes Moran.

She adds: "Our mobile network is hugely important to small firms across Ireland, and we have been independently certified as having the best network for voice, data and text. That 'always-on' connectivity is really important today."

#### A smart solution

Vodafone's desire is to start a national conversation between industry, Government and communities on how advancing smart working opportunities can benefit local economies, the environment and the wellbeing of employees and business owners.

Smart working is defined as the combined use of technology with flexibility and agility for employees to work from home, from a hub or using a hybrid model (part-home, part-office) enabled by connectivity.

According to SME research released by Vodafone Ireland in 2018 - The Future of Business in Ireland: A Conversation with SMEs - the majority of SME employees are in favour of remote, flexible or smart working practices but only 9% of SME

owners are fully embracing it. One in three (33%) employees sees it as top priority in their current role, 50% in a future job and 34% are likely or very likely to move job for it.

A first-of-its-kind economic report commissioned by Vodafone Ireland in 2019 and written by economist Jim Power shows that the creation of smart working in Ireland could prove transformative for businesses and local communities.

In this context, Moran believes there has been a deepening divide between our urban and rural economies. "A big conversation has come about through our work with the SFA, and others, which informed our smart working programme and reports," she explains.

"There are so many potential benefits to smart working, not only to small firms and rural communities, but also to urban communities that are getting saturated by infrastructure. Companies benefit from increased productivity as people spend less time travelling, but it also widens their talent pool considerably. Plus, employees are more likely to stay with the company; the flexibility means a lot to people".

**"This reliable connectivity is really important for small firms as they now have the ability to trade in countries across the world. What can be achieved is actually very powerful."**

#### Digital hubs

As part of Vodafone's national Gigabit Hub Initiative, the company provides free connectivity to 15 digital hubs, which are making significant contributions to the local economies and communities they operate in.

"These hubs are a place where small businesses congregate, and it's amazing to see ideation emerging and businesses flourishing outside the main cities.

Overall, it is stimulating local economies and breathing life back into rural towns," notes Moran.

"From a mental health perspective, there is the removal of isolation for remote workers, and there are also benefits for the environment from the reduction of carbon emissions that result from long commutes. Ireland has a real opportunity to make a difference. Obviously, you need the high-speed



Regina Moran, business director, Vodafone. Photo: Paul McCarthy

connectivity that Vodafone can provide, but it's the community dimension that I see as another key element in making this work."

One of the obstacles for small firms in entering new markets is limited access to high-speed connectivity, which can make it difficult to compete with bigger competitors and internationally. Vodafone's gigabit connectivity is fundamental in broadening the enterprise and export base of Irish firms.

"This reliable connectivity is really important for small firms as they now have the ability to trade in countries

across the world," says Moran. "What can be achieved is actually very powerful. One example is the art dealer, Morgan O'Driscoll. Based in Skibbereen and with access to gigabit connectivity, it can upload high quality images instantly to its website and sell art worldwide from West Cork."

*For more information about Vodafone's technology communications solutions for businesses, visit [www.vodafone.ie/business](http://www.vodafone.ie/business). Written by Colin White, this is an edited version of an article which first appeared in Better Business magazine.*



Damien Lynch, co-founder, Etag Fixings

## Fixed benefits

A willingness to evolve to meet ever-changing customer needs has positioned specialist building supplies company Etags Fixings well for success

**E**tags Fixings was founded by Paul Bonner and Damien Lynch in Ashbourne, Co Meath in 2004. Bonner had a background in fixings, while Lynch had worked as a sales negotiator for estate agent Hamilton Osborne King before going out on his own in 2003.

"I always wanted to work for myself," Lynch says. "I decided to set up a small distribution company that specialised in on-site consumables, hand-powered tools and safety equipment."

The product line grew and when Bonner came on board a year or so later, the pair added fixings to the mix and Etag Fixings was born. "Nobody else really had that so it gave us a unique product offering for the marketplace," Lynch says.

The company's range today includes products in the ceiling and drywall, exterior insulation systems, mechanical and electrical, masonry, concrete and formwork, signage and carpentry categories.

Clients include most of the main building contractors in the UK and Ireland, some of whom are now working in Germany, the Benelux countries and Scandinavia, Lynch says. "We follow our customers and a lot of them are now working in continental Europe on critical infrastructure projects. Where they go, we go."

Total headcount is now just over 80, with 40 based in Ireland and the remainder in the UK. The company opened a UK office in Bermondsey, London in 2011 and has since moved to larger premises in Dagenham. The Irish business, meanwhile, relocated into a 30,000 sq ft premises in Cloness, Co Dublin in 2018.

Apart from Lynch and Bonner, the business partners include general manager Shirley Bowman who joined in 2005 and Shaun Bonner, who started as a sales rep

in 2010 and is now sales director.

"Over the past two years, Shirley and Shaun, in particular, have been interested in directing the company going forward," Lynch says. "Shirley has been involved in a rebrand process for Etag, which is mainly a rebrand of the understanding of what we're about, both internally and externally."

The company is also investing in a new e-commerce platform for the UK and Ireland, as well as a fully automated barcoding and stock control system.

In addition, the company has recently set up a number of internal committees – including social, charity and environmental groups – to give staff a greater say in decision making within the organisation. "With the environmental committee, for example, we're looking at how we can be more responsible and greener in our practices," Lynch explains.

He is anticipating strong growth this year, particularly in Ireland. "We're looking at the mechanical and electrical market as a big area for growth, along with general housebuilding, fitouts and dry lining."

**"We follow our customers and a lot of them are now working in continental Europe on critical infrastructure projects."**

## Finding talent

A keen understanding of the requirements of client companies and candidates is at the heart of HERO Recruitment's offering

**P**ersonal experience of looking for work after returning to Ireland from the US and New Zealand was the catalyst for Michelle Kilcar and Roisin McNamara to set up their own recruitment agency in 1997.

"I had held a successful career abroad with a good company and company car," says McNamara. "After meeting with local recruitment agencies in Ireland, I lost my confidence. They didn't take time to understand my talents. I wanted to change that experience for other people looking at a career move and HERO Recruitment was born."

The company, which was known as CCP until 2016, initially serviced the Galway market and now recruits for companies all over Ireland. Internationally, it has provided talent to Germany and Canada. With a staff of 20 people, it currently has offices in Galway and Cork.

Stryker, Hollister, Medtronic, Integer, Thermo King, BD Medical, Coca-Cola and Ingersoll Rand.

"The company's focus is to 'find the best in people'," says McNamara. "We love to work with people throughout their entire career, not just a once-off placement. We are proud that many of our valued candidates become our clients on this journey."

Partnering with clients to set goals around talent acquisition challenges and delivering bespoke recruitment marketing campaign strategies are key selling points for the company, according to Kilcar.

"We really believe that in 2019 in particular we stretched the boundaries of recruitment as we know it," she says. "We developed and implemented advanced, visionary and groundbreaking strategies for our clients' businesses."

One notable initiative last year was a collaboration with Boston Scientific targeting Irish engineers who had moved to Australia during the recession. "We think outside the box and if the people are not available in Ireland for our clients then we reach across the world to find them," notes Kilcar.

One new offering is employer branding, whereby HERO works closely with clients to position them as the employer of choice with jobseekers. "This is a powerful talent attraction tool that will be embraced by all businesses in the future," McNamara says.

Having doubled in size over the past four years, the company is planning to open a fully operational office in Dublin over the next two years. Also on the cards is further expansion of its contracting division into Europe, with a new team member recently hired to spearhead this growth.

**"We love to work with people throughout their entire career, not just a once-off placement."**

Customers are predominantly medical device and pharmaceutical companies searching for technical talent within the engineering sectors of automation, validation, R&D, quality and manufacturing operations. HERO's second key area of expertise is information technology. Clients include Boston Scientific



Michelle Kilcar and Roisin McNamara, co-founders, HERO Recruitment

## SERVICES

# Fueling demand

A refueling service set up to cut transport companies' operational costs is also helping reduce their environmental impact



Adeola Ogunsina, founder and chief operations officer, On-Site Refueling

**B**ased on the simple idea of bringing fuel to vehicles rather than the other way around, On-Site Refueling was set up in 2008 to service fleet transport companies.

With truck refueling taking an average of 20 minutes, a company with a fleet of 30 vehicles being refueled daily could lose 2,600 hours – or over 100 days – in productivity each year. On-Site Refueling addresses the problem by providing a mobile service that fuels vehicles outside normal working hours.

According to the company's founder and chief operations officer, Adeola Ogunsina, the reduction in operational costs has meant huge savings for customers. "Clients can focus on their core business as we effectively cover all of their site locations with reliable service," he says.

The company now employs 14 people and has a fleet of over 10 mobile tanker trucks, serving clients throughout Leinster and growing nationwide.

The range of services and target markets has also grown. "Today, using the basic concept the business was founded upon, we have spread our ISO-certified services to include AdBlue, construction site and airport equipment refueling," says Ogunsina. AdBlue is a fluid injected into diesel exhaust systems to reduce nitrogen oxide emissions.

Saving money and increasing productivity have always been big selling points, but cutting greenhouse gases and reducing environmental risks have also become key priorities for managers whose businesses rely on fuel, he adds.

"There is more awareness now than ever

before of the effects of greenhouse gases. And more and more companies want to be part of the solution, leading to a dramatic surge in demand for our refueling services."

The On-Site Refueling service also reduces the number and severity of spills, says Ogunsina, as the company's fleet-fueling drivers are professionally trained and experienced in handling every type of product. "On-Site Refueling is the only company specialised in handheld nozzle refueling in Ireland, guaranteeing environmentally safe refueling."

The company continues to innovate to meet customer needs. For example, when AdBlue became a requirement for trucks, On-Site Refueling designed a special refueling tanker. "We created a combination AdBlue and diesel fueling system that refuels in five minutes instead of 25," says Ogunsina.

"We have built mini-tankers capable of manoeuvring around tight sites, through to 18 tonnes, capable of operating in the most remote and demanding sites in the country. So now AdBlue is applied cleanly and quickly at the same time as refueling, saving time and resources whilst keeping clients' crews and plant running seamlessly."

And the company continues to invest in its state-of-the-art, proprietary end-to-end fuel system and technology. "Our fuel delivery systems allow On-Site Refueling to capture the information needed to understand consumption, refueling planning and billing or the compliance evidence our customers need to operate their sites."

**"Clients can focus on their core business as we effectively cover all of their site locations with reliable service."**

[www.on-siterefueling.com](http://www.on-siterefueling.com)



Caroline Thompson, founder, Riverside Spa

# No sleeping beauty

Started as a single salon 10 years ago, Riverside Spa now comprises three spa locations, a distribution business and hair and beauty academy

**W**ith a passion and flair for everything hair and beauty, Caroline Thompson was always headed for a career in this area. After gaining the necessary training and experience following her Leaving Cert, she opened her first salon in Stradone, Co Cavan in 2009 at the age of 21.

Coinciding with the height of the recession, business was "extremely tough" for the first year. "I had been working in a local pub throughout college, so I kept this job on for the first year of business for the salon," Thompson says.

As the salon became more established, she began to move into advanced beauty treatments and invested in two non-surgical machines. "These two machines were the turning point for my business and this is where I could see the potential for Riverside Spa expanding in the future," she says.

The sudden death of her mother in 2012 was an added motivation to grow the business. "I wanted my mum to be proud of me," she says. "This is where my journey really took off and I set a goal for myself to push Riverside to be famous throughout Ireland and the largest spa chain in the country."

Since then, she has opened two further spa locations, at Cootehill and Kells, and plans to open a fourth, in Oldcastle, Co Meath, in 2021.

Another strand to the business, EllaBella Beauty Distribution, which opened in 2018, is a unique asset to the Riverside chain, she says. "I saw a gap in the market for non-surgical technology and personally worked with a manufacturing company to develop a range of non-surgical machines that suited my clientele."

"I wanted to bring these high-end advanced treatments to rural Ireland at an affordable price for both salon owners and the client. I have seen first-hand how lucrative this revenue stream has been to Riverside and I wanted to share this with other salon owners."

The company now sells six machines and is planning further growth in this area. Thompson also sees great opportunity to expand this side of the business to Northern Ireland, the UK and throughout Europe. "I know that EllaBella can be a multi-million euro company with the right vision, drive, enthusiasm and the correct team behind me," she notes.

Developing in yet another direction, Thompson last year opened the Riverside Academy of Hair & Beauty, a private training college adjoining the Stradone spa. This, she says, already has numerous students.

"The beauty industry has huge potential for growth; treatments and technologies are constantly advancing which keeps our career exciting."

**"I wanted to bring these high-end advanced treatments to rural Ireland at an affordable price for both salon owners and the client."**

[www.riversidespa.ie](http://www.riversidespa.ie)



Pat Desmond, managing director, SimoTech

## Smooth process

Automation and IT engineering company SimoTech is making it easier for world-class pharma companies to set up in Ireland

Its projects and technologies may be highly complex, but SimoTech's purpose is simple: to support clients in bringing life-changing medicines to patients across the globe quickly, cost effectively and safely.

The Cork-based company does this by providing automation and IT engineering services to large pharmaceutical and life sciences companies. Its team of engineers, technical consultants, project managers and compliance specialists supports the pharmaceutical manufacturing process with technical expertise from initial design concept stage through construction to round-the-clock operations support.

The company was set up in 2011 by Pat Desmond, who had spent the previous 25 years leading teams in delivering fast-track projects and implementing the latest automation and technologies in the process industry.

He describes SimoTech as a trusted advisor to pharma and life sciences companies when building and operating highly complex manufacturing facilities. "We're offering a level of expertise that will get them up and running very quickly, effectively and efficiently," he says. "And we have that knowledge because we've worked with all the major global multinationals. We know exactly what they're looking for and how to get the job done."

Senior members of the SimoTech team have been involved in providing the technical vision for many large multinational pharma companies locating in Ireland, he adds. "We are proud to have provided significant input to the automation and IT solutions capital investment now implemented in such plants as Amgen, Bristol Myers Squibb, Takeda and WuXi Biologics over the past five years.

"These clients, along with our other clients such as Abbvie, Eli Lilly, Ipsen and Pfizer have/are investing a total of over €3bn in capital investment, of which over €300m is automation and IT solutions."

SimoTech, which has grown from five to 38 employees over the past five years, is planning further rapid expansion of the business in Ireland. "We've doubled our turnover and resources in the past 12 months," says Desmond. "Our plan is to double the size of the business in Ireland again in the next three years."

While the vast majority of the business so far has been in Ireland, the company will also be expanding its horizons. "We built the company at a pace that will support our reputation. We're now at a scale that will allow us to support our clients globally," he says.

In December 2019, SimoTech was awarded an Enterprise Ireland Market Discovery Grant to enable its expansion into the US market. "Having attended an international pharma conference in Las Vegas last October and seen the interest for SimoTech, we are confident of replicating our success globally," says Desmond.

**"We built the company at a pace that will support our reputation. We're now at a scale that will allow us to support our clients globally."**

[www.simotechnology.com](http://www.simotechnology.com)

## Fit for purpose

Spotting a gap in the market for an end-to-end service for office fitouts, T&I Fitouts has dramatically grown its turnover by focusing on project size

Working as a surveyor for a large building contractor in 2010, David Merriman noticed that nobody in the industry was offering an end-to-end service for office fitouts.

"Back then, clients would typically have had six or seven entities delivering their fitout projects," he says. "I thought we could build a better way of doing it."

And so T&I Fitouts was set up later that year to provide a specialist fitout and refurbishment service, initially to the commercial sector and, since 2018, also to hospitality and retail clients.

The company takes care of all project elements, including demolition of existing interiors, design, joinery, mechanical and electrical, floor, wall and ceiling finishes, furniture and feature decoration.

**"Now, customers have a single point of contact and a single point of risk, which makes their life incredibly easy."**

"Now, customers have a single point of contact and a single point of risk, which makes their life incredibly easy," says Merriman.

One of the company's first clients was eBay, which required a small fitout at the time. After successfully completing that job, the team won a contract from LinkedIn. And from there, it just spiralled

– so much so that the company's turnover increased from €186,000 in its first year to just over €40m in 2019.

T&I has grown alongside many of its customers. For example, having completed a very small fitout for Airbnb when it first arrived in Dublin, T&I recently finished a 37,000 sq ft project at the company's new Hanover Quay headquarters.

Other recent clients have included Slack, Iconic Offices, Avoca Ballsbridge, StayCity, Dropbox, Green Reit and the Comer Group.

Merriman says T&I has a personal, hands-on approach to each job and still takes on just four projects at a time. "We've grown the turnover through the size of the projects rather than the quantity. We want to be giving a really good quality service to our clients rather than charging through projects.

"That's key to our business. We don't want to want to take over the world and turn into a huge company."

The team is made up of 24 people, primarily project managers, surveyors, mechanical and electrical coordinators and engineers. "We're a management contractor so we subcontract the packages and generally use the same subcontractors again and again. They've grown with us and are really an extension of T&I," Merriman explains.

While the company hasn't yet looked for work outside Ireland, Merriman sees this as probably being its next move. "Many clients have asked us to go overseas with them but we've resisted it," he says. "We still felt we needed to get into a comfortable position in the Irish industry first. The next step is to look abroad and maybe follow our clients to London and Paris and other European capitals."



Fitout at Avoca Ballsbridge completed by T&I Fitouts

[www.tandi.ie](http://www.tandi.ie)



The One4All Digital Gift Card

## Jobseeker preference

One4All's research into the types of businesses that Irish employees would prefer to work for found that SMEs and start-ups are the most popular businesses for prospective employees. Over 39% of the 1,000 people asked said that they would like to work for an SME and a further 29% of those asked said that they'd like to work for a start-up.

So what does this research mean for employers? Well, an increasing number of millennials could be looking for employment in your company! 46% of the 18-24 year old audience said an SME would be their ideal workplace.

The respondents say they would be more motivated to work hard for a small business, as SMEs have more passion amongst their workforce, stating that they would be more motivated to work longer hours. Employees enjoy a good office culture and the intimate, almost family-like atmosphere that comes with a small business. This means they will tend to have a better work ethic and more loyalty to the company.

# MEANINGFUL REWARD

Terry Spence, employee engagement expert at One4all Rewards, outlines ways in which SMEs can make the most of employee recognition and engagement

Largely due to the state of the Irish jobs market, employee recognition and engagement are more important than ever nowadays. We are close to full employment, and that means that businesses are not only striving to make their workplaces more desirable for new recruits but also more flexible and appealing to existing employees.

Larger firms have the scope to offer 'buzzword' benefits - flexible hours, work from home, unlimited annual leave - but SMEs have their own unique selling points that they can also draw on. Smaller working environments mean more opportunity to upskill and learn

**“SMEs need to communicate with staff to find out what they want, and not be afraid to mix it up and change things when they're not working.”**

about new areas, a more direct line to senior leadership and other benefits that deliver real empowerment and autonomy to the employee. Such benefits are quite literally priceless and often feature highly on candidates' lists when looking for a new job.

Tangible, genuine and public displays of appreciation continue to be a winner for small firms. The value of a sincere 'thank you' has not diminished, despite advances in flashy rewards platforms and points systems. That said, there are new ways to deliver that 'thank you' - company intranet platforms have advanced now to the point where a message of appreciation can be sent both directly to a person and simultaneously broadcast throughout the business. This ensures that an individual's boss and their peers hear about it when they go above and beyond in the organisation.

### Element of surprise

Similarly, spontaneous rewards delivered through digital gifting (like the One4all Digital Gift Card) add an element of surprise and delight to the work day. The personalisation available with a digital gift further bolsters the value of the reward, making sure that the recipient knows that gift was made for them.

SMEs should lean into their unique selling points when looking to attract

and retain talent. That means opening up to their employees and keeping their rewards and recognition flexible. They need to communicate with staff to find out what they want, and not be afraid to mix it up and change things when they're not working.

Most SMEs welcome employee feedback on processes, products and other areas. Soliciting that feedback helps



to engage employees and can also provide invaluable data to work with and improve the business. Managers should also make sure to extract maximum value from their rewards by communicating them publicly and following up later on.

One4all recommends and supports a holistic approach to employee recognition and engagement, acknowledging that no single reward, policy or initiative will be enough to create a great place to work. We work closely with the SFA, Executive Institute, Great Places to Work and other organisations to regularly review the latest in employee engagement trends and promote sustainable and effective initiatives in this space.

We strive to innovate the rewards sector while acknowledging that some things never change - that's why we developed the One4all Digital Gift Card, to allow businesses to say thank you, like they've always done, but now with added security, flexibility and speed.



Paul Gill and son Jamie Gill, owner, Gill Opticians

## An eye for business

As a small independent operator, Gill Opticians has the ability to be agile and take on new and exciting brands and innovative technologies

**J**amie Gill inherited an ingrained love of optometry from his father Paul and in 2018 fulfilled his ambition of taking the reins of the family business by buying Gill Opticians and remodelling the interior. It has been in Dalkey, Co Dublin since 1977.

“One of my earliest memories is staring into one of the measuring machines at green glowing numbers wondering how my father made people see better,” says Gill. His father, who was also his mentor, was always pushing the envelope in the world of optics, taking pride in the interesting glasses range that he stocked.

Currently with a staff of five, the business is going from strength to strength, offering a limited edition eyewear which is difficult to source. Gill regularly attends trade shows sourcing only the finest selection of eyewear brands from around the globe.

A minimum of 45 minutes per eye examination is one of the things that make this company special. “It is a personable journey from the time you enter the practice until the time you leave with highly qualified optometrists and friendly, helpful staff,” says Gill.

In 2018 Gill decided to become an exclusive Carl Zeiss Lens partner. He invested in the only ‘1 Terminal 2’ facial measuring device in Ireland which revolutionised the spectacle lens offering. The business now offers individualised lenses giving unrivalled clarity and field of vision. The portfolio includes lenses for night driving, office, computer and golf use with 100% UV block on all lenses.

“When a lens technology comes to the market it invariably was created by Carl Zeiss. This means we are always one step ahead of the rest with our offering.”

notes Gill. “Continually reinvesting in eye equipment is paramount for ensuring that clients are receiving the greatest eye care in the industry.”

An example of this is Optical Coherence Tomography which has been a standard part of the business since 2014. Fitting only disposable contact lenses unless a prescription cannot be met in a daily material (which costs less than a cup of coffee per day) has resulted in a near zero percent case of eye infection due to contact lenses.

The business is currently fitting children with innovative contact lenses which can slow down the progression of myopia and is in talks with a company which makes a device that tracks the user’s eye movements and focal distances. “This device will give us real-life information to aid in spectacle selection, resulting in a lens truly bespoke to the wearer’s habits and working environment,” says Gill.

**“When a lens technology comes to the market it invariably was created by Carl Zeiss. This means we are always one step ahead of the rest with our offering.”**

[www.gillopticians.ie](http://www.gillopticians.ie)

## Growth path

Dublin-based software company Child Paths is helping parents play a more active part in their children’s development

**S**eeing the potential benefits of becoming more involved in his young daughter’s learning and development journey, Ciaran Flynn created the Child Paths platform, initially targeting early years education.

His daughter Katie moving to a new creche in 2012 sparked the idea. “I thought it would be just a babysitting service,” he admits. “But we started to get more information around her welfare and development and could see that it was so much more. And, I saw that there was a lot more parents could be doing to help with their child’s learning and development.”

Flynn went about creating an app that allows childcare practitioners to capture, store and communicate information to parents in a quicker and smarter way in real time, eliminating all the paperwork.

The app includes tools that identify all the key milestones children should be reaching at various ages and automatically creates an action plan if they are not. This element was developed in collaboration with The Adult and Child Therapy Centre, while the benchmarks were validated with preschools around the country.

The platform also tracks group updates for attendance, food, medicine, activities, nappy changing, sleeping and communication. From the parents’ point of view, the platform – which is accessed via tablet – allows them to monitor, track and analyse all the data and photos which are stored chronologically.

“Childcare software is not new,” says Flynn. “What is new about our app is that it’s a supportive system to educate parents where most other software solutions are administration tools.”

Based in Dublin City University’s

Invent centre, the Child Paths team of five people works closely with several partners, including the Crann Support Group and the National Childhood Network. Cork College of Commerce is now teaching Child Paths as part of its early years curriculum to teachers and Ulster University plans to pilot the system in 90 primary schools in Northern Ireland this year.

**“What is new about our app is that it’s a supportive system to educate parents where most other software solutions are administration tools.”**

Close to 30,000 parents and teachers are now using the platform in Ireland and the UK and the company is very much in growth mode, according to Flynn. “We are recruiting four new sales staff and are looking for investment to help us move into the European and US markets.

“We’re a market leader with a small team and without investment so far. We charge a premium price and deliver a quality product and customer service. And we’re different to our competitors because we’re bringing this from early years into primary schools and then into secondary.”



Ciaran Flynn and his daughter Katie

[www.childpaths.ie](http://www.childpaths.ie)





Michael Flynn, owner, Mattress Mick's and his daughter Marina

## Put to bed

Clever and consistent branding has a lot to do with the popularity of Mattress Mick's, which is expanding outside Dublin using a licensing model

It is now an iconic brand, but Mattress Mick's came from a very simple idea. "My name is Mick and I wanted to sell mattresses. There was no dedicated bed store in Dublin," explains founder Michael Flynn. "I had a choice – to use a cartoon, an actor or me and I was the cheapest!"

A friend took the photo of Flynn with his hand out which is the core element of all the branding since the business started in 2010. It started with two outlets, in Coolock Industrial Estate and Pearse Street in Dublin, which now employ a total of 15 people.

**"The mattress industry is evolving at a massive rate and I visit factories and keep staff up to date."**

With no spare cash in the beginning, Flynn got posters made and embarked on a guerrilla marketing campaign, putting them all over Dublin. "I put them on every empty shop front and every traffic light. I got a lot of fines and never paid any of them. When I went to court I pleaded my case and the judges struck it out and even bought mattresses from me!"

This ability to draw attention to himself has been a major asset. Flynn got his first TV break on Katherine Lynch's show Wagon's Den. He was then offered a part in a Meteor Christmas ad, and actor Stephen Fry tweeted about him after seeing one of his posters. "This brought my profile to another level. RTE have also been very good to me. Whenever there is a query about beds I'll be asked for a comment," says Flynn, who has even put out a rap video on Youtube called 'Back with a Bang'.

Always on top of the latest trends in mattresses, such as memory foam, Flynn makes a point of spending a lot of time in his stores interacting with customers. "The mattress industry is evolving at a massive rate and I visit factories and keep staff up to date. We try to sell as much Irish-made products as possible."

Flynn registered Mattress Mick's as a trademark four years ago and there are two licenses operating from Naas Road, Dublin and in Drogheda Co Louth. "This is how the business will grow going forward. We are in negotiations with interested parties in Cork and Limerick," he explains.

While Mattress Mick's is doing well now, Flynn never forgets what led him to start the business. In 2009, he had to make the tough decision to liquidate a furniture business that he had been running for many years. He has given talks in schools and in Wheatfield Prison sharing what he has learned. "I always tell people not to be afraid to fail. It's not a stigma," he says.

[www.mattressmicks.ie](http://www.mattressmicks.ie)

## All aboard

Catering for up to 70 passengers per sailing, Scattery Island Tours has carved out a space for itself in the crowded tourism market with its unique offering

Scattery Island Tours is a unique travel experience set in the majestic uninhabited part of the Wild Atlantic Way. With sailings from Kilrush, Co Clare, this passenger trip starts with the tranquillity of the Shannon before arriving on the unspoilt Scattery Island.

Once on the island, a friendly and informative OPW tour guide brings visitors on a historical walking feast, including five churches, a cathedral, round tower, Napoleonic artillery battery and a lighthouse located at the far end of the island. A packed picnic from locally sourced suppliers is also included in the tour.

The company was the brainchild of Irene Hamilton. Having worked in print media for over 20 years, she took some time out to complete her studies. During this time there was serendipitous moment when an ad appeared on the local paper to run a ferry service to

Scattery Island.

Her father was a river pilot and they spent many summers when she was a child fishing on the Shannon and going for picnics and tours of the island. She wanted to give other people the same magical experience she'd had. Taking a leap of faith, Hamilton got a 12-passenger boat and the company was launched in 2017.

She now runs the business with her sister-in-law Martina McKeynon and two other team members. "We had a really good first season and people loved the peace and tranquillity of the island. It is encased in a capsule of history," says Hamilton.

Since then it has grown to a 70-passenger catamaran and tours will be running this year from April to the end of October. Aside from the core tourist market, special interest groups such as those engaged in meditation and wellness have come on board because the island is "a space of serenity", notes Hamilton. Maintaining the groups at 25 ensures that everyone has a personal experience.

"We are launching a new sister company this summer called Siannan Luxury Cruises, catering for groups of up to 10. It will offer private cruises on the Shannon Estuary showcasing the beauty of the West Coast," notes Hamilton. "It is ideal for private parties, corporate or wedding parties. We are diversifying a little while still promoting the same area."

The island is an area of conservation and the company is very aware of respecting this. The cooler bag that contains the picnic lunch on the tour is brought back on board at the end of the trip so no trace of refuse is left behind.

**"We had a really good first season and people loved the peace and tranquillity of the island. It is encased in a capsule of history."**



Martina McKeynon and Irene Hamilton of Scattery Island Tours

[www.scatteryislandtours.com](http://www.scatteryislandtours.com)

# PERSONAL SERVICE

Combining face-to-face advice and engagement with enhanced digital services is at the heart of Permanent TSB's refreshed approach to supporting SMEs as they grow and develop

**P**ermanent TSB's Business Banking team focuses on identifying the most suitable lending products to satisfy a customer's financial needs, and guides customers through the application process to increase the chances of a successful outcome.

With this focus, and a more responsive, decisive approach to business lending, Permanent TSB offers the SME business community a superior banking alternative, according to retail banking director Patrick Farrell.

"As one of Ireland's oldest financial service institutions, serving communities across Ireland for over 200 years, we take pride in our reputation for personal service. In particular, we focus on the quality of relationships with our customers, and in developing the relationships smaller businesses need that they don't get elsewhere," he says.

"Face-to-face engagement has never been more important, especially on a customer's business premises where possible. It is an integral part of how Permanent TSB supports the SME business community."

Supporting small businesses and solo entrepreneurs has always been at the core of the bank's business, he adds. "We offer an unrivalled personal service and have built long-standing relationships with our customers. We are committed to supporting our customers throughout all stages of their business and providing them with what they need to be successful."

#### Acting as advisers

Permanent TSB's refreshed SME approach is focused on partnering with small businesses, not just in terms of supporting their banking needs, but through acting as advisers to help them to launch and grow.

By way of example, in September 2019, Permanent TSB supported SME customers Tom Gannon and Niall McGrath in the launch of their newest business venture, Cali Cali Foods. Backed by Permanent TSB, Cali Cali Foods took

**"We focus on the quality of relationships with our customers, and in developing the relationships smaller businesses need that they don't get elsewhere."**



The Cali Cali Foods pop-up at Permanent TSB Grafton Street



over the Permanent TSB flagship Grafton Street branch in Dublin. This allowed them to showcase their new range of guilt-free, real food that delivers authentic flavours of California street food with 'Californian' benefits. Permanent TSB will continue to support Gannon and McGrath as their business grows and evolves.

This type of engagement is just one example of how Permanent TSB differs from its competitors and offers a truly personal service for business customers.

In recent years, the bank has been investing in modernising its branches on a continuous basis to make them

nicer places to visit and create a bright environment combining technology with well-trained advisers. Achieving the ideal blend between people and technology has been a key aspect of the upgrading of Permanent TSB's branch network.

Most recently, the Grafton Street Branch was reopened, a new digitally focused branch in Omni opened its doors, and renovations have been carried out across the network, including: Tallaght in Dublin; Castlebar in Co Mayo; and Patrick Street in Cork City. The concept of digital advisers has also been tested in some branches. Digital video booths have been installed where customers can access

specialist advisers via video link.

Permanent TSB is also investing in its mobile teams to support SME customers at a time and place that suits them. Over the next four years, the bank will grow its mobile workforce from 100 to 150 to support small businesses and solo entrepreneurs.

#### Digital transformation

The Permanent TSB personal service is complemented by enhanced digital services, as customers want the ability to interact with their bank at a time and place of their choosing. Permanent TSB has embarked on a journey to deliver a digital transformation programme, underpinned by a safe and resilient infrastructure.

With an investment of €100m in digital transformation over four years, significant progress has already been made in enhancing Permanent TSB's digital offering. This has included the introduction of an in-app document uploader, in-app term lending and in-app credit card application; the rollout of the online booking system for mortgage advisors and launch of the online travel note. Permanent TSB will continue to build on this momentum with further digital rollouts planned for the year ahead.

When it comes to serving the small and micro business community, technology is an important aspect of Permanent TSB's new SME strategy. Watch this space as there are some exciting new developments coming in 2020.



**Declan Crosse, technical director, Woodco Renewable Energy**

## Waste not want not

With several award-winning innovations under its belt, Woodco Renewable Energy has come up with a transformative product that converts organic waste into a valuable substance

Innovation has been at the forefront of Woodco Renewable Energy since it was first founded in the early 1970s by Gerard Crosse (Snr) who developed the first back boiler. The first wood pellet boiler in Ireland was developed in 2004 while the company's Biogenic Processor won both Green Product of the Year and Best Agri-Environmental Initiative at the Enterprise Ireland Innovation Arena at The Ploughing Championships 2019.

Initially called Gerard Crosse and Sons, the company was originally involved in the manufacture of oil tanks and agricultural equipment. It rebranded to Woodco Energy in 2015 to reflect its focus on combined heat and power systems. Currently employing 16 staff at its base in Donaskeigh, Co Tipperary, the company has become known as the 'Biomass Boiler People'.

Declan Crosse, technical director at Woodco, describes the workings of its latest innovation: "The Biogenic Processor takes any type of organic waste such as agricultural residue, food waste,

**"The Biogenic Processor takes any type of organic waste such as agricultural residue, food waste, sludge from waste water treatment plants and forestry residue."**

sludge from waste water treatment plants and forestry residue. Through a process called pyrolysis it turns these materials into highly valuable carbon-rich biochar or charcoal in a process that is both carbon negative and energy positive."

The product will be transformative for sectors such as agriculture which are struggling to keep emissions in check while increasing output. A small-scale product such as this which is portable for deployment on individual farms or businesses does not currently exist.

A further application for Woodco's Biogenic Processor is as a waste treatment solution as part of the sanitation chain in developing countries where no sanitation treatment solution exists. The company is currently working with the European Space Agency to explore where smart sanitation solutions can be deployed in remote areas in India and South Africa. These can be improved by using Satellite data and technology such as SatCom and Earth Observation.

The company is also developing products to deal with huge volumes of waste going to landfill and recovering resources from this waste to make useful and valuable by-products.

In addition, it uses the latest in artificial intelligence technology, as Crosse explains: "Woodco is developing this technology to be used in agriculture to explore areas where increased yield can be achieved by altering the inputs and growing environments of certain crops. By processing the waste from agriculture the impact of the growing process on the environment can be ascertained."

Woodco has a consistent track record of innovation including picking up the World Dairy Innovation Award in 2015 and 2017 for Best Environmental Sustainability Initiative for a carbon neutral hot water heater.

## Move to inspire

Zevo Health has come a long way in a relatively short space of time, tapping into the growing awareness of the tangible benefits of workplace wellbeing programmes

In 2017 founder and CEO of Zevo Health Richard Murphy initially accepted an offer of €60,000 for a 25% share in his company on the RTÉ TV show 'Dragon's Den', but later changed his mind. The decision was to prove a shrewd one as the company continues to grow and discover new markets with a client list that includes Google and Circle K.

Currently employing 28 people, Murphy describes Zevo as a "creative, fun, collaborative and passionate" place to work. The company kicked off 2020 by working with a company in the US which will help it to further expand outside Ireland and into different sectors and industries.

Murphy knew he wanted to develop a company and brand that helped people to become healthier and happier both inside and outside the workplace. He believes Zevo Health has become an expert in the field of workplace wellness due to its dedicated team. "We provide clients with the most up-to-date, scientific approach to wellness to ensure programmes are created that have the most positive long-term impact," he says.

In setting up the business, Murphy was of the opinion the biggest and most effective impact on an individual's wellbeing can be achieved in the workplace. He explains that the company employs three core pillars which cover every aspect of wellbeing.

"The 'Move' pillar tracks physical movement and allows the individual to set daily goals. The 'Nourish' pillar gives users access to over one million recipes which can be tailored to suit diet and lifestyle needs. Lastly, the 'Inspire' pillar covers mindfulness and meditations with a wide range of topics from sleep to focusing in the workplace."

Zevo Health's technology platform Zevo Connect allows its own teams and partner organisations to get a baseline employee engagement score in five areas: Wellbeing, Communication Satisfaction, Job Satisfaction, Trust and Individual Work Performance. In addition, Zevo Connect provides managers with bespoke training to help them respond to employee feedback and increase engagement in their teams.

The application used by the company is psychology-based and is backed by its expert health coaches to ensure a positive and lasting effect on individuals. Every programme Zevo Health implements in a company is designed by its team of coaches. It conducts in-depth research to develop a programme that's suited to the needs of every organisation it works with. Murphy has found this method to be the most effective in terms of creating impactful positive changes.

Murphy believes wellbeing in the workplace is now fundamental: "Employee energy is the most limiting factor in the workplace, so when wellbeing is a priority this results in higher performing teams. Workplace wellbeing is here to stay".

**"We provide clients with the most up-to-date, scientific approach to wellness to ensure programmes are created that have the most positive long-term impact."**



**Richard Murphy, CEO, Zevo Health**



Finlay Dargan, COO, Simon Hillary, CTO, Pierce Dargan, CEO, Equine MediRecord

## Future-proofing equine health

Through personal experience, Equine MediRecord founder Pierce Dargan saw the need to eliminate paper in the area of equine welfare compliance

**E**quine MediRecord was founded in 2016 by Pierce Dargan, a third-generation racehorse owner and breeder. While working on the family farm he found completing equine welfare regulatory documents on paper was time consuming and also quite difficult, as regulations changed on a frequent basis.

Launching a simpler digital system in March 2018, the company now operates and is approved in Ireland, the UK and France with plans for further expansion. It employs four full-time and eight part-time staff.

This is the first application of its type globally to replace a paper-based system. A chance encounter with Simon Hillary, a schoolfriend of Dargan's who founded a company that worked with the Oireachtas digitising paper processes, resulted in the perfect technical partner. Hillary is now the company's chief technology officer.

Digitisation of horses' medical records leads to improved equine safety and welfare as records are available to trainers, assistants and vets who are able to see the full history of the horse at a touch of a button. Records can also be sent in advance of racing, competition or during a disease outbreak ensuring the

**"As of 1 January this year all purebred Arabian racehorses in the UK must use our system to record their regulatory medical information."**

welfare of the horse.

Dargan explains the diversity of the company's client base: "Our customers are those who are involved in equine care. For the moment that is mainly horse trainers, but we also have breeding, polo and equestrian customers. As of 1 January this year all purebred Arabian racehorses in the UK must use our system to record their regulatory medical information as it is written into the rules of racing governed by the Arabian Racing Organisation."

Based in The Curragh, Co Kildare, Equine MediRecord is the only company in the world to be approved by equine regulators to replace paper systems. It is helping to improve equine safety and welfare standards, which is of paramount importance to the whole equine industry. Its innovative system is also designed to ensure that all records are entered correctly. The company has a 100% compliance record to date with its customers in relation to equine welfare regulations.

Horses' medical histories are much more accessible and vaccination tracking and reminders lead to better disease protection, and, in the case of outbreak, quick analysis to discover which horses might be at risk.

Equine MediRecord is actively negotiating with multiple stakeholders in Europe, North America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Dargan has lofty ambitions for the future of the company: "Our aim is to be the global equine welfare regulatory aid for the sector. Each country is facing similar concerns and having a shared framework will allow for better equine research and welfare as well as easier movement of horses from one geography to another."

[www.equinemedirecord.com](http://www.equinemedirecord.com)

## Cream of the crop

The demand for high quality ice cream and frozen yogurt has seen Cavan-based Ice Cream Treats double its manufacturing storage capacity in recent times

**N**ow based in Killashandra, Co Cavan, Ice Cream Treats' ice creams and unique Yomega3 range of Greek-style frozen yogurts are available in Centra and Supervalu stores all over Ireland as well as much further afield in Dubai and Singapore.

The company has been in operation since March 2013 when it presented an idea to Musgrave Retail Partners to develop and create an in-store premium ice cream parlour concept. MOO'd parlours are now in 200 retail stores nationwide and take-home tubs in five flavours are available in Centra and Supervalu stores across the country.

Lisa Clarke, business development manager at Ice Cream Treats, explains the workings of its operation: "Innovation lies at the heart of Ice Cream Treats' business operations. We are constantly looking at ways to deliver new and exciting products that delight consumers and set us apart from the competition, both in terms of our authentic, delicious flavours and our unique product benefits."

A challenge for the company was to find a supplier to help it develop a product that would contain significant quantities of Omega 3 and Vitamin D. A prominent Irish expert in Omega 3 supplementation was duly sourced. This led to the unique PY03 process, enabling products to be developed that did not have any noticeable fish smell or taste, which seemed to be the main barriers to consumer consumption.

"By using PY03, our Yomega3 range of Greek-style frozen yogurts contain an adult's full recommended daily allowance of Omega 3 and Vitamin D in each 100g portion, providing all the health benefits

without compromising on great taste," Clarke explains. "We are Origin Green members and focus on quality to ensure we make the best products using locally sourced Irish milk and cream."

Yomega3 was first unveiled to much critical acclaim in March 2017 at the International Food and Drinks Exhibition in London and was subsequently named winner of the 'Best Ice Cream and Frozen Yogurt Award' at the World Dairy Innovation Awards 2017. As a result, great interest was generated from markets around the globe. Yomega3 was launched in Dubai and Singapore following a trade show in Dublin run by Bord Bia. The frozen yogurt product is available in three flavours: vanilla, raspberry and mango.

Currently employing nine people, Ice Cream Treats recently began to grow its business in the North of Ireland and UK foodservice sectors, supplying high quality ice cream made in small batches to over 400 restaurants for use on Christmas 2019 menus. Further listings are also due in 2020 on Spring/Summer menus.

**Ice Cream Treats is also shortlisted in the Food and Drink category**

**"We are constantly looking at ways to deliver new and exciting products that delight consumers and set us apart from the competition"**



Joanne Beirne, product developer, Kathryn Reilly, quality manager and Lisa Clarke, business developer, Ice Cream Treats

[www.yomega3.com](http://www.yomega3.com)

## INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR

# Beyond the farm gate

Already identified as a world leader in its field, Terra NutriTECH has developed a unique solution for adding minerals to water

**T**erra NutriTECH sprung into life back in 2013. Then called Terra Liquid Minerals, the company was constantly being asked about the best method for putting minerals into water for farm animals. Thus began an exhaustive project to find an option that was automated, precise and easy to use.

The result was the OPIS controller, an automated and accurate hardware/software solution developed to accurately dispense liquid supplements in water. Once on the farm, the controller (patent pending) ensures that minerals are inputted according to exact dosing requirements, animal numbers and farm parameters. This empowers farmers to provide for their animals in the most cost effective and efficient way. The system reduces labour and eliminates waste while giving complete control to the farmer using a custom-designed app.

The company employs 20 people and is

based in Athy, Co Kildare. Its co-founder and CEO Padraig Hennessy is keen to stress the importance of the company's innovative approach to business:

"Innovation is at the heart of everything we do at Terra NutriTECH. In the past 18 months we have developed a complete system from hardware, software, to the Internet of Things. The end result is the OPIS controller that can be installed anywhere in the world and gives us visibility inside the farm gate."

In 2018 Terra NutriTECH was crowned Overall Winner at the National Enterprise Awards and the Overall Winner of Google's Adopt a Start Up within a two-week period. Both awards showcased Terra NutriTECH as having world-leading technology, with Commissioner Phil Hogan opening its new head office in December 2018.

A number of new mineral blends as well as new technologies were launched



Brothers Tom and Padraig Hennessy, co-founders, Terra NutriTECH

last year, when the company was also accepted onto The Pearse Lyons Accelerator. This attracts applications from hundreds of leading agritech companies from around the world. Terra NutriTECH and eight other companies were selected as being world leaders in their field, and the company presented its innovations to more than 4,000 industry experts at the One conference in Kentucky in the US in May 2019.

A strong research and development focus is still evident within Terra NutriTECH, with research currently

being conducted in unpowered mineral dispensers for smaller farms and developing countries, methane and ammonia reduction supplements as well as a project that is looking at developing real-time sensing of mineral components within milk – a world's first.

Hennessy has great plans for Terra NutriTECH for the new decade: "2020 will be a year to expand internationally, with units already installed in Germany. We also aim to begin exporting to five additional markets within Europe and South America before the end of the year."

**"In the past 18 months we have developed a complete system from hardware, software, to the Internet of Things."**

[www.terranutritech.com](http://www.terranutritech.com)



# FOCUSING ON YOUR PEOPLE

Dave Flynn, executive director of Skillnet Ireland, highlights the vital need for small businesses to focus on the development of their people, as they grapple with uncertainties and seek to capitalise on opportunities

**S**mall businesses are the backbone of the Irish economy. The most recent Productivity Statement for Ireland, released by the National Competitiveness Council, noted that increased SME productivity and performance are vital to Ireland's future competitiveness and growth.

The success of any small business ultimately comes down to its people. A key question asked by all business owners and managers is whether they have the right people with the right skills to help them grow their business, manage cost, and increase their customer base.

Given the growing pervasiveness of change, a related question is whether owners of small firms themselves feel empowered to drive their business with an up-to-date knowledge of emerging technologies, innovation within their industry, regulatory changes, new standards and many other developments facing their business.

Most Irish businesses recognise the

value of learning and the importance of ensuring that the skills of their employees are regularly updated, but in practice, investing in the development of staff is not always prioritised. From our interactions with owner-managers, we can see that they are faced with a multitude of competing priorities on a daily basis. We also know that many are struggling to attract and retain talented people. That's where Skillnet Ireland can help.

Skillnet Ireland is a business support agency of the Government dedicated to the promotion and facilitation of workforce learning in Ireland. Our business is to ensure that your business has the skills it needs to thrive. Our approach is to connect you with other businesses, so that you can work together to address common talent challenges and implement solutions that would otherwise be difficult for a single business to achieve on its own.

The most important aspect of Skillnet



Dave Flynn, executive director, Skillnet Ireland

Ireland is that, each year, we enable the 17,000 companies that we support nationwide to set the skills agenda. They determine how, where and when

upskilling is delivered, in a way that suits the requirements of their business and their valued employees. Skillnet Ireland has engaged with the SFA and over 50 other industry bodies to design tailor-made learning solutions for enterprises across the economy.

Through our 70 Skillnet Learning Networks, Skillnet Ireland provides funding and other supports to groups of companies in the same industry sector (or region), making investment in the development of their workforce more straightforward, affordable and impactful.

The main message we want to give to owners of small firms is to engage with your Skillnet. This will give you the opportunity to grow and develop your business through your people – which at the end of the day are the most important asset of any business.

*More details about the work of Skillnet Ireland can be found at [www.skillnetireland.ie](http://www.skillnetireland.ie).*

# CREATING CLUSTERS

Eoghan Hanrahan, regional director for Dublin at Enterprise Ireland, highlights how it is supporting SMEs to collaborate, both with each other and as well as multinationals and academic institutions

It is imperative for Ireland that all companies from start-ups to SMEs to large companies are encouraged and supported, as they look to scale, innovate and internationalise.

The remit of Enterprise Ireland is to support manufacturing and internationally-traded services companies. Ireland is a country with a small, open economy and is very dependent on supporting companies as they look to operate in a very competitive global economy.

The markets companies have traditionally targeted and the types of customers they are trying to reach have changed. Enterprise Ireland recognises the importance of supporting companies to identify upcoming trends and needs.

Critical to the development of companies is the importance of innovation for new products and processes, improvements in competitiveness and resilience, and future-proofing the Irish business model to meet and overcome the challenges ahead.

At the core of Enterprise Ireland's 'Powering the Regions' strategy is the importance of facilitating balanced regional development. With small and medium enterprises making up over 99% of businesses in Ireland it is vital that this cohort of companies is capable and flexible to succeed on the global stage.

## Regional Enterprise Development Fund

Since 2017 Enterprise Ireland has been operating the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF) and to date 68 projects have been approved encompassing €100m in funding. These projects are aimed at building capacity for companies by fostering an environment for innovation, collaboration and exporting.

The power of the REDF is that it can support such a diverse range of projects, building on strengths that already exist in the regions, and helping to take them to the next level in terms of sustainable job creation.

With this in mind, a key aspect of the REDF has been to support a number of hubs across different areas such as start-ups, food, fintech and agritech. The aim is to leverage the capability of different companies and allow them to learn from others across a connected landscape. Funding co-working and second-site initiatives and promoting collaboration between regional hubs are central to this.

Small firms accessing the core knowhow and skillsets within each hub will build the overall capability in specific areas. It will mean that small firms will no longer be seen in isolation, but connected into the broader community in the space they are operating in. This represents a huge opportunity for Ireland.

The projects the REDF supports cover a variety of activities. For example,



**Eoghan Hanrahan, regional director, Dublin, Enterprise Ireland**

funding of €1.2m was recently awarded to Galway's PorterShed, one of the country's most successful innovation and enterprise hubs, to support its relocation to larger premises. Businesses located in the PorterShed already support more than 700 jobs and its overall project expansion will facilitate the creation of 800 more.

In January, Enterprise Ireland awarded more than €2m in REDF funding to develop The Collaboratory, an industry solutions hub in Blanchardstown, north-west Dublin. This workspace will support agile startups, scale-ups, SMEs and multinational companies within cyber

**“Critical to the development of companies is the importance of innovation for new products and processes, improvements in competitiveness and resilience, and future-proofing the Irish business model to meet and overcome the challenges ahead.”**

security, internet of things and artificial intelligence.

To date under the REDF, there have been three open calls for collaborative projects aimed at creating sustainable jobs in regional cities and towns, as well as rural areas. There were three times as many applications as successful projects. This shows the drive and goodwill that exists around the country for companies to come together, share their experiences and see how they can leverage capability as a group.

## Regional Technology Cluster Fund

Building further on this spirit of collaboration, Enterprise Ireland launched the €8.25m Regional Technology Cluster Fund (RTCF) last July. This is focused on small businesses engaging with multinationals and academic institutions in order to capitalise on particular strengths in different regions.

Last December, 12 projects led by academic institutions were selected through a rigorous evaluation process which was based on criteria including a project's significance for innovation. Dundalk Institute of Technology, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Tralee and Sligo Institute of Technology were among the successful applicants.

The projects selected will support and activate clustering in several sectors, including furniture manufacturing, marine, connected health, Industry 4.0, medtech and agritech. It's important to note that the RTCF process has shown so far that different sectors have been identified as having the potential to be a viable cluster in different regions, for example, marine in Donegal, construction in Dublin and connected health in Dundalk.

With the right leadership and vision, collaborative projects such as those supported under the REDF and the RTCF will ultimately mean more innovation and greater capacity among SMEs to export and achieve their global ambition.

## The extra mile

Customisation is key to Adams & Butler, which pulls out all the stops for clients in Ireland and internationally when arranging memorable trips to destinations around the world

**W**hether it is staying with a tribe in Africa or going on a 'ski safari' in the South Tyrol, a holiday arranged through Adams & Butler means a personalised, authentic experience for mid- to high-end clients. "With us, you don't just see and do, you feel and are engaged," says Siobhán Byrne Learat, who established the company in 2002.

In the early days, Adams & Butler focused on providing bespoke holidays in Ireland and the UK. This has expanded to destinations worldwide and the company is now a specialist in Africa, Australia, the Americas and high-end cruises.

Being the only Irish member of the prestigious Virtuoso travel consortia network has been central to Adams & Butler's success in Ireland and internationally. "We can offer cruises at the same price as other agents or travel sites, but we can arrange US\$500 onboard credit because Virtuoso has negotiated this with the cruise ships," says Byrne Learat.

**"It is important for us to use local suppliers and one-man bands to help local communities to survive and thrive."**

Up until recently, Adams & Butler was very much a business-to-business company whose offerings were booked by travel agents. Thanks to coverage in the New York Times and Washington Post – and the fact that Byrne Learat is a Travel + Leisure A-List travel advisor in Ireland – an increasing number of American clients in particular want to book directly.

When dealing with clients, the Adams & Butler team of ten people are "straightforward, open and sometimes blunt", she says. "It is our responsibility to discuss a trip warts and all because we believe it is not the positives that will make it but the negatives that will break it. We also always look for genuine feedback from our clients."

Sustainability is very much at the heart of everything Adams & Butler does. "It is important for us to use local suppliers and one-man bands to help local communities to survive and thrive. Our suppliers are our partners on the ground and we see them as an extension of ourselves. We do simple things otherwise like making sure the hotels and guides we contract with



Siobhán Byrne Learat, founder, Adams & Butler

don't use plastic bottles," explains Byrne Learat, who has been invited to speak as a sustainability ambassador at TFest, a luxury travel trade fair in Dubai in 2021.

She also won the ITAA Best Travel Professional award at the Irish Travel Industry Awards last January. "This was interesting as we are quite a maverick company and the fact we were awarded is an example of how the business is changing and has to change," she notes. About 10% of Adams & Butler's clients are now Irish, further to launching here a year ago.

**"We can offer cruises at the same price as other agents or travel sites, but we can arrange US\$500 onboard credit because Virtuoso has negotiated this with the cruise ships."**



Gary Redmond, Liam Brennan and Paul Carrick, co-founders of BusterBox

## Perfect for pooches

Recognising the potential for the subscription-based model in Ireland, BusterBox is getting tails wagging with its boxes of goodies for dogs, particularly in the UK market

**A** shared love of dogs brought Gary Redmond, Liam Brennan and Paul Carrick together to create Buster Box, which is a monthly subscription box full of naturally produced, chemical-free treats and toys for dogs.

The company was set up in 2016 because all three found it difficult to source toys and treats for their own dogs in local pet shops. At the same time, they saw an opening for subscription boxes in Ireland having researched the growing success rates for these in the US market.

Every month a new box of healthy toys is delivered, specifically tailored to an individual dog's needs and size. "We try to incorporate superior treats in our boxes and we're now giving our existing clients a trial of a premium dog food which is sourced from the UK," says Redmond.

The main objective is to give an experience of happiness to the dog owners and dogs. Redmond says: "When the box arrives on a regular basis the dog knows it's for them and gets so excited when they see it coming. They know what's in it before it's opened so it's a joint experience of happiness for both owner and dog. And that's what the customer is paying for."

The items change every month so it's a surprise for the customer and dog. An added aspect that appeals to dog owners is that a percentage of the money goes to charity. Last year BusterBox partnered with the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and DogsTrust delivering boxes at Christmas to dogs with no homes.

Using Facebook as a marketing tool, Busterbox has been able to hone in on where its target audience is based. The co-founders discovered that it is more cost effective for them to advertise in the UK because of the population size.

With 80% of the business in the UK already, Redmond says the company is continuing to consolidate there, but is also looking at Germany down the line as one of its target markets.

BusterBox is developing its own premium, grain-free dog food with hopes to launch this in the near future. Customer

research has shown a demand for doggy dental care, another area the company would like to get into. Redmond, Brennan and Carrick are currently looking to investors to help them fulfil these ambitions.

**BusterBox is also shortlisted in the Outstanding Small Business category**

**"We try to incorporate superior treats in our boxes and we're now giving our existing clients a trial of a premium dog food which is sourced from the UK."**



**Marta De Giovannini, e-commerce manager, Ronan Clarke, director, Audiola Lumnica, operations manager and John Byrne, finance manager, Smarter Surfaces**

## Writing on the wall

Specialising in export markets, Smarter Surfaces transforms office and classroom walls into spaces for collaboration with whiteboard, magnetic and projection surface solutions

**H**aving started out as a simple idea to remove the limitations of whiteboards and flip-charts, Smarter Surfaces has grown in a few years into a company with ten e-commerce websites in five languages and distributors in over 20 countries for its innovative products.

Founder and director Ronan Clarke spotted the opportunity while working in the fit-out business. A US tech company was setting up an Irish office and wanted rooms with walls covered in whiteboards.

"When the recession hit, we started research and development [R&D] to come up with a product that would solve that problem. In 2012 we launched our first product, smart wall paint which turns a wall into a writable surface," he explains.

The product range has since expanded to include magnetic coverings and projector wall paints. All products have been developed from scratch and Smarter Surfaces' R&D is supported by CREST, the only dedicated surface coatings laboratory on the island of Ireland. The company counts the likes of Nike, Mazda

**"Our products provide a simple way for an organisation to create a space for modern working culture and open things up."**

and Microsoft among its clients.

"Our products provide a simple way for an organisation to create a space for modern working culture and open things up. They allow interactivity without the need for technology. Teachers tell us they love our big interactive boards as they need lots of writing space for lesson plans," says Clarke.

"One of the lessons I learned from my construction experience was the need to diversify to spread risk. Brexit has made this even clearer. Less than 20% of our sales are in the UK now – it was higher and we are trying to bring it down further."

With about 97% of its business now outside Ireland, Smarter Surfaces started out by targeting the English-speaking markets of the UK, Australia and the US using e-commerce. Once it had secured its first distributor, the company focused on bringing in foreign-language markets one by one.

An important decision was to hire native French, German, Spanish and Italian speakers and do all language translation for its e-commerce websites in-house.

"We quickly learned that doing a straightforward translation of our English site into German doesn't work. The tone needs to be totally different and German clients expect more technical detail," says Clarke. "With French customers, they will be gone if the person answering the phone doesn't speak the language. We recently started answering the phone 20 hours a day to deal with the challenge of time zones."

There are now 16 people employed at Smarter Surfaces' office in Rathgar in Dublin and the business has been growing by 20-25% a year since it was established in 2011.

[www.smartersurfaces.ie](http://www.smartersurfaces.ie)

## A marketer's dream

Acting as a partner to companies looking to grow their global presence and international sales, IMS Marketing believes in a result-focused, strategy-first approach

**I**MS Marketing began in the attic of managing director Kevin Moran's home in 2007. In the early stages of the company's existence a decision was made to work with technical and industrial products as this was an untapped area with little or no specialist marketing knowledge. The company now consists of a team of 19 design and marketing professionals based in Oranmore, Co Galway.

Commercial director Karagh Kelly explains what IMS Marketing provides to companies: "Our team brings real industry experience and knowhow to companies in sectors which include healthcare, medical devices, electronics, communications technology and precision engineering. We chose a niche, developed it, constantly improve it and today we have grown our business to new limits."

A key area of differentiation for IMS Marketing is its emphasis on international projects, taking indigenous and international organisations and promoting their products and services to global markets. In the past five years the company has successfully completed marketing projects in 20 countries including the UK, most mainland Europe markets, the US, South Africa and a number of South-East Asian and Middle Eastern markets. The company strategy is to increasingly position itself as the "go-to" agency for export marketing, both for Irish and international clients.

Kelly highlights the company approach to workplace wellbeing: "We don't employ a formal wellbeing programme; we implement a range of supports which are both structured and part of the fabric of our culture as a company."

We believe workplace wellbeing is more than a 'healthy eating week' a few times a year or a bike-to-work initiative. To us, workplace wellbeing is about creating an environment built on values such as teamwork, respect, personal development and compassion."

A holistic approach to wellbeing has been met with huge positivity from the IMS Marketing team. An organisational culture has developed that is employee-centred where input and implementation is continuous. Kelly stresses the importance of staff to the success and growth of IMS Marketing: "Finding the right people and giving them an environment to develop their full potential is innate to our business model. As a company we have seen significant benefit from

this people-focused approach. It is a key contributor to our consistent 20% year-on-year growth."

As the IMS Marketing team has grown over the years it has invested in a wide range of structural supports (training, mentoring, flexible working hours, etc) as well as informal measures to develop a culture where every employee feels valued and supported.

**We chose a niche, developed it, constantly improve it and today we have grown our business to new limits."**

**IMS Marketing is also shortlisted in the Workplace Wellbeing category**



**Kevin Moran, managing director, IMS Marketing**

[www.imsmarketing.ie](http://www.imsmarketing.ie)



# FINANCE FACILITATOR

Nick Ashmore, chief executive of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI), explains the role of the organisation in supporting SMEs and the difference it has made to the sector

**Q: Why is the SBCI important for the Irish SME market?**

**A:** The SBCI exists to ensure SMEs can access the most competitive finance available by addressing market failures in the Irish SME lending market through the development and delivery of lower cost, easier-to-access products for Irish SMEs and by driving competition in the Irish credit market.

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

**A:** Since it started its lending activity in March 2015 more than 29,000 Irish SMEs have availed of an SBCI-funded or guaranteed product. The SBCI has provided low-cost liquidity or partial guarantees on loans totalling more than €1.4bn. The SBCI's funding is designed to be applicable to the majority of SMEs across most sectors of the economy (see Figure 1 right). The SBCI's funding is also well spread across the eight economic regions of the country (see Figure 2 below).



Nick Ashmore, chief executive, SBCI

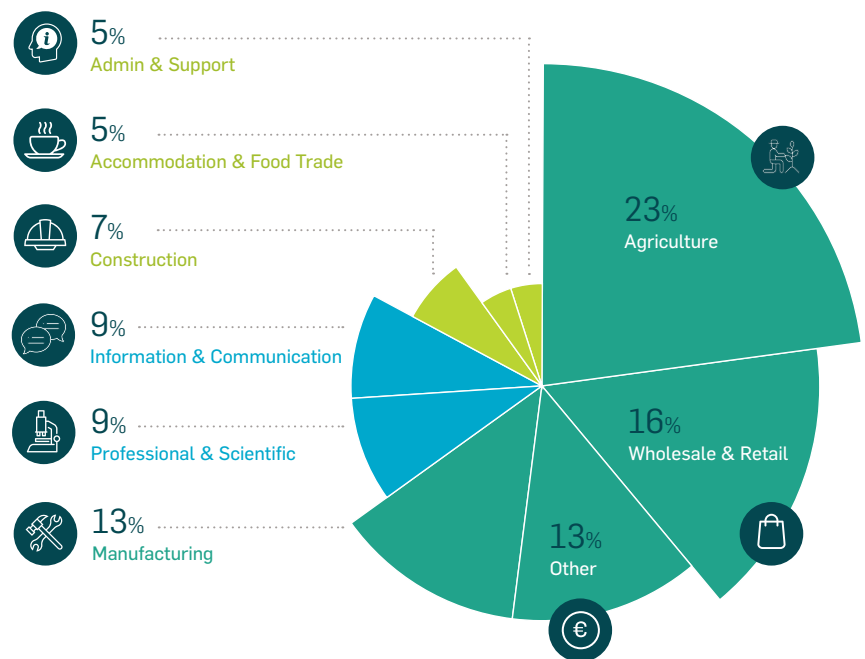


Figure 1 – SBCI funding: sectoral spread at the end of 2019  
Source: SBCI 'A positive impact on SME financing' (February 2020)

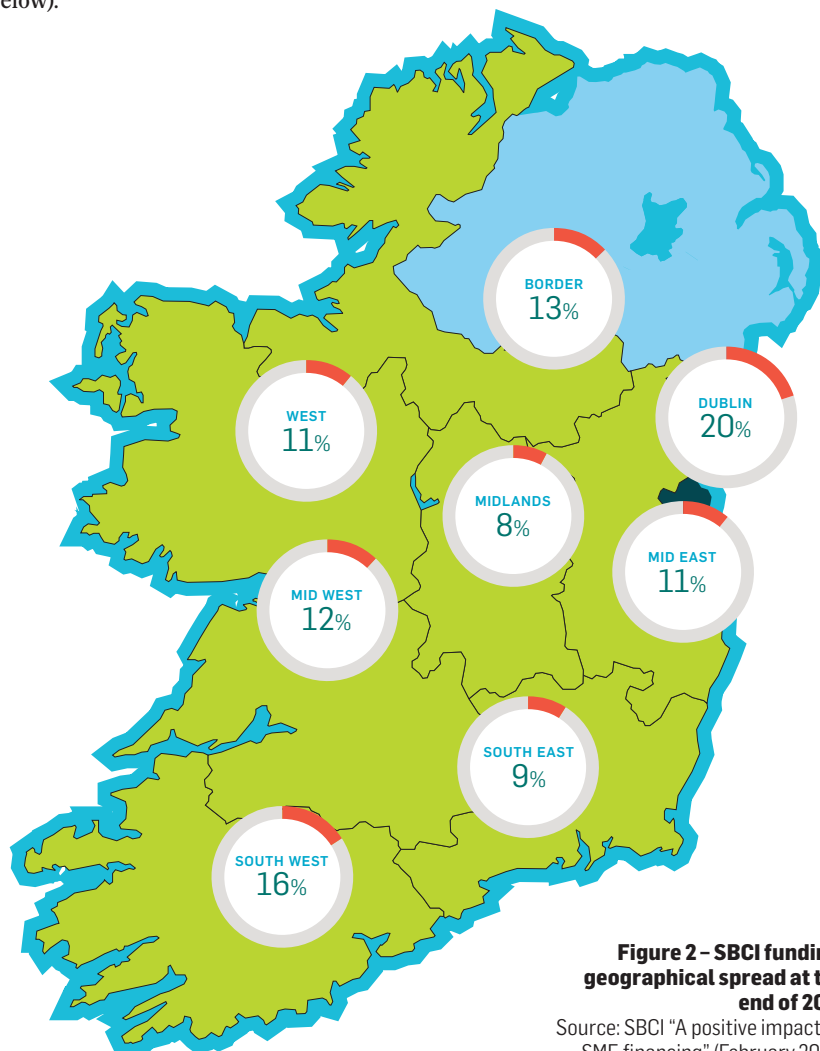


Figure 2 – SBCI funding: geographical spread at the end of 2019

Source: SBCI "A positive impact on SME financing" (February 2020)

**Q: Can you outline the different schemes and innovative products that specifically help SMEs and how they are different?**

**A:** The SBCI engages in two main lines of business, the provision of low-cost funding or guarantees to our partners. Low-cost liquidity provides a discount to the rate our partner would lend at, whereas a guarantee reduces the risk taken by the finance partner and the SME. This makes funding more accessible at a lower price and with less collateral requirements.

SBCI deploys low-cost liquidity into the SME finance market through its partners (Bibby Financial Services, FEXCO, Finance Ireland and Capitalflow) supporting financial products, such as term lending, leasing, hire purchase and invoice financing. The SBCI's guarantee products such as the Brexit Loan Scheme (BLS) and the Future Growth Loan Scheme (FGLS) have been deployed by AIB, Bank of Ireland, KBC Bank (FGLS only) and Ulster Bank.

**Q: How does SBCI support SMEs involved in innovative and energy efficient projects?**

**A:** The SBCI's FGLS was designed as a longer-term investment loan for SMEs that wished to innovate and change their business. Energy efficiency measures qualified for scheme eligibility. Energy efficiency is a critical element in the delivery of measures that will mitigate climate change in the future.

The SBCI believes that developing products that can help SMEs become more energy efficient will contribute to them becoming more innovative and enable them to become more sustainable in the long term.

**“The SBCI believes that developing products that can help SMEs become more energy efficient will contribute to them becoming more innovative.”**

**Q: Have there been any new initiatives in these areas or any plans to introduce anything new?**

**A:** The SBCI has brought three risk-sharing schemes to market in the past three years; it is currently working to identify market failures in the energy efficiency area that could be addressed through the development of similar schemes.



Kieran O'Byrne, owner, MBSL

## Paper trail

Maximising the use of technology for over 20 years has allowed MBSL to differentiate itself by making back office solutions paperless

Set up in 1998 to provide outsourced accounting solutions to enable clients to focus on their core business, MBSL is now also helping them to operate more efficiently and sustainably. It has grown from employing five to 18 people at its office in Dundrum in Dublin.

"We provide a whole back office to our clients – including tax, accounting and payroll – so they can focus on what they're good at," says owner Kieran O'Brien. "Once we take that on board, we can effectively remove paper from most of that process because we use electronics and computer software for most of the work we do. From the start in 1998, our approach has always been to use technology to its utmost."

**"In 2008, we set up our own internal cloud and our clients were able to dial into our system."**

In 2007, MBSL invested in a document management system to remove paper completely from its internal processes. "When the documents came in, they were scanned into the system and sent off to be shredded and recycled," says O'Brien. "It meant that any documentation we needed to look at was available immediately, referenced and version controlled. It was

good for legal purposes and made things easier to find."

It also facilitated the practice's next step – the move to a cloud-based system for payroll. "In 2008, we set up our own internal cloud and our clients were able to dial into our system. That was ahead of the curve in terms of cloud-based technology. It enabled us to promote our service as environmentally friendly which became a unique selling point," says O'Brien.

The company also works with business owners to review their processes and deliver efficiencies and cost savings through the use of the very latest technology.

It had its biggest year ever in 2019, with €1.5m in turnover, partly driven by the fact that MBSL was well prepared for GDPR. It is the only Irish accounting firm to have achieved ISO certification for its data management systems, which it initiated in 2013. "When GDPR came on the agenda, we were ready in terms of what was required so we could advise our clients and promote this as a service," notes O'Brien.

Another important milestone in 2019 was the addition of accounts payable to the company's suite of programmes. "In the fourth quarter, we went live with a large retail client with a huge number of small purchases. This is a major benefit to them, allowing them to move that out of paper and into electronic format."

With this key element, O'Brien says MBSL can move up the value chain. "Previously, we were primarily catering for low-volume processors. Now we can go for bigger clients. Having the first large retailer on board proves the model works and this will be our focus for the next 12 to 18 months."

[www.mbsl.ie](http://www.mbsl.ie)

## A shoo-in

Once Shoe Lane Coffee realised how important being environmentally friendly was to its customers, changes were made so that now this is integral to the business

When Jonathan Hughes and Jane Lunnon started Shoe Lane Coffee on Tara Street in Dublin in 2016 it was a 'pop-up' coffee shop, but they realised after three months it had the potential to be more established. Their instinct was right, as it did so well that the pair decided to open a second outlet, in Dun Laoghaire, two years later.

Sustainability became a focus for Shoe Lane Coffee about a year into the business, says Hughes. "Because we had started as a pop-up with no washing-up facilities, we were continuing to only use paper cups, regardless of whether people were sitting in or taking out. We realised our customers were disappointed in this and that it would be easy to go the other direction – which we did quite aggressively."

In practice, this meant first of all that Shoe Lane Coffee switched all of its packaging to either recyclable or compostable. The distressed tool lighting was switched to LED and it went with a green power provider. In addition, the vintage timber in both locations was salvaged from a nearby warehouse and used to handcraft the floorboards, seating and counter. "I even sold my jeep and replaced it with an electric vehicle. A few little decisions have brought us totally to the other side in terms of being sustainable," says Hughes.

All of the 15 staff employed by Shoe Lane Coffee are enthusiastic about this aspect of the business and there are regular brainstorming sessions to discuss what it should work on next to be even more sustainable.

In terms of the product offering, all of the coffee beans are ethically sourced, which ensures farmers get a fair price. From the start, Shoe Lane Coffee has offered a selection of four non-dairy milks. Non-dairy sales make up about 25% of the total now.

The concept for the coffee shop came from Tara Street previously being called 'Shoe Lane' and the fact that there used to be a row of cobblers there. The vintage sewing machines and wooden lasts in the window of the first shop were donated by Tara Leather, the last remaining cobbler on the street.

**"A huge amount of our customers go for these options and non-dairy sales make up about 25% of the total now."**

"When we thought of getting into artisan coffee, we felt there were a few nice places but also a lot of 'attitude'. If a customer ordered a cappuccino staff would look at them like they had two heads," says Hughes. "We wanted to differentiate ourselves through the character of the shop and by making artisan coffee more accessible to everyone and having a friendlier approach."



Jane Lunnon and Jonathon Hughes, co-founders, Shoe Lane Coffee

[www.shoelanecoffee.ie](http://www.shoelanecoffee.ie)



John B. Smith, retrofit programme manager, Kore, Stephen Farrell, SEAI, Noel Brady, MD, Kore and John Flynn, SEAI

## Core values

Continuous improvement is central to everything that happens at Cavan-based EPS products maker Kore

**F**rom its products to its processes, expanded polystyrene (EPS) manufacturer Kore is committed to having a proactive rather than reactive approach in the way it goes about its business.

“We often take the lead in projects for industry and share our learning for the good of all,” says managing director Noel Brady. “We’re focused on continual improvement across the entire organisation. And we’re consistently speaking with our customers to understand their needs and pain points and how we can relieve them.”

The Kilnaleck, Co Cavan-based company was set up as Airpacks in 1997 by Brady’s parents, Thomas and Helen, and their friend Jimmy Macken, who saw a gap in the Irish market for high-quality and long-lasting EPS insulation products.

Located today in a 45,000 sq ft facility, the company is primarily focused on the construction market with a product range that includes floor insulation, insulated foundation systems, cavity wall and external wall, roof and attic insulation.

“Our main focus is providing the construction industry with a sustainable,

**“Our retrofit team alone has achieved over 25GWh of energy savings across domestic, commercial and community projects over the past five years.”**

versatile, high performance and cost-optimal insulation material that can easily meet and exceed the requirements of Ireland’s building regulations and, more specifically, the changes to Part L 2019 and the introduction of nearly zero energy building (nZEB),” Brady says.

Kore also makes EPS for non-insulation applications, such as product packaging, television and film set design and the marine sector. In the civil engineering sector, meanwhile, it is used for void formers for bridges, roadways, train tracks and buildings. “In fact, our EPS can be found under the Luas line and even the Spire in Dublin,” Brady notes.

Last year, the company underwent an intensive strategic marketing review ahead of plans to ramp up its exports. In 2020, it will be heavily focused on targeting the UK market with several of its established products.

Currently employing 44 people, Kore is also in the research and development phase for several new insulation products that could be introduced to the Irish and UK markets over the next two years.

Another big area for the company is sustainability – internally, in its local community and in support of Ireland’s climate action objectives. “Our retrofit team alone has achieved over 25GWh of energy savings across domestic, commercial and community projects over the past five years,” Brady says.

Over the coming year, it plans to continue to make energy efficiency improvements at its own facilities, including investment in a new block mould machine that will facilitate increased production. Work has started on automating its silo and bead transport system, which will also increase production efficiencies. An extensive electrical upgrade on the facility in 2019 has allowed the company to increase its electrical power consumption by 50%.

## More is possible

Dublin-based Vivid Edge is helping large organisations ramp up on energy efficiency projects by enabling upgrades using capital support and a service model



Tracy O’Rourke, CEO, Emer Cahalin, chief financial officer and Paul Boylan, technical director, Vivid Edge

**A** real desire to be involved in something innovative and impactful was the starting point for Tracy O’Rourke leaving her senior role in a large multinational to found energy efficiency service provider Vivid Edge in 2015.

O’Rourke had experience in aviation leasing and thought she could use the principles that had made that sector so successful to provide organisations with the energy efficient systems they need without the upfront capital expenditure.

She was joined by technical director Paul Boylan, who has a background in engineering and energy efficiency, and Emer Cahalin, an experienced chief financial officer who had worked in the financial services and green energy sectors.

“I felt we could use the model that has made aircraft leasing so successful – renting rather than buying – to make more of an impact in the sustainability sector,” O’Rourke explains. “It is about mobilising energy efficiency projects so large organisations can do so much more beyond their capital budgets.”

Vivid Edge delivers the latest energy efficient equipment to organisations through a service model. “We estimate that most large organisations are probably wasting up to 30% of their energy bill because the equipment is still working fine but is just not optimal,” O’Rourke says. “Changing it is not a priority. It’s not their core business so they don’t want to use their capital on upgrades.”

The company takes the risk of ownership and charges a fixed monthly service fee, which O’Rourke says is offset by energy savings that would otherwise be lost.

With the backing of a large European

energy efficiency fund, Vivid Edge has an initial €30m project funding facility. Its first contract was agreed in 2017 and it has since completed projects with large private and public sector organisations, generating a multi-million euro revenue stream.

Projects range from big heat exchangers in large processing plants to the upgrade of lighting, air conditioning or solar panels.

Headquartered at NovaUCD, the company employs five people and is an Enterprise Ireland high potential start-up (HPSU). Manpower on the projects is all outsourced so the company can remain agile. “We join the dots to make it happen, co-ordinate and oversee projects to ensure that everything’s done to the right standards.”

O’Rourke says this year’s growth will be “explosive” based on existing contracts and a sales pipeline extending into Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

“Decision makers here in Ireland can make a call across their entire European portfolio and we can implement projects across multiple sites. When we started out, people were not talking about climate action, now it is centre stage,” says O’Rourke. “It feels like the market has finally caught up with what we are doing.”

**“We estimate that most large organisations are probably wasting up to 30% of their energy bill because the equipment is still working fine but is just not optimal.”**

# RAISING A SMILE

Employee wellness can be improved in many ways, but approaching this with oral health as a starting point will go a long way to prevent chronic diseases and stress

**W**hen it comes to employee wellness, there is an increasing appetite for programmes that address “the whole human”, not just the person that turns up for work.

This is according to Maureen Walsh, managing director of DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland, which has zoned in on the link between dental wellness and overall health in the programmes it delivers to 500 companies in Ireland.

The World Dental Foundation describes oral health as multifaceted. It includes, but is not limited to, the ability to speak, smile, smell, taste, touch, chew, swallow and convey a range of emotions through facial expressions and free from pain or discomfort.

“When people think of the mouth, they don’t always think of overall wellbeing. They may not consider that by looking after your mouth you have the power to be a chronic disease preventer. In fact, over 140 diseases can be detected in the mouth,” says Walsh.

“There is also a huge link between oral health and mental health, particularly in relation to people feeling confident to smile. We are spending a lot of time lately looking at this. Statistics have shown that smiling can directly impact your immune system, stress levels and life expectancy.”

Walsh is keen also to point out the importance of smiling in a business setting: “When a person smiles, it sends an invitation, helps to establish a rapport and initiates trust – which is the cornerstone of every work and business relationship. It can help to break down barriers with people you may be interacting with for the first time,” she says.

“We are struggling to retain an ability to create rapport in a world where we’re addicted to our smart phones and multi-tasking. More of us work remotely on our devices and while there are benefits to this, it can make us as individuals more remote.”

#### Optimum place

It is estimated that the economic impact of unwell workers – in terms of both medical expenses and lost productivity – is close to 10-15% of global economic output. In the US, it is estimated that the costs of chronic disease, stress, work-related injuries and illnesses amount to 12% of GDP.

Against this backdrop, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has deemed the workplace as the optimum place to promote health, as working adults spend 60% of their waking hours at work.

“Our wellness is paramount in the future of work. With the rise in technology and artificial intelligence, work is becoming more fluid, adaptable and collaborative and it requires constant learning,” notes Walsh.

“As work tasks are increasingly borne by



Members of the DeCare Dental Insurance team in Ireland with its mascot



Maureen Walsh, managing director, DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland

**“Workplaces today are helping employees to improve health behaviours. They are a key contributor to chronic disease prevention.”**

computers and machines, human beings add value by being creative, innovative, perceptive, intuitive, empathetic and adaptable. We need to be in a good state of physical, mental and emotional wellness to be able to bring these qualities to work each day.”

From an employer perspective, this

means embracing the potential of wellness by aligning work environments and cultures with workers’ personal values, motivations and wellness needs, she adds.

“The majority of workplaces today are playing a role in improving health and wellbeing. In fact, workplaces today, both

public and private, are helping employees to improve health behaviours. They are a key contributor to chronic disease prevention.”

#### Track record

A subsidiary of US health benefits provider Anthem, DeCare is Ireland’s only dental insurance and oral health company. It has been providing dental insurance products and wellness services to companies, individuals and families throughout the country for over 20 years. In the past five years, it has paid on over 320,000 dental treatments for its Irish members.

DeCare’s comprehensive dental plans encourage regular visits and provide financial protection for minor and major treatments. Its wellness programme offers a range of general health clinics, including dental wellness training programmes. They are rooted in science and clinical evidence and underpinned by the WHO.

“Our clients can have anywhere from 10 to 6,000 employees. Every company is in a different place on the wellness benefit journey, so we customise our programmes to accommodate that. Our team will sit down with the HR or benefits team to discuss what they would like us to do onsite to engage staff,” Walsh explains.

“Some clients want us to come ten times a year, while others prefer only one visit. We introduced an oral cancer benefit last year and mouth cancer screening would tend to be a popular element of many programmes.”



Paul Murphy, managing director, AVCOM (left) with his event production team

## Turn of events

The stress and pressure of delivering faultless live events coupled with long unsociable hours made a wellbeing programme a priority for Dublin-based technical event specialists AVCOM

**A**VCOM aims to bring the 'wow factor' to corporate events. The company provides immersive visuals and crafts creative content that represents clients' values and excites their audiences. Event spaces are transformed using LED display systems, modular scenery, big screen projection blending and creative lighting solutions.

Managing director Paul Murphy recalls AVCOM's humble beginnings as a family business 40 years ago and how it has grown since then: "We started with an editing suite in one end of the living room and a garage full of audio visual rental equipment. In the 1990s AVCOM catapulted from a sole trader to a limited company with 20 plus employees and a 1,000 sq m warehouse/office in Sandyford. In 2018 we moved to a 3,700 sq m premises in Ballyfermot with 49 staff."

In 2019 the company introduced its first employee wellbeing programme, flipping its external marketing message of 'Making Your Vision a Stress-Free

**"We are all encouraging better lifestyle choices. Four of our lunch-time runners recently completed the Dublin Night Run 10km race, with two achieving personal best times."**

Reality' to 'Making Our Vision a Stress-Free Reality'. A simple free fruit snacking facility was introduced – fruit bowls were placed around offices so staff and visitors could avail of a free healthy snack throughout the day.

After a few weeks, Murphy recalls one of AVCOM's warehouse team commenting, "This is great, usually at mid-morning I used to head off to the local shop to buy a fatty breakfast roll. Now I've replaced this with a healthy alternative and I'm saving €4 a day".

AVCOM has also facilitated its first-ever supplemented yoga and mindfulness course. Every Tuesday morning at 8am for eight weeks, 12 employees (including the boss) gathered to learn the basics of yoga and gain an understanding of mindfulness. Of the 12 participants surveyed after the course, all reported that yoga contributed to them de-stressing and to an increase in productivity levels. After each session each participant approached their workspaces with renewed vigor and clear minds.

Murphy is very positive about the outcome of its employee wellbeing programme: "Six staff members are now heading out for lunch-time runs, from novices to marathon runners. We are all encouraging better lifestyle choices. Four of our lunch-time runners recently completed the Dublin Night Run 10km race, with two achieving personal best times."

At the end-of-year appraisals, the success of the programme was summed up by one of AVCOM's new technicians: "I am happy to be part of a company that shares and respects the same values I hold, particularly in relation to work-life balance, in an industry where this is not always the case."

## Firing on all cylinders

Established for over 20 years, Guardian Safety works hand-in-hand with its customers providing bespoke safety training and advice

**G**uardian Safety began in 2005 when managing director Jason Kearns was made redundant from his job of 13 years. For the first two years of the company's existence Kearns worked on it from a home office while holding down full-time job as a safety officer in a pharmaceutical company.

The business slowly expanded with the help of the local enterprise centre and employment services and recently hired its tenth member of staff at its base in Dublin 12.

Guardian Safety provides health and safety consultancy and training to a wide variety of companies around Ireland. The main areas it specialises in are health and safety training, risk management, ergonomics and fire safety management. It also has a fire extinguisher division which accounts for around 20% of its overall business.

**"Recently an employee of five years left to take on another job, but returned to work for us because of how well we treat people compared to larger organisations."**

The company was the first to introduce fire warden instructor training courses in Ireland as Kearns felt the quality of training on the market was very poor and lacking in instructor-level training. It continues to introduce new courses every year, including online training

programmes which are approved by external certification institutes IIRSM and CPD.

Kearns explains the culture he has strived to cultivate in Guardian Safety: "Having worked in many companies where bullying, overwork, racism and sexism were considered the norm, it was my aspiration to have a workplace free of bullying and where no unnecessary pressure was put on employees. I've always wanted to create a work environment where staff felt they were part of a team and felt respected and valued as a person not just as an employee."

Considering its small size, Guardian has implemented an impressive range of improvements for staff to improve workplace wellbeing. These include flexible start times to accommodate family life, a four-day working week to reduce travelling, education programmes and a bonus at Christmas.

The health of staff is also taken into consideration with the option of a free medical every two years, free eye tests and glasses, weekly fruit deliveries and paid lunches off-site to encourage workers to get away from their desks.

Kearns reflects on the positive effect these improvements have made to staff: "Absenteeism is very low and staff turnover is very rare. Recently an employee of five years left to take on another job, but returned to work for us because of how well we treat people compared to larger organisations."

Guardian Safety's revenues continue to grow by 10% year-on-year. To improve quality, increase efficiency and remain competitive, it has implemented a customer relationship management system which runs every aspect of the business.



Jason Kearns, managing director, Guardian Safety

## Energising employees

In pursuit of its mission to ‘make a difference in a sustainable world’, Interactions Research has made workplace wellbeing an integral part of its culture

**F**ounded in 1993 by Eileen O’Connell and John Porter, Interactions Research in Kilcoole, Co Wicklow has grown from a niche start-up to a company offering a full range of services across quantitative and qualitative research. These include focus groups, in-depth interviewing, workshops, feasibility studies and user needs analysis.

Working in Ireland, the UK and Europe, Interactions Research has extensive experience in consumer and business-to-business research across a wide market base – utilities, energy, transport, media, PR, project and event evaluation and new product and service development. But the company specialism is in the sustainability sector, working on energy and transport projects with local authorities and cities across Europe.

O’Connell, who is also the managing director, sees Interactions Research as a company that is making its mark in the area of sustainability: “Our expertise

in consumer values and behavioural change inspires our mission to ‘make a difference in a sustainable world’. We see sustainability as good for both the outcomes of our clients and our own company.”

Doing meaningful and ethical work

**“By making wellness a part of what we do, our employees are happier, healthier and better able to grow within their careers and their personal lives.”**



**Claire Rountree, research director and Eileen O’Connell, managing director, Interactions Research**

is fundamental to why Interactions Research is in business according to O’Connell, who also believes this is in tandem with the company approach to workplace wellbeing.

Two new staff members have been recruited in recent times, bringing the total number employed up to eight. All staff work a four-day week or less, can choose their own start and finish times

and can take advantage of the company’s flexible approach when a crisis situation arises. Outside commitments such as study leave, childcare and aging parents are all accommodated as much as possible, so the company fully supports a genuine work-life balance.

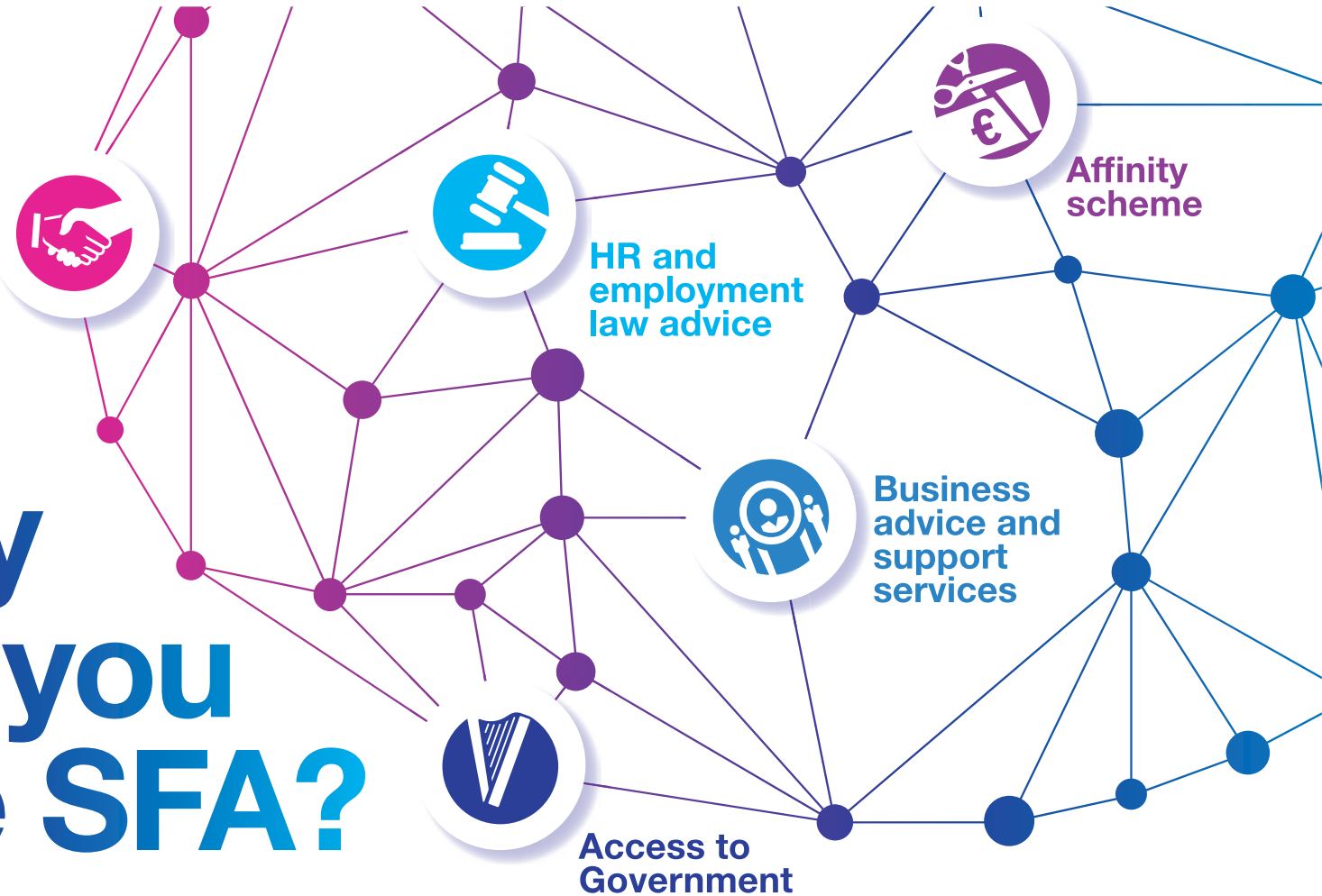
Individuals’ achievements are celebrated within Interactions Research. There are also regular team outings, including annual summer tours that are relevant to its team members such as sustainable business tours and sightseeing with its multinational staff and interns.

“By making wellness a part of what we do, our employees are happier, healthier and better able to grow within their careers and their personal lives,” says O’Connell. “Wellbeing is so integrated within our workplace culture that it is often just a part of what we do. Our staff remain happy and energised and able to do amazing work for our clients.”

As a small firm itself, Interactions Research has identified a pressing need to make high-calibre research available to other small and medium firms. In addition to securing contracts with large organisations such as Dublin Bus and Teagasc, the company is now concentrating on making contact with SMEs.

[www.interactions.ie](http://www.interactions.ie)

Events and networking opportunities



# So, why should you join the SFA?

Learn more about us at [www.sfa.ie/joinusnow](http://www.sfa.ie/joinusnow)

Otherwise email [info@sfa.ie](mailto:info@sfa.ie) or telephone (01) 605 1664

# DIGITAL ADOPTION

Irish SMEs' online presence is relatively high. However, they are not making best use of their online platforms for e-commerce and this reduces their appeal to the online consumer

**T**he current generation of consumers are adapting their shopping habits in response to technology. The next generation of consumers will be mostly digital natives who will expect nothing less than the 'digital default': accessibility, ease of use, and immediacy.

According to IE Domain Registry's SME Digital Health Index 2019, which analyses Irish SMEs and consumers' attitudes to digital technology, almost six in 10 consumers (59%) say making online purchases is 'important' to them. More than half (53%) of Irish consumers want their local high street shops to offer a full online shopping service (such as direct-to-door delivery) and 45% want a click-and-collect service.

"Irish consumers expect their local SMEs to provide the same experience as multinational retailers such as Amazon. They want to see what their local shop has to offer, buy their product online, and have it delivered straight to their door," says David Curtin, chief executive at IE Domain Registry.

#### Missed opportunity

E-commerce is worth €12.3bn to the Irish economy (Wolfgang Digital 2018 report), yet less than a third of SMEs with a website can actually take sales orders or process transactions through it. According to the Central Statistics Office Retail Sales Index, for retailers based in Ireland, online sales were estimated to account for only 3.3% of total retail sales in 2019.

In an age of digital convenience, consumers will not wait around for their local high street businesses to catch up – 54% will shop with a competitor if their preferred retailer isn't online, and that might entail spending abroad.

In response to this emerging trend, some retailers are transforming their physical shops into 'showrooms', whereby consumers visit for staff expertise and a physical, hands-on experience of the goods. They then make a purchase at the till or via touchscreen, where they can choose to have the item delivered direct-to-door.

"Your online presence should complement your in-store experience. Providing options such as click-and-collect or the ability to reserve an item in store are e-commerce methods that are easily adapted for SMEs and can encourage in-store shopping," says Curtin.

#### Barriers to overcome

When asked what exactly is preventing SMEs from doing more online, nearly three in 10 say they simply don't have the time. One in 10 say they lack the



**Phil Prentice, chief officer, Scotland's Towns Partnership; Oonagh McCutcheon, corporate communications manager, IE Domain Registry; David Curtin, CEO, IE Domain Registry; and Bobby Kerr, broadcaster at Digital Town 2019**

expertise, and a similar number say that the investment seems too expensive.

A recent OECD report, SME and Entrepreneurship Policy in Ireland, also stated that SME adoption of digital technologies is low. Ireland has a digital skills deficit in comparison with the EU average (OECD, 2018) and there are instances of a lack of awareness among SMEs of digitalisation opportunities and their benefits (European Investment Bank, 2018).

This slowness to adapt to the digital standard is largely based on a pervasive misconception that using a website, using data analytics tools and accepting online payments are difficult, time-consuming tasks that require specialist expertise. This is not the case anymore. There are now many affordable (and sometimes

free) online tools that allow SMEs to build modern, e-commerce-ready websites quickly without any knowledge of coding or web design.

#### Digital skills

The SME Digital Health Index also reveals that only one in 10 Irish SMEs have availed of digital skills training supports (such as a Local Enterprise Office grant) over a 12-month period. As well as the Trading Online Voucher Scheme, the Local Enterprise Offices are running The Productivity Challenge. This is a national programme that supports Ireland's small businesses and enterprises, by providing them with the right advice and training resources to enhance productivity and efficiency. Small Irish businesses can apply for one

**"Providing options such as click-and-collect or the ability to reserve an item in store are e-commerce methods that are easily adapted for SMEs and can encourage in-store shopping."**

## .ie the preferred online address

Rule changes have made it easier and faster for people with a connection to Ireland to secure their .ie domain of choice and build a web presence. The total number of .ie domains is now over 280,000, an 81% increase since 2010. Interestingly, .ie has now overtaken .com to become the online identity of choice for businesses and individuals in Ireland. At the end of 2019, .ie had the largest percentage of hosted domains in the Irish market.

As Ireland becomes more globalised and the Internet connects consumers to more international businesses, it's essential that our businesses have the means to identify themselves online as familiar, local, and Irish through the trusted .ie brand. According to the IE Domain Registry's SME Digital Health Index, 81% believe that buying Irish is important. Make sure your business is Irish online, register your .ie. Visit [www.iedr.ie](http://www.iedr.ie).

of 200 productivity vouchers valued at €2,500 each, to help them develop a more efficient and productive business operation.

"We believe that lasting, substantive change in Irish SMEs' adoption of and attitudes towards digital technology can occur only with large-scale action. That's why we're recommending that the Government takes a 'regional digital hub' approach to its national digitalisation initiatives and the National Broadband Plan," says Curtin.

While total inclusive digitalisation of Ireland should be this country's ultimate aspiration, it is not practical in the immediate term. We need to prioritise digital skills training and internet infrastructure upgrades in smaller towns and regions with high growth potential.

"In places like Sligo Town and Gorey in Wexford, where there are targeted digital activation campaigns and physical digital hub co-working spaces, citizens and businesses have benefited from job creation, increased revenue for high street shops, and new ways of learning at local schools and education institutions," notes Curtin. "With reduced commuting distances and time-saving digital tools, overall quality of life is better. The rest of Ireland needs to follow their example."

# PROBLEM SOLVERS

All of the winners of the Emerging New Business category in the SFA National Small Business Awards have identified gaps in the market and come up with great ideas to fill them

## BUILDTech

Already employing 16 people after only three years in operation, BuildTech is carving a niche in property maintenance by targeting it from the compliance side. Ronan Culkin set up as a sole trader initially and was joined by his brother Farnan a year later.

"Regulations for property owners have intensified in the past few years. We are fulfilling the need for landlords and property managers to be compliant by doing all the upgrades required to adhere to rental, fire, ventilation and energy regulations," explains Farnan Culkin, who has a background in project management in the construction industry.

"To allow us to offer this service in its entirety, we have become a registered electrical contractor and a registered contractor under the SEAI's Better Energy Homes scheme."

BuildTech is mainly a business-to-business company, focused on working with property management companies in providing general maintenance and preventative maintenance solutions. While it has completed larger projects,

such as upgrading an entire block of 18 apartments, day-to-day maintenance of individual properties is its bread and butter.

The software systems BuildTech uses are facilitating its fast growth. For example, it uses the latest field-app technology to monitor the progress of jobs in real time and all of its 11 vans are tracked. Culkin hopes staff numbers will rise to 35 by the end of this year.

"We are focused on hiring the best technical staff. We did try using subcontractors but that didn't work because of the speed required to fulfil work orders. Continuous training is really important as we have to have the comfort that our staff have the knowledge and understanding to ensure everything they do is compliant."

[www.buildtech.ie](http://www.buildtech.ie)

## SOOTHING SOLUTIONS

Having worked in pharmacies since the age of 15, Sinead Crowther spotted a gap in the market for the equivalent of an adult throat lozenge designed for children. She took a year off in 2017 to look after her youngest child who had been in an accident and during this time started to research this idea she had thought about for ten years.

"I got up on New Year's Day and googled 'How to make a product from scratch' and it went from there," she recalls. Soon after that Crowther applied and was accepted onto the Enterprise Ireland New Frontiers programme and subsequently secured feasibility and Competitive Start funding from the agency.

Now, Soothing Solutions is at the prototype stage with its child-friendly lozenge and over 125 pharmacies are on



Farnan and Ronan Culkin, co-founders, BuildTech

**"My ultimate goal within a few years would be that pharmaceutical companies could license the product and add their own medications to it."**



Sinead Crowther, founder, Soothing Solutions, Katherine O'Neill and daughter Fiadh

board already to stock it once it is ready to go to market later this year.

"Due to strict regulations there is nothing really available to soothe a sore throat or dry cough for children, apart from pain relieving medicines. The purpose of a throat lozenge is that the sucking motion produces saliva which acts like a balm," Crowther explains.

"The product we have developed is presented in a way that is appealing for children to use. It is made from 100% natural ingredients and is completely safe thanks to its uniquely designed dosage delivery system."

Soothing Solutions has collaborated with St Angela's Food Technology Centre at NUI Galway on the making of the lozenge and with a medtech company in Co Longford on the delivery system. The product requires its own unique manufacturing process, which will be facilitated at the Boyne Valley Food Hub once the company is ready to go into production.

"My ultimate goal within a few years would be that pharmaceutical companies could license the product and add their own medications to it," says Crowther.

[www.soothingolutions.ie](http://www.soothingolutions.ie)

## THE SALT ROOMS

Lianne Traynor and Jessica Aherne decided to extensively research salt therapy after Aherne experienced the benefits of it for herself with her son. Since he was born he was on numerous antibiotics and inhalers and nothing seemed to work until she started to bring him to a salt therapy clinic twice a week. "He is like a different child now," she says.

**"Our customers range in age from a 12-week old baby to a 91 year old woman and everyone that comes to us reports positive effects and improvements."**

"The benefits of salt therapy originated in Polish salt mines in the 1800s. Workers were coming out of the mines healthier than when they went in. Salt therapy is really popular across Eastern Europe and we are finally catching onto it here in Ireland," Traynor explains.

They opened The Salt Rooms in Ratoath, Co Meath last August and more than 5,000 people have been through its doors so far. There is a dedicated adults' room and children's room, both designed to mimic the environment of a cave.

"Our customers range in age from a 12-week old baby to a 91 year old woman and everyone that comes to us reports positive effects and improvements. The tiny salt particles in the air draw out congestion in the nose and throat, which helps with sinus and respiratory problems," says Aherne. "But there are so many other benefits – teenagers come to us and have seen their acne clear up. And a lot of people find the 45-minute sessions great for mindfulness and to aid restful sleep."

Word of mouth is spreading and



# EMERGING NEW BUSINESS



Jessica and Edward Aherne (left) and Lianne and Adam Traynor of The Salt Rooms

Taylor and Aherne are already looking at expanding and opening a second premises. "The Salt Rooms should be in every town in Ireland. People are veering away from antibiotics and looking for natural remedies," says Aherne.

[www.thesaltrooms.ie](http://www.thesaltrooms.ie)

## VANGUARD HEALTH SERVICES INTERNATIONAL

As a former director of commissioning at the NHS in the UK, Audrey McDonnell found the cost of healthcare in Ireland very concerning when she came back here in recent years. Also, firmly believing that we should have a universal health system, she decided to establish Vanguard Health Services International (VHSI) to disrupt the market.

Having recently secured planning permission and €81m in investment, VHSI is in the process of building its first hub in Swords, Co Dublin, which is due to be completed in the first quarter of next year. It plans to build a further four similar hubs across the country, as well as a number of smaller specialist centres.

"VHSI will provide an integrated, flexible, whole-system healthcare model

**"VHSI will provide an integrated, flexible, whole-system healthcare model through a hub and spoke healthcare service throughout Ireland."**

through a hub and spoke healthcare service throughout Ireland. Our vision is founded on the principles of: delivery of care on the basis of need, not ability to pay; outstanding clinical outcomes; and locally accessible care," says McDonnell.

In the VHSI hubs there will be teams working on different 'pathways', for example for musculoskeletal (MSK) disorders, and supported by a 'virtual campus'.

McDonnell uses the example of how a 50-year old man with hip trouble would be treated: "He would see a GP on campus, then go to diagnostics and on the same day could be referred directly to an orthopaedic surgeon onsite. Or, the MSK team would provide support in terms of pain relief and ways to build muscle. This would mean no need for an in-patient stay after a hip operation.

"I am trying to advocate on behalf of

patients to offer more choice and make healthcare more patient-centric. I've looked at healthcare across the globe and what's working, lean and affordable," says McDonnell. "I believe patients should be given a list of hospitals to pick and what time suits them to see a professional, but in Ireland the hospital picks you and tells you what time to come."

[www.vanguardhealthservicesinternational.com](http://www.vanguardhealthservicesinternational.com)

## VIZTRONICS

Co-founder of Viztronics Dr Tahir Rabbani has a background in machine vision, a PhD in augmented reality and 3D image processing and over 15 years' experience as chief architect at HP and senior R&D engineer at Agilent Technologies. This made him aware of the gap and need for 3D technologies in



Dr Tahir Rabbani, co-founder, Viztronics

**"We felt this was the right time to enter the market as automation has seemingly shifted from a vague possibility to an inescapable reality."**

automation and robotics and he started researching 3D technology to help simplify industrial inspection.

Established in 2018 and based in Leixlip, Co Kildare, Viztronics designs 3D sensors and software solutions for industrial inspection, 3D printing and robotic guidance.

"We felt this was the right time to enter the market as automation has seemingly shifted from a vague possibility to an inescapable reality," says Rahki Gupta, who founded the company with Rabbani. "Manufacturing companies are investing in automation-related technologies as industrial automation yields increased safety, reliability and profitability."

For example, ZFlex, its large field-of-view 3D sensor for bin-picking and industrial inspection, can be configured in the field to operate on an area ranging from 0.3m to 1.5m. "This gives the customer flexibility to use one robotic guidance system for multiple products with different sizes," says Gupta.

"The system also has the ability to image polished metallic objects, which to date no other provider can do. Metallic objects with a mirror-like finish are generally very difficult to detect and image in 3D. For example, hip and knee implants are extremely shiny and to date these parts are handled manually as the use of robotics and automation is not possible."

Viztronics currently only has one full-time employee apart from the two co-founders. "As we grow we will be needing people especially for software development, mechanical design, marketing and manufacturing assembly," says Gupta.

[www.viztronics.com](http://www.viztronics.com)



Keith Purvis, director, business excellence, Vanguard Health Services International

# BUSINESS CONNECT



Eileen O'Connell, Clare Rountree and Andrea Mitchell, Interactions Research



Caryna Camerino and Zandra Faustino, Camerino Bakery

## FLAGSHIP EVENT

The third Business Connect event took place on 6 February, 2020 at the Aviva Stadium and was attended by over 400 delegates

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

On the day delegates heard from: heads of procurement on what they look for in partners; small companies which provided insights on how to win big contracts and organisations and agencies that provide support for collaboration. There was also an interactive session with renowned leadership expert, motivational

speaker and mentalist David Meade who showed delegates how to influence to win business. Companies shared many experiences with experts and peers and there was plenty of networking with buyers.

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

*If you would like to get involved in Business Connect next year contact [sven@sfa.ie](mailto:sven@sfa.ie)*



Declan Clarke, Zoan Biomed



Sinead Ní Ghallachóir and Lisa Clarke, Ice Cream Treats



Irene Hamilton, Scattery Island Tours

# BUSINESS CONNECT



Graham Byrne, SFA chairman, David Meade, Richard Curran



Pat McCann, Ibec president



Carman Devlin, O'Leary Insurances and Paul Winters, AIG



Chris and Mary Mitchell, Green Angel



Jessica Aherne and Lianne Traynor, The Salt Rooms



Pierce Dargan, Equine MediRecord

# Being in business for yourself doesn't mean you have to be in business by yourself.

We understand the challenges and issues that come with running a small business from managing finances to managing staff. And we know the best course of action.

Join us and enjoy access to expert advice at any hour of the day. With our team on hand to support you, your business will thrive.

**Become a member today and call us on  
01 605 1664 or visit [www.sfa.ie](http://www.sfa.ie)**



**SFA**

Small Firms Association