

SFA National Small Business Awards 2021



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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 17 years.

We look forward to continuing these relationships with another successful year in 2021.

PRESENTED BY



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SFA National
Small Business
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Comment from the chair

I am delighted to offer my congratulations to all the 2021 finalists in the SFA National Small Business Awards programme. Now in their seventeenth year, these awards celebrate achievement, innovation and excellence amongst small firms. These are the very qualities that are evident in the companies featured in this special awards supplement.

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

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

It is encouraging to see such innovation in our small businesses during such uncertain times. 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. They have also showcased their products and services as part of the virtual SFA Business Connect event (see page 25).

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

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

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

Graham Byrne
SFA chairman

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Sven Spollen-Behrens, SFA director

CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM

Sven Spollen-Behrens, director of the SFA, highlights the positivity that exists in Ireland's small business sector, which inspires hope for the rest of the year

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

2020 was a year like no other and in the

opening months of 2021 small firms in the retail, hospitality and tourism sectors remain closed and the rest of the business community is operating under strict Covid-19 restrictions. I am pleased to hear that the wider public health outlook is improving due to both the rollout of the vaccine and the action that we've all taken to curb the rise of Coronavirus within our communities. Upcoming announcements with indicative dates for a wider reopening of the economy will bring a morale boost to the small business community.

Success in sight

While 2021 will not see a return to normal trading in all sectors, there is potential for business owners and entrepreneurs to look to the second half of the year with hope.

The finalists in this year's SFA National Small Business Awards 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. This 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, Cisco, Enterprise Ireland, One4all, .IE, Microsoft, NSAI, SBCI,

“The finalists in this year’s awards demonstrate that with a clear business vision, a sense of optimism, passion, drive and perseverance, success is possible.”

Permanent TSB, 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 to CEO Barry McCleary 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, to see past and present finalists and winners go to www.sfa.ie/awards.

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LENDING A HAND

Permanent TSB is prioritising SME customers with a new business banking team led by Mags Brennan, who explains why its personalised service is central to Permanent TSB's approach and much needed in the current climate

The past year has seen significant challenges for businesses of all sizes across Ireland, with many sectors facing an almost complete shutdown of operations, and companies of all kinds struggling to attract customers, retain their staff, and continue to do business.

The need for support – both financial and advisory – from a financial institution has never been greater. Permanent TSB is rising to the occasion to solidify itself as a very viable alternative in Irish business banking by providing personal support to our customers.

Business customers are a key priority for the bank with backing from CEO, Eamonn Crowley, his management team, the board and the rest of the organisation.

We can talk face to face, even if virtually, with every one of our business customers who is impacted by Brexit, or Covid-19, or both, and have a meaningful discussion. For example, when Covid-19 hit in March 2020, we rang all of our customers, regardless of whether they are borrowing with us or not.

“We can talk face to face, even if virtually, with every one of our business customers who is impacted by Brexit, or Covid-19, or both, and have a meaningful discussion. When Covid-19 hit in March 2020, we rang all of our customers, regardless of whether they are borrowing with us or not.”

We have continued to do this throughout the pandemic because some customers could tell you that they were OK, but two months later they might not be so it is all about keeping in touch with those customers and listening to their needs.

Facing challenges

The biggest challenge businesses continue to face because of the pandemic is uncertainty, followed by the need to adapt and evolve their business to a



Mags Brennan, head of business banking, Permanent TSB

digital marketplace. While that digital transformation happened quickly, uncertainty remains. The other challenge impacting a lot of Business customers is Brexit, the scale of which has been masked by the pandemic. Businesses are seeing supply chain impact and indeed margin impact as a result.

For the retail and hospitality sectors, there have been many issues regarding the ability to open for business and keep their staff employed. It is very difficult for those sectors of the economy to plan for the future in the current environment. However, more positively, when these businesses are permitted to reopen there will likely be strong demand for their services.

On the other hand, you have other sectors that are doing really well such as manufacturing, transport and logistics, technology and agribusiness. In the main, they have only been somewhat impacted by Brexit, but it could have been a lot worse. Permanent TSB is providing support for businesses coming out of

Covid-19 or Brexit or indeed businesses looking to grow.

New departure

Permanent TSB entered into a partnership with the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) for the first time last November to provide business customers with access to its Future Growth Loan Scheme. It has been hugely successful and we were inundated with applications, not just from our own customers but from non-Permanent TSB customers too.

The interesting thing about this scheme is that it is for businesses that are growing, so its popularity shows that there is room for optimism when it comes to businesses in Ireland getting through the pandemic and coming out strong on the other side.

For those companies starting out, or who have found it difficult to stay afloat, we have offered support, including payment breaks and working capital and we continue to offer case-by-case

PERMANENT TSB'S SENIOR BUSINESS BANKING TEAM

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

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

David McCarthy, regional and sectoral head of business banking – started with Permanent TSB last September from AIB where he was head of the hospitality and tourism sector.

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

Killian O'Flynn, regional and sectoral head of business banking – a certified bank director who has specialised in business lending, strategy and risk management for more than 30 years.

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

solutions for these customers.

We are looking forward to continuing to support our business customers and increasing business lending throughout 2021 and onwards. The SBCI was our first partnership and in February 2021 we launched a partnership with Bibby Financial Services to provide invoice discounting for our customers. We will see further partnerships in 2021 to ensure our customers have all the banking products and support they need to manage their businesses.

Our purpose is centred on building trust with customers and we are committed to delivering for our business banking customers and doing what we say we will do. That means fast decisions, whether it's yes or no, and getting funds to our customers quickly and providing support when they need it most.



Darren Fenton and Ciarán Gorman, co-founders, Bevcraft

Bevcraft is also shortlisted in the Manufacturing category

Craft masters

Running the largest mobile canning fleet in Europe for the craft beverage industry, Bevcraft is set to handle over 50 million cans in 2021

Founded in 2016 by friends Ciarán Gorman and Darren Fenton, Bevcraft is a 'craft can' specialist first established in Mullingar, Co Westmeath, which now includes operations across Ireland, the UK and the Netherlands.

Its main service is to send its mobile canning lines and crews into craft breweries to convert tanks of beer into cans, ready for supermarket shelves and off-licences.

"Bevcraft was one of the very first companies to develop mobile contract canning solutions anywhere in Europe. This is a commitment-free, on-demand service that allows producers to have several thousand litres of beer converted into professional multipack pallets of can stock by our crews, ready for immediate distribution and export in a single day," explains finance director Gorman.

"Traditional co-packers operate large static facilities. In contrast, the Bevcraft solution has always been about serving the long tail of craft producers that demand more variety, flexibility and specialise in limited size batches. Bevcraft now handles thousands of different

"The Bevcraft solution has always been about serving the long tail of craft producers that demand more variety, flexibility and specialise in limited size batches."

products each year across different sizes, branding type and beverage style."

Bevcraft expects to grow its workforce from 20 to 30 people by the end of 2021. It continuously invests in new technologies, services and people, with plans to invest €5m in the UK market alone over the next three years.

Direct-to-can printing

Most recently, Bevcraft partnered with UK firm Tonejet to commission cutting-edge direct-to-can digital printing technology. By printing directly onto the beverage can, Bevcraft will be able to offer an entirely new and environmentally sustainable way to decorate cans for volumes of between 1 and 50,000 units. Up until now, these have relied on the application of labels or shrink sleeves.

Beer sales in Ireland are down by 20% as a result of Covid-19, but because Bevcraft has always operated small crews it was able to adapt to social distancing rules relatively easily. The business handled a total of 20 million cans in 2020. In the first quarter of 2021, most of its revenue was generated from international markets for the first time.

The global shift towards more environmentally friendly, recyclable packaging has been a major driver of business growth. Less than 3% of craft breweries in Ireland were canning in 2015, but this figure is currently at over 90%, notes Gorman.

Ultimately, Gorman believes Bevcraft's success is down to tapping into a growing beer industry niche: "Our story is a reflection of what the craft beer sector has achieved in Ireland over recent years. There are over 1,000 people now employed in this industry across every corner of the country and the standard of output is now as good as the world leaders."

www.bevcraft.ie

Check mate

Launched as Latin America's first direct-to-consumer sexual health testing platform, Cork-based ChektAhora has grown from a staff of 15 to close to 50 the past 12 months

ChektAhora decided to focus on the Latin American market with its sexual health testing platform in 2018 after a lack of innovation in healthcare there presented it with an ideal opportunity, according to CEO Blaine Doyle. In Spanish 'checate' means 'to test yourself' and 'ahora' means 'now'.

In response to Covid-19, ChektAhora launched a home testing campaign in Mexico, allowing people to stay at home, thus cutting out the risks associated with travelling to a hospital or testing site. As Mexico City has a population of 22 million, keeping the movement of people to a minimum was absolutely crucial in preventing transmission.

The ChektAhora digitised model means a sample can be collected from a home or office to ensure convenience and confidentiality but also to allow people to quarantine if they are suspected to be positive. The 24-hour turnaround time has revolutionised testing in Latin America and also ensured the company stayed on top of all new Covid-19 variants, according to Doyle.

"Fortune 500 Companies with more than 5,000 employees on manufacturing sites became clients, requiring fast responses and screening for their employees," he notes. "We needed to implement both testing and technology solutions to coordinate these responses and ensure no stone was left unturned. The goal was to re-open plants and minimise transmission rates."

Passionate team

The ChektAhora team includes scientists, doctors, nurses and marketing and logistics professionals. "I really can't put into words how passionate and important each member of the team has been to the

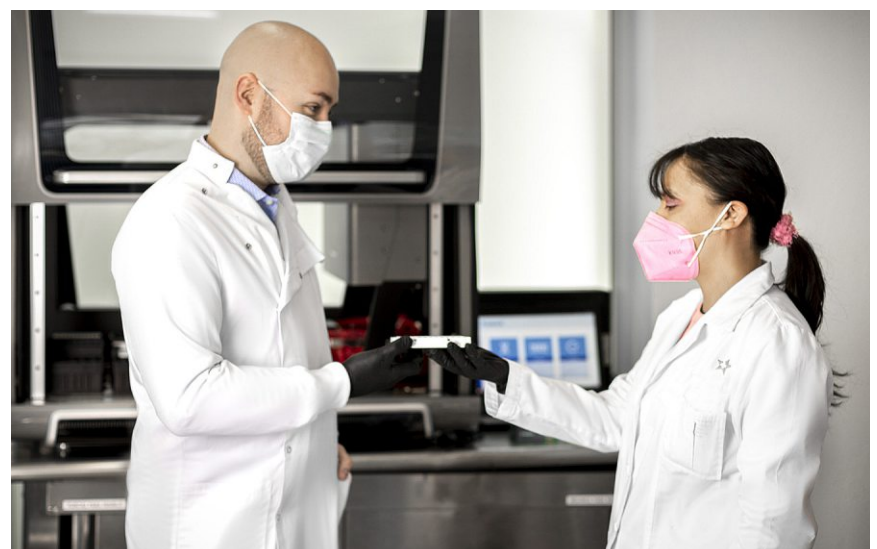
scaling of this Covid-19 solution," says Doyle.

"Each team member took this pandemic personally, as a threat to their country, city and family. There was an intense and relentless level of work ethic since we kicked off Covid-19 testing."

"Fortune 500 Companies with more than 5,000 employees on manufacturing sites became clients, requiring fast responses and screening for their employees."

ChektAhora recently partnered with Colombian e-commerce company Rappi (which raised US\$1bn from SoftBank in 2019) to grant it greater market access in Latin America. It had a surprise audit from the Mexican regulatory body of its newly built laboratory and made national TV appearances that required the company to navigate both public and private healthcare messaging. Doyle describes it as a "good learning curve and an excellent experience".

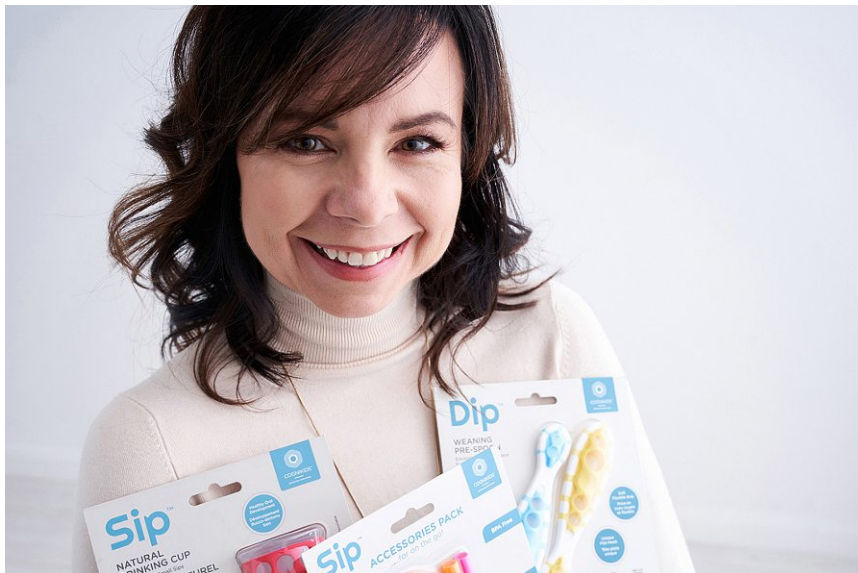
The company is currently raising US\$2.5m (around €2m) to push market share in Mexico and to open the Colombian market. It is also focused on a research and development programme that has progressed significantly and will impact its market in the women's health space in a major way, according to Doyle.



Blaine Doyle, CEO of ChektAhora and medical scientist Rosalba Mendez

www.chektahora.com

INNOVATOR OF THE YEAR



Ollwyn Moran, founder and CEO, Cognikids

The kids are alright

Originally operating under the brand name Creeper Crawlers, Cognikids has developed a unique range of products to aid neurological and sensory development in babies

The change in home environments and how this affected babies was a key motivating factor for founder and CEO of Cognikids Ollwyn Moran to develop the business. She observed that the move away from traditional carpet and tiles to wooden floors was a positive change for babies' respiratory systems. However, it proved more of a challenge when it came to getting to grips with gravity.

This inspired Moran to design the Easy Grip Crawl Suit, the company's first product to the market in 2012, which helps babies to crawl safely and successfully on the smoothest of modern floor surfaces.

The range has since expanded to include products such as Sip, a cup with a free-flow drinking straw, Dip, a spoon designed to encourage independent feeding and Grip, a universal bottle gripper.

With a background in education and neurophysiological psychology, Moran runs the business with chief operating officer Siobhan Wilmot. "There are just

two of us in the business so we are flat out all the time. I wear the creative hat and Siobhan looks after the commercial side of things. We have similar personalities but completely different skill-sets, which is ideal," she explains.

"I love innovation and looking at things differently. The fact that we have a number of patents granted and executed around the world indicates that there is a lot of innovation in our company. Patents are only granted if you have 'invented' something completely new, unique and innovative. I believe the way I look at things and develop products is also pretty innovative in this space."

Online sales push

The company faced a survival crisis when orders were either cancelled or placed on hold because of the pandemic. A huge push on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, a revamped website and partnering with other businesses meant online sales grew exponentially.

As a result of this online activity, large UK retailer JoJo Maman Bébé contacted Cognikids with a request to stock its products. This development was particularly sweet as Moran had been emailing the company for five years previously in an attempt to arrange a meeting. Cognikids is due to launch in JoJo Maman Bébé's UK stores in the near future.

In addition to this, Cognikids has signed new retail and distribution partners in markets such as Singapore, Australia, China and the United Arab Emirates in the past year. Its future plans include the launch of a small range of products in a completely new market sector.

"The fact that we have a number of patents granted and executed around the world indicates that there is a lot of innovation in our company."

www.cognikids.com

The tooth of the matter

Headed by directors Dr Paul Moore and Hazel Hendy, Galway-based dental product design company DentalOrg specialises in products to make dentists' lives easier

For 33 years as a dentist Dr Paul Moore found that the storage and organisation of cerec blocks and dental burs (drill bits) had never been sufficient to suit his needs. He set out to find a simple, elegant, versatile, durable solution.

DentalOrg's first product, the BurButler, was launched at the International Dental Show in Cologne, Germany to 140,000 dentists in 2011.

The BurButler is a bur stand with a clear lid that protects the contents inside against aerosols in the dental surgery. The new design with a non-magnetic silicone base fits any diameter drill bit in any order allowing the dentist to organise and sterilise the range of burs in the order they are required. This systematic management saves time and improves cross-infection control.

"Previous bur stands held the selection of drill bits a dentist uses in practically every restorative procedure, but these had not enjoyed any design advancements in a number of years. Some were plastic and not sterilisable, some were metal and could only hold some drill bits while others were magnetic," Moore explains.

"We were a small family company with a new idea in a profession and industry that is dictated by large international companies with matching budgets for marketing and production," says Moore. "But, we knew we had a solution to a problem every dentist in the world faces every day."

Growing potential

Following its success with the BurButler, DentalOrg developed further organisational products to make dentists day-to-day procedures simpler, safer and more efficient. These include the BlockButler, EndoButler and LaminateButler.

As its products have been recognised by leading clinicians around the world, DentalOrg has been able to create a network of distributors in 14 different countries, including Australia, the Middle East and Colombia.

In response to the pandemic, DentalOrg created a new e-commerce website, www.steiriliu.com (translates as 'sterilisation') and introduced a package of equipment for the beauty profession to sterilise their instrumentation.

"Previous bur stands held the selection of drill bits a dentist uses in practically every restorative procedure, but these had not enjoyed any design advancements in a number of years."

DentalOrg has submitted a procurement bid for US Government dental services to the Army, Navy, Airforce, Prison Services and Indian reservations to supply one-use sterile bur procedure sets for the 5,000 dentists they employ. If accepted this could mean orders of multiples of 5,000 sets of its BurButler per day. It has also reached out to four new partner distributors in the Czech Republic, Germany, Bulgaria and Japan.

DentalOrg currently employs two full-time staff and seeks part-time staff when required. It has been supported by its Local Enterprise Board for an expansion project which will mean taking on more people this year.



DentalOrg directors Hazel Hendy and Dr Paul Moore

www.steiriliu.com



Seamus McHugh, retail sales director, Intouch.com

The Midas touch

Dublin-based Intouch.com is on a mission to empower retailers in Ireland and internationally with the technology, data and insights to better serve their customers

Founded in 2015, Intouch.com has developed patented technology which is focused on helping physical retailers to better connect customers to products. Its retail personalisation platform is essentially an in-store media network, which utilises data to promote the right product to the right customers at the right time on digital screens.

Using visual sensors, the intelligent system can detect whether, for example, the majority of shoppers are male and between the ages of 25 and 35 and then display ads relevant to that group. It can take the weather into account, and display ads for ice cream if it is sunny, or promote beer if there is a football match being played nearby.

"We can take all the products and brands a retailer stocks and allow the system to do the work based on such data points, but a client can also choose to use it to display ads based on their own weekly or monthly promotions. Our solution increases product sales by influencing buying decisions where it matters most: in-store," explains retail sales director Seamus McHugh.

"We use technology such as artificial intelligence [AI], machine learning and the Internet of Things to help make ad campaigns in-store as effective as possible."

The Intouch.com platform generates a significant sales uplift, with recent campaigns achieving increases of between 27% and 35% for clients, which are mainly Tier 1 retail groups, he adds.

International reach

Intouch.com employs more than 30 staff across Ireland, Canada, Egypt, the Netherlands and the US. Covid-19 meant

some company projects were delayed, which gave the team time to review the solutions and benefits they could deliver to customers. They realised the technology was ideal for fast-moving consumer goods brands, resulting in a push to expand in this area. Because of this, the company has signed new contracts in Ireland as well as in the US and Mexico and plans to hire 10 more people.

"We use technology such as artificial intelligence, machine learning and the Internet of Things to help make ad campaigns in-store as effective as possible."

Last November, Intouch.com announced a partnership with German company Scheidt & Bachmann, which the partners expect will take in-store marketing to the next level by driving impulse purchases within fuel retail stores. One of the leading solution providers in the fuel retail sector in Europe, Scheidt & Bachmann has now integrated the Intouch.com AI engine into its ecosystem.

"As we are a small team operating across many countries, the biggest challenge is ensuring that we capitalise on all the opportunities currently in the pipeline," says McHugh. "However, as we deliver real success for our clients and the expansion of the company continues it is all worthwhile."

Community gains

In the space of four years, Whelehans Pharmacy has graduated from a single-level operation to a centre of excellence for health and wellbeing in Mullingar, Co Westmeath

Whelehans Pharmacy is also shortlisted in the Services category

In 2017, Whelehans Pharmacy opened a dedicated 2,000 sq m residential care fulfilment facility and pharmacy at Clonmore, Mullingar. From a staff of five in 2005, it now employs over 40 people across two locations in the town. Those employed include a physiotherapist, chiropodist, audiologist, holistic therapists, counsellors and a beautician.

"The range of activities and initiatives we have put in place in our facilities and out in the community have helped to extend the reach of our service offering and build our sense of 'community service'," says pharmacist and managing director Eamonn Brady. "Examples include adrenaline pen demonstrations for schools, medicine safety training for nursing homes and on-site flu vaccination services in workplaces."

Whelehans greatly expanded delivery of the flu vaccine throughout last autumn and winter. A new dedicated online appointment booking system resulted in the administering of over 2,000 vaccines in stores and at local workplaces and residential facilities. This was a record number of vaccinations for the company.

"The Synmed robotic automation used by Whelehans is unique in that it dispenses individual tablets in pods, rather than simply dispensing boxes of tablets."

"In a tremendously competitive sector, innovation and the ability to lead have been at the core of Whelehans' success," says Brady.

Investing in automation

An example of this was the decision to invest in robot dispensing technology. The pharmacy supplies medication to nursing homes all over Ireland. Further to taking on some new nursing home contracts in 2019, it needed to maximise efficiencies by embracing automation.

"The Synmed robotic automation used by Whelehans is very innovative; it was only the third robot of its type in Ireland and is unique in that it dispenses individual tablets in pods, rather than simply dispensing boxes of tablets," Brady explains.

Pre-empting the demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) in early 2020, Whelehans stocked up massively prior to PPE price rises. It sold €20,000 worth of PPE all over Ireland through its online shop between March and May last year and was also in a position to support the HSE and residential care facilities when supplies were low and inconsistent.

An online prescription service was also offered very early in 2020. The net result was a 500% increase in home prescription delivery via Whelehans' van fleet. "We have always aimed to anticipate the changing needs of our customers by speaking to them and looking at market trends," says Brady. "Whelehans' tagline 'It's all about YOU' on display in our pharmacies reminds the public that they are at the core of everything we do."



The Whelehans Pharmacy team

THE DIGITAL OPPORTUNITY

It has never been more important for food and drink businesses to be mindful of consumer behaviour and attitudes, particularly in relation to online shopping

Selling your food, drink and horticulture produce online as a small business must be viewed as an essential service for your customers, not an optional extra, according to Bord Bia's small business manager, Gillian Willis. "The funding associated with doing so should be viewed as an investment in making your business more accessible to a wider audience, rather than a cost," she says.

Throughout the past 12 months consumers have become more acquainted with various avenues of online shopping including home delivery, 'click and collect', subscription boxes and direct purchasing from online shops.

A multitude of safe and convenient options exist when purchasing food. Although regular online shopping has been around for some time it has undoubtedly been accelerated due to Covid-19 as fluctuating demands and fears across the board press home this need for simplicity and safety.

It is important to understand your consumer's motivations for shopping online, how they interact with your product and their needs. "Delving beyond the surface of these motivating factors will better equip you with the insights necessary to satisfy existing and potential consumers more effectively online," says Willis.

The 'Feeling the Pinch' report conducted by Bord Bia was designed to understand global consumer sentiment and attitudes emerging as a result of Covid-19. It identified control, comfort, convenience and creativity as the top four



Gillian Willis, small business manager, Bord Bia

drivers of consumer behaviour during this time, explained as follows:

Control - People want to regain control amid the chaos.

Comfort - People seek comfort in a crisis. With the current uncertainty, shopping for quality, local brands in a safe, digital setting is reassuring.

Convenience - People seek simplicity when life is complicated. The ease of shopping for and accessing food through online platforms simplifies a consistent part of people's lives – food consumption.

Creativity – This is about freedom to live a regular aspect of life unrestricted; being helped by technology and not hindered by time lost in-store due to a

“Delving beyond the surface of these motivating factors will better equip you with the insights necessary to satisfy existing and potential consumers more effectively online.”

lack of convenience or safety concerns. Shopping online frees people up to be more creative when spending and cooking alike.

“Small businesses should keep these consumer behaviour needs top of mind when targeting their online consumer audience,” says Willis. “An opportunity exists to leverage all that is innately advantageous about their size – differentiation, agility and innovation resides within online selling’s diverse routes to market.”

Bord Bia encourages small food and drink producers to engage with its website to access various resources, including webinars and insight reports, to support their digital business growth. See www.bordbia.ie

SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORTS



Karen O'Neill of Beekon Batches, a Food Works programme participant

Small Business Seminar:

This annual event affords small businesses the opportunity to network with their peers, hear from industry experts and meet with the Bord Bia team. The 2021 event was held virtually. There was still the option to book one-to-one meetings with a client company's sector manager and representatives from Bord Bia's grants, sustainability, Brexit and library teams. The next Small Business Seminar will take place in January 2022.

Food Works is a start-up accelerator programme run by Bord Bia, Enterprise Ireland and Teagasc, which aims to develop the next generation of scaleable and export-driven Irish food businesses.

Retailer programmes:

Bord Bia partners with a number of Irish supermarket chains on their retailer programmes, namely 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 along the way.

Trade shows: Bord Bia supports clients to showcase their food and drink products at a number of trade shows across the globe annually, enabling them to win new business and access new markets through a structured and targeted approach.

Financial assistance:

The Bord Bia Marketing Assistance Programme (MAP) is open to clients with a turnover of between €100,000 and €3.5m in the year prior to application. Applications are open from November to January each year. Companies can apply for funding across a wide range of marketing activities such as attendance at trade fairs, market visits, packaging design and in-store tastings.

Bord Bia library: Bord Bia believes insight should underpin all decisions. It empowers clients to champion insight-led behaviours through the dissemination of expert information from its world-class library. Bord Bia clients can access the library and insight reports can be accessed via the Bord Bia website.

Online Learning Zone:

The Online Learning Zone platform provides Bord Bia small business clients the opportunity to enhance and develop skills on topics most important to them and their business. Users can enrol in modules such as 'Diversification into Foodservice' and 'Preparation for Buyer Meetings'. The topics covered within the wide-ranging modules enable clients to upskill in key business competencies at a time and place suitable to them.



Michael O'Donnell, marketing manager, Atlantic Treasures

Ocean gold

Originally operating under the umbrella company Island Seafoods, Atlantic Treasures is a family-run business in Killybegs, Co Donegal with an ethos to 'Bring seafood into the 21st Century'

Atlantic Treasures has been producing a range of smoked mackerel called 'Full on Flavour' since 2010, as well as sliced smoked salmon and Nordic-style marinated herring, which it distributes to supermarkets around the country.

Focusing on the premium end of the market, Atlantic Treasures products are handcrafted, with new flavour combinations continually added to the range. For example, its smoked mackerel with garlic, herbs and spices was launched in late 2020 and is currently available in Dunnes Stores and selected retailers.

"We are lucky to have direct supply from the boats in Killybegs to our factory. We hand-pick only the finest premium selection to go through to our processing plant," says marketing manager Michael O'Donnell. "In addition, our smoked mackerel contains one of the highest Omega-3 fats content in the market, giving the fish a superior taste and texture. It is selected by rigorous testing at specific times of the year."

"Our smoked mackerel contains one of the highest Omega-3 fats content in the market, giving the fish a superior taste and texture."

Another strand to the business is The Fish Stop in Killybegs, a fish-monger selling fresh, frozen and chilled seafood as well as local artisan produce. Opened in 2019 for local customers, it is now supported by an online shop which delivers fresh fish anywhere in Ireland.

Last summer, Atlantic Treasures launched the 'Hooked & Cooked' experience, which involved visitors selecting fish and seasoning from The Fish Stop, then taking it to be cooked and served at Hughie's Bar across the road. This is on hold currently due to Covid-19.

The road ahead

In 2000, Island Seafoods began plans for a hydroelectric power plant to become more energy efficient. When this came to fruition in 2007, it generated enough electricity to power 60% of its factory's annual consumption. In December 2020, Atlantic Treasures completed its own 850kw wind turbine on site and is well on the road to being carbon neutral.

O'Donnell notes the impact of Brexit on Irish seafood producers: "Quotas have already been hit and this will increase year on year for the next five years. We are starting to see small changes in terms of documentation, lead times and so on. We don't export our added-value products to the UK so we are somewhat safe for the time being."

Atlantic Treasures plans to expand its product range to include other species and flavours. It would also like to explore new markets. While having strong connections in Asia, it wants to focus on Europe, particularly the Nordic, French and Dutch markets, as its main export destinations.

www.atlantictreasures.ie

Boxing clever

Established by Timmy and Angela Faughnan in Dromod, Co Leitrim, Dromod Boxy has successfully mixed tradition with awareness of modern consumer preferences

For over 30 years, Dromod Boxy has been producing traditional homemade boxy from an old family recipe passed down through generations after finding there was a gap in the market for wholesome, authentic, traditional Irish dishes.

Using locally sourced ingredients wherever possible, the company also produces pancakes and potato bread. In the past 18 months, it has won three awards, including a Gold star for its vegan-friendly potato bread at the 2020 Great Taste Awards.

Co-founder Timmy Faughnan developed a gluten-free version of the boxy in 2014, motivated by a family member who couldn't eat the regular version. Sales of this product have increased over the past two or three years.

"Regular focus groups with the team help us to keep on track of our goals and generate new ideas on how we can do things better for our customers."

"Sometimes you have to forfeit the taste with gluten-free products, but not with our gluten-free boxy – some customers have bought it by accident instead of the regular one and continue buying it," says his daughter Áine Faughnan who took over as managing director in 2015.

She puts Dromod Boxy's success down

to quality, handmade products and its team of 13 people, some of whom have been with the company for over ten years.

"Our boxy has a unique gold finish which makes it stand out. We get regular calls from customers telling us it is just like the one they had as a child and brings back a sense of nostalgia for them. Getting first-hand feedback like this is why we strive for our continued high standard in each and every batch," she says.

"Regular focus groups with the team help us to keep on track of our goals and generate new ideas on how we can do things better for our customers."

Distribution drive

Being classified as an essential service meant Dromod Boxy continued to manufacture throughout the pandemic. There was relatively little disruption to production as most of its business is in retail, with its products available in SuperValu and Aldi stores around Ireland. Dromod Boxy has also recently started distribution in Northern Ireland and the US.

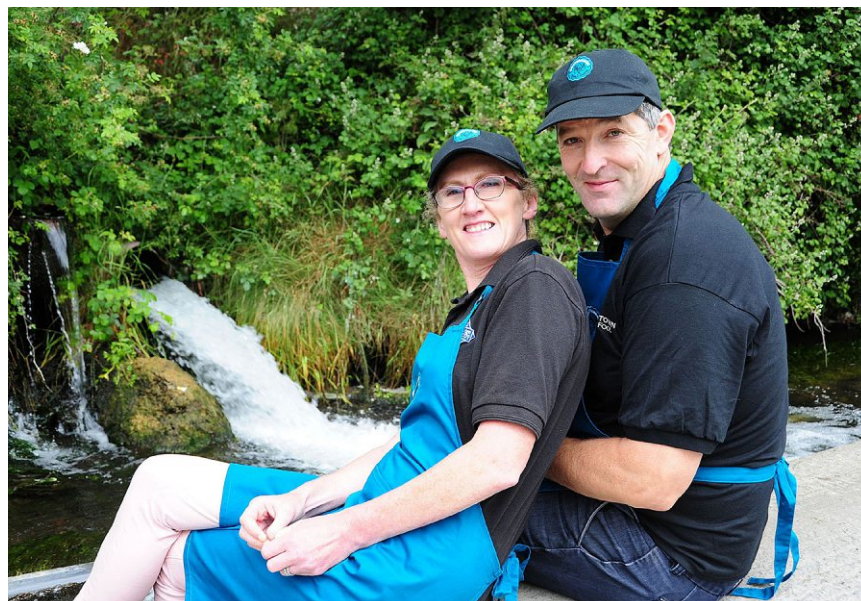
"This year we are focusing on growing our customer base with our current range. At the moment our boxy is in Aldi nationwide on a 12-month contract," says Faughnan. "We would like to have an option for all of our products to be nationwide and to focus more on exporting."

Sustainability and reducing its carbon footprint is another priority for Dromod Boxy going forward. With this in mind, it recently started the process of becoming a Bord Bia Origin Green member. It has also invested in new processes and machinery, allowing it more flexibility with sustainable packaging.



Áine Faughnan, managing director of Dromod Boxy with her father Timmy Faughnan

www.dromodboxy.ie



Mag and Ger Kirwan, co-founders, Goatsbridge Trout

Trout to the top

Based in Thomastown, Co Kilkenny, Goatsbridge Trout is run by Mag and Ger Kirwan who believe quality trout depends on two things – excellent water quality and good feed

Goatsbridge Trout is the last remaining freshwater aquaculture business in the Republic of Ireland which farms trout in a flow-through system of production. It harnesses the water on mill sites ensuring the high-quality water in very natural conditions results in the best tasting trout. Each daily catch comes from the waters of the Little Arrigle River in the Nore Valley, where the monks of Jerpoint Abbey fished over 800 years ago.

The company has two products which co-founders Ger and Mag Kirwan feel particularly stand out – its trout caviar, which won the Chefs Choice award at the Blas na hÉireann Awards in 2017, and its trout paté which both children and adults enjoy.

Goatsbridge Trout was the first Irish company to produce trout caviar, pasteurised using steam and cured using salt to produce a completely natural product while retaining all the goodness of the fish. With all of its products made without additives, its new fish chowder is also produced with a stock from fish bones making it particularly sustainable.

“We hope to extend our reach beyond Ireland and the UK and to continue to future-proof our business for many generations to come.”

“We believed the small pin bones were a possible deterrent to people trying trout, so we have removed them in an attempt to educate consumers that trout is in fact a very delicate tasting fish,” says Mag Kirwan.

Mag deals with the sales, marketing and business development side of Goatsbridge while husband Ger deals with operations. Ger is second generation to the business while Mag joined over 30 years ago after the pair met in University College Dublin. They currently employ 26 people.

Continuous investment

An ultra-modern packaging and processing facility was added to the operation in 2010 to guarantee its quality. The couple continues to invest in the business by rebuilding some of the farm and focusing on new product development. It is also looking at more sustainable ways of doing business.

At present, Goatsbridge Trout is stocked in all the main supermarkets as well as specialist shops in Ireland and it launched in Sainsbury's in the UK last November. Consumers can also order directly via its online shop.

Despite the increased cost and challenge of doing business in the UK due to Brexit, Mag sees the business as having a viable, long-term future: “We will continue to endeavour to be the most trusted trout brand in the world. We hope to extend our reach beyond Ireland and the UK and to continue to future-proof our business, not just for the next generation but for many generations to come.”

Aged to perfection

As a supplier of beef to some of the world's plush establishments, including the Burj Al Arab in Dubai, John Stone Fine Foods pivoted quickly in response to Covid-19

Based in Ballymahon, Co Longford, John Stone Fine Foods prides itself on selecting the best beef from fully traceable herds that have been grass fed and reared naturally on small, family-run farms. Competing Australian and American beef tends to be grain fed and highly marbled.

John Stone Fine Foods stays ahead of the competition by paying particular attention to five aspects of its business: farming, the environment, ageing, selection and butchery. Founder John Stone has been dry-ageing beef for more than 50 years, a process the company is known for both at home and abroad.

“Consistent quality is what we are known for as beef has lots of variables which can affect quality,” says managing director Allan Morris. “Our team of master butchers select pieces of beef for specific customers around the world. Our customers understand that great beef takes time and patience so cannot be rushed.”

After selling into the United Arab Emirates for over five years, the company was the first beef importer to receive the national halal mark there. This

“A government award means consumers in the Middle East particularly trust John Stone Fine Foods’ products and methods.”

was awarded based on animal harvesting, cutting and food safety after a government audit of these processes from beginning to end. “A government award means consumers in the Middle East particularly trust John Stone products and methods,” notes Morris.

Decisive action

The company response to the pandemic was swift and decisive. “We decided to sell online very quickly. We were partners with some of the best chefs in Ireland and sent them boxes of meat to cook for social media demos,” Morris explains. “We contacted local companies such as St Mel's Brewery in Longford, Wines Direct in Mullingar and Classic Wines in Cork. We bundled meat, beers and wines with our product and started selling.”

John Stone Fine Foods was not well known to the general public as a brand so asked food critics and chef colleagues for help. It purchased second-hand refrigerated vans, put the John Stone Fine Foods branding on them and employed two new full-time staff to make deliveries to customers. A new product manager also took care of its online shop.

On top of this, the company pivoted into Asian markets where it launched along with a new brand called 'Natur'. It also recently developed a beef sausage, an innovation in both Irish and export markets, and plans to launch its Japanese Black Wagyu later this year. It continues to create videos with client chefs on Youtube and will re-launch a new website in May.

John Stone Fine Foods is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category



Allan Morris, managing director, John Stone Fine Foods



The Dunne family of Killowen Farm

The generation game

Situated at the foot of the Blackstairs Mountains in Enniscorthy, Co Wexford, Killowen Farm is run by three generations of the Dunne family who are themselves ninth generational farmers

Killowen Farm produces yogurt made with milk exclusively from its own herd of around 250 grass-fed dairy cows. The result is particularly fresh products with little or no food miles and full traceability. Milk taken from cows at 6am becomes that day's yogurt.

In 2003, managing director Nicholas Dunne acquired the Killowen yogurt brand from a nearby dairy producer and moved the production facility to the Dunne family farm. Killowen Farm began in local supermarkets and was served in Bewleys Hotels the following year.

Distribution expanded gradually with a listing with Pallas Foods in 2005. SuperValu, Dunnes Stores and Tesco followed suit. The business has continued to grow since then and now has nationwide listings with all the main retailers in Ireland. It is also available in first class on Emirates Airlines and in the Burj Al Arab in Dubai through a distribution partner.

Financial director Michael Moran emphasises the importance of using purely natural ingredients, prompted by the Dunne family's desire to make products they are happy to feed their children and eat themselves.

"Our natural yogurt is made with only milk and live cultures. When making our fruited or layered products, we add real fruit [sourced locally where possible] and a small amount of sugar," he says.

Agile approach

A team of 40 work on site. Covid-19 meant keeping staff safe and focusing on core ranges to ensure retail distribution became key priorities. Killowen Farm still managed to launch its first cream

cheese during this time, made using 100% natural ingredients and without any preservatives or stabilisers. This was a first for Ireland.

"Agile production made it possible for Killowen Farm to proactively offer solutions to suit the new environment," notes Moran. "These included an extended range of 135g stirred fruit and natural yogurts to appeal to Irish hotels and contract caterers looking for breakfast buffets, in-room trays, picnic basket or lunch-box delivery solutions."

"Our natural yogurt is made with only milk and live cultures. When making our fruited or layered products, we add real fruit and a small amount of sugar."

Killowen recorded an increase in visitors to its Instagram and Facebook social media channels over lockdown. People were looking for inspiration since yogurt can be used in many recipes from bread to frozen yogurt pops. A number of creative customers shared photos using Killowen Farm's recyclable plastic pots as planters for seeds and its distinctive glass jars as miniature milk jugs.

Currently building a large extension to its plant which will double the existing footprint, the company hopes to supply the UK and Western European markets in the future.

Not your usual Blaa

Walsh's Bakehouse in Co Waterford is a third-generation bakery that has been making the flour-dusted, soft, white bread roll famously known as Blaa for 100 years

Run by brothers Dermot and Michael Walsh since 1985, Walsh's Bakehouse moved from its original 3,000 sq ft bakery to a new state-of-the-art 17,000 sq ft premises in 2017. It has made sizeable investments in equipment, research and development and marketing over the past three years. New specialised machinery includes bespoke ovens, high-speed mixers, blast freezers and a cold store.

Blaa can only be manufactured by three bakeries in Waterford, with Walsh's Bakehouse the only one to distribute it both nationally and internationally to date. Employing 24 people, the business has recorded a 2.5-fold growth in production over the past five years.

"This unique bread dates back to the 1700s when the French Huguenots came to Waterford. It is believed the name Blaa derived from the French word *blanc* meaning white," explains Dermot Walsh.

"Further to receiving Protected Geographical Indication [PGI] status in 2013, the Blaa could claim its place among the ranks of internationally renowned products such as Italy's Parma Ham and France's Camembert de Normandie Cheese. The ability to use the PGI logo on packaging and marketing material has made it easier for us to attract attention and acts as a buy-in when organising meetings with buyers."

Shift to retail

Before Covid-19 hit, Walsh's Bakehouse was mainly focused on large foodservice contracts for frozen products. The brothers recognised the immediate need to shift to national retailers rather than distributors to offset the impact of the pandemic.

Walsh's Bakehouse launched its Blaa

range in SuperValu stores across the country in 2019. Its long-shelf-life, four-pack brioche product is now available in SuperValu and Centra as a result of a recent partnership with Musgrave. The company is also currently developing a number of products according to customer-specific requirements, including hot dog rolls, individually wrapped rolls, par-baked rolls and a variety of brioche products and pack sizes.

"The ability to use the PGI logo has made it easier for us to attract attention and acts as a buy-in when organising meetings with buyers."

"Due to the recent investment in equipment at our site, we have been able to discuss the development of own-brand products for retailers. This year, we teamed up with Dunnes Stores to offer our Blaa in a variety of pack sizes under the Simply Better range. This range has now been featured on a number of occasions by Neven Maguire across his social media sites," notes Walsh.

"We make a conscious effort not to add any unnecessary ingredients. As a result the majority of our breads are made without any added fat, sugar or dairy. Recent trends towards sugar-free and additive-free foods have also seen people go back to more traditional and natural foods like the Waterford Blaa."



Michael and Dermot Walsh, co-owners, Walsh's Bakehouse

ADVANCING STANDARDS

The National Standards Authority of Ireland provides many services that can benefit small businesses, offering tools through standards and certification that can help across all sectors, writes its chief executive officer Geraldine Larkin

This past year has seen unprecedented challenges for small businesses across Ireland, throughout every sector of the economy. During this time the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) has continued to work with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and help them to navigate these uncharted waters.

Through engagement with NSAI, Irish companies can guarantee they are ahead of the curve when it comes to product innovation and ensuring continued compliance with international trade requirements. Throughout 2020 and into 2021, NSAI has embraced remote auditing and we continue to operate a full service to all of our clients, including SMEs.

NSAI helps businesses to become more efficient by developing standards, inspecting measuring instruments used in trade, conducting audits, and issuing certificates on the application of standards to goods, services, and measurements. We believe that this aids Irish businesses in maintaining and improving their competitiveness, which is key to economic growth and job creation.

Standards are agreed by experts in their respective fields. They provide businesses with a formula that describes the best way of doing something. It could be about making a product, managing a process, delivering a service, or supplying materials – a huge range of activities are covered.

Timely engagement

The 'Report of the SME Growth Taskforce: SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan', published in January 2021 by the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment, provides a long-term strategic blueprint for SMEs and entrepreneurs beyond Covid-19.

The report emphasises the need for SMEs to engage in standardisation and certification as a means of improving their quality management and innovation practices, and facilitating trade across borders – the latter being of particular importance since the changes to our trading relationship with the UK.

NSAI's relationship with SMEs is a partnership. Where a standard already exists, NSAI works with businesses to help them apply it to their organisation. Through NSAI Standards Committees, Irish companies and other stakeholders can contribute to and influence the creation of standards across different industries and sectors. This process enables Irish companies to have a direct input on Irish, European and international standards being developed that shape the market in which they operate.

Using standards can help business owners to improve their risk mitigation process. Companies thinking about



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

recovery in the months ahead should consider how standards and certification can offer a methodology to make them more resilient in the face of future shocks. The pandemic has shown that small businesses need to take a planned, proactive approach to risk.

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

Building on successes

Achieving third-party certification independently validates compliance with best practice as set out in standards. NSAI provides a broad range of such certification activities in support of SMEs.

The independent certification NSAI provides to organisations enables them to demonstrate compliance with international standards. This allows them to operate to the highest international standards.

The range of management systems offered by NSAI includes:

- Quality Management (ISO 9001)
- Environmental Management (ISO 14001)
- Occupational Health and Safety Management (ISO 45001)
- Information Security (ISO 27001)
- Energy Management (ISO 50001)

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

An organisation's ability to innovate is widely recognised as a key factor for sustained, profitable growth. Taking a wider view of innovation, outside of technical research and development, the ISO56000 Innovation Management Standard will provide a set of interacting elements that enable an organisation to

develop and deliver innovation. These elements address organisational context, leadership capability, operational support, planning, measurement, and ongoing improvement.

New and exciting digital technologies in areas such as Blockchain, artificial intelligence, data security and advanced manufacturing will be key to transforming the Irish economy over the next decade. NSAI will continue to play a pivotal role in advancing global standards in these areas to help continue the work of revolutionising global manufacturing supply chains and business models.

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

NSAI is proud to sponsor the Manufacturing category in the SFA National Small Business Awards. These awards go to the heart of what NSAI does in supporting SMEs, celebrating excellence, achievement, and innovation.

“Companies thinking about recovery in the months ahead should consider how standards and certification can offer a methodology to make them more resilient in the face of future shocks.”

For more information on how working with NSAI benefits small businesses go to the website www.n Sai.ie or make contact via its social media pages:

*<https://www.linkedin.com/company/national-standards-authority-of-ireland/>
<https://www.facebook.com/NSAIstandards/>
https://twitter.com/nsai_standards*



Trevor and Michael Mahon of Mahon Windows

Window of opportunity

Founded by Michael Mahon in the early 1980s, Mahon Windows thrived during the Covid-19 pandemic thanks to its focus on quality and customer relationships

Based in Athlone, Co Westmeath, Mahon Windows offers a ten-year guarantee on all of its products, which is not necessarily the industry standard, according to Trevor Mahon, managing director and son of founder Michael Mahon.

"Ten-year guarantees would be very rare. Most would be between two and five years. We are lucky to have very good suppliers in Profile Systems and Carey Glass, which we have been dealing with since we started the business. Their systems along with our highly skilled workforce allow us to offer the ten-year guarantee," he explains.

Other aspects which set the company apart from its competitors include minute attention to detail and the very close relationships it has with its clients, he adds. Because of its Midlands location, Mahon Windows can manufacture, supply and fit products for a large cross-section of customers throughout the country.

The company's product range includes UPVC and aluminium windows certified by the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI), doors, sunrooms, roof lights, bi-fold doors and curtain wall-

"Energy efficiency is key and our NSAI-certified products have the lowest U-values for windows and doors in the market."

systems. It has a staff of 22 full-time employees, each of whom Mahon regards as "very important and highly thought of", as well as teams of sub-contractors for the commercial side of the business.

Mahon Windows provides many bespoke products and offers a very personal service, dealing directly with clients when helping them to choose the best windows and doors for their particular project.

Energy efficiency

UPVC windows have a lifespan in excess of 50 years and UPVC can be recycled up to four times. Indeed, the energy-efficiency of the company's products is something Mahon is very proud of: "It is great that we can manufacture products that help to fight global warming. Energy efficiency is key and our NSAI-certified products have the lowest U-values for windows and doors in the market." U-value is a measurement for the thermal performance of glass.

Despite the pandemic and the lockdown that ensued, 2020 turned out to be one of the busiest years ever for Mahon Windows and it looks like 2021 will follow a similar pattern. The company has won three new contracts for schools since Christmas, which will be completed later this year. It had no issues sourcing materials from its suppliers and introduced Covid-19 measures for both its factory spaces and showrooms in line with government guidelines.

Future plans for the company include investment in new machinery as well as upskilling and staff training. Mahon sees huge potential for growth and is very keen to capitalise on that, particularly when the construction sector starts to recover.

www.mahonwindows.ie

The precise solution

N&E Precision Engineering has become a leader in providing machined components for the medical, oil and gas, pharmaceutical and aerospace industries

From humble beginnings in a relatively small 2,000 sq ft unit on the Athlone Road in 2005, N&E Precision Engineering now occupies ten times that size across three units in Templemichael Business Park in Co Longford.

In addition to specialising in customer-specified machine components, the company also provides specialised machine building and problem-solving services. N&E Precision Engineering is currently a member of the Irish-German Chamber, Aerospace, Defence, Security & Space Northern Ireland and the Irish Precision Turned Parts Manufacturing Association.

With brothers Noel and Eamon Farrell at the helm, N&E Precision Engineering employs 22 staff, split between two shifts, while others work offsite due to Covid-19.

Director Eamon Farrell stresses the importance of keeping clients happy: "Each job and part is manufactured in a way that is tailored to the exact specifications the customer requires. On-time delivery is a key component of our service. This culture has been embedded throughout the company with all employees adopting this mindset throughout the production process."

With the aerospace market being so adversely affected over the past year, N&E Precision Engineering was quick to focus attention on the pharmaceutical and medical industries. Nevertheless, it put a lot of resources, time and effort into obtaining its aerospace accreditations. Last year it achieved the prestigious AS9100, a company-level certification based on a standard published by the Society of Automotive Engineers.

Move to 3D mapping

Peak lockdown was used to work on the

company's online presence, particularly its website. It completed a 3D mapping of its facility with assistance from the Lensmen video production company in Dublin and the German-Irish Chamber. Working in a similar way to Google Maps, this enabled potential clients to view the space when physical visits were not an option.

"Each job and part is manufactured in a way that is tailored to the exact specifications the customer requires."

Brexit was a cause for concern for the business, but navigating it was manageable, as Noel Farrell explains: "Brexit has of course been an issue, especially when it came to sourcing materials, tools and other supplies for jobs on tight schedules. With the help of Enterprise Ireland and others we have been able to learn pretty quickly and adapt to the situation."

N&E Precision Engineering plans to continue its growth in the domestic market but also into mainland Europe and the US, with an eye on "a few big players" that would potentially make ideal clients. According to the Farrell brothers, N&E Precision Engineering's success is down to its energetic and dedicated team: "The talents and skills that each member of staff possesses helps in one area or another and we would not be where we are without them."



Brothers Noel and Eamon Farrell, co-founders, N&E Precision Engineering

www.nandeprecision.com



Shirley and Henry O'Kelly, co-founders, Timbertrove

Timber treasure

From its base opposite the Hellfire Club at the foot of the Dublin Mountains, Timbertrove specialises in transforming quality natural materials into stylish garden products

Timbertrove started out in 1986 as O'Kelly's Sawmill & The Shed Man, initially focused on purchasing trees from Coillte and turning them into timber planks to sell on.

Founders Shirley and Henry O'Kelly soon realised a greater return could be yielded so began producing a range of products, including garden sheds, fencing and furniture – all designed and manufactured in the Dublin Mountains. Its large range of garden sheds all come with a five-year guarantee.

In recent years, the business rebranded under the name Timbertrove with the tagline 'Wood products you will treasure for life'. The new brand aligned itself with the company vision to differentiate itself through quality products, innovative design and craftsmanship.

"Over 50% of our raw timber material is native grown and sourced locally. We use specially-selected timber to manufacture our products with a thicker timber to ensure longevity and sturdiness," explains Shirley O'Kelly.

"When the wood is delivered it is checked for quality and selected for individual products. It is then machined and cut to size. Each product is handmade. A combination of

"We use specially-selected timber to manufacture our products with a thicker timber to ensure longevity and sturdiness."

traditional craftsmanship and modern manufacturing techniques are used in the process. Our range is in constant development to meet the diverse requirements of designers, architects and builders, as well as new trends in the wider consumer market."

Timbertrove employs a skilled and dedicated team of 35 people who are committed to producing the best quality products for its clients. "We constantly strive to improve and be unique. We have never been afraid of change. We have proven to be innovative and to adapt to every situation we have found ourselves in," says Shirley.

Ability to adapt

The collapse of the construction sector in 2008 was a particularly challenging time for the company. With a huge drop in sales and profits becoming losses, the O'Kellys were determined to keep the business going: "I recognised an opportunity to set up a café, given the scenic setting of the business. We converted the stores department and bought second-hand equipment. Timbertrove's Country Store & Café was born," Shirley recalls.

"I wanted to ensure the café was unique to any other, serving quality home-baked food with warm customer service. It grew rapidly and ultimately ended up saving the business."

Having survived recession and after so many years in operation, the business was ready when the pandemic hit. It adapted for the new Covid-19 era by improving its website and online ordering system. The café focused on its takeaway business and included corporate deliveries. "We received huge backing from our customers who were keen to support a local business," notes Shirley.

www.timbertrove.ie

Top of the class

Since winning the overall award at the SFA National Small Business Awards in 2016, Topform has continued to excel in its niche and grow its exporting footprint

Originally established in 1976 by Canadian manufacturer Amhurst, Topform was one of the first companies to make modern postformed laminate kitchen worktops. "This heritage in manufacturing has seen many twists in the road to what is now a company known across Europe as one of the best in its sector," says managing director Paul Glynn, who has led the current management team since 1996.

From its best-in-class facility in Gort, Co Galway, Topform manufactures specialist laminate worktops with core technologies in precision-engineered work surfaces. This involves designing and processing laminate work surfaces into complex, sophisticated, niche market volume production.

"Five years ago we started a whole programme of change to improve every aspect of the business. Topform is now a centre of excellence for manufacturing based on Lean principles. We take orders on a cycle, delivering from manufacture within the same week to order. This is a staggering feat, given that we have over 7,000 standard products and no stock of finished items," says Glynn.

"In non-Covid-19 times, we allow peer companies access to our manufacturing facility to see and learn from our use of Lean principles." Topform employs 50 people in Gort, many of whom have been with the company for over 20 years.

In 2008, Topform launched a groundbreaking initiative called 'Laminate fights back' (against other competing worksurfaces such as granite). Laminate was sourced worldwide and new materials and designs were introduced that radically changed the look and feel of laminate-based worktops. "We designed a thinner worktop with square edges that mirrors the appearance of granite

without any of its drawbacks. This is now our most popular item," says Glynn.

March into Europe

In Ireland, Topform is the Number 1 recognised worktop brand with its range including TopShape, TopPlus and Heritage. Overseas, it has built up a reputation as a specialist worktop maker, selling a product customised for motor homes, mobile homes and caravans.

"Topform is now a centre of excellence for manufacturing based on Lean principles. We deliver from manufacture within the same week to order."

"This focus on niche areas allows the company to bridge the transport cost of some of the most expensive waters to cross," says Glynn. "We want to continue to manufacture here so we must devise strategies that allow us to achieve our growth plans. We are so successful at this that half of our business is now export."

Topform currently holds an 80% share of the UK mobile home market and cracked the French motorhome market in recent years. "Our business in France is growing at a huge rate. We have doubled the value every six months for the past six cycles," notes Glynn. "We will never forget our roots, but our growth must come from our developments in France, Germany and later Italy and Spain."



Paul Glynn, managing director and Steve McCarron, marketing manager, Topform

www.topform.ie

PEDALLING FORWARD

Half of working Millennial and Gen Z adults in Ireland said they are more likely to cycle to work following the Covid-19 outbreak and One4all has the ideal scheme to respond to this trend

Anationally representative survey of 1,000 adults aged 18+ years carried out by Coyne Research showed 85% of Irish adults were concerned about public transport due to the pandemic and 60% of working adults responded they would change their commuting habits. Half of working Millennial and Gen Z adults in Ireland said they are more likely to cycle to work following the Covid-19 outbreak while 89% of Irish adults agree that commuting on a bike would save money.

In August 2020, the Government issued improved legislation which allows for the purchase of bikes and accessories up to the value of €1,250, an increase of 25%, and introduced e-bikes purchasable to the value of up to €1,500. Teamed with the Government's commitment to upgrading or installing new bikeways across cities and towns nationwide, it is apparent there is a real focus on encouraging people to start or return to cycling, and employers are increasingly aware of this.

"We are already reporting a 30% increase for 2021 in employees availing of our cycle-to-work scheme, and interestingly, we have seen an increase in the value of the bikes being attained. This shows that people are serious about their commitment to choosing cycling as their commute of choice where possible, when offices and workplaces return to normal," says Ronan Kieran, business development manager for One4all Rewards and project lead on the newly launched Cyclescheme, which has replaced its predecessor, Bikes4work.



New model

Cyclescheme improves on the Bikes4work scheme. Moving away from the old model of physical cards, Cyclescheme provides a simple e-code solution for employers and employees, which improves on efficiencies from an employee placing an order to receipt of a bike. The new scheme

brings with it an increase in the number of retailers – now over 300 – for those looking to invest in a bike or e-bike as transport for work, as well as their health.

"We know the health of employees is paramount for employers. Wellness is a topic which has been consistent in the media across the past 12 months and, post-Covid-19, employee mental health and wellness will continue to be a focus for most businesses," says Kieran. "Cyclescheme can play a role in this as a cost-effective way to promote and encourage wellness awareness as we pedal through 2021."

Cyclescheme presents a more fluid, online platform where employers using the scheme can track employee applications, review and approve applications, and apply employee salary sacrifice agreements and payroll adjustments via a centralised software platform, MyScheme. Participating businesses are assigned their own unique URL. Additional features include a full suite of customisable marketing collateral for a business to tailor with its own logo, for example, posters and email templates.

Championing retail

"One4all continues to champion Irish retail. If employers request a local retailer

"We are already reporting a 30% increase for 2021 in employees availing of our cycle-to-work scheme, and interestingly, we have seen an increase in the value of the bikes being attained."

to be part of our Cyclescheme community, we encourage this support. We look for more bike retailers on an ongoing basis to ensure we can provide this scheme to all corners of Ireland," says Kieran.

Bike retailers who sign up to Cyclescheme also receive a unique URL which allows for transparent reporting on bikes/e-bikes ordered and pending bike orders that have been logged with their store, with visibility at any time on payments. In contrast to the old scheme, when an employee applies for a quote with a bike retailer and submits the details via MyScheme, the transaction is confirmed against that retailer only, which guarantees the bike retailer that sale.

Dedicated account managers are assigned to employers and retailers alike who participate in the new and improved scheme ensuring the quality of customer service synonymous with One4all.

Jock Jordan, regional vice president of One4all Ireland and long-term supporter and partner of the Small Firms Association, says: "One4all continues to lead the rewards and incentives sector, backed by parent company Blackhawk Network, with market-leading products such as Cyclescheme, and a world-first with the One4all Digital Gift Card. We are thrilled to deliver premium rewards and incentives products, while supporting Irish retailers and small businesses nationwide through our newest offering Cyclescheme".

For more information on Cyclescheme, email info@cyclescheme.ie



**SAVE MONEY
ON A NEW BIKE
AND SPREAD THE COST**



Promised land

Cork-based Ancient Permaculture is the brainchild of Adam Afoullouss, whose passion for sustainability was the catalyst to starting the business four years ago

Adam Afoullouss discovered the practice of permaculture through world-renowned permaculture consultant, designer and teacher Geoff Lawton's video on the 'Greening the Desert' project, which has brought life back to a barren site in Jordan over the past ten years.

Permaculture is a system of agricultural and social design principles focused on using as many local resources as possible, including water, to survive in a particular landscape.

After completing a FETAC course in Organic Horticulture in Ireland, Afoullouss went on to study at the Permaculture Institute in Australia.

The only person in Ireland to qualify from the institute as a teacher, consultant, designer and project/farm manager, Afoullouss has provided project consultations and taught Permaculture Design Certificate courses in France, Germany, Switzerland, Morocco and Jordan. He also spent three years working on the Greening the Desert project.

"As a former mechanic, I was attracted to the problem-solving, solution-based, hands-on philosophy that permaculture offers as it allows me to interact with the natural world and find sustainable

Ancient Permaculture is also shortlisted in the Sustainability category

solutions," he says.

Ancient Permaculture began as a consultation, design and teaching business in 2017. Projects included home designs and consultations for sustainable gardens. For example, Afoullouss designed and implemented a Montessori garden in Clonakilty, Co Cork to provide a natural landscape for learning.

Practical application

Getting involved in a project called 'Green Spaces for Health', part-funded by the HSE, gave him the opportunity to create and build a garden space within Cork City for locals to harvest from. The initiative had mental health, community building, biodiversity and food awareness at its core. It made Afoullouss realise that permaculture could be used practically in a business sense.

"We are an ethical business which strives to create and be a part of a wider sustainable movement with inclusive accessibility to a healthier lifestyle."

This is what led him to take over Devoy's Organic Farm in Rosscarbery, Co Cork, which is currently being converted into a permaculture landscape with a focus on food production. Called Ancient Organics, this side of the business supplies high quality, reasonably-priced organic eggs, vegetables and fruit to supermarkets, cafés, farmers markets and individual customers via its online shop.

"Our farming venture is unique in that it is one of the very few Irish farms running under permaculture principles and ethics, producing niche products and offering pasture-raised, free-range, organic eggs," says Afoullouss, who aims to expand this side of the business alongside its educational and design consultation offerings.

"We are an ethical business which strives to create and be a part of a wider sustainable movement with inclusive accessibility to a healthier lifestyle. We see a future where business and community are intertwined in a sustainable and inclusive way."



Adam Afoullouss, founder, Ancient Permaculture

www.ancientorganics.ie



Ciaran Flynn, founder, Child Paths with his daughter Isabelle

The right path

Child Paths has designed an easy-to-use app to aid communication between parents and teachers in order to track children's learning and development

Child Paths founder Ciaran Flynn found inspiration for the business when his daughter Katie moved to a new crèche in 2012 and he wanted to be more involved in her learning and development journey. He soon came to realise there was a large amount of information about his daughter that childcare practitioners didn't have the platform or time to communicate.

A mock-up system was followed by a 'real' prototype a few months later, and concept became reality. The Child Paths app allows childcare practitioners and teachers to capture, store and communicate information to parents in a quicker and smarter way in real time, eliminating all the paperwork. Over 45,000 parents and teachers are now using the Child Paths platform in Ireland and the UK.

"I left a well-paid job in News Ireland to develop something I was passionate about. We knew we could make a difference to teachers, parents and children's lives," says Flynn.

"We aim to give parents a greater

insight into their child's path of education and career based on helping children identify where they will excel in life. We will help them to find the career of their dreams most suited to their knowledge, skills, abilities, passions and capabilities."

Progress through partnerships

The business started with just Flynn, supported by a few different mentors, and now employs five full-time staff. It came to be based in Dublin City University's (DCU) Invent Centre as it was looking to work on a project with Dr Gillian Lake, assistant professor in early childhood education at DCU's Institute of Education.

Together they found that most information about a child was left behind in preschool once they started primary school. If this information was known, teachers could be helped to plan for junior infants, allowing each child's maximum potential to be realised as well as developing an educator-parent partnership.

Cork College of Commerce was the first to teach its students the Child Paths platform in 2018 as part of its early-years curriculum after deputy principal Gobnait Burke observed how many childcare services in Cork were using it. She believed this would give her students a competitive advantage when seeking employment. Other partnerships with higher education institutions include Ulster University, Dorset College and Technological University Dublin.

Child Paths recently announced a new partnership with Early Childhood Ireland and is also in the process of launching in India. It has just built a new finance tool which will allow early-years services to reduce a huge amount of administration by automatically sending out invoices each week or month.

"We aim to give parents a greater insight into their child's path of education and career based on helping children identify where they will excel in life."

www.childpaths.ie



Debbie Crowley, founder,
Funky Monkey Foods

Monkey see, monkey do

Born and raised in Dublin's Ballymun, Funky Monkey Foods founder Debbie Crowley has grown the business to achieve nationwide listings through hard work and determination

Debbie Crowley spotted a gap in the market for homemade Chinese curry sauce when she couldn't find a shop-bought product that tastes like the one you get from your local takeaway. Her initial idea was to make her own version and sell it on Facebook. She and her husband Joseph were both working full-time and looking for ways to make extra money to put one of their three children through college.

One day Crowley returned home from her job as a hospice care assistant to learn that Joseph had made enquiries into Bord Bia's Food Academy programme, having heard about it on the radio. Two weeks later she received a call to say she was accepted.

Initially, Crowley felt daunted and challenged by the experience: "I had no idea what they were talking about. Most of the people there had been to college and had a degree of some sort - I left school at 15. I wanted to throw the towel in so many times but my husband just kept telling me to wing it."

"I worked seriously long hours seven days a week to make the business work and it paid off. Funky Monkey Foods has grown dramatically."

Relentless effort

The Food Academy programme turned out to be particularly helpful in terms of marketing and branding and Funky Monkey Foods got up and running as a business in 2016. Crowley started out by approaching Supervalu stores and drove all over the country in an effort to make sales. Once these were achieved, delivery and in-store tastings were key. She cooked, packed, sold, delivered and conducted in-store tastings every day for three years without a wage.

Funky Monkey Foods' two products, Curry Sauce and Salt and Chilli Spice Bag Seasoning, are now stocked in stores throughout Ireland, including SuperValu, Aldi, Centra, Fresh Today, Lonsis and Mace. All of the fruit and vegetables in these products are sourced locally for maximum freshness.

Needing extra capacity for production, Crowley has moved from her home kitchen to renting the upstairs of a local warehouse which she refurbished to meet her needs. She has also developed an online shop where consumers can buy Funky Monkey Foods products directly.

"I worked seriously long hours seven days a week to make the business work and it paid off. I have grown Funky Monkey Foods dramatically and I will continue to grow and expand to the best of my ability. The company is part of me now - it's like one of the kids. Our products have been shipped to Australia and the US. We also hope our new products will make it to market in the very near future."

www.funkymonkeyfoods.ie

Star quality

After 15-years' experience in the aircraft leasing industry, Andrea Griffin launched Glam Doll as an e-commerce business in 2017 with a goal to 'Bring Hollywood Home'

The concept behind Glam Doll is to create a designated home space for women to sit at to make them feel good. As a mother of three girls, founder Andrea Griffin found it challenging to find affordable, high quality products for them to build their own 'glam stations'. She spotted an opportunity to offer a similar solution to women to create a sense of calm after the chaos of the morning routine or to apply skincare at the end of a busy day.

"We created our range of vanity mirrors, lighting and storage solutions to provide options for any budget and space. There weren't any options in Ireland for our range of engineered products for home use," Griffin explains. "Although we do kit out salons and spas, I wanted Glam Doll to be for the everyday woman, so she can channel her inner Hollywood star and feel great."

Based in Maynooth, Co Kildare the company has grown steadily and now has seven employees. It expanded its warehouse and office space in the middle of the pandemic and now has a larger showroom. The fact that people have been spending more time at home over the past year has been a plus for the business, which has seen an increase in demand from customers keen to create a calm indoor space for themselves, Griffin notes.

Social media savvy

Like many entrepreneurs Griffin started her business at the kitchen table. It now boasts 9,000 customers in 16 different countries. Glam Doll has also amassed over 100,000 followers on its social media channels.

Last year, Griffin started Glam Doll's 'Behind the Brush' blog to get a behind-the-scenes look at how Hollywood makeup artists work. This included talking to Matteo Silvi, makeup department head on Ridley Scott's 'The Last Duel', about his career working on major blockbuster movies. The next edition is due to feature a BAFTA award-winning makeup artist.

"Our objective is to make Glam Doll a household name for luxury beauty essentials while growing our Irish workforce."

Glam Doll sponsors 'The Edit', an online show created and hosted by Lisa Cannon providing the latest news on fashion, culture and entertainment. It is also very active in its local community, particularly around women's and children's issues, recently helping to raise over €60,000 for the Rotunda Hospital's neonatal intensive care unit.

Griffin has ambitious plans for the future: "We are working on further developing our export potential to Europe, the UK and the US. Our objective is to make Glam Doll a household name for luxury beauty essentials while growing our Irish workforce."



Andrea Griffin,
founder, Glam Doll

www.glamdoll.ie



Miena's Handmade Nougat is also shortlisted in the Exporter of the Year category

Willemien Rust, founder, Miena's Handmade Nougat

Nougat of wisdom

Former architect Willemien (Miena) Rust's artisan nougat business in Wicklow's Glen of Imaal has grown from selling at local food markets to exporting into Europe

After being made redundant in 2010, and with two very small children, Willemien (Miena) Rust wanted to start her own business and knew she wanted to go into the food sector. "After playing around with a few ideas, I started to make nougat – similar to what we used to get in South Africa where I'm from," she says.

The two years Rust spent researching and planning her food business idea included a trip to Italy to investigate nougat-making machines. Financed with the help of Wicklow County Council, savings, loans and a priming grant, she converted her garage into a purpose-built nougat kitchen.

The company began by selling its products at South Dublin's Marlay Park Market every Saturday. Miena's Handmade Nougat was launched at the RDS Christmas market in 2013 and Avoca became the first retailer to stock the product in 2014. The business now employs three full-time staff and one part-time worker.

Rust worked in the factory on her own at the beginning of the pandemic when everything started to close down. When the other staff members returned to work

"I am the only nougat producer in Ireland. The products we make are so different to what Irish people are used to."

she found business was as brisk as ever and particularly noticed that customers were much more willing to buy local and Irish products than before.

Natural progression

Inspired by nature – bees making honey, fresh ingredients and nothing artificial – the nougat products are made using recipes tweaked with a fusion of South African, Irish and continental influences.

"I am the only nougat producer in Ireland. The products we make are so different to what Irish people are used to and one of the biggest challenges was to educate and let people know what really good nougat should taste like. I think the passion and love for what I do means a lot," says Rust.

Miena's Handmade Nougat products are all certified gluten-free and are therefore coeliac friendly. "We pack our nougat in 50g bars which is perfect for a treat. I know many walkers and cyclists eat it as it's made with glucose, honey and packed with nuts to give long-lasting energy," says Rust.

The company produces nougat for the Dunnes Stores 'Simply Better' range. One of Harrods' chocolate producers, Xocolatl, tasted Miena's nougat and got in touch. This led to Miena's Handmade Nougat producing under the Harrods brand and exporting to Denmark and Belgium. It has since been working with Bord Bia to explore other export markets.

New packaging which resembles Christmas crackers and three new flavours were launched at the end of 2020. Rust's plans for the future are "to keep making the best nougat in the world".

www.mienas.ie

High-performance snack

Set up in 2015, The Irish Biltong Company is owned by Noreen Doyle and her husband John who operate from their facility in Naas, Co Kildare

The Irish Biltong Company's big break came in 2016 when it won a pitching competition at a food and retail hospitality expo at Dublin's Citywest and CEO of Applegreen Joe Barrett offered an immediate listing in all 110 of its stores nationwide.

Nowadays, it also supplies many mainstream supermarkets through a distribution company as well as directly into privately-owned stores, gyms, cafés, health shops and food specialist stores.

Originally from a dairy farm in Cork, co-founder Noreen Doyle has a background in sales and marketing. Husband John is a qualified butcher and specialist in the meat growing and buying areas. They became interested in biltong after discovering it at a Dublin food market stall.

Biltong is a traditional snack food in South Africa where it has been produced for over 400 years. Irish biltong is air-dried and made from 100% Irish grass-fed beef from local farms which is slightly spiced and thinly cut. It has 69% protein content and is low in fat (3.9%) and sugar (3%).

So far, The Irish Biltong Company produces plain beef and mild chili flavours of its "Irish gourmet beef snack". It currently employs four full-time and four part-time staff.

Sports nutrition fit

"Working in the food sector for a number of years, I saw a gap in the health food sector and developed this high-protein beef snack range which has adapted itself successfully to the sports nutrition market," says Noreen Doyle.

"With so little fat and no artificial preservatives, biltong is particularly suited to a low carbohydrate diet or one

which includes regular exercise. It is also non-perishable." Connaught, Munster and Bristol Rugby teams all testify to this on The Irish Biltong Company website.

In 2017, the Irish Biltong Company made an appearance on RTE's Dragon's Den. The Doyles turned down two €100,000 offers as too much equity was involved, later securing investment privately. This allowed them to upscale to a new, completely kitted-out biltong production facility with full Department of Agriculture licensing.

"With so little fat and no artificial preservatives, biltong is particularly suited to a low carbohydrate diet or one which includes regular exercise."

The Irish Biltong Company recently secured two new contracts with online businesses in France and Switzerland. These companies were previously sourcing their product through the UK before Brexit.

"We started to sell on Amazon UK in the third quarter of 2019 and were very excited at how well the product sold. We continued growing this until Brexit was finalised. We have now moved that business from the UK and are concentrating on Amazon.de, with our first shipment going to Germany in May this year," says Doyle.

Noreen Doyle, co-founder, The Irish Biltong Company



www.irishbiltong.ie

AHEAD IN THE CLOUD

Microsoft has introduced a cloud-based solution that is helping Irish SMEs to embrace business management in a new way and Irish start-ups continue to benefit from its dedicated programme

Recent research from IBEC shows that while Irish SMEs have been very successful at managing the shift to online shopping, they are just near or below the EU average when it comes to adopting other 'e-business' technology, such as supply chain management, enterprise resource planning (ERP) and customer relationship management.

To date, Irish SMEs have been confronted with a choice of more basic finance solutions, that don't offer them increased functionality as their businesses grow, or unwieldy ERP solutions that require a large upfront capital investment and slow time to value.

Dynamics 365 Business Central Online is designed to bridge this gap. Launched in Ireland by Microsoft last October, it provides a comprehensive, cloud-based, business management solution that connects different teams such as sales, service, finance, and operations to help them adapt to ever-changing requirements faster and deliver results.

"As Business Central Online is cloud-based, the barrier to entry is now much lower for SMEs. With software and applications running in the cloud, non-technical folks can better serve customers, manage financial data, and stay connected without having to wait on IT support for answers," explains Peter Loughheed, Microsoft Ireland SME lead.

"It is also supported by our extensive network of partners which can provide our customers with a range of options to help with implementation and ongoing support. Being based in the cloud means that Business Central Online can be

scaled up to meet the needs of a business as it grows and our partners can offer fixed-price solutions, which can have customers up and running in just one week."

Business Central Online integrates with other parts of the Microsoft cloud, for example, customers can simply stay connected and simplify work by installing the Business Central Online app in Microsoft Teams to share business data within their Teams chats.

Microsoft also has a cloud customer relationship management tool for SMEs called Dynamics 365 Sales Pro which integrates with Business Central Online to help enhance SME sales capabilities.

In April, Microsoft launched a new site to help SMEs easily identify ways to grow their business using digital technology. Customers can choose an area of the business that they are responsible for and see content that is specifically related to them.

"For example, a finance manager might be interested in how they can simplify reporting, while a sales manager is more likely to be interested in strategies to boost sales productivity," says Loughheed. "The site allows customers to select a persona and find information that is relevant to the area they work in." (See <https://www.microsoft.com/en-ie/business/grow-your-business/overview>)

Focus on start-ups

Having worked with Irish start-ups under various guises for many years, Microsoft set up the Microsoft for Startups programme in 2019. This is a free, global programme dedicated to helping start-ups, across any industry, to rapidly scale and grow their companies. It provides start-ups with the resources they need, when they need them, regardless of where they are on their start-up journey.

"From access to a global cloud platform, to best-in-class technology and business support, our goal is to provide a customised set of offerings and resources

"Business Central Online can be scaled up to meet the needs of a business as it grows and our partners can offer fixed-price solutions, which can have customers up and running in just one week."



Peter Loughheed, SME lead, Microsoft



that grow with the company – from 'idea to exit,' says Loughheed. "We have worked with a host of outstanding Irish organisations as part of the Microsoft for Startups programme."

Since 2014 Microsoft has been working with Access Earth, which has developed a free app to help people find and rate places according to accessibility needs. By embracing cloud and artificial intelligence (AI) technology, it has transitioned from a concept to a fully-fledged business with over 8,000 users and 92,000 locations across the globe.

Another start-up supported by Microsoft, SoapBox Labs, is building completely unique AI-driven speech recognition software for children – typically a very underdeveloped area.

SoapBox Labs has demonstrated how state-of-the-art speech recognition technology can be used at scale with Microsoft Azure, to support play, accessibility, literacy and language learning for young children.

Also part of the Microsoft for Startups programme, ApisProtect is using sensor technology to help beekeepers protect honeybees and increase productivity to solve a real problem for the global pollination and food industry. In the past 12 months it has launched two products – one for commercial beekeepers in the US and one for hobbyist beekeepers exclusively in Ireland.

"ApisProtect is bringing the power of advanced sensors and machine learning technology into beehives to deliver a 24/7 early-warning system so beekeepers can give at-risk hives immediate attention and improve bee health," notes Loughheed.

UPCOMING VIRTUAL EVENTS

Microsoft is hosting a webinar where SMEs can learn more about Dynamics 365 Business Central Online and the Microsoft Power Platform. Participants can learn how to automate ad-hoc or unique business processes to achieve new levels of productivity.

See www.aka.ms/BusinessApplicationswebinar

Alternatively, SMEs can join Microsoft partner Codec's virtual event to discover the benefits of transitioning to Business Central Online, how best to make the move, and what resources are available. Participants can hear first-hand how other companies are managing the move and what impact it has had on their day-to-day operations.

See www.aka.ms/MovetoBusinessCentralOnline

Irish start-ups are advised to keep an eye out for an upcoming Microsoft for Startups event here: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/microsoft-for-startups-europe>



Siobhan Byrne Learat, founder and CEO, Adams & Butler

Going live

Adams & Butler's response to the pandemic was to embark on a series of live webinars, which have brought destinations to life in a unique way

S iobhan Byrne Learat, founder and CEO of Adams & Butler, had just come back from a trade fair in the US on 13 March last year when she called a town hall meeting with her team in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic being declared. Established in 2002, Adams & Butler specialises in bespoke and memorable travel experiences in worldwide destinations. "We decided to concentrate on the areas that would bring the strongest return going forward, including castles and exclusive-use houses and to concentrate on Africa and places off the beaten track," explains Byrne Learat. "In addition, we recognised that we needed to market our brand more and communicate more with our database of 36,000 high-end travel agents around the world."

Adams & Butler started by creating a webinar series based on the idea of catching up with Irish friends, including contributions from the likes of Ashford Castle and the Jameson whiskey family, which was sent out to the database.

Pretty soon, the company got braver and decided to produce live webinars

"We recognised that we needed to market our brand more and communicate more with our database of 36,000 high-end travel agents around the world."

using iPhone technology, further to a request from a US corporate client. These informal webinars proved to be an effective marketing tool, achieving 500-600 registrations a week, and a total of around 32,000 views so far.

Informal style

"We wanted the people featured to be informal and share real insights. We had the manager of Blarney Castle leaning in to kiss the Blarney Stone, the doorman at Hayfield Manor singing a song and a girl at the Irish National Stud & Gardens climbing over a fence," says Byrne Learat, who went on to do live broadcasts herself from all over Scotland.

Byrne Learat has been a Travel + Leisure A-list travel advisor for Ireland and Scotland since 2015. The addition of Africa to her A-list credentials in 2020 gave her the confidence to do live webinars from Zimbabwe, again attracting over 600 viewers each. "We are the only ones to market the country as a destination. It really has a lot to offer, with safaris half or one third of the price in other African countries," she says.

Being the only Irish member of the prestigious Virtuoso travel consortia network has been central to Adams & Butler's success over the years. Byrne Learat was recently named a Condé Nast Travel Specialist 2021.

"Condé Nast is an award-winning travel publication that features the most beautiful places, best vacation spots and places to visit worldwide; and its travel specialists pull off the impossible and spare clients all of the logistics," she says. "I could not have achieved this without my dedicated team of ten people – who thankfully I have been able to keep on despite the pandemic."

The show must go on

Quickly pivoting online when Covid-19 hit, Axis Ballymun created over 140 hours of new content in 2020, which has allowed it to reach a broader audience

On the first day of Covid-19 restrictions in 2020, Axis Ballymun was in the middle of a European arts programme focused on climate change. Delegates had arrived from Sweden and Belgium, but the event had to be cancelled and everyone went home.

"This made us all realise that this wasn't going to be a two-week thing. The building had to close and our programme for the year couldn't go ahead as planned," says artistic director and CEO of the arts and community resource centre Mark O'Brien.

"We turned the organisation inside out and found a mechanism to do most things in the digital space, including online plays and productions, creative learning, dance classes and festivals. This has been so successful that others in the industry have come to us to learn from what we have done."

A new concept and way of working called #AxisBootleg was created, inspired by the roaring twenties and promoting the idea that 'Creativity won't be prohibited'. As part of this, Axis Ballymun hosted a series of interviews with performers and people who work in

the arts called #TheAxisChats.

"We have done 100 of these so far and they have achieved 30,000 views on Youtube and Facebook," notes O'Brien. "We also hosted weekly live music gigs in artists' houses, which attracted an average of around 3,000 or 4,000 views each."

"We hosted weekly live music gigs in artists' houses, which achieved an average of around 3,000 or 4,000 views each."

Innovative approach

In May 2020, Axis Ballymun broadcast a new interactive children's channel called ZoomBoom, including live chats, story-making and puppetry. Over 2,000 students were involved in the Otherworld festival for Halloween, which achieved 30,000 views online.

A highlight in terms of dramatic productions was a collaboration with Dublin Port Company called The Pumphouse Presents. This involved plays being filmed in the Pumphouse Building in Dublin Port during the summer and subsequently premiered online over five Friday nights, culminating in a week-long festival of theatre in December 2020.

Axis Ballymun is a registered charity which operates based on a social enterprise model. Deeply rooted in the local community, it is focused on developing arts and creativity in Ballymun – but also regionally and nationally.

"Normally we would produce work and then tour with it. Our experience online means we can mutate our platform to be more hybrid. It has allowed us to reach a much broader audience around the world," says O'Brien.

"While nobody takes any profits, we have to be sustainable. We looked at how to monetise what we were doing online and found that people were interested in donating what they could rather than paying a fixed price. We raised over €11,000 in this way, which is now being put out as a bursary for artists this year."



Mark O'Brien, artistic director and CEO, Axis Ballymun



Leonie Tansey, Kevin Moran and Karagh Kelly of IMS Marketing

International reach

IMS Marketing has had an “exceptional year”, launching two new services and increasing its team from 19 to 21 design and marketing professionals

Established in 2007 by managing director Kevin Moran, IMS Marketing has successfully carved out a niche in the international marketing of technical and industrial products, such as those in the medical devices, electronics and precision engineering sectors.

IMS Marketing’s unique selling point as a business-to-business agency is that it blends strategic insight with creative design to enable companies to succeed in global markets. Last year alone, it implemented projects for clients in 20 different countries.

“There have been challenges in the past year, but the way we have overcome them is what sets us apart,” says commercial director Karagh Kelly.

When Covid-19 hit, IMS Marketing’s first response was to develop a virtual selling masterclass with content designed for SMEs that could no longer get in front of potential clients or attend trade shows. Since last July, IMS has delivered 18 four-hour virtual masterclass sessions involving 250 companies and 600 professionals across 30 different countries.

“We help companies to grow export sales through different marketing strategies. This virtual training series is an extension of that,” Kelly explains. “It has been a big programme for us, including clients of Enterprise Ireland, Local Enterprise Offices and Showcase Ireland, and is very much in keeping with our international focus.”

Virtual studio

Because IMS Marketing’s office in Oranmore, Co Galway is large and open-plan, it was able to transform it into a virtual studio while adhering to public health guidelines. Three of the team were

presenters and there were two technical managers as background support.

The second new initiative for IMS Marketing last year was to be a service provider for Enterprise Ireland’s ‘Enter the Eurozone’ programme along with ESMT. Previously very much a face-to-face programme, the three parties worked together to completely redesign it to be delivered virtually. It resulted in 20 market entry plans being developed for 20 ambitious Irish companies using new marketing strategies. IMS Marketing is working with another 22 companies for this year’s programme.

“We help companies to grow export sales through different marketing strategies. This virtual training series is an extension of that.”

“Covid-19 was disruptive but it also presented a significant opportunity as it has made the world a smaller place. With our new programmes, we recognised the need for a shift in terms of how companies engage with potential buyers and build a relationship with them,” says Kelly.

“It is about more than simply a virtual meeting and showing of the product; companies need to have a big-picture focus and think about how to attract the right types of customers, how to sell the product and deliver samples.”

Keeping the beat

Mezzo Music Academy has adapted to the pandemic by offering a range of online music classes and aims to now appeal to students outside Ireland

Ten years ago Mezzo Music Academy started in a humble building in Kimmage in Dublin with founder Sonya Murphy-Lyons, one other teacher and just 17 students. It relocated to larger, purpose-built premises in Terenure in 2014 and now employs over 30 teachers and has a roll call of over 500 students.

Hailing from a musical family, Murphy-Lyons is a University College Dublin Music graduate who has taught classical guitar for over 20 years. Her father William Murphy, a well-known songwriter and guitarist, and sister Maria Stanley, who is a pianist and conductor, both teach at the academy. Niece Sorcha Stanley manages day-to-day operations.

Mezzo Music Academy teaches all instruments and offers a range of early learning programmes, pre-instrumental classes, private and group instrument tuition, performing arts, jam sessions and choirs.

Having pivoted the business online during the pandemic in 2020, Mezzo Music Academy recently launched

its Online Lesson Programme aimed globally. “You can now avail of the service we have to offer no matter where in the world you’re based. For adult students who find it difficult to travel to lessons after a long day at work, our online programmes will definitely be a bonus,” says Murphy-Lyons.

Reaching out

“The winning formula for us is our class content, the quality and expertise of our teachers, the way in which they impart the information and encourage students to excel and love their music. This formula can be transferred to students across the world, especially those who are taking the Trinity College London globally-recognised exams, as we are now experts in this field.”

According to Murphy-Lyons, the individual needs of students and their families are at the heart of Mezzo Music Academy’s offering. “When new customers come to us saying their child wouldn’t practise for their previous teacher, I try to find out why. I consider the child’s personality and pair them with the most suitable teacher. If necessary, I also suggest a diversion from the exams for a while in favour of playing ‘fun’ music, which ultimately will result in more practice.”

Indeed, the focus at Mezzo Music Academy is on ensuring that students develop a love of music for life and not just for the few years that they are doing exams. “I grew up loving music and I still do. While I was being classically trained, my Dad showed me other styles of music at home,” says Murphy-Lyons.

“This helped me to sustain my interest in the often gruelling process of classical training and gave me an escape to other worlds of music – something every budding musician should be exposed to.”

“This formula can be transferred to students across the world, especially those who are taking the Trinity College London globally-recognised exams, as we are now experts in this field.”



Sonya Murphy-Lyons, founder, Mezzo Music Academy

Past, present and future

Based in Dublin, Stella Novus has successfully diversified its offering from a website to a range of services focused on ancient history

Ancient Origins is the number 1 ancient history website in the world with over 5 million unique visitors and 9.5 million views a month and 200,000 newsletter subscribers. This is around 50% higher than competitor sites, according to ranking services such as Alexa.

Husband and wife team Dr Ioannis (John) Syrigos and Joanna Gillan started the website in 2013, driven by their shared fascination with ancient history, human origins and mythology and their love of travel.

They found that there were no websites that presented history in a professional manner, while also being fun, novel and easy-to-digest for a non-academic audience.

“Our goal was to fill this gap and make ancient history interesting for the mass public. We have successfully done this, attracting a diverse audience of both academic readers and lay people with readers from 229 countries,” says Gillan. “We carefully plan our content so that the history of every country, religion and culture in the world is featured.”

By 2016, Ancient Origins was growing

in popularity and the couple decided to register a company, Stella Novus, dedicated to developing it into a fully-fledged, multi-faceted business.

Branching out

The first step was to launch a premium subscription-based website, providing extensive researched content, live webinars, exclusive interviews, e-books and discounts to third-party ancient history related services. A year later, Stella Novus started expeditions in South America, giving premium members the chance to become ‘real-life Indiana Jones’ adventurers. It also launched a digital magazine.

Last year, Stella Novus introduced its digital store where visitors can buy e-books, magazines or webinars without needing a premium subscription. In co-operation with a travel agency in the UK, it launched Ancient Origin Tours with the help of top experts as guides. This has been temporarily suspended until travel can resume post-Covid-19.

Two new projects, Ancient Routes and Ancient Origins DNA, will be launched this year. “Ancient Routes paves the way



Dr Ioannis Syrigos and Joanna Gillan, co-founders, Stella Novus

to the new sector of virtual tourism, focusing on the growing niche of archaeological and heritage travellers. It will offer a library of over 16,000 proprietary, peer-reviewed articles in

“Ancient Routes paves the way to the new sector of virtual tourism, focusing on the growing niche of archaeological and cultural travellers.”

an immersive, interactive multimedia format, using artificial intelligence to yield personalised travel suggestions,” Gillan explains.

“For the first time in the industry, Ancient Routes will develop a community and management platform for tourist guides.” Ancient Routes was awarded with a seal of excellence from the European Commission after Stella Novus submitted it to the Horizon 2020 programme.

For the Ancestry DNA Origins project, the company is collaborating with a university professor to create a platform that will provide uniquely accurate ancestry tests with direct comparisons to ancient people.

Gillan and Syrigos oversee 12 staff covering the editorial, marketing, operational and technical areas of the business, and over 250 contributing writers. The team is spread all around the world.

www.stellanovus.com

Growing green skills

Tracey Donnery, executive director at Skillnet Ireland, discusses Climate Ready and the potential of skills to transform climate challenge into business opportunity



With 250,000 SMEs in Ireland, the health of small businesses is vital to our economy. But as the past year has shown, these businesses are especially vulnerable to shocks. As we move into recovery mode, it's essential to refocus and prepare for other challenges coming down the tracks – most notably, climate action.

Ireland's Climate Action Plan and the Climate Action Bill present ambitious targets to achieve an environmentally-sustainable and climate-neutral economy. Every business and sector will play a pivotal role in Ireland meeting those commitments. However, it will require radical change, including the overhaul of entire industries. Fortunately, the outlook is not solely about challenge – opportunities also abound for SMEs to capitalise on the potential the green economy will offer.

While the Climate Action Plan 2021 will set out the roadmap to bring us to zero net carbon emissions, skills and talent will be one of the key enablers to bridge business realities with climate ambition

– and this is a key area Skillnet Ireland is focusing our attention on. In partnership with enterprise, we recently launched Climate Ready to help businesses prepare for the climate challenge ahead.

Extended offering

Climate Ready will support Irish businesses in developing the skills and talent they need to thrive in the green economy. Skillnet Ireland has a strong track record in supporting businesses in the areas of renewable energy and green technology; environmental, water and energy management; and sustainable finance. Now we want to extend this offering to every sector to ensure no business gets left behind as climate action gains momentum.

In addition to our Skillnet Business Networks operating within this space, a new Climate Ready Academy has been launched offering programmes and practical supports for business owners and employees seeking to develop their sustainable skills. Current programmes include an Energy Leaders Programme



Tracey Donnery, executive director, Skillnet Ireland

and a series of specialist masterclasses designed for business leaders. Climate Ready Insights will also offer research and insights from an industry perspective to help businesses advance their thinking around sustainability.

Taking action today to understand how climate change could impact your operations is critical to ensuring our businesses remain resilient and competitive as we tackle the challenges posed by climate change. Investing time and energy in

building these skills, knowledge and expertise makes great business sense and can pay dividends in years to come.

In addition to Climate Ready, Skillnet Ireland also supports businesses through our 73 Skillnet Ireland Business Networks and through Mentor-sWork in partnership with the SFA.

Find more details about Skillnet Ireland and Climate Ready at www.skillnetireland.ie.

TRIUMPH THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

Cisco, sponsor of the new Covid 19 Recognition Award in the SFA National Small Business Awards, is encouraging small businesses to leverage technology as part of their journey out of the pandemic

This evening, a special new award will be given to one of the finalists in the SFA National Small Business Awards to highlight a company's particular resilience and success during the Covid-19 pandemic. Cisco has come on board as a new sponsor to champion achievements in this area.

Caroline Burke, account manager at Cisco, explains why this award is so important at this time: "Small businesses are the backbone of our communities. When they're strong, we're all stronger. The finalists in this year's awards are innovative and resilient, and they'll recover from current economic challenges triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic by adapting, adopting, and persevering."

"We really want to recognise and celebrate stories of small businesses correcting their course through challenges and innovating on the fly; stories of small businesses that are now leveraging technology to differentiate themselves to reach their customer base."

Our lives changed overnight last year. From work to school to socially – nothing has felt the same. As Burke notes, for the first time, many organisations were faced with challenges they never considered such as:

- how to get up and running with remote workforces
- how to expand their capacity quickly
- how to best protect their teams and keep their data secure
- ultimately, how to keep their businesses productive.

For businesses, this has put more focus, energy and urgency on digital transformation and delivering digital-first services. "As we enter the next phase of the pandemic, it's crucial for SMEs to understand how best to leverage technology to ensure their customers can access their business securely and safely," says Burke.

"Economic recessions are known for causing layoffs, business closures, and financial struggles. But they are also famous for forging visionary entrepreneurs and innovative start-ups."

A time for reinvention

This can be a time of reimagining and reinventing your business, and many are doing it with technology. Simply put, where possible, businesses should deliver products and services to customers digitally, according to Burke. And their strategies should be focused across four key areas:



Caroline Burke, account manager, Cisco

1. Re-imagine – Re-invent your applications. Apps are your brand, your shop front, how customers access your services – so get creative with how you design and deliver your applications. In the next three years, 500 million new applications will be developed. It's an amazing opportunity to engage with your customers in a whole new way.

2. Empower – Inspire your teams. Work is no longer a place; it's something you do from anywhere. More people than ever before are working remotely, and this may become permanent or hybrid, where employees split time between the office and their home. It's estimated

that 98% of all business meetings will have at least one person joining from a home office. To truly enable and drive your team, you need to give them reliable, secure and productive technology.

3. Transform – Revolutionise your infrastructure. The network helps your business to grow, allowing everything to be connected. This creates limitless possibilities but also more complexity. Today, there are 20 billion devices connected to the Internet. And by 2023, that number will jump to 29 billion – nearly four devices per person. Each of these connections puts pressure on

"As we enter the next phase of the pandemic, it's crucial for SMEs to understand how best to leverage technology to ensure their customers can access their business securely and safely."

the network and needs to be managed and monitored in real time. In addition, policies need to be created and deployed in an automated way.

4. Secure – Protect your data. Security has always been important but even moreso now. The attack surface has increased massively with remote workers using their own unsecured devices from their own unsecured home networks.

All organisations, irrespective of size, segment or market, are really embracing technology to remain competitive and relevant to their customers and to ensure business continuity and resilience. And while all of this may seem daunting, Burke truly believes there's never been a better time to change.

One of the issues faced by many small businesses when it comes to implementing new technology solutions is the lack of the necessary skills. "Cisco can take that burden away from small businesses. We can deliver the advice, guidance – and the right products – through an ecosystem of partners while the business owner focuses on their business. We can help SMEs become more profitable by reaching new markets, selling more, improving efficiency, and reducing costs," notes Burke.

"It's been a very tough year and there are still challenging times ahead, but small businesses are uniquely placed to adapt as they are more agile, can implement change faster and recover quicker."

"Reimagining your small business requires adapting to the current climate, overcoming challenges, and adopting real solutions that can help you not only survive this crisis, but thrive long after it ends."

GOING VIRTUAL

As businesses have adapted to new ways of working this year, so too has the Small Firms Association by adapting each element the SFA National Small Business Awards programme to be delivered remotely

On 11 March, 2020 the pandemic was officially declared on the eve of last year's SFA National Small Business Awards ceremony, which was due to be held in Dublin's RDS and welcome over 300 guests representing the 39 finalist companies and sponsors for a black-tie celebration. The Small Firms Association (SFA) made the brave decision to broadcast the awards the next evening virtually from the RDS. Throughout this awards programme virtual communication has continued and will culminate in today's awards ceremony which will be streamed from 4pm. You can still register to watch at www.sfa.ie/awards.

Awards management masterclass
Sponsored by the SFA National Small Business Awards training partner Skillnet Ireland, the prize of a strategic management masterclass is provided to all finalists. Normally delivered over a weekend in the Hodson Bay Hotel, Athlone, Co Westmeath, this year, part of the training was delivered in two separate online sessions by Barry McLoughlin, senior training consultant with The

“Throughout this awards programme virtual communication has continued and will culminate in today's award ceremony which will be streamed from 4pm.”

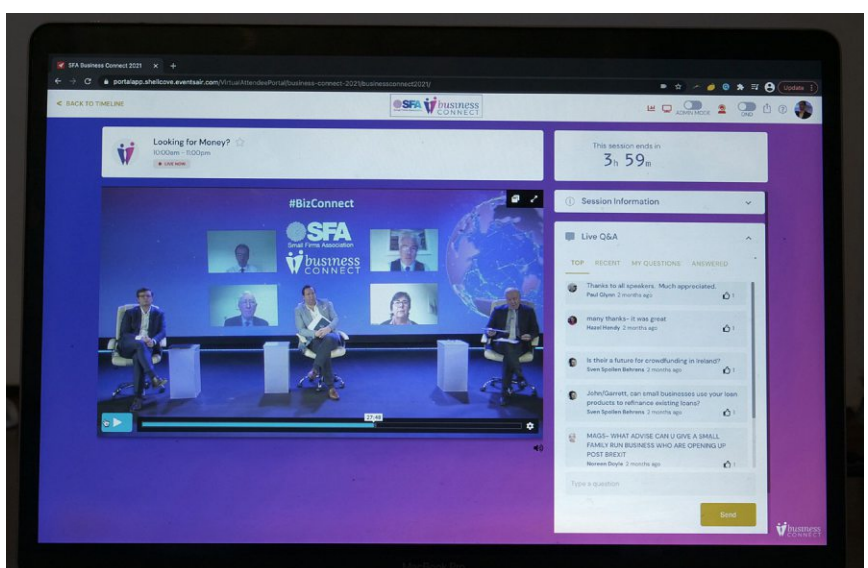


Barry McLoughlin,
Senior Training Consultant

The strategic management masterclass

Communications Clinic. These lively interactive sessions gave all participants really good advice on how to best promote themselves and use media channels effectively. It is intended to deliver follow-up training in Athlone later this year so that all 40 of the 2021 awards finalists will get to meet each other in person.

Business Connect 2021
Business Connect is a flagship event for the SFA that brings members together with leading medium-sized and large companies across a wide range of industries. Hosted by broadcaster Richard Curran, presenter of RTE's Dragon's Den,



The Business Connect virtual event in 2021

the exciting marketplace event delivered virtually this year gave a rare view inside buying processes and decision making in some of Ireland's leading companies.

At this day-long event companies shared many experiences with experts and peers and there was plenty of networking with buyers.

Delegates were able to meet other businesses at virtual networking sessions, visit an online exhibition space and learn from key industry experts who covered topics such as: learning how to do business in a virtual world, how to cope and re-set the dial for 2021, how to win when working with big business and how to access the best finance for your business.

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 were interviewed by the awards judging panel as part of the judging process. The awards sponsors also exhibited at the event.

“The exciting marketplace event delivered virtually this year gave a rare view inside buying processes and decision making in some of Ireland's leading companies.”



Overall winner 2020, Kore Insulation, being presented its award virtually by Alan Shortt, Sue O'Neill and Sven Spollen- Behrens, SFA Director

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Ian Black, interim chief executive of the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, explains the role of the organisation in supporting SMEs through the pandemic and beyond

Q How has the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme been progressing?

A The €2bn Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme was launched in September 2020 to assist SMEs with the challenges they were facing as a result of the pandemic. The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) operates the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. This includes the assessment of lenders for inclusion in the scheme, together with the ongoing administration of the scheme on behalf of the Department.

To date, 4,778 SMEs have been sanctioned for loans under the scheme and over 4,000 loans, with a value of more than €246m, have been drawn down. This means that, by number, the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme has supported more SMEs than any other SBCI/government risk-sharing scheme so far.

Data to mid-April of this year shows a consistent take-up across a wide range of sectors, including wholesale and retail (18%); agriculture, forestry and fishing (17%) and accommodation and food services (13%). With an average loan size of slightly over €61,000 and a maximum term of 5.5 years, the scheme is proving to be accessible to a broad spread of SMEs seeking funding to help them address immediate working capital needs or to refinance Covid-19-related debt over a longer period.

Q How significant is it that credit unions have joined the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme?

A Since its inception, the SBCI has continually looked to bring more choice of lenders and products to the market for SMEs in Ireland. This is part of its mission to deliver effective financial supports that address failures in the Irish credit market, while driving competition

“The SBCI has continually looked to bring more choice of lenders and products to the market for SMEs in Ireland. This is part of its mission to deliver effective financial supports that address failures in the Irish credit market.”



Ian Black, interim chief executive, Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland

and innovation. The addition of 19 credit unions together with Bibby Financial Services, Capitalflow, Finance Ireland and Linked Finance to the existing scheme partners – AIB, Bank of Ireland and Ulster Bank – has been a significant step towards the provision of this choice for SMEs. The Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme has also been important in making risk-sharing schemes available to non-bank financial institutions and credit unions.

Q How has the Future Growth Loan scheme been going since Covid-19?

A The Future Growth Loan Scheme is the SBCI's longer-term investment risk-sharing scheme offering loans with terms up to 10 years. Throughout the pandemic the Future Growth Loan Scheme has continued to be very attractive with SMEs seeking to invest in their businesses. The scheme was expanded by €500m in July 2020 bringing its overall capacity to €800m.

Over the past few months, Permanent TSB and Close Brothers joined the Future Growth Loan Scheme. The great success of the scheme has resulted in AIB, Bank of Ireland, Permanent TSB and Ulster Bank now being fully allocated and closed for applications. KBC Bank and Close Brothers continue to have capacity under the Future Growth Loan Scheme.

Q Can you explain how an SME can engage with the schemes the SBCI operates?

A For both the Future Growth Loan Scheme and the Brexit/Covid-19 Working Capital Schemes a two-stage application process applies. First, the SME needs to complete a simple eligibility application form on the SBCI website, print it off, sign it and send it to the SBCI via email or post.

The SBCI will assess the SME's eligibility for the relevant scheme and if this is successful the SBCI will issue an eligibility code. This code is then included

“Throughout the pandemic, the Future Growth Loan Scheme has continued to be very attractive with SMEs seeking to invest in their businesses. The scheme was expanded by €500m in July 2020.”

as part of the SME loan application to the lender. The credit decision remains with the lender and not the SBCI. The Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme application process is slightly different, with the SME applying directly to its chosen lender which will deal with both eligibility and the credit decision.

Q What advice would you give to SMEs regarding cashflow in the current climate?

A Many SMEs are reluctant to take on debt; however, as generating cashflow is critical to the success of any business, consideration should be given to taking on some debt. There may be an accumulation of short-term Covid-19-related debt, such as overdraft, short-term loans, creditors or tax payments. By availing of a scheme such as the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SME could protect its day-to-day cashflow and repay the debt over a period of up to 5.5 years. In addition, SMEs should consider the other government supports available, such as the Covid-19 Restrictions Support Scheme, warehousing of tax and waiver of rates – all of which will help support cashflow when the business can reopen.

Q Are there any recent or future developments relevant to SMEs?

A It was announced earlier this month that the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme will be available until the end of 2021. This is good news for SMEs as there is significant capacity remaining under the scheme, at a time when the economy begins to reopen and businesses can establish the initial level of financial support they may require. In addition to this, the SBCI is currently engaging with both government and EU stakeholders regarding the availability of support for SMEs under the European Guarantee Fund.



The BNRG team

Here comes the sun

Headquartered in Dublin, BNRG is punching above its weight as a pioneering developer, operator and owner of solar projects

BNRG finances, builds, manages and owns large-scale solar farms that today produce more than 150,000MWh of clean electricity, with more than 1.5GW of active projects in the development pipeline. With operations in the US, the UK, mainland Europe and Australia, BNRG projects are responsible for saving around 155,000 tonnes of CO2 since 2007.

“Despite the pandemic we had six different projects in construction in the US – two in Oregon and another four in Maine. We are starting another batch of four projects in Maine and have kicked off three projects in Ireland, which will produce 68MW of electricity to power between 17,000 and 20,000 homes here,” says founder and executive director David Maguire.

A scientist by background, Maguire is chairman of the Irish Solar Energy Association. Prior to founding BNRG, he spent 13 years as an environmental consultant, including running the research and development division at the Environmental Protection Agency.

“For me, the future of energy was always going to be solar. I could see the technology was on such an incredible

“Although we are relatively small, we have blazed a trail in many countries as one of the first developers to seek planning for utility-scale solar projects.”

trajectory in terms of advancement and costs going down. In the early days, people laughed at me because everybody in Ireland believed in wind energy,” he says.

“The time has come to pass where solar energy is passing out wind and every other form of energy generation. People said it could never be a business of scale, but in the past two years we have built and developed €200m of assets in Ireland and the US alone.”

Watershed moment

BNRG employs 35 full-time staff, eight of whom are based in the US, where it has built 33 projects since entering the market in 2016.

“Although we are relatively small, we have blazed a trail in many countries as one of the first developers to seek planning for utility-scale solar projects. We take part in auctions for electricity across all forms of energy generation and last year we were successful in one in the US. It was a watershed moment as it was the first-time electricity was priced less than US\$30 a megawatt hour,” says Maguire.

“Our ability to achieve lower costs is through the deployment of cutting-edge technology. We spend a lot of time working with technology manufacturers to see what’s coming next.” BNRG was the first solar developer to deliver larger 72-cell solar modules in Europe and has also introduced bifacial modules, which capture energy from both sides of a solar panel.

Maguire believes a key driver of BNRG’s success is the partnerships and relationships it has fostered with local manufacturers, developers, land owners and communities, which help to expand the collective business in each region and enhance biodiversity.

Off to the races

EcoFriendly Cups was the first company in Ireland to offer an end-to-end service for branded reusable cups at sporting and other events

For 20 years Elaine O’Farrell’s business Race Displays has been manufacturing and installing signage and branding at racing events such as the Irish Grand National. She had been looking into adding reusable cups as an extra layer to her branding offering when the Irish Government announced plans to ban single-use plastics in 2019.

“What started off as a branding idea ended up being more about sustainability. Reusable cups have become the new norm in a lot of countries across Europe and the public are driving demand for them in Ireland,” says O’Farrell.

EcoFriendly Cups provides an end-to-end service that includes design, manufacturing, event logistics and cup collection. Its purpose-built wash and dry facility in Ballycoolin in Dublin is the only one of its kind in Ireland and has the capacity to clean around 3,000 pint-sized cups per hour.

At events ranging from small charity gatherings to big matches and concerts, customers pay a deposit when they buy a drink and can redeem it when they bring the cup back. A lot of people like taking the specially branded cups home as souvenirs, says O’Farrell.

“Reusable cups have become the new norm in a lot of countries across Europe and the public are driving demand for them in Ireland.”

“The cups are made of polypropylene, which is less offensive than plastic and nicer to hold. They can be used 300 times before they get melted down and remade into crates. We estimate that our service results in an average 70% reduction in waste at events.”

Early successes

The Forever Young festival in Palmerstown House in September 2019 was EcoFriendly Cups’ first big job. Over the three-day event, it supplied 100,000 branded cups, collected those left behind at the end and brought them back to the wash station.

Having also supplied cups for a number of race meetings through Horse Racing Ireland, O’Farrell knocked on the doors of big stadiums including Aviva Stadium and Thomand Park. “We also met with drinks companies, which wanted to make sure the product tasted the same in the cup after repeated uses. Both Diageo and Heineken approved our custom-designed wash station and we went on to supply cups for the Guinness Six Nations Championship at the Aviva in January 2020.”

Currently employing two people, EcoFriendly Cups outsources manufacturing to Dutch Cups in the Netherlands, but is installing a machine to do the branding element in-house. “Ideally, down the road we would love to be able to manufacture in Ireland and have the whole process as a one-stop-shop,” says O’Farrell.

“The racing business has been keeping us going through the pandemic. We are sitting in the holding gates for the white flag to be raised so we can work at other big events again.”



Elaine O’Farrell, founder, EcoFriendly Cups



The M&C Hybrid Energy team

M&C Hybrid Energy is also shortlisted in the Workplace Wellbeing category

Energising change

The pandemic has not deterred M&C Hybrid Energy, which has grown to become one of Ireland's leading green, renewable energy solution providers

Established by Michael Smith in 2009, M&C Hybrid Energy is currently working with the Irish people and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) to help us reach Ireland's climate action goals to 2030 as set out in the Climate Action Plan 2019.

This includes 400,000 heat pumps being installed in the next nine years, 500,000 homes retrofitted with renewable energy sources, as well as creating a nearly zero energy building directive governed by current building regulations.

The aim of the Co Cavan-based company – which Smith runs with his wife Carmel – is to effect positive change by supporting and educating Irish homeowners and businesses to become more energy efficient, to understand the importance of renewable energy, not just for the benefit of money saving, but also to protect the planet for our children and future generations to come.

“Our business is consistently growing, even during the pandemic, with all new builds installing at least one renewable

“Our business is consistently growing, with all new builds installing at least one renewable energy source, as well as thousands of homes and businesses upgrading their energy efficiency with SEAI grants.”

energy source, as well as thousands of homes and businesses upgrading their energy efficiency with SEAI grants,” says Smith.

“We expect this to continue for the next decade as we work towards lowering our carbon emissions and creating sustainability in every building in Ireland.”

Working with a team of sub-contractors across Ireland, the company installs a range of systems, including solar panels, heat pumps, mechanical ventilation and LED lighting.

Varied approach

“We work on a variety of projects – both assessment-based and installation-based – for consumer and corporate customers. These include homeowners, property developers, governmental bodies and construction companies,” says Smith.

M&C Hybrid also works with Sustainable Energy Communities around Cavan and surrounding counties identifying the most cost-effective long-term solution for their needs. This included a retrofit project with the Cavan Centre back in 2016, which has resulted in savings of €2,636 a year for the voluntary organisation and charity for residential education.

The team is made up of four full-time employees and one part-time employee, which Smith describes as “a family, who chat daily and celebrate birthdays and milestones together”.

“Our team is what makes us successful and we always ensure we support our staff in any way we can. Physical, mental and emotional wellbeing is top on the list of priorities here, with team lunches every week [online nowadays], weekly team catch-ups, dogs in the office, and training and certification for all staff to ensure their health and safety,” he explains. “We also meet for walks, have mindfulness sessions, take part in charity events and support each other on the GAA field.”

Circular champion

Having invested in a ground-breaking anaerobic digestion plant, NRGE is at the forefront of bringing real sustainability to intensive agribusiness

Based in Co Tipperary, Nutrient Recovery to Generate Electricity (NRGE) is an agricultural, environmental, engineering and planning consulting firm which was formed through the merger of a farm services provider and an engineering firm in 2004.

“Between 2006 and 2010 we were handling environmental compliance for around 60 intensive agriculture facilities licensed by the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA],” explains NRGE director Michael Sweeney.

“It became apparent to us that a critical part of managing these operations was to look at a sustainable way to deal with back-end products such as slurry and by-products from food ingredients. We identified anaerobic digestion as a suitable technology to do this.”

Anaerobic digestion is a natural treatment which breaks down a by-product to release the methane gas content and puts it through a combined heat and power unit to generate electricity and organic fertiliser.

NRGE is part owner of a €5.5m anaerobic digestion plant in Timoleague in West Cork, which started operations last year. While countries such as Germany have thousands of such facilities, this is one of a handful in Ireland. It is ground-breaking in terms of reducing methane from food waste, and reducing reliance on fossil-fuel energy.

“We have designed and incorporated a number of innovative features into the digester, which represent a first in Europe, and other operators are looking to replicate them,” notes Sweeney.

Part of the journey

“We see this as the future and are working with all of our agrifood business clients to reduce their carbon footprint

and make them sustainable. But rather than just telling them what to do, we want to be part of the journey – and how best to explain that other than doing it ourselves.”

NRGE has designed and is managing an anaerobic digestion project for a long-standing client in Nurney, Co Kildare. Its latest venture was to build its own poultry facility near its offices in Lattin, Co Tipperary. At this Greenfield site, eggs are produced from 8,000 hens using the lowest carbon footprint possible.

“We see this as the future and are working with all of our agrifood business clients to reduce their carbon footprint and make them sustainable.”

“The litter from the hen house goes through the anaerobic digester in West Cork which in turn supplies all of the electrical energy to operate the facility. This is an example of what we need a multiple of throughout the country,” says Sweeney.

“We are at a critical phase in agribusiness with so much negative talk about carbon emissions in intensive farming. We prefer to look at this as an opportunity. Implementing proper design and methodologies into these operations reduces the environmental impact, complies with animal welfare standards and still produces food. It doesn't have to be a cost if it is done properly.”



NRGE directors Michael Sweeney and Michael McEniry

A PICTURE OF HEALTH

There is a growing demand for DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland’s dental insurance plans and customised wellness programmes driven by the pandemic and its influence on employees

Against the backdrop of Covid-19, there is an increasing awareness among Irish employers of the link between oral and eye health and general health and wellbeing. This is according to Maureen Walsh, managing director of DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland, which has recorded 10% growth in its dental insurance plans and wellness programmes over the past year.

A subsidiary of US health benefits provider Anthem, DeCare is Ireland’s only specialist dental, vision and wellness benefits provider serving a total of 420 companies across a range of sectors.

“The cost of dental care has increased significantly over the past year because of social distancing requirements, personal protective equipment and other operating costs. This has led to price increases, highlighting the important role of dental insurance in mitigating that financial burden,” says Walsh.

“Both companies and individuals are placing increased emphasis on their health because of Covid-19 and employers had to find ways to keep their staff well and connected while working remotely. Dental and wellness programmes have been an effective way for them to do this.

“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.”

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 in the current climate.

Addressing concerns

When Covid-19 hit, the DeCare team reached out to all of its customers to find out what their concerns were and the issues they were dealing with. They then customised programmes around this.



Members of the DeCare Dental Insurance team in Ireland with its mascot before Covid-19

“Employees were experiencing a lot more stress and anxiety and there were more dental issues because of grinding of teeth and snacking at home. People were also more concerned about their appearance and smile from looking at themselves all day on Zoom calls,” notes Walsh.

“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. We are struggling to maintain rapport in a world where we’re addicted to our smart phones and multitasking.”

Within two weeks of the first lockdown, DeCare delivered its first virtual wellbeing programme and these have continued ever since depending on customers’ requirements – some companies opt for a monthly session while a lot prefer quarterly programmes.

“The virtual wellness programmes have gone really well and have helped us to tailor our offerings through key learnings. The pace of recovery is different for different sectors and we had to evolve our services to align with a changed landscape,” says Walsh.

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

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

Vision for the future

DeCare has been providing its dental insurance products and wellness services to companies, individuals and families in Ireland for over 21 years.

It recently became the only company to launch a vision insurance plan here. Similar to dental insurance, it covers the various aspects of looking after your eye health, such as glasses, contact lenses, eye exams and related health services.

“Employers are looking for meaningful ways to add to a person’s health and vision fits in well with this – particularly with people spending so much more time now looking at screens,” says Walsh. “An eye exam does more than alert you to whether you needed glasses. It is essential for detecting eye health problems early such as glaucoma and high blood pressure. Most importantly, employees who see well perform better and make fewer errors.”

The next ten years will see a transformation in Irish society and around the world. In this context, global and national demographic trends indicate strong relevance for dental and vision insurance, according to Walsh.

“We must lead to educate our customers on the value of oral health and dentistry, the cost of dentistry and the vital role that insurance plays in enabling and underpinning staff attendance,” she says.

“Employers had to find ways to keep their staff well and connected while working remotely. Dental and wellness programmes have been an effective way for them to do this.”



Maureen Walsh, managing director, DeCare Dental Insurance Ireland



Sohini Mitra, Patrick Hughes, Olivia Kennedy and Anthony Griffin of Pale Blue Dot

Giving something back

Engrained in its culture since 2017, Pale Blue Dot Recruitment's approach to employee wellbeing is closely tied in with its corporate responsibility strategy

Over the past two Christmases, Pale Blue Dot (PBD) Recruitment's small team raised a total of €10,000 for its chosen charity Cope Galway, which provides essential support services for people who are homeless, women and children experiencing domestic abuse and older people.

This is part of PBD's corporate social responsibility strategy (CSR), which is core to its overall strategy to achieve the vision of becoming the leading National Recruitment Federation agency for the medtech sector.

"The CSR activities we engage in are good for mental health and fitness. Our latest initiative was Challenge 360, where the team ran 300km over 60 days," says managing director Anthony Griffin, who set up the business in 2017. In non-Covid-19 times, each of PBD's consultants is assigned eight hours of volunteering a year.

"It is important for our medtech clients to be seen to do the right thing. I have met business and community leaders at Cope Galway Sleep Outs where we have the opportunity to discuss the bigger picture. One of our clients became a critical supplier of ventilators during Covid-19."

Having recently hired a new person, PBD employs a team of six full-time employees and a part-time digital marketing officer.

Personal development

"We value the wellbeing of our employees and building supportive, quality relationships in the workplace. Personal development and learning are part of our culture," says Griffin. "At least once a month team members do a course focused directly on their current role

and also do modules on things such as mastering your mindset and being productive. All of this training brings them outside their day-to-day job."

All full-time employees have health insurance, life insurance and income protection and can take three personal days on top of their 21 days' holidays. They can also avail of a nutrition education programme.

"We don't have any absenteeism problem or staff retention issues. A key aspect of this is maintaining a high level of staff engagement. We do a group Zoom call every morning setting out goals, targets and commitments for the day and in the evening we do another one to see how things went," Griffin explains.

"We don't have any absenteeism problem or staff retention issues. A key aspect of this is maintaining a high level of staff engagement."

"A big part of looking after employee wellbeing is to check in with each person individually and simply ask how they are doing. You would be surprised how important it is to simply ask that question, particularly remotely.

"We have enormously committed people. A lot of our success is down to how we work as a team. We share successes and everybody brings each other along. There is never a wrong question to ask and we will always figure challenges out together."

Wealth of experience

Currently in expansion mode, SYS Wealth & Financial Planners treats its staff like family members so everyone feels valued and part of the same journey

Since Tony Delaney established SYS Wealth & Financial Planners in 2015 he has always been open and transparent with his staff and the company provides support and encouragement to help them to reach their maximum potential.

"I like to have a lot of one-to-ones with the staff and everyone knows they can come to me with a problem. I know a lot about each person personally. I don't believe in micromanaging and am flexible about working hours and holidays," he says.

"Staff turnover is extremely low and from feedback we know that in general we have created a fun, sociable, family environment. We celebrate birthdays and have ongoing reviews to help staff on an ongoing basis to reach their full potential."

Headquartered in Nenagh, Co Tipperary, SYS Wealth & Financial Planners has grown to employ 32 staff across three offices in Ireland, having hired ten new people during the pandemic. Delaney plans to take on six more people this year as the business expands to becoming SYS Group and opens another office in Cork.

"We have always recruited quality people and this has brought the business up and

meant quality people wanted to join us," he says. The firm recently appointed three new directors with significant expertise.

Team effort

Prior to Covid-19, SYS Wealth & Financial Planners had regular staff outings and Delaney has strived to keep the camaraderie going via Zoom. He supplied new printers, scanners and other equipment to staff working from home and made sure everyone was protected wherever they were based.

"Everyone has mucked in to keep the show on the road during the pandemic. The fact that the staff all know they can talk to us really came to the forefront. We were mindful of looking after people's mental health," notes Delaney.

Learning and development is an integral part of SYS Wealth & Financial Planners' culture, with staff facilitated to continue with financial training and other exams.

"We have created a working environment that allows employees to further their own education. Because of this, employees gain greater confidence and clarity in their respective roles," says Delaney. "This culture of learning encourages all employees to partake and we have the added benefit of well-informed, happy people who can provide an excellent service to clients."

SYS Wealth & Financial Planners is launching a new transparent investment vehicle to the market in the coming weeks. "What separates us as a financial services company is that we are totally focused on taking an advisory approach, rather than offering isolated advice on products," Delaney explains.

"We have identified a gap in the market to service staff on company pension schemes. There is a major shortfall in this area and employees are the ones who need advice."

"Everyone has mucked in to keep the show on the road during the pandemic. The fact that the staff all know they can talk to us really came to the forefront."



Tony Delaney, CEO, SYS Wealth & Financial Planners

E-COMMERCE EDGE

The latest Tipping Point research released by .IE highlights the changes in consumer behaviour due to Covid-19, which make investment in online even more compelling

While vaccines offer Ireland a way out of lockdown, until a critical mass is reached and the population is immunised, our economy and society are set to remain in a state of flux. “This flux is accelerating major trends in how consumers spend and how SMEs sell their goods and services,” says David Curtin, chief executive of .IE, the company that manages .ie domains, the preferred online identity for business in Ireland. “Behaviours and ways of working that boost sales, cut costs or increase convenience are likely to become permanently ingrained.”

All government and medical advice suggests that economic restrictions and social distancing requirements are likely to remain in place until at least the end of 2021. Consumers seem to be mostly on the same page, with 55% believing that life in 2021 will be mostly the same as life in 2020 or even more restricted, according to the .IE Tipping Point Report 2021: Irish e-commerce and digital business in the Covid vaccine era.

Produced in partnership with Digital



David Curtin, chief executive, .IE



Business Ireland, the report assessed the attitudes and responses to the pandemic of 1,000 Irish consumers and 500 retail and consumer-facing professional services SMEs.

Among the key findings are that 68% of Irish consumers said they spent more online in 2020 than they did in 2019. A sizeable 42% say they will do most of their shopping in physical, bricks-and-mortar stores in 2021, despite the current restrictions, down from 48% in 2020. Greater numbers say they will shop only

“Behaviours and ways of working that boost sales, cut costs or increase convenience are likely to become permanently ingrained.”

for necessities in-store but buy most other products online (43% versus 41%) or do most of their shopping online (15% versus 11%).

“These changes reflect the current state of the pandemic. The longer compulsory online shopping continues, the more entrenched it will become in consumer behaviour,” says Curtin.

“While consumers are keen to support local businesses during the pandemic, international businesses continue to prove attractive. Cheaper prices, better product ranges and superior online storefronts were key factors driving behaviours among those that have done most of their shopping with international businesses.”

However, consumer behaviour still implies competitive advantages for Irish SMEs. Solidarity and patriotism aside, many consumers think Irish businesses are faster and more reliable, more trustworthy (which jumped to 48%, up from 41%) and have better order tracking and delivery. “With investment in a modern, e-commerce website, Irish SMEs can also win over consumers who are simply seeking a straightforward and convenient online experience,” notes Curtin.

Reaping rewards

An increasing proportion of businesses recognise that a digital channel is key to their survival. Those SMEs with an online store have benefited from consumers spending more online – 86% say they have experienced an increase in sales or sales enquiries from their online store since the pandemic began.

The number of Irish SMEs that have invested in their online presence has grown: 55% have invested since the beginning of the pandemic, up from just 21% in 2020. Because of this investment, 78% of SMEs say they have been able to

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Buying Irish isn't enough

Crisis solidarity is not enough for a stable e-commerce strategy. Irish SMEs seeking to sustain sales through their online store can only retain their customers by consistently improving the online customer experience.

Play to your strengths

Multinationals with globalised supply chains can be more competitive on price and range. However, Irish SMEs still have competitive USPs, such as trust and reliability. They need to focus on perfecting these so that shopping local continuously generates benefits for their customers.

Brexit: advantage Ireland?

Brexit may provide local businesses with some advantages which SMEs should seek to exploit. Because many Irish SMEs ship goods entirely within Ireland, they can pass on cost benefits to consumers, who will not have to pay customs charges. Delivery from within Ireland is also faster.

Omni-channel is preferred

Consumers are spending more online. Their in-store shopping routines have changed and many now visit shops at a certain time of the week, when they view them as safer or less crowded. Bricks-and-mortar SMEs that invested in an online store with a pleasant browsing experience will have a major advantage over their offline competitors.

For more information and insights, go to www.weare.ie

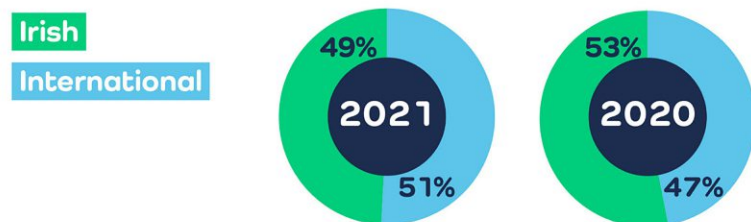
sustain pre-Covid-19 levels of business or are busier than before, up from 46% in the summer of 2020.

Unsurprisingly, SMEs which have invested in their online presence fully intend to continue to do this in 2021. Nearly two thirds believe that their online presence will be more important to their business this year than last.

“From a digital perspective, the pandemic is having an accelerant effect. What we view as Ireland’s digitalisation tipping point may be an accelerating downward spiral for those who fail to adapt as e-commerce and online interaction become the default,” says Curtin.

“Local authorities and national decision-makers must consider these factors if their digital development plans are to be effective and relevant.”

Consumer spending with Irish and international businesses since the pandemic began



.IE Tipping Point Report 2021

TIMELY AND TENACIOUS

All of the winners in the Emerging New Business category in the SFA National Small Business Awards set up ventures in the past two years which turned out to be particularly relevant during Covid-19

THE INSTITUTE OF CHINESE

While studying at the University College Dublin Confucius Institute, Lauralee O'Donovan saw a gap in the market to create an authentic, structured and personalised language learning environment that accelerates fluency.

"With a background in various entrepreneurial and international businesses, my husband Andy and I decided to follow my dream and launched the Institute of Chinese in 2019 – primarily targeting the kids and teens market," she says.

The venture started as a face-to-face, bricks-and-mortar Chinese language school in Dublin, pivoting in March 2020 to being an online player with its Learn Chinese Plus Global Classroom offering.

"Our mission is to make top quality online education affordable and accessible – whether it is to learn a new language, master a new skill or for personal or professional purposes," O'Donovan explains.

"Similar to how mobile transportation platform Didi Chuxing matches

"Our mission is to make top quality online education affordable and accessible – whether it is to learn a new language, master a new skill or for personal or professional purposes."



Lauralee and Andy O'Donovan, co-founders, the Institute of Chinese



Gary O'Sullivan, founder, OSENG Engineering Services

passengers and drivers, we connect a pool of the highest quality, professional, native Chinese speaking tutors with Chinese language learners."

Students attend one-on-one live online Chinese lessons or purchase Netflix-like subscriptions for self-paced, on-demand video content or to practise speaking Chinese live online with native Chinese speakers and other learners worldwide.

The Institute of Chinese has successfully delivered over 3,500 online lessons to date and is on target to achieve 300% growth in 2021. It has paying customers in Ireland, the UK, mainland Europe, the US, Sri Lanka and Australia. "While typical online tuition providers only have a 15% completion rate on their courses, we have a 99% completion rate," notes O'Donovan.

With a teaching team of more than 15 tutors based around the world, the Institute of Chinese recently raised seed

capital from an angel investor. It plans to use this funding to develop the technology side of the business and increase its headcount in Ireland and internationally.

www.learnchinese.ie

OSENG ENGINEERING SERVICES

Gary O'Sullivan identified the need to improve the design side of pharmaceutical construction projects while working as a project manager for a large mechanical and electrical company in Galway. "I had years of frustration looking at projects coming out with half-completed designs and spent so much time fixing things. The client always bore the cost in the end," he says. "I wanted to do it better by bringing construction experience to the design side from inception to completion."

OSENG started out with O'Sullivan securing work through contacts in the pharmaceutical sector and has grown organically since through recommendations and a lot of repeat business. The workforce has gone from two to seven people since 2019 and O'Sullivan expects to employ a team of ten by the end of this year.

An example of one of OSENG's standout projects was to design a system to remove pharmaceutical ingredients from waste water, which was integrated into the client's plant.

"We are in prime position as there are very few engineering consultants in the West and clients want to use local firms and talk directly to senior people," says O'Sullivan.

"We have seven or eight clients on our books, mainly from the pharmaceutical and medtech sectors. Last year we worked on 30 projects and so far this year we have secured nine major projects. While we can't match the resources of our larger competitors, we can be more competitive

"We are in prime position as there are very few engineering consultants in the West and clients want to use local firms and talk directly to senior people."

on the commercial side. We also try to be at the cutting edge in terms of technology and because we are small we can pivot easily."

Last year, OSENG introduced augmented reality (AR) smart glasses and helmet-mounted AR headsets, which allow the firm to show clients designs overlaid on existing facilities remotely and validate them. It also developed software for its quality inspections and walk-down systems – accessible in real-time via tablet – and has invested in 3D printing.

www.oseng.ie

THE AGILE EXECUTIVE

In 2018 Tony Dignam was approached by his friend Paul McArdle, managing partner of recruitment firm The Panel, who was looking at the idea of a business focused on providing part-time finance executive support to SMEs. Dignam had gone part-time himself as financial director at catering firm Compass Group and started to see an opportunity in this space.

"We were aware of a big supply of experienced executives from the corporate world who weren't sure what they wanted to do next. At the same time the OECD and others had highlighted gaps in Irish SMEs in terms of lack of financial acumen," he says. "We decided to put our heads together and do something about it."

The Agile Executive launched in April 2019 with a few clients Dignam had already been working with. Things

"For one programme for the SFA and Skillnet Ireland we put forward a panel of 130 people with eight different competencies and covering 20 different sectors."



Tony Dignam, managing director, The Agile Executive

really took off in 2020 when Covid-19 hit and government agencies and bodies introduced support programmes for businesses.

“We were in the right place at the right time to provide solutions to a lot of those organisations. For one programme for the SFA and Skillnet Ireland we put forward a panel of 130 people with eight different competencies and covering 20 different sectors,” notes Dignam.

“We can do this through a partnership approach with other small consultancy organisations such as The Grey Matters Network and BusinessWorks. By going together for tenders, we can offer a real alternative to large consulting firms. Before Covid-19, we were already set up to operate remotely with people based all over the country, which meant we could react faster.”

So far, The Agile Executive has placed part-time executives with around 300 SMEs suited to their individual needs. It is planning a series of free webinars to share key learnings on areas such as digital marketing, leadership, finance and business planning. “All of our clients have seen significant improvements in turnover, cash flow and profitability,” says Dignam.

www.theagileexecutive.ie

THE JOHNNY MAGORY COMPANY

Emma-Jane Leeson self-published her first book, *Johnny Magory in the Magical Wild*, while working full time at Bord na Móna, inspired by the stories her father told her as a child and her love of the outdoors. Having continued to self-publish and seeing the popularity of her books grow, she took the leap to set up The Johnny Magory Company as a business in 2019.

Currently available in over 70 stockists in Ireland, The Johnny Magory Company signed a distribution deal with O’Brien Press and Gill Books in March. The six books in the series so far have sold 30,000 copies and online sales have climbed 80% since the pandemic began.

More than simply a book series, The Johnny Magory Company’s vision is to encourage children to get outside, explore and learn about Irish heritage and the natural world.

“Instagram is our biggest platform with celebrities and influencers including Lucy Kennedy, Jennifer Zamparelli and Kieran Corrigan as fans. Don Conroy has also illustrated one of our books,” says Leeson.

“Our Hedge School has been a real game-changer. This virtual school delivers online courses to people across the world in a fun and engaging way. We show children and adults how to self-publish and do online events and Zoom calls into schools and libraries.”

Leeson has taken part in programmes such as Enterprise Ireland’s New Frontiers, the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine’s Acorns and Female High Fliers at the DCU Ryan Academy. “The biggest thing I got from these programmes was confidence in my own

“Our Hedge School has been a real game-changer. This virtual school delivers online courses to people across the world in a fun and engaging way.”



Emma-Jane Leeson, founder, The Johnny Magory Company



David Quirke and Denise Buckley, co-founders, Wholesome Kitchen

products and business,” she says.

This drove Leeson to secure developmental funding from Screen Ireland to create a Johnny Magory animation series with Elk Studios in Dundalk, Co Louth. “I want to make an Irish ‘Dora the Explorer,’” she says.

www.johnnymagory.com

WHOLESOME KITCHEN

David Quirke and his wife Denise Buckley spent 15 years working on the concept of their food business Wholesome Kitchen, which started in 2019 as a casual-style restaurant in Mullingar, Co Westmeath. “Our aim is to make healthy food fast and delicious. On our first day of opening there were queues out the door and we had a very busy first year,” says Quirke.

During the first lockdown, Quirke developed a new e-commerce website and made a big push on social media. “This has been crucial to keeping the conversation going with our loyal customers. We now have 30,000 Facebook and Instagram followers and get a lot of

“We think there is a massive gap in the market for tasty, chef-made meals in this format as there have only been two or three other main players in the past five years.”

re-shares of our posts,” he says.

Employing a team of 28 chefs, mostly of Malaysian background, Wholesome Kitchen re-opened as a takeaway for deliveries, collection and catering after two and a half months. All the necessary modifications were made in the 65-seater restaurant to meet public health guidelines.

Wholesome Kitchen is soon to launch the second stage of the business: healthy meal plans delivered nationwide. “These chilled, microwave-style meals can be eaten straight away or frozen. We think there is a massive gap in the market for tasty, chef-made meals in this format as there have only been two or three other main players in the past five years,” says Quirke. “Our plan is to develop the business further to introduce a product range into the retail environment.”

From the outset, sustainability has been a core part of the Wholesome Kitchen brand. “We source only the freshest food and local where possible. For our restaurant fit-out, we used a lot of reclaimed and recycled materials, plant-based paint and LED lighting. The restaurant is a plastic-free zone,” Quirke explains. “We are also committed to planting trees to offset our carbon emissions. In partnership with Self Help Africa, we have planted 10,000 trees in Ireland and Africa so far.”

www.wholesomekitchen.ie

JOURNEY COMPANION

Brexit and Covid-19 have brought the need to support Irish exporters into sharp focus and Enterprise Ireland has stepped up to the plate with dedicated funding and programmes

In February, Enterprise Ireland's UK team organised a webinar for Irish companies trading with or exploring opportunities in the north of England. More than 400 entrepreneurs registered for the event and a survey of those who took part revealed that 90% saw new opportunities in the UK, while more than 80% planned to increase their UK exports.

"On 1 January, our trading relationship with the UK changed fundamentally. However, the UK will remain an important trading partner for Irish businesses and Enterprise Ireland is supporting companies to avail of the emerging opportunities in the market," says Eoghan Hanrahan, regional director for Dublin at Enterprise Ireland.

Brexit has imposed a new level of administration, particularly through new customs requirements. To ensure that Irish companies have the capacity to deal with this development and continue to

trade smoothly, Enterprise Ireland has offered the Ready for Customs grant. Open to companies trading with the UK, this grant provides up to €9,000 per employee taking up a new customs role.

Enterprise Ireland offers two additional supports for companies targeting the UK market. The Post-Brexit Advisory Support provides expert consultancy advice on supply chains, customs and financial/currency management.

Looking to the longer term, the Evolve Strategic Planning Grant offers up to €5,000 to support projects focused on export opportunities and related issues in the UK.

Diversification drive

At the same time as helping Irish companies to deal with the UK, Enterprise Ireland has been encouraging diversification into new markets in recent years to offset the effect of Brexit. In 2009, exports to the UK accounted for 42% of all exports by Enterprise Ireland supported companies. A decade later that had reduced to 31%.

"Enterprise Ireland works hard to support Irish companies breaking into new markets. Our network of 40 overseas offices provides insight and direct support to companies seeking new markets or to expand an existing presence," says Hanrahan.

"Our Market Discovery Fund has made a significant contribution to the diversification plans of companies."

Working with delivery partners, Enterprise Ireland has also developed high-quality programmes, such as Enter the Eurozone and the Export Compass series. These programmes bring companies through the practicalities of starting their export journey, how to market products and services in local

"The OECD has ranked Ireland as the fifth-largest exporter of Covid-19 products worldwide. We believe that Irish companies are in a good position to increase export sales as restrictions ease around the globe."



Eoghan Hanrahan, regional director for Dublin, Enterprise Ireland



markets and a range of other issues.

"The past year has presented unprecedented challenges to Irish business. However, the resilience and innovation of Irish companies in the face of Covid-19 has been remarkable. The OECD has ranked Ireland as the fifth-largest exporter of Covid-19 products worldwide," says Hanrahan. "We believe that Irish companies are in a good position to increase export sales as restrictions ease around the globe."

The pandemic has changed how we work and how we purchase. In response, Enterprise Ireland launched the Online Retail Scheme, which is designed to enhance the existing online offering of retailers and increase their sales – at home and abroad. To date, €11.8m has been provided to retailers under this scheme and another call for applications will be launched in the coming months.

Regional development

While Enterprise Ireland's remit is to support Irish companies on their export journey, much work is also undertaken at regional level to build entrepreneurialism and competence within Irish companies to allow them to take their first steps on the road to exporting.

Last summer, the agency rolled out the Enterprise Centre Scheme, which was designed to strengthen the resilience

of enterprise centres, digital hubs and campus incubation centres nationwide.

"This highly successful fund saw 95 centres assisted with their resilience and recovery plans, with nearly €9m in funding approved," says Hanrahan.

The Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF), operated by Enterprise Ireland, has provided €100m in support to a total of 68 projects approved in Ireland since it was introduced in 2017.

A shining example of a project supported by the REDF is the Guinness Enterprise Centre in Dublin 8, which is making significant progress in completing its expansion project.

Last year, the third call of the REDF saw the creation of the Linc Collaboratory through TU Dublin Blanchardstown. This is an industry solutions hub focusing on cyber security, the Internet of Things and artificial intelligence.

"With a suite of funding programmes and supports to companies in the regions, Enterprise Ireland has at its heart the aim to support the welfare of Irish businesses at all stages of development," says Hanrahan.

"This is why in these most extraordinary of times we are honoured to support the SFA National Small Business Awards Exporter of the Year category. We wish all of the companies every success in their exporter journey for the future."



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

Horses for courses

Based in the Curragh, Co Kildare, Equine MediRecord is the only company in the world to be approved by regulators to replace paper-based systems for equine welfare compliance

A major coup in 2020 for Equine MediRecord was to be hired by the Breeders' Cup to build a system for capturing medical information on the horses competing at the World Championships in Kentucky to pre-clear them to race.

"It was a bit of a dream as we were dealing with the top thoroughbred horses from Ireland, England, Japan, the Middle East, France, Germany and Sweden. It was an opportunity to introduce a version of our system to top trainers from across the world. While many in Europe knew about us, we were still pretty new in the US," says Pierce Dargan, who established Equine MediRecord in 2016.

The Equine MediRecord system allows for the full veterinary history of a horse to be recorded securely, ensuring the best possible horse welfare as well as aiding with crucial anti-doping procedures. The mobile and web-based application has proven to reduce time spent on regulatory documentation by up to 50% and ensure complete compliance when inspected by regulators.

"It was an opportunity to introduce our system to top trainers from across the world. While many in Europe knew about us, we were still pretty new in the US."

From Kentucky to California

Covid-19 threw a spanner in the works as animal welfare and anti-doping regulations were sent into disarray. Dargan was also due to speak at the Association for Racing Commissioners conference, which brings together all the equine regulators from across the US, Canada and South America.

"In March we secured a contract with the Kentucky Thoroughbred Association to build a system for regulations that were set to come in. The system was endorsed by top stakeholders but those regulations have still not come into force because of Covid-19," says Dargan.

"However, on the back of that contract we signed a deal to build a system for Thoroughbred Owners of California and were endorsed by the Arabian Racing Association of California and executive director of the California Horse Racing Board, Scott Chaney."

The Equine MediRecord system is approved by the Irish Veterinary Welfare Commission and, since January 2020, it must be used to record the regulatory medical information for all purebred Arabian racehorses in the UK.

While the company does sell its solution to individual customers, including breeders and trainers, Dargan believes the way to scale the business is through more business-to-business contracts like those it has achieved so far in the US.

"We are now in discussions with stakeholders in other geographies, mainly the Middle East and Asia. Exporting is our main focus going forward," says Dargan. "While Ireland is a great equine market, it is small in terms of the number of racehorses – there are around 150,000 racehorses in Ireland compared to between 9 and 10 million in the US."

Core strengths

Building partnerships is at the heart of Kora Healthcare's exporting strategy, which has been reaping rewards in recent years

A focus on new export markets and product ranges has been the driving force behind Kora Healthcare's growth since the divestment of its sister company Newport Pharmaceuticals in 2011.

Today, the company develops and markets a range of pharmaceutical and healthcare products, including prescription-only medicines, medical devices and food supplements. Currently selling into over 30 countries around the world, it launched its FamilyD Vitamin D range last December designed to help address the specific needs of the Irish and UK populations.

"At Kora Healthcare, we regard ourselves as an emerging pharma company. Over the past number of years, we have continued to grow but at the same time build a flexible structure that facilitates our continued growth," explains CEO Conor O'Daly.

"We have a robust development pipeline as a result of our own internal development but also arising from partnerships with other pharma companies who share similar therapeutic interests."

Continued export growth is central to a new five-year plan. "In 2019, the company rolled out a new five-year strategy based on five key pillars and, despite challenges, we are delivering on this as we approach the half-way point," says O'Daly.

Thanks to the rollout of this strategy, export-generated revenue currently accounts for over 95% of turnover and turnover is expected to increase by more 50% in 2021 compared to 2019.

Continued expansion

The company employs 31 people and is in the process of ramping-up recruitment both at home and abroad. With its head

office based in Swords Business Park in north Co Dublin, Kora Healthcare set up its first overseas office in 2017 in York, where UK-specific commercial activities are located. Building on this sales and marketing expansion, Kora Healthcare plans to add additional overseas offices in North America and on mainland Europe in 2021.

"We have a number of products, assets and knowledge within our existing portfolio that we've yet to capitalise on in a meaningful way in Europe."

Remarkably, Kora Healthcare works off a virtual manufacturing and development platform, whereby it collaborates with a network of contract manufacturing companies and research organisations.

"As a result, we have the flexibility to pick and choose those operationally excellent facilities we wish to collaborate with," O'Daly says. "This allows us to narrow our focus on research, development and innovation and thereafter concentrate on achieving great market penetration and sales growth."

O'Daly is also expecting increased growth in existing markets. "We have a number of products, assets and knowledge within our existing portfolio that we've yet to capitalise on in a meaningful way in Europe. And we have a clear plan and strategy as to how we will go about doing that."



Conor O'Daly, CEO, Kora Healthcare

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